

## THE COMMUNICATIVE PROFILE OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OR COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS?

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Drawing children’s communicative profile represents an indispensable element in research designing in the area of communicational development. If in the early years of childhood, the communicative relationships are especially established within the family, later on, during the preschool interval, the range of communicative relationships become various. Therefore, it is necessary to draw a communicative profile of the preschool child in order to serve both parents and educators in implementing appropriate strategies for language achievement and use. Drawing a preschool child’s communicative profile could be achieved either by an effective investigation on a specific sample of subjects, or by setting a theoretical outline of their communicative behavior, based on previous studies resultant from different psychological schools. We have chosen the latter option because it is more relevant and general. Accordingly, we grouped important data based on the components of the communicative competence model proposed in 1990 by Bachman. The resulting profile could represent a standpoint in analyzing the communicative behavior of the preschool child, equally answering the fundamental question: should we talk about communicative competence or communicative skills during the preschool period?

**Keywords:** *CLA model, communicative competence, communicative profile, communicative skills, preschool children.*

### PROFILUL COMUNICATIV AL COPIILOR DE VÂRSTĂ PREȘCOLARĂ. COMPETENȚĂ COMUNICATIVĂ SAU ABILITĂȚI DE COMUNICARE?

Trasarea profilului comunicativ al copiilor reprezintă un element indispensabil al cercetărilor în domeniul dezvoltării comunicative. Dacă la o vârstă fragedă relațiile de comunicare se stabilesc cu membrii familiei, atunci mai târziu, în perioada preșcolară spectrul de relații comunicative devine mai vast. Astfel, este necesar să conturăm profilul comunicativ al preșcolarului, care îi va ajuta atât pe părinți, cât și pe educatori să implementeze strategii potrivite de asigurare a însușirii și folosirii limbii. Conturarea profilului comunicativ al preșcolarului se realizează sau prin studierea efectivă a unui eșantion concret de subiecți, sau prin trasarea unui cadru teoretic al comportamentului comunicativ, bazat pe studii precedente ale diverselor școli psihologice. Noi am ales cea de-a doua variantă, pentru că este mai relevantă și generală. Astfel, am grupat datele importante bazate pe componentele modelului de competență de comunicare, propus în 1990 de Bachman. Profilul obținut poate fi folosit pentru analiza comportamentului comunicativ al preșcolarilor și identificarea răspunsului la întrebarea fundamentală: în perioada preșcolară vorbim despre competență comunicativă sau despre abilități de comunicare?

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *modelul CLA, competență comunicativă, profil comunicativ, abilități de comunicare, copii de vârstă preșcolară.*

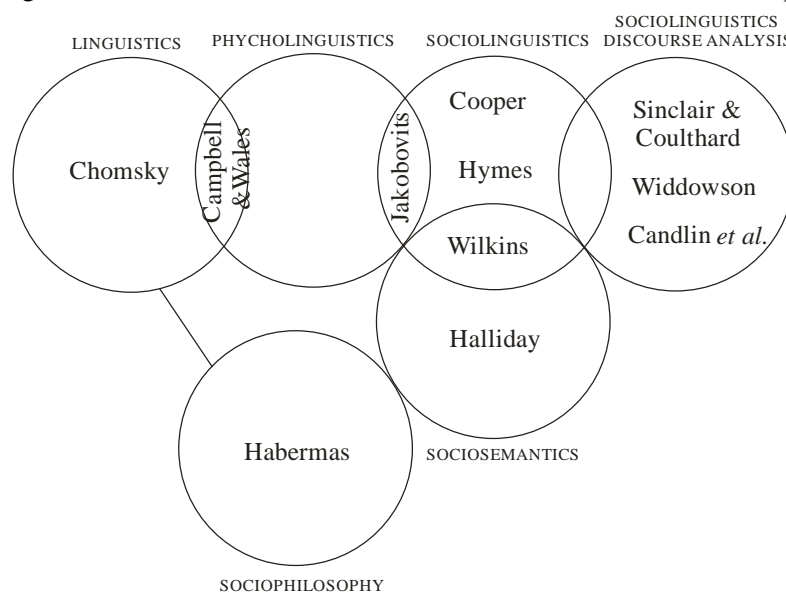
**1. Introduction.** Researchers in the field of linguistic psychology have encountered difficulties in drawing the standard communicative profile of preschool children’s communicative behavior due to the lack of certainty with regard to the relation between the amount of linguistic acquisition and the amount of linguistic acquisition in terms of understanding. Moreover, the existent controversies between various schools of developmental psychology, such an attempt as to outline a communicative profile is strenuous, given various perspectives, even arbitrary, at times. Most studies approaching issues related to the preschool communicative profile, either distinctly or close to the topic, do make clear distinction between conceptual development and the development of the language use. They focus preponderantly on the child’s speech: number of words used, features of the phonetic apparatus, common errors, etc. Consequently, it is important to draw a study regarding the communicative profile of preschool children, while issues like the relationships between child development and learning of codes, between developmental environment and particularities of linguistic code use, between conceptual distinctions and life experience or area of origin are left apart. It is difficult to design performing research tools for revealing the conceptual differences integrated in the child’s language, his/her imitations, or use of “meaningless” words. The complexity of this perspective is highlighted by the following remark:

