

# What is symbolic competence and what can we do with it?

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20 November 2015

# How it all started



## What might be the matter?

- Incorrect grammar/non-native vocabulary?
- Infelicitous speech act?
- Impolite way of talking ?
- Ignorance of New York culture?
- Inability to *savoir s'engager/savoir etre*?
  
- No understanding of the power game?
- No institutional legitimacy?
- No power to reframe the context?

## What does the man lack?

- (linguistic competence)
- (pragmatic competence)
- (sociolinguistic competence)
- (cultural competence)
- (intercultural competence)
  
- (symbolic competence)
- (symbolic competence)
- (symbolic competence)

“The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be *listened to*, likely to be recognized as *acceptable* in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak. Social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality” (Bourdieu 1991:55)

# I. How was symbolic competence defined originally?

Kramsch (2006)

The ability to **manipulate symbolic systems**, to **interpret signs and their multiple relations** to other signs, to use semiotic practices to **make and convey meaning**, and to **position oneself** to one's benefit in the symbolic power game.

Kramsch & Whiteside (2008)

The ability to position oneself as a multilingual subject, **to understand the cultural memories** evoked by symbolic systems, **to perform and create alternative realities**, and to **reframe and shape the multilingual game** in which one invests.

Kramsch (2009)

The ability to understand the symbolic value of symbolic form and the different cultural memories evoked by different symbolic systems, to draw on the semiotic diversity afforded by multiple languages to reframe ways of seeing familiar events, create alternative realities and find an appropriate subject position between languages.

Kramsch (2011a)

The ability to manipulate the three dimensions of language as symbolic system: **symbolic representation, symbolic action, symbolic power.**

Who has written about symbolic competence in recent years?

# How has symbolic competence been understood?

## 1. As a theoretical construct, it has been understood

- as a dynamic, flexible, locally contingent competence (Leung 2014, Li Wei 2014)
- as a post-modern, ecological (Californian!) competence (Byram 2011, Molina 2011)
- as a nuanced way of teaching culture beyond national stereotypes (Baker 2016)
- as related to intercultural competence (Kearney 2010, 2015, Gassenbauer 2012, Clark & Stratilaki 2013)
- as distinct from intercultural communicative competence (Byram 2011), performative competence (Canagarajah 2014), metacultural competence (Sharifian 2013)

## vs. intercultural competence

From Byram , M. (1997) *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*.  
Multilingual Matters.

Intercultural communicative competence is composed of five “savoirs”:

*Savoir*: knowledge of self & other; of interaction – individual and societal

*Savoir comprendre*: interpret and relate

*Savoir apprendre/faire*: discover and/or interact

*Savoir s’engager*: political education, critical cultural awareness

*Savoir etre*: relativising self, valuing other

## vs. performative competence

From: Canagarajah, S. (2011) From intercultural rhetoric to cosmopolitan practice: Addressing new challenges in Lingua Franca English. In Diane Belcher & Gayle Nelson (Eds.) *Critical and corpus based approaches to intercultural rhetoric*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press.

“Nowadays, focus is on connections not just differences; multilayered affiliations, not unidimensional identities, contact rather than community “(p.212)

From: Canagarajah, S. (2014): Theorizing a competence for translingual practice at the contact zone. In May, S. (Ed.) *The Multilingual Turn. Implications for SLA, TESOL and Bilingual Education*. Routledge.

“Performative competence” is a “competence for practice”: procedural (not propositional) knowledge  
Involves the following practices:

- Start from your positionality
- Negotiate on equal terms
- Focus on practices, not form
- Co-construct rules and terms of engagement
- Be responsive to the joint accomplishment of goals
- Reconfigure your norms and expand your repertoire



## vs. metacultural competence

From Sharifian, Farzad. (2011) *Cultural Conceptualization and Language*. John Benjamins.

Metacultural competence = awareness of the cultural conceptualizations or cultural schemata associated with semantic and pragmatic meanings.

Ex. ability to recognize what cultural schemata underlie things like *pain* in French, *beer* in American English, and the use of the pronouns T/V in various languages.

