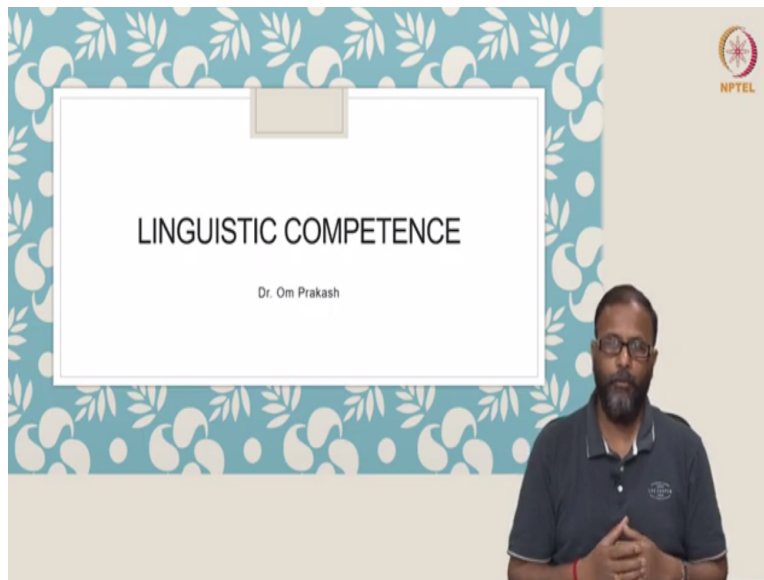


Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics
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Lecture 10
Linguistics Competence

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Welcome to class. Today we are going to talk about Linguistic Competence. Competence is your efficacy, your potential, your underlying potential to do something as opposed to performance, which is the actual act of it and is perceptible and externally observable. In order to understand linguistic competence, we need to look into the Chomsky enterprise and Chomsky's theory of generative grammar, from which this term comes out.

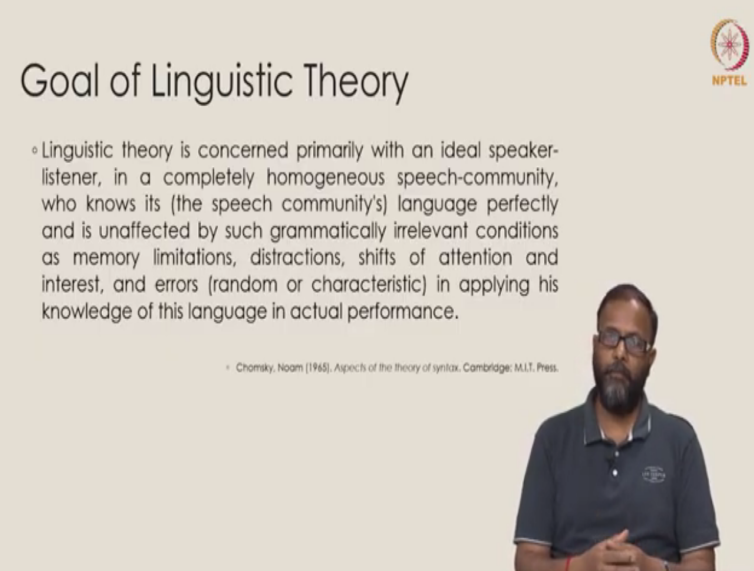
A historical reference can be made to Ferdinand de Saussure's expression of *la langue* and *la parole*. We will talk about *la langue* and *la parole* in some other videos. Today we are going to talk about Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence. Why it is so important to understand is that it had a very deep impact on linguistic theories and post behaviorist theory.

And roughly, we can say post-1965, it has an implicit impact. Whether it was criticized or it was accepted by scholars in both ways. It has a deeper impact on understanding language as a phenomenon, and all linguistic theories have some other reference to it. And that is why this concept is very important to understand. This was criticized by Dell Hymes, MAK Halliday, and

other people; the primitive people working in pragmatics, people working in social and sociolinguistics, and others already scientists.

