

**When Shyness Is *Not* Incompetence:
A Case of Thai Communication Competence***

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Abstract

Following the framework of communication competence, which consists of motivation, cognition and performance, this paper argues that Thai communication competence differs from the American or Western counterparts in all three elements. Some Thai communication competence notions include shyness, reluctance to ask for favors, as well as knowledge and awareness of seniority, social links, and *Kreng Jai* (being extremely considerate). Instead of being assertive, appearing to be shy or reluctant to ask for favors, being humble, and not responding too quickly in interactions are strategic mode of communication to gain social respect and recognition in Thai society. Autoethnographic data and Thai proverbs are used to demonstrate those themes of Thai communication competence. The conclusion suggests that the notion of communication competence as motivation, cognition, and performance appears to be universal and the framework is heuristic in analyzing communication competence. However, ideology and behaviors that count as being competent vary from culture to culture. Therefore, there should be more attempts to employ an interpretive approach to study communication competence.

Introduction

I first came to America in 1999. As a Thai student who had never been abroad before, I was excited to meet with people from other countries who look different from me and to live in a new environment. When looking back, I realize how little I knew at that time about the differences, not only in terms of the physical appearance but also the hidden assumptions about selves and lives, between other people and myself. When I was young, my parents taught me that to be *Kreng Jai*¹, or considerate, is the best strategy when dealing with people that I first meet or even with people that I know very well. If you show your consideration to others, they will reciprocate in the same manner. So, as a part of being *Kreng Jai*, I try not to speak up very often in hopes that other people I meet in America would consider that I am nice and sincere to them and that they would be nice in return and grant me a favor when I need. I have to admit that I am lucky to have met nice people who try to understand my behaviors. Usually,

we communicate successfully but that is not always the case.

One day, my American classmate asked me to join the departmental soccer team as they needed people to sign up so that they could join the university's tournament. Even though this activity did not require a great skill and all my friends were studious students who barely knew how to play soccer, I really felt uncomfortable to join the team as I never played this kind of game before. At the same time, I did not want to refuse his wish because I was afraid that it would hurt his feeling. So I said to my friend, "I will try my best to show up at the game." The day after the game, my friend came to talk to me again and he seemed very upset. He asked me why I did not go to the game as promised. I was speechless as I thought he should have known that I was reluctant to accept his invitation in the first place.

This misunderstanding led me to question why my answer did not work in such a situation even though I had a good intention to maintain the relationship between my friend and me. I am certain that if I had said the same thing to Thai people, they would have known right away that I am refusing to play in the game. The effect of my communication strategy appeared to be one that I had not wished. My indirect answer did not seem to be an appropriate response to my friend. The effective communication strategy that I used while I was in Thailand did not work here at all. As a result of this incident, I start to be interested in investigating the differences between the notions of communication competence between Thai and Westerners.

In this paper, I will first review the literature on communication competence and approaches to study this concept. With this review, three main elements, i.e. cognition, performance and motivation, will be presented as a framework to analyze communication competence. Afterwards, the framework will be used to analyze shyness as a strategic communicative behavior. In this sense, shyness can be seen as a communicatively competent behavior among the Thai. This analysis will illustrate the heuristic framework of communication competence yet highlight the different notions of communication competence between the Thai and the Westerners. Finally, I will discuss the prospect of studying communication competence from an interpretive/ethnographic standpoint in order to expand the body of knowledge in this area.

Four Approaches on Communication Competence

Even though the study of communication competence can be traced back in the ancient times as far as the birth of rhetoric, communication scholars have seriously studied communication competence as a construct for more than two decades and the term first appeared in a communication journal in 1974 (Rubin, 1990). Since then, there have been debates and different perspectives on investigating communication competence. I found that communication scholars

take four different perspectives to studying communication competence. The four approaches that appear in the literature consist of goal-oriented perspective, cognitive versus performance perspective, social and interpersonal perspective, and resources or skills based perspective. The goal-oriented, cognitive versus performance, and resources based perspectives have been conceptualized by Jablin and Sias (2001) while I found the social and interpersonal perspective emerging from my review of literature.

