Unit A6
Interactional competence

PROLOGUE AND ROADMAP

What does it mean when we say that someone is ‘competent’ or that they have ‘competence’? Discussion of these two terms has occupied linguists and applied linguists for many years and has led to fine distinctions between ‘competence’ and ‘performance,’ between ‘linguistic competence’ and ‘communicative competence,’ between ‘communicative competence’ and ‘communicative language ability,’ and between ‘competence’ and ‘expertise.’ In this unit, we will try to steer a course through these distinctions because of the important connection that must be made between the social and cultural constructions achieved through interaction in discursive practice and the cognition of individual actors. We conclude with a presentation of interactional competence, which will help to make that connection because it is based on the psychology of intersubjectivity and the sociology of interaction.

A6.1 THE MEANING OF ‘COMPETENCE’

In Units A2 through A5 we analyzed a number of discursive practices and described the resources that participants in these practices have employed in order to construct actions, meanings, and identities. In the patient consultation in the pharmacy, the patient was successful in getting the pharmacist to fill his prescription and the pharmacist successfully gave the patient advice on how to take the medication. In his ‘I have a dream’ speech, Dr Martin Luther King Jr eloquently presented to his audience his vision of a future in the United States where racial discrimination would be a thing of the past. And in the clarinet lesson, the teacher was skilled in getting the student to hold certain notes for a full eight beats and to execute crescendo–decrescendo on another note. In these three examples, individual participants were successful in achieving their aims, and it is common to relate their success to some ability that these individuals possess. So we say that the pharmacist is a good communicator, Dr Martin Luther King is an eloquent speaker, and the clarinet teacher is a good teacher; in other words, we relate something that these people do in interaction with some ability that they possess that makes them different from other pharmacists, orators, or teachers. One word to describe what we believe that these individuals possess is competence and we say that they are competent to do certain things. The word competence, however, has taken on several different meaning in discussions of language and social interaction over the past
hundred years, and before putting forward a definition of interactional competence, we'll review here some previous definitions of the word.

Let's start with ordinary language. Here are three examples of how people have used the word 'competent' to describe what they believed certain individuals possess.¹

'Justice Ginsburg is a very competent justice, and it is a joy to have her on the court, but particularly for me it is a pleasure to have a second woman on the court.' – Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

'I was amazed at how organized the Palestinian election authority was, how competent they were in setting up their polling places and the poll workers they had.' – US Senator Joe Biden

'I consider myself to be an inept pianist, a bad singer, and a merely competent songwriter. What I do, in my opinion, is by no means extraordinary.' – Billy Joel

In the first quote, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who for many years was the only female justice on the United States Supreme Court, welcomes her first female colleague and says that she is 'a very competent justice.' In doing so, she relates something that Justice Ginsburg possesses (her knowledge, her scholarship, and her judgment) to her performance as a justice on the Supreme Court. In the second quote, US Senator Joe Biden, a senior member of the Senator Foreign Relations Committee, evaluates people in the Palestinian election authority as having performed their duties surprisingly well. These two statements of competence are made by people about other people, but in the third quote, singer and songwriter Billy Joel modestly evaluates his own abilities, saying in the practice of writing songs, he is 'merely competent' and implying that he is an incompetent singer and pianist.

In these examples, the meaning expressed by the word 'competent' is a relationship between an individual, the individual's ability, and that individual's performance. And the focus on the individual can be observed in a sense of the related word 'competence,' when it is used by linguists. This sense was introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1965, when he wrote, 'We thus make a fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations)' (p. 4).

In Chomsky's sense, then, a person's linguistic competence must in principle be separated from that person's use of language. But Chomsky's use of the word differs from the meaning of the word in ordinary language, for if at some point Justice Ginsburg's performance on the Supreme Court began to be very incoherent, her colleagues might call her 'incompetent,' or if the Palestinian election authority failed to set up polling places and train poll workers, then perhaps Senator Biden might call them 'incompetent.' Not so with the language of Chomsky's speaker/hearer, however, because there is a conceptual disconnect between competence in
Chomsky's sense and the speaker/hearer's performance. One feature, however, that 'competence' in Chomsky's sense does share with ordinary usage is in the location of competence in a single person, and not in that person's ability in interaction with others. So it is Justice Ginsburg who is competent, independently of how the other members of the Supreme Court vote or react; it is Billy Joel who is a competent songwriter independently of how any singer performs his songs; and it is 'the speaker/hearer' whose competence Chomsky wishes to investigate independently of interlocutors.

