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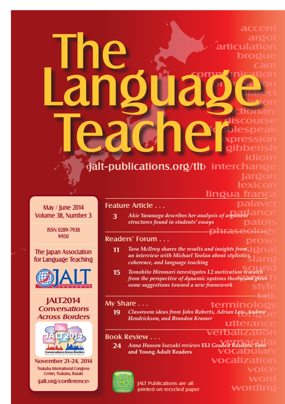

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JALT
THE JAPAN ASSOCIATION FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING
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Foreign language teaching and the multilingual subject

An interview with Claire Kramsch

University of California, Berkeley

Sponsored by the College and University Educators (CUE) SIG

Peter Hourdequin

JALT2014 Co-Chair

Claire Kramsch is Professor of German and Affiliate Professor of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Applied Linguistics and directs doctoral dissertations in the German Department and in the Graduate School of Education. She has written extensively on language, discourse, and culture in foreign language education. Two of her books, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (OUP, 1993) and *The Multilingual Subject* (OUP, 2009) won the Mildenberger Award from the American Modern Language Association. She is the past president of the American Association for Applied Linguistics and the current president of the International Association of Applied Linguistics.

PETER HOURDEQUIN (PH): For readers not familiar with your work, can you briefly describe some of the directions your research interests have taken you in recent years, and how this work has influenced your own classroom practices?

CLAIRE KRAMSCH (CK): I started out believing I would become a teacher of German at high schools and universities in the French Educational System, since I was French and I had studied German language and literature at the Sorbonne. But marrying a German who wanted to emigrate to the United States forced me to rethink my professional life. Since we lived in Cambridge, MA, I taught German at MIT for many years. But, because I didn't understand the American way of life nor my American students' worldviews, and they didn't understand my worldviews, I felt very alienated in the U.S. So I started researching the link between language, discourse, and culture in order to understand what I didn't understand about America and about myself. This research led me to the interdisciplinary field of applied linguistics, which slowly gave me answers to my questions that the study of German literature had not. Understanding the relationship between language, discourse, and ideology helped me understand many of the misunderstandings I had experienced moving to the U.S. My first books, *Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching* (1981), *Interaction et Discours dans la Classe de Langue* (1984), and *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (1993) were all attempts to find classroom applications for the insights I was gaining through studying research in psycho- and sociolinguistics, SLA, and discourse analysis. In the first 20 years of my life in the U.S., I taught German as a foreign language at MIT, Cornell, and UC Berkeley, and in the last 20 years, I have mostly taught courses in applied linguistics that all draw on the research I have conducted on my own on foreign language learners and teachers in various countries like China, Japan, France, Germany, and the U.S. This work has been influenced by the tremendous changes that have occurred on the geopolitical stage and that have transformed language teaching and learning around the world: globalization, information technologies, social networks, the spread of neoliberalism, and the fight against terrorism.

PH: In recent years there's been a push in foreign language education for more and more standardization to guide teachers in helping their

students reach "objective" benchmarks. Your most recent book, *The Multilingual Subject* (2010), however, calls for an approach that gives greater voice to language users' subjective experiences, memories, perceptions, emotions, desires, and imaginations. These may be harder to measure on many kinds of standardized tests, but they are clearly elemental components of becoming and being a multilingual. Can you discuss what you see as the proper balance between the acquisition of testable "skills" in the foreign language classroom and the foregrounding of language users' subjective experiences with language?

CK: The current pressure to standardize knowledge and objectives, measure results, evaluate performances, and assess outcomes are all ways in which the corporate world and the nation-states they hold hostage exercise control over language and knowledge. Foreign languages that, in the U.S., are avowedly viewed by the media, the politicians, and school administrators as merely tools for safeguarding American national security and maintaining American economic superiority, are particularly visible targets for the exercise of corporate and state control. Unlike their counterparts in literary and cultural studies, teachers of language seem to be held accountable only for developing linguistic proficiency and fluency in the foreign language (FL), not for fostering alternative worldviews or for putting in question the students' national cultural narrative. And yet, the increasingly visible contradictions in national narratives that are very much linked with the ways these narratives are "languaged" in the press and the media, are creating cognitive and emotional dissonances in the students' minds that need to be discussed openly in the language class. For example, why do the U.S. media call the knife attacks in London last year "terrorist acts," but the knife attacks in Kunming in China this year "acts of ethnic violence"? And, why is the Chinese press so upset about that? How are emotions and the actions they trigger associated with the kinds of words we choose?

PH: And what role do you see for teachers' own experiences of language? How important is it for these to be shared with students, and how should this be balanced with the attainment of learning objectives?

CK: To the extent that students are ready to hear their teacher's experiences, and to the extent that teaching a foreign language is meant to help students see the world from a different perspective, then teachers have a responsibility to tell their students about their own experiences with language and culture. However, the teacher herself is in a vulnerable position. What if the students are not mature enough to understand their teacher's experiences and the emotions associated with them? What if they ridicule them, or trivialize, or sensationalize them? The teacher also has a responsibility to protect herself emotionally and professionally, and she might therefore prefer not to share her own experiences, but use texts written by someone else to analyze, interpret, and discuss rather than put herself personally on the line.

PH: Many teachers and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers frame challenges of language acquisition in terms of issues of motivation, but in *The Multilingual Subject* (2010) you focus on what you call "the embodied self" of the language learner, and the role of desire rather than motivation. Can you briefly discuss how language learner desire differs from motivation, and why it's important for educators to consider desire?