Communication competence from the goal-oriented approach focuses on the effectiveness or situations in which competent communicators interact to achieve the desired goals. Parks' (1994) definition of communication competence represents this approach, as he states:

Communicative competence represents the degree to which individuals satisfy and perceive that they have satisfied their goals within the limits of a given social situation without jeopardizing their ability or opportunity to pursue their other subjectively more important goals (p. 595).

This definition places an emphasis on the goal achievement of a competent communicator which can be observed and/or perceived by the communicator. Communication competence from this perspective suggests that persuasion or control is the key element in communication effectiveness. Along with this perspective is the definition of communication competence offered by Phillips (1983) who states that "competence would refer to understanding of situations, skill in demonstration of necessary techniques, effectiveness to goal accomplishments all by a particular person in a given case" (p. 31). Even though both definitions focus on the goal achievement, Phillips' definition of competence differs from Parks' as it suggests that effective or competent behaviors must be demonstrated and observable while Parks focuses on the perception of communicators whether or not they achieve their goals. In addition, Phillips' definition of competence also implies that we should look at competence in a given situation and competence should not be viewed as a static trait of communicators across various cases.

The second approach to view communication competence focuses on the distinction of competence and performance. McCroskey (1982) is a major scholar who advocates that competence should be viewed separately from performance. Competence is the knowledge of behaviors while performance is the actual behavior one performs in an interaction. He argues that the "accomplishment of goals (effectiveness) is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a judgment of competence. One may be effective without being competent and one may be competent without being effective" (p. 3). This notion suggests that we need to look at motivation as another factor in studying competence. A competent communicator who has knowledge of effective

communication behaviors may not be motivated to perform those behaviors in a given case. At the same time, a person who performs effective communication behaviors could be effective as a result of external factors, not his or her knowledge of communication competence. Therefore, "one may not infer competence from performance or project performance from competence. Neither is a necessary condition for the existence of the other" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 263).

The third approach of communication competence is based on interpersonal and social perspectives. Bochner and Kelly (1974) posit that communication competence is the ability to relate effectively to self and other. These scholars explicitly identify that their notion of competence focuses on interpersonal interactions. They suggest that communicators develop five skills to be interpersonally competent i.e. empathic communication, descriptiveness or giving feedback, owning feelings and thoughts, self-disclosure, and behavioral flexibility. Another definition of communication competence based on social and interpersonal perspective is offered by Littlejohn and Jabusch (1982). They propose that communication competence is "the ability and willingness of an individual to participate responsibly in a transaction in such a way as to maximize the outcome of shared meaning" (p. 29). Even though this definition sounds similar to the goal-oriented approach definition, it places an emphasis on shared meaning, implying that both interactants are engaging in a communication process to relate to each other. They also suggest further that competent communicators need to have understanding of communication processes and skills such as interpersonal sensitivity as well as ethical responsibility.

The last perspective on communication competence views the construct as resources of communication abilities. Jablin, Cude, House, Lee, and Roth (1994), for example, define competence as:

[T]he set of ability (resources), which a communicator has available for use in the communication process. These resources are acquired via dynamic learning process and take the form of interrelated subjects of communication skills (capacities), and strategic knowledge appropriate communication behavior (p. 125).

This definition of competence places the emphasis on the practicality of certain communication skills and is mostly adopted by those who try to apply communication competence to workplace settings. Research from this perspective tries to provide catalogues of certain communication skills required in workplaces (Monge et. al., 1981). However, this perspective is useful only when considering the minimum requirements of communication skills to get work accomplished while the superior quality of communication skills needs more investigation.

