L2 Journal, Volume 17 Issue 2 (2025), pp. 1-17 Produced by eScholarship, 2025

ARTICLE

Ten Moments in Symbolic Competence

DAVID GRAMLING

University of British Columbia
E-mail: david.gramling@ucb.ca

Symbolic Competence (SC) has emerged as one of the key intellectual and critical contributions from Claire Kramsch's five decades of published research so far, though we scholars and teachers still hesitate at times to apply it in our analyses of practical, multilingual settings. This essay takes the opportunity to reflect personally on the concept, and on how the complex features it illuminates in everyday life have shaped the author's own formation in various dimensions. The piece takes as its particular inspiration Kramsch's 2023 "Poetic Equivalence: Key to the Development of Symbolic Competence" as a model for self-reflection, historical contextualization, for its rigorous, fresh understanding of what "symbolic" does and doesn't mean in everyday, multilingual life, and—to use a Kramschian turn of phrase—for articulating "why it matters."

> But symbolic systems not only refer to the real world, they structure things in people's minds by categorizing them (category: wall), making distinctions (wall vs. fence) and evaluating them (a beautiful wall). Thus, symbolic systems are at once structured (by syntactic, lexical, discourse rules), and they themselves structure our representations of the world. (Kramsch, 2020, p. 22)

This essay is an autoethnographic meditation, orbiting around the explanatory power of Claire Kramsch's concept of "symbolic competence" (2006, 2009, 2020, 2023). The historically detailed self-reflection and contemplative spirit that Kramsch brought to her 2023 article "Poetic Equivalence: Key to the Development of Symbolic Competence" particularly inspired its writing—though such reflexive dimensions have always motivated Kramsch's methods. In the vein of Pierre Bourdieu's *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (2004), Kramsch's own vivid sense about speakers' (and, therefore, also scholars') capacity to be answerable for ourselves as subjects (Bakhtin, 1990), our readiness to provide an "account of the self/*Rechenschaft von sich selbst*" (Butler, 2002, p. 12), becomes key to what it ultimately means to be symbolically competent. A person can very well be interculturally or translingually competent, without this dimension of *symbolic* competence—i.e., without being ready to practically grasp, confront, or account for the variously acute and subtle forms of power structuring the meaning-making scenes of human socio-political life, as we engage and manipulate those scenes amid our own daily lives-in-language(s).

The concept of symbolic competence (sometimes abbreviated as "SC" below) suggests that we language users not only acquire, speak, and act through language; we always also live or survive the multiply contextual consequences (good or bad, pleasurable or brutal) of doing these linguistic actions and habits in certain ways rather than others, over time. As adult subjects, we therefore stand for (and stand before) the ways we have spoken or not spoken:

for our styles, our repertoires, our habitual silences, our symbolic embodiments, our discourse. And if we're truly fortunate, we get chances along the way to honestly review the price we may have paid for those particularities of our languaging, as well as the price that others may well have paid (or collected on) because we have embodied language in the ways we do. Though the concept of symbolic competence was introduced to us as early as 2006, I see it as coming to its fullest contextualization and elaboration in Kramsch's later works like *Language as Symbolic Power* (2020), a book which serves accordingly as an epigraph to this essay.

Books and essays throughout Kramsch's career have set the bar high for how we professionals in applied linguistics and the multilingual philologies account for the complex, multicontextual strands making up who we've become, among the grooves and memories of our own historical experiences. In the tradition of Butler and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Kramsch's account(s)-of-self exemplify how it behooves each of us to identify the ways we learned early on—from everyday social and symbolic life, and often long before we even contemplated getting advanced research training—what matters most enduringly when it comes to meaning, literariness, aesthetics, language, and power in their institutional, familial, and socio-political settings. Our resulting competence in the symbolic world—that of collective politics, community inclusion and exclusion, truth-telling, alliance-building, capital-seeking, job-doing, and the pleasures of social life—is both demonstrated and ratified through the ways our habitual standing in that symbolic world lines up with who we like to say we are, i.e., with our alleged identities. In French, German, and English, Kramsch has written generously on this, sharing both the details and the conceptual implications immanent in her own itinerary as a lifelong learner and teacher, amid various coercive political regimes, predominant discursive conjunctures, and generations of political economy. The reflections that appear throughout the disparate corners of her vast work in all these languages can help us envision a sturdier model of symbolic accountability in the midst of our volatile professions, drawing on nearly fifty years of Kramsch's scholarly writing, teaching, and publishing.

As it turns out, I am now a mid-career teacher-researcher myself, on a surprisingly winding road spanning multiple countries, languages, and regimes, in which I continue to puzzle through my composite experiences and symbolic histories as an accidental applied linguist and a wayward literary and cultural studies scholar. Though my own personal history is quite incommensurable with Kramsch's own on the surface (consider her childhood in Nazi occupied France and its aftermath, for starters), I seek in this essay nonetheless to understand commonalities in how we've needed to intuit the enduring centrality of power and the manipulation of symbolic resources. I want to understand how one's personal education in "symbolic competence," to which Kramsch attests implicitly and explicitly throughout her writings, becomes pivotal and sensible for subjects of vastly diverse backgrounds, myself among them.

In parallel, though, I'm equally curious what is happening—or what has happened—when a speaker appears able to grow into an adult livelihood apparently indifferent to, or aloof from, the viscosities of the symbolic world and its compulsory orders of power. I want to know how such subjects become able instead to rely on the rationalist ideal of "communication" as a meaning-making activity unburdened of coercive, mythical, poetic, political, and ideological dimensions (Kramsch, 2021, p. 3). Such is an idealized world where symbolic power is either a mere bother, an unpleasant afterthought, an excess of empire or "civilization," or something people "misuse"—but not an integral feature of all meaning-making interaction throughout history. Kramsch does not subscribe to these minimizing or dismissive presumptions about (symbolic) power, seeing it rather as an anthropological

constant attending all meaning-making scenes in some central way across cultures, politics, and eras.

