

Is The Unitary Competence Hypothesis Tenable?

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Abstract: In Oller's view (1979) the idea that language can be broken down into smaller, isolated segments falls short of validity. Instead, Oller hypothesises the existence of a single faculty which is responsible for all language processing. Although his proposal is derived from several studies, this is not sufficient assurance for the validity of the theory he tries to establish.

Key words: unitary competence, indivisible.

Long before the concept of 'communicative competence' was introduced by Hymes (1972), it had been widely believed that language could be discretely broken down into its componential factors. Following this view, an individual's language ability was seen as an accumulation of mastery on the discrete components of a language being learned. In the mid of 1970s, however, this long-standing belief was challenged radically by Oller (1975, 1976, 1979) and his colleagues. In questioning the divisible approach to language ability, Oller could, by using statistical evidence, convincingly theorise that rather than divisible, language was indivisible. Oller's controversial view, however, aroused reactions among theorists and researchers. Theoretical explorations on the concept of communicative competence—which implies a notion in favour of the divisible nature or language ability—were extensively carried out. Almost simultaneously, empirical investigations were intensively exerted. All those attempts were made in

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search of more theory-based and more empirically verified evidence for the plausibility of the concept of language ability.

This writing presents a brief sketch on the development of the Unitary Competence Hypothesis as proposed by Oller. The discussion encompasses several sub-topics: divisibility of language ability, the Unitary Competence Hypothesis, swinging back to the multi dimensionality of language ability, and language ability: divisibility or unitary? The final section summarises the discussion and takes into account possible further developments of the concept of language ability.

DIVISIBILITY OF LANGUAGE ABILITY

The idea that language is divisible into its sub-components can originally be traced back to the work of those who are in favour of the thoughts of the proponents in the American school of structural linguistics. Lado (1961) points out that language can be compartmentalised into two discrete major elements: language skills and language components. Language skills comprise macro skills of language, which include listening, speaking, reading and writing. Language components embrace pronunciation, grammar and lexicon. Further, Harris (1969) maintains that language components constitute "the fillers" of those four macro language skills. Harris also specifies that 'parallel to' pronunciation is graphology. When pronunciation is concerned with the oral form of language, graphology is associated with the written form of language. In addition, he considers the importance of including 'fluency and rate' as a factor of language skills. Thus, language skills in this view are comprised of phonology/graphology, grammatical structure, vocabulary and fluency and rate. Theoretically the relation between language skills and their components is shown in the chart that follows:

Components	Language Skills			
	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Phonology/orthography				
Structure				
Vocabulary				
Rate and general fluency				

Chart of the Language Skills and Their Components (Harris, 1969:11)

As shown in the chart there are sixteen columns as a result of intersecting the language skills across their components. Those sixteen columns are believed to represent putatively independent areas of language mastery. This philosophy subsequently underlies the practice in language teaching and testing of language ability. In language teaching, for example, once there was a slogan which implied the "independent teaching of the language skills" which should be carried out in the following order: listening—speaking—reading—writing. Another example is the isolated teaching of language components such as the teaching of grammar, the teaching of vocabulary or the teaching of pronunciation.

In the field of language testing the sixteen areas in the chart lay an important basis for language test designers to construct tests. Based on the chart a test designer can theoretically develop tests for assessing 'different' language abilities. In other words, individual's overall language ability can be revealed by measuring the ability against the mastery of each of the sixteen areas outlined in the chart. An example of language test developed on the principle of the divisible approach may be represented by a test item for assessing mastery on grammatical structures as follows:

Mary _____ in New York since 1960.

- A. lives C. has lived
B. is living

(Harris, 1969:26)

THE UNITARY COMPETENCE HYPOTHESIS

The introduction of the divisible approach gains vast acceptance in the field of language teaching and language testing (Howatt, 1988). Teaching and testing practices adopt the principle of the approach in which classroom sessions are dominated by 'partitioned' teaching and testing (Diller, 1971). Oller (1979), however, is one of those who are dissatisfied with the approach and he begins to question in particular the validity of the principle underlying the development of discrete-point tests.

One issue in the discrete-point tests on which Oller's criticisms focus (Oller, 1979) concerns the practice of delimiting language to its linguistic factors; language is decontextualised from its actual use. In this way in-

dividuals are often tested on their ability in linguistic mastery only, apart from extralinguistic factors. In actual use of language, Oller (1979) maintains, both linguistic factors like lexicon, grammar and sound systems, and extralinguistic factors that constitute individuals' knowledge of the world are equally important and integral to language processing. Those are the factors that integratively interact. This interaction enables individuals to encode or to decode verbal messages through either productive or receptive modes.

