In No Time.
Temporal Foundations of the Concept of Competency

Commentary

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Abstract

The paper deals with the construction of architectural competency, starting from the entwinement of the terms *competency* and *competence*. Following the etymology of the two words, we define the distinction between them through the problem of time. On the one hand, *competence* is atemporal in nature, while on the other hand, *competency* is necessarily directed at the present. The bond with the present is explained by defining *competency* as the capacity to produce the new, understood as Deleuzian difference, which objectifies time and always puts it in the order of the present. In the discipline of architecture, the concept of *competency* is defined through the problem of the extensiveness of theory, which obviates the production of the new. In that sense, competency is interpreted as the ability to preserve the (conceptual) unity of the singular new, despite the impossibility of reconstructing the real as a whole.

1 – Morphologically speaking, *competency* and *competence* are both nouns derived from the adjective *competent*, where the former can also function as a countable noun (Huddleston, Pullum, 2002: 1705).

The problem of competency

In Chapter I of the first of *The Ten Books*, which deals with the education of architects, Vitruvius cites Pytheos's comment on what we might define as architectural competency:

[…] an architect ought to be able to accomplish much more in all the arts and sciences than the men who, by their own particular kinds of work and the practice of it, have brought each a single subject to the highest perfection [*ad summam claritatem*] (Pollio, 1914: 12).

Pytheos's mistake is, according to Vitruvius, not to have considered the fact that architecture, like all arts, consists of *actual work* [*opus*] and *the theory* [*ratiocinatio*] *of it*. When Vitruvius in this place defines theory – in contrast to *opus effectus*, which he says always refers to a singular field of professional activity – as a commonality of *all* educated men, the problem of architectural competency appears as a question of *extensiveness of theory*. Thus, in describing the difference between architect and mathematician, he says:

[…] he has done enough and to spare who in each subject [*ex singulis doctrinis*] possesses a fairly good knowledge of those parts, with their principles [*partes et rationes earum mediocriter*], which are indispensable for architecture, so that if he is required to pass judgement and to express approval [*iudicare et probare*] in the case of those things or arts, he may not be found wanting (Pollio, 1914: 13).

The difference to Pytheos is in what Vitruvius calls the necessity of the architect to be "amenable to instruction" [*ad disciplinam docilem*] (Pollio 1914: 6). Only through a dialectical relationship between practical knowledge and submission to theory will the architect be able "to reach a position of authority" [*auctoritas*] (ibid.). The discourse of authority is, in this sense, related to the impossibility of acquiring absolute, that is, mathematical knowledge and, consequently, the need for theoretical generalizations. In order to distinguish between these two types of knowledge, we will introduce the difference between the terms *competency* and *competence*.[1]

Etymologically, *competency* is a direct adaptation from the Latin *competentia*, while *competence* comes from the French *compétence* (Simpson et al., 1989: 603); semantically, there is no difference. Historically, however, the two terms have been used roughly in two parallel groups of meaning. The first refers to rivalry and competition, from the Latin *competere*, in the post-classical active sense ("to strive after [something] in company or together"). On the other hand, all meanings that refer to "sufficiency" come from the verb *competere* in the classical neuter sense, which, in addition to sufficiency, also means efficiency and accordance (Simpson et al., 1989: 603; Glare, 1968: 376). Thus, in relation to the inclusivity implied by the prefix *com-*, the difference in these meanings can be overall

read as having to do with the issue of authority. Namely, the fact that the adjective *competent*[2] – which never refers to rivalry – appears two centuries before the two nouns (competence and competency) indicates the precedence of the idea of the transcendent other, who has the authority to declare someone competent based on their ability to *con*form to existing professional knowledge.

Edmund Burke was the first to use the nouns competence and competency in the sense of "sufficiency of qualification" (Simpson et al., 1989: 603). He writes in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

It is indeed difficult, perhaps impossible, to give limits to the mere abstract competence of the supreme power, such as was exercised by parliament at that time; but the limits of a *moral* competence, subjecting, even in powers more indisputably sovereign, occasional will to permanent reason, and to the steady maxims of faith, justice, and fixed fundamental policy, are perfectly intelligible, and perfectly binding upon those who exercise any authority, under any name, or under any title, in the state (Burke, 2003: 18, emphasis in the original).