Below are ten moments in my own personal education about symbolic competence, most of which occurred long before I met Claire Kramsch or had (her) words to describe which aspects of symbolic power may have indeed been organizing the practical poetics of the moments at hand. If symbolic competence got introduced to us twenty years ago as "the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else's language, but to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used" (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 664), it has grown since then to include a responsibility to account for how that manipulation of contexts impacts others and one's own subjectivity over time. And it is this dimension that I aim in particular to address in the sections that follow.

To be clear, in no case below do I intend to suggest that I have somehow achieved "symbolic competence" myself in any of the arenas discussed, so much as that I understand what it means to have been acutely exposed to the kind of circumstances that would reliably warrant symbolic competence and relentlessly exploit symbolic incompetence. In the conclusion, I will return to a few lingering uncertainties about symbolic competence itself, and about why it has taken me so long to understand this concept in its holistic fullness in my own professional work.

2001: The New England Small Liberal Arts Cocktail Party (SC in Career Advising and Intellectual Formation)

In her classes over the decades, Claire Kramsch has frequently invoked the setting of the "cocktail party" to teach about symbolic power, and specifically about the baffling, subtle codes of prestige, casualness, and expertise that sustain this genre. And so, I begin this meditation by remembering one such party in my own life that ended up making all the difference. At a Vermont cocktail party, a few years after I'd graduated from an undergraduate college there, a former comparative literature professor of mine looked over at me on the couch, as I was tentatively discussing my future livelihood and would-be profession with a group. He scoffed with fond condescension at my muddling uncertainty about what lay ahead and, without giving the various options a further thought, said "Whatever. You're gonna go to Berkeley and study with Claire Kramsch. She does sociolinguistics; it's totally *your thing*."

I nodded quickly, so as to acknowledge that this professor was saying comprehensible words that made up an informative sentence of some sort, but I had no idea what any of them meant, even after four years of small liberal arts college preparation. So flattered as I was right then on that couch at the notion that *I* had "a thing," I hardly noticed how what he was saying about my future seemed a strange outcome to predict in such bold terms, particularly since the only subjects I had studied in college were literature and languages (Spanish, German, French, etc.). There was no linguistics program nor any linguistics professors at my college, let alone this "sociolinguistics" stuff he reasonably supposed Kramsch taught out in California. And "language pedagogy" meant no more to me at that point in life than those blasé stock phrases I had been scrawling on undergraduate teaching evaluations for years about my professors: "passionate about X," "knows the material," "not a monster," "lives in the real world," "isn't an essentialist, like Prof. X," "doesn't believe gender is a construction," etc. As for "sociolinguistics," this was completely off my radar. It sounded exciting and talismanic—but hardly "*my thing*."

So, when it comes to symbolic competence, in the setting of this 2001 cocktail party, my questions are: through what competence of his own did this professor have me so easily pegged when it came to predicting the kinds of questions and critiques that would come to occupy my own professional consciousness for decades to come? Why was I so simple to read at age 23, as a person who so legibly had “doesn’t understand symbolic power, but needs to” written across their face? And what enfranchised this professor anyway to make such pronouncements, at a cocktail party among a range of our shared acquaintances? What symbolic variables made his speech-act both appropriate *and* felicitous in that moment, especially when I knew so little about what he was opining on?

After working for a few years by that point in Seattle, as a not particularly skillful (and, definitely, undertrained) social worker, case-managing incarcerated youth with IV drug problems, I was right then trying to pivot back to academia and pick from among a handful of high-powered graduate school programs in German literature and culture—and trying not to let their shiny funding packages and the architectural prowess of their respective campuses run the decision making. How did this professor know that, deep in my bones, I was compelled to care about the specific kind of competencies that occupied Kramsch as well—rather than merely, say, caring about “languages and cultures,” or “literature and literary theory,” “effective communication” or “being interculturally competent” or the like?

Thinking now about the 25 years that followed that cocktail party, at which some pivotal elements of my professional fate were evidently sealed, I wonder: have I just ended up obediently doing what that professor told me to? What kind of illocutionary force did this utterance, my comp lit professor’s offhand remark about Kramsch, exert in the course of my life, all things considered? Was I just a mark for powerful teachers’ snap judgments about where my lot was to be cast? The more charitable version of this story would propose that I was already well on my way toward coming into my own proper realm, as an early-career researcher whose vital interests and nagging intuitions about discourse and power had been forged in fires ablaze long prior in my life—since back in my Central Massachusetts hometown, where I’d been “researching” its breezy forms of cisheteropatriarchy and raciolinguistics since kindergarten. But what did this *Claire Kramsch* person out in Berkeley, of all places, have to do with any of these experiences I’d been puzzling over all the while?

Each of these questions involves potent elements of “symbolic competence” itself: my professor’s intuitive clocking of my particular forms of critical anger and umbrage, and my own positioning at the nexus of knowledge, threat, indifference, immense privilege, and structural vulnerability. But then, too, there was the kairotic, high stakes (but ostensibly casual) genre of the academic cocktail party (Weber et al., 2021, p. 160), with its myriad epistemic and affective stance-takings, its stylistic shibboleths, its strategies of condescension, its forms of ease, so practiced that they look natural, and its complex and expensive insider knowledges. The overdetermined and intermingling nature of all of these dimensions leads me to propose to speak henceforth of “moments” in symbolic competence, where complex and consequential things in the realm of the symbolic happen before you even can name quite what they all are, such that it’s tempting to throw up your hands and say that everything happens merely by chance. This is where bodies of knowledge from sociolinguistics to Conversation Analysis and stylistics offer their profound assistance to the effort and where, as Kramsch proposes, a vivid conception of symbolic competence can most effectively shed light.

1986: French as Egress (SC as De-Monolingualization)

Given how so many of my best teachers over the decades could spot my critical investments before I could, and given that Kramsch's enduring investment in the symbolic (as distinguished, perhaps, from the semiotic or communicative or intercultural) has been a career-long overtone of her research and teaching, I've long felt it was high time for me to develop a self-reflective historical account of how I came to relish the ideal of "symbolic competence" from childhood experiences to mid-life professional inquires.