Linguists before Chomsky did not always make such a neat conceptual distinction between competence (what someone knows) and performance (what someone does), although the idea of language as an abstraction from the hurly-burly of performance has been accepted by many. As we have seen in Section A3.1.2, in the Course in general linguistics, a summary of Ferdinand de Saussure's lectures delivered at the University of Geneva between 1907 and 1911, Saussure recognized that 'language' had two senses. Because he wrote and lectured in French, Saussure called one sense of language 'la langue' and the other he called 'la parole.' Here is Saussure's definition of these two terms (Saussure et al., 1966, p. 14).

[La langue] is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts [la parole] . . . It is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community.

Although Saussure's langue and Chomsky's competence are similar in the sense that they are abstractions from performance or parole, Saussure's langue is distinguishable from Chomsky's competence in one important respect: It is the result of a social contract, formed through social action and not by individual cognition. For Chomsky, however, competence is located in an ideal realm far from the tumult of social interaction, a principle that he made clear. Linguistic theory, according to Chomsky should be concerned with 'an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly' (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3).

A6.1.1 Communicative competence

Chomsky's idealization of the concept of competence was criticized by Dell Hymes, who made the case that, even in language, there exists great individual variation in competence. Hymes (1971/1972) held up Leonard Bloomfield's portraits of two members of the Menominee tribe of Native Americans in Wisconsin as examples of bilinguals who seemed to have very different competences in their languages. Bloomfield told first of Red-Cloud-Woman (1927, p. 437).

Red-Cloud-Woman, in the sixties, speaks a beautiful and highly idiomatic Menominee. She knows only a few words of English, but speaks Ojibwa
and Potawatomi fluently, and, I believe, a little Winnebago. Linguistically, she would correspond to a highly educated European woman who spoke, say, French and Italian in addition to the very best type of cultivated, idiomatic English.

He then went on to contrast Red-Cloud-Woman with White-Thunder.

White-Thunder, a man around forty, speaks less English than Menomini, and that is a strong indictment, for his Menomini is atrocious. His vocabulary is small; his inflections are often barbarous; he constructs sentences of a few threadbare models. He may be said to speak no language tolerably. His case is not uncommon among younger men, even when they speak but little English.

The knowledge that these two individuals possess of Menominee, their native language, seems to be very different, and just as Billy Joel admitted different competences as a singer, pianist, and songwriter, these two native speakers of Menomini can be said to have different competences in their mother tongue. As Hymes (1971/1972) suggested, ‘Social life has affected not merely outward performance, but inner competence itself’ (p. 274). Arguing further against the idealization of linguistic competence, Hymes put forward the notion that not only does an individual’s competence refer to the individual’s knowledge of the forms and structures of language, but competence extends to how the individual uses language in actual social situations. That is, Hymes rejected Chomsky’s dichotomy between competence and performance and argued that using language in social situations required as much knowledge and skill as knowledge of language as an idealized system. In Hymes’s famous words, ‘There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar are useless’ (p. 278). Hymes then went on to specify the knowledge that speakers must have of at least four ways in which language is used in social situations: what is possible to do with language, what is feasible, what is appropriate, and what is actually done. These are rather like constraints on language use in social situations.

