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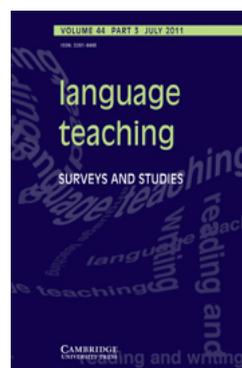
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## The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural

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# Plenary Speeches

## The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural

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*While communicative competence is characterized by the negotiation of intended meanings in authentic contexts of language use, intercultural competence has to do with far less negotiable discourse worlds, the 'circulation of values and identities across cultures, the inversions, even inventions of meaning, often hidden behind a common illusion of effective communication' (Kramersch, Lévy & Zarate 2008: 15). The self that is engaged in intercultural communication is a symbolic self that is constituted by symbolic systems like language as well as by systems of thought and their symbolic power. This symbolic self is the most sacred part of our personal and social identity; it demands for its well-being careful positioning, delicate facework, and the ability to frame and re-frame events. The symbolic dimension of intercultural competence calls for an approach to research and teaching that is discourse-based, historically grounded, aesthetically sensitive, and that takes into account the actual, the imagined and the virtual worlds in which we live. With the help of concrete examples from the real world and foreign language classrooms, the paper attempts to redefine the notion of third place (Kramersch 1993) as symbolic competence.*

### 1. Introduction

The organizers of the Second International Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence at the University of Arizona posed a challenge in their conference program as follows:

Intercultural competence is [the ability] 'to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to a society – and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people'. It also encompasses the ability 'to critically or analytically understand that one's own and other cultures' perspective is culturally determined rather than natural.' (Byram 2000: 10). Globalization, having brought individuals in contact with one another at an unprecedented scale, has also brought forth a general challenge to traditionally recognized boundaries of nation, language, race, gender, and class. For those living within this rapidly changing social landscape, intercultural competence – as defined by Michael Byram above – is a necessary skill, and the cultivation of such intercultural individuals falls on the shoulders of today's educators. They should provide students with opportunities to help them define and design for themselves their 'third place' or 'third culture', a sphere of interculturality

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that enables language students to take an insider's view as well as an outsider's view on both their first and second cultures. It is this ability to find/establish/adopt this third place that is at the very core of intercultural competence.

I would like to explore in this paper the nature of the challenge presented above. How can one mediate, that is, interpret one's own and the other's culture each in terms of the other, if at the same time one's interpretation is culturally determined? Where, then, is mediation located? I wish to re-visit the notion of third culture I proposed more than 15 years ago (Kramersch 1993) in the light of the explosion of global communication technologies and the increased mobility caused by the large scale migrations of the last ten years. I stake out briefly the nature of the challenge, and suggest that the notion of third culture must be seen less as a PLACE than as a symbolic PROCESS of meaning-making that sees beyond the dualities of national languages (L1-L2) and national cultures (C1-C2). The development of symbolic competence does not replace the hard won notion of communicative competence that has served us so well in the last 25 years, but it includes a systematic reflexive component that encompasses some subjective and aesthetic as well as historical and ideological dimensions that communicative language teaching (CLT) has largely left unexploited. I examine some field notes from language classroom observations and explore how these dimensions could be added to the communicative syllabus used in these classes. I finally consider the implications of including symbolic competence in the training of language teachers.

## 2. The challenge

The notion of culture in which the concept of third place was developed in Kramersch (1993) was still a modernist notion that defined culture as membership in a national community with a common history, a common standard language and common imaginings. Like the notion of native speaker and of speech community, culture was seen as rooted in the nation state and its institutions. But in Kramersch (1998), culture had already become a more portable notion that had to do with the construction of meaning and imagined communities. The 'speech community' had become the 'discourse community', whose discursive practices were seen as both enabling and limiting the range of possible meanings constructed by the individual. Created and shaped by language and other symbolic systems, culture was seen as a site of struggle for the recognition and legitimation of meaning.

