Introduction

Gillian Brown

The topic of this book is one of crucial importance to those concerned with teaching a second or foreign language since it explores two major, highly relevant questions: 'What does it mean to learn a language?' and 'Is it possible to determine what someone might know of a language independently of that person's performance in the language?' In this Introduction I shall offer a brief survey of some of the current debates which papers in this volume address.

1 What is language?

A teacher who proposes to teach something to a student should have a clear grasp of what is to be taught. This means not only having a good grasp of what is to be taught in a particular class, but also a view of how that part of the subject relates to the whole subject area.

Language is notoriously difficult to characterise, in part at least because the term is used in so many different ways. Two scholars who have helped to structure the way we think about language today are de Saussure and Chomsky. Their seminal contributions are discussed by John Lyons in the first paper in this volume. He teases apart many of the terms which are frequently used in the literature – 'langage/langue/parole' and 'competence/performance' – and examines how far Chomsky's approach to language can be seen as compatible with Saussure's. Nowadays most writers relate discussion of the nature of language to the dichotomy 'competence and performance'. However, there is a wide range of interpretation of these terms, as Lyons' paper shows. It is by no means clear that scholars who use these terms are always discussing the same phenomena.

Regular readers of the journal *Applied Linguistics* will know that, in recent years, the nature of competence in a language and how it is to be distinguished from performance is an issue which has constantly resurfaced. In 1988 (9/2), for instance, David Taylor wrote a paper on 'The meaning and use of the term "competence" in Linguistics and

1

Applied Linguistics'. In 1989, a complete issue (10/2) was dedicated to the notion of communicative competence, and many contributors felt obliged to orient themselves with respect to Chomsky's notion of competence, notably Henry Widdowson in a paper entitled 'Knowledge of language and ability for use'.

A further issue of *Applied Linguistics* (1990–11/4) contains a cheerfully polemical paper by Kevin Gregg entitled 'The variable Competence Model of second language acquisition and why it isn't.' This paper attacks, in a forthright manner, models of second language acquisition which rely on a notion of variable competence, particularly those associated with the work of Rod Ellis and Elaine Tarone. Both of these scholars were invited to write responses to Gregg's paper in this same issue of the journal. This interaction between Gregg, Ellis and Tarone encapsulates many current debates in Applied Linguistics about the nature of competence and performance and the relationship between them. I shall go on to mention some of these issues but, first, we should briefly recall Chomsky's own position.

2 Chomsky's use of the terms 'competence' and 'performance'

Chomsky first drew the distinction between performance and competence in 1965, in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax:*

(a) Linguistic theory is primarily concerned 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, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of language in actual performance. (Chomsky 1965:3)
(b) We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language) and *performance*, the actual use of language in concrete situations. (Chomsky 1965:4)

It is clear that what Chomsky is concerned with here is linguistic theory – which he takes to mean the theory of syntax. He is not saying anything at all about other aspects of language, for instance language variation or rhetoric. He postulates the *ideal* speaker-hearer, as an artificial construct, just as the *homogeneous* speech community is an artificial construct – all grammarians of whatever theoretical type, like all scientists, have always found it necessary to idealise their descriptions in order to be able to make them at all. In giving a textbook account of a childhood disease like measles, a medical writer takes to begin with the ideal, typical case of measles. Having established the ideal type, you can then think about the range of variation. What

Chomsky is doing is specifying how he is setting about defining his syntactic theory with respect to an ideal type of speaker-hearer, and to what the speaker might *know* of the syntax of his or her language. He claims that he is constructing a *cognitively* based description of the syntax of languages, which will be limited by the capacity of the human mind. The function of the construct, the ideal speaker-hearer, is to guarantee psychological plausibility for the linguistic theory.

Chomsky, then, is not concerned with other aspects of human language, for instance variability in the proficiency of language use from one speaker to another. Of course he does not deny that such variability exists but that is not the topic of his own project. In 1980, Chomsky further elucidates the notion that he wishes to identify by the term 'competence':

The term 'competence' entered the technical literature in an effort to avoid the slew of problems relating to 'knowledge', but it is misleading in that it suggests 'ability' – an association I would like to sever. (Chomsky 1980:59)

Chomsky here draws a distinction between (a) knowing (the forms of) a language, (b) the ability to use the language that one knows and (c) actually using it.