*Sometimes, however, the child can make linguistic differences that do not seem to encode the conceptual differences of the adult language; he can speak without expressing conceptual differences, or can express other differences than the differences expressed by the adult with the same linguistic forms. We cannot easily determine whether conceptual differences occur prior to the emergence of new linguistic forms or the child pays attention to consequential linguistic expressions of the adults’ conceptual differences that build his conceptual skills. (Huttenlocher, 1978, p.89)*

We can consider the outlining of communicative profile of the preschool child imperative in an advanced research area since most researchers are studying mainly the child’s sounds/syllables, words, and sentences in comparison with the extra-linguistic and contextual state of activation of the first linguistic acquisitions, or in comparison with the level of cultural codes acquisition (that do not explicitly concern verbal expression, including the non-verbal performance). The results of this research could be useful both to parents and educators, interested in implementing effective strategies in linguistic acquisitions.

**2. The study of the communicative competence. Openings and limitations.** The study of communicative competence represented, to some extent, the center of interest in Romanian researches. Communicative competence is rooted in Noam Chomsky’s studies about the linguistic competence (1957), defined as the ability of an ideal speaker or receiver to produce or understand infinite grammatically correct sentences. Chomsky’s competence was followed by the studies of R.L. Cooper (1968), R. Campbell & R. Wales (1970) and Leon A. Jakobovits (1970) that directed the research toward foreign languages acquisition.

Jürgen Habermas, in 1971, transformed the American linguist and philosopher’s perspective, in terms of philosophical approaches. He proposed the term “communicative competence” in relation to the ideal speaking situation, not to the ideal speaker, in spite of the fact that the term was defined much later, in 1979. Meanwhile, in 1974, following the same direction as Habermas, but changing the registry, Hans-Eberhard Piepho, a specialist in language pedagogy, defined the communicative competence as the ability of human being to make himself understood and to understand the communicative intention, regardless of the code used. From the communicative perspective, this competence was initially studied within the sociolinguistic school. The result was an enrichment of the term by including the pragmatic dimension, as in Dell Hymes’ studies (1972). Hymes’ direction with regard to the communicative competence was continued by Sandra J. Savignon (1972), D.A. Wilkins (1976), Michael Canale & Merrill Swain (1980), Michael Canale (1983), M.A.K. Halliday (1985), Jan A. van Ek (1986), Lyle F. Bachman (1990), Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltan Dörnyei & Sarah Thurrell (1995), Marianne Celce-Murcia & Elite Olshtain (2000) and Marianne Celce-Murcia (2008). From the perspective of discourse analysis, the Oxford school proposed a different approach regarding the analyzability and accessibility, through the agency of Henry G. Widdowson (2007). The path had been previously opened by J.Sinclair’s & R.Coulthard’s studies (1975), respectively of Christopher N. Candlin’s (1981). In a scheme intended to summarize the main contributions to the study of the communicative competence, depending on the disciplinary areas of expanding the studies, the sketch of the current state of research could be represented as follows:



**Fig. 1.** Areas of the communicative competence’s studies extension (as cited in Munby, 2004, p.21).

Not only the related areas are necessary to be represented in the general board of the communicative competence research, but also the subsumed competences and the particular communicative skills to be developed. Under the influence of different disciplinary areas, the proposed models lead to a particular understanding of the communicative competence, from the linguistic to the strategic dimensions, emphasizing certain component elements. Thus, in a cumulative representation of the communicative competence evolution, we can notice some particular perspectives (Fig.2).

The study of the communicative competence development during the preschool age was the subject topic of some previous researches, starting with Ton van der Geest (1973). The necessity of studying the children's communicative competence was also analyzed by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes (2001), a noticeable personality in this research area, that affirmed: "Clearly work with children, and with the place of language in education, requires a theory that can deal with a heterogeneous speech community, differential competence, the constitutive role of sociocultural features (...)" (p.59).

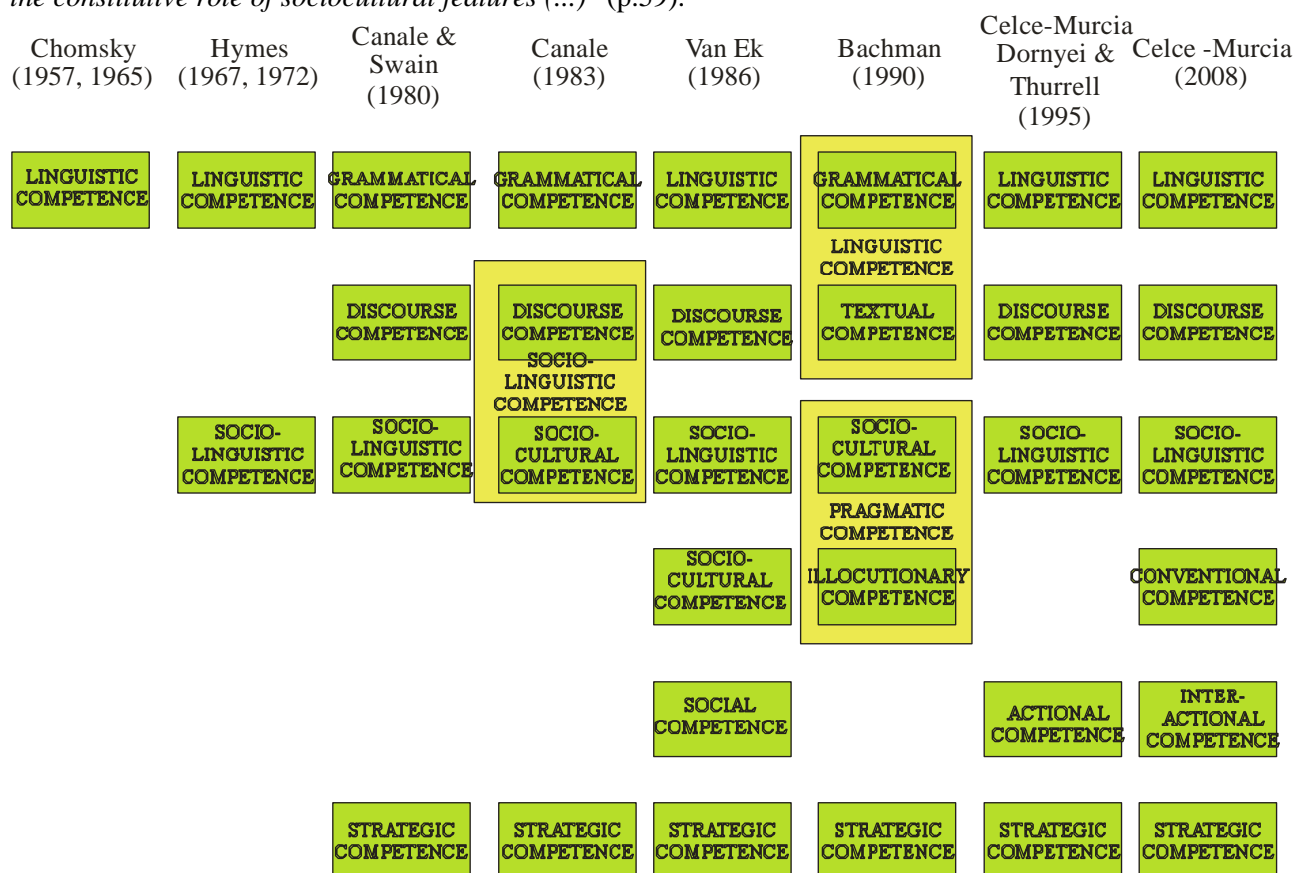


Fig.2. Components of the communicative competence.

In Romania, the general acceptance of the researchers is that communicative competence is not perceived as necessary knowledge of participants in the communication act for interaction and their capability to perform, or use the language appropriately related to different contexts (including grammatical/linguistic, textual/discursive, socio-cultural, illocutionary, strategic components), but more restrictively, as some particular communicative skills. One of these restrictive forms of understanding this concept could be:

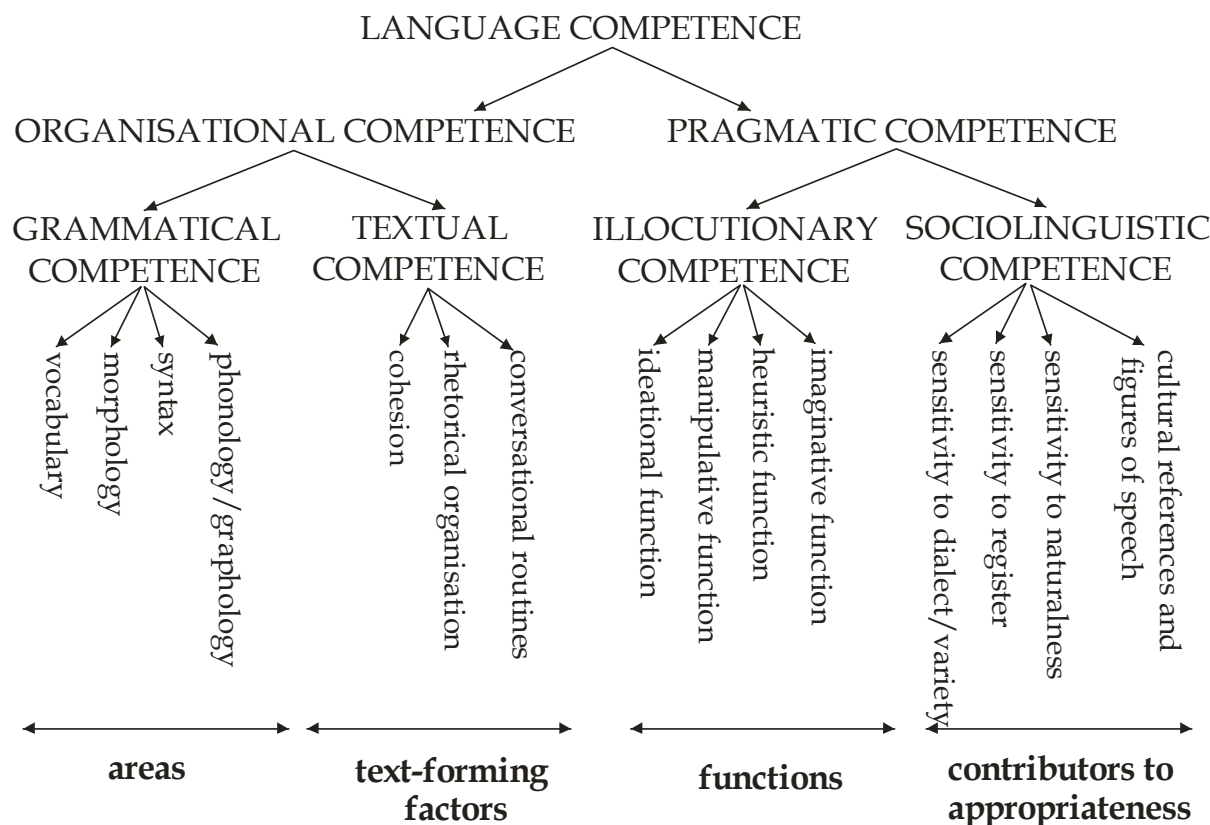
*The communicative competence is one person's ability to transmit through verbal and extra-verbal means of expression one's thoughts, feelings, and intentions, to receive and understand messages transmitted in the act of communication. Early school children's communicative competence is the capacity that allows them to recognize and produce statements available for their level of perception and operationalization, correct statements regarding the language system and adequate to the communication situational context (Ilyés, 2010, p.57).*