In the receptive mode both linguistic and extralinguistic factors provide individuals with a psychological guidance to make predictions concerning incoming messages. That is, the interaction between those two factors enables individuals to match their internalised linguistic systems and their knowledge of the world with verbal input data. In this way comprehension is processed by reducing the ambiguity caused by the redundant nature of language production. Meanings are achieved by reducing redundancy. A similar process occurs in the productive mode of language processing. Oller (1979) conceptualised such a mechanism as a process of 'analysis-by-synthesis'.

Further, Oller (1975, 1976, 1979) hypothesises that individuals' internal capacity that accounts for all language behaviours is called 'pragmatic expectancy grammar'. This capacity suggests the existence of a unitary faculty which simultaneously embraces both individuals' linguistic knowledge, together with their ability to use the knowledge, and individuals' knowledge of the world to process an intended verbal message. Pragmaticism of Oller's grammar may be best described as individuals' ability in mobilising their knowledge of the world through language for communication purposes; whereas Oller's expectancy grammar can be equated with the internal, psychological devices which enables the process of continual meaning negotiation to take place by means of 'linking and matching' linguistic or non-linguistic data. In the meaning negotiation irrelevant data are 'discarded' so that only an intended message is able to be created.

Oller succinctly postulates that language ability is indivisible:

language proficiency is relatively more unitary than discrete-point testers have contended. Perhaps what has been called "vocabulary" knowledge (as measured by tests that have been called "vocabulary" tests) cannot in fact be distinguished from "grammar" knowledge (as measured by "grammar" tests). This alternative is not apt to be found as appealing as

the first mentioned one, but it cannot be excluded by pure logic (Oller, 1979:424-425).

Oller's claim is by no means speculative. Factor-analytic studies (Oller, 1975, 1976, 1976; Oller and Hinofotis, 1980) empirically indicate a dominant first factor. This is claimed to suggest the existence of a single trait ability. In another study, for instance, Oller (1983a:8—9) found that cloze tests of different levels of difficulty showed a single general factor which accounts for a high percentage (van Dalen, 1979)—ranging from 73.1% to 76.1%—of the total variance among the other four subtests: vocabulary, grammar, reading, and dictation as used in his study.

Also, in the same study (Oller, 1983a:7) it was revealed that the correlations between the scores of integrative tests like dictation and composition were higher ($r = .79$) than the indices of correlation between the scores of discrete-point tests like vocabulary, grammar and phonology (phonology and grammar: $r = .58$, phonology and vocabulary: $r = .59$ and vocabulary and grammar: $r = .68$). The findings are interpreted as empirical evidence for the superiority of the integrative tests over discrete-point tests. As measuring devices for a single trait language ability, integrative tests are believed to be more sensitive than the discrete-point tests.

Backed up by conceptual arguments and empirical evidence from several studies, Oller (1979) proclaims his theory on the existence of the Unitary Competence. He also claims that the single faculty of language ability is best assessed by means of pragmatic-integrative tests. Tests of those types include, among other things, cloze test, dictation, composition, and oral interview (Oller, 1971, 1973a, 1973b, 1975, 1979).

SWINGING BACK TO THE MULTI DIMENSIONALITY OF LANGUAGE ABILITY?

Unlike the impact of the divisible approach of language ability, the Unitary Competence Hypothesis seems to have subtle contributions to language teaching practices, particularly those practices that have to do with teaching methodology. This may be understandable because Oller mostly concerns testing devices. Nevertheless, several of the pragmatic tests have gained popularity as an integral part of a language testing battery. Of the testing techniques, the much-used tests seem to be cloze procedures, composition and oral interview.

Those testing techniques are not invented for the first time by Oller.

Cloze procedures, for instance, were introduced by Taylor as a means of 'determining the readability of reading passages in the readers' native language' (Cohen, 1980:90). Dictation and oral interview are recognised as testing techniques in the textbooks following the divisible view (Lado, 1961; Harris, 1969) although the techniques are considered to have serious drawbacks (Lado, 1961). What is interesting to note is that while those last two techniques are avoided in the divisible approach due to their assumed low reliability, Oller (1979) reintroduces them and claims that those two techniques are appropriate for measuring his theorised single ability in language.

In terms of the reintroduction of the "forgotten" testing techniques, Oller's proposal deserves acceptance for practical purposes. However, his hypothetical proposal on the existence of a single trait of language ability is challenged. Several studies (for instance, Carroll, 1983) revealed different findings from those claimed by the proponents of the Unitary Competence Hypothesis (for instance, Oller and Hinofotis, 1980; Scholz et al., 1980). Findings of other validation studies (Bachman and Palmer, 1981, 1989; Bachman, 1982; Sang et al., 1986; Fouly et al., 1990; Buck, 1992; Stansfield et al., 1992) did not suggest the existence of language as an indivisible dimension.