First, in certain discursive practices, only certain actions and certain uses of language are formally possible. By ‘formally possible,’ Hymes meant the kind of social action that would elicit a response to language use like ‘Oh you don’t say it like that’ or a response to a cultural behavior such as ‘Oh, we don’t do that sort of thing around here.’ Language use that is not formally possible is ungrammatical, and social action which is not formally possible within a community is ‘uncultural.’ In the context of the clarinet lesson that we analyzed in Unit A5, for example, the teacher’s use of a different language, Italian say, would not be formally possible, and if the student brought a trombone instead of a clarinet to the lesson, a clarinet lesson could not happen. Second, in the social use of language, only certain actions or uses of language are feasible. Hymes related what is feasible with cognitive limitations on speaking such as memory and perception, so, in the patient consultation in the pharmacy, memory limitations may not render it feasible to have the patient repeat
word-for-word the instructions given to him by the pharmacist, and it may not be feasible for the pharmacist to diagnose the patient’s condition because he may not have the medical expertise to do so. The third aspect of social use of language that Hymes revealed is whether (and to what degree) something is *appropriate* in the social situation in which it is used and evaluated. Appropriateness is a relationship that participants in a discursive practice perceive between a particular linguistic action and the context in which it is performed. So something may be appropriate or inappropriate for an individual participant, for a particular place, or for a particular practice. Language or social action that is believed to be inappropriate may result in overt sanctions by other participants. What would you do for example, if you heard a 3-year-old scream at his mother, ‘I HATE you mommy!’ when the mother refused to let him eat his Halloween candy before supper?

**Task A6.1.1.1**

➢ What language actions by the patient or the pharmacist would you consider to be inappropriate in the patient consultation? How do you think the other participant would react? Why do you consider the actions inappropriate?

Finally, Hymes considered whether (and to what degree) something is actually done in communicative interaction. By this he meant that it is important to consider that, even when linguistic actions are considered by participants to be impossible, unfeasible, or inappropriate, those actions may actually be done, and so the concept of competence must include things which participants may believe are otherwise prohibited. To sum up, then, in Hymes’s theory, a theory of competence must show the ways that what is possible, what is feasible, and what is appropriate are related to the production and interpretation of actually occurring linguistic and cultural actions. This ability and knowledge Hymes called *communicative competence*, which many people contrasted with Chomsky’s theory, which came to be known as *linguistic competence*.

The ideas behind Hymes’s communicative competence were the basis for views of *communicative competence* put forward by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain in 1980 and *communicative language ability* introduced by Lyle Bachman in 1990. These scholars tried to relate linguistic acts in social situations to an individual person’s underlying knowledge, and their views became very influential in foreign-language teaching and language testing. In both these applied linguistic theories, competence is recognized as something that an individual person possesses to a greater or lesser extent than another person, and a person’s competence is a complex construct composed of several component parts.

The communicative competence framework of Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980) includes three different components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Sociolinguistic competence is further divided into two parts: appropriateness and discourse competence. A
person's grammatical competence is very similar to the linguistic competence theorized by Chomsky and includes a person's knowledge not only of grammatical rules but also rules of phonology and knowledge of lexical items. What that means is that if a speaker uses words and grammar according to the accepted rules of the language and speaks with an accepted pronunciation, then that person's speech actions indicate that they have some degree of grammatical competence. Equally, if another person recognizes the difference between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, between words used with their dictionary meanings and words used with idiosyncratic meanings, between an acceptable pronunciation and an unacceptable pronunciation, then the opinions of that person indicate their degree of grammatical competence.

The sense of appropriateness that is part of sociolinguistic competence in the Canale and Swain framework is the same sense that Hymes described when he said that participants in a discursive practice perceive a relationship between a particular linguistic action and the context in which it is performed. The example of sociolinguistic competence that Canale and Swain give is of a waiter in a restaurant commanding diners to order a particular dish. People in many cultures would regard the waiter's action as inappropriate and, if their judgments correspond to the norms of the community (and the waiter's actions do not), then we could infer that those people have a degree of sociolinguistic competence. The knowledge of rules of discourse that Canale and Swain include in sociolinguistic competence is very similar to the sequential context that we discussed in Unit A2; that is, the relationship of certain words and structures to words and structures that preceded them in a written text or in a conversation. If, for example, you (the reader) understand that this paragraph and the next are organized in the sequence that is laid out in the first two sentences of the preceding paragraph, then you recognize the author's discourse competence. Thank you!

