

Special Issue

Symbolic Competence: From Theory to Pedagogical Practice

Introduction to the Special Issue

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Over a weekend in April 2015, a community of over one hundred language instructors, language learners, and applied linguists gathered at the University of California, Berkeley, to celebrate the ongoing teaching, research, and service of Claire Kramsch. Several panels took on the challenge of responding to and exemplifying Kramsch's research in applied linguistics, contributions to language and culture teaching, and service to the community of language educators.¹ The panels presented new studies that shed light on different strands of her interests in applied linguistics: the relationships between technology and second language (L2) learning; the ongoing construction of the multilingual subject; and, history, historicity, and foreign language education.

One implicit thread that linked all the panels together—directly addressed by some panelists—was the relationship between language and symbolic power. For instance, papers such as “Language, power, and the development of disciplinary textual practices” (Gebhard, 2015) and “Communicative language teaching and language under duress: Global contexts for language pedagogy” (Levine & Phipps, 2015) explored the often unequal power dynamics at play in second language learning in different settings. Extending the description of power dynamics in language learning to symbolic competence in language instruction, presenters, including Dorothy Chun (2015) in “Developing language teachers' symbolic competence through an online exchange,” proposed that symbolic competence offered language users a way to engage in the power play at the heart of language learning in a globalized context.

That exciting weekend created the opportunity for further discussion of and research into symbolic competence, especially in classroom-based language learning and instruction. Specifically, in this special issue, we address questions that emerged from those discussions, attempting to weave together and extend the various strands of work on symbolic competence:

- Theory: How can symbolic competence be further theorized?
- Teaching and learning practices: What is the relevance of symbolic competence to the language classroom?

¹ <http://kramschconference2015.berkeley.edu/>

- Research: How do we conduct research on symbolic competence, its theoretical potentials and limitations, in relationship to classroom learning and pedagogical practices?

It is these three questions that guide the organization and content of this special issue. This introduction thus includes evolving understandings of symbolic competence as a theoretical construct, potential fields of inquiry that have motivated the articles in this collection, summaries of the articles' contributions to our understandings, and considerations of future directions for instruction and research focusing on symbolic competence. At the end of the issue, we feature an afterword, which invites readers—language educators and language learning researchers—to imagine concretely where encounters with symbolic competence might lead.

We are thankful to Claire Kramersch for the wonderful opportunity afforded to us in this special issue to further the language learning community's understanding of symbolic competence. Her research, especially the seminal study with Anne Whiteside (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008), has provided the springboard to this issue's authors and to us to provide very real ways to encounter symbolic competence in the language learning classroom. Along with Claire, we acknowledge the generous participation of Richard Kern, whose suggestions on early drafts of the special issue proposal proved invaluable as we established the goals and framing of this special issue. The Editorial Staff of the *L2 Journal*, namely Emily Hellmich, Emily Linares, and Noah Katznelson, have provided consistent, supportive, and thoughtful guidance along the way to producing this issue; a friendly thank-you to them. There would be no issue without the contributions of abstracts and articles that many language instructors and researchers submitted; we appreciate the richness of interest and possibility that all submissions contained. We remain deeply indebted to the peer reviewers who read through the submissions with keen eyes, inquisitive minds, and generous hearts. Finally, we wholeheartedly thank the many scholars who participated in those panels at UC Berkeley in 2015. Your joy and scholarship inspired this special issue. It is our pleasure to present this to all of you.

UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE

Symbolic competence in language learning and use has been a moving target in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) for over the past ten years. Initially, it was described in terms of gameplay—as an ability “to position oneself to one's benefit in [a] symbolic power game” through the manipulation and interpretation of symbolic systems, practices, and relationships therein (Kramersch, 2006). An analysis of verbal phrases used to explain symbolic competence in earlier iterations provides insight into the types of activities inherent in the concept: “to manipulate symbolic systems, to interpret signs and their multiple relations[...], to position oneself to one's benefit in the symbolic power game” (Kramersch, 2006); and, “to understand [...] cultural memories [...], to perform and create alternative realities, and to reframe and shape the multilingual game (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008). In these formulations, the L2 user is quite active; indeed, the language user can be imaginative, creative, mobile, competitive, understanding, performing, and powerful.²