The similarities between Kramsch's and my personal itinerary toward these investments are few. Whereas Claire Kramsch grew up in a polycentrically multilingual family, I did not. Where she learned the immediacies of discourse and power in the looming presence of Nazi occupiers, I did not. My experience of symbolic power and, relatedly, of the prospect of symbolic competence arose from a quite monolingual, "peacetime" experience in the highly militarized and neocolonial Reagan/Thatcher era. Nonetheless, being a gay kid in the early age of AIDS—when the Reagan government was poised to ignore and punish the sick—as well as being a visually Disabled youth in a highly assimilationist pre-Americans With Disabilities US, were symbolic predicaments that prepared for my younger languaging self a deeply unsettled position amid (and a complicated stake in) symbolic orders and their baffling normative power—a power I felt I had no other option but to take personally.

Kramsch's articulation of "symbolic competence" in her 2023 piece helped me to grasp a number of long-elusive facts about my own development, as a teacher and learner who first ventured out into the world of additional language learning by "taking" something called "French" in grade six. But additional language learning really entered my teenage landscape back then thanks to symbolic tensions around what Kramsch terms, with Jakobson, the "poetic equivalence" between *function* and *meaning*. For me, the symbolic *function* of learning a new-to-me language circa 1986 (a language beyond my household's stolid neoconservative Anglophone monolingualism) was poetically *equivalent*—i.e., of rhyming symbolic import—to the more rationalistically framed *meanings* usually attached to learning additional languages, which is the realm where many of my peers found their motivations for doing so.

That is, whereas becoming an emerging French speaker *meant* (for most of my peers) that they would feel and appear more empowered to go to university in Montréal, to work with Médecins Sans Frontières, and to be a credible candidate down the line for the Peace Corps or the like, becoming an emerging French speaker was for me symbolically *functional*, both illuminating and dislodging elements in a broader discourse about who I was becoming in relation to social norms of (Dis)ability and heteronormativity. From the very first day of class in September 1986, French resuscitated a flailing feature in the prose and meter of my youthful everyday life; it fulfilled a poetic *function*—not substantive in nature (i.e., referential meanings), but strategic and disidentarian in their impact (Muñoz, 1999). When it came down to it, I cared next to nothing in the 1980s about Frenchness, about the *Massif central*, or about how some fictional "Sophie" talked to "Alain" in the cafeteria of the Université de Nantes. Rather, what mattered to me a great deal as a French learner—and I was a very good, assiduous learner, at least at first (see below)—was the intense symbolic *function* of this curricular path I had elected, what it did for me practically right then in the psychic and discursive economy of my earliest teenage years.

1986: Dodging the Deluge of English (SC in Educational Accessibility)

Beyond this, though, learning French got me (as a visually Disabled person) out of the ongoing misery of having to read English all the time, and out of thinking that that's what successful adults have to do. As the sheer volume of English-laden pages I was expected to read each night at home increased steadily throughout grades six and seven, and as I noticed my mounting suffering and inability to physically read larger and larger quantities of small-font text in English, French *functionally* restored my flailing sense for hopeful involvement in the life of the mind, and in the emotional-intellectual promise of Language. As a French learner searching for aesthetic and conceptual satisfaction, all I had to do to succeed was repeat the same stock phrases over and over in my mind (and in my mouth and ears) until they became adequately beautiful and "fluent." My eyes—the site of my Disability (ocular albinism)—needed to bear only a partial burden in this enunciative process, whereas that 9-point-font paperback *Tale of Two Cities* standing between me and academic survival felt 100% like a visual drudgery.

Developmentally, then, additional language learning was where I could succeed and flourish, not because of all of the cultural meanings and faraway places I was thereby able to gain exposure to, but rather because of the therapeutic and compensatory *functions* that such a strategic shift in my academic attentions granted me. Language learning *rhymed* subtly with a need I had elsewhere in my psychic-ergonomic life; it had little to do with Frenchness or even with "the world" in any geopolitical or multicultural sense. The embodied attempt at speaking French into the Anglophone air of my claustrophobic hometown rhymed with a queer ego ideal in me that was struggling to determine what a livable future was to be in the age of Reagan, homophobia, and an AIDS pandemic where gay people were considered expendable, contagious, and irrelevant. But it also rhymed with a Disabled experience that was slowly dawning on me, and for which there were few obvious futures, nor propositions about symbolic competence in public life. I had to make these strategies on my own, usually without talking to anyone about them.

Though this all probably sounds a little out-of-left-field from the standpoint of most standard rationales about language learning, I think this line of thinking gets at an experience of existential confrontation much more widespread among mono- and multilingual young people than we might habitually credit. In *The Invention of Multilingualism* (Gramling, 2021, pp. 46-48), I discussed the case of W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963), a French-learner and eventual Pan-Africanist whose motivations for learning French lay principally in the symbolic and distinctive liberatory *function* of that learning for him, rather than in its cumulative propositional or even cultural meanings in the informational/transactional world. Attunement to this kind of elusive, intensive resonance is what Kramsch means, in part, by the *poetic equivalence* of function and meaning in the symbolic. It is key to cultivating symbolic competence in various everyday developmental and learning settings, far beyond the realm people associate readily with "poetics" or even with "multilingualism."