The objections of these speculatists, if its forms do not quadrate with their theories, are as valid against such an old and beneficent government, as against the most violent tyranny, or the greenest usurpation. They are always at issue with governments, not on a question of abuse, but a question of competency, and a question of title (Burke, 2003: 49).

More important than any difference in meaning, their use in Burke's text could indicate the particularity of the context of the words' transfer from the field of transcendent authority into Vitruvius's *auctoritas*. We have here a transformation in which "sufficient knowledge" acquires a political meaning, beyond the meaning of *com-* as mere plurality. The discourse of sufficiency is, in that sense, directed against the idea of revolution as the event of the absolute new.

(Performance of) the competence of performance
In contrast to the parallel use of *competence* and *competency* in Burke, Noam Chomsky's theory only features *competence* (in competence-performance systems). Indeed, the absence of *competency* in Chomsky seems crucial to us for the defining of their distinction.

Chomsky opposes the term *competence* to the term *performance*. Whereas the latter is defined as "the actual use of language in concrete situations," *competence* means "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" (Chomsky, 2015: 2). Compared to Saussure's distinction *langue-parole*, Chomsky's distinction between *competence* and *performance* implies an incongruence between knowledge and the actual use of language. In other words, *performance* always introduces an addition that evades linguistic knowledge or capacity. For this reason, in place of Saussure's *langue* – understood as "merely a systematic inventory of items" – Chomsky places *competence*, which is closer to Humboldt's understanding of

2 - The OED gives the first use for the adjective towards the end of the fourteenth century, in *An apology for Lollard doctrines* (attributed to John Wycliffe), in the meaning of "suitable, fit, appropriate, proper" (Simpson et al., 1989: 603). None of the later examples of this adjective contain any sense of rivalry.

language (Chomsky, 2015: 2). The basic difference between these terms, he describes as the difference in subject of study: on the one hand (the Saussurian) study of a system of *elements*, while on the other is a system of *rules* (Chomsky, 1970: 23). Chomsky develops the idea of *competence* as a "system of rule" based on Humboldt's indirect relation between word and thing:

For Humboldt, as for many others before and since, a word does not stand directly for a thing, but rather for a concept. There can, accordingly, be a multiplicity of expressions for the same object, each representing a way in which this object has been conceived through the workings of the process of 'Spracherzeugung', […] (Chomsky, 1970: 20).

In describing language thus as a "system of concepts", Chomsky uses the phrase *underlying competence* to define the relation of linguistic knowledge towards the creative aspect of actual use of language. That is, "the capacity of 'Spracherzeugung' is constantly at work, not only in extending the system of concepts, but also in recreating it, in each perceptual act" (Chomsky, 1970: 20). Defined in this way – by shifting from "elements" to "rules" – it would appear that the term *competence* reconstructs the limits of the etymological entry of "sufficiency" understood as "efficiency", that is, as a matter of prescribing "examples." Thus, Chomsky states that the basic problem of linguistic analysis is revealing this "underlying system of rules" among the formal (or, in his terminology, perceptual) parts of a statement (Chomsky, 2015: 2). Here we encounter the basic difference between his and Latour's standpoint of defining the relation of performance-competence. When Chomsky speaks of mentalistic linguistics, his use of competence differs from Latour's in that it is contained in performance, indeed is its condition. On the other hand, Latour uses this term in the sense of substance whereby "from what it *is* you may draw the conclusion that it will be able, in the future to *do* this and that" (Latour, 2014: 3, emphasis in the original). Here, competence is a generalized *description* of a certain set of actions. In contrast to Chomsky, this meaning implies a drive towards a mathematical object – competence as description without generalization, which in Chomskian language is a taxonomic understanding of the term. Latour, thus, erases the ontological difference between competence and performance:

Although the concept of substance can be asked to play the role of what lies "under" the properties, it may also mean, in a more mundane manner, depending on how you play with the etymology of the word substance, what *subsists* after stabilization throughout the paraphernalia of the "thought collective" […] (Latour, 2014: 3-4).

In describing a scientific discovery – which he explains as turning performance into competence – Latour emphasizes the problem of *time*, that is,

localizing scientific practice in it. He states that contained in the course of scientific discovery is a tendency towards narrativization, that is, reversing the order of cause and effect (Latour, 2014). In other words, science presents competence as a law that precedes performance, with the consequence of *objectification* of performance:

As soon as you claim that the agencies encountered in experience 'obey a law', immediately the law *takes over* the role of the substance, of the competence, while what happens, that is the set of properties, of performances, are *retrograded* to the status of mere phenomena of mere appearances [...] (Latour, 2014: 31).