CK: Most research on motivation in SLA is based on a version of *rational actor theory*, in which people set goals for themselves, like belonging to or identifying with a group that speaks the language (integrative motivation), or learning the language for ulterior social or economic benefit (instrumental motivation), and then move towards realizing these goals. Having learned German just for the beauty of its syntax and the musicality of its poetry, I have always missed in motivational studies the esthetic or poetic motivation that prompts learners to invest in a language like one would invest in a lover. Desire in love and desire in language are related—they demand nothing, nor do they work toward some future gratification. They exist only for the present as embodied pleasure, like a poem. Adolescents who learn a foreign language often project onto the language their innermost dreams and aspirations and their desire for fulfillment of the self. This self-fulfillment is somewhat different from motivation to "do" things or to "achieve" goals.

PH: You've given us the term *symbolic competence* to point to the kinds of skills foreign language users need in the 21st century. For teachers who might not be familiar with this term, could you explain it a bit and perhaps suggest some practical ways that symbolic competence can be exercised in the language classroom?

CK: I have defined symbolic competence as an awareness of what words index or connote in a particular context of use, and the ability to reframe these words when used in a different context. In particular it means:

- understanding the symbolic value of words and the different cultural memories evoked by different symbolic systems, for example, the fears associated with the term *communautarisme*, the values attached to a term like *laicitt* in French, the terror triggered by the word *terrorism.*
- locating oneself and others within real or imagined historical trajectories, for example, locating oneself as an American speaker within a history of race relations, liberal democracy, and frontier spirit; locating a Chinese speaker within a history of Western colonialism, Mao communism, and age-old traditions.
- manipulating social norms and expectations to reframe ways of seeing familiar events, for example, if you are Chinese, you might respond "thank you" in English to a compliment made to you in Chinese. You will thus not sound as arrogant as you would if you had said thank you in Chinese, and yet you will show that you know the pragmatics of English and can say "thank you" without having really said it.
- creating a new context so as to shift power relations among speakers, and to take up alternative subject positions, for example, answering a question with a question, using metacomments, reflecting on how things are said, not just what is said.

Symbolic competence can be fostered in the classroom by systematic attention to the words chosen by speakers or writers instead of other words they could have chosen and the different values indexed by different words, for example, the difference between calling a difficulty a *challenge* versus a *problem.* Why do Americans prefer to speak of challenges rather than of problems? A challenge evokes a can-do frontier spirit, whereas a problem implies/connotes a realistic/fatalistic worldview. The teacher might want to compare how the same event is described in the American and in the French press: for example, oil spills off the coast—an environmental challenge or an environmental catastrophe? Other activities that raise the social and political consciousness associated with symbolic competence are transposition, translation, transcription, etc.

PH: Can you talk a little bit about your experience as director of Berkeley Language Center and some of the insights you may have gained from that work with teachers of many different languages, and how it perhaps influenced your own research and/or classroom practices?

CK: I founded the Berkeley Language Center in 1994 because the majority of language teachers on campus did not know one another, didn't think they had anything in common with one another, and didn't know that language learning and teaching had a common research base in SLA/applied linguistics. It was from the start a research and resource center, not a teacher training center—nor was it responsible for delivering language instruction. The FL departments did not want someone to impose one language pedagogy on all foreign languages, and they wanted to retain the prerogative of hiring/firing and teaching all languages. But they appreciated a center that formed a community of teachers who slowly also became researchers of their own classrooms and who acquired a drastically improved morale. As director of the BLC for 12 years, I understood better the working conditions of these lecturers and have recently completed a study (with Lihua Zhang) of foreign born, native instructors in the University of California system that I am working up for publication (Kramsch & Zhang, in press).

PH: Your 2012 article, *Imposture: A Late Modern Notion in Poststructuralist SLA Research*, resonated with me, and I think probably many readers in Japan, because it seemed to speak very directly to dilemmas and paradoxes faced by foreign language teachers and students here. You point to ways that cultures and institutions, and even language teaching materials frame language speakers in certain ways. Could you talk a bit about this, and about things that teachers and students can do in what you term an "ethical transformative quest" to challenge dominant discourses while still deriving pleasure from language learning as a process?

CK: The study I have just completed with Lihua Zhang (Kramsch & Zhang, in press) addresses the issue of native instructors who increasingly teach their own native language at educational institutions around the world. These institutions thereby gain global symbolic distinction but totally underuse these instructors if they use them as mere "walking dictionaries" or "tape recordings", where in fact these instructors model day in day out for their students the difficult—and

often painful—work of cross-cultural mediation at the intersection of the local and the global. I have called this work ethical, because very often cross cultural misunderstandings occur when moral universes clash, that is, when the learners encounter worldviews or actions that go totally against what they believe is "right" and "good" (e.g., euthanasia, the death penalty, or the French interdiction to wear the Muslim veil in public schools). The challenge is how to help students ask different questions than the ones they are used to. Literature and the arts can help here, as well as narrative and the personal testimony.

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Investigating concepts of desire, gender, and identity in language learners

An interview with Kimie Takahashi

International Christian University, Tokyo

Sponsored by the Gender Awareness in Language Education (GALE) SIG

Michi Saki

Ritsumeikan University

Over the course of her international career as a sociolinguist, Kimie Takahashi has spent many years working in Australia and Thailand. She has published widely on gender, race, and language learning, which she addresses in her new book *Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move* (2013, Multilingual Matters). Takahashi is also the co-founder of the sociolinguistics website *Language on the Move* <languageonthemove.org>. In this interview, Takahashi discusses the motivation behind her research and the concept of *akogare*