A hundred years after Du Bois, I sat eleven-years-old at my own little desk in Mrs. Smith's French class in Central Massachusetts, looking at the yellow mimeographed sheet before me, repeating to myself: *J'ai onze ans. J'ai onze ans. J'ai onze ans,* until I had it down pat. Until I had it down better than anything else I'd ever had down in the world. Which is to say, until I for the first time believed that what I was saying about myself and how I was saying it, in any language (including English), were mine and true. It was a kind of prayer—less intercultural than cosmological, less about access to the foreign than about egress from a

spiritual coil. Something, too, about the *enchaînement consonantique* in that one phrase *j'ai onze ans* made it even more powerful and promising. There I was, in the crucible of Ronald Reagan's landslide re-election, of AZT and Miami Sound Machine, of Euro Disney and Wrestlemania III. *J'ai onze ans. J'ai onze ans.*

1989: The Traffic Cop (SC as Queer Aesthetics in Civic Life)

Donald Thomas (1927–2019) began working for the Provincetown, Massachusetts, police force in 1947 and eventually became known as Provincetown's Dancing Cop. Lopes Square is, in the summers at least, a jam-packed, chaotic pedestrian and automotive intersection in downtown Provincetown. Service vehicles, pedicabs, large groups of walking tourists with ice cream cones and shopping bags, taxicabs, drag queens, partiers in various states of drunkenness, mail carriers, emergency vehicles, and annoyed locals—everyone is trying to squeeze through this one intersection day and night, all at the same time. A music lover and traffic cop, Donald Thomas eventually began—in part to keep all of these intersecting travelers' attention—to dance on the job, as part of his traffic cop gestures and instructions.

It was hard to take your eyes off him: his white gloves, his spinning and beckoning waves, his "come through, please!" invitation to guileless tourists visiting town for the first time. All the while, he attested to a "working man first" approach that made sure that delivery drivers and workers on the clock would have priority through the intersection, while fawning affectedly over tourist crowds in such a way that they wouldn't notice how long they were being made to wait to get through Lopes Square. Thomas wore out three pairs of sneakers each summer, he said, and he described his movements not as "dancing" but as "self-preservation." Thomas was a multimodal artist of symbolic competence, in the midst of one of the most dangerous discursive formations the world has invented: the intersection.

Consider traffic in an intersection—wrote Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, when I was thirteen years old—coming and going as traffic does in four or more directions. Symbolic violence, like traffic through an intersection, may flow on one axis (race, gender, sexuality, Disability, etc.), and it may flow on another simultaneously, without warning. If a death or damage happens in an intersection of justice, this can be the doing of subjects traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. If a Black woman is harmed because she is at a dangerous intersection of judgment and institutional protection, Crenshaw teaches us, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination, or both at once in a combined order of magnitude. Intersections move fast, and mercilessly, and without remorse.

I grew up close to Provincetown, but in the 1980s when I was a pre-teen, it suddenly became off-limits to me because of AIDS. My family, many of whom were healthcare workers who frequently took care of people suffering the acute effects of the virus, more or less acquiesced to homophobic silence in social settings, even when people in our own neighborhood were dying. Provincetown receded farther and farther into an early childhood memory, right as I was coming out to myself as gay. Somehow the memory of this "dancing cop" held my imagination from when I'd last seen him at age 8 or so, and continued to illuminate a hopeful pathway all the way through my teenage years, when I finally got myself a hand-me-down car and could drive down there on my own in secret.

I'm sure, in memory, I attributed to Donald Thomas a much more glamorous and queer set of aesthetic practices than those that actually characterized his daily work. But the virtuosity I groked from his creative manipulation of interpellative, illocutionary force and

complex social attention epitomized something about symbolic competence, something that I admired and desired. He literally "manipulated" symbolic power, with his hands, all day long. Thomas was able to harness a movement vocabulary that was unexpected of him in his role, as a way to intensify his power and authority and turn these deftly into charm and charisma. And yet, he was the embodiment of a state strategy to regulate chaos and violence, one of the "faces" of legitimacy in Provincetown.

But Thomas was also the product of the kind of alternate social order I desperately desired to inhabit as a young person in the Reagan era: a kind of society that benefited everyone somehow without oppressing and silencing, a caretaking authority that was loving and lighthearted and, yes, a little "gay." In the midst of the early AIDS pandemic, I was yearning for models that could be all of these things at once, that could normalize a symbolic order that didn't hide its poetic equivalences but flaunted and delighted in them, without losing any of their effectiveness. It was irrelevant in the end that Donald Thomas was a heterosexual married man; his practical queerness was cultural, situated, and accountable to the diverse requirements and relations of his community, who made it possible for him to marshal symbolic resources to become something other than what was expected of him.

1990: Quitting French (SC in Language Dissociation)

I quit French at the end of eighth grade out of homophobia. Not quite the internalized kind of homophobia rooted in self-loathing and being haunted by the truth, so much as a strategic and rationalistic kind of homophobia that sought to preserve the dubious protections of the closet for as blessedly long as they would last. French—in Central Massachusetts, as opposed to in northern Vermont or New Brunswick—was symbolically a *gay* language, much as Latin was a *preppy* language and German was a *weird* language. These descriptors are not vague aspersions; their precision was lived and felt in the habitus-field relations of my public middle school. When I chose to duck out of French before high school, I was not trying to avert the inevitability of my *becoming gay* as a result of taking French; I knew I was gay and wanted to throw people off the scent for a while (see Moore, 2023, on "language dissociation"). It was 1989, AIDS was raging, and it was a rational decision for a 13-year-old boy to choose deception over exposure. I slid over into Spanish, which had no consequential symbolic implications of note. I excelled at it, allowing (a closely related) French to atrophy quietly alongside it. My unabated "velvet rage" at learning Spanish (Downs, 2005) compelled me to pronounce *equipaje* valiantly, while Mike back in the fourth row clowned around with his emerging deliberate linguistic incompetence, showing how unimpressed and inconvenienced he was by this word and this language in general, doubling down on his pronunciation *Eck-KOO-pah-JJay*.

Inevitably, Spanish became a place for me to toy around anyway with coming out a few years later. I remember performing my own Spanish translation of Maya Angelou's poem "On the Pulse of Morning" for Bill Clinton's 1993 Inauguration. Angelou showered us with a catalog of America's diverse identifications—including "the straight, the gay"— and I relished the opportunity to evoke these, in Spanish only, before my peers. The Jakobsonian equivalence I manipulated here in Spring 1993 was that of using the foil of additional language learning (i.e., function) to mask and slow the assertion of gay identity (i.e., meaning). Roland Barthes had spoken to this kind of second-order mythologization of speech, when reflecting on how Aesop's utterance *quia ego nominor leo* gets diminished, from a roaring declaration of one's name "I am lion!", to a mere demonstration of a grammatical principle: "I am a grammar example." Such is, in some ways, the epitome of the depoliticization of languages through the

instructional setting of additional language learning, where everything is an example of how a language works rather than a primary assertion of fact. But this hierarchy served me well as a powerful mode for scaffolding and rehearsing public identification for later. The symbolic competence potentially evident in this moment—and in several others like it throughout my career—was this intuition to exploit the equivocation between function and meaning while no one appeared to be looking.