In other words, such restrictive definitions, under which the entire area of study is supposed to be built, restrict the communicative competence to grammatical/linguistic and textual/discursive dimensions. In general,

misunderstandings generated by the confusion of terms such as “competence”, “capacity”, “capability” are still persistent. Therefore, these misunderstandings generate confusions and restrictions in the area of study (sometimes, for example, the communicative competence is inappropriately replaced by communicative competences).

A clear distinction between the communicative competence and communicative skills within the preschool age calls for an identification of the general relationships between competence and skills and the extrapolation of this very relationship to our analysis plan. Discriminating between linguistic and performative dimensions of the communicative competence, between the linguistic competence associated with the former and the communicative competence associated with both, as a functional whole, we realize that we cannot relate to the language use outside context or to occasional performance. Despite these limitations, we should see communication as a whole, as a continuum meaning knowledge, performance, and assessment. Therefore, in these circumstances, we can subsume skills to competence, both in reporting to factual context and in reporting to skills as “*specific components that make up or contribute to the manifestation or judgment of competence*” (Spitzberg, Cupach, 1989, p.6). The binomial communicative competence – communicative skills could be seen from a double perspective: in an inclusive way, in which the first term is broader than the second one and includes it; or in a manner of relatedness with effectiveness and appropriateness. In the former case, “*Effectiveness is pertinent to goal attainment, such as satisfaction, desired change, or creativity. The importance of appropriateness indicates the contextuality, or relation/context specificity. One’s knowledge, motivation, and skills affect the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness, and ultimately influences other’s judgment of competence*” (Hammer, *apud* Hajek & Giles, 2003, p.936). In the latter, only the communicative competence implies results in relational terms, aiming at effectiveness and appropriateness. In reality, “*interpersonal competence is intimately bound to the maintenance of mutually satisfying, effective relational systems... In fact, from an interactional perspective, it makes no sense to talk about a person being competent apart from a specific relationship or set of relationships*” (Wiemann *et al.*, 1997, p.26). At this point, we can make some final remarks in order to clarify the concepts: components of the communicative competence (including that one corresponding to the preschool age) are different; and the communicative competence includes communicative skills. In this respect, we can summarize these characteristics in a functional whole, aiming at conferring, on the one side, the perspective of functionality, and, on the other side, the possibility of analyzing the components as psychical processes, as observable activities, or as values embedded in the structure of each individual. Only in this manner, we can strictly develop these components in order to form/educate the communicative competence.

