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Claire Kramsch in conversation with Zhu Hua

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The following conversation between Zhu Hua (ZH) and Claire Kramsch (CK) was conducted on 27 October 2020 at a webinar organized by Rebecca Taylor and Rachel Tonkin from Cambridge University Press on the occasion of the impending publication of Claire's book *Language as Symbolic Power* and in the shadow of the imminent presidential American election. What follows are extracts from the conversation in which we have incorporated some of the questions sent in by the attendees.

ZH: *What motivated you to choose this topic for your book?*

CK: I have always been fascinated by the power that language can have in defining social relationships. I grew up in France in the forties and fifties in a family where my French father spoke a language different from the language of my British mother, and again different from the language of the German occupying forces during the war. Language was always foregrounded and was certainly much more than a linguistic code. The choice of which language to speak defined the way we would interact with one another, understand or misunderstand each other's intentions as well as the jokes we would make in various languages around the dinner table. It shaped my relationship with the English world of my mother and the French world of my father, that often seemed incompatible. When I came to the US, I had to deal with yet another world, which I had difficulty understanding, both in its use of language and in its values.

   This personal experience led me to design an undergraduate course that I gave for some 15–20 years at UC Berkeley. First through my German department, then as a Discovery course, that I was invited to give through the College of Letters and Science and that appealed to a broad range of students from all over campus. The success of that course and the impetus that it gave me to reflect on issues of language led me to believe that it would be a good idea to put them in the form of a book. This book is not a textbook, but a distillation of the ideas that my students and I discussed over the years.

ZH: *In your book, I can see the many connections you make between the personal and the professional. The book has been endorsed by Alastair Pennycook and by Tim McNamara from the University of Melbourne, who actually wrote the first book in our series Key Topics in Applied Linguistics, titled* Language and Subjectivity. *McNamara writes: 'This book is a tour de force, the fruit of Kramsch's brilliant command of ideas and arguments from many fields and many languages and cultures. It is beautifully written and powerfully and clearly argued – a pleasure to read.' I couldn't agree with him more. So how did you put the book together, and how did you find the writing process?*

CK: When I write a book, it generally comes out of a sense of frustration that my field, which is language teaching, has often been looking at language in ways that don't do justice to the fullness of language as I have experienced it. My readings in applied linguistics and other fields have shown me that there's so much more to language than just communicative competence! People don't want only to make correct sentences, they want to be taken seriously, not just

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heard but listened to and respected. They want not just to understand what others are saying, but why they are saying it this way or that in order to make what impression on you; they want to be able not just to inform people but to change their perceptions of the world! All this is a matter of symbolic power.

As to how I go about making a book out of this … well … first, I open a file. That's always my first thing. And over the years that I am busy crafting this book, I live with my topic all the time – weekdays, Sundays and holidays. I fill the file with relevant newspaper clippings, notes on readings, bibliographical references, reflections and conversations. And at some point, I start thinking about how to organize the lot into chapters and what would go in which chapter and under 'Further readings', 'Footnotes' and 'Glossary'. As I then start writing, the words have a way of growing on you, of making you think of things you hadn't thought before. The material seems to take a life of its own, so I open a file 'Remnants' that consists of things that I can't put into this book but I want to keep for another piece of writing. That was the case, for instance, for the many examples from Donald Trump that were threatening to take over the whole book!

ZH: *You mentioned you've got frustrated by the political environment; how did you manage to stay positive or to manage your anger while you were writing the book?*

CK: Writing a book is a very self-reflective process. You are constantly writing and observing yourself writing through the eyes of your intended readers. Yes, I was frustrated to see many language teachers remain on the level of linguistic structures, of the linguistic code, while the house was burning, so to speak. I was outraged at Trump's abuse of language. But writing about it always helps. You then wrestle with words, not with persons, and you try to describe the problem the best you can and to use the best examples you can find to make your point.

