
SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction to the Special Issue

Multilingual and Intercultural Perspectives in Language Learning: Essays in Honour of Claire Kramersch

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Claire Kramersch has a long and distinguished career in the field of applied linguistics. This is not the first and nor will it be the last occasion to honour her contribution to the field of language education and applied linguistics more broadly. Yet we are pleased nonetheless to present this collection of essays which pay tribute to the reach of Claire's scholarship. Claire has authored many texts that serve as key references in intercultural and multilingual research and has developed several seminal concepts that have guided generations of teachers' and researchers' thinking and practice. The aim of this special issue is to celebrate Claire's influence through the voices of a range of scholars whose professional trajectory she has influenced. As well as being an outstanding scholar, Claire's personable character and lucid, fresh manner of articulation have won her the admiration and affection of all those who have worked alongside her in different capacities, whether as students, colleagues, co-authors, or collaborators.

The idea for this special issue was sparked by the occasion of Claire's 90th birthday earlier this year. In a life marked by professional acclaim, honours, and awards, it might seem almost trite to use something as ordinary as a birthday milestone to celebrate personal achievement. In the case of Claire, though, whose longstanding contribution goes far beyond her own impressive body of work, we think such a celebration is fitting. While longevity alone is not a measure of merit, a body of work as wide-ranging and richly textured as Claire's, infused with autoethnographic depth and candour, invites more than celebration of an individual. It becomes an occasion to honour what Holland and Lave (2001) call "history in person," the embodiment of complex historical processes through a single life.

Throughout Claire's writings and lectures, she has spoken about the biographical contexts that have motivated her reflections and stimulated her research.¹ Born in France in 1935 to a French father and English mother, whose own Jewish family had migrated to London from

¹ For a fairly recent biographical interview see, for example, Sadeghi (2020). See also Kramersch & Zhu Hua (2021) for an interview given on the occasion of the publication of *Language as Symbolic Power* where Claire talks, among other things, about the influence of Bourdieu.

Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, Claire has described how her “first memories are steeped in the foreignness of foreign sounds ... their meaning entered my ears, my muscles, my sinews with an immediacy that one cannot imagine if one learns these same sounds in a classroom” (Kramersch, 2023, p.14).² Having lived through German occupation, the choice to study German language and literature might seem unexpected, but it is what Claire chose as her university career at the University of Paris-Sorbonne in the 1950s. Later, now married to a German, Claire moved to the United States in the early 1960s. Here she encountered complex new patterns of linguistic and behavioural codes and protocols, an intense cultural immersion that instilled in Claire a lifelong interest in how difference is experienced and how to navigate the symbolic landscape of living together. Claire has written about the personal challenges of adapting to a different set of values pertaining, for instance, to childcare practices in the US. In the professional domain, transitioning from the French to the American academic system in the field of German as a foreign language brought her face-to-face with fundamental issues surrounding language, knowledge, culture, and identity. Over time, Claire came to see that the “Anglo” roots of applied linguistics and its presumption of global English could serve as both a unifier and a limitation, particularly in language education, where global market values often overshadow historical, cultural, and political depth.

Claire taught German language and literature at M.I.T. and applied linguistics at Cornell University before joining the University of California, Berkeley in 1990. There, she founded the UC Berkeley Language Center in 1994 and served as its director until 2006. She was Professor of German and Affiliate Professor of Education at Berkeley until retiring in 2015. Claire is the author of many articles and books which have inspired students and teachers for decades. Her many publications include *Interaction et discours dans la classe de langue* (Hatier, 1984), *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford University Press, 1993), *Language and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1998), *The Multilingual Subject* (Oxford University Press, 2009), *The Multilingual Instructor* (Oxford University Press, 2018, with Lihua Zhang), *Language as Symbolic Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), and *Decolonizing Applied Linguistics Research in Latin America* (Routledge, 2023, with Harold Castañeda-Peña and Paola Gamboa). Claire has also been a generous and inspirational collaborator, editing and co-editing numerous volumes and special issues, always lending laser-sharp observations and an extraordinary depth of intellectual richness. She has additionally authored her fair share of prefaces and codas, approaching these tasks not as merely performative exercises, but as genuine acts of dialogue.

Prizes include the ACTFL Nelson Brooks Award for the teaching of culture (1988), the MLA Kenneth Mildener Prize for Outstanding Research in the study of foreign languages and literatures (1994, 2009, 2019), the Goethe Medal (1998), the MLA Distinguished Service Award (2000), the AAAL Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award (2007), the AILA Honorary Membership Award (2020) and the British Association for Applied Linguistics book prize (2022). Claire has served as President of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (1994-1995) and President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA, 2014-2017) and was co-editor of the journal *Applied Linguistics*, 1998-2003. She is currently the series co-editor (with Zhu Hua) of *Key Topics in Applied Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press) and *Language and Intercultural Communication* (Routledge).

