

04. Clinical linguistics data: pragmatic and ecologically valid approaches¹.

As discussed in Section 03.07. "Source of the data: empiric conditions for linguistic data", it is not possible to undertake linguistic research if data are not used, that is, a corpus of language samples. Following the development of disciplines such as socio-linguistics and pragmatics, linguistics requires this corpus to meet certain requisites of plausibility and naturalness; it therefore rejects the use of data from the literature or laboratory situations (a typical occurrence in research of a more philological and psychological nature).

In classic Saussurian structuralism, there are some terminological overlaps that should be considered; one of the most important is that which distinguishes between **language** (as an abstract system) and **speech** (as the concrete realisation of this system in real communicative contexts). For Saussure, the object of linguistics is language and speech is not relevant because it falls into the field of individual, non-systematisable variation.



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A similar binomial can be found in the field of generative linguistics; Chomsky distinguishes between **competence** (the implicit knowledge that all speaker-listeners have of grammar) and **performance** (putting this knowledge into practice by means of concrete speech acts). Chomsky also defends that the purpose of generative linguistics is to give an account of competence, thus reducing the study of performance to something of no interest.

Noam Chomsky
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Chomsky.jpg>

From this distinction, the socio-linguist William Labov² identifies what is known as the "**Saussurean paradox**". The classic language / speech dichotomy involves a paradox, as language, which is "*essentially social and independent of the individual*", must be studied with reference to personal conversational partners; speech, on the other hand, is "*the individual part of language*" and is studied using sociological considerations. It is not therefore possible to study the language system other than by means its specific expressions in speech samples.

"in every research field there is an inevitable hiatus between the raw data obtained and the protocols in which these data are inserted into theoretically formulated material. (...) [in the literature] we find many types of data used to provide information about the real use of language: surveys, questionnaires, summaries of theatre plays and novels, psychological tests, ethnographic reports about community rules. Unless we embark on a discussion of how sharp or productive such studies may be, they do not bring us any closer to the fundamental data of language in its real use than we were before. [...] There are

¹ These paragraphs partially correspond with B. Gallardo (2002): "Fronteras disciplinarias: pragmática y patología del lenguaje" (Disciplinary frontiers: language pragmatics and pathologies) in Hernández Sacristán, C. and Serra Alegre, E. (Coords.): *Estudios de lingüística clínica (Clinical linguistics studies)*, Valencia: Nau Llibres, pp. 129-174.

² 1972: *Modelos sociolingüísticos (Sociolinguistic patterns)*, Madrid: Cátedra.

many acts of perception, resource, selection, interpretation and translation that come between the data and the linguist's report. [...] If we want to understand the 'language' we have to examine everyday speech data in as much detailed and as directly as possible, and characterise their relationship with our grammatical theories as precisely as possible, correcting and adjusting the theory so as to fit the object of study".

The same is true for pathological speech. In order for clinical linguistics to develop, we must, at the outset, have real speech samples from people with disorders. This need to use data from real-life situations appeared in 1960s linguistics with the development of pragmatic research (speech act theory, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, text linguistics, etc.), but it was not generically applied to pathological speech until much later, particularly in the Spanish-speaking field. Since pathologies were for many years the preferred object of study for psychologists, the most usual practice was to use laboratory data obtained from assessment and diagnostic sessions (anamnesis).

However, in linguistics, these data cannot be taken as representative of the patient's speech, as the communicative situation in the consulting room is a marked one. In this respect, it should be remembered that, according to J. Fishman³, a communicative system is made up of three basic factors:

- The **functional relationship** between speakers, that is, the "set of rights and obligations mutually accepted by participants"; this relationship can be either symmetric or asymmetric.
- The socially appropriate **time** and **place** for the interaction.
- The **topic** discussed.

The need to assess each aspect of the language separately means suggesting decontextualised activities to the subject, something that would never happen in real-life language use. This circumstance reduces the **ecological validity** of tests, and some studies (such as those by Vanhalle, Lemieux, Ska and Joannette, 2000⁴ on the understanding of some speech acts) have thrown up different results between the tests designed for assessments and other similar actions carried out under natural conditions.