1985: ¿Te Gusta América? (SC in Linguanational Affiliation and Affect)

The first time I remember being instructed in what then would have been called a foreign language was on the beach in Massachusetts with my Tía Genny. I was too young to know or care whether she was a "native speaker" of Spanish, whether she was Latina herself, or why she spoke Spanish in the first place. *¿Te gusta América?* she instructed me, one afternoon on the beach. I was ten, and I was as far as I knew *in* America and had never been anywhere but *in* America, so the idea that it might please or displease me was an oddly tautological but prescient question. Of course, my Tía was trying to get me to practice the Spanish construction for "I like," in which the object of fondness in English becomes, in Spanish, the subject that does or does not please.

So, kid, does América please you? It is the mid-1980s, and I am flummoxed by a country that is on the brink of nuclear war and willfully abetting hundreds of thousands of gay AIDS deaths a year, something for which I know quite intuitively I am a candidate. As I practice the phrase, I am trying to sort out the true nature of my teacher Tía Genny's cosmopolitanism: does her urbane bilingualism mean she's ultimately less homophobic than my suburban monolingual parents? What do adults in América need to undergo—perhaps linguistically, too—in order to become less homophobic, i.e., to become kinder and less threatening to my personhood? I sit there on the beach, practicing this construction *¿Te gusta América?* over and over, precisely so that I don't have to answer the actual question it prompts me with. S*í, por supuesto, me gusta América*; what other option do I have at the present time?

Forty years later, I am no longer in "América" anymore but rather in Canada, slow dancing with my boyfriend at a camp hall in the forests outside of Squamish, British Columbia. The song we are dancing to is Ethel Cain's "Thoroughfare," which begins with the following lines:

> You fell in love with America when you were 12 years old
> And by 17 you knew you had to see it all.

There was a short while in college when I was an American Literature major, out of a fondness for the cozy old building where the department was housed, but after a few months I pivoted back to graduate with a German major, which required fewer credits. The truth is that, ever since Tía Genny's grammatical example in 1985, I have sidestepped answering this question of whether I *love América*—by learning and loving languages instead. Now, as I pursue Canadian citizenship in 2025, I propose to do so in French. But is this work to resuscitate my French from 1986 in any way related to whether or not *le Canada me plait*; will there ever be a beloved linguacultural referent behind any of the languages I've been labouring to learn?

1988: Cylon (SC in Ableist "Bullying" vs. Social Consecration)

For much of my early career, authorities encouraged me not to talk much about my visual Disability, lest it scare off hiring committees. This means that I am now at age 50 playing catch up in acknowledging the ways my ocular albinism profoundly organized the symbolic resources of my early life and career. I think back to some of the elliptical ways my brother and I made sense of our shared visual Disability, by way of television shows and films that thematized vision in some way.

In ABC's 1978 television production *Battlestar Galactica*, the Cylon are a human-made enemy machine race. Their one red-laser eye goes back and forth with a ghostly whooshing sound. My ocular albino brother was nine at the time the show debuted, and immediately the school crowd around him saw the Cylon as too good an epithet to pass up for making jokes about the way his eyes worked, especially given our pronounced nystagmus—a word which in Greek and Proto-Indo-European languages means slumber, drowsiness, sleepiness. For us ocular albinos, this means that, if we are not concentrating in a fixed and focused way on something visually, our eyes will involuntarily move back and forth, basically functioning as a light sensor for low-resolution retinae that are depleted of rods and cones. Once, this nystagmus got me arrested on suspicion of cocaine use in a country (Germany) whose language I could not yet speak.

At age ten, my brother already understood the Cylon joke differently than I would seven years later when I caught up to him. In middle school, he made his strategic peace with the epithets that his peers enjoyed taunting him with, and he had taught himself how and why to be on the winning side of them. Even then, he had the symbolic competence to insist on his rightful place in complicated group social structures-in-motion, on variously ruled fields of play. As the second child, and also the queer one, it seems I may have gone in the other symbolic direction entirely, opting out of fields of potential competitive competence early on—sports fields, fields of expertise, fields of social tension, and eventually disciplinary fields, too.

When I arrived at that same middle school seven years later, the Cylon epithet was still waiting for me. Unlike my brother, I didn't know how to laugh about it, because I saw in the taunt a confusing annihilation of my humanness that I could not reasonably accommodate, on top of the subjugation emerging through my queerness in those earliest years of the AIDS pandemic. Somehow, I decided that what was happening at that intersection was too dangerous to not take seriously, and personally. Where my brother saw consecration, I saw oppression. What I consequentially remember about seventh grade is getting into a lot of trouble with authorities: punching kids, threats of police investigations, dispassionate admonishments by the school principal in front of other kids, getting suspended—all in different and apparently unrelated situations, but all subtly tied together by the specter of exclusion. I'm sure my friends and family would tell a different story, but this is what I remember, and it is what I would rather not remember. Whereas my brother seems to have seen the challenge and the taunting around his vision as an invitation to symbolic competence, I stopped far short of that, seeing only an occasion for symbolic anxiety.

2016: Quantity Time With(out) the In-Laws (SC in The Macro/Micro Nexus Of Familial Homophobia)

I made the understandable mistake of marrying a man I was in love with but who was unable to tell his parents that he was gay or that he was getting married. My ex-husband's father was a general in the Jordanian army and an advisor to King Abdullah II, and his son's marrying a man in the United States would reliably cause some significant trouble at Court. Shortsightedly and in love, I somehow couldn't bring myself to think through the longer-term implications of signing up for this set of indefinitely diminished conditions for what, I thought at the time, was to be my lifelong marriage.

