

---

## Competence and Performance Towards an Integrative View of the Competence–Performance Dichotomy in Linguistics

**Dr. Shakeel Ahmad**

*Lecturer, Department of Arabic*

*Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad*

**Ammar Ahmad**

*PhD Researcher & Visiting Lecturer in Arabic*

*Faculty of Arabic, International Islamic University, Islamabad*

### Abstract

This paper examines one of the most significant dichotomies to have occupied modern and contemporary linguistic thought: the dichotomy of competence and performance, as it came to be formalized within generative-transformational linguistics. The study traces the intellectual roots of this dichotomy in Western linguistic thought since Saussure then in Chomsky, who established it as a theoretical foundation of modern linguistics, while also examining its counterparts in the classical Arabic linguistic tradition through the concept of "linguistic aptitude" (Al-Malaka). The paper further discusses the dialectical nature of the relationship between competence and performance, the limits of this distinction, and the criticism it has received, which led to broader concepts such as "communicative competence." The study concludes that competence and performance are complementary facets of the linguistic phenomenon that cannot be separated, and that a sound scientific understanding of language requires considering both together rather than in isolation from one another.

**Keywords:** linguistic competence, performance, communicative competence, linguistic aptitude (malaka), Chomsky, Saussure, generative linguistics

### Introduction

The dichotomy of "competence" and "performance" is among the most fertile dichotomies known to contemporary linguistic thought, and one of the most contested at the theoretical and methodological levels, since it touches the very question upon which modern linguistics was founded: What is language? Where does its true reality lie — in the system latent in the speaker's mind, or in the actual speech behaviours produced in different communicative situations? Noam Chomsky formulated this dichotomy in a precise terminological form when he distinguished between "linguistic

competence," the implicit knowledge of the rules of language possessed by the ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, and "performance," the actual use of this knowledge in concrete situations, subject to psychological, social, and physiological factors that may prevent a full correspondence between knowledge and its realization.

Yet this distinction, however recent its terminological formulation, is not the product of the Chomskyan moment alone; it has roots extending both into earlier Western linguistic thought and into the classical Arabic linguistic tradition, which makes it necessary to examine these roots before elaborating the two concepts and the nature of the relationship between them.<sup>1</sup>

This study is divided into several main sections: the first addresses the intellectual roots of this dichotomy beginning with Saussure and his celebrated distinction between "langue" and "parole"; the second presents Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence and its theoretical foundations; the third is devoted to the concept of performance and its relation to competence; the fourth examines the counterparts of this dichotomy in the Arabic linguistic tradition through the concept of *malaka* (aptitude); the fifth discusses the criticism directed at this distinction and the developments it subsequently generated; the study then closes with a conclusion synthesizing the main findings.

## **1. The Intellectual Roots of the Dichotomy in Saussure**

Credit for the first foundation of a dichotomy resembling that of competence and performance goes to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who distinguished in his celebrated lectures between "langue," an abstract social system of signs shared among members of the linguistic community, and "parole," the concrete individual realization of this system in particular communicative situations.<sup>2</sup>

For Saussure, *langue* is a ready-made social given that the individual receives from their environment, which resembles closely what Chomsky would later call competence, whereas *parole* is the individual, voluntary act in which the speaker exploits the possibilities of the linguistic system, which is thus closer to the concept of performance. However, the essential difference between the two dichotomies lies in their philosophical starting point: Saussure views language from a social-structuralist perspective that makes the linguistic system an external, collective given, whereas Chomsky proceeds from a rationalist, mentalist perspective that makes linguistic competence an innate knowledge latent in the mind of the individual, not in society.

Some scholars consider that the shift from Saussure's dichotomy to Chomsky's was not a complete rupture so much as a reformulation of the

same question from a different epistemic angle, in that Chomsky replaced the social given with an individual mental one, and the static structural description with a dynamic generative explanation of how the speaker is able to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences on the basis of a finite set of rules.<sup>3</sup>

It should also be noted that Saussure himself did not entirely neglect the individual dimension, but rather made parole the domain in which the individual's freedom and stylistic choice are manifested; he nonetheless excluded it from the core object of linguistics, which in his view should confine itself to the study of the system rather than its incidental individual realizations — a methodological exclusion that anticipates, in embryonic form, what Chomsky would later do in excluding performance from the core of linguistic theory.

