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Special Issue

Symbolic Competence: From Theory to Pedagogical Practice

Afterword to the Special Issue: Where Do We Go from Here?

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The focus of this special issue as posed in the call for papers highlighted explorations of symbolic competence at several levels: theory; teaching and learning practices; and research. In this Afterword, we consider these levels central to our reflections on the particular contributions of this special issue as well as to considerations of future areas of inquiry. The guiding questions for each included:

1. Theory: How can symbolic competence be further theorized?
2. Teaching and learning practices: What is the relevance of symbolic competence to the language classroom?
3. Research: How do we conduct research on symbolic competence, its theoretical potentials and limitations, in relationship to classroom learning and pedagogical practices?

The articles in this special issue have made significant contributions in responding to these questions. These articles all grapple with theorizations of symbolic competence in relationship to questions of symbolic representation and language users' understandings of the relationships between form and meaning; symbolic action and language users' manipulation of semiotic resources to meaningfully engage in the multilingual and multimodal game; and, symbolic power in terms of how learners engage these resources to play this game. From pedagogical practice to classroom interactions the articles have all demonstrated the relevance of symbolic competence to the language classroom as well as offering insightful and innovative pedagogical practices designed to potentially support its development. Additionally, they provide differing models of research, from the level of detailed analysis of conversation and turns at talk to thematic analysis of reflections on the implementation of new pedagogical practices and considerations of their potentials.

To further explore these contributions in light of the guiding questions we draw on data from a June 2017 interview with Eddie¹, a community college student in California who moved to the U.S. from Ethiopia with his family when he was 7. The interview was conducted by Kimberly Vinnall as part of a larger research project that focuses on exploring students' language and culture learning experiences. In the case of Eddie, these language experiences have included both the learning of English and Spanish. We believe that a precursory analysis of data from this interview provides a unique opportunity to consider the following: a) what do the ideas from these articles help us to understand in this data?; b) what gaps remain that suggest the need for further exploration?; and, c) where do we go from here with future research into symbolic competence?

Each of these three guiding questions that framed this special issue will be addressed separately, however, we do acknowledge that in reality they are intertwined. The consideration of each guiding question begins with data from Eddie's interview. In subsequent sections we will consider the specific ideas from the articles that elucidate this data before outlining the specific areas for future consideration.

1. THEORY: HOW CAN SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE BE FURTHER THEORIZED?

In his interview, Eddie recounted his early adjustments to U.S. culture and to learning English. As his reflections revealed, this cultural and linguistic adjustment was intimately tied to processes of racialization, ones that did not influence his life in Ethiopia because "back home everybody looks like you you know like they're your neighbors they're your you know they're black so there is never any racial like anything." He admitted that he initially "hated America," and he identified his first "incident" that led to this hate as a "racial" one, explaining: "when I got here I got called the n-word and at the time I was like oh I don't know what that means you know I barely spoke English but I remembered it." Eddie later added, "I don't know what it meant but I knew I felt bad."

In addition to not knowing the meaning of the word, Eddie may not yet have learned about the multiple layers of history of the word and its contexts of use in connection with slavery, Jim Crow Laws, the Civil Rights Movement, and the mass incarceration of African-Americans, amongst many others. Nor, potentially had he learned how the word's use spoke to a long history of prejudice, exploitation, and violence. While Eddie might not have understood the word's denotation and history, there was no ambiguity about its connotations and the symbolic power its user had wielded as Eddie began to grapple with what it meant to be constructed as black in the U.S. In acknowledging that he "felt bad" Eddie expressed no doubts about how he felt that he was being positioned by this symbolic action.

What would Eddie need to be able to reframe the context of this utterance, to reposition himself, and to manipulate the linguistic code in order to ultimately reject this operation of symbolic power by resisting it? What might it look like to do so? Would the way in which he did so be recognized by others? How would it be recognized? What new meanings might emerge in the process? What would be at stake in doing so? What would be at stake in not doing so?

¹ A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the student.

At the heart of all of these questions lies the notion of symbolic competence (Kramersch, 2006; Kramersch, 2011; Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008) and some concepts central to its theorizations. All of the articles in this special issue contribute significantly to broader understandings of symbolic competence at the same time that they speak in different ways to Eddie's racial incident. Yet in the context of Eddie's experiences these questions also suggest the need for further theorizations. I will briefly explore three of these central concepts as pertinent to these continuing explorations: 1) ambiguity; 2) meaning making; and 3) symbolic power.