In lieu of being invited to meet my partner's parents in Jordan, we took a side trip from a job-seeking tour to meet his older brother's family in Columbia, Missouri, as a kind of surrogate. Imagine the mutual disappointment: I don't get to meet my in-laws in Amman but have to settle for the older-brother deputy—in, of all places, Missouri? And, imagine the equal disappointment on their side: a *man,* and with somewhat unpromising career prospects as a humanities professor of some vague sort.

I think I intended to arrive to Missouri ready to be adequately gallant and charming for a short amount of time, particularly toward my future brother-in-law's Turkish wife, with whom I intended to gossip in Turkish for a furious ten minutes or so. I showed up at the house ready to do "quality time"—explaining who I am, what I do, what my intentions were with their brother, etc. We arrived around 11:30 a.m. and, after a light and pleasant lunch, nothing else happened. I noticed I felt a little scruffy and decided to get on my phone and find a place to get a haircut. I did this in a belated, misplaced gesture to appear presentable for the occasion. No one really had asked me any questions about myself at lunch, nor seemed to want to do much discourse of any kind. The ten-year-old son of the family seemed interested in me, or at least really wanted to show me his model Boeing plane collection, but that was the most enthusiastic invitation to engagement by far.

Mostly, we were all sitting around that afternoon on a huge sectional couch, almost all of us looking at our phones for long periods of time and not talking. I was baffled. Where were my in-laws, where was this general and advisor to the King? Surely, he wouldn't have me sitting around on a sectional couch all day for nothing? When I got back from my haircut, my brother-in-law appropriately tells me نعيمًا. This is my one potential moment to shine, by responding الله ينعم عليك ("May God give you pleasure!"), but of course I can't even pull that off. I am already resistant to the big brother's patriarchal air of relaxed entitlement, especially because he's only a stand-in for the father-in-law I am not permitted to meet.

My therapist tells me that anxiety is social, not just cognitive: it is an effect of one's proximity to the ambiguous desires of the Other, from which or whom the subject wishes to gain some favorability. In my yearning to gain favorability from this complex Other-in-law—the social-familial Other in the room, but also the absent Other across the world I was prevented from meeting—I was completely unable to see what that Other was actually looking for in me at that juncture, which was in fact to spend *quantity time* (Markovitz, 2019) with them: unremarkable, unstructured, inconsequential long periods of time in each other's company, doing nothing, being available for low-level monitoring and exposure. As a workaholic academic, I have such a hard time being generous in this way: simply spending apparently purposeless, directionless time with people. The symbolic competence of the moment wasn't about language ability or eager disclosure and exchange, but rather a kind of passivity and abandonment to shared time. From me, it should have required overcoming the urge to escape

the house on the pretext of "making myself presentable" with a belated haircut and, instead, merely *being* amid the muted conviviality, doing the boring work of integrating into the unassuming normalcy of an Arab-Turkish-American family.

2022: Making Peace With the Colloquial (SC in Language Prescriptivism)

One of the more condescending exchanges scripted for the almost always condescending NBC television show *The West Wing* involves White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry, briefing his new deputy national security adviser Kate Harper, played by Mary McCormack. Leo has spent the first part of the onboarding conversation with Kate assuring her that he is sensitive to gender-neutral language and is able to work with women in an egalitarian way. Leo says: "Yeah, listen. With Nancy McNally out of the country, you're going to have to be our go-to... I was gonna say 'guy.' The problem with English: 'guy' is wrong, 'gal' is patronizing, and 'person' sounds arch."

Kate Harper is unnerved by how much time her new boss is taking away from the substantive, indeed urgent aspects of her job on this particular day, where one has to hit the ground running without extra time spent on preemptive niceties. She wants to speed along this humiliating exercise that calls more attention to her apparent femaleness than to her qualifications as a military expert. She tries to get ahead of it:

> KATE
> I won't let you down. Oh, and on that whole language score: I was in the military. I "manned" battleships, was "one of the boys," occasionally was exhorted to "drop my ...," you know, and "grab my socks." I've made my peace with the colloquial.
>
> LEO
> Okay.
>
> KATE
> Just between us girls. Thanks, Leo.

The particular condescension at issue lies not just in Leo's attempt to get his new direct report Kate to feel certain things about the first task he is asking of her, but also in his artificial, engineered pretext about the discomforts of wrangling with non-sexist, ungendered language. An open-minded liberal Democrat with a feminist and gender-critical daughter of his own, Leo tries halfheartedly to enlist Kate's understanding, and even complicity, around his own linguistic predicaments as a powerful man. Kate tries to elude her symbolic conscription into this project of male fragility, precisely so that she can get to the core of her actual responsibilities of the day, and avoid being held symbolically responsible for Leo's alleged difficulties.

It is hard for me to say quite why I feel such a kinship with this character Kate Harper around "making peace with the colloquial" in this moment, and why my own investment in some kinds of egalitarian and accessible style remains skeptical. I was struck once, in a Zoom panel I was on, at how another presenter—engaged in the new ritual practice of describing in detail the visual features of one's Zoom box—began their talk by enumerating for visually Disabled people (like me) Everything About Themselves at a brisk pace, including their hair color, eye color, skin tone, clothing, and cisgenderedness. Sitting impatiently through this

whole introductory bit—it was a panel on Disability—I remember feeling robbed as a learner of the full ten minutes of time that had been set aside for this obviously intriguing person to share their ideas with us. The whole three-minute alt-text ramp-up came off, unfortunately, as more self-stylizing and potentially narcissistic than was ever likely foreseen—by them in the course of their preparation, surely, but also by the well-intentioned alt-text genre itself.

Kate's symbolic competence lies in having the stamina and rhetorical tools to forego the ways in which power seeks to enlist her in projects that proudly allege to have her interests at heart, but which in so claiming mask the underlying fact of those projects' indifference to her subjectivity and their utterers' hunger to overlook the very hierarchies where they occupy a supreme position. "Making peace with the colloquial" is a kind of symbolic competence that acknowledges the ways some social justice matters cannot be mitigated and litigated *in situ* by merely using *better* language.