The multi-dimensional aspect of language ability, it turns out empirically, varies not only along the line of the language component-trait parameter, but also along the line of the language skill-trait parameter and the level-trait parameter. The existence of the language component trait is empirically supported by several studies. Bachman and Palmer (1982) construct validated some tests of communicative competence based on a theoretical framework developed by Canale and Swain (1980). This study reported that the model that was supported by the data consisted of one general and two specific trait factors. Those two specific factors were grammatical/pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence. A similar construct validation was carried out by Bachman (1982). The purpose of the investigation was to examine the trait structure of a cloze test. This study reported that a model with a general and three specific traits best fitted the data. Those three factors were syntactic, cohesive and strategic trait factors.

Another construct validation study was conducted by Fouly et al. (1980). This investigation validated two models of language ability: the correlated traits and the second-order model. The former aimed to examine

whether 'separate traits (of factors) underlie performance on language tests and (whether) these traits are correlated with each other'; whereas the latter hypothesises that 'the traits underlying performance on language tests are separate and influenced by a single high-order factor' (Fouly et al., 1990:4-5). Three factors were posited to account for each model: aural-oral ability, structure-reading comprehension ability and discourse competence. The findings demonstrated that the two hypothesised models were sustained by the data.

Similarly, the existence of the language-skill trait was authenticated by several studies. Bachman and Palmer (1981) construct validated the FSI (Foreign Service Institute) Oral Interview. Two traits were posited: speaking and reading, and three testing methods were used. The study reported that the model that best fitted the data was the one comprising a general factor, two trait factors and three method factors.

Other evidence of the existence of the language-skill trait was provided by Carroll (1983). In re-analysing the data used in the study by Scholz et al. (1980), Carroll (1983) demonstrated that language ability consisted of one single higher-order factor, which was reflected in the score of oral interview, with several separate lower-order factors, which were manifested in several tests: reading and writing, oral comprehension, listening comprehension and combined subtests of reading, structure, listening and reading aloud. It was also found that each language skill—speaking, listening, reading and writing—was learned at different rates.

Another investigation to examine the existence of language skill trait was also carried out by Buck (1992). The purpose of the study was to examine whether listening was a separate skill. This study reported that Buck's data confirmed the existence of listening as a separate skill. Further, in a construct validation study, Stansfield et al. (1992) found that translation ability also comprised several distinct skills.

All the studies described above deal with the "horizontal dimension" of language ability. That is, they are concerned with "how many factors" and "what factors" there are constituting language ability. As described previously, those studies reveal that language ability is not unitary as Oller (1979) puts it forward; it is multi dimensional. A study by Sang et al. (1986) is an attempt carried out to explore if language ability varies along the "vertical dimension". It was reported in the study that language ability was hierarchically structured along the following three dimensions: elementary, complex and communicative (Sang et al., 1986).

Based on the findings of several studies presented above, language ability is essentially a multi-faceted entity. The facets already empirically verified are those of "horizontal" and "vertical" lines. Furthermore, it is also empirically found that both the facets are comprised of distinct "layers".

Along the lines of attempts in search of empirical evidence concerning what constitutes language ability, similar effort has also been carried out almost simultaneously at the level of conceptual elaboration. When the empirical studies discussed previously focus on the theory-verification level, this conceptual elaboration has more emphasis on the synthetic approach. That is, this effort makes critical use of 'findings' of previous theoretical and empirical elaborations as a basis for establishing a theoretical proposal.

Hymes' influential work (Hymes, 1972) may be used as a point of departure for exploring the concept of 'competence', a jargon which later becomes a "bandwagon" and which characterises what is called 'the communicative competence movement'. In reviewing Chomsky's work on the concept of competence as 'the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language' (Chomsky, 1965:4), Hymes (1972) argues that the concept essentially refers to the most common capability of human beings. Further, he points out that competence in Chomsky's sense above is confined: it is commonly associated with the ability of employing accurate linguistic forms. This ability is not sufficient for one to be considered competent in verbal communication. Hymes (1972) views that another dimension needs to be taken into account: sociocultural use of language. This dimension is concerned with 'appropriateness' in using language according to particular sociocultural contexts. Thus, at this stage language ability stipulates linguistic knowledge and knowledge of social use of language as has been demonstrated in Savignon's study (Savignon, 1972).

In later development, the concept 'communicative competence' is broadened by Canale and Swain (1980) to include three components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980:29-30). The Canale-Swain's framework is extended by Canale, splitting 'discourse competence' as an independent component. In this extended framework, communicative competence includes four factors: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence (Canale, 1983; 1984).

