

Олена Ленеха

м. Чернігів

Competence and Performance

Current theoretical linguists distinguish between the knowledge that speakers of a language must have in order to be able to function in that language and the use speakers make of that knowledge to speak, understand, read, or write. They call our knowledge of the rules that constitute the language competence, and they call our linguistic activities performance. These activities demonstrate that we possess linguistic competence. From this point of view, the primary task of a theoretical linguist is to discover and create a hypothetical model of the rules that constitute a speaker's competence. Linguists often use the term grammar or internalized grammar to designate competence, this usage should be carefully distinguished from the two earlier uses of the term.

The notion of competence depends on certain necessary fictions. Many linguists, though by no means all, assume that all speakers of a language have the same set of rules in their competence. This is a conscious simplification, made with full awareness of the variety inherent in natural language. It's done to allow linguists to develop models of competence without being distracted by phenomena that don't appear to necessitate altering the models' basic principles and architecture. This assumption is not uncontroversial. It has occasionally been viewed as an attempt to ignore the social, discourse, and textual functions of language, which some linguists believe to be crucial in understanding language structure. It has also been viewed, because the majority of linguists are white, male, and middle class, as a thinly disguised attempt to define their variety of English as the grammatical model for all language and all varieties, much as Latin grammar was until recently (and in many situations still is) the model for the grammars of other European languages.

While neither criticism is justified in its extreme version, both point up limitations of the language-as-competence approach. They also point up the need to understand language as a social artifact used by social beings in social contexts for social purposes.

Because many modern theoretical linguists begin from the assumption that what they're modeling is knowledge, it follows that their theories have implications for psychologists and ultimately for biologists. Many believe that language is a very specialized, perhaps unique, kind of knowledge. They believe that it isn't acquired in the ways that other kinds of knowledge are acquired, such as writing or arithmetic. On the basis of these observations, and the (abstract) similarities among languages, these linguists argue that humanity is specifically endowed by nature and genetics with a capacity to acquire natural languages with particular kinds of rule systems. They argue that linguistic knowledge is different in kind from other knowledge because it's based on specialized mental structures, which in turn appear to be based on specialized brain structures.

In support of this neurobiological claim, linguists point out that damage to certain parts of the brain, mainly in the left hemisphere, affects people's linguistic abilities, whereas damage to corresponding areas in the right hemisphere doesn't. Thus, the language capacity appears to be (at least partially) localized in the brain. If this point of view is correct, it explains why, even with intense and specific training, no nonhumans, even the most intelligent ones, have ever learned a human language.