Kramersch (2011) pushed the understandings of symbolic competence even further,

² The choice of the term “L2 user” is deliberate in order to pinpoint an individual at the center of these understandings which all highlight the actions that he/she can do that go beyond just language choice.

naming the three dimensions of language as a symbolic system that L2 users can learn to manipulate: symbolic representation, symbolic action, and symbolic power. It is important to consider how the “symbolic” is understood in these dimensions. In this context, language is a semiotic system: Language users manipulate signs in order to make and convey meaning. Inherent in this conceptualization is the pluralistic nature of signs as encoded in language (both within one linguistic system as well as across different languages). That pluralistic nature offers the possibility of competing meanings, rooted in cultural histories and social expectations. (See Keneman’s fine-tuned analysis of *l’apéro* in this issue as an example of the competing and layered meanings that a lexical item might have.) Once we acknowledge the histories and expectations behind words—and, consequently, word choice as an action per se—we then encounter the symbolic power imbedded within language and language use. Since cultural histories and social expectations are contingent on time, place, and subject positionalities, language is not a neutral system. Rather, the signs that make up language become used as objects to construct meanings, stake claims, and position one’s self in relationship to others and to one’s self over time. It is not far to then imagine the symbolic power game (Kramsch, 2016) in which language users find themselves every time they interact with others.

With this understanding, symbolic competence is not an inert concept or ability that learners either “get” or “do not get.” Rather, it is a way to maneuver through language learning and language use that is neither static, nor uni- or bidimensional, nor goal-oriented in the same way that other language-related competences (e.g., grammatical competence and communicative competence) are traditionally defined. Symbolic competence itself, on a metalevel, requires tolerance of ambiguity in that it defies static definitions and linear applications while it embraces multiplicity and complexity. The notion of symbolic competence produces complexity because it invites L2 users to reflect constantly on the dynamic relationships between symbolic power and symbolic representation, which themselves are mediated by language users’ semiotic resources. See Kramsch & Whiteside’s rich, annotated bibliography for further exploration of the evolution of understandings of symbolic competence as well as of the similarities and differences between symbolic competences and other language learning competences (<http://blc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Symbolic-competence-annotated-bibliography.pdf>).

Theorizing symbolic competence offers the potential to address limitations in other understandings of language competences. For instance, grammatical competence in SLA, as explained by Canale & Swain (1980) and expanded by Díaz-Rico & Weed (2010) and Gao (2001), has as its goal for language learners to acquire knowledge of, and ability to use, forms of expression that are grammatically correct and accurate. That goal has then been linked to communicative competence, the Hymesian notion (1966) that situations, contexts, modes, and speakers drive language use, not just broad descriptions of linguistic forms. Communicative competence underlies what is arguably the most widespread pedagogical approach in classroom-based, US second/foreign language learning today—the communicative approach to foreign language teaching (CLT). The emphasis in some current iterations of CLT is to have students develop the ability to use situationally appropriate language in order to achieve a desired, interactional result. In classrooms directed by the communicative approach, language instructors assess learners on readily identifiable and quantifiable, “correct” (i.e., standardized) uses of the target language in given contexts.

Symbolic competence does not replace nor supplant these theoretical understandings of how L2 users learn and develop their ability to use language. Rather, it adds complexity often

absent in discussions of what language learners can (and cannot) do with and through language. Symbolic competence pinpoints the ability to manipulate the three dimensions of language as a semiotic system: *symbolic representation*, *symbolic action*, and *symbolic power* (Kramersch, 2011). These three dimensions complicate traditional ideas about the elements of the language learning processes: lexical learning and use, grammatical forms and use, and semio-pragmatic choices. Interaction in a framework employing symbolic competence involves identifying and analyzing “the symbolic power game” (Kramersch, 2006) at play at any given moment. New questions arise, such as *What does power look like in these situations? Is the power in the interaction immutable? How do subject positions change over time? and Are speakers creating new possible ways to use language and/or to encounter the world?*