**3. The scheme of structuring the communicative profile.** Apart from these drawbacks in the field of research, we intend to sketch a communicative profile to be used as reference in our psycho-pedagogical study. The pre-operational stage in Piaget’s works, corresponding to a great extent to preschool age, is characterized at the level of linguistic acquisitions by the most important and dramatic development. The general communicative profile is characterized by an increase in vocabulary acquisition of almost a hundred times between the ages of 1.5 and 5 and by a continuous development of grammatical structures of speech. Thus, the children’s language ceases to function from primarily naming the objects around, it being used for purposes more and more abstract and complex. The pre-operational language is associated with: the egocentric thinking, assuming the placement of child’s self person in the center of everything happening around him, without accepting the possibility of a different perspective; the animist thinking, meaning to assign life and conscience to physical objects; and the artificial(ist) thinking, that is to assume that environmental phenomena are human inventions. In Piaget’s terms, this independence between cognitive structures and language leads to a distinct (and somewhat obscure) perspective on language development (Cattell, 2004, p.49). According to this perspective, language is the “necessary” result of sensory-motor intelligence development and the use of linguistic structures depends, first of all, on the development of particular types of conceptual structures (mental representations). Yet, the study of the communicative profile of the preschool child should not be understood as within the limits imposed by Piaget’s structuralist stages. Therefore, we propose as a contents organization scheme the model of communicative language ability (CLA) developed by Bachman (1990). In addition, we will use different data of various developmental schools in order to outline the communicative profile.



**Fig.3.** Structure of language competence in CLA model (*apud* Bachman, 1990, p.85).  
 “Conversation routines”, as text-forming factors, were introduced by Peterwagner (2005, p.5).

**4. The organizational competence.** Most studies focus on language development, viewed as quantitative gainings. Therefore, related to the grammatical organizational language competence (GC), we can distinguish such issues as:

– quantitative enrichment of vocabulary, from about 800-1,000 words at the age of 3 years old to over 3,500 words at the age of 6/7 years old (Golu, Verza & Zlate, 1993, p.87); Golu *et al.*'s perspective is contradicted by O'Grady (2005, p.8), Stilwell Peccei (2006, p.17), a.o., considering that a six-year-old child's vocabulary includes approximately 14,000 words, developing at a rate of 10 new words/day before and 20 new words/day after, as shown in Figure 4:



**Fig.4.** Rate of new words' acquisition (*apud* O'Grady, 2005, p.8).

The American researchers' perspective is supported by the Uhrbrock experiment that, in 1936, recorded about 24,000 words used by a five-year-old child (hence, the amount is different from Verza & Verza's approximation). Moreover, since 1925, various lists of frequently used words by children have been drawn by: Horn (1925), Buckingham & Dolch (1936), Davis (1937), Rinsland (1945), Stone (1956), Murphy (1957), Dale & Eichholz (1960), Dale & Razik (1963), Howes (1966) etc. (*apud* MacGinitie, 1978:122); unfortunately, there have hardly been any studies related to the meanings of used words. Therefore, the mere quantitative investigation is not relevant in terms of shaping the communicative profile of the preschool child. Let us note that within the preschool age the difference between the number of known words and used words is noticeable. This difference is significantly reduced during the late preschool age.

– independent word-formations, based on generalization of lexis structure laws and strengthened grammatical relations (Golu, Verza & Zlate, 1993, p.88); the following principles are fundamental in order to form new words: transparency principle, leading to the appearance of new morphological structures built on already familiar language elements that hold a consistent meaning; simplicity principle, implying that the new morphological structures encounter minimal changes as compared to inputs; and productivity principle, according to which children become aware that a particular lexical innovation process is productive, becoming the most preferred principle (Stilwell Peccei, 2006, p.20).

– improved pronunciation compared to the pronunciation of the early years of preschool age, marked by sounds omissions, substitutions and inversions; during the late preschool age, almost all children pronounce all the sounds. The first child’s phases in pronouncing sounds are: switching from cooing to sounds with phonologic (semantic) value; occurrence of nasal-oral [m-b] and labial-dental [p-t] oppositions; and occurrence of intermediate vowels in addition to the open and closed vowels. This hierarchy of the phonetic system’s layers leads to a hierarchy of certain sounds occurrence. Usually, the last occurred sounds in preschool age are the inter-dental and pre-palatal spirants or fricatives: s[s], z[z], ș[ʃ], and j[ʒ]. In this respect, it is worth mentioning Monahan’s conclusion with regard to the phonetic acquisitions (*apud* Vihman, 1996, p.5). Concerning the grammatical competence (GC): “*phonological development... is pattern formation and adaptation, not knowledge discovery and deduction*”, assertion that places the issue of pronunciation in a different light from the issues of syntax, morphology and vocabulary.

