

# IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE TO COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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**Abstract:** *Knowing a language is not the same as knowing about a language. Knowing a language denotes understanding the four language skills; knowing about a language includes knowledge of the four skills, as well as knowledge of describing the systems of the language and how they are used structurally, socially and orally. Knowledge about a language is knowledge of communicating competently, as all workings of the elements of the language are in your brain. Communicative competence in a language is therefore attained by knowledge and use of sociolinguistic competence (social relations), linguistic competence (observing acceptable rules), strategic competence (skill in explaining oneself away when bloc sets in), and discourse competence (right pronunciation). These notable aspects of competence can only be realized by a speaker – hearer acquainting themselves with the cultural values, nuances, philosophies and inherent interpersonal social relationships forming part and parcel of the cultural community of which the language exists. This paper, explaining culture, communicative competence, as well as the interface of culture and communicative competence, identifies various ways culture facilitates communicative competence in human social activities. In establishing these aspects made possible by communicating competently in a language, it presents crucial factors that aid attaining communicative competence in any linguo-cultural community.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence, cultural community

## INTRODUCTION

Generationally transmitted human behaviours, beliefs, philosophies and terminologies of fauna and flora contributory to enlivening lives in a surrounding speech-community are basically made possible by language. Spoken or written language or kinesics cannot have become palpable without indebted involvement of speakers in acquiring or learning the grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic aspects of communicative competence underlying the inseparability of people (speakers), culture and language. The implications of this hand-in-hand symbiosis are the natural assurance of understanding among speakers of this language community. These speakers determined by nativity, birthright, education, habitation and official citizenship are the actual facilitators really exhibiting the roles or implications of culture to communicative competence which this paper strives to discuss. Preceding the discussions on the implications are explanations about culture, communicative competence and the interface between them.

## CULTURE

Three authoritative considerations of culture are given and conceptual elements explaining it sifted to justify its implications to communicative-competence. Webster (304) considers culture as “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, behaviour that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generation”. Cultural transmission of knowledge echoes anthropologists’ conception of culture, according to Yule (246), as “socially acquired knowledge”. Waudlaugh (215) concerning culture says it is “whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society”. Elaborating on his conception of culture which encapsulates the same sense he conceives it, Waudhaugh quotes Goodenough’s well-known definition (1957, P167): “a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves”.

These conceptions of culture have recurring commonalities of ideas. These common concepts elucidating culture are tacitly enumerated by Waudhaugh (215): “That knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviours are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Culture, therefore, is the ‘knowhow’ that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living.... “This knowhow” is transmitted to succeeding generations to ensure togetherness, neighbourliness and continuous enculturation.

## COMMUNICATIVE-COMPETENCE

Competence “refers to speakers’ knowledge of their language” Crystal (87): it is “Chomsky’s term in the 1960s for a speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language’, Matthews (67). Throwing light on this, Crystal explains that knowledge results from



mastering the system of rules which enable them “to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences and to recognize mistakes and ambiguities”.

This in-depth knowledge makes speakers’ actual speech or utterance (performance) free from errors. Chomsky as quoted by Waudhaugh (3) furnishes a scenario of competence reflecting unblemished performance:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected, by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shift of attention and interest, and errors in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance....

The internalized knowledge of the rules of the language of a homogeneous speech-community enables the speakers to functionally use language to describe, explain, threaten, warn, counsel, and talk about anything perceivable in such a community and beyond. Chomskyan competence as stated observes the idea of taxis whose components are phonotactics, morphotactics and syntactics which characterize the acceptable orderly sequence of sounds, morphemes and groups like phrases, clauses and sentences.

On the other hand communicative competence embraces not only tactic competence but also the use of language as determined by social conventions as reflected in greetings, hospitalities, social hierarchies, field of discourse, mode of discourse, tenor of discourse, social status of participants in a discourse-doctor vs patient, etc. Therefore, communicative competence is “a speaker’s knowledge of the total set of rules, conventions, etc. governing the skilled use of language in a society” Matthews (65). Communicative-competence as elaborated by Crystal (88) “focuses on the native speaker’s ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur- - - what speakers need to know in order to communicate effectively in socially distinct settings”. Communicative competence of native speakers facilitating effective communication in socially distinct setting is further lucidly explained by Hutchinson and Waters (28). It consists not just of a set of rules for formulating grammatically correct sentences, but also a knowledge of when to speak, when not.... what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner (Hymes 1972). The study of languages in use, therefore, should look not just on syntax, but also at the other ingredients of communication, such as: non-verbal communication (gesture, posture, eye contact etc), the medium and channel of communication, role relationships between the participants, the topic and purpose of communication.