## **2. The Concept of Linguistic Competence in Chomsky**

Chomsky defines "linguistic competence" as the implicit knowledge possessed by the ideal speaker-listener of the rules of their language, i.e. their ability to generate an infinite number of grammatically well-formed sentences and to judge their grammaticality or ill-formedness, on the basis of a finite set of latent mental rules and principles. This knowledge, in his view, is not acquired through mere learning or imitation as the behaviourists held, but is to a considerable degree innate, given that the human being possesses a biological predisposition to acquire it thanks to what he calls the "Language Acquisition Device."

Among the most salient features of this competence is that it is an unconscious latent knowledge, in the sense that the speaker is not necessarily aware of the rules they deploy in producing speech, just as a child is not aware of the laws of physics when walking or balancing. It is also an abstract, idealized knowledge, in the sense that it is not necessarily reducible to any particular speech performance, but rather transcends it to account for an infinite range of possible linguistic production. Hence, on the generativist view, competence — not performance, which remains fraught with imperfections and slips — is the true object of linguistics.

It should be noted that Chomsky linked this competence to the notion of "Universal Grammar," the set of principles shared by all human languages that constitutes the innate foundation on which any particular language is built, while "parameters" specific to each language account for the surface differences between them. On this view, a child's acquisition of their mother tongue is not learning from scratch, but a process of setting these parameters on the basis of limited input from their environment — which explains the astonishing speed with which a child acquires a highly complex linguistic

system despite the poverty of the linguistic input received, a matter known in the generativist literature as the "poverty of the stimulus."<sup>4</sup>

It follows from this view that the study of language, for Chomsky, should form part of the study of the human mind in general — that is, a branch of cognitive psychology — rather than a mere description of socially acquired speech habits, as the behaviourists such as Skinner held. Chomsky subjected the behaviourist position to sharp criticism, arguing that its account of language acquisition is incapable of explaining the speaker's creative ability to produce sentences never heard before.

### **3. The Concept of Performance and Its Relation to Competence**

Performance, by contrast, is defined as the actual use of language in concrete situations — the physical, phonetic, or written realization of that latent knowledge. Chomsky pointed out that performance does not reflect competence directly and faithfully, since its shaping is affected by a range of non-linguistic factors such as forgetting, hesitation, slips of the tongue, fatigue, emotion, and the constraints of short-term memory.<sup>5</sup>

When a speaker makes a grammatical error, stammers, or begins an utterance only to correct it, this does not necessarily mean that their linguistic competence is defective or deficient; rather, it means that performance factors have prevented that competence from being fully and correctly realized. Hence the distinction between competence and performance was, above all, a methodological one, through which Chomsky sought to isolate the object of linguistic study (competence) from the incidental imperfections that beset actual usage (performance), so as to build an abstract theory capable of accounting for linguistic aptitude in its ideal form.

This does not mean that performance is of no scientific value; its study is essential to other fields such as psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Chomsky nonetheless held that the theory of transformational-generative grammar should focus primarily on the description of competence, leaving the study of performance to other auxiliary disciplines intersecting with linguistics.<sup>6</sup>

Another important aspect of the relationship between competence and performance is that performance itself divides into two levels — comprehension and production — which, although both grounded in the same linguistic competence, do not necessarily develop at the same pace: a child, for instance, often understands more sentences than they can actually produce, which confirms that performance is not a mere mechanical echo of competence, but a domain in which other cognitive capacities interact, such as memory, attention, and articulatory-motor planning.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Competence and Performance in the Arabic Linguistic Tradition: The Concept of Malaka**

The notion of latent competence was not foreign to classical Arabic linguistic thought. In his book *al-Khaṣā'is*, Ibn Jinnī offers a precise indication that a native Arabic speaker's knowledge of their language is an innate, intuitive knowledge, defining grammar (*naḥw*) as an extraction from the speech of the Arabs and a tracking of what their innate linguistic intuition (*saṭīqa*) uttered.<sup>8</sup>

For Ibn Jinnī, this innate intuition (*saṭīqa*) is akin to the latent competence from which the speaker draws their intuitive judgements on the correctness or incorrectness of speech, without needing to learn the rules deliberately, since the grammarian merely extracts the rules from this intuition inductively, after usage has occurred — rather than positing them in advance as a basis from which the language would then be acquired.

