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On multipolar communicative competence

Sophia Papaefthymiou-Lytra

Σε αυτό το άρθρο θα υποστηρίξω ότι σήμερα η επικοινωνία σε μια ξένη γλώσσα (Ξ.Γ.) και ειδικότερα στην Αγγλική δεν είναι διπολική, δηλ. μη φυσικοί ομιλητές δεν ομιλούν κατά κανόνα με φυσικούς ομιλητές, αλλά πολυπολική, δηλ. μη φυσικοί ομιλητές την χρησιμοποιούν μεταξύ τους για λόγους επικοινωνίας. Αυτό μας επιβάλλει να επανεκτιμήσουμε τον αρχικό ορισμό της επικοινωνιακής ικανότητας στην Ξ.Γ. αφού λάβουμε υπόψη μας ότι α) οι μη φυσικοί ομιλητές προέρχονται από διαφορετικές μητρικές γλώσσες και κουλτούρες και β) δεν μπορούν να ξέρουν εκ των προτέρων τι ακριβώς γνωρίζουν από κοινού σχετικά με την ξένη γλώσσα και την κουλτούρα της ούτε και το επίπεδο ικανότητάς τους στο χειρισμό της ξένης γλώσσας. Επιβάλλεται λοιπόν να προσδιορίσουμε την πολυπολική επικοινωνιακή ικανότητα στην Ξ.Γ., όπου οι χρήστες καλούνται να αντιμετωπίσουν τη γλωσσική και πολιτισμική διαφορετικότητα των συνομιλητών τους στην πράξη μέσα από την επικοινωνιακή χρήση της Ξ.Γ.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the concept of communicative competence in the emerging new paradigm that of more and more L2 speakers using a language other than their L1 to communicate effectively. As a matter of fact, language users use the foreign language (in our case English) not only with native speakers (henceforth NSs) but also -or shall I say primarily- with non-native speakers (henceforth NNSs). Concerning the latter, there are three important conditions that characterize it and need to be addressed. Firstly, L2 language users come from diversified linguistic and cultural backgrounds; secondly, they cannot know in advance how much of the target language and culture they really share, and thirdly, their actual level of ability and skill in using the target language may differ. In my opinion, this situation calls for a redefinition of the concept of communicative competence in S/FL learning.

To make things clearer for the reader, I will first provide two examples of this emerging new paradigm by citing anecdotal evidence from an international symposium on intercultural competence in Paris (R. Fay, personal communication) and from McCluskey's 2002 article on

multipolar contexts in the EU and Euro-English. The participants of the symposium in question came from various language and cultural backgrounds. They were English, French, German and Swedish NSs. The symposium had no official language(s) but a blending of French and English as suited the groupings and the fluencies of the participants. Interestingly enough, some items from one language were inserted repeatedly within the other. For example, the term '*compétence interculturelle*' was used early on by a speaker (French NS) who was speaking largely in English, and thereafter this French chunk was used repeatedly within English utterances of the other participants, namely, NSs and NNSs of English¹.

The second anecdotal evidence comes from McCluskey (2002) who claims that in the context of EU English speakers are willing to adopt and use transliterations of terms lifted out directly from other languages. He cites as an example the use of the term '*democratic deficit*' to refer to the lack of democratic accountability perceived by some as existing within the EU's institutional structure. This was first identified and described in French, he writes, as '*deficit démocratique*' in a report by a committee of the European Parliament, and was put into English by the Parliament's translators as '*democratic gap*'. A literal-minded English-speaking official, however, said that '*democratic deficit*' was perfectly well understood and there it has been ever since in the Euro-English of the EU (p. 42).

How can we define the communicative competence of the participants in the aforementioned cases? How is effective communication realized in these contexts? It seems that the use of features from other languages, be it the L1s of the NNSs or other languages, by participants becomes an important issue to understand the new environments of S/FL encounters and language use. In my paper I will try to redefine the notion of communicative competence in a post-modernist era taking into account the realities of the new environments of social interaction and the role of language(s) in these contexts. Last but not least, I will suggest a more suitable term for it.

2. On communicative competence in post-modernism

In a seminal paper, Canale & Swan (1980) claimed that L2 learners' communicative competence is comprised of three different com-

petences, namely, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. They understand *grammatical* competence to mean 'knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence –grammar, semantics, and phonology' (p. 29). They understand *sociolinguistic* competence to mean 'knowledge of sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse' (p. 30). They understand *strategic competence* to mean L2 learners' 'verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence' (p. 30). It is the interaction of these competences that allow communication to function supported by their assumed cognitive abilities as social beings and language users. However, they state that learners' grammatical and sociolinguistic competences should reach at least the minimum levels expected by NSs to function.