The final component of Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence is strategic competence, and this component has less to do with knowledge than with performance. In Canale and Swain's words, strategic competence is 'made up of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence' (p. 30). An example of a communication strategy might happen if a reader comes across a word that they do not know in a book they are reading ('solipsism,' say) and they turn to a dictionary to look up the meaning of the word. If they do not turn to the dictionary or use some other strategy such as asking someone else to explain the meaning of the word, then their lack of action would be evidence of a degree of strategic incompetence. Strategic competence differs from the other components in Canale and Swain's framework because it is called into play only to compensate for difficulties in communication. Although speakers may well have difficulty in implementing grammatical or sociolinguistic competence, those components of knowledge exist independently of any trouble. The existence of strategic competence, in contrast, depends on there being some trouble in communication.
The framework of communicative competence that Canale and Swain built clearly goes beyond the theory of competence put forward by Chomsky. In fact, we could say that they simply added components of communicative competence to Chomsky's original formulation of grammatical competence. In fundamental respects, however, the framework of Canale and Swain is identical with Chomsky's thinking. The concepts at the foundation of both theories are, first of all, abstract. That is, competence, even communicative competence, is not simply a record of performance but rather an inference from performance to an individual's knowledge. Second, the competence of an adult native speaker of a language is considered to be fixed and stable, and it is to this unchanging standard that the communicative competence of learners of a language (either children or foreigner) is compared. And last, competence is considered to be a property of individuals, just as in the ordinary language examples with which this unit began. It is, in effect, an ability that individuals possess in unequal measures; and, in fact, differences in ability between individuals are in principle measurable. It is this sense of competence as an ability of individuals that was theorized in language testing by Lyle Bachman, and it is to Bachman's theory that we now turn.

### A6.1.2 Communicative language ability

Language testing involves discriminating among people. In a test at the end of a course of study of a foreign language, for example, a test will tell the teacher and students who has learned what the teacher taught and who has not. It may also rank students on a scale from those who learned most to those who learned least. In a test of foreign language given to people who wish to become citizens of a country, the test will say this person knows or does not know enough of our language to function as a citizen of our country. Language tests have very practical outcomes for test takers, and the people who design tests have very practical concerns about relating what test takers can do on a test with what they know. For this reason, the theory of communicative language ability put forward by Bachman (1990, Bachman and Palmer, 1996) was a serious attempt to bridge the divide set up by Chomsky between competence and performance. As Bachman (1990, p. 84) wrote,

*Communicative language ability* (CLA) can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing it, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use.

Bachman accepted all of the components of grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge that Canale and Swain had provided, but he integrated them all into the first component of his communicative language ability as 'language competence.' In the second component of communicative language ability Bachman included 'strategic competence' and the 'psychophysiological mechanisms' for psychological and physical production and interpretation of language. Although Bachman used the same term as Canale and Swain, his meaning of 'strategic competence' was very
different. Bachman did not limit strategic competence to situations of communication difficulty but extended the term to apply to all social interaction. In all communicative contexts, according to Bachman, individual participants must decide what they are going to do, they must take stock of possible constraints on their action, and they must decide how they are going to employ the resources at their disposal. Strategic competence, in other words, involves an individual participant in setting goals for interaction, assessing what resources they have and what resources other participants have, and planning to use those resources. These processes do not necessarily happen in this or in any sequence, and actual implementation of communicative resources is left to an individual's psychophysiological mechanisms. Because the processes included in Bachman's strategic competence all involve higher order thinking – that is, they involve a person's active control over their own processes of language production and comprehension – they can be called metacognitive strategies. That does not mean necessarily that these individuals are conscious of these processes, although they may be.

**Task A6.1.2.1**

In William Shakespeare's play *The tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, the title character talks aloud to himself about some future action. In Hamlet's famous soliloquy, identify evidence of his metacognitive strategies: What goals does he set? What resources does he think he has? What resources does Hamlet believe others to have? How does he plan to use those resources?

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurs
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. – Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.

Bachman's communicative language ability differs from Canale and Swain's communicative competence because Bachman recognized that individuals utilize metacognitive strategies in implementing their linguistic competence, and one important strategy involves ascertaining the abilities and knowledge of their interlocutors. Bachman is thus one of a group of scholars since Saussure who discuss the possibility that competence involves more than an individual secluded from social interaction. Saussure wrote about a social contract, and Bachman wrote about assessing where one's interlocutors are at, a point that was made forcefully by Claire Kramsch (1986, p. 367).