This type of reversal imposes a dualist position, resulting in the ultimate problem appearing as the distinction between facts and values. The differentiation of the epistemic subject from its object of inquiry implies the division into agency and politics, and in which the ideal of an objective approach to scientific inquiry is limited to "matters of fact," excluding "matters of concern" (Latour, 2014: 24). Opposing such a view, Latour asserts that values are not a human addition to the world but are already part of it. It follows from this that urgency emerges from values in the world, where the task of the "subjects" is to register those values (Latour, 2014: 36). It is here that we encounter Latour's thesis on the imperative of slowing down. For Latour, "projecting" one's values onto the "natural" world is the result of reductionism that involves substituting attributes with substance and substituting performance with competence. But, as competence is only a generalized description of performance, this type of reductionism results in dealing in clichés. Slowing down, thus, represents resistance to clichés occurring when the connection between performance and competence is lost. However, the insistence on such a connection, which preserves the possibility of reconstructing the mathematical knowledge out of generalized and clichetized competences, opposes the idea of "sufficiency of knowledge." The discourse of sufficiency, not belonging to scientific research, seems to construct a diametrically opposed relationship to the problem of time in relation to Latour's standpoint. Namely, Latour's call for slowing down is related to scientific competence, limited by the real, which always ontologically precedes it. In this sense, the imperative to slow down is a call for opening up to the "contingency" of the real, which lies between scientific generalizations. However, what connects Latour's concept of competence with its historical precedents is what Chomsky calls the taxonomic understanding of this term. This is directly related to the scientific discourse, within which Latour defines the concept of competence, and which develops theoretical knowledge beyond the problem of practice or application. Latour therefore speaks of the new only as "new agencies," *already in the world* (Latour, 2014: 11).

Production of the new

While in Latour only the "unexpected" or part of "as yet unknown" can be referred to as the new, Chomsky's theory of generative grammar implies an encounter with the problem of the new. However, competency cannot be explained through his concepts of competence and performance because they do not refer to *creation*. In the case of competence, it is thinking about the *conditions* for reaching the new, while performance is always a matter of the already *created*. With regard to the category of time, competence has an atemporal character; its nature is, therefore, general in the sense of Deleuze's *général* as opposed to the singularity of difference (Deleuze, 1993: 9). On the other hand, the question of temporality in Chomsky's understanding of performance is somewhat more complex. Although the term designates actual use of linguistic rules, it is always perceived in the past tense – as a completed action. Thus, "actual" refers to the *situation* in which the linguistic expression is formed, but not to the process of its formation. For this reason, the difference between competency and competence cannot be described in relation to the notion of performance, because competency – if we want to alter its meaning compared to that of the term competence – has to include the issue of creation, thus implying the state of being posited within specific spatio-temporal relations. Unlike the aspiration towards mathematical reconstruction in Latour, which presupposes the possibility of establishing theoretical continuities between existing performances, practical work presupposes intervening *in* the real world. Dealing with the act of creation is, thus, the reason competency refers to the present. The actuality of the present moment determines the relative character of competency, as a result of which the Vitruvian *opus effectus* becomes impossible when striving for the reconstruction of absolute continuity between the real world and theoretical knowledge. In that sense, the discourse of sufficiency implies not only the impossibility of total knowledge, but also a state of urgency within which a certain body of knowledge is declared sufficient – sufficient for practice and action. Therefore, it is about the need to act within the continuum of the real – or the theory of it – despite the lack of total knowledge. In order to define the conditions for such action, the concept of competency should be distinguished from competence with regard to the problem of the new. While competence refers to the *determined* knowledge, whose fragmentariness is overcome by limiting oneself to known "theories of practice," we could define competency as the ability to, despite non-mathematical generalizations, structure the real and create relations that enable the objectification of the space-time continuum. In this sense, competency would function as the ability to overcome the problem of generalization and the general, not by mathematical reconstruction of the space-time continuum (which results in specialization and the pursuit of perfection), but by creating "cuts" in it. Following Deleuze's concept of the Idea, a "cut" would be a way of (re)constructing or objectivizing the horizon of the real by creating a "concrete universal" beyond the general:

The Idea as concrete universal stands opposed to concepts of the understanding, and possesses a comprehension all the more vast as its extension is great. This is what defines the universal synthesis of the Idea […] (Deleuze, 1994: 173).