Each of the nine essays in this special issue is an original text that highlights how one or more of Claire’s key concepts or insights have guided the author’s own scholarship or teaching. The essays were originally prepared, in accordance with the journal guidelines, as six Articles and three Teachers’ Forum pieces. However, apart from their length, we realised that this distinction seemed artificial for this set of papers. Several contributors adopt a reflective stance (sometimes through autoethnography, using their own lived experiences as sites of analysis), while others make

² See this chapter for an insightful autobiographical reflection on Claire’s salient memories of her experience as a language learner.

connections with their own projects. In doing so, several pieces blur the conventional boundaries between the Articles and Teachers' Forum genres in the *L2 Journal*. For this reason we decided, with the general editors' permission, to publish all nine as Articles.

For each piece, we asked contributors to select a short quotation from Claire, drawn from any of her extensive publications or conference papers, as a feature beneath the title of their paper. In some cases, contributors reinterpret Claire's words beyond their original contexts. Through weaving direct quotations, personal reflections and theoretical resonance, the essays both honour Claire's contributions and extend them to new contexts. What follows is our attempt to curate these contributions through their links with Claire's works concerning multilingual and intercultural perspectives in language learning.

First, What does it Mean to Develop Symbolic Competence, and How can it be Cultivated through Narrative, Pedagogy, and Critical Engagement?

Starting with **symbolic competence**, one of Claire's central theoretical notions and intellectual contributions, David Gramling revisits ten formative moments across his personal and professional journeys of becoming a language learner, teacher and applied linguist. These life stories, told through David's narrative voice, illustrate what constitutes symbolic competence and the conditions under which it can be meaningfully exercised. He notes that while symbolic competence was initially framed as extending beyond simply adopting or appropriating another's language, but rather involving the ability to actively shape the very context in which language learning and use take place, the concept has since expanded to include a responsibility to consider how that reframing of contexts (i.e., manipulation in its neutral sense) affects others and one's own subjectivity over time.

Lihua Zhang explores how **symbolic competence** can be integrated with the development of language skills through her experience of incorporating **linguistic landscaping** techniques into a Chinese L2 course for non-heritage learners. In this project, symbolic competence is not treated as an abstract ideal but brought to life through structured pedagogical practices that encourage critical engagement with language in context. Students were guided to interpret and analyse symbolic meanings embedded in multilingual signs in public spaces through a carefully designed sequence of activities starting with orientation, followed by exploration and discoveries, and then leading to evaluation. This piece provides an excellent example of how educators can bring the development of core language skills, symbolic competence and research skills together in a pedagogical project. The guiding questions in the orientation stage align well with Claire's framework on the symbolic dimensions of language encompassing cultural, social and historical contexts and therefore are of particular interest to anyone who would like to approach the notion of symbolic competence in practical terms.

Linking to **symbolic competence**, and in particular, its emphasis on critical and imaginative engagement, Michiko Uryu focuses on **empathy**, understood as the ability to imagine the perspective of others. In her study, she employs discourse analytical concepts (such as speech acts, subject pronouns, modalities, stance in narratives) to investigate how empathy emerges in the written texts of two students enrolled in Japanese culture courses. Her analysis illustrates how discourse analysis can serve not only as a diagnostic tool for examining construction of the cultural "other," but also as a developmental tool to refine pedagogical practices.

Secondly, How do Concepts of Subjectivity and the Multilingual Subject Reshape Our Understanding of Language Learning and Teaching?

Anthony Liddicoat explores what it means to be "**a multilingual subject**," a key concept and the very title of one of Claire's award-winning monographs. He argues that positioning learners as

multilingual subjects entails three dimensions: living and communicating across languages and cultures, negotiating multiple identities, and developing a multilingual self. For language teaching and learning, this perspective highlights the importance of a learner-centred pedagogy, one that shapes learners' experiences and scaffolds their active processes of meaning-making, while teachers act as facilitators who support and guide this process.

Building on Claire Kramersch's influential scholarship on **subjectivity**, understood as the individual's personal, lived experience in language learning, Simon Coffey reflects on how recent poststructuralist developments in applied linguistics have reshaped his own understanding of the learning process. Central to his exploration is the heuristic role of **metaphors** in conceptualising language learning. He highlights how metaphors can be employed pedagogically to enhance language education and additionally, how metaphors such as "what language learning is like" contain conceptualisations of language learning and teaching objectives. He concludes by emphasising the value of examining metaphors we use—or more precisely, the act of metaphorising itself. Reimagining the metaphors we "language" by allows for deeper critical engagement with the underlying assumptions that shape how we teach, learn, and experience language.

Thirdly, What New Possibilities Open Up When Applied Linguists Turn the Focus onto Themselves—On Their Feelings, Standpoints, And Responsibilities—in Order to Transform the Field?