2024: ***May the Widow*** (SC in Subjugated Literary Hyper-Appropriation)

Amid the cascade of awkward contingencies that got me into my career as a German Studies professor, one of the key factors was advice from my undergraduate advisors that a master's course in German would bolster my language proficiency as a non-native speaker, before I might continue on to a PhD in Comparative Literature or the like. The fact that I stuck around for the PhD in German had to do mostly with the comfort and trust I eventually built with my faculty and peers during the MA course in German. I also felt, as an advanced language learner studying with Claire Kramsch, an excitement around pursuing concepts like "translingual practice" in a Germanophone context, attuned as I was becoming to the socio-aesthetic gauntlet that immigrants to Germany experience vis-à-vis the new language they find they need to learn there. Twenty years later, I realize how much my zeal and devotion in the field of literariness and poetics focus admiringly on such people whose work as writers have mirrored back my own affective experience as a non-native speaker making some kind of modest symbolic claim on meaning-making rights in German.

Soon after the Bosnian-German writer Saša Stanišić won the Wilhelm Raabe Literature Prize in Fall 2024, I found myself on a book tour in Berlin and Göttingen to talk about my book *Literature in Late Monolingualism*. Jogging around Berlin that week from neighborhood to neighborhood in the winter evenings, I rekindled my true love for this multilingual city after years away, while listening to Stanišić's acceptance speech for the Raabe Prize. Stanišić was being feted particularly for his collection of short stories called *Möchte die Witwe angesprochen werden, platziert sie auf dem Grab die Gießkanne mit dem Ausguss nach vorne* [If the widow wishes to be spoken to, she places the flowering can upon the grave with the spout pointing forward]. This title gleefully joins in the tradition of other transnational multilingual works in the Germanophone world, like Emine Sevgi Özdamar's loquacious *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* [Life is a Caravansaray has two doors I came in through one and went out through another], thereby claiming more than their normative space in German language than is usually expected of a book title.

Stanišić's collection is both a beautiful restaging of Germanophone literary luminaries since the 18th century—Theodor Fontane, Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer und Anette von Droste-Hülshoff—and also a way of "reading" German culture radically, from a powerful outsider standpoint. That is, Stanišić is acutely invested in symbolic competence in German discourses precisely in the way Kramsch lays out, in being able to reflectively manipulate a language that one has laboured to

understand and embody against many odds. The title of his book, particularly, is a remarkable exemplar of poetic equivalence between meaning and function, derived from Saarland's folk traditions, which give widows a socially appropriate way to indicate their desire to marry again while still grieving the loss of their spouse. There are so many ways this one idiom and its social tutelage convey a model for what symbolic competence can mean: the griever of profound loss, who knows how to manipulate the social semiotics of her specific environment in order to convey a powerful new message. Such messages are buried within decades and centuries of Germanophone social knowledge, and it has taken a Bosnian-German multilingual literary war-refugee creator to resurface this story as a diagram for resilience and compassion in a frequently unforgiving culture of symbolic proscriptions.

CONCLUSION

I admit it has taken me far too long to understand what it is exactly that makes up the distinctive core of "symbolic competence," and what there is about this concept that merits the specificity of a new paradigm, one that goes beyond broadly affirmative views about the added value of poetics, literariness, and style for additional language learners' practical enrichment. Kramsch (2021, pp. 4–5) points out that most learners already have an inkling about the "symbolic" nature of languages—that is, the arbitrary, binding, and socially entangled unity between signified and signifier as sign. But the story of "the symbolic" in language is too frequently allowed to end there (Kramsch, 2011, p. 355).

Always, Kramsch claims, this initial "linguistics" dimension of the symbolic is and must be accompanied by an anthropological awareness about the situated power of interpellation and addressivity, as well as by a sociological awareness about the ways material reality, resources, wealth, privilege, and status are actively constructed through utterance and silence. Apparently, then, symbolic competence is not quite symbolically competent if it does not mobilize all of these three disciplinary understandings of the "symbolic," in their composite situated relation to one another. Certainly, there are compelling political reasons at work that lead people to systematically ignore these latter (anthropological or, particularly, sociological) dimensions of the symbolic, as they are the Pandora's box containing the chaotic and crushing magic upon which civilizations, empires, and normative orders continue to be built. Not everyone feels the urge to lift that lid, pleased enough with what they get already from the first (linguistics) sense of the symbolic—where, tragically, "Saussure's deux individus are the figure of […] modern liberal democratic citizenship" (Pratt, 2012, p. 17).

Since SC's initial 2006 formulations, I have been tentatively vying here and there to test out various assumptions about "the symbolic," as it bears on symbolic competence. I had myself believing at one point, for instance, that under Kramsch's paradigm literature needed to be exalted as the domain *par excellence* that enriches our attentions to the social world, and that such enrichment was the key insight of symbolic competence. Then, I had myself thinking almost the opposite: that the classroom-based study of literature was routinely missing the boat on the underlying poetic nature of the practical social world, which already pulsed with creativity and imagination the likes of which far outstripped some of the stodgier traditionalisms of university-sanctioned literature teaching (Kramsch, 2023, p. 371). In the end, neither of these positions quite sufficed; each was driven by too much opportunistic straw-person argumentation and disciplinary flag-waving.

Rather, what is reflected in Kramsch's proposals around symbolic competence is the claim that human life in general is always tied up in the rhymingly interwoven reality of

symbolic life, in which languages' function, force, and meaning are each competing for effective primacy at every practical step. Explicit forms of rational "communication"—in its referential, managed, idealized, charismatic, intercultural, and interactional senses—are only one thrust in this powerful mix of the symbolic world, routinely trumped by everyday poetic equivalences that compel our attention and action far more readily than do reasoned, referential meanings. Literature and poetics are spheres where these *realities* of symbolic equivalence have been explored with a particular lay intensity over the millennia, but this does not mean that literature and poetics have some essential pride of place among these intensities and realities.