Seen from California in 2010, culture today is associated with ideologies, attitudes and beliefs, created and manipulated through the discourse of the media, the Internet, the marketing industry, Hollywood and other mind-shaping interest groups. It is seen less as a world of institutions and historical traditions, or even as identifiable communities of practice, than as a mental toolkit of subjective metaphors, affectivities, historical memories, entextualizations and transcontextualizations of experience, with which we make meaning of the world around us and share that meaning with others. Since that sharing is increasingly taking place in an idealized cyberspace, rather than in messy real-life encounters, culture is easily fragmented into sentimental stereotypes that can be manipulated to reinforce private

interests. This is not to say that there is no such thing as proud membership in a national community or in communities of practice, but the value attached to something bigger than yourself has moved away from the nation-state and from multiple and changing communities to the very foundation of our symbolic self and its survival: our culture is now subjectivity and historicity, and is constructed and upheld by the stories we tell and the various discourses that give meaning to our lives.

Applied linguists therefore turn to discourse to understand communication across cultures. However, unlike the 80s, when discourse was studied structurally as larger units of language above the sentence such as paragraphs, conversations and interviews, discourse today is studied post-structurally as something that offers various ways of making meaning through various symbolic systems. For example, Chris Weedon, a post-structuralist cultural critic who inspired applied linguists like Bonny Norton to write about language and identity in language learning, defines discourse as ‘a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity’ (Weedon 1987: 40), and she is interested in studying the social semiotic processes by which discourse structures society.

Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation in language and language is not an abstract system, but is always socially and historically located in discourses. Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist (Weedon 1987: 41).

Pennycook adds to Weedon’s definition the notion that discourse not only (re)produces but organizes meaning through the conceptual categories (e.g. man, woman, German, American) it makes available to speakers. ‘Discourse is shared ways of organizing meaning that are often, though not exclusively, realized through language. Discourses are about the creation and limitation of possibilities, they are systems of power/knowledge (*pouvoir/savoir*) within which we take up subject positions’ (Pennycook 1994: 128). The link between discourse, ideology and identity in language learning and teaching has been stressed recently by Richard Young, who writes: ‘Discursive practice is the construction and reflection of social realities through actions that invoke identity, ideology, belief, and power’ (2009: 1).

If culture is being increasingly viewed as discourse and the production of meaning, the development of intercultural competence is not only a question of tolerance towards or empathy with others, of understanding them in their cultural context, or of understanding oneself and the other in terms of one another. It is also a matter of looking beyond words and actions and embracing multiple, changing and conflicting discourse worlds, in which ‘the circulation of values and identities across cultures, the inversions, even inventions of meaning, [are] often hidden behind a common illusion of effective communication (Kramsch, Zarate & Lévy 2008: 15). While communicative competence was based on an assumption of understanding based on common goals and common interests, intercultural competence presupposes a lack of understanding due to divergent subjectivities and historicities. By defining culture as discourse, we are looking at the interculturally competent individual as a symbolic self that is constituted by symbolic systems like language, as well as by systems of thought and their symbolic power.

### 3. What do I mean by 'symbolic'?

As a symbolic system, discourse is at once:

- **SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION.** It denotes and connotes a stable reality through lexical and grammatical structures (e.g. Saussure 1916/1959; Benveniste 1966). These structures are to be seen as conceptual categories, idealized cognitive models of reality that correspond to prototypes and stereotypes through which we apprehend ourselves and others (e.g. Lakoff 1987; Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Discourse as symbolic representation focuses on what words say and what they reveal about the mind.
- **SYMBOLIC ACTION.** Through its performatives, its speech acts, speech genres, facework strategies and symbolic interaction rituals (e.g. Austin 1962; Goffman 1967) discourse as symbolic action focuses on what words do and what they reveal about human intentions.
- **SYMBOLIC POWER.** Through the intertextual relations it establishes with other discourses, the moral values it expresses, the subjectivities and historical continuities (or discontinuities) it constructs, discourse as symbolic power (e.g. Weedon 1987; Bourdieu 1991; Butler 1997) focuses on what words index and what they reveal about social identities, individual and collective memories, emotions and aspirations.

#### 3.1 An example

Let us take an example. In his famous 'I have a dream' speech of 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King attempted to bridge the cultural divide between White and Black Americans. One could say today that this speech is a model of intercultural competence in action through a particularly high dose of symbolic competence:

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality (King 1963: 2).