## vs. ACTFL global competence

Global competence is the ability to:

- Communicate in the language of the people with whom one is interacting.
- Interact with awareness, sensitivity, empathy, and knowledge of the perspectives of others.
- Withhold judgment, examining one's own perspectives as similar to or different from the perspectives of people with whom one is interacting.
- Be alert to cultural differences in situations outside of one's culture, including noticing cues indicating miscommunication or causing an inappropriate action or response in a situation.
- Act respectfully according to what is appropriate in the culture and the situation where everyone is not of the same culture or language background, including gestures, expressions, and behaviors.
- Increase knowledge about the products, practices, and perspectives of other culture

*Approved by the ACTFL Board of Directors- Monday, August 25, 2014.*

[GlobalCompetencePositionStatement0814.pdf](#)

<http://www.actfl.org/news/position-statements/global-competence-position-statement#sthash.tzx4zMjH.dpuf>

# How has symbolic competence been understood?

## 2. As the ability to play the symbolic power game in everyday life, it has been understood

- as positioning of self/other in face-to-face or online social encounters (Belz 2002, Bernstein 2015, Hult 2013, Johnson 2015, Kitade 2013, Liddicoat 2016, Shin 2016, Zhu Hua & Li Wei 2016)
- as relationality, transgression, meaning-making (Vinall 2016)
- as transformative experience, subversion of established power (Vinall 2012)

# How has symbolic competence been understood?

## 3. As classroom pedagogic practice, it has been understood

- as representing, doing, and changing things with words (Kramsch 2011a, Zhang et al 2015)
- as semiotic awareness and interpretation of film (Kaiser & Chibahara 2014), political speeches (Kramsch 2011a), literary texts (Kramsch 2006, 2011b)
- as ability to play with language (Pomeranz & Bell 2007, Li Wei 2014)
- as a way of teaching literature in EFL classes (Gassenbauer 2012)
- as critical literacy, i.e. meaning-making and perspective-taking practices in the analysis of cultural/ historical narratives (Kearney 2012, Warriner 2011)
- as multiliteracies (Lopez-Sanchez 2009, Warner 2011)
- as the ability to understand translation and its educational value (Ruschiensky 2015)

## II. What do we mean by ‘symbolic’?

### Discourse as symbolic representation, action and power

As symbolic system, language is at once:

1. **symbolic representation** (Saussure, Benveniste, G. Lakoff – enunciative and cognitive linguistics ). Denotations, connotations, lexical and grammatical categories, idealized cognitive models, prototypes, stereotypes. *What words say and what they reveal about the mind.*
2. **symbolic action** (Austin, Searle, Goffman, Halliday - performative and functional linguistics). Performatives, symbolic interaction rituals, facework, roles, genres. *What words do and what they reveal about intentions.*
3. **symbolic power** (Bourdieu, Fairclough, Blommaert – sociology, critical sociolinguistics)  
Values, intertextualities, subjectivities, historicities. Logos, brands and myths. *What words index and what they reveal about social relations, individual and collective memories, emotions and aspirations.*

Of these three aspects of symbolic systems, *few scholars have picked up on the symbolic power dimension of symbolic competence* (which was so prevalent in Kramsch & Whiteside 2008), with the exception of :

- Warriner (2011) who deals with refugee ESL learners
- Hult (2013) who studied Swedish NNS of English.

Enormous influence of

-Michael Byram in Europe, South and East Asia and in the U.S.

-European research on the intercultural

- Overwhelming focus of attention nowadays, is on *intercultural communicative competence*, based on an educational and social psychological approach to teacher development.

*But symbolic competence never ceases to intrigue and to inspire researchers in intercultural communication, even though they don't quite know what to do with it.*

# We need to look at language *as discourse*

“What circulates on the linguistic market is not ‘language’ as such, but rather discourses that are stylistically marked both in their production... and in their reception” (Bourdieu 1991:39)

## **Discourse is language use beyond the sentence level.**

1. Discourse is “language in use, for communication” and discourse analysis is “the search for what gives discourse coherence.” (Cook, G. *Discourse*. Oxford:OUP, 1989:6)
2. Discourse is “a general term for examples of language use, i.e., language which has been produced as the result of an act of communication” (Richards, Platt & Weber 1985:83)
3. Discourse analysis is “concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used.” (McCarthy, M. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press, 1991,5)

## **Discourse is organized meaning.**

4. Discourse analysis is “the description of the process whereby we create and relate, organize and realize meaning” (Riley, P (ed.) *Discourse and Learning*. Longman 1985:2).
5. “Discourses are systems of meaning embedded in certain institutions, which in turn are determined by ideologies in response to larger social structures. On the microlevel is the text, determined by discourse and genre, in turn determined by ideology; on the macrolevel is the larger social structure” (Kress, G. 1985, 31).
6. In a Foucauldian sense, “discourse does not refer to language or uses of language, but to ways of organizing meaning that are often, though not exclusively, realized through language. Discourses are about the creation and limitation of possibilities, they are systems of power/knowledge (pouvoir/savoir) within which we take up subject positions” (Pennycook, A. in *Applied Linguistics* 15:2 (1994), 128.)



