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# Γλωσσικός Περίπλους

Μελέτες αφιερωμένες στη  
Δήμητρα Θεοφανοπούλου-Κοντού

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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 English<sup>1</sup>.

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).<sup>2</sup> 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,

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

<sup>2</sup> 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-



fluence communication at the here-and-now of a pair or group of NNSs communicating via a S/F language other than their L1.

In this context, I will argue, interpersonal communication in the S/F language – here English, which may be the L2 or the L3 etc. of the participants, – denotes that there are no static *norms* to be taken for granted as *conditions* depend on the *immediate context* at the here-and-now, the *affinity* of participants' languages and cultures, the participants' *language-culture identities* in relation to the language(s) they have been exposed so far and the *immediate needs* of participants that the S/F language is called upon to serve. Meaning, therefore, is not transactional but interactional; in other words, it is situated in the interaction and is constantly negotiable as the interaction unfolds. Consequently, I will maintain, it is as important for L2 users to try to decentre themselves from becoming S/F language 'copycats', as to try to embrace a variety of *otherness* as the aforementioned examples from anecdotal evidence indicate.

*Otherness* is here defined as L2 users becoming aware of their limitations as S/F language users as well as that of others.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, they become aware that they are free to employ and exploit any other language sources available to them to put their message across as long as they can serve interactional goals. In this way, they challenge the sovereign stereotypical representations of NSs as well as of the fluent NNSs in S/F language interactions. Eventually, L2 users come to recognize and respect otherness and difference as a source of wealth for their interaction but also for our 'global village'.

Awareness, therefore, of their strengths and weaknesses will allow them to exercise their negotiation skills by employing appropriate strategies to realize their intentions and purposes as social action at the here-and-now of a specific S/FL interaction in real time (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1996, 2001). Expanding on Rampton's (2000: 13) argument, therefore, that "a range of social relationships of varying duration are conceptualised as communities of practices (e.g. unions, trades, boards of directors, marriages, bowling teams, classrooms)", I will take S/F language encounters of the nature described above as examples of communities of practice on their own right. Of course, these communities of practice last as long as the encounters last and they are then dissolved. In this sense, they may never contribute to 'big' culture

building but only to 'small' culture building of the pair or group members participating in the encounter.<sup>4</sup> As far as the two examples stated in the beginning of this article are concerned, both are examples of potentially 'small' cultures. The former is an example of 'small' culture that may affect the participants of the symposium as long as it lasts, the latter of Euro-English in the context of the EU Parliament and beyond.

### 3. On defining multipolar communicative competence

In the light of this argument, I would claim that we re-define the concept of communicative competence from the *conventional bipolar* one to a *post-modernist multipolar* one. In a multipolar context S/F language users do not only need to have developed an understanding of the S/F language and culture in order to communicate successfully, but they also need to be able to handle other language and culture inputs present at the here-and-now as the examples cited above suggest.

In Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1987), I argued that L2 learners' communicative competence is comprised of four different competences rather than three as suggested by Canale & Swan 1980, namely, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, sociocultural or pragmatic competence, and strategic competence. I have adopted Canale & Swan's definition of grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence but I have taken strategic competence to mean a language user's cognitive orientation, cognitive processes and strategies for learning and communicating purposes, not simply to mean communicating strategies to cope with breakdowns as claimed by Canale & Swan. Besides I have taken sociocultural or pragmatic competence to mean the social and cultural rules and norms language users possess as substantive information, which enables them to understand and use language, namely, to communicate and learn through language (p. 13). I further argued that the interaction of these four competences results in verbal or non-verbal behaviours to be realized in the act of communication. Eventually, language users may select either their L1 or the L2 in order to externalise the outcome of this interaction in relation to the received input at the here-and-now, the context of situation and the knowledge they have of the S/F language and culture.

<sup>3</sup> For the conventional definitions and use of the terms *otherness* and *otherisation* see, for instance, Bhabha (1994), Leung *et al.* (1997), Johnson (1999) as well as Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1996, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I have borrowed the term from Holliday (1999). I use it to define a pair or group culture in language encounters.