ZH: *So, tell us very briefly: what is symbolic power?*

CK: Symbolic power is the power to use symbols (e.g., words, pictures, images, behaviors, clothes, foods) to not only denote things in the real world and connote status and authority, but also to change people's perceptions and evaluations of that reality. It is a social symbolic concept, i.e., a way of influencing or having an action on your environment through symbols. Because it is based on suggestion and persuasion, symbolic power can only operate with the complicity of the people on whom it is exercised. People have to recognize the value of a symbol in order to be influenced by it or to be changed by it. Foreign language learners may know how to exercise symbolic power in their mother tongue, but they may not know how it works in the foreign language in a foreign context.

ZH: *Does an ESL learner's lack of language proficiency, most specifically vocabulary, affect his/her ability to wield symbolic power, in any way?*

CK: Of course the more vocabulary you have, the more choice you have to express yourself this way or that and to shape the perceptions of your interlocutors. But even beginners have the choice of when to speak and when to remain silent, when to code-switch and when not, how to compensate for a lack of lexical knowledge through communicative strategies. They can be taught what cognitive categories English words represent (e.g, as Fairclough (1989) reminds us, the difference between a *rebel* and a *freedom fighter*) and how to save face in delicate cross-cultural situations. But most of all, by learning English, they gain the symbolic capital of becoming bilingual and they can be taught, through a translanguaging pedagogy, how to increase the symbolic power that such a capital gives them. But symbolic power is always exercised in a social field in which power is contested and can only exist through its recognition by others.

ZH: *Your work has strong connections with philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, linguistic anthropology and applied linguistics. One of the key scholars whose work you have drawn from is Bourdieu. In what way does your conceptualization of symbolic power build on his work?*

CK: I have been very much influenced by Pierre Bourdieu and his notion of *pouvoir symbolique*. My notion of symbolic power obviously builds on Bourdieu's (1991) book. By changing the 'and' to an 'as' in the title of my book, I wished to emphasize the social semiotic constructivist approach to language that I take, and that inflects Bourdieu's theory in a more post-structuralist and even post-modern direction than Bourdieu himself intended, because I want to reach people who are learning and using a language that is not their own. Using another symbolic system is in itself a powerful act that represents, shapes and constructs a social reality that is different from the reality constructed by one's native language. As a sociologist, Bourdieu focused on the constraints imposed by institutions and other fields with which a speaker's habitus interacts. I don't ignore the way institutions both enable and limit language users' symbolic power, but as an applied linguist I focus more on the power of the speaking subject who is learning to use a new way of creating meaning. It is true that when I taught *Language and Power* many American students in the class interpreted issues of symbolic power through a psychoanalytic lens, for instance asking if 'symbolic violence' wasn't the same thing as 'microaggression'. And I always had to remind them that Bourdieu was a sociologist, not a psychologist, and that symbolic violence is a social semiotic concept, not a psychological one. If I supplemented Bourdieu with extracts from Butler's *Excitable Speech* (1997) and Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* (1981) it was to bring in a philosophical dimension to the topic, not a psychoanalytic one.

ZH: *One of our participants is asking: what is the difference between your approach and Halliday's systemic-functional linguistic approach?*

CK: As social scientists, both Bourdieu and Halliday see language reflecting social structure. But as a linguist Halliday developed an elaborate description of language as social semiotic, where Bourdieu as a sociologist developed an elaborate description of the social symbolic world. Since my interests are both in the humanities and the social sciences, I have chosen to draw on humanists like Barthes, Bakhtin and Butler and social scientists like Bourdieu, Tannen and Lakoff, rather than lock myself into one systemic functional linguistic theory. But Norman Fairclough's notion of language and power draws heavily on Halliday.

ZH: *How does 'symbolic power' complement your concept of 'symbolic competence'?*

CK: By coining the notion of 'symbolic competence', I intended to supplement the notion of communicative competence by a focus on the symbolic power of language. Like critical discourse analysts who study language ideology (e.g., Fairclough, 1989) and linguistic anthropologists who study language materiality (e.g., Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017), I see words as vectors of meanings that have sedimented over time in a given speech community and have acquired a social symbolic reality that is as physical as architecture, food or music. I say 'physical' because the use of symbols affects our perceptions, our emotions and memories. Symbolic competence is the ability to use symbolic power to represent, frame and reframe this reality, and thus its perception by others (see Zhu & Kramsch, 2016). The book places the notion of symbolic power and thus symbolic competence into a clearly and explicitly post-structuralist framework that I explain in the introduction.