Largely absent in discussions emerging from grammatical competence and communicative competence are questions of the symbolic power inherent, constructed, negotiated, and resisted in any given speech act and in different culturally based contexts. Symbolic power is the key to distinguishing symbolic competence from intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Byram & Nichols, 2001), performative competence (Canagarajah, 2014), semiotic competence (van Lier, 2006), and semiotic agility (Kern, 2015). By foregrounding power and power struggle in language use, symbolic competence accounts for the ways that language users call into question their own subject positionings, those of their interlocutors, as well as the constructed nature of speaker authority and legitimacy. Symbolic competence for the L2 user has come to emphasize the relationality of people, symbols, and moments; the transgression of real and imagined boundaries; and, the potentiality of new meanings (Vinall, 2016). If other language competences are linear and trackable (as within Saussurean and generative linguistics), symbolic competence has resisted a binary or linear study nor is it discretely measurable. Because it emerges from the in-between spaces among texts, historical moments, modalities, and speakers (Vinall, 2016), symbolic competence resists discrete, artificial boundaries between standard and non-standard language, between legitimate and illegitimate speakers (Kramersch & Zhang, 2015), and between sanctioned histories and personal ones (Heidenfeldt, 2015).

Turning attention to symbolic competence in the context of language learning and use allows scholars, instructors, and language learners and users to engage creatively with the complexity of language learning. This complexity centers on three key components: form as meaning, production of complexity, and tolerance of ambiguity (Kramersch, 2006). Implicit in all three are the following, rooted in L2 users’ life experiences:

- non-linearity of development of symbolic competence
- multiplicity of possible meanings and meaning-making potential
- operation of symbolic power (Kramersch, 2016)
- transgression of boundaries
- role of critical reflecting on meaning making, positionality, and privilege in order to facilitate the crossing of boundaries
- development of critical literacies
- critical creativity

This critical creativity of L2 users, enabling them to push beyond discrete and neat boundaries of thought and expression, is nothing new in the study of second language acquisition, but it gains nuance with an understanding of symbolic competence. It also

contributes further understanding of what may drive L2 users, language educators, and language learners to do what they do.

Whereas theorizations of symbolic competence have opened new avenues of inquiry and research, many critical questions still remain. What exactly does symbolic competence look like? How does it differ from cross-cultural or intercultural competence? In language and culture teaching contexts, how can instructors and learners encounter, develop, and measure symbolic competence? How do instructors call upon their own symbolic competence in their teaching practices? How can researchers investigate and document the potentiality of symbolic competence particularly in relation to emerging understandings of multiculturalism and multilingualism? (For some responses to these questions, see Kramsch & Zhang, 2018.) As we shall see in each of this issue's articles, the authors take up these questions with critical lenses on not only the learners in their studies but also on the instructors, many of whom are the authors themselves.

In light of those questions, this special issue of the *L2 Journal* offers considerations of how language learners do the following through linguistic and extralinguistic means:

- develop the ability to play the symbolic power game in everyday life,
- represent, do, and change things with words in classroom settings (Kramsch, 2011),
- demonstrate critical literacy, i.e., meaning-making and perspective-taking practices in the analysis of cultural and historical narratives (Kearney, 2012; Warriner, 2013).

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE ARTICLES

The articles in the special issue advance theories of symbolic competence and their pedagogical practices that provide both birds' eye and on-the-ground understandings of symbolic competence in language learning and usage. Additionally, the issue seeks what current or emerging theorizations may add to existing understandings of such notions as multilingualism/multiculturalism in applied linguistics and second language acquisition. The authors in this special issue examine different ways in which language learners encounter and, in some instances, demonstrate symbolic competence in creative ways. In the context of all the studies, the authors consider the ways in which they conduct research on symbolic competence, its theoretical potentials and limitations in relationship to classroom learning, pedagogical practices, and everyday usage.

The issue begins with an exploration of the current theoretical understanding of symbolic competence, with an article that spotlights engagement with ambiguity in an L2 German language-literature class. The first author, Diane Richardson, explores what happens when learners grapple with ambiguity—in her own terms, “multiplicity or indeterminacy of meaning”—in literary and non-literary texts. In “Beyond a tolerance of ambiguity: Symbolic competence as creative uncertainty and doubt,” Richardson seeks to understand how learners make sense of three types of ambiguity: ambiguity of genre, ambiguity of perspective, and ambiguity of silence. Through a close analysis of student reaction writing over the course of the term in the target language, the paper identifies how learners uncovered and constructed meaning through recontextualized texts. Learners were frequently confronted with multiple meanings that were culturally and historically situated, and, thus, filled with ambiguity for the non-native German learner. The study hinges upon the “critical creativity” of L2 users. In this context, the learners have the ability and possibility to reflect on their language learning and instruction as well as their changing