Chomsky adopts what is to many readers a provocative stance in identifying syntax as the core of human language. For him, the remarkable and characteristic feature of human language is not the ability to communicate with other members of the human race. After all, members of other species can communicate in a highly developed way with one another, as has been shown in studies of chimpanzee interaction for instance. Chimpanzees apparently use a very wide range of signs which they extend to new uses on new occasions, much as we extend the uses of words. They use a wide range of vocal signs as well as facial and manual gestures. In some sense you would have to attribute to them pragmatic behaviour, in that, for instance, a chimpanzee will adopt a different signing stance if it is addressing the leader of the tribe rather than a junior member. You must assign to them some semantics, in that their signing appears to be meaningful and to convey messages. You can draw parallels between the medium of gesture and the phonology of human languages (and certainly with the gestures of sign languages used by the deaf). There is, however, no compelling evidence of anything resembling the complex syntax of human languages in any animal signing system, and it is this aspect which Chomsky regards as the quintessential characteristic of human language.

Chomsky also differs from many other scholars in not taking the primary function of human language to be a vehicle of communication. After all, chimpanzees can achieve that. Rather he sees the primary function of language as the vehicle of cognitive growth. It is only

4   *Introduction*

as a result of cognitive growth that the human being has anything to communicate which the chimpanzee could not have communicated, using a much more rudimentary system of communication.

3   What does it mean to learn a language?: SLA and variable competence

Against this background, I shall summarise in this Introduction, some of the relevant points in the ongoing debate on the nature of second language acquisition.

Over the last twenty years or so, it has often been noted that the performance of foreign language students appears to vary, depending on the nature of the use of language on a particular occasion. Ellis writes of such variability among second language learners:

The essence of a variabilist account of SLA is that the competence of the learner is much more variable than that of the native speaker, for the simple reason that interlanguage systems are more permeable to new forms than fully-formed natural languages. Often a learner's knowledge is anomalous in the sense that she may not be sure whether form x or y is required in a given linguistic context. As a result she will sometimes use one and sometimes the other ... (a learner's competence) is inevitably variable because acquisition involves change, and change can only occur when new forms are added to the existing system, resulting in a stage where two (or more) forms are used for the same function. (Ellis, 1990:387)

Here the question is raised of what knowledge of language is represented in the mind at each stage of acquisition and how that representation changes at each succeeding stage. If we acknowledge that in all learning, in first or second language learners, progress is not achieved in a series of discrete stages but rather in bursts and backdrifts and overlapping usages, the question of how such a volatile system of knowledge might be represented in the mind is indeed a live one. Sharkey's paper (this volume) outlines a learning mechanism which may give us a better idea of how the mind may represent a network of possibilities for each structure, any of which may be activated but only one of which may eventually come to be preferred in a given context.

There is of course a further, special, feature of second language acquisition, which is that the learner already possesses some (more-or-less developed, and more-or-less stable) form of representation of knowledge of a first language. What would the linguistic competence of a child who has been learning the foreign language for two years look like, how would it be represented in the mind, and, crucially, how would this representation relate to that of the first language (an issue which several papers in the present volume address, notably those by Cook, Lyons, Meara, Riley, Schachter and Selinker). Tarone

and Ellis and like-minded scholars have collected large amounts of data from students of foreign languages and they stress the degree of variability of control of the second language, in different contexts and under different genre conditions. Under some conditions, the student may produce a native-like structure but under other, perhaps more stressful conditions, a divergent structure is produced. These scholars believe that the phenomenon of systematic variability in the utterances produced by second language learners has to be built into any model of second language acquisition and, not only that, but this variability must be represented in the *competence* of the learner, since the learner does not manifest homogeneous control of structures. (It is, in fact, misleading to suggest that their accounts are identical. Tarone's model is described as a 'capability continuum paradigm', where she explicitly avoids the issues of how capability might relate to competence, whereas Ellis describes his model as a 'variable competence model'.) Tarone makes a strong claim about the relevance of her performance data to an underlying representation, to the speaker's knowledge of the second language:

the systematic variability which is exhibited in the learner's performance on a variety of elicitation tasks actually reflects his/her growing capability in IL, and is not just a performance phenomenon. (Tarone 1985:35)

Of this claim Gregg writes:

(there are) two possible interpretations of Tarone's position: (1) the learner has, simultaneously, several different knowledges about a given rule/form/structure (i.e. that it is or is not grammatical), one knowledge for each task or situation in which the rule/form/structure is exemplified in production; or else (2) the learner has a knowledge of how to realise any given rule/form/structure in output … depending on the specific task or situation. (Gregg 1990:368)

What is needed to clarify the debate appears to be (i) an indication of how it is supposed that different forms of data produced by speakers relate to competence, and (ii) an indication of the nature of the representation of knowledge of language (competence).