ZH: *Why do you use the term 'symbolic violence', why not 'coercion' or 'manipulation'?*

CK: The term comes from Bourdieu and it does sound more 'violent' in English than in French. *Faire violence à quelqu'un* [doing violence to someone] in French means suggesting or persuading someone to do of their own volition something they at first didn't want to do. Like symbolic power, symbolic violence always implies the complicity of the one who is subjected to it, because it is perceived as legitimate. It does not necessarily mean using physical force, but because the term *violence* can also be used in French to index physical harm (as in *user de la violence, une violente tempête*), the physical is always potentially included in the symbolic. This is not the case with the terms 'manipulation' or 'coercion' that do not include the idea of complicity. Bourdieu examines at length the symbolic violence that the educational system, as an institution, does to the students in its care. It does empower them with knowledge and symbolic capital, but it

also reproduces through them a stratified class structure of social inequality under the guise of meritocracy. In my book I give other examples of symbolic violence, especially in the case of Donald Trump, whose violent rhetoric incited his followers to physical violence.

ZH: *The strength of this book is indeed the rich current and engaging examples you give. I found the stories from children's books particularly endearing. And you show how symbolic violence can turn into symbolic warfare, for example with Trump's use of Twitter. So how has the political situation in the United States impacted the way you view the issues discussed in the book?*

CK: Over the years that I taught the course on which this book is based, the political situation in the world, and in particular in the United States underwent many changes and so have the examples I have drawn on to illustrate the workings of language as symbolic power. Since 2015, the topic has become of acute political relevance and I have become more and more convinced that language teaching is an eminently 'political' activity in the broader sense of the term. The large number of books on language in the Trump era (McIntosh & Mendoza-Denton, 2020), on the politics of language (Lakoff, 1990), the power of social media (Van Dijck, 2013; Vaidhyanathan, 2019), algorithmic power and politics (Bucher, 2018) and on the ethics of digital technology (Amoore, 2020) should be of interest in the pre- and in-service training of language educators.

ZH: *So how do we engage with symbolic power and how do we respond to symbolic violence?*

CK: The first thing is to understand how much more language is than just a tool for communication. Many might think: 'What? Of course, people use language to control people and maintain systems of power! Feminists and social and cultural critics have amply decried the uses and abuses of power by marketing strategists and politicians. Why is this anything new? This has always been central to advertising and with now big tech. Yes – we have to find ways to disrupt, confront and dismantle oppressive systems. Isn't this what critical thinking is all about?'. Well, yes, but since this book is for applied linguists, many of whom teach language, I will say this. In most educational circles, critical thinking means the ability to reason clearly and logically and to analyze a text into its constituent parts. It does not mean, following Foucault, the ability to reflect on the larger discourse that prompts an educational system to promote, for example, 'critical thinking'. Language teachers are paid to teach and test learners' ability to use a linguistic system correctly and fluently, not to show evidence of understanding language as symbolic power. They are not trained to teach vocabulary as cognitive categories used by speakers of the language and these speakers' social and cultural expectations. This would require changing the training of teachers and the expectations of students who sign up for language classes. It would also mean upgrading the social and academic status of language teachers and the symbolic value of learning a foreign language in the first place.

The second way of engaging with symbolic power is to understand precisely these larger discourses within which we use language, their historic conditions of possibility, which enable us to say and think certain things but not others. For example, how to talk in French about *laïcité* [secularism] both from an American and a French perspective, using the cognitive categories associated with 'freedom of speech' and *liberté d'expression*, and how the one and the other can lead from symbolic to physical violence in the respective countries. The challenge is not just to talk about these things intellectually, but to let them resonate within you emotionally, so that you can begin to feel their emotional intensity for speakers of the other language, what memories these words might evoke for them. Literature and the arts might help here: a poem can provide just the right metaphor, a short narrative can mediate just the relevant identification. Mostly it can offer language learners a glimpse into possibilities of dialogue despite social and cultural differences.