But nonetheless, this concept of linguistic competence remains a very strong and important idea. And we need to understand it in order to understand whether it was approved, adopted, and appreciated by linguists, or it was very precise for both the reasons. For both the reasons we need to understand this concept.

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The slide features a title 'Goal of Linguistic Theory' at the top left. In the top right corner is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a star-like pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it. The main content is a quote: '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.' Below the quote is a small citation: 'Chomsky, Noam (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.' In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark blue polo shirt, with his hands clasped in front of him.

So we will start with a quote from Chomsky where he talks about the goal of linguistic theory. So in his famous work *Aspects of Theory of Syntax* published in 1965, on page 3, he mentions “linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener”. We have to keep in mind this phrase, ideal speaker and listener. We will come to that in a while.

In a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows if this speech community is language perfect and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions? As memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors, random or characteristics in applying his knowledge to this language in actual performance.

And this single statement is so powerful in the sense that it in no way defines the entire Chomsky approach. So Chomsky essentially distinguishes between competence and performance. Chomsky enterprises starts with three etymological questions; what is knowledge of language?

How is this knowledge of language acquired? And how this knowledge of language is put into practice?

With these three questions, the entire Chomsky enterprise and the theoretical paradigm starts. If you can recall, in 1957 BF Skinner came up with a very important and monumental work that summed up the entire behaviorist paradigm called *Verbal Behavior*. And language was considered to be part of total human behavior; it is a verbal behavior, which is part of total human behavior.

And you can recall and connect with stimulus and response chain, operant conditioning, reinforcement and habit formation. So language was considered to be an act of habit formation. So in the behaviorist paradigm, this is how language, this is how they look at the language. And we also recall the Chomskyan criticism. Chomsky criticized this work, and that gave the foundation for the generative paradigm. And in 1965, Chomsky actually articulated the framework of generative paradigm in his wonderful work *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, and I just quote from page 3 of that book.

The linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker and listener and in a completely homogeneous speech community. That means Chomsky is referring to an underlying system of knowledge of language shared by all speakers of that speech community. So at that level there is a variation, and everyone shares that knowledge of language. And for him, the knowledge of language represents the underlying grammatical system.

So he refers to two aspects; one is grammatical competence and the other is pragmatic competence. He refers to primary competence as the answer to the third question, how this knowledge of language is put into practice? But in grammatical competence, he is essentially referring to the computational aspect of language and its representation in the human mind.

So we have to understand this distinction. This distinction of underlying, this is the grammar being underlyingly represented as a mental reality, and the use of language as pragmatic competence or actual performance. So homogeneous speech is covered here. Perhaps these are the terms like ideal speaker and listener. This was one phrase and another one is homogeneous speech community.

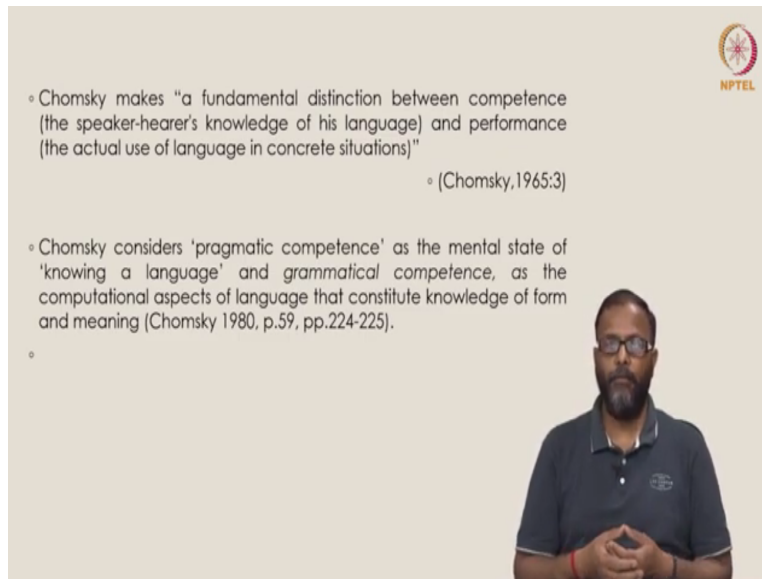
This word homogeneous is another bone of contention. Why was he criticized? Because if you look at the language use, you live if you look from a performance perspective how actually language is being used in a social context. The situation cannot be homogeneous; it is heterogeneous. But he draws a distinction between knowing a language and language use. Knowing a language to him is competence.