In this speech, King combines the words of the White Other to express the claims of African Americans, using the style and rhythm of Black homilies to reach his White and Black audience. He uses the symbolic denotations and connotations of originally White terms like 'freedom and democracy', 'justice' and invents new meanings for them through new collocations as in 'freedom and equality' and 'racial justice'. His symbolic performance combines not only parallelisms ('from . . . to') and repetitions ('now is the time') typical of Black sermons, but also Shakespearian-style neologisms ('the fierce urgency of now') to bridge the gap between White and Black. 'The sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent' draws on an intertextuality familiar to the White educated elite ('the winter of our discontent' from *Richard III*) and expands it through graphic alliterations ('sweltering summer') that refer

to the plight of Blacks. He alludes to a common heritage in the Christian Bible ('the dark and desolate valley') and in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address ('we have come to this hallowed spot') to embrace both audiences in the same rhetorical flourish. This speech thus combines symbolic representation, symbolic action and symbolic power to make it the most cited example of intercultural communication in American history.

King's speech, however, carried the same uncertainties and ambiguities as any attempt to communicate across cultures with wide disparities in power and legitimacy. Was he speaking as a Baptist minister, a patriot, a civil rights leader? What genre was his discourse: a biblical homily, a political manifesto? 'The sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent *WILL NOT PASS . . .*' Was this 'will not pass' a declaration, a prophecy, or a threat? From where was he mediating between the two cultures? At the time, Martin Luther King was placing himself squarely within an American discourse of freedom, democracy and justice but, as an American, he was claiming the right to resignify these terms and open up what Butler called 'the domain of the sayable' (Butler 1997: 133). He was assassinated on 4 April 1968 not for what his language represented, but for what his discourse was a metaphor for, namely a cultural revolution. Inasmuch as intercultural communication reshuffles the power dynamics between discourses and proposes 'inversions, even inventions of meanings' (Kramsch et al. 2008: 15) it raises the question of what we mean by 'effective communication' under conditions of unequal power. Effective communication has increasingly come to mean not only 'getting things done in the real world', but 'redefining the symbolic reality of the real world'.

We should not conclude that Martin Luther King's assassination showed the failure of intercultural communication between Black and White in America. Because discourse is open-ended, both towards the past and towards the future, one cannot assess the success of King's speech by its immediate effect on the actions of men. It took another 40 years for a Black president to arrive in the White House. But like other forms of discourse (e.g. satirical TV, inaugural speeches, campaign speeches, verbal art and other forms of art – including teaching!) discourse prepares the ground for action. Indeed, the post-structuralist approach I propose to the development of intercultural competence seeks the meaning of events on a much larger timescale than is usually the case in academia.

### 3.2 The struggle with symbolic meaning

Since the sixties, we have become much more aware of the symbolic dimension of intercultural communication, especially in societies with great inequalities among discourses. Global communication technologies and a global market have created an illusion of equality in intercultural encounters. We are all subject to the same brands and logos, pop culture and talk shows, but we don't take them up in the same way. The sociolinguist Jan Blommaert writes: 'Whenever discourses travel across the globe, what is carried with them is their shape, but their value, meaning, or function do not often travel along. Value, meaning, and function are a matter of uptake, they have to be granted by others on the basis of the prevailing orders of indexicality, and increasingly also on the basis of their real or potential 'market value' as a cultural commodity' (Blommaert 2005: 72). We need more than ever to know how to

recognize the uptakes, the intertextualities, the orders of indexicality of words and images and their multiple timescales. For example, King's discourse reappeared in Barack Obama's campaign speech in South Carolina on 3 November 2007: 'I am running [for this office] because of what Dr. King called 'the fierce urgency of now', but a recent recruitment ad from the US Army exhorts Hispanic Americans to enlist by urging them to 'embrace[e] the fierce urgency of now' both in English and in Spanish ('*¡Enlazando la urgencia feroz de ahora!*'). Two different uptakes, two different meanings. A recent cartoon by the Alsatian cartoonist Tomi Ungerer, published on the front page of the New York Times, shows the silhouette of a Black man staggering under the weight of an enormous cross in the colors of the stars and stripes. It is captioned 'Barack Obama'. That cartoon draws yet another line of indexicality between discursive events that took place at different times in different places and now make new meaning in unexpected ways.