The concept of "malaka" (aptitude) in Ibn Khaldūn's *al-Muqaddima* comes closer still to the competence–performance dichotomy. He defines linguistic malaka as a firmly rooted disposition of the tongue, acquired through extensive practice and exercise, until it becomes an intuitive faculty enabling the speaker to compose Arabic speech according to the manner of the Arabs' speech.<sup>9</sup>

Notably, unlike Chomsky, who considers competence an innate knowledge prior to usage, Ibn Khaldūn treats malaka as a result of practice rather than something prior to it — that is, it is formed through repetition and exercise until it becomes rooted in the tongue and turns into a second nature akin to the first, innate one. In this the Khaldunian conception converges with certain functionalist and usage-based contemporary linguistic views, which hold that linguistic competence itself is shaped and grows through continuous interaction with usage, rather than being a ready-made innate given wholly independent of experience — opening the door to a comparison between this ancient Arabic view and post-Chomskyan trends in functional and cognitive linguistics.

This concept is not confined to Ibn Jinnī and Ibn Khaldūn alone; similar intimations can be found among the earliest grammarians in their discussion of *samā'* (attested usage) and *qiyās* (analogy) as two sources for deriving grammatical rulings. *Samā'* is the corpus of actual performance transmitted from the speech of the Arabs, while *qiyās* is the extraction of the latent rule from this attested performance — a procedure closely resembling that followed by the modern descriptive linguist in deriving the rules of competence from the available corpus of performance.<sup>10</sup>

Some modern scholars go so far as to argue that the Khaldunian conception of malaka, as the product of repeated practice which gradually

solidifies into an intuitive disposition, also approaches certain contemporary usage-based theories of language acquisition, which hold that linguistic structures gradually take shape in the speaker's mind through repeated exposure to linguistic patterns in communicative contexts, rather than through a ready-made innate given independent of experience — a striking convergence between an ancient Arabic view and a contemporary Western linguistic one, despite the temporal distance and the difference in overall epistemic framework between the two.

## **5. The Dialectic of the Relationship, and Criticism of the Dichotomy**

Despite the methodological rigour that Chomsky brought to this distinction, it did not escape the criticism of many linguists, who saw in it an exaggerated separation between the purely mental and the social-communicative, holding that language is above all a social communicative phenomenon that cannot be understood apart from the actual contexts of its use.

Foremost among this criticism is that offered by the linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes, who considered Chomsky's notion of competence too narrow, confined to purely grammatical knowledge and neglecting another essential dimension: the speaker's knowledge of the conditions of appropriate language use according to occasion and social context. He proposed instead the concept of "communicative competence," which includes, alongside grammatical knowledge, the speaker's knowledge of when to speak and when to remain silent, in what manner to address different interlocutors, on what topic, and by what means.<sup>11</sup>

Another line of criticism holds that the strict separation between competence and performance makes it difficult to account for many linguistic phenomena that arise only within actual usage, such as intonation, pause, discourse initiation, and phenomena of reception and contextual interpretation — phenomena that are difficult to reduce to abstract grammatical competence alone.<sup>12</sup>

Some scholars, however, argue that although this criticism is valid insofar as it broadens the scope of linguistic inquiry, it does not invalidate the methodological value of Chomsky's distinction, but rather complements and develops it, since distinguishing between latent knowledge and actual use remains theoretically necessary, even as the notion of latent knowledge itself expands to include pragmatic and communicative dimensions alongside the purely grammatical one.

Chomsky himself, in later work, revisited the concept of competence, distinguishing between "I-language" (internalized grammatical competence), the proper object of pure linguistic study, and

manifestations of "E-language" (externalized language), in an attempt to renew the philosophical basis of this distinction in the face of the criticism directed at it.<sup>13</sup>

A further functionalist line of criticism holds that language, being above all a tool of communication, cannot be studied in isolation from its communicative function, and that grammatical structure itself has historically taken shape, and continues to be acquired, in response to communicative and functional pressures — making the separation between an abstract grammatical competence and a communicative function, in this view, an arbitrary one, since grammar itself, on the functionalist account, is nothing but the crystallization of recurrent patterns of usage over time.

## **6. The Dichotomy's Resonance in Contemporary Arabic Linguistics**

Modern Arab linguists received the competence–performance dichotomy with critical awareness: some sought to trace it back to its classical Arabic origins, while others applied it to the analysis of the contemporary Arabic linguistic phenomenon. Tammām Ḥassān held that language is a system of relations that cannot properly be understood except by considering both of its levels together — the abstract mental level and the actual performative level — and that neglecting either leads to a truncated conception of the linguistic phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

A number of researchers have also stressed the need to distinguish between the theoretical level, at which competence is studied as an abstract object, and the applied level, concerned with analysing actual corpora of speech, while affirming that proceeding from performance to the inference of the rules of competence remains the soundest methodological path in descriptive linguistics.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that many of these contemporary Arabic studies have sought to reconcile the modern generativist perspective with the classical Arabic tradition, offering a contemporary reading of Ibn Khaldūn's concept of *malaka* that positions it as anticipating Chomsky in pointing to the existence of a latent knowledge guiding speech performance, even where the philosophical and methodological starting points of the two conceptions differ.