Taking Claire's reflections on the **middle-ground conservative ideology** in language education as a starting point, Alison Phipps connects Claire's work with her own scholarship on languages and intercultural communication through a restorative design framework, which she terms **permaculture**, inspired by indigenous practices of cultivation and land restoration. Drawing on her extensive work with the Global South and Indigenous Peoples, Phipps illustrates this approach with a range of examples. These include the evocative "linguaging, poetic cries and heartbreaking scholarship" she and her colleagues have been practising in response to Gaza; an Indigenous language revitalisation project in Aotearoa, New Zealand; and the UNESCO publication of *Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education* (2025), which reaffirms the importance of mother tongue instruction, the role of multilingual education across all levels of education, and language as an essential component of intercultural education.

In her reflective piece *Construire sans relâche un habitus de la pluralité (Resolutely building a habitus of plurality)*, Geneviève Zarate describes her longstanding relationship with Claire, in particular their collaboration on the volume *Le Précis du plurilinguisme et du pluriculturalisme* (Zarate, Lévy & Kramersch, 2008) (later translated into English and Chinese, as discussed), to illustrate how humanities and social science researchers collaborate across different languages, academic traditions, and ideologies. Recognising Claire as a "border-crosser," Zarate highlights the potential to transgress conventional notions of international collaboration by deliberately engaging with the "in-between" spaces inherent in cross-border, multilingual research. Her insistence on the importance of what French scholars call "*représentations sociales*" — a notion that Anglo scholars would refer to as attitudes, beliefs, ideologies and other mental, social and political schemes of perception that form and shape our habitus — is all the more timely as "in-between spaces" are currently the sites of increased contestation, misinformation and misunderstanding.

Joseph Park builds on Claire's work on **subjectivity** and **symbolic power** in language learning and turns attention to the researcher's positionality. He argues for **affect as a method** in applied linguists' engagement with social transformation. Joseph challenges us to critically reflect on the assumptions and unintended consequences of conventional approaches in multilingual advocacy, notwithstanding their significant contributions to advancing the rights of marginalised communities. These include: the positionality that separates theory from real world problems of

language, reinforcement of dominant language ideologies which see linguistic differences as salient, a narrowing of the field's imagination about where social intervention is possible and reproduction of a hierarchical divide between the researched and the researcher. For Park, *affect as method* goes beyond reflexivity. It is a reminder that affect, a key element for decentring normative assumptions about language and power, is not confined to research participants but also compels researchers themselves to face discomfort and to recognise their own implication in the very social conditions they aim to transform.

In a similar vein, Cristina Ros i Solé draws from Claire's extensive scholarship on **language and subjectivity** as well as her recent contributions to **decolonial perspectives** in applied linguistics and discusses the positionality of the researcher. She suggests that the notion of locus of enunciation (understood as how the individual positions themselves regarding other languages) provides a way to amplify and foreground the researcher's subjectivity. Autoethnography, she argues, could function as a methodology of decoloniality, offering possibilities for challenging and reshaping power imbalances through multilingual forms of resistance. Her contribution resonates with and complements other pieces in the special issue that similarly employ autoethnography as a critical method. As Cristina eloquently put it, "Languages and cultures do not define us, but they are an important part of our subjectivities and our multilingual mindsets. It is through conversations between different subjectivities and different voices that we change and challenge ourselves and our realities, not through the imposition of a single language that silences other voices."

Finally, Bringing Everything Together

The highlight of this special issue is the coda by Claire herself. In responding to the collection, she returns to La Fontaine's fable *The Wolf and the Lamb*, the story that she selected for the cover of her award-winning book, *Language as Symbolic Power*, and to which Zarate refers in her reflection. Claire calls on the readers to consider the dimension of complicity in Bourdieu's conception of symbolic power: the lamb, she reminds us, is not merely a passive victim, but is also 'complicit' in sustaining the very political structure through which it is oppressed. Claire argues that grasping this perspective would help learners of French and English better understand the different social spaces that these languages construct. It can also encourage applied linguists to position themselves "not just as researchers of mediation processes, but as mediators (*passeurs*) themselves" (Kramsch, this issue, p.4).

Claire was also founder of the UC Berkeley electronic *L2 Journal* and served as its first editor-in-chief. It was, therefore, a natural choice for us to approach the current editors of *L2J*, Emily Hellmich and Kimberly Vinall, with our proposal to edit this special issue. We owe a debt of gratitude to Emily and Kimberly for their support in helping us guest-edit this volume. We are also deeply grateful to Claire for agreeing to write the coda for the special issue, and of course to all our contributors and reviewers for their work. We hope that Claire's works, as reflected in the collection and beyond, will continue to inspire scholars today and for generations to come.

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