Three Main Elements of Communication Competence

Despite those debates and various perspectives on communication competence, there are three main elements that help explain the existence of communication competence from the approaches delineated above. These elements will serve as a framework for the later discussion on how Thai communication competence differs from the Western views on communication competence. First, competent communicators need to have the knowledge of competent behaviors. This includes the resources of effective behaviors as well as rules, norms, and ethics for choosing appropriate behavior. This element is referred to as cognition or competence. However, since the word competence itself may be misleading as communication competence actually requires more than just cognition, therefore I will use the term cognition to refer to the knowledge of effective communication strategy and competence as the overall communication competence for the remainder of this paper. Second, competent communicators must have the ability to perform certain behaviors. This is referred to as performance. Finally, the competent communicators must have motivation to mobilize their competence to performance, that is, they need to have a drive to perform what they know in a given situation. Cognition, performance and motivation provide a broad framework of communication competence that can be applied to analyze behaviors in various communication episodes.

The establishment and development of this communication competence framework is heavily influenced by communication scholars who primarily adopt the social scientific paradigm. I have noticed that the three elements are useful in explaining a communication phenomenon. The cognition and the performance, in particular, are instrumental in the teaching and learning of communication competence as they are observable and measurable. However, when encountering different cultural contexts, the same set of knowledge and behaviors may not be judged as competent. Therefore, we have to reconsider and examine if the sender's intention and motivation to communicate in that particular situation. Unfortunately, not much research has been conducted to investigate the situation when the sender is motivated to communicate but his or her repertoire of knowledge and abilities on communication competence do not fit in the context. In that case, we should take into our consideration not only the context of the situation but certain unobservable factors such as the sender's motivation or intention as well as the cultural value or ideology the interactants hold on to.

Chen and Starosta (1996) argue that with the technology development, globalization of the economy, widespread of migrations, development of multiculturalism, and de-emphasis on the nation-states, intercultural communication is inescapable and thus we need to re-conceptualize scholarly

work on communication competence, particularly in intercultural interactions. These researchers define intercultural communication competence as “the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviors that recognize the interactants’ multiple identities in a specific environment” (pp. 358-359). To understand intercultural communication competence, we certainly need to consider the affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of communication both of our cultures and the cultures of people we are interacting with. However, we need to investigate competence in different cultures more closely before moving on to the universal framework of competence.

In the following section, I will illustrate difficulties or misunderstandings as a result of different fundamental beliefs concerning communication competence of Thai people and that of the Westerners by analyzing my personal autoethnographic accounts. Even though this approach is subjective, it will allow Thai people to understand their own value, or at least for me, to investigate my personal cultural assumptions before attempting to understand other cultures. Moreover, it will shed lights on the notion of competence in one specific culture that may contribute to the understanding of universal communication competence in the long run. In so doing, I hope to call for an alternative approach to study or investigate communication competence.

Shyness as Thai Communication Competence

If we admit that communication competence varies from culture to culture, Thai communication competence is then different from the Western notion of competence. Sriussdaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin (1999), for example, conducted a survey to find out what Thai businesspeople perceive as communicatively competent behaviors. The researchers identified four issues in their study, i.e. knowing how to avoid conflict with others; controlling emotions; display respect, tactfulness, modesty, and politeness; and appropriate pronoun usages in addressing others. Among the Thai competent communicators, maintaining relationships with interlocutors will be the main concern even over task achievements (Komin, 1990). Relationships can be gained and maintained with subtle communication behaviors such as selecting appropriate terms of address for interlocutors (Palakornkul, 1975). The status of Thai interlocutors in a conversation can be displayed or honored by selecting appropriate personal pronouns, personal names, nominal reference terms such as kinship terms and occupational terms, the demonstrative this-that, or reference avoidance strategy. The level of formality in language use can also influence the Thai who communicate in English with their non-Thai colleagues.

All the studies cited above seem to identify competent behaviors without relating the behaviors to ideology, or cognitive knowledge, as well as the

motivation of communicators and thus fall into the resource approach to studying competence as mentioned earlier. Viewing communication competence as a set of skills may be useful when we first conceptualize the notion but it isolates communication competence from its cultural context and disregard some hidden assumptions the communicators have in their minds. One example that illustrates the loophole of considering communication competence only from the observable elements is the way Thai people conceptualize and strategically choose to present themselves as shy persons.