Taking into consideration the new realities of our time I would like to extend my argument and claim that individuals develop intercultural competence as a separate competence early on due to the multiple identities that are expected to develop and exercise as language users (be it their L1, L2, L3 and so on) in real time contexts. In my opinion, intercultural competence is to be seen primarily as process rather than substantive information. Besides, I will maintain, education, ease of communication and tourism as well as the Internet have dramatically increased our knowledge of the world as visual and often verbal knowledge thus expanding our knowledge of the world at large as substantive information. Consequently, when individuals start learning S/F languages their intercultural competence develops further and becomes more refined and extended. Eventually, L2, L3 and so on language users become sensitive to cultural and language differences and similarities they encounter in the process of learning and using these languages. As a result, I will claim, that S/F language users, as participants in an encounter, may select any verbal or non-verbal behaviour they may possess (be it from their L1, L2 or L3) in order to negotiate meanings and to externalise the process of interaction in relation to the input received, the context of situation and the knowledge they have of the languacultures of the participants. Hence the new realities, I maintain, call for the development of a *multipolar* rather than a *bipolar* definition of communicative competence, as has been the case so far, thus accommodating intercultural competence in the construct of communicative competence.

In the light of the argument put forth, therefore, communicative competence in S/FL contexts should not be merely considered as (knowledge of and) ability to handle the target language successfully and efficiently. Instead, S/FL users' communicative competence should reflect their ability to handle a variety of presumably S/F language inputs successfully in the process of communication. Consequently, in multipolar communication speakers are not confined to handling their own understanding of the S/F language but they are expected to be able to handle the other S/F language users' understanding of the S/F language and culture. As a matter of fact, they are expected to be able to cope with the multiple otherness ever present in such encounters. As stated, the S/F language inputs will also reflect the otherness of NNSs of various language and cultural backgrounds participating in the encounter. Otherness, therefore, is here considered as a pragmatic and positive characteristic of interactants. Each time individuals interact they build up unique identity groups sharing lan-

guage and cultural experiences and values. These experiences, values and identities are moulded and redefined anew in each encounter be it in the L1, the L2, the L3 and so on.

Consequently, *multipolar communicative competence* is taken to mean the interlocutors' ability to appreciate, understand and interpret *otherness* and difference in S/F language inputs in the act of communication thus putting their multipolar intercultural competence in action. Otherness and difference are perceived as conflicting/contrasting sets of rules, values, attitudes, verbal and non-verbal behaviours, code switching and mixing, borrowing, identity displays and stances etc. always present in multipolar social encounters.<sup>5</sup> For successful communication participants are expected to be on the look out to either graciously cope with them in an attempt to save face for themselves and/or the others or adopt them as negotiation tools at the here-and-now as the two examples cited above indicate. The new realities call for diversified action by S/F language users. In an attempt to extend their communication abilities they can heavily rely on language and culture awareness, metacognition as well as their metacommunication practices making use of all resources available among participants to achieve communication.

Furthermore, I will maintain, by adapting the concept of multipolar communicative competence in S/FL learning we can open a window to the languaculture world of the other S/F language users, acknowledge their presence in an encounter and the need to come to terms with their otherness. In my opinion, this can be an interesting way for S/FL learning to dig up in-roads to otherness and difference in an attempt to overcome longstanding stereotypes and ideologies (cf. Pennycook 1999). The viewpoint put forward, I will argue, may have important consequences for S/FL pedagogy and practice particularly concerning issues of *otherness*, language and cultural ecology, tolerance and understanding. The issue of pedagogy, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our global village requires a fresh look at interpersonal and interactional encounters in the context of S/FL learning and use. We need not

<sup>5</sup> The importance of code-mixing concerning proficiency and pragmatic issues in bilingual children has been extensively attested in the literature. See Genessee (2001) for a review.



categorise any instance of seemingly non-S/F language and culture material in a communicative encounter as alien. We will be much further along in our effort to understand the way cognitive, social and cultural processes work together in multipolar linguistic and cultural settings in our time if we consider them as interactional tools in the hands of S/F language participants in order to achieve convergence in interaction. In other words, they will assist us to discover how S/F language users develop shared knowledge and mutual understanding at the here-and-now of an encounter.

In my opinion, multipolar interactional encounters as communities of practice constitute a fruitful area of research. It is worth exploring, for instance, what constitutes intercultural competence for a variety of S/FL users, how individuals develop their intercultural competence and what use they may make of it in real time L1, L2, L3 and so on encounters. In this way, we will be able to define and explore more precisely the construct of multipolar communicative competence in multilingual and multicultural environments. To my knowledge, however, very little research has been carried out to this direction.

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