That means underlying grammatical representation, our mental reality refers to a computational aspect of language, which is shared by all the speakers of the language in that particular speech community, and then he mentions, unless such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations. So these are exceptions. He is ruling out so many limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, errors, and any kind of error, whether it is a random error or a pattern.

So he is keeping the mental representation of language and grammar out of the ambit of all these restrictions and problems that we may have in performance or while using the language. So is that a goal of linguistic theory: the goal of linguistic theory is to predict, account for and explain this mental representation and computational aspect of language. Use a user centric control by being influenced by multiple factors such as memory limitations, distractions, shift of attention and interest, and errors.

So that is a huge part of language, but as far as mental representation of language is concerned, as far as computational aspect of language is concerned, that is shared by all speakers of this speech community, and that gets you linked to native intuition about language. So you are able to distinguish between a grammatical and ungrammatical sentence at the same time. You are able to predict and filter ambiguity in a sentence. So native speakers and native like intuition is what he is referring to.

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The slide contains the following text:

- Chomsky makes "a fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations)"
- (Chomsky, 1965:3)
- Chomsky considers 'pragmatic competence' as the mental state of 'knowing a language' and *grammatical competence*, as the computational aspects of language that constitute knowledge of form and meaning (Chomsky 1980, p.59, pp.224-225).
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The slide also features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner and a video of a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark blue polo shirt, standing in front of a plain background.

So he makes a fundamental distinction between competence and the speaker's knowledge of his language and performance. The actual use of language in concrete situations. And he is more concerned about the first competence. So by linguistic competence, he means grammatical competence which refers to computational aspects of language. How language is computed in the human mind. And he sets the goal of linguistic theory to understand and predict that computation.

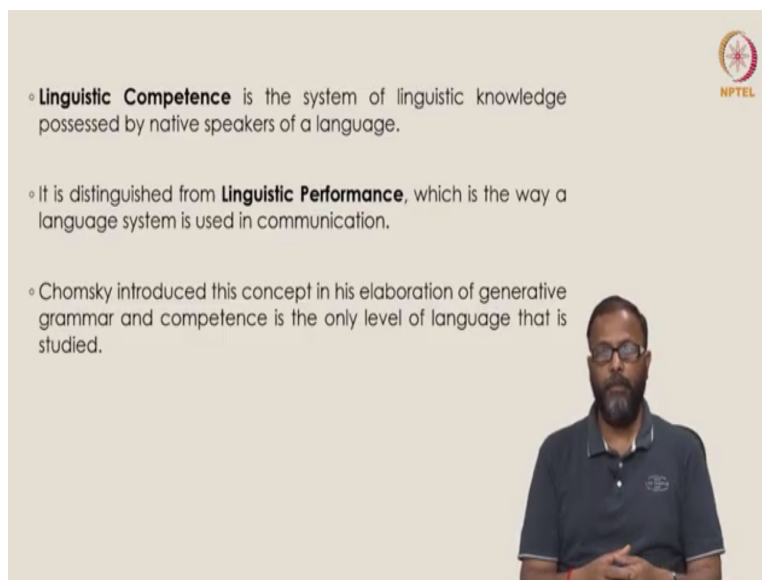
So Chomsky considers pragmatic competence or the actual use of it as the knowledge of using language as the mental state of knowing a language. And grammatical competence as the computational aspect of language that constitutes knowledge of form and meaning. So to him there is a difference between pragmatic competence and grammatical competence. Pragmatic competence includes both. It is a mental state of knowing language. And when you say I know a language, what does it mean?