subject positions vis-à-vis their languages. They become aware of boundaries between languages, between contexts, between speakers, and perhaps even between discourses. They can begin to question those boundaries and imagined dichotomies, engaging with the tensions that exist within linguistic and cultural systems. The paper also documents the choices that the L2 German instructor made in selecting very specific texts of different genres and in different media in order to present complicated and layered material for students to investigate. In responding to Kramersch's (2011) call for language instructors to "bring up every opportunity to show complexity and ambiguity" (p. 364), Richardson makes the case for FL education to move beyond a pedagogy that simply tolerates ambiguity, to one that wholeheartedly embraces it so as to promote and activate symbolic competence. The learner reflections included in the article reveal the ways in which the learners began to understand—and, in some instances, question and/or subvert—the rules of the game in German text creation.

Besides different texts to explore, many classroom-based language learners themselves have different modes of expression with which to position themselves and stake a claim for power. For example, in "Performing deafness: Symbolic power as embodied by deaf and hearing preschoolers," Jennifer Johnson analyzes plays for symbolic power through language users' multimodal practices in moments of intercultural communication. Symbolic competence offers a theoretical framework from which to analyze multimodal interactions through considerations of the operation of subject positioning, historicity, performativity, and framing. Johnson zeroes in on how deaf and hearing participants in her study chose to use (and not to use) any of the semiotic resources available to them in order to exert or resist power plays during conversation. If symbolic competence essentially indexes an understanding of power dynamics reproduced in and through language, then the informants in Johnson's study demonstrate their capability to question—and occasionally to subvert—traditional notions of how language learners make meaning. Johnson argues that "symbolic competence offers a semiotic angle to both recognize and understand modal transgressions as meaning-making practices" (p. 59), thus pushing the boundaries of how we consider the very constitution of and the agency involved in those very practices. Ultimately, Johnson's study demonstrates how participants blend and blur constructions of deafness and hearingness as they transgress their boundaries.

Making sense of meaning-making practices is at the heart of Corinne Etienne and Sylvie Vanbaelen's "Exploring symbolic competence: Constructing meaning(s) and stretching cultural imagination in an intermediate college-level French class," featuring an analysis of a pedagogical semiotic gap activity in an L2 French class. This paper looks squarely at the ways in which learners construct meaning from symbolic representation in a French-language film scene. A film-based activity invited learners to occupy multiple subject positions, made visible through the use of both L2 French and L1 English, during repeated viewings and layered analysis of the same film clip. These activities allowed them to make predictions collaboratively, revise them, and then reflect on how they made decisions over time. The paper argues that at the heart of these learners' development of symbolic competence is a wrestling between deeply embedded cultural myths, including US beliefs about eating practices and spaces alongside (or in competition with) comparable French beliefs. Analysis of student talk and writing during the semiotic gap activity, involving representation, interpretation, and creation, shows how the learners had to contend with a surplus of meanings, not all readily categorizable nor stable. This study concludes with reflections on and suggestions for further cultivation in students of a symbolic competence mindset

through exploring their cultural imagination and subjectivities.

The final paper in the special issue offers a model of how to promote the development of L2 French students' symbolic competence through the re-imagining of a classic French play. In "Redefining the foreign language requirement in higher education by prioritizing symbolic competence as a learning outcome," Margaret Keneman argues for and presents a pedagogical unit that uses elements of symbolic competence as a framework for student exploration and learning. The paper explores the development of student symbolic competence through the integration of critical literacies and performance approaches. In the unit, students focused on one scene from *Huis Clos* (Sartre, 1947), moving through three guided encounters with the text. With each encounter, students interacted with three dimensions of symbolic competence, namely symbolic representation (textual analysis), symbolic action (staging of scene), and symbolic power (reimagining of scene). In detailing each stage of the pedagogical unit, the paper provides examples of transgressive acts by L2 learners through speech acts in an L2 text, creating the space in which they encounter symbolic competence. This paper argues that such acts, as reflections of burgeoning symbolic competence, serve as a catalyst for L2 users to develop their symbolic selves.