As a simplification to aid understanding of communicative competence, Yule (197) gives three constituents parallel in making speakers functionally competent in a second language acquisition/learning. He defines communicative competence “in terms of three components, as the ability to use the L2 accurately, appropriately and flexibly. The first component is grammatical competence which involves the accurate use of words and structures in the L2. Concentration on grammatical competence only, however, will not provide the learner with the ability to interpret or produce language appropriately. This ability is called sociolinguistic competence. It enables the learner to know when to say Can I have some water? versus Give me some water!



according to the social context:.... The third component is called the strategic competence .... which is “the ability to overcome potential communication problems in interaction”. This problem remedied by strategic competence might be difficulty of representing a concept with a word, and such a speaker, via circumlocution, goes on to describe what the object looks like until a skilful user of the language understands and names the right referring word. This is called communicative strategy of strategic competence.

Communicative competence, therefore, portrays the accuracy in the use of language of a speaker in a homogeneous speech-community, the appropriacy in the use of language in its right context or situation, and the flexibility of the speaker in knowing how to get around difficulties where speaking bloc rears up.

### **CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: INTERFACE**

Culture is socially acquired knowledge; communicative competence is a speaker-hearer’s knowledge of a total set of rules, conventions governing the use of language in a homogeneous speech-community. This homogenous speech-community is a cultural community whose inhabitants know their culture and, by so doing, get through the task of daily living. This interface is corroborated in a chapter, entitled “Language, race and Culture” in Sapir. According to Sapir (207),

Language has a setting. The people that speak it belong to a race (or a number of races), that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives.

People, culture and language in a homogeneous speech community are intertwined: language spoken by people is a vehicle for cultural transmission generationally. This demonstrably underlines prevailing effective communication as dependent on speakers’ knowledge of practices, beliefs, world views of the culture forming the locale of the vehicular language. The knowledge of this culture presupposes communicative competence as a speaker-hearer has already inherited the assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of his lives and will encounter no hindrance in describing, explaining, narrating, arguing and doing anything with his language. This confirms Robert Lado’s counseling in an article by a British correspondent in the *Awake* magazine of January 8, 2000: “There can be no real learning of a language without understanding something of the patterns and values of the culture of which it is a part”

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE TO COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

“Language does not exist apart from culture”, Sapir (207). This connection between language and culture has wider implications for communicative competence of speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech-community vis-à-vis other languages because, according to Yule (246), “in the study of the world’s cultures, it has become



clear that different groups not only have different languages, they have different world views which are reflected in their languages". Yulean point of view echoes Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis of linguistic determinism which claims "that structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world" (Waudhaugh 216), or which "holds that people from different cultures think differently because of differences in their languages" (Holmes 336). This paper however is not concerned with admissibility or in admissibility of Whorfian hypothesis; rather it is emphasizing that people of a culture with their language will be at home in using their language accurately, appropriately and flexibly without experiencing any bloc that would naturally have arisen were a foreign language is involved. Farb in Clark et al (3) affirms these possessed communicative skills thus: "Every native speaker is amazingly creative in the various strategies of speech interaction, in word play and verbal dueling, in exploiting a language's total resources to create poetry and literature".

### **CULTURE AND ORAL COMPETENCE (VERBALIZING)**

"A child growing up anywhere on earth will speak the tongue he hears in his speech community..." Farb in Clark et al (3). The speakers in this language background discuss with ease fauna and flora. They grew with them, familiarized themselves with them, and savoured them. This correspondence between speakers, culture and language finds proof on the Igbo adage: Old age is no barrier to a musical tune an aged woman knows its dance-steps, as well as the aphorism of Edward Sapir that "when it comes to language Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the headhunting savage of Assam", Farb in Clark (4).