Whether it is face-to-face interaction between two or several speakers, or the interaction between a reader and a written text, successful interaction presupposes not only a shared knowledge of the world, the reference to a common external context of communication, but also the construction of a shared internal context or 'sphere of intersubjectivity' that is built through the collaborative efforts of the interational partners.

Kramsch called the basis of successful interaction 'interactional competence.' It is Kramsch's theory that forms the basis for contemporary understandings of the competence that is created by all participants in social interaction, and this is the topic to which we now turn.

**A6.2 INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE**

In the discussion of competence in the Section A6.1, we have identified several fundamental differences between scholars who have theorized the concept. One difference is between those who take 'competence' to refer only to the grammatical, morphological, lexical, and phonological systems of language and those who expand the concept of competence to include pragmatic systems of language use such as speech acts and knowledge of the relation between language forms and the social
contexts in which they are used. This is the difference between formal linguists and sociolinguists. A second difference is between those who use ‘competence’ as a methodological tool to distinguish an abstract concept that pertains to a language (or in general to all languages) and not to a person, and those who maintain that competence has more to do with an individual person’s ability, an ability which may differ from one person to the next. That is a difference between people who want to relate competence to language and those who want to relate it to people. The third and final difference is between those who recognize competence as an ability belonging to one individual who employs the ability in all social contexts and those who recognize that social contexts involve at least two participants and, for this reason, an individual’s competence varies according to what the other participants do. This last is the difference between individual competence and interactional competence. Because in this book we focus on the use of language in social interaction, the meaning of competence that we will use here is that of sociolinguists and interactional competence. As we will use it here, interactional competence is a relationship between the participants’ employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed; the resources that interactional competence highlights are those of identity, language, and interaction that we have described in Units A4 and A5. Interactional competence, however, is not the ability of an individual to employ those resources in any and every social interaction; rather, interactional competence is how those resources are employed mutually and reciprocally by all participants in a particular discursive practice. This means that interactional competence is not the knowledge or the possession of an individual person, but it is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice, and interactional competence varies with the practice and with the participants.

A6.2.1 Interactional competence and intersubjectivity

A few examples will illustrate the concept of interactional competence more clearly. Let’s take a simple conversational interaction as a first example. Ms Allen and Mr Bunch are two teachers at an American school. They are acquaintances and the following conversation happens as they are walking toward each other along a school corridor. They see each other for the first time today.

Ms Allen: How are you?
Mr Bunch: Fine.
Ms Allen: That’s good.

In starting to talk, Ms Allen shows an understanding that a previous turn was finished or that no previous turn had occurred, and, when Mr Bunch replies, he recognizes that Ms Allen’s turn is complete, something that she must also recognize. If not, there would be overlap between Ms Allen’s and Mr Bunch’s turns. Mr Bunch’s reply also shows that he understands that Ms Allen has asked a question and he expects that she will hear his next turn as an answer. Mr Bunch also shows that he understands Ms Allen’s question to be a wh-question, one which requires an answer
that gives more information than a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ If Mr Bunch replies with ‘Yes,’ it’s likely that in the next turn Ms Allen might seek some repair. In Ms Allen’s rejoinder, ‘That’s good,’ she expresses an understanding that Mr Bunch’s turn is complete and that he had indeed provided an answer to the question that she posed, which was interpreted by Mr Bunch as a response to Ms Allen’s question. Why didn’t Mr Bunch take the opportunity to provide an extended report of his medical, emotional, and economic conditions? Mr Bunch could have provided a longer and more substantial response but, if he had done so to his colleague in the school corridor, he would be attempting to construct a different discursive practice such as a visit to a doctor’s office or to a therapist. That would have been an answer to Ms Allen’s question, but it would have shown a misunderstanding of her intentions — a pragmatic failure that occurs often in communication across cultures.

The two teachers are well acquainted with each other’s intentions, however, and Mr Bunch shows Ms Allen that he has interpreted her question as a formulaic greeting. In fact, Ms Allen’s rejoinder is interpreted by both Ms Allen and Mr Bunch to effect closure of the practice of greeting as they walk past each other.