That I have control and understanding of the pragmatic aspect and the grammatical aspect of the language as a computational. So grammatical competence, competence as computational aspect of language, constitutes knowledge of form and meaning. So this is how you combine it and essentially makes the distinction between competence and performance. And he says linguistic competence, understanding linguistic competence should be the goal of linguistic theories.

So he takes that understanding of linguistic theories to an abstract level and underlines the underlying level of mental representation where he clearly makes a distinction between competence and performance. And this is that, knowing a language is the mental representation at the underlying level in the human mind, that takes care of the competition aspect of it. And this knowledge is shared by all speakers of the speech community.

However, the performance or the actual use of this knowledge may be restricted because of multiple other factors. So he is not talking about his structures in terms of an externally observable perceptible structure that we see in performances. He is referring to competence in a language of a speaker as a deeper mental representation, and that refers to the competition of it.

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The slide contains the following text:

- **Linguistic Competence** is the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language.
- It is distinguished from **Linguistic Performance**, which is the way a language system is used in communication.
- Chomsky introduced this concept in his elaboration of generative grammar and competence is the only level of language that is studied.

The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the slide. A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark polo shirt, is shown in the bottom right corner of the slide, appearing to be the speaker.

So he says that linguistic competency is the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language. Not necessarily visible in his own performance, but every native speaker of a language shares the same knowledge base about the language. And it is distinguished from linguistic performance, which is the way a language system is used in communication. So Chomsky introduced this concept in his elaboration of generative grammar, and competence is the only level of language that is studied.

So he restricts the focus of the entire linguistic theory and studies this aspect of language, the deeper representation, the mental representation. And perhaps this is the reason why Chomsky

was severely criticized. Because he is blamed for ignoring the performance and using no language in the real situation. But the foundation of generative theory, look at it, through so many references he makes you understand this theory.


Look at this infinite creativity thing, where you have the linguistic elements and limited rules of grammar. But you can create unlimited utterances. So do we learn the rules of a language? Do we acquire rules of language? We acquire a pattern. So he brings in two important hypotheses to support his explanation of generative grammar. Then he talks about universal grammar. He talks about universal grammar again. Universal grammar is an underlying thing, an underlying thing, a mental representation.

He says that a human child is born with a language acquisition device. What Steven Pinker says, we are hardwired to learn a language. So this is a native approach where language is native. As native speakers we are born with that mechanism, that apparatus to learn a language, that contains LAD, Language Acquisition Device and UG Universal Grammar. So he talks about principles and parameters.

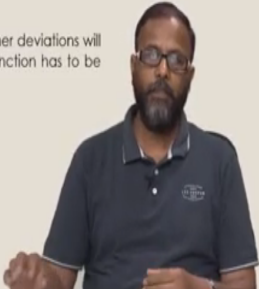
So he says that linguistic competence is all about understanding the principles of language available to all native speakers of that language. So you refer to that competence as *I-language*, I in Italics. *I-language*, so we call it internalized language. So competency is all about internalized language. And that is why he refers to his speech community as a homogeneous speech community at that level, where this knowledge of language is shared without variation.

So the speaker of the language understands and can make native speakers' judgments about grammaticality and can have linguistic intuitions. To get all upset about the underlying factors he is talking about?

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- Chomsky differentiates competence, which is an idealized capacity, from performance which is the production of actual utterances.
- According to him, competence is the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of his or her language and it is the 'mental reality' which is responsible for all those aspects of language use which can be characterized as 'linguistic'.
- Chomsky argues that only under an idealized situation whereby the speaker-hearer is unaffected by grammatically irrelevant conditions such as memory limitations and distractions will performance be a direct reflection of competence.
- A sample of natural speech consisting of numerous false starts and other deviations will not provide such data. Therefore, he claims that a fundamental distinction has to be made between the competence and performance.