One of the direct causes of these reductionisms is probably the generativist concept of language that underlies the majority of studies and tests designed in the English-speaking field. However, although it is true that the predominant grammatical model in aphasiology is the generative-transformational one, as previous Bloomfieldian structuralism rejected the interest in "mentalist" questions⁵, the applied nature of these studies frequently favours a fairly heterodox eclecticism. For example:

- in Lesser⁶ there is a presentation of syntax in which there is a crossover of generativist and systemic concepts, or a discussion of speech disorders that makes reference to concepts from both the Prague School and Chomsky.
- Lenneberg (1968)⁷ notes the theoretical "abuse" or the inadequacy with which Chomskian theories are used by some aphasiologists.

³ Fishman, Joshua J. (1971): *Sociología del lenguaje (The sociology of language)*, Madrid: Cátedra.

⁴ "The evaluation of the Ability of Right-Hemisphere-Damaged Patients to Process Speech Acts: An Ecological Approach", *Brain and Language*, 74: Academy of Aphasia Meeting, pp. 483-486.

⁵ Fromkin, Victoria (2000): "Brain, Language and Linguistics", *Brain and Language*, 71 pp. 72-74

⁶ Lesser, Ruth (1978): *Investigaciones lingüísticas sobre la afasia (Linguistic research on aphasia)*, Barcelona: Ed. Médica y Técnica, 1983. Trans. by Alberto Cardín Garay; pp.34-49.

⁷ Lenneberg, Eric H. (1968): "En busca de una teoría dinámica de la afasia" (In search of a dynamic theory of aphasia), in Eric H. Lenneberg and Elizabeth Lenneberg (eds): *Fundamentos del desarrollo del lenguaje*, Madrid, Alianza, 1982, pp. 319-338. Trans. by Pilar Soto *et al.*; p. 322.

This "generativist filiation" of aphasiology explains the delay (or even the complete failure) in incorporating pragmatic approaches, in favour of an essentially grammatical approach.

As we know, Chomsky did not consider including a pragmatic component until the late 70s⁸, and his insistence on innatism and on a universal grammar shared by all languages rejects in principle the kind of variability that can be dependent on context; from this approach, the speaker's competence (an ideal speaker-listener, remember) can be described without the need to analyse real data, sometimes basing the description on mere introspection (Lesser, 1978: 58-67). But, as neurolinguistics and aphasiology pointed out long ago, speakers affected by some sort of pathology need to recover verbal skills precisely in order to continue functioning in everyday situations that are very different from the therapy context:

Chomsky: pragmatic competence

- Chomsky, 1978: "Language and Unconscious Knowledge", en J.H. Smith (Ed): *Psychoanalysis and Language*, New haven, Conn. Yale University Press, pp. 3-44. Reimpr. En Chomsky (1980): *Rules and representations*, pp. 217-54, 287-290
- La competencia pragmática: un componente del estado mental de "conocer una lengua"
- Distingue entre
 - a) competencia gramatical: aspectos computacionales del lenguaje, que suponen un conocimiento con forma y significado
 - (b) competencia pragmática: conocimiento de las condiciones adecuadas de uso, y de cómo utilizar los recursos gramaticales y conceptuales con cierta finalidad (p.59, pp.224-225). estaría restringida a "to knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes" (p. 224), y situaría al lenguaje "in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand."
- Pero no desarrolla (b)

"In traditional speech therapy, there is a therapeutical interaction that closely resembles a didactic situation, in which the therapist alone knows the final outcome of the interaction (production of names and/or sentences) and takes a directive stance with the patient. Referential coherence in speech therapy is an aspect that is not taken into account. The end purpose of traditional treatment is recovery of formal linguistic skills [our

underlining] such as phonology, lexical wealth and syntactic complexity at expressive and receptive levels respectively". (Peña-Casanova, Pérez Pamies, Manero and Bertran-Serra, 1995: 231).⁹

In this respect the linguistic notion of **communicative competence** should be introduced, with which Dell H. Hymes (1964) attempted to overcome the limitations derived from the