### **CULTURE AND CREATIVE COMPETENCE**

Culture reflects in literature; literature mirrors society. "In its literature, poetry, ritual speech, and word structure, each language stores the collective intellectual achievements of a culture, offering unique perspectives on the human condition", Fromkin et al (525/6). Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and many of their contemporaries know their language (Igbo, Yoruba), their culture and their people to be able to replicate in a foreign language gross injustice against a race in *Heart of darkness by Joseph Conrad and Mr Johnson by Joyce Cary*, authors starkly ignorant about Africa's world views. "It is the occupants of a homestead that can identify the first daughter of a goat" so goes an Awgu proverb". It is only the owner of a culture who uses the language of that culture that can competently communicate the beliefs, behaviours, philosophies of a culture, and not an outsider.

### **CULTURE AND THINKING COMPETENCE**

Language mechanism is a process of psycho-physiological connection. Ideas in the brain are encoded in language which is conveyed to the speech chain processes of respiratory system, phonatory system, and the articulatory system to manifest phonotactically, morphotactically and syntactically. Competent communication



requires brain cudgeling in a language a speaker understands its intricacies well. Otherwise, language interpretations and translations will converge in the brain. Translations of ideas from one language to the other will take place. In so doing a bilingual may become frustrated as the expected idea to be conveyed is lost or distorted. This is an instance of poor performance in many public examinations (WAEC – SSCE, NECO—SSCE etc) and even in degree examinations involving regular students, weekend programme students and sandwich programme students. Thinking in a language fully lost in a speaker removes hindrances of frustration, non-communication of ideas and accurate use of structure of the language.

## **CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCE**

Development competence is modeling a speech-community towards unity, education, economic well-being, mass participation in government and making language instrumental to realizing these factors of development. Ben Elugbe in Emenanjo (14) stresses the centrality of language towards national development. A national language fosters unity, engenders feeling of oneness, and is a rallying point for development. As regards education, he says that “the quickest way to make the majority of Nigerians literate is their own languages. Unless we can make it possible for our children to learn the basics of modern technology, sciences and mathematics, for example in their mother tongue, then the seed of transferred technology will fall on barren ground and fail to germinate”. Economically, Elugbe states that educating citizens in a language understandable to them will make them practically demonstrate their various potentials since they will not be marred by their inability to speak a strange language not fully lost in them. With regard to mass participation in government, he avers that elitist language of the few (English) should be replaced with one known to the citizens because election campaigns, election policies and other government policies can only be effectively conveyed when the people are addressed in languages understandable to them. Elugbe’s viewpoints are adjudged plausible because they are indirect suggestions to the relevance of communicative competence of speakers of speech-communities to fostering togetherness, progress and strength as tunefully rendered by Sunny Okosun: “Together we will move our country”. Strange language begets strange reception, mistrust and apathy. This is a common issue in Nigeria. Whenever a government plans to siphon the countries wherewithal it will propose certain policies to hoodwink the citizens-what is Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Austerity Measures, Foreign Exchange Market, Second-tier Foreign Exchange Market, MAMSER, Oil Subsidy, NAPEP, Sure-P etc. These are policies encoded in technical terms government unsuccessfully strives to sail to the masses.

## **CULTURE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING COMPETENCE**

The fundamentals of culture to language skills quartet of speaking competence, writing competence, reading competence and listening competence are obvious implications of the sustenance of communicative competence by an existing culture. Learner’s motivation is high when passages, subject matters, books are in a language



known to them. This contrasts with the picture painted by Bright and McGregor (16) about a context replete with words unexisting in a language and therefore unknown to learners in an Africa setting. According to their observation:

Lack of experience of the appropriate context may make understanding the meaning of the words used in it extremely difficult. Mist and fog are unknown in Khartourn and the words mist and fog are difficult to understand. There are even more dangerous traps when the overseas context that appears to correspond to the native speaker's context differs. A brother in some parts of Africa includes not only male children of the same biological parents but half-brothers, cousins, fellow-clansmen, fellow-tribesmen and in extreme cases a chap I was having a drink with last night. A village may be equated with a trading centre. Cross-cultural difficulties are as much a problem as lack of background knowledge.