### 3.3 From third place to symbolic competence

The proliferation of global communicative technologies has made intercultural communication into a much more complex, changing and conflictual endeavor than just a L1/C1 self understanding another L2/C2 self from a third place in between. THIRD PLACE, THIRD CULTURE and SPHERE OF INTERCULTURALITY are metaphors that attempt to capture through a place marker what is in fact a process of positioning the self both inside and outside the discourse of others. It is the capacity to recognize the historical context of utterances and their intertextualities, to question established categories like *German, American, man, woman, White, Black* and place them in their historical and subjective contexts. But it is also the ability to resignify them, reframe them, re- and transcontextualize them and to play with the tension between text and context. As one of my undergraduates wrote in answer to the question from the textbook (Johnstone 2008: 207): 'What do you think "proficiency" in reading should entail in "the Information Age"?'

Today you have to be able to tell fake information from real information. Both can be useful, but only if you can tell the difference. A century ago, knowing vocabulary was probably very important. Today, knowing what is being used sarcastically, or is entirely false is more important than spelling. If you can't think critically enough to tell who has written what you are reading, what they are trying to get from their writing (do they want you to buy something?) you might mistake a trickster for a scientist or vice-versa.

Symbolic competence goes further than just critical thinking and distinguishing fake from true, especially when fake news has become true news, as in Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*<sup>1</sup>. It also goes further than semiotic competence (van Lier 2004) because it does more than interpret events according to truths conventionally agreed upon. Symbolic competence is also engaged in the symbolic power game of challenging established meanings and redefining the real (see Kramsch 2006, 2009a).

<sup>1</sup> Jon Stewart is a popular political entertainer in the daily American television show *Comedy Central*.

The interculturally competent speaker, then, when reflecting upon discursive practices between people who speak different languages and occupy different and sometimes unequal subject positions, asks the following questions:

- Not which words, but whose words are those? Whose discourse? Whose interests are being served by this text?
- What made these words possible, and others impossible?
- How does the speaker position him/herself?
- How does he/she frame the events talked about?
- What prior discourses does he/she draw on?<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Teaching for symbolic competence

I had the opportunity in 2009 to visit three intermediate-level German language classrooms, one in Germany and two in the US. The following discussion is based on my field notes and conversations with the instructors after class. All the teachers were following some version of CLT, i.e. active student participation, use of authentic texts, reading and speaking for information retrieval and exchange of information, group and pair work. My purpose here is to explore ways in which CLT could be made more ‘intercultural’ and in which communicative competence could be supplemented by what I have called ‘symbolic competence’.

##### 4.1 A visit to an intermediate German-as-a-second-language (DaF) classroom

The class in Germany was taught by an experienced German DaF teacher as part of an intensive six-week course for American undergraduate students.

The students were given to read the night before a short text written in 1957 by Erich Kästner on the bombing of Dresden that was featured in the textbook by S. & K. Schmidt, *Erinnerungsorte: Deutsche Geschichte im DaF-Unterricht* (published by Cornelsen, 2007), followed by questions on the text.

Yes, Dresden was a beautiful city. You can hardly believe how beautiful it was. But you must believe me! Today, none of you, however rich your father might be, can take the train and go there to see if I am right. For the city of Dresden doesn't exist any more. Except for a few remains, it has disappeared from the surface of the earth. The Second World War in a single night and with a little flip of the hand wiped it out. Its incomparable beauty had been built over centuries. A few hours were sufficient to make it magically disappear from the surface of the earth. That happened on 13 February 1945. Eight hundred airplanes dropped explosives and fire bombs. What remained was a desert. With a few giant ruins that looked like stranded ocean liners. (my translation).

- What information does Kästner give his young readers regarding the bombing of Dresden on 13 February 1945 and its consequences?

<sup>2</sup> The ability to ask these questions is evidence of symbolic competence whatever language is spoken. It shows an awareness of the cultural or cross-cultural context in which language unfolds, and, as such, symbolic competence is an important dimension of intercultural competence. If we take culture to mean not only ‘foreign national culture’ but context in general (e.g. professional, generational, Black, White, or urban culture), these questions can be discussed equally in L1 classrooms and in foreign language classrooms.