In this simple interaction between two participants, both individuals are demonstrating that they have a common understanding of the process of turn-taking in conversation and that they are interpreting the discursive practice as an exchange of greetings. The timing of each participant’s turn shows their mutual understanding of three aspects of turn-taking: selection of next speaker, identification of turn-constructural units (TCUs), and projection of transition relevance places (TRPs). The practice is co-constructed by both participants and in their skillful co-construction they are displaying interactional competence. Interactional competence arises from the interaction and is based on knowledge of procedure and practice that is shared by participants. This shared knowledge has been called by philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists intersubjectivity, and it is the basis for interactional competence. This example is one that clearly involves two people taking turns at talk and it is easy to see how intersubjectivity is the basis of their actions, but let us consider a second example, in which apparently only a single participant is involved. Do intersubjectivity and interactional competence still apply?

The ancient Greek historian Plutarch remarked about listening to lectures, ‘The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled,’ but many of us have sat through lectures in which no intellectual fires were kindled. A boring lecture is a practice in which a lecturer talks at great length without relating what they are saying to the interests of the members of the audience. Here are some things that Christopher Thomas (1994) suggested to do during a boring lecture. (He assumes that you are not the lecturer.)

There are many games one can play in a lecture. Games like ‘I Spy,’ ‘Charades,’ ‘Basketball,’ or ‘Boxing’ are usually quite noisy, and can distract the toffee-nosed note-scribbling scum-bag party-poopers who do not wish
to play or who are in no need of an increase in brain activity. A less
obtrusive and altogether quieter form is required. Observation showed that
most students attending lectures will have at least one sheet of paper and
a pen. The application of the one on the other is, usually, quite quiet, which
then indicated to me that using them was the best course of action.

This led me to compile a list of games which can be played with a pen and
paper, between two people (or more in some cases): Noughts and Crosses
(a.k.a. Tic-Tac-Toe), Alphabetic Variation of Noughts and Crosses, Connect
Four, Squares/Boxes, Tetris, Oxo, Lecture Bingo, Bok.

Although the lecturer is a single speaker in this practice, it is nonetheless possible
to identify intersubjectivity and interactional competence. Apparently, the lecturer
is giving his lecture as if they were alone in the room, in effect constructing a very
long turn at talk. This very long turn is, however, co-constructed by the students,
who are choosing to play games quietly, which means that they are not attempting
to take a turn-at-talk in interaction with the lecturer. They also stay in the same
room as the lecturer; although they could leave, they do not do so, and a lecture hall
in a school with a lecturer talking and bunch of students is a discursive practice
called a lecture. The practice of a lecture – boring or not – is one in which all par-
ticipants co-construct a very long turn-at-talk by one participant and, by their
co-presence in the room with the lecturer, co-construct a participation framework
that demonstrates shared knowledge of procedure and practice by all participants.
The students demonstrate interactional competence by not taking turns while the
lecturer takes his long turn and they demonstrate intersubjectivity by sharing with
the lecturer an understanding of the discursive practice of a lecture.

In the first example of a greeting, both participants talked; in the lecture, the
students didn’t talk while the lecturer took a long turn. In the third example of
intersubjectivity and interactional competence, no participant needs to talk. This
is the case of pointing. When one person points to a distant object and another
person follows with their gaze in the direction indicated by the gesture of pointing,
although neither person speaks there is a very clear evidence of intersubjectivity.
Figure A6.1 illustrates this.

Figure A6.1 shows a mother and her son. Something in the distance has caught the
mother’s attention and she is pointing to it. Her son gazes in the direction that she
is pointing. The reciprocal behavior of the mother’s pointing and her son’s gaze
following in the direction pointed is a very good example of intersubjectivity. The
physical hand gesture of pointing is a nonverbal sign and is a cardinal example of
the indexicality that we introduced in Section A5.3.3. We introduced the idea of
indexicality to illustrate the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce. According to Peirce,
the actor creates a sign that in the actor’s mind is a relationship between a physical
or linguistic action and an object, while the observer creates a sign in the observer’s
mind which is a relationship between the physical or linguistic action and an object.
The two signs are not identical: the actor’s sign is representamen and the observer’s
sign is interpretant – the sense that an observer makes of a sign made by an actor. In the act of pointing that we see in Figure A6.1, the mother is creating an indexical sign that is the relationship between a distant object and her own position. In order for her son to interpret his mother’s sign, he has to take his mother’s point of view: that is, he has to imagine that he is in the same physical position as his mother and direct his gaze in the direction of his mother’s gesture. This taking of another’s point of view is intersubjectivity.