Like many Asian cultures, Thai people tend not to speak up or appear to be assertive as in the Western sense. Fieg (1989) as well as Knutson, Komolsevin, Chatiket, and Smith (2002), for example, describe Thai people as being shy, easy going, fun loving, polite, and kind, and reluctant to be in conflict or direct confrontation. If we adopt the value that being assertive or taking the opportunity to voice your opinions is always a trait of communication competence, then the characteristics of Thai people mentioned here will imply that Thai people are, for the most part, incompetent communicators. However, as a Thai person, I myself would argue that there are times when we, Thai people, deliberately appear to be shy in order to maintain social harmony. Shyness, for the Thai, is then a strategic performative behavior which is *not* a result of external factors or incompetent behavior per se.²

From the Western perspective, shyness is normally considered an unfavorable trait and is the opposite of assertiveness. I remember when I first started my graduate studies in America, I really felt uncomfortable participating in class discussions. It was not that I did not have any ideas to share with the classes but there were too many concerns going on in my head. I was not sure if I would appear to be rude to anyone, show off my knowledge too much, disrespect the teachers, waste the class time, etc. Generally speaking, I was not sure if speaking up would be considered a good thing at that time. As a result, I chose to be quiet. My quietness or shyness was not based on the fact that I did not want to communicate with others either but it was an intentional behavior that I chose to perform with the hopes to maintain good relationships with my teachers and classmates. That shyness may not lead to positive outcomes in interactions but it should not be considered a sign of incompetence.

Analyzing Thai Shyness from the Communication Competence Framework

As mentioned earlier, communication competence consists of three elements, i.e. cognition, performance, and motivation. This framework of communication competence can be used to illustrate that the Thai shyness is considered a communicatively competent behavior among Thai people. In the following section, I will discuss three specific behaviors that can be seen as parts

of Thai shyness i.e. not asking for help, extreme humility, and not speaking up or not responding quickly. These three behaviors will be presented in relation to the ideology or cultural value that Thai people hold on to. The knowledge of this cultural ideology in this case serves as the cognition aspect of competence. Finally, the motivation to perform such shy behaviors will be analyzed.

Not Asking for Help and Not Refusing to Help

Without any relatives in America, graduate student classmates are the only group of people I mainly socialize with. Even though I believe I know some of them very well, I find it hard in several occasions to ask them to do me a favor as I feel uncomfortable to do so. One day, I walked into the graduate student lounge and chatted with my classmates as usual. I told them that I just moved into a new apartment and felt exhausted. A friend then asked me if I had had anybody to help me move. "No, I did it all by myself." Then, my friend said to me, "Why didn't you tell us? We were all free last week." Certainly, I was too shy to ask for help and that is not pragmatic in the American context. I recognized after that conversation that one American graduate student had asked others to help her move a semester before and I actually did help her. Asking for help is probably not considered rude if it is done right in among the American people. A person who is asked to help may or may not agree to do so as long as can justify his or her decision politely to the asking person. However, that is not the case that I have experienced as a Thai person when interacting with the Thais.

When considering this situation, I start to realize that I often feel uncomfortable asking for help from others no matter how well I know that person. You certainly feel uncomfortable asking for help from the people you don't know very well. For many Thai people, they also feel uncomfortable asking for help from people with whom they have close relationships. Asking your friends to help you in some way may jeopardize the interpersonal dynamics as that causes your friend an extra effort to help you. In that situation, you will be seen as inconsiderate. However, in a special case, if you are asked to help or grant someone a favor, you are not supposed to refuse even though you may feel uncomfortable in doing so. Refusing often hurts your interlocutors' feelings among Thai people. In short, there is a Thai saying that is taught and passed on for generations that we should "bring the others' hearts in to our hearts," meaning we should be sensitive to how other people feel or think. We have to realize automatically if our friends need help or not and offer them a favor instead of waiting for them to ask. At the same time, if we are asked to help we should try our best not to refuse. Not asking or not refusing does not mean Thai people are merely shy to do so but they do that to maintain the relationships.