- What linguistic features did you notice in this text?
- How do you feel about the way Kästner described the bombing of Dresden? What information do you have yourself?
- Can you imagine that there might be good, i.e. legitimate, reason in times of war for destroying a whole city and killing its inhabitants?
- Do you know of any cases in history where such reasons were given? (my translation).

This was accompanied by exercises and an original recording read by the author himself. The teacher has just played the recording in class. Here is my reconstitution of the classroom dialogue in my English translation.

T. What do you associate with the name Dresden?

Ss. Bombing . . . Caspar David Friedrich . . . protest movements . . .

T. How do you feel about the way Kästner tells the story of the bombing of Dresden?

S1. Kästner didn't say who did it or why

Ss. No reasons given !!!

T. Why not?

(long silence)

S2. Because the Germans feel guilty (5.0 second pause)

S3. Bombing Dresden was the only way to bring Germany to its knees

T. To FORCE Germany to its knees. *In die Knie zwingen* (writes on board)

S4. German texts always favor passives, where no one bears responsibility, whereas English prefers the active voice

T. But the text doesn't have a single passive! (5.0 second pause)

S5. The text has a performative effect – is that the correct word? It hides the truth

T. Is the story appropriate for children? What information do they get? (3.0 second pause)

S1. I wouldn't tell the story like that to children nowadays. I would give them the historical truth.

*Later, at a meeting with the students*

CK. Why didn't you ask your teacher what he felt about the bombing of Dresden and the way Kästner told the story? After all, he is German and has a native speaker's perspective.

S1. The language classroom is not really the place to learn about values, history and culture.

S2. Cultural articles are used to pique our interest, but we don't have the vocabulary to talk about political topics.

S3. Yeah, some German instructors want to raise our consciousness about us being Americans. It's debilitating.

S4. The language teachers are great. They are facilitators, catalysts, they are not professors. They understand the science of language. They know we need to talk to each other, so they remain back seat riders.

*That evening, at a meeting with the teacher*

CK. Why didn't you tell your students how YOU understand the way Kästner tells the story? Give the German perspective?

- T. I am very aware of the discrepancy in linguistic abilities between them and me. I will only engage in such a discussion with people on equal linguistic footing. (. . .)
- CK. So how would YOU explain why Kästner didn't name those who dropped the bombs?
- T. In 1957, Kästner was a pacifist and the most vocal opponent of the rearmament of Germany. He didn't want to raise children who would put all the blame on the Allies, as had been done by the Nazis at the time. He didn't want children to grow up 'like them'. In this text, Kästner is by no means politically neutral.

This explanation by the teacher showed me how much we underestimate the impact of other powerful discourses on what gets said or remains unsaid in language classrooms. In this case, the American historical discourse of 'German guilt', the expectations on the part of the American students of what a 'language' course was supposed to do, itself linked to the split in American academia between the less prestigious 'language' program and the more prestigious 'literary and cultural studies', combined with the teacher's restraint and desire not to embarrass the American students, all contrived to silence a more complex response to the teacher's question: 'Why did Kästner not tell the children who bombed Dresden?'. That was the fundamental question that the development of intercultural competence would have to tackle. For this, both teacher and students would have to be willing to wander off the communicative beaten path and revisit established notions of historical truth and moral superiority during WWII. One way of doing this is to have students imagine themselves as American parents telling their own children about what happened on 13 February 1945 on the sixtieth anniversary of the bombing of Dresden. How would THEY write the story? If such an activity is not to remain on the level of grammatical accuracy and information exchange, it would call for reflection in the classroom about the linguistic and stylistic choices made by the students and the effect these choices have on various native and non-native readers.

## 4.2 A visit to two German IV classes

The following two classroom observations took place towards the end of a fourth semester college-level German class in the US. The two classes were taught by two graduate student instructors, highly trained in communicative language pedagogy and each with two years of experience teaching in the program. The first is a doctoral student in German literary studies, the second a doctoral student in Germanic linguistics. They are both near-native speakers of German.