Defined in this way, the idea is the element that produces the difference between *production* and the *production of the new*. Production itself *does not need* an idea, given that "techniques" guarantee the outcome of production, which is to say, make it entirely pre-determined. Yet, what does it mean when Deleuze says that the idea always depends on "techniques I am familiar with"? On the one hand, an idea cannot occur without possessing skills in a specific field; on the other, to have an idea means something more than technical ability. For Deleuze, this addition contained in the idea is resistance – resistance to information, understood as system of control (Deleuze, 2006: 321-323). Resistance that constitutes production of the new is resistance to the pre-scriptive knowledge of how to produce something. Resistance thus allows for the abstraction of knowledge that liberates it from its formal givenness.

When we say that resistance leads to abstraction of knowledge, this type of abstraction is always relative: it depends on the degree of abstraction from the amount of expression being abstracted. The new is produced through abstraction in which the method is *visible* to the extent equal to the number of expressions in relation to which the new appears as such. This is the type of relativity to which Deleuze refers when speaking of the formation of space-time(s) through creative activity (Deleuze, 2006: 315). The spatial-temporal character of creation is what makes the new always singular, which is why the term competency necessarily refers to the present: it is a matter of the actuality of the new. With the mentioned relativity of this term in mind, it seems essential to pose the question *when is the new truly new?* Deleuze's answer to this question – that the new remains forever new – refers to the idea that the production of the new does not imply it being established as "the new" (Deleuze, 1994: 136). Instead, the difference of the new becomes possible only with repetition, which at the same time constitutes the past and determines the present in which *transformation* caused by the new occurs (Deleuze, 1994: 90). Such a transformation is produced only when there is the opposition to formal finitude that determines space-time: "The form of time is there only for the revelation of the formless in the eternal return. The extreme formality is there only for an excessive formlessness" (Deleuze, 1994: 91).

In no time
Regarding Vitruvius's claim that, for an architect, reaching authority becomes a problem due to the extensiveness of the subject [*amplitudo rei*], reaching the state of epistemic "sufficiency" appears to be crucial for the definition of the temporal aspects of architects' work. According to Vitruvius, the architect is *forced* to create within contexts in which they possess "not the highest but not even necessarily a moderate

knowledge of the subjects of study" [*non iuxta necessitatem summas sed etiam mediocres scientias*] (Pollio, 1914: 13). The discourse of sufficiency se, in the case of architectural creation, does not refer to the architect's external status, but primarily to *decide* in front of an indefinite body of knowledge. Unlike the concept of competence, which does not interrupt the indefinite continuum of knowledge that corresponds to the indefinite character of Nature (Deleuze, 1994: 14), competency implies the ability to radically intervene *in* Nature or its mathematical comprehension. In this sense, competency does not mean attachment to the real, but on the contrary the readiness to problematize and then transform it, despite its elusiveness. Deleuzian new, therefore, results from the ability to make a cut [*coupure*] in the continuum of the real not to produce a discontinuity for itself but to evade general, clichetized representations. Such readiness to *decisively* intervene could be brought into connection with Vitruvian *auctoritas* – referring to the one who is capable to conceptually (re)construct the horizon of the real, in spite of the impossibility of its absolute comprehension. Regarding the issue of the new and its production, Deleuze's system of the problem and Idea serves to objectify and epistemologically structure the new, which is always outside experience (Deleuze, 1994: 169). In this way, the Idea functions as a means to enable creation, despite the problem of the indefinite. Deleuze thus speaks of the Idea as a "concrete universal": "The Idea as concrete universal stands opposed to concepts of the understanding, and possesses a comprehension all the more vast as its extension is great. This is what defines the universal synthesis of the Idea" (Deleuze, 1994: 173). The universal in the singular gives the opportunity to construct a singular unity of the real, which would enable the translation of the architectural concept into its material form, while pointing to the paradox of architecture, which always assumes the position *between* the idea and concept (Vesnić, 2020: 76). The objectification and creation of unity between extension and comprehension also objectifies and synthesizes time, placing it in the order of the present. Deleuze's reversal of the relationship between time and the present – where, according to him, the present is not a dimension of time, but exists independently of the category of time – allows the present moment to create a synthesis of time *in* it, thus making both the past and the future "dimensions of the present" (Deleuze, 1994: 76). With such a definition of the present, the genuine competency would be the ability to create *in no time*.

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