The third way of engaging with and responding to symbolic violence is to reclaim language in all its complexity, historicity and subjectivity. I mention in the book the work of Judith Butler and other feminist scholars who have reclaimed the meaning of 'queer'. The same could be discussed in language classes about the meaning of, say, 'freedom'. Most American students will tell you that

freedom is *freedom from* (oppression, constraints etc.) and have to be reminded that it is also *freedom to* (to free others, to work for the common good etc.). Right now would be the time to reclaim a narrative of America that is neither Republican nor Democrat but a still-to-be-defined nation of immigrants in dialogue with other immigrant nations around the globe.

ZH: *How does viewing language as symbolic power influence your view about the relationship between language and culture?*

CK: Everything we've just talked about is about culture, because culture is nothing but discourse. If you look at Scollon and Scollon's (2001) book on *Intercultural Communication*, it offers a discourse approach to language. So, if you take discourse as the exchange of meaning between people, culture is the meaning that they share as members of the sociohistorical speech community with which they identify. Culture is something that people fight about, as we can see today in the culture wars that Donald Trump has been fueling in the U.S. around the meaning given to Slavery, the Civil War, White supremacy, the Civil Rights movement etc. He has accused activists who tore down the statues of General Robert E. Lee in North and South Carolina of wanting to 'cancel culture'. And he has been a genius at manipulating the symbolic power of the media to consolidate his own political power over the Republican Party.

ZH: *I have a question here that has come in: What is your view on teaching English as an international language or as a* lingua franca *that focuses on the code?*

CK: A *lingua franca* is not devoid of culture, but because it is a transactional language, used for the exchange of information, it departs from any particular native speaker norms and their symbolic power. However, because it is still a language in itself, it holds symbolic power in very many other ways, including in its combination with other languages, and other speaking and writing styles.

ZH: *How can we help our students develop that awareness of the symbolic power of the language? I'm thinking especially to those of us who are teaching refugees and students who are in a weaker social position?*

CK: Students who have experienced hardships and are in a precarious position are particularly able to understand that language is symbolic power (see Freire (1970)). They need to be shown how this power works, how it is exercised, not just through nouns and adjectives, but through performatives, face-saving strategies, participation frameworks and an understanding of the algorithms of social media. They can be particularly valuable participants in class discussions about the conflicts that native speakers of the target language are experiencing and anguishing about. They can share with the class the larger concerns that their home communities talk about. You may ask: How can they do that if they are not proficient enough in the target language? That is where collaborative translation, translanguaging, code-switching come in and all the translingual practices described by Li (2011), Canagarajah (2013), Cenoz and Gorter (2015) and others.

ZH: *From all you have said, the book is a warning to all of us in this challenging time, but it also gives a message of hope. You write: 'As the book goes to print, the COVID19 pandemic is raging across the globe, revealing longstanding inequalities and injustices. But it has also revealed inordinately powerful forces for social justice led by a new generation of young people, who are both socially aware and politically savvy. I hope the book can contribute to this new awareness in the years to come'. So, what does this mean for us, researchers and educators in applied linguistics?*

CK: There is a proverb in English: 'The lowest ebb is the turning of the tide', which has proven quite prophetic in this election cycle. After four years of chaos and despair, the political tide in the US seems to have finally turned. If Joseph Biden wins the election, Democrats and Republicans will need to deploy all the symbolic power they have to craft a common national narrative.[1] My book gives the last word to Toni Morrison and her Nobel lecture of 1993 that shows us the way.

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[1]As of 3 November 2020, Donald Trump has been voted out of office, revealing the enormous changes that have taken place in the electorate since 2016: the Black Lives Matter movement, the Women's movement, the Ecological movement

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and a new awareness of the vulnerability of democracy. People have become more aware of the dangers of social media at spreading misinformation and have mobilized to vote like never before. Now with a new Democratic President and an intercultural Vice President, they are ready to try and heal the country, and bring Democrats and Republicans to talk to each other again.