Where N-NN speakers are involved, different terms have been employed in the literature to denote their communication, such as bilateral, intercultural, cross-cultural. In this case, which I call a *bipolar* situation, the NSs are expected to help the 'poor' NNSs to express themselves and keep the interaction going thus holding the upper hand in N-NN interaction. In this sense, a power and authenticity relationship dominated by the knowledgeable NSs is developed. As a result, S/FL learners are usually trained to cope with the NS model. Of course, one may claim that the more fluent, knowledgeable and skilful NNSs (be it the teacher, fellow learners or other interlocutors) may play a similar role in an encounter where the level of ability between NNSs may differ (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1987).² For a critique about the role of the native speaker from the linguistic imperialism perspective see Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994) as well as Davies (2003) who is less concerned with linguistic imperialism and more with the usefulness of the NS construct.

As stated, however, in the emerging new paradigm S/FL users are not only expected to use the target language with NSs or with their teachers and/or fellow learners with whom they usually share the same L1 and culture, but more often than not, with a variety of NNSs of various cultural backgrounds with varying L2 abilities and skills (cf. Kramsh 1998). Arguing along with Bhatia (2003), I maintain that the emerging paradigm is characterized by a more S/FL user-friendly orientation, work orientation and collaboration orientation. In other words,

¹ This was commented by some of the participants as evidence of plurilinguism/ pluriculturalism (R. Fay, personal communication).

² The European Framework has introduced six levels of language proficiency that can be eventually certified. For definitions of the levels see Council of Europe 2001.

individuals with varying purposes, tasks, and practices in mind do not merely learn S/F languages for classroom practice purposes but for (future) use in real world contexts. Real world contexts expect individuals to rely on their language and culture awareness and sensitivity (or their insight in the case of NSs) in order to use language as social action (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1996). Besides they are expected to handle multiple literacies in S/FL learning (as they usually do in L1) rather than single literacy.

In this sense, these individuals are culturally unique and culturally complex as Singer (1998) claims since their experiences and backgrounds are different. As a result, in S/FL encounters, it is very difficult to match each other's abilities and cultural sensitivities and backgrounds since there are no norms to rely on and to be taken for granted any more. For this reason, in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (2004), I have maintained that this situation calls for a redefinition of the concept of *inter-cultural competence*. I have argued that in order for S/FL users to cope with the new emerging paradigm they should develop *multipolar intercultural competence*. Due to different cultural orientations of the participants and their potential understanding of the S/F culture, I take multipolar intercultural competence to mean an interlocutor's ability to perceive conflicting/contrasting sets of rules, values and behaviours, etc. in multicultural social encounters and be on the look out to solve misunderstandings and potential conflicts through appropriate language behaviours. In this sense, I maintain, S/F language encounters in the emerging post-modernist paradigm are primarily *multipolar* rather than *bipolar* in nature.

My argument is strengthened by the global spread and use of foreign languages - especially English. English in particular has developed as an international language, a point of contact and co-operation between peoples and cultures, not only within the Anglo-American-Australian centre. This spread has given rise to debates "about cultural, ecological, socio-political and psychological questions" concerning ownership of language and culture norm, as Seidlhofer (2001: 43) states. Disclaiming ownership is also supported by research carried out in ESL situations where the notion of the idealized native speakers vis-à-vis the L2 or bilingual speakers has been questioned. Leung *et al.* (1997), for instance, claim that, whereas minority ESL speakers are often able to function well both in standard and local community English, white British native speakers may not be able to handle standard English but only regional or community English.

This line of thinking is in accord with post-modernist views that the notion of a native speaker community and culture at a society level has weakened. Rampton (2000) in discussing shifts in meaning of the term *speech community* argues that our actions are not to be seen as 'mere reflections' of the conventions of 'big' communities we may belong to but as here-and-now social action in interacting with 'strangers' inside, outside and at the boundaries of them. We are, therefore, expected to look at the individuals and their potential identities. In a macroscopic perspective, he maintains, identities as attributions of nationality, education, occupation, hobby etc. play an important role in encounters since they may determine shared knowledge. In a microscopic perspective, however, we need to look at the individual speaker and how the individual speaker processes communication. After all, as research indicates individuals' behaviours and functions as language users are not static unchangeable units (Smagorinsky 2001). They may change across time or place, across groups and individuals, and even the same individuals may behave differently from situation to situation, from addressee to addressee in an attempt to adjust themselves in the ever-changing social and interpersonal circumstances they find themselves involved. In this sense, individuals develop their own *languaculture* identities as users of the L1, the L2, etc. which may vary over time due to long and persistent exposure to the S/F language, the variety of the interlocutors' backgrounds they communicate with, the circumstances they may find themselves involved and so on.

The term *languaculture* was coined by Agar (1994) to denote the close relationship between language and culture. In other words, Agar maintains, languages contain words and expressions for all the important aspects of a group's culture, whereas it is through language that shared cultural meanings are identified. It is worth mentioning here that developing multilingualism in Europe has already drawn the attention of researchers concerning the role of the L2 in the learning of the L3 and so on. There is already research published, see Williams and Hammarberg (1998) and Dewaele (1998), for instance, who argue that the L2 has an important role to play in the learning and use of the L3. Both papers provide evidence, for instance, how L2 interlanguage rules rather than L1 rules influence L3 lexical construction attempts. In this sense, one can claim that the more languages NNSs are exposed to the more complex their languaculture identities should be. The question in our case is which of these identities, probably among many others, may in-