So this is what Chomsky means by Linguistic competence. So Chomsky differentiate competence which is an idealized capacity from performance which is the production of actual utterances. And according to him, competence is the ideal speaker here is the knowledge of his or her language. And it is a mental reality which is responsible for all those aspects of language use, which can be characterized as linguistic. He argues that only under an idealized situation, the speaker here is unaffected by grammatically irrelevant conditions such as memory limitations and distractions. Will performance be a direct reflection of competence? Otherwise performances are restricted by these memory limitations, distractions, and shifts one's attention.

So he says that performance does not correspond to competence. Performance is a partial reflection of competence, it is not identical. And that is why linguistic theory must distinguish between these two levels for understanding language. So the capacity or the competence of a speaker cannot be absolute by looking at the performance. So externally perceptible and observable structures in no way represent the efficacy or the potential or the knowledge of the speaker of the language.

So we need to distinguish between these two levels, where one is the level of competence and the level of performance. Performance is restricted by a lot of external factors like memory loss, shifting attention and interests occupied by mind, and lots of other factors like fatigue. So the

performance is influenced by multiple suited by multiple factors and Chomsky says that these two cannot be equated.


And if at all you want to judge the knowledge of language and understand the knowledge of language of a speaker, then we have to remove all these grammatically irrelevant factors,, which is not possible. So he makes a distinction between the two levels of competence and performance. And a sample of natural speech consisting of numerous false starts and other deviations will not provide such data.

And if you recall, there is a reason why he talks about his poverty of stimulus. You can understand the poverty of stimulus in these terms, in the sense that a young child, an innocent baby or newly born baby is exposed to a variety of data which is idiosyncratic and fuzzy. So adults, who speak around a child and child's input is the performance of these adults. But what makes the child learn the language perfectly fine?


Even though the input is fuzzy, incomplete, not sufficient, degenerate and limited, the child is able to acquire the first language without any such restrictions. You can understand this poverty of stimulus idea with distinction between competence and performance and the whole idea of the speaker. A child has an inbuilt mechanism and apparatus programmed to learn language, and what he calls LAD language acquisition device.

And a child does not learn rules, but he confirms the levels that he has, that is, what he says that confirms that level. So universal rules, which he called the principles of language, are already available with a child. So this is what he may be referred to as a mental representation of language and the grammatical competition. This is what he is referring to. He claims that a fundamental distinction has to be made between competence and performance.


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- 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.
- Competence can be studied independently of language use, which is "performance", through introspection and grammatically judgments by native speakers.




Goal of Linguistic Theory



- 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, Noam [1965]. *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, M.I.T. Press.



According to Chomsky, competence is the ideal language system that enables a speaker to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language and distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. So that gives you our capacity to develop native like intuition. Language intuitions, not necessarily you have heard all the words and all the sentences of the language you speak, but as a speaker you have this intuitive, underlying ability to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences. What is possible and what is not possible in a language.

So it is your competence. It is your grammatical competence. It is your native like intuition that allows you to do so, and that is why he delinks competence from performance. He says that it is performance that is affected by many grammatical, grammatically relevant or irrelevant factors. But competence can be studied independently of language use. It is not to understand language user and linguistic competence, say, he completely de-links these two ideas, competence and performance. Performance is individual centric and in a given context restricted by multiple social, linguistic, and individual grammatically irrelevant factors. So he is not concerned about that. He is more concerned about the mental representation, the computational aspect and underlying grammatical structures, what constitutes the knowledge of language?

So this is the Chomskyan idea of linguistic competence. It is a very loaded term and we need to understand the profundity of this explanation in the sense that Chomsky. So what is the deduction that we can make out of it or what are the learnings that we can make out of it? Number one, Chomsky delinks competence and performance. Competence for him is *I-* language or internalized language, which is not perceptible and visible in performance.