### III. Symbolic competence in action

#### **What kind of power do people wield with words?**

As speakers/writers

We name things, persons and events (Sapir/Whorf, Lakoff)

- We categorize (*freedom fighters vs. rebels vs. insurgents vs. terrorists*)
- We order, classify (teachers vs. scholars; language vs. literature)

We do things with words (Austin, Searle, Butler, Goffman)

- We perform speech acts (we request, apologize, warn, threaten)
- We engage in face-saving or face-threatening strategies

We construct social reality (Bourdieu, Foucault)

- We (re)produce or subvert conventions, ideologies
- We build cultures, identities through discourse

As speakers/writers we name things,  
persons and events



Source : Plantin *Plus ça change...* Hatier International, p.69

T/V, the pronouns of power and solidarity (Tannen 1993, Roger Brown & Albert Gilman 1960)

1) Maurice the plumber reverses the roles through a *strategy of condescension*, that at the same time acknowledges (use of *vous*) and negates (call me *Maurice*, arm around boss) the hierarchy between him and his boss.

“The strategy of condescension consists in deriving profit from the objective relation of power between the languages that confront one another in practice in the very act of symbolically negating that relation, namely, the hierarchy of the languages and of those who speak them” (Bourdieu 1991:68)

2) The boss exercises a similar strategy of condescension, that at the same time negates the hierarchy (arm around employee, symmetrical use of *vous*) and reinstates it (call me Monsieur Edouard).

“The relation between two people may be such that one of them has only to appear in order to impose on the other...a definition of the situation and of himself..., which is all the more absolute and undisputed for not having to be stated.” (Bourdieu 1991:52)

As speakers/writers we do thing with words

# *“Where do you come from”?* (YouTube. What kind of Asian are you? 2’20)

Context: California. A white man (W) tried to strike a conversation with an Asian-looking young woman (A) who is jogging.

W: Hi, there.

A: Hi.

W: Nice day, huh?

A: Ya, finally, right?

W: (sounding surprised) Where are you from? Your English is perfect.

A: San Diego. We speak English there.

W: (looks confused and beginning to slow down in the speech, trying to emphasize every syllable with exaggerated hand gestures) Ah, no, whe...re... are... you... f...rom?

A: Well, I was born in Orange County but I never actually lived there.

W: I mean before that?

A: Before I was born?

W: Ya, like, where are your PEOPLE from?

A: Well, my great grandma was from Seoul.

W: (delighted) Korean. I knew it. I was like she’s either Japanese or Korean. But I was leaning more towards Korean.

A: (in a flat tone) Amazing.

W: Ya, Gahm-sah-hahm-ni-da!, there’s a really good Teriyaki Barbecue place near my apartment. I actually really like Kimchi.

Ex.1 From Zhu Hua & Li Wei (In press). 'Where are you *really* from?':  
Nationality and ethnicity talk in everyday interactions. *Multilingua*,  
special issue, Kramersch/Zhu Hua eds.

Example 1 from blog article posted on Wednesday 3 March 2010 with the headline 'It may not be racist, but it's a question I'm tired of hearing'. In the article, Sherine talks about 'the Conversation' she had for the 3,897th time. [Her implicatures in italics]

- Stranger: Where are you from? [*You look a bit brown. Why are you brown?*]
- Me: London.
- Stranger: No, where are you really from? [*You are clearly not telling me the truth. Brown people do not come from London.*]
- Me: London.
- Stranger (exasperated): No, where are your parents from? [*Now you're just being obtuse.*]
- Me: Africa and America.
- Stranger (confused): Erm ... so where are your family from, like, back in the day? [*People who come from Africa and America do not look like you.*]
- Me: Iran, India, Africa, America and England.
- Stranger (relieved): India and Iran! Do you ever go back?

## Analysis:

- NET talk (“nationality and ethnicity talk”): (Zhu Hua & Li Wei in press)
- The speech act and its ambiguity (request for information? Insult? Expressing doubt about sincerity? Suspicion of deviousness? Illegitimacy?)
- The text: *where do you really come from?* Why is it offensive?
- The context: The struggle for legitimacy
- The complicity of actors and viewers
- How does one counteract symbolic violence?

(see also: Derald Wing Sue 2010. *Microaggressions in everyday life. Race, gender and sexual orientation*. New York: Wiley.)