Every language has grammar-phonetics/phonology, syntax, morphology and semantics. Native speakers are conversant with the system and conventions of their language. Knowledge in the language makes users adept at production skills (speaking/writing) and reception skills (reading/listening). A notable example is Babs Fufunwa's experiment on teaching a pilot school in the Yoruba language. Students taught and examined in Yoruba performed far better in Senior School Certificate Examinations of that session than those examined in English. The result from this experiment is analogous to Napoleon's epigram about attacking Russia: "If I capture Petersburg, I'll take Russia by its head, and if capture Moscow, I'll destroy its heart" (Awaka Dec 22, 1997). So, learning and using a foreign language by non-natives is capturing discourse (subject, mode, tenor) peripherally (head), while learning and using a native language in discourse is destroying or conquering discourse (heart) permanently, as "a job well-done leaves an inner glow of satisfaction" from "The Joy of Working a Book" in *Awake*, Dec 22, 1997.

## **CULTURE AND PEDAGOGIC COMPETENCE**

Language teaching requires replication of certain cultural practices in a classroom. This replication makes learning interesting, inspiring and captivating. Learners experience what they already know around their homes and farms as they are being improvised and demonstrated in their language. The result of this involving language is removal of obstructions accompanying demonstrations in foreign languages, of poor retention experienced after any teaching, of mass failures after any examinations, and of problem of choice of expressions by teachers to extricate themselves from explaining certain concepts or processes to their learners. Teaching in a native language heightens understanding of learners and gladdens teacher conscience for a job well-done.

## **CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY COMPETENCE**



Philosophy is the study of knowledge; culture is knowledge learned and generationally transmitted. Philosophy is therefore part and parcel of culture. All the sayings of philosophers all over the world are results of observing cultural worlds of their respective cultures. Herodotus, a historian, Homer, an author, and Socrates, Plato, Aristotle all wrote in their language their observed knowledge about cultural milieus. Similarly, sayings, proverbs, anecdotes, epigrams are reflections of culture norms carefully observed, skillfully woven in native language and perpetually transmitted to succeeding generations orally or mechanically (writing). The reality of these world views is captured by real members of the culture exemplifying observed ideas about their speech community.

## **CULTURE AND ORATORICAL/RHETORICAL COMPETENCE**

Persuasive use of language is facilitated by having recourse to objects in the physical surroundings of cultural milieus. African folktales, proverbs, idioms, songs and plays; European tales, phrase comparisons (as white as snow) and anecdotes; Asian tales (Epic of Gilgamesh) which emphasize cultural world views are skillfully woven into speeches to inform, persuade, argue by orators. Translations into other languages and recordings in writing have been made of these literary genres, however the original cultural flavours have been lost because, according to Taylor (22), “the words become fixed and unchangeable; dramatic gestures and voice inflections of the performer as well as relevant cultural setting are lost”.

Really, competence can be attained with regard to Francis Bacon’s maxim of “Reading makes a man; conversation, a ready man, and writing, an exact man”, but reading, talking and writing in the native language of a speaker make a man ready and complete as there will not be reading bloc, speaking bloc, writing bloc arising from a speaker not acquainting himself fully with the patterns and values as well as with the words of the culture. Cicero, a Roman statesman and an orator, made use of Latin; Winston Churchill, a wartime prime minister of Britain, used English effortlessly; African leaders of pre-European advent used African languages. These orators rhetorically used the grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence obtained in the conventions of their native languages to persuasively buy over their audience in parliaments and village assemblies.

## **CULTURE AND RESEARCH COMPETENCE**

Successful research is one conducted by someone adept in a language or who has a native interpreter in that language; otherwise much of the pieces of information needed for observation, collection, and hypothesis are lost. This is a reason underlining misinterpretation of native ways by foreign researchers especially in Africa. Joseph Conrad’s and Joyce Cary’s interpretations of Africa as heart of darkness (spiritual and physical) and home of savages depict gross ignorance of information collection, observation and analysis. This similar ignorance of judgment is related by Holmes (344) about Robyn Kina, an Australian Aborigine, who was



sentenced to life imprisonment for stabbing Tony Black to death. The Aborigines are given to indirectness in relating with one another and not to directness. Indirectness requires such eliciting expression as I heard there was a big argument at the store yesterday, as against directness requiring yes-no expression as you were at the store? This ignorance about the way of life of the Aborigines made Tina keep mum about direct questions put to her and so she was adjudged to have willingly committed the homicide. However after five years in jail, a journalist who understood the Aborigines' ways of indirectness interviewed Tina and she subsequently opened up and related what really happened. Tina was retried and acquitted.