### Class 1

The students have read a chapter from *Lila Lila*, a thriller by Martin Suter (Published by Diogenes, 2004). The class I observed was a good example of CLT in action. Role plays enable students to enact characters and situations as they understand them. The suspense of this page-turner, which features a hoax perpetrated by a young man (David) who lets himself be taken for a famous writer in order to impress his girlfriend (Marie) but gets caught up in his own game, leads students to speculate on various endings, outcomes, events, characters' motivations and

mental states, and to hypothesize and negotiate various possibilities and ‘what if’ scenarios. However, I realized after a while that the purpose of these communicative activities is for students to practice their German, not to better understand the cultural aspects of the story – to make a social critique or explore the status of the writer in German society. Nor are they meant to help students reflect on the intercultural paradox of having a German novel, written for German readers, read by American students with possibly different sensibilities. What seems to be missing is someone to tie the strings, draw the implications, and incite reflection on the nature of language, of literary narrative, of cultural assumptions and intertextualities: what was said, and what was not said – both in the text and by the students (see Byram & Kramersch 2008). Two examples from my field notes will serve as illustrations.

Example 1. The teacher asks: ‘*Von welcher Perspektive ist das Kapitel geschrieben?*’ [from which perspective is this chapter written?], then gives her own answer, that Chapter 24 is written from Marie’s perspective, and Chapter 25 from David’s perspective. Would it be worthwhile asking them for evidence from the text? And discussing why it is important to ask that question?

Example 2. David works as a waiter but is not a professional waiter. He is a high school drop-out who suffers from being taken for a waiter. Implications of social class. Jacky, the real author, drops names of authors, has a ‘*lässiges Gebärden*’ (relaxed demeanor) and is a wine connoisseur, all signs that he is the stereotypical ‘*Schriftsteller*’ [writer]. Here too: social class. Marie is surprised at David’s concern about money (as a sign of a lower class?). Should all of this be brought to the students’ attention?

I made the following notes for myself:

How could the instructor add an intercultural dimension that goes beyond communicative competence and towards symbolic competence?

- incite reflection on the nature of language, genre, cultural assumptions in the novel. (How do you imagine a ‘writer’ to be/to behave? What do you associate with the words ‘writer’/‘*Schriftsteller*’/‘*écrivain*’?)
- discuss the changes in perspective from chapter to chapter with evidence from the text. (How can you tell that Chapter 24 is written from Marie’s perspective and Chapter 25 from David’s perspective?)
- reflect on what was said and not said by the students (CK: ‘Marie is surprised at David’s concern about money, a sign of a lower class. Would you have wanted to point this out to them?’ T: ‘many students are from a working class background and would feel put down by any discussion of social class’.)
- discuss the social criticism implied in the book.

## Class 2

In this lively class, the lesson is on Vienna. Here are some observations followed by my own reflections.

- (1) T. explains the expression ‘*Wien hat Flair*’. The teacher says: ‘*Flair* means “cool”’, and he writes *Ansehen* (prestige) on the board. He adds: ‘*In Wien wohnen hat Flair*’ (to live in Vienna is cool). He then asks the students how they characterize where they come from: ‘from the US’ or ‘from California’? ‘from ‘Stanford’ or ‘from the Bay Area’?

S1: It depends who your interlocutor is

S2: We are afraid of . . . the feelings of the other people . . . what they think of us

CK: This would be an opportunity to teach the symbolic value of having *Flair* = class, expressed also by the place you come from. How is status, class expressed in the US? Also opportunity to teach perspective, positive face and subject-positioning as discursive practice.

(2) Freud's *Traumdeutung* (interpretation of dreams). T. explains the verb *deuten* and its prefixes (e.g. *be-deuten*).

CK: This would be an opportunity to teach something about the way meaning is not inherent in words but is *attributed* (*be-deutet*) by glosses in the dictionary, and the role of dictionaries as gatekeepers of a nation's language.

(3) T. asks students to write down a dream they had, then give it to another group to interpret and guess whose dream it is. S1 asks: 'which tense do you write up dreams in, and do you use indicative or subjunctive?' T. gives a linguistic answer.

CK: This would be the opportunity to discuss briefly the idea of narrative time for events that, like dreams, stand outside of time and reside purely in their telling. Address this question as a discourse question regarding the ability of language to 'construct reality', not just refer to it.