## **7. Further Methodological Dimensions: Corpora and the Problem of Inference**

One of the methodological problems raised by the competence–performance dichotomy is how to infer competence from available performance data, given that competence, as a latent knowledge not directly observable, can only be accessed through indirect indicators, such as

grammaticality judgements, the analysis of an actual speech corpus, or the observation of performance errors and slips themselves, which, incidental as they are, may nonetheless reveal certain features of the underlying system that produces them.

Some scholars working on error analysis in second-language learners have drawn on this same principle, holding that a learner's errors are not merely random performance lapses but often systematically reflect a particular stage in the construction of an "interlanguage" — a linguistic system the learner builds mentally as a competence still in formation. This documents the close relationship between the analysis of performance and the exploration of the structure of latent competence, rather than treating error merely as something to be avoided and eliminated.<sup>16</sup>

## **8. Towards an Integrative View of the Relationship between Competence and Performance**

It emerges from the foregoing that competence and performance are not opposed, contradictory poles but complementary facets of a single phenomenon — language. Competence without performance remains a latent knowledge incapable of appearing or being realized, while performance without competence loses its explanatory generative basis, since the speaker's ability to produce novel sentences never heard before cannot be explained except by positing an underlying system of rules that guides this production.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, performance is not merely a passive realization of competence; it is also a source that shapes, nourishes, and develops competence across the stages of language acquisition, through the speaker's continuous contact with their social linguistic environment. This makes the relationship between the two terms a reciprocal, dialectical one rather than a one-directional causal relationship: competence guides performance, and performance in turn feeds and develops competence, especially during the early stages of a child's language acquisition.

This perhaps explains the return, in much contemporary linguistic scholarship — particularly within functional, cognitive, and usage-based approaches — to according renewed importance to performance and actual usage as a fundamental source for understanding the structure, origin, and development of language, in contrast to the strict abstractionist tendency that characterized the early phase of generative linguistics.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, performance itself divides into two levels of activity — comprehension and production — that, though grounded in the same underlying competence, do not necessarily progress at the same rate, which is a further indication that competence and performance interact dynamically rather than standing in a simple, static hierarchy.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the integrative view of competence and performance does not negate the usefulness of the methodological distinction between them, but rather reformulates it within a dynamic framework, whereby competence remains the explanatory basis for linguistic creativity, and performance remains the domain in which this creativity is realized and through which it takes shape and develops — in a continuous interactive relationship that does not end once the speaker attains linguistic competence in childhood, but continues throughout life with every new communicative experience.<sup>20</sup> Also relevant here is the pedagogical dimension: many applied linguists hold that the ultimate goal of language teaching is not to instil abstract theoretical rules to be memorized, but to equip the learner with genuine linguistic competence that they deploy spontaneously in actual performance situations — which calls for revisiting many traditional curricula concerned with rote grammatical rules divorced from their natural contexts of use, in favour of communicative approaches concerned with building the learner's overall communicative competence rather than grammatical competence alone.

### **Conclusion**

This study has concluded that the competence–performance dichotomy, with the philosophical and methodological dimensions it carries, represents one of the most important theoretical frameworks that enabled modern linguistics to move beyond the surface description of speech phenomena towards explaining the underlying mental mechanisms behind them. It has been shown that the roots of this distinction run deep in Western linguistic thought since Saussure, and that it was not foreign to the Arabic linguistic tradition, which knew the concepts of *malaka* and *sarīqa* (intuitive aptitude) in Ibn Jinnī and Ibn Khaldūn.

It has also been shown that this distinction, for all its methodological importance, did not escape criticism that led to a broadening of the concept of competence to include communicative and contextual dimensions, and that the correct relationship between competence and performance is one of dialectical complementarity rather than separation and opposition: language, in reality, is simultaneously latent knowledge and actual realization, and there is no way to understand it soundly and scientifically except by considering both together, as two inseparable facets of a single reality.