Psychologists who have studied pointing by mothers and infants have found that 9-month-old infants are able to follow their mother’s point when the object pointed at is in the infant’s visual field. Those who have studied other evidence of intersubjectivity in infants have found that it develops even earlier: two to three months of age. Intersubjectivity between infants and their mothers goes beyond simple responses to pointing and includes mutual attention to objects, shared rhythm, facial expressions, and emotion. These examples of shared mental control by infants and their mothers were first noticed by University of Edinburgh researcher Colwyn Trevarthen, who described intersubjectivity as follows (1977, p. 241).

A correct description of this behavior, to capture its full complexity, must be in terms of mutual intentionality and sharing of mental state. Either partner may initiate a ‘display’ or ‘act of expression’ and both act to sustain a sharing and exchange of initiatives. Both partners express complex purposive impulses in a form that is infectious for the other.

Although pointers often accompany the gesture of pointing with expressions like ‘Lookit,’ language is not necessarily involved. Whether language is involved or not, pointing demonstrates intersubjectivity in which the observer interprets the
pointing gesture as an intentional creation of a sign and then interprets the sign from the point of view of the pointer. This is what Trevarthen means by sharing of mental state, by one participant’s ‘infecting’ the other. Interactional competence is displayed by both participants by their co-construction of pointing and following the point.

These three examples of competence show a relationship between language forms, gestures, and the social contexts in which they are used. Interactional competence, however, is not the ability of a single individual such as Mr Bunch, the imaginary lecturer, or the mother pointing to employ those resources in any and every social interaction; interactional competence is how those resources are employed mutually and reciprocally by all participants (both Mr Bunch and Ms Allen; the lecturer and the students; the mother and her son) in a particular practice. This means that interactional competence is not the knowledge or the possession of an individual person but it is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice, and, in order to describe interactional competence, it is necessary to carefully analyze the participation framework of the practice.

Task A6.2.1.1

In this interaction reported by Deborah Tannen (2004), analyze the participation framework in order to discover how (or whether) participants construct intersubjectivity. What evidence exists of their interactional competence?

A couple who live together are having an argument. The man suddenly turns to their pet dog and says in a high pitched, baby-talk register, ‘Mommy’s so mean tonight. You better sit over here and protect me.’ This makes the woman laugh – especially because she is a petite 5 ft, 2 in.; her boyfriend is 6ft, 4 in. and weighs 285 lb.; and the dog is a 10-lb Chihuahua mix.

SUMMARY AND LOOKING AHEAD

In this unit we have provided a number of views on ‘competence,’ most of which have been developed by applied linguists in trying to assess how well a learner knows a foreign language. We follow these threads in an activity in Unit C6 when we present two data segments from oral interactions between native and nonnative speakers of English as a way of comparing the competence in the practice of assessment with competence in ordinary conversation.

Interactional competence builds on the theories that preceded it, but it is a very different notion to communicative competence and communicative language ability. Interactional competence involves knowledge of the relation between language forms and the social contexts in which they are used. Interactional competence recognizes an individual’s competence varies according to what the other
participants do; that is, interactional competence is distributed across participants and varies in different interactional practices. And the most fundamental difference between interactional and communicative competence is that interactional competence is not what a person knows, it is what a person does together with others. Because of this, interactional competence presupposes intersubjectivity, something that infants at a very early age develop through interaction with the caregivers. In Unit C6, we examine cases where intersubjectivity is not acquired by children and where we cannot see development of interactional competence.

In this unit we have placed much emphasis on the importance of interaction in understanding competence, and in Units A7 and A8 we will present further evidence of the importance of interaction in the construction of identity and in the formation of community.