**THEORY OF GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE**

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**Abtract**

Chomsky's 'interpretive-semantic' theory of grammar does not provide an explanation of language acquisition and performance, and in fact is not an empirical theory. Chomsky's treatment of 'competence' involves a logicist fallacy: assuming, without empirical testing, that a formally adequate grammar would correspond to a speaker's knowledge of linguistic rules. Chomsky; interpretive semantic grammar; linguistic competence and performance;

**Key words:** inconvenient to handle, generativist,utterances, introspection

**Linguistic competence** is the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by [native speakers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_speaker) of a [language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language). It is distinguished from [linguistic performance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_performance), which is the way a language system is used in communication. [Noam Chomsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noam_Chomsky) introduced this concept in his elaboration of [generative grammar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generative_grammar), where it has been widely adopted and competence is the only level of language that is studied. According to Chomsky, competence is the ideal language system that enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language, and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. This is unaffected by "grammatically irrelevant conditions" such as speech errors. In Chomsky's view, competence can be studied independently of language use, which falls under "performance", for example through introspection and grammaticality judgments by native speakers. Many other linguists –  [functionalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Functional_theories_of_grammar),  [cognitive linguists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_linguist),   [psycholinguists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psycholinguist),  [sociolinguists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociolinguist)  and others – have rejected this distinction, critiquing it as a concept that considers empirical work irrelevant, leaving out many important aspects of language use. Also, it has been argued that the distinction is often used to exclude real data that is, in the words of [William Labov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Labov), "inconvenient to handle" within generativist theory.

Many linguists have severely critiqued this distinction between competence and performance, arguing that it skews or ignores data and privileges certain groups over others. Linguist William Labov, for instance, said in a 1971 article, "It is now evident to many linguists that the primary purpose of the [performance/competence] distinction has been to help the linguist exclude data which he finds inconvenient to handle. ... If performance involves limitations of memory, attention, and articulation, then we must consider the entire English grammar to be a matter of performance." Other critics argue that the distinction makes other linguistic concepts difficult to explain or categorize, while still others argue that a meaningful distinction cannot be made because of how the two processes are inextricably linked.

“Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its (the speech community's) 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 this language in actual performance.” ~[Chomsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chomsky),1965

"In [Noam] Chomsky's theory, our **linguistic competence** is our unconscious knowledge of *languages* and is similar in some ways to [Ferdinand de] Saussure's concept of [langue](https://www.thoughtco.com/langue-linguistics-term-1691219), the organizing principles of a language. What we actually produce as utterances is similar to Saussure's *parole*, and is called linguistic performance. The difference between linguistic competence and linguistic performance can be illustrated by slips of the tongue, such as 'noble tons of soil' for 'noble sons of toil.' Uttering such a slip doesn't mean that we don't know English but rather that we've simply made a mistake because we were tired, distracted, or whatever. Such 'errors' also aren't evidence that you are (assuming you are a native speaker) a poor English speaker or that you don't know English as well as someone else does. It means that linguistic performance is different from linguistic competence. When we say that someone is a better speaker than someone else (Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, was a terrific orator, much better than you might be), these judgements tell us about performance, not competence.

"The **linguistic competence** of a human being should accordingly be identified with that individual's internalized 'program' for production and recognition. While many linguists would identify the study of this program with the study of performance rather than competence, it should be clear that this identification is mistaken since we have deliberately abstracted away from any consideration of what happens when a language user actually attempts to put the program to use. A major goal of the psychology of language is to construct a viable hypothesis as to the structure of this program…" (Michael B. Kac, *Grammars and Grammaticality*. John Benjamins, 1992)

**Reference**

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