This conclusion opens the way for future studies to examine in greater detail how this dichotomy may be applied to the analysis of contemporary Arabic linguistic phenomena, particularly in the fields of language acquisition and language teaching.<sup>21</sup>

There also remains a need for further applied research drawing on genuine Arabic corpora to test the extent to which the proposed theoretical models of Arabic linguistic competence match the actual performance of

native speakers across its various registers — formal and colloquial, written and spoken — which would bring abstract theoretical accounts closer to lived linguistic reality, and make Arabic linguistic scholarship more open to the data of actual usage without sacrificing its theoretical rigour and methodological precision.<sup>22</sup>

## Sources

### Arabic Sources

- Hassān, Tammām. “The Arabic Language: Its Meaning and Structure”. 5th ed. Cairo: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 2006.
- Ibn Jinnī, Abū al-Faṭḥ ‘Uthmān. “Al-Khaṣā’iṣ”. Edited by Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Najjār. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, n.d.
- Ibn Khaldūn, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. “Al-Muqaddima”. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2001.
- Mu’min, Aḥmad. “Linguistics: Origin and Development”. Algiers: Office of University Publications, 1994.
- Naḥla, Maḥmūd Aḥmad. “New Horizons in Contemporary Linguistic Research”. Alexandria: Dār al-Ma’rifa al-Jāmi’iyya, 2002.
- al-Awraḡhī, Muḥammad. “Modern Linguistics: Its Foundations, Methods, and Theories”. Casablanca: Dar Toubkal, 1993.
- al-Fāṣī al-Fihri, ‘Abd al-Qādir. “Linguistics and the Arabic Language: Syntactic and Semantic Models”. 2nd ed. Casablanca: Dar Toubkal, 1990.
- al-Musaddī, ‘Abd al-Salām. “Linguistics and Its Epistemological Foundations”. Tunis: Tunisian Publishing House, 1986.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. “Course in General Linguistics”. Translated into Arabic by Ṣāliḥ al-Qarmādī, Muḥammad al-Shāwish, and Muḥammad ‘Ajīna. Tunis: al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1985.

### English Sources

- Chomsky, Noam. “Aspects of the Theory of Syntax”. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965.
- Chomsky, Noam. “Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use”. New York: Praeger, 1986.
- Chomsky, Noam. “Rules and Representations”. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Hymes, Dell. “On Communicative Competence.” In “Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings”, edited by J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes, 269–93. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. “Course in General Linguistics”. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

## References:

- 1Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1965, p. 4.
- 2Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, Philosophical Library, New York, 1959, p. 33 (Arabic trans.: Šāliḥ al-Qarmādī et al., *al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb*, Tunis, 1985).
- 3‘Abd al-Qādir al-Fāsī al-Fihri, *Linguistics and the Arabic Language: Syntactic and Semantic Models*, Dar Toubkal, Casablanca, 2nd ed., 1990, p. 21.
- 4Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use*, Praeger, New York, 1986, p. 27.
- 5Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
- 6Aḥmad Mu‘min, *Linguistics: Origin and Development*, Office of University Publications, Algiers, 1994, p. 112.
- 7‘Abd al-Qādir al-Fāsī al-Fihri, op. cit., p. 55.
- 8Ibn Jinnī, *al-Khaṣā’iṣ*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Najjār, *Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya*, Cairo, vol. 1, p. 34.
- 9‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, *Dār al-Fikr*, Beirut, 2001, p. 546.
- 10Aḥmad Mu‘min, op. cit., p. 145.
- 11Dell Hymes, "On Communicative Competence", in J.B. Pride & J. Holmes (eds.), *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 269-293.
- 12Maḥmūd Aḥmad Naḥla, *New Horizons in Contemporary Linguistic Research*, *Dār al-Ma‘rifa al-Jāmi‘iyya*, Alexandria, 2002, p. 88.
- 13Noam Chomsky, *Rules and Representations*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, p. 59.
- 14Tammām Ḥassān, *The Arabic Language: Its Meaning and Structure*, ‘Ālam al-Kutub, Cairo, 5th ed., 2006, p. 15.
- 15Muḥammad al-Awraḡhī, *Modern Linguistics: Its Foundations, Methods, and Theories*, Dar Toubkal, Casablanca, 1993, p. 45.
- 16Muḥammad al-Awraḡhī, op. cit., p. 60.
- 17‘Abd al-Salām al-Musaddī, *Linguistics and Its Epistemological Foundations*, Tunisian Publishing House, Tunis, 1986, p. 67.
- 18Aḥmad Mu‘min, op. cit., p. 130.
- 19Maḥmūd Aḥmad Naḥla, op. cit., p. 102.
- 20Tammām Ḥassān, op. cit., p. 40.
- 21See: Tammām Ḥassān, op. cit., p. 22; and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Fāsī al-Fihri, op. cit., p. 30.
- 22‘Abd al-Salām al-Musaddī, op. cit., p. 80.