⁸ In July 1999, *Brain and Language* published a monographic issue under the title "Pragmatics: Theoretical and Clinical Issues" (Editor: Brigitte Stemmer). In an interview in this issues, Chomsky gave more exact dates for his position on pragmatics and responded to the usual critique of his exclusion of speaker competence by referring to terminological issues: "My own view has always been stronger than what you quote from Levinson: 'a general linguistic theory must incorporate pragmatics' not only 'as a component or level in the overall integrated theory', but as a central and crucial component (...) My first (non-)publication on these topics is a very long manuscript called LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF LINGUISTIC THEORY (1955, revised 1956 version published in part in 1975). (...) I've always assumed that pragmatics is a central part of general linguistics theory". And: "If we are using the term 'competence' in my technical sense, then pragmatics is not part of a theory of linguistic competence, for uninteresting terminological reasons. If we are using the term 'competence' in his ordinary English sense, then I suppose one might say that pragmatics is part of linguistic competence, but the conclusion is again uninteresting, merely a matter of terminology." (Stemmer, 1999a)

⁹ Peña-Casanova, Jordi, Pérez Pamies, Montserrat, Manero, Rosa M. and Bertran-Serra, I. (1995): "Rehabilitación del discurso y de la comunicación (aspectos pragmáticos)" (Rehabilitation of discourse and communication - pragmatic aspects), in Peña-Casanova and Pérez Pamies (Eds.) *Rehabilitación de la afasia y trastornos asociados*, Barcelona, Masson. pp. 231-241.

Chomskyian concept of competence. Both in the description of a patient's state, and in the later planning of speech therapy treatment, linguistic behaviour should always be considered in its broadest sense.

The starting point for this article ("On communicative competence") is the Chomskyian distinction between linguistic competence and performance. Competence is the tacit knowledge of linguistic structure, a shared knowledge, not necessarily conscious but implicit in what the ideal hearer-listener can say. It is regarded as an abstraction, independent of social and cultural features and is linked to linguistically homogeneous societies. Performance, on the other hand, contemplates linguistic coding and decoding processes; it makes reference to the actual use of language in specific situations, but only reflects the competence of the ideal speaker-listener.

But this generativist distinction, according to Hymes, does not reflect the reality of natural language, in which there are deviations from the rules, false starts, restarts, changes of intention halfway through a discourse, etc. All this goes unnoticed by competence and performance. The presence of a language in a linguistic community (L.C.) should not be interpreted literally. If we analyse the language of a L.C. as if it were homogeneous, its diversity leads to errors being made; if we start by analysing the diversity, the homogeneity that really exists can be isolated. For this reason a notion of linguistic theory is needed that can treat a heterogeneous community. This key notion, as Hymes states, is that of COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE. A normal child learns things like when to speak, when not to speak, what to talk about with whom, and so on (if they do not learn these things, their social image is affected). They learn to make APPROPRIATE use of a whole repertoire of communicative varieties and events. This competence or ability involves attitudes, considerations and motivations related to language, its characteristics and uses. There are rules for usage without which grammatical laws would be useless. Therefore differentiation should be made between grammatical competence and competence of use, which are acquired simultaneously and in parallel to each other. In his presentation of this concept, Hymes indicated that Communicative Competence includes Chomsky's Linguistic Competence.

[Suggested further reading on the ethnographic method and conversational analysis: Hamo, Michal; Blum-Kulka, Shoshana; Hachoen, Gonen (2004): "From Observation to Transcription and Back: Theory, Practice, and Interpretation in the Analysis of Children's Naturally Occurring Discourse", in Research on Language and Social Interaction, 37(1), 71-92.]

In our clinical field we would say that drawing up and applying assessment and rehabilitative tests should not focus merely on the speaker's linguistic competence, but that the process should be oriented towards overall communicative competence:

"language use is not an exhibition of linguistic competence but a behavior primarily oriented toward communication. In normal conditions, the ordinary use of language in natural settings has as a major goal to make contact with other individuals." (Patry and Nespoulous, 1990: 21)¹⁰

As a result, the study of speech in people with a pathology needs to incorporate the pertinence of context and of concepts such as **encyclopaedic knowledge, shared knowledge, relevance,**

¹⁰ Patry, Richard and Nespoulous, Jean-Luc (1990): "Discourse Analysis in Linguistics: Historical and Theoretical Background", in Yoanette and Bronwell (Eds.), pp.3-27.

inference, etc.; in other words, it should take a pragmatic stance not centred just on "formal linguistic skills" but on the subject's social and communicative efficacy.

To study this topic further, revise the section on commonplaces in clinical linguistics: "[03.07. Source of the data: empirical conditions for linguistic data](#)".