The four articles explore the ways in which these learners and their instructors are language users: they all are doing things with language which reveal their meaning-making processes and suggest their struggles with power dynamics in language learning settings. Central in all of these studies is the text. The students of L2 German in Richardson's study engage with potential power shifts in different text types and literary genres; here, texts are mutable and become entwined with other texts. In Johnson's study, those power dynamics are enacted by the subjects' uses of sounds, sign, and bodily hexis; the subjects themselves are the texts to be read and contested. In Etienne and Vanbaelen's analysis, film is the central text, but the students have to wrestle with conflicting cultural understandings and grapple with shifting power dynamics within a filmic text. The student actors-writers-directors of a scene from *Huis Clos* in Keneman's study have to first engage in the power dynamics between the play's three antagonists then translate that struggle into their own visions of what can be said or not said by whom. In the end, these papers nuance the belief that language learners are not passive recipients of checklist-based material but rather active language users who play and struggle with language as a key part of their own development.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although this special issue offers new ways of considering symbolic competence in different learning and usage contexts, it also points to possibilities for further research. The papers in this collection address some of the ongoing difficulties with applying understandings of symbolic competence in the language classroom. For instance, each paper takes on the questions of ambiguity, relationality, and transgression in language learning: the ways in which the studies' learners and instructors navigate multiple, often competing meanings as they cross linguistic and cultural borders. What remains to be explored is the positioning of the learner in considering ambiguity, not just in the classroom but in the larger sociocultural contexts of language use.

Moreover, specifically, how do L2 users encounter symbolic power in the language classroom? This critical engagement with power—naming it, understanding it, and staking a claim in it—is absent in traditional communicative approaches, and is an essential element and distinguishing feature of symbolic competence. The papers in this collection begin to

engage with symbolic power in the language learning classroom, and future research could zero in on both instructors' and learners' shifting positionalities in multilingual power play, responding to calls from Heidenfeldt (2015), Kramersch and Zhang (2015), and Vinall (2016).

Additionally, following the skills-based assessment associated with grammar-translation and communicative pedagogical approaches, the quest to assess student development of symbolic competence remains contested. The three articles focusing on pedagogical interventions—Richardson, Etienne and Vanbaelen, and Keneman—address differently how they assessed students' experiences of symbolic competence. Appendix D in the Richardson article offers descriptions of possible assessment types in an L2 language-literature course.

Richardson highlights the productive analysis of students' reflections as a means to observing how students' wrestle with symbolic representation and symbolic action in different text genres. Such observations served as the primary assessment for the unit, but accounted for a minority of the term grade. Etienne and Vanbaelen also look closely at students' written reflections on a Semiotic Gap Questionnaire designed specifically to document the ways in which students constructed their understandings of the filmic text. In her study, Keneman points to the difficulty of thorough assessment due to time limitations, a very real consideration in project-based learning. In the end, these articles point to the ongoing design question of what assessment of symbolic competence might look like.

As you now turn to the articles, we invite you to consider how these studies might look in your own educational or research setting. Consider these questions, especially as you look at the texts in each study: Where, in our language classrooms, do we encounter symbolic representation, symbolic action, and symbolic power? Johnson's study, for instance, shows how two young learners take on each of these dimensions of symbolic competence by using multimodality as the means to make claims for power as well as to transgress social expectations in a particular encounter. How do the texts with which we engage make the symbolic accessible to our learners? Richardson's study highlights the power of specific texts, when juxtaposed, to draw understanding of the symbolic from learners.

Questions of learner and teacher agency appear in the issue's articles as well. Who selected the texts for study in a language classroom? Who decided that these texts were legitimate? Whose voices are represented in the texts? Whose are not represented? What actions do the texts themselves perform? What actions do we perform in engaging with the texts? What actions are we forbidden from doing? How can we reframe and reshape the texts we engage with? How can we create revised and new texts that position ourselves as legitimate speakers of the languages that we are learning? Keneman, for instance, takes on these questions by examining the pluralistic nature of words as signs in Sartre's *Huis Clos* and then builds a case for how learners can resignify meaning through the rewriting and performance of texts. In this article, development of the literary imagination is central. The pedagogical intervention in her study that merges a critical literacies approach and performance-based learning offers a model for learners to rework texts over time. This creates the opportunity in the language learning classroom for learners to struggle with referential content and style (symbolic representation), performatives and facework (symbolic action), and perlocutionary effects and emotional/aesthetic impact (symbolic power).

You will see how these studies begin to engage with some of these questions and how they pose more in their conclusions for our consideration. Hopefully, they will inspire us to do the same in our own instruction and learning.

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