## Ex.2 From A. Liddicoat (in press). “Native and non-native speaker identities in interaction: Trajectories of power.” *Multilingua*

In Extract 1, which is taken from a forum in which participants are discussing holidays, a NNS is responding to negative comments made by a NS about problems in a preceding post.

C\*\*\*: Your pictures are nice but your English is not good. You make too many mistakes.

M\*\*\*: Please do not criticise my English. It is NOT my mother tongue and as you should appreciate I am trying to speak another language, unlike many lazy English native speakers.

In Extract 2 participants are discussing alternative ways of using software programs to resolve particular computer problems in a technology oriented forum.

A\*\*\*: i'm think i not do it like that

P\*\*\*: u should say “I don't think I'll do it like that”

A\*\*\*: That is not how i mean. i think that i'll not do it. i might not say it right if you don't understand you ask me. my English is not good but i still know how i mean.

NS “didactic voice”:

NS takes the right to shift the focus from the content of NNS utterance to its linguistic performance. A hegemonic power, exercised with the complicity of the NNS, but like all symbolic power it may be challenged. The question is: what is the best way to challenge it?

As speakers/writers, we (re)construct social reality

## Martin Luther King Jr. I Have a Dream Speech August 23, 1963.

“One hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination... One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense **we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check**. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, **they were signing a promissory note** to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that **America has defaulted on this promissory note** insofar as her citizens of color are concerned...America has given the Negro people **a bad check**, a check which has **come back marked “insufficient funds.”** But we refuse to believe that the **bank of justice is bankrupt**. We refuse to believe that there are **insufficient funds in the great vaults** of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to **cash this check** – a check that will give us upon demand the **riches of freedom and the security of justice”**.

## How does MLK construct the social reality of the United States?

Through metaphors taken from the discourse of *democracy-as-capitalism*.

MLK warned by JFKennedy not to sound like a communist!

From  
JUSTICE IS DEMOCRACY

Freedom

Equality

Inclusion

to  
JUSTICE IS CAPITALISM

Financial credit

Opportunity

Prosperity

“We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all God’s children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.”

## **How does MLK convince his audience of the urgency of the moment?**

Linguistic categories: denotations/connotations of words like democracy, freedom, racial justice; affect (assonances/alliterations). Cognitive metaphors: RACIAL INJUSTICE IS QUICKSAND

Discourse structure: parallelisms ('from...to'), repetitions ('now is the time'), poetic neologisms ('urgency of now'), genre: homily, performatives: exhortations, warnings, predictions

Participants in discourse: we (the people); our nation; the Negro; God. Bystanders, Blacks and Whites.

Prior discourses: intertextualities (Bible, Shakespeare), interdiscursivity (the American Dream and the current crisis of capitalist democracy).

Speech acts: Declaration? Warning? Threat? Exhortation? Prophecy?

Contextualization cues: subjective and moral resonances of words like 'freedom', 'democracy', 'justice'. Indexicalities on multiple timescales (e.g., Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Lincoln Memorial).

(for analysis, see Kramersch 2011a:357)

# Symbolic competence



Why are people so upset?

- He is flouting expectations of the speech community
- He is going against the conventions of a well-socialized habitus
- He is trespassing the norms of conventional moral conduct
- He has changed the rules of the symbolic game
- He seems convinced of his *profit of distinction*
- He remains silent

“What is rare, then, is not the capacity to speak, which, being part of our biological heritage, is universal and therefore essentially non-distinctive, but rather the competence necessary in order to speak the legitimate language which, depending on social inheritance, re-translates social distinctions in the specifically symbolic logic of differential deviations, or, in short, distinction” (Bourdieu 1991:55)



# Conclusion:

## Communicative competence AS symbolic coompetence

In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Bourdieu argues that the power of the speech act comes not from the intention of the speaker, but from the institutional and societal context.

“Symbolic power is an ‘invisible’ power which is ‘misrecognized’ as such and thereby ‘recognized’ as legitimate. Symbolic power requires, as a condition of its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it.” (J.B.Thompson in Bourdieu 1991:23).

In *Excitable Speech* (1997) Judith Butler disagrees.

“It is the breaking of the utterance from prior, established contexts that constitutes the ‘force’ of the utterance (141). . .Bourdieu fails to grasp the logic of iterability that governs the possibility of social transformation. It is clearly possible to speak with authority without being authorized to speak (157). . . Agency emerges from the margins of power (156)”

Thank you!

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