Performance is the actual use of language. He calls it the *E-language*. We call it the *E-language* or external language, that you see and you witness. He sets the goal of linguistic theory to understand, explain, and account for this mental representation of language, the computational aspect of grammar, underlying grammatical structure available to a child as principles of language. He does not talk about the parameters which define the performance. He is talking about the principles.

So principles and parameters. He makes a clear distinction between the two; *I-language* and *E-language*. He makes a clear distinction between the two, and this is that linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an idealist speaker and a listener in a completely homogeneous speech community. And his homogeneity refers to that similarity and an underlying level of the representation of language in the human mind, and that knowledge is shared by all members of the speech community without any variation.

So at competence level all of these users of language are at an equal level. They all share the same knowledge about the language. At performance level we find variations, so he delinks the level of competence and level of performance. Though he was criticized for this de-linking and

focusing more on the abstractness of it. Because competence and computation that he is talking about is not externally observable and perceptible.

And that is suggested and reflected in terms of actual performance. And in attack of enterprise and theory talks about that in that underlying mental capacity and computational aspect of language. So he was criticized by people like MAK Halliday. He was really criticized for this approach in understanding language. However, this idea of linguistic competence had a deep impact in language teaching and learning as well.

And as a response to this linguistic competence, Dell Hymes came up with communicative competence. So what Chomsky talks about as *E-language*, that can be equated with Dell Hymes idea of communicative competence. In another class we will talk about the Dell Hymes communicative competence. MAK Halliday also underlines seven functions of language, as a response to Chomsky's theory which was very popular in late 60s and early 70s. Dell Hymes came up with a speaking model which is ethnography of communication. So they focus more on the language used.

So they are talking about appropriacy, social culture appropriacy, pragmatic appropriacy, how a user of the language uses the language. And then equates these two levels. Dell Hymes calls it communicative competence, which is seen as a response to Chomsky's linguistic competence. So we will talk more about the Chomskyan idea of, let us say, generative grammar.

So for now this is linguistic competence for you. You have to remember 2-3 terms, which are very crucial. Number one, ideal speaker and listener in a homogeneous speech community. This is a phrase that you need to remember. And then, who knows this speech language is perfectly fine and also unaffected by grammatically irrelevant restrictions and conditions.

That means he is talking about the knowledge of language as possessed by every speaker of the speech community, at an underlined underlying level, as mental representation as a typical computational system. How are these grammar rules computed? How is the user able to use these rules? All these rules are represented in the human mind. So he is talking about language as a computational entity in the human mind, in an idealized speaker and listener with a homogeneous speech community.

So these are the terms we need to remember in order to understand the Chomskyan idea of linguistic competence. And for him, competency is all about *I-language*, internalized language, and performance is external language or *E-language*. So it makes a distinction between *I* language and *E* language. *E-language* is observable perceptibly. You can see from a distance in performance, but performance is controlled, restricted and influenced by many grammatically irrelevant conditions like limitations of memory, distraction of attention, shifting of attention, and interest, errors, it may be random or pattern characteristics.

But they all restrict your performance and by no means your performance reflects your competence. Because performance is restricted by these factors so that cannot be equated. So your performance is not a good sample to understand the competence. This is what Chomsky says. And we need to understand this distinction of communication of linguistic competence and linguistic performance.

So there are certain repeating words you have to remember; linguistic competence, linguistic performance. Another pair parallel to this is *I-language* and *E-language*, you have to remember it. Then another pair is, principles and parameters which you have to remember. They all refer to similar ideas and concepts in pairs.

Competence and performance, *E-language* *I-language*, and principles and parameters. So we will continue our discussion on Chomskyan theory of language and why sociolinguistics, you understand you need to understand the reactions and how social linguists respond to Chomskyan generative theory. However, the development of sociolinguistics has always greatly influenced Chomskyan generative theory.

Though people see them as two separate theories, I believe that, in order to develop a better understanding of communicative competence, it is important for you to understand linguistic competence. So that is it for now. We will meet in another video with communicative competence. Thank you very much.