These distinctions of cultures and problems arising from them are again related by Holmes (287). According to her, "anyone who has traveled outside their own speech community is likely to have had some experience of miscommunication based on cultural differences. Often these relate to different assumptions deriving from different normal environments". Affirming Robert Lado about knowledge of a culture, Holmes (288) positively states: "Learning another language usually involves a great deal more than learning the literal meaning of words, how to put them together and how to pronounce them. We need to know what they mean in the cultural context in which they are normally used. And that involves some understanding of the cultural and social norms of their users". This surely will make research highly objective, generally advantageous, and fully understood as it is knowledgeably interpreted.

## ACHIEVING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Using language accurately, appropriately and flexibly is attained by taking cognizance of certain socio-cultural privileges.

**Nativity Privilege:** Geographical location of a language makes the language a first language or a mother-tongue of the inhabitants of such speech-community. Parents use the language in their domestic as well as in their public affairs. Children born in such location grow to acquire, learn and speak the language from their mothers and any other grown adult.

**Birthright Privilege:** "A child growing up anywhere on earth will speak the tongue he hears in his speech community, regardless of the race, nationality, or language of his parents", Farb in Clark et al (3). This privilege makes the child observe social conventions in which the language is used and constrains it to digest and reproduce in the language appropriate imitation of the speakers around it. Growing up to adulthood in the community, the child becomes an embodiment of the rules and conventions of the language of the locale. This shows the connection between nativity privilege and this privilege. Both native and non-native children born in this community are described as native speakers since they use the language as they begin their holophrastic stage, continue to use it as their dominant language and have ultimately attained the competence required to talk, listen, write and read in the language.



**Education Privilege:** Literacy in a language makes a speaker good at using the language. Prolonged sojourn at a speech community for education makes one understand the language via teachers, readings, seminars, conferences and dissertation/thesis writings and defences. Aristotle says that education is an ornament is prosperity and refuge in adversity. The ornament and refuge of education are only attainable by knowledge of the language of a speech community or by having as your world any other persons knowledgeable in your language. Otherwise what is the essence of your education when language power is not there? Page | 10

**Association Privilege:** Political, economic, social, diplomatic relations and culture engagements are avenues facilitating interactions with nations with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The United States of American came out of the 1939 – 45 World-war commercially and technologically superpowerful. English, the language of the United States, became “the key to the international currency of technology and commerce”, Hutchinson and Waters (6). Competition to relate with the US in commerce, technology, politics, education and medicine compelled nations and individuals to learn the language of the United States. Prior to 1945, colonialism was foisted on Africa and Asia, and the people found the need to learn English, French Portuguese and German. Currently, China is extending arms of fellowship to Africa by establishing Confucius centres in many tertiary institutions where undergraduates, graduates and lecturers undergo smattering training on Chinese cultural studies before a select-few leave for any Chinese cities for between a year and three years to digest, assimilate and regurgitate Chinese ideas for the glory of China and perhaps for the credit of the learners. The centripetal instrument of these contractual associations is communicating competently in Chinese language without which association is stillborn.

**Habitation Privilege:** Citizenship is by birth, naturalization and lottery. This tripartite officialdom determines legal habitation at a foreign country. Those privileged to secure migration to culturally distinct communities find themselves immersed in new cultures, languages and people. Cultural permeation, language internalization and populist association make these migrants understand people, cultures and languages which subsequently transform them into communicating competently with the native speakers they have habituated themselves to.

## CONCLUSION

Culture aids communicative competence in a language. Communicative competence is attained by effortless demonstration of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence in the use of a language. No one can offer what one does not have. Unless one is natively, birthrightly, educationally, associationally and habitationally privileged one can never completely claim to have attained communicative competence, and the implications thereof are that oral competence, creative competence, thinking competence, development competence, language learning competence, pedagogic competence, philosophy competence, oratorical/rhetorical competence, research competence will be an illusion.

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