Symbolic competence, then, invites and renews our effective attention to the Goffmanian question about "what is going on" (really) in symbolic life, because symbolic orders themselves powerfully organize what can be going on politically, culturally, psychically, and socially to begin with. What is powerfully rhyming, in situated social life at any given moment, such that a given involuntarily poetic feature in one arena matches up resonantly with another in an apparently unrelated domain, often in a sub- or infrarational way? In these moments, what form, force, myth, or compulsory convention might be quietly outweighing or annulling another more explicit meaning that is being loudly conveyed to us? How is a speaker's way of identifying themselves in a particular, casual moment frequently subordinate in importance to the structures of talk and hierarchy that characterize the space in which that position-taking occurs? What power do certain elements of rhetorical design acquire, by simple virtue of their contrast with other features? And can we ever opt out?

These kinds of questions are central to symbolic competence, not because the human world is perversely manneristic, because society is shot through with ideology and hypocrisy, or because institutions are corrupt and elitist. Rather, these indelible features of the symbolic are in many ways pre-ideological, apolitical, anthropological constants baked into the very predicament of being human; variants of them crop up in every class and culture, every language and community. Empires just often figure out how to exploit them at a more effective scale. Running away from them, in search of efficient, transparent, and rational information-sharing, is a surefire way to court symbolic *in*competence.

One key aspect of symbolic competence, I believe, and also one that causes some reluctance in the field around taking it up, is its focus on "manipulating" symbolic systems to one's benefit (Kramsch, 2023, p. 251)—a disposition that arouses suspicion among progressive academics. Why manipulation? Why the focus on producing symbolic goods to one's own benefit in the complex global context in which we live today, rather than on noticing, understanding, empathizing, and critiquing alone? There is, further, the mention of power itself. Liberal values foresee only a rather narrow set of appropriate practical implementations for power, and power itself is generally presupposed to be the dubious prerogative of the "powerful"—of hidden hands, of manipulators, of autocrats. Kramsch proposes quite openly that symbolic competence involves, indeed requires, manipulating reality—that is, empowering oneself to manipulate reality to one's benefit. These two images alone—power and manipulation—are enough to send an additional language teacher or methodologist back without further ado to the more agreeable virtues of communication, transparency, intercultural understanding, and the like. Kramsch, of course, works conceptually in French with a range of connotations around "*manipuler*" that are neutral or positive, where the English connotations of "manipulate" tend to be prohibitively negative.

Kramsch's personal account of her early subjectification into symbolic competence—in her French-English-Hungarian-Jewish families-of-origin under the brutal menace of Nazi totalitarianism, and then again in her early-career tours through competing and mutually

hostile schools of thought on languages and literature—suggests that there is something in multilingual experience that renders the symbolic world more palpable, inevitable and, often, ominous. Or, put in another way, those who find themselves protected from embodied multilingual frontiers and experiences by various forms of monolingualism in social and institutional life will enjoy the dubious privilege of ignoring the symbolic in favor of more rationalistically tinged, unambiguous ideals like "communication," "dialogue," "transparency," "clarity" and "accessibility." Monolingualism is designed in some ways to occlude and deny the power of the symbolic, and to maximize the apparent efficiency of rationalist communication in its stead. Such is the scientistic conceit of monolingualism; it makes such rickety promises to us, despite the fact that no actual social institution or discursive order can deliver us from the anthropological constant of the symbolic. In the twentieth century, multilingual experience was one of the key, but disavowed, grounds for cultivating humility in the symbolic world, reminding us of this essential and always compulsory constant of symbolic power. The fantasy of being able to opt out of it—by virtue of capital accrued, class status, plain-languagedness, the ideological high-ground, or moral piety—was alluring but ultimately futile.

This essay has taken Claire Kramsch's concept of symbolic competence as a basis upon which to develop an autoethnographic account of my own formation as a language learner, languages teacher, and applied linguist. Through ten moments over the course of half a lifetime, I have sought to bring the explanatory power of this concept to bear on my own development in the field, from teenage years to now. I remain immensely grateful to the concept, and to Kramsch herself for pushing the boundaries of what we think competence in language(s) can and must mean for the coming century.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. (1990). *Art and answerability: Early philosophical essays,* M. Holquist (Ed.) and K. Brostrom (trans.). University of Texas Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1992). *Réponses, pour une anthropologie réflexive*, Le Seuil.

Bourdieu, P. (2004). *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*. Raisons d'agir éditions.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology.* University of Chicago Press.

Butler, J. (2002). *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt,* Rainer Ansén (trans). Frankfurt: suhrkamp.

Downs, A. (2005). *Velvet rage: Overcoming the pain of growing up gay in a straight man's world.* Da Capo Lifelong.

Gramling, D. (2021). *The invention of multilingualism.* Cambridge University Press.

Gramling, D. (2024). *Literature in late monolingualism.* Bloomsbury.

Kramsch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal 90*(2), 249–252.

Kramsch, C. (2009). *The multilingual subject.* Cambridge University Press.

Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching 44*(3), 354-367.

Kramsch, C. (2021). *Language as symbolic power.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kramsch, C. (2023). Poetic equivalence: Key to the development of symbolic competence. In M. M. Echevarría (Ed.), *Rehumanizing the language curriculum*. Peter Lang.

Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2008). Language ecology in multilingual settings. Towards a theory of symbolic competence. *Applied Linguistics 29*(4), 645–671.

Markovits, D. (2019). *The meritocracy trap: How America's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite.* Penguin.

Moore, A. (2023). Linguistic dissociation: A general theory to explain the phenomenon of linguistic distancing behaviours. *Applied Linguistics 44*(6), 1152-1171.

Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics.* University of Minnesota Press.

Pratt, M. L. (2012). If English was good enough for Jesus: Monolinguismo y mala fe. *Critical Multilingualism Studies 1*(1), 12–30.

Weber, S., Randall, A., Neuman, N. M., McGregor, J., Jacobs, J., Gramling, D., Gouaffo, A., Gindner, J., Criser, R., & Coleman, N. (2021). Decolonizing German studies curricula: A Report from the 2019 GSA Seminar. *German Studies Review 44*(1), 155-166.