4   SLA theory and its relation to data

The chief accusation which Gregg levels against the variationists is that they are unduly concerned with what might be called performance phenomena – that is, the forms of the foreign language which the student produces. Knowledge of a language, he suggests, must stretch far beyond what a student can produce – for instance it must constrain what a student does not produce. He offers the following, familiar, paradigm which illustrates possible and impossible sentences in English:

1 a Who do you think that Mary saw?
   b Who do you think Mary saw?
   c Who do you think that saw Mary?
   d Who do you think saw Mary?
2 a Bill was believed to have seen Tom.
   b Bill was preferred to have seen Tom.

Of these he writes 'the ungrammatical sentences violate (and the gram-
matical sentences observe) the empty category principle. Chomsky …
has a putative explanation for the (non-) occurrence of certain forms,
an explanation that goes beyond the acquisition (let alone production)
of the forms themselves … We never actually produce the Empty
Category Principle itself … and that means that it is far from clear
how the variable competence model could possibly explain (its) acqui-
sition. The description needed is of a speaker's knowledge, not of his
output.' (Gregg 1990:377)

   The problem, of course, is how to describe the speaker's knowledge,
particularly if the speaker is a SL learner. How is the analyst to
approach it? The variationists may simply be 'collecting facts', without
a theory to explain them, but then how else is one to proceed? Ellis
describes the predicament of the researcher into the nature of second
language acquisition:

(how are) we supposed to construct a theory of L2 competence when the
only data available are performance data. (Gregg) observes that the tradi-
tional practice of linguistics is to use 'the facts of the language being inves-
tigated' … This is fine in the case of fully-formed natural languages … But
are the 'facts' of learners' interlanguages known and indisputable? (Ellis
1990:388)

We encounter here a very traditional disagreement between those who
favour a deductive approach and view data from the perspective of a
theory or hypothesis about its nature, and those who favour an induc-
tive approach and examine data in the hope that they will be able to
perceive a generalisable pattern in it.

5   The contributors to this volume

It was in order to address some of these questions that the papers in
this volume were solicited. They were originally delivered at the
University of Cambridge, Second Summer Institute in English and
Applied Linguistics in 1993. It was planned to represent a wide range
of approaches to the central issues. Is it possible to discern any com-
mon approach, or is the field radically diversified with respect to such
basic concepts as those which we have briefly discussed?

Whereas most of the contributors to this volume work in some aspect of second language acquisition, two papers are written by scholars from outside this domain of study. John Lyons, a theoretical linguist with strong historical and philosophical interests, is a scholar who has made a particular study of Chomsky's work and of the developments in his thinking over the last thirty-odd years (Lyons 1991). He was asked to give an authoritative account of the notions of competence and performance and how they have been developed. His paper is placed first in order that the terminology that he proposes can be exploited later in the introductions to subsequent papers.

Most of the contributors to the volume (Cook, Meara, Riley, Schachter, Selinker, Shohamy) work in some aspect of second language acquisition. They were invited to give an account of how the notions of competence and performance seem to them to relate to issues in second language acquisition. Between them, they represent a wide range of approaches to second language acquisition. Cook and Schachter adopt different approaches to the acquisition of syntax, working in parallel methodological paradigms, though both work within the paradigm of Universal Grammar. Selinker also studies the acquisition of syntax but he is more generally interested in the wider issues of Interlanguage. Whereas Cook and Schachter adopt an experimental approach to data, Selinker explores naturalistic data. Meara studies the nature of vocabulary acquisition and prefers an experimental approach, while Riley studies the acquisition of pragmatic competence in natural communication. Meara's paper on lexis appears first, followed by the papers by Cook and Schachter which directly, though differently, address issues of competence and performance in syntax. Selinker's paper, which ranges over the whole field of second language acquisition, follows and is itself followed by Riley's paper, which is primarily concerned with pragmatic competence. Elana Shohamy was asked to survey the relevance of the notions of competence and performance to the field of second language testing – what do testers claim to be assessing, performance or competence, and what do they understand by these terms? The penultimate paper is by Noel Sharkey, a professor of Computing Science, who has himself made significant contributions to the developing theory of connectionism. He was asked to give an account of the theory of connectionism, since this seems to be the most productive of current learning theories, and it is one which is increasingly appealed to by applied linguists. It is particularly relevant in the content of this volume since it is an approach which many see as effectively blurring any possible distinction between competence and performance. The final paper by Brown, who works on naturalistic data in English, attempts to offer an overview of issues which have constantly re-emerged in the papers of