These two classes dramatize the strengths and the limitations of CLT in the development of the students' symbolic competence. While they offered a host of imaginative opportunities to acquire fluency, lexical accuracy and communicative effectiveness, several opportunities were missed for greater intercultural understanding. In some cases, these opportunities were deliberately side stepped as not relevant or not appropriate for the goals of the course, e.g. the discussion of social class.

One could imagine making the following recommendations to teachers eager to include a symbolic dimension to their language teaching:

1. Use communicative activities as food for reflection on the nature of language, discourse, communication and mediation.
2. Pay attention to what remains unsaid, or may even be unsayable because it is politically incorrect or disturbing (e.g. social class or the bombing of Dresden).
3. Bring up every opportunity to show complexity and ambiguity (e.g. the grammatical tense of dreams, or responsibility in the bombing of Dresden).
4. Engage the students' emotions, not just their cognition (Kramsch 2009b).

## 5. Implications for the training of language teachers

At the beginning of this paper, I defined symbolic competence as having three dimensions: symbolic representation, symbolic action, and symbolic power.

While symbolic representation has usually been interpreted by language teachers as the referential function of language, it has usually been taught as dictionary meanings applied to an outside world. It has not been taught as a way of making and organizing meaning through signs, symbols and conceptual metaphors that not only refer to the outside world but shape the minds of their users and receivers as well. In particular, it has not shown students how

the choice of one word over another sets a frame for all the others (consider Martin Luther King's reference to 'racial justice' or 'the fierce urgency of now'), and can thereby change the tenor of the discourse. Teachers might want to read up on recent advances in discourse analysis (Johnstone 2008).

While symbolic action has been seen in CLT as the pragmatic or interpersonal function of language, it has usually been taught in the US as interaction rituals of a predictable kind, the good manners and etiquette of everyday life. It has not been taught as the construction of social reality through performative speech acts and the emotional and ideological impact of words. To understand how speakers and writers construct the very culture that we see them representing through spoken and written texts, teachers might want to read, for example, Fairclough (1989) or Ochs (2002).

The symbolic power of language has been, of course, present in the training of teachers of English, French or German as second languages to immigrants, who are very aware of power inequalities between native speakers and non-native speakers and who learn the language in order to gain access to the world of the native speakers and become integrated into their culture. But in a globalized world symbolic power is more diffuse and less unidirectional. Non-native speakers transform the native speaker's culture in persistent and subtle ways, and not only through rational dialogue and negotiation of meaning but through silences, and through verbal and non-verbal art forms (see, for example, Blommaert 2005; Pennycook 2010).

## **6. Conclusion: symbolic perspectives on intercultural competence**

The program of the University of Arizona conference quoted Michael Byram as saying: 'Intercultural competence encompasses the ability to critically or analytically understand that one's own and other cultures' perspective is culturally determined rather than natural.' (see the longer quotation at the start of this paper). The challenge is to understand how and to what extent our perspective is culturally determined. It is not easy to make American students understand when the American ideology of individualism precisely precludes any consideration that we might be 'culturally determined'. But if they understand that culture is symbolically mediated through words, sounds and images, they are more apt to agree that the discourses that surround us (from the media and popular culture to the conversations we have with others) structure our imaginations and sensibilities and are in turn structured by them. These discourses are what we call 'culture'. If intercultural competence is the ability to reflect critically or analytically on the symbolic systems we use to make meaning, we are led to reinterpret the learning of foreign languages as not gaining a mode of communication across cultures, but more as acquiring a symbolic mentality that grants as much importance to subjectivity and the historicity of experience as to the social conventions and the cultural expectations of any one stable community of speakers. As foreign language teachers we do well to remember that, as Michael Holquist said, 'in addition to our local allegiances, in our work we share a commitment to Language with a capital L' (Holquist 2007: 3). I take this to mean a commitment to the symbolic dimension of our endeavors: language as a means of symbolic representation, action and power; speakers, writers and learners as symbolic selves,

constituted by symbolic systems like language, music and art that shape and are shaped by others. The symbolic dimension of intercultural competence calls for an approach to the training of language teachers that is discourse-based, historically grounded, aesthetically sensitive, and that takes into account the actual, the imagined and the virtual worlds in which we live.

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