A more recent framework of communicative competence is elaborated by Bachman (1986). In the framework a broader spectrum of abilities is

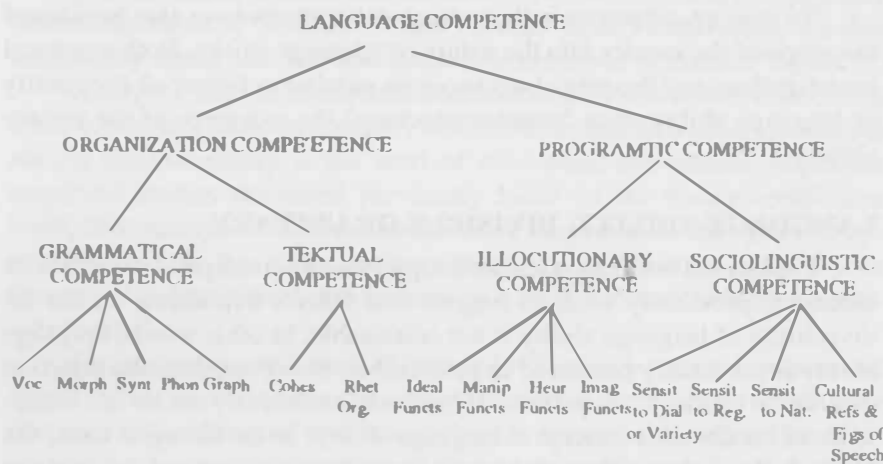
included. In addition, the relation between components in the framework is outlined (see also Bachman, 1990 for further discussion).

To sum up, advances in theoretical elaborations have also broadened the scope of the inquiry into the nature of language ability. Both empirical investigations and theoretical advances go parallel in favour of divisibility of language ability, thus "counter attacking" the existence of the unitary ability.

LANGUAGE ABILITY: DIVISIBLE OR UNITARY

Findings of both empirical investigations and conceptual explorations discussed previously seem to suggest that Oller's hypothesis on the indivisibility of language ability is not sustainable. In other words, language ability is potentially perceived to be divisible. However, does the rejection of Oller's Unitary Competence Hypothesis exclusively mean the acceptance of the divisible concept of language ability? In the strongest term, the Unitary Competence Hypothesis (Oller, 1979, 1980) is not defensible as revealed by the findings of several studies. Even, the evidence induces its main proponent to leave it and to make a compromise on the existence of a trait other than the one formerly claimed (Oller, 1983b). However, language ability cannot either be claimed to be exclusively divisible. Carroll (1983) points out that language ability has a structure which shares the features in between the two poles: extremely divisible-extremely unitary.

The idea that language ability shares the characteristics of the two extremes seems to fit several models if these characteristics are meant to refer to the hierarchical order of the components in language ability. In Fouly's et al. proposed models (Fouly et al., 1992), for instance, language ability is empirically found to consist of a structure sharing the following features: a single higher order trait, several lower order factors, interrelation between the lower order factors. In Bachman's theoretical framework (Bachman, 1990) an almost similar structure is identifiable. For instance, language competence—one of the three components of communicative language ability (Bachman, 1990:85)—is made up of two first separate lower order components. Further, each of those two separate components, is comprised of second distinct lower order components and subsequently, each of those components is distinguishable into several third lower order factors. The relation of the components in the Bachman framework is outlined in the figure that follows:



Components of Language Competence
(Bachman, 1990:87)

As shown in the figure, one factor, namely language competence is accounted for by several lower order factors. In addition, the relation between the lower factors is of vertical ordering. This relation is a bit different from Fouly's et al. model described previously in that Fouly's et al. model outlines not only vertical relation between higher-order components and lower-order components themselves. Nevertheless, the frameworks proposed by both Fouly et al. (1992) and Bachman (1990), reflect the theorised existence of language ability sharing the quality of both the divisible and the indivisible views.

CONCLUDING NOTES

The 'pendulum' syndrome (cf. Prator, 1981) is almost applicable to the trend characterising the inquiry into the nature of language ability. At a stage, the pendulum swings to the left: language ability was believed to be of divisible nature. Later, it was strongly opposed: language ability was believed to be unitary. However, after the pendulum swings to the right reaching its extreme point, it tends to swing to neither the left nor the right at its strongest pace. At this stage the framework of communicative language ability is identifiable. In addition, the relation of the components in

the framework is theoretically outlined (Bachman, 1990). Further tasks, however, challenge: empirical verification of this most recent framework. Or else, the pendulum stops swinging: stagnant.

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