The habit of not asking for help can be best explained by the Thai ideology,

Kreng Jai. This concept is widely discussed as it is a unique characteristic of the Thais. Pornpitakpan (2000), for example, explained *Kreng Jai* as:

diffidence; deference; consideration; sensitivity toward others; reluctance to impose on or interrupt others; reluctance to assert one's comments, wants, or disagreements, especially to one's superiors; reluctance to negotiate with or give instructions to superiors; complying with other's explicit or implicit wishes or requests, especially if those come from superiors; concealing negative feelings, such as anxiety, resentment, and anger, to avoid making others uncomfortable or lose face; and reluctance to demand one's own rights (a nonsmoker will patiently inhale the cigarette smoke from nearby smoker; a customer usually does not demand compensation for faulty products.) (p. 65).

Being *Kreng Jai* is a reciprocal process, that is, when you appear to be *Kreng Jai* to someone, that person is obliged to become *Kreng Jai* to you in return. A *Kreng Jai* person does not exhibit the *Kreng Jai* trait only for presenting himself or herself as a socially admirable being in a Thai community but also performs *Kreng Jai* acts to create, maintain, honor, and/or rebuild the face of his or her interlocutor. *Kreng Jai*, thus, determines important communicative acts of the Thai including requesting and responding to request, conflict resolution, negotiation, giving criticism, group participation etc., where interlocutors are engaged in face-work (Goffman, 1967). This unique trait of Thai people is then a cultural knowledge that influences the Thais not to speak up or asking for help in various situations.

Extreme Humility

Another situation when Thai people seem to be shy is when someone acknowledges their achievements. People from different cultures employ different discourse strategies in responding to compliments. I have noticed that when I give compliments to my Thai friends such as when they did well on the exams or presentations, my Thai friends usually refer to their accomplishments as a result of luck, favorable factors in the situation, or assistance from others. On the other hand, my friends from other countries, particularly from the western hemisphere, usually refer to the effort they have put or how hard they have tried when they talk about their achievements. As for the Thais, speaking of one's own achievement or a good trait is considered bragging even though that person has concrete evidence or does not do it in a threatening manner. Thai people would rather be quiet and let the others appreciate their achievements without speaking of it themselves. Moreover, it is better to let others see your deeds from actions, rather than hear about them only from your words. This shyness to show off is a behavior that Thai people intentionally perform in order

to maintain relationships with the others.

Being humble is a cultural knowledge that Thai people pass on to one another. Parents often refer to a proverb, “Don’t lift your self up to threaten others” when teaching their children the concept of humility. Not putting one’s self ahead of others’ is what Thai people value (Vathanaprida, 1994). To maintain social harmony, it is better to put yourself in the same position as others. This can be done by not talking about your achievements. Another proverb that precipitates in the Thais’ minds is “Stick a golden plate behind the Buddha image.” One way the Thais make a religious merit is by sticking a golden plate on a Buddha image. If you stick the plate in front of the Buddha image, others will see it directly and people who do so may appear to have bad intention to get benefits back from their actions. Therefore, this proverb teaches Thai people not to overly expect benefits from their actions and not to show it off to other people. However, it is your responsibility to be sensitive to other Thais’ achievements and acknowledge them as they are not supposed to speak on such things. This cultural knowledge is the reason why Thai people are shy to speak of their achievements in most situations.

Not Speaking Up and Not Responding Quickly

I once had a chance to teach Thai language at an American university. My American students often shared stories of misunderstandings they had with Thai people with me. One day, a female student told me how furious she was at a Thai restaurant. According to her, there was a mistake on the bill. She then talked to a Thai waitress to explain the situation. However, she said the Thai waitress just smiled back to her and that made her very angry.³ After a while, the manager of the restaurant stepped in to solve the problem. I personally was not surprised with the waitress’ response (or the lack of). When I taught in Thailand, I barely received any answers from my students when I asked them in class. These situations show that the Thai tend to be slow in responding in interactions or not speaking up at all.

Verbal prudence is highly valued among the Thais. We are taught to be conscientious in our behaviors and words. Thai parents often say to their children, “if you do something slowly and prudently, you will get two swords.”⁴ This passes on the value that you have to think carefully before actually doing or speaking something as it will lead to a better result. Therefore, it is common to see Thai people becoming slow in speaking up or responding in interactions even among people who are skillful communicators as they have to take time to think carefully before they interact. It is this cultural value that teaches them to be slow in responding. As a result, the Thai quietness in this case implies that the Thais are still engaging in the interaction cognitively while they are quiet and thus should not be seen as incompetent trait.