– acquiring the basic syntactic structure, in order to raise a relative unit of pronominal system and tenses in late preschool children’s language. From this standpoint, the Mean Length of Utterances (MLU), introduced in 1973 by Brown is the standard method of measuring the grammatical complexity of children’s language. MLU involves five stages: a telegraphic stage and four multi-morphemic stages (Plunkett, Wood, 2004, p.175). The preschool age is characterized by values pertaining to the multi-morphemic stages II and III, whose main feature is the emergence of numerous fundamental grammatical morphemes. It is important to note that grammatical skills cannot be imitations of the adult speech, as long as “early sentences” are not fragments of adults’ current use, but children’s constructions and combinations of words in telegraphic and creative manner (Huttenlocher, 1978, p.91). At the end of the telegraphic stage, the child begins to take over not only words of everyday language, used in his proximity, but also rules that simplify and derive them. One can say that, rather, a particular form of grammatical construction systems’ acquisition, based on “pivot” words is functional (Braine, 1963).

In the same phase of preschool age, the ability of understanding language is much more developed than the ability of producing language. Similarly, the ability of comprehending grammatical rules is more developed than the ability of applying the rules. The grammatical rules are learned rather based on habits than on explanation of appropriate use of grammatical structures, related to the performance context. Apart from the Chomskyan perspective on innate knowledge of the universal grammar, there are many other scientifically argued ways to highlight the fact that the grammatical structure is shaped based on certain regularities regarding the ways of language use (Tomasello, *apud* Plunkett & Wood, 2004, p.194). In this respect, the syntax learning is performed discontinuously: “*According to distributional accounts of learning syntax (e.g. Tomasello, 2000) children should not systematically generalize word order from one learned word combination to all similar utterances*” (Plunkett & Wood, 2004, p.196).

Regarding language organizational textual competence (TC), the preschool age (especially the late preschool age, 5-6/7 years) is characterized by: linguistic coherence; conventional structure of text: introduction – body – conclusions; cohesive organization of discourse; unity of signification in monologue; appearance of interior discourse; marking the link between linguistic units used in the speech act; use of logic connectors; i.e. a certain degree of discursive cohesion. With the late preschool age, within the textual competence (TC), the predominance of situational language is replaced by the predominance of contextual language, “*which allows the child to be able to refer, in communication, to a wide and complex range of previously experienced events or events projected in the future*” (Verza & Verza, 2000, p.107).

**5. The pragmatic competence.** Even if children generally allocate a strong illocutionary force to speech, even if the “manipulation” is a frequent phenomenon (from the pre-operational stage to two-year-old children), the developmental psychology researchers, especially in Romania, paid less importance to illocutionary competence (IC) matters at preschool age. The ideational function, through which we express ourselves in

terms of our own experience regarding the real world, is seen as a function essentially defining the adults' language (Cattell, 2004, p.144). Regarding the manipulative function, children's communication take place for both fundamental purposes: for information transmission, and, more pregnant, for determining a particular behavior of communication's partner. Expressing an acting intention, and waiting for an appropriate behavior as a response of the communication's partner are results of messages sent through the agency of all the senses and analyzers, both verbally and nonverbally. By firstly using fragments from the adult language in objective, emotional and functional cases, similar to those where the language has occurred, children usually extend verbalization to the limits of a "declarative or manipulative social instrument" (Lewis, 1999, p.209). The heuristic function, related to knowledge expansion, is also specific to the adult language, but is still found in children-to-children speaking, in the reproduction of educational situations from their proximity. The imaginative function, involving an extension of own performance context, results in the children's language meant to create their own world: "From this ability to create, through language, a world of his own making he derives the **imaginative** model of language; and this provides some further elements of the metalanguage, with words like story, make up and pretend." (Halliday, 2004, p.275). The illocutionary competence (IC) functions, as described by Bachman, are, to a certain extent similar, to the homonymous functions described by Halliday (1975) in relation to the needs of language use during the preschool interval: the instrumental function, required for satisfying basic needs; the regulatory function, used for influencing others' behavior; the interactional function, activated with the purpose of establishing relationships with others; the personal function, describing the self expression; the heuristic function, necessary for environment exploitation; the imaginative function, useful in the exploitation of the imagined world; and the informative or representational function, necessary for information.