8   *Introduction*

the other contributors and, where possible, to show possibilities of
reconciliation between the diversity of opinions to be found in the
volume.

References

Chomsky, N. (1965) *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
    Press.
Chomsky, N. (1980) *Rules and Representations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Ellis, R. (1990) A response to Gregg. *Applied Linguistics* 11 (4), 384–392.
Gregg, K. R. (1990) The variable competence model of second language
    acquisition and why it isn't. *Applied Linguistics* 11 (4), 364–384.
Lyons, J. (1991) (3rd edition) *Chomsky*. Fontana.
Tarone, E. E. (1985) The interlanguage continuum. In B. Wheatley et al (eds.),
    Current Approaches to Second Language Acquisition. Indiana University
    Linguistics Club.
Tarone, E. E. (1990) On variation in interlanguage: a response to Gregg.
    Applied Linguistics 11 (4), 392–401.
Taylor, D. S. (1988) The meaning and use of the term 'competence' in
    Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics* 9 (2), 148–169.
Widdowson, H. G. (1989) Knowledge of language and ability for use. *Applied
    Linguistics* 10 (2), 128–138.

Introduction to Lyons' paper

On competence and performance and related notions

In this paper, Lyons draws a set of careful distinctions between terms which are widely used. He examines Saussure's familiar terms 'langage, langue and parole' and shows how readily misunderstanding of these terms can arise when they are translated into English. He also examines Chomsky's terms 'competence and performance' and helpfully explores the ambiguities of the term 'performance' in English, showing that it may be used to refer both to the processes of utterance or comprehension (as it is often used in psycholinguistic literature, and as it is used in Sharkey's paper in this volume) and to the product of that process (as it is usually used by linguists and by most of the contributors to this volume). Lyons suggests that we need to distinguish between competence, the processes of production, and the products of production (which he calls 'text' – to be used of both spoken and written utterances).

He offers us what he calls 'a more or less uncontroversial, non-technical definition of linguistic competence':

Linguistic competence is the knowledge of particular languages, by virtue of which knowledge those who have it are able to produce and understand utterances in those languages.

The gloss which he offers on both Saussure's 'langue' and Chomsky's 'competence' is 'language system'. The products of the use of the language system are 'text' (parole/performance). We could now state the disagreement between Gregg, Ellis and Tarone (which was discussed in the Introduction) in these terms: whereas Gregg proposes first to specify the language system and then to predict from that what types of text will be produced by the learner, Ellis and Tarone propose first to study the text (output, spoken or written) produced by the learner and then to infer from this text what sort of language system is able to produce it.

Lyons goes on to discuss the status of natural languages such as English, Russian and Hindi in discussing Chomsky's distinction between what he calls 'I-language' and 'E-language'. Chomsky's claim

9

10   *Introduction to Lyons' paper*

here is that there is an obvious sense in which we can say that the language stored in the mind/brain of an individual (I-language) has existence. It is much more difficult to understand the existential status of the language and associated dialects of 'a speech community' (E-language) since, as Lyons puts it, 'there is no shared or social brain in which they are stored'. This discussion is of course pertinent to the question of how those constructing a language syllabus determine what to include within it.

In the following section, Lyons moves on to discuss the relationship between 'linguistic competence', narrowly defined, and other types of competence which have been proposed, for example 'communicative' or 'pragmatic' competence, a familiar issue in Applied Linguistics. In the final section he considers what it might mean to know more than one language, considering, in particular, the distinction between procedural knowledge ('knowing how') and propositional knowledge ('knowing that').