Motivation

Not asking for help, being humble, and slow responses are parts of behaviors that may cause people from other cultures to misunderstand Thai people and view the Thais as shy. However, these behaviors are influenced by the cultural knowledge that has been passed on to them. Actually, when not asking for help, appearing humble, or responding slowly, Thai people may intend to communicate with specific motives. As a high-context culture (Knutson et. al., 2002), the three behaviors mentioned are strategic attempts of the Thais to gain respect or recognition from others without explicitly displaying them. The recognition or respect they try to create and maintain must be done with care while they desire to be accepted as a part of the community.

The interactions among the Thais may be subtle from the outsiders' perspective and I would also argue that Thai communication is heavily receiver-oriented. That is, the senders do not often show their actual motive explicitly in their interactions. They, for example, do not ask for help even when they need or do not speak of their achievements even when they are proud of them. It is the receivers' responsibility to be sensitive to their interlocutors' motives and respond accordingly. With the implicit strategies as a result of their cultural value, communication competence of the Thais then appears to be different from that of the Western. The implicit communication, or shyness in this case, is not a negative trait but a strategic choice of the Thais to gain respect and maintain social harmony.

Call for Alternative Approach to Researching Communication Competence

In this paper, I have argued that the Thai communication competence can also be explained by the framework of cognition, performance, and motivation and thus the framework is heuristic in analyzing competence from different cultures. However, the main research program in America is heavily influenced by the social scientific paradigm. Investigating competence from the observable and measurable aspects is beneficial for capturing the concreteness of communication episodes. Nevertheless, there are some intangible issues that influence our notions of competence.

More interpretive approaches will certainly help us make sense of competence by taking into considerations intangible factors such as cultural value, motivation, and underlying assumptions of communicators. These alternative ways of studying communication competence will also help explain the existing gap that social scientific research has found. For example, a recent study that employs the rhetorical sensitivity scale did not yield the results researchers have speculated (Knutson, Komolsevin, Chatketu, & Smith, 2003).

Contrary to its hypothesis, the study found that US Americans display significantly higher levels of rhetorical sensitivity than the Thai. When I examined the instrument, I would guess that Thai subjects in the study did not rate themselves high on rhetorical sensitivity because all of items in that category are obviously positive traits. If they rated themselves high on those items, they would have been considered bragging which is against their value. So they may have tried to be humble in that study. When communication behaviors do not match with theories, such as Thai communication in this case, an interpretive viewpoint can provide a rich description and explanation why they do not work.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have illustrated that implicit communication behaviors of the Thai that non-Thai people may consider shyness are actually strategically performed by the Thais to maintain social harmony and gain recognition from others. Those behaviors, i.e. not asking for help, being humble, and slow response or not speaking up, are not necessarily viewed negative by Thais people. The communication competence which consists of cognition, performance, and competence, coupled with an interpretive approach are appropriate for explaining this phenomenon as it captures both tangible aspects of the Thai competence as well as the intangible factors such as cultural value and motivation. Therefore, more interpretive studies are needed to help us fully understand the notion of communication competence particularly when studying competence within different cultures.

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Notes

1. The closest translation of this Thai term is to be considerate. More explanation will be provided in the following section.
2. I also acknowledge that there are some situations when Thai people become shy or do not speak up due to the lack of knowledge or skills in those communication episodes. Sometimes, they may lack the motivation and intention to interact. In those situations, I consider Thai people really incompetent.

3. Thai smile is another research area that is worth looking into as there are several meanings of smile for Thai people. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this issue extensively. In this situation, I would interpret that the waitress smiled to ease the tension and reduce the anxiety as she did not know what to do.
4. This proverb in Thai is *Cha Cha Dai Pra Song Lem Ngram*, which has a similar meaning to slow but sure in the English language.

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