Regarding the sociolinguistic competence (SLC), Romanian studies are usually focused on aspects of design arising from curricular documents regarding foreign languages teaching. These aspects are in the center of interest starting with the operational stage, and focus on the language functions and on the level of formalism. Other specialized studies highlight the role played by the communities to which the child's parents and families belong. Children inherit specific dialects, use their utterances in the limits of particular codes, restricted or elaborated, they speak according to their parents' level of education or their belonging to certain social environments, have a particular sensitivity in terms of register or naturalness depending on their initial home education. Some important studies, such as Labov's (2001, p.416-417), point out that in the school environment, "children must learn to talk differently from their mothers", as a first consequence of possessing a particular level of language, or, more exactly, as a proof of possessing certain sociolinguistic communication skills.

**6. The strategic competence.** With the preschool child communicational profile, all the components of Bachman's CLA model represent indicators of specific communicational skills (grammatical, textual, illocutionary, sociolinguistic). The strategic competence (SC) is the only one that does not imply particular skills. Its presence is sufficient for referring to adjustment to the performance context. The strategic competence is a standpoint in the curricular design of Western schools, oriented towards practical dimension of the educational finalities. During preschool age, the goals of implementing a strategy of developing communicational skills could be related to conceptual understanding and procedural fluency (in language use). Similarly, it could (and should) be related to the strategic competence (SC), defined as the ability of transmitting a message or an intention, or the ability of expressing ideas despite the lack of linguistic instruments necessary to make communication possible. In kindergarten, the strategic competence of a child can be proved by the ability of clearly and coherently explaining particular machine operations, such as, for example, despite the child's lack of specialized language for explanations. The strategic competence of preschool child can be explained more easily: a child is competent if he/she realizes when to say, when not to say, what to say, what not to say, with whom to speak, when, where and how to do it (Ślęzak-Świat, 2010, p.65). This indicator could be, within our study, the most important in the formulation of an answer to the question: *should we talk about communicative competence or communicative skills during the preschool period?*

The communicative profile of the preschool child is not complete without analyzing the non-verbal competence (NVC), an element added by us to the scheme derived from Bachman's CLA model. The communicative competence, fundamental in the child's early years, become more and more discreet during the preschool period, accompanying the verbal communication in the late preschool age. Elements of nonverbal

communication, such as head and eyes movement, facial expressions, skin contact, gestures, postures etc., are more frequent in child-to-child communication than in child-to-adult communication. In comparison with the adult nonverbal communication, controlled to a great extent, and hidden sometimes, the child's nonverbal communication is characterized by energy and dynamism. In the preschool age, the control of nonverbal communication is more difficult, and the nonverbal skills are more evident due to the expressive richness (directed to transmit a message or to influence the communication partner) and to the ability (rather flair, intuition) of “reading”/decoding the adult facial expressions.

**6. Conclusions.** The communicative profile of the preschool child is a necessary standpoint in designing a particular research aiming at the study of the communicative competence or skills specific to preschool age. This profile could result from bringing together reference elements derived from previous studies, as is the case with this work, or could represent the goal of a particular research. We are not interested in the study of preschool children's communicative competence as virtuosity or mastery, but in terms of the most appropriate ways to respond to the environment. Once the preschool child's communicative profile is drawn, we can sketch some minimal limits of efficient response to the environment, starting from which we can debate on the communicative competence.

The preschool child's communicative profile requires more theoretical focus and confirmation resulting from practical application. We intend to broaden our communicative approach related to preschool age, based on the already outlined communicative profile of the preschool child.

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