Ambiguity

All of the articles in this special issue in one way or another highlight the important role of ambiguity in understandings of symbolic competence. More specifically, Richardson takes up the question of ambiguity as one of the three main components of symbolic competence, the other two being production of complexity and form as meaning (Kramersch, 2006). In particular, Richardson (2017) pushes against the idea of tolerating ambiguity in order to embrace it and the power of its "productive, creative doubt and uncertainty" (this issue, p. 16). In terms of its implications for foreign language curricula and classroom practices, she argues that embracing ambiguity means moving away from concerns about understanding every word, knowing the correct answer, and formulating grammatically correct utterances and the anxiety that these concerns produce. As a result, she argues, students can learn to creatively manipulate language as an ultimate means of reframing reality, in other words, as a means of facilitating the development of symbolic competence.

From the position of a newly arrived immigrant, who at the time of the incident had limited knowledge of the language and culture, Eddie demonstrated anxiety around not knowing the meaning of the n-word because he felt the effects of its use. Yet, understanding these effects defies a dictionary definition, because such a definition does not capture the "historicity of convention that exceeds and enables the moment of its enunciation" (Butler, 1997, p. 33). In fact, when he returned home and asked his father what the word meant he did not receive a dictionary definition. Instead, his father explained, "there's gonna be these times your gonna hear these words to you and it's because we're in a um new environment and some folks who are gonna be ignorant enough to judge you off the color of your skin."

This response certainly spoke to "conflicting and historically contingent truths" (Kramersch, 2006, p. 251)—specifically, those of the unidentified speaker, the one doing the judging, and those of Eddie, the one being judged. Yet, at a broader level, we wonder what it means to go beyond tolerance of ambiguity in the classroom or outside of the classroom when one is positioned as part of the outgroup and when one's very sense of safety, identity, and well-being are being threatened on a daily basis—in this case as a male living in the U.S. who is constructed as black. What does it mean to embrace creative uncertainty for individuals who are positioned in comparable ways, albeit through processes such as racialization, genderization, and/or sexualization? How can ambiguity facilitate these individuals' reframings of accepted meanings?

As Keneman (2017) has highlighted, previous research on symbolic competence has focused on the "everyday hegemony that disenfranchises certain individuals and where symbolic competence is especially valuable, both socially and economically speaking" (this issue, p. 86). Yet, these musings on Eddie's racial incident point to the need for discussions around broader considerations of ambiguity in relationship to the operations of power and

positionality. Does the development of symbolic competence look different for different people in relationship to this positionality? Is it potentially yet another privilege to not only develop tolerance for ambiguity but to embrace it as productive doubt without examining privilege itself and one's own positionings? In the case of Eddie, embracing ambiguity would mean understanding the ambiguities of racism in the U.S., i.e., systematic oppression based on skin color despite the Bill of Rights, his interpellation as being black in the U.S. notwithstanding his own history and potential identifications as Ethiopian, the history of slavery as indissociable from the history of the American dream, and the conflation of racism and classism. Eddie would also want to examine his ambiguous subject position as a previously middle-class Ethiopian who upon his family's arrival in the U.S. became a vulnerable, lower class² immigrant now attending a community college in order to realize his academic and social ambitions. It is important that future research on symbolic competence explore this relationship between embracing ambiguity in connection to subject positioning and the social meanings attached to these positionings.

Meaning Making

The understandings of symbolic competence as elaborated in these four articles include a consideration of meaning-making processes, and two of them explicitly incorporate their exploration in the language-learning classroom. In terms of their pedagogical intervention, Etienne and Vanbaelen explore what learners bring to the meaning-making process through a semiotic gap activity. This activity facilitates the learners' exploration of their connections to their own past cultural and symbolic representations and experiences as well as their awareness of their own positionalities and perspectives. Keneman (2017) provides an opportunity for learners to "discover and make meaning in a foreign language" (this issue, p. 90) through exploring multiple interpretations and representations of Sartre's play *Huis Clos* arguing that, according to Kearney (2015), "the development of symbolic competence is observable as students engage in the interpretations of signs and meaning over time" (as cited in Keneman, 2017, p. 16). These understandings of meaning making recognize that meaning is pluralistic and at times contradictory as it does not reside in one truth; meaning is constructed in the interaction between text and context; and, meaning is dependent on subject positions as "the way in which the subject presents and represents itself discursively, psychologically, socially, and culturally through the use of symbolic systems" (Kramsch, 2009, p. 20).

Accompanying the social turn in second language acquisition (Block, 2003; Ortega, 2011) has been a renewed interest in meaning-making processes in relationship to language and culture education. Perhaps this interest is attributable at least in part to the perceived limitations of current iterations of communicative competence and its accompanying emphasis on instrumentalized, functional language use (see Tucker, 2006) and a tourist gaze on culture (see Kramsch & Vinall, 2015; Vinall, 2012; Vinall, 2015). Interest in meaning-making processes may also be in response to the recognition of globalizing forces that have brought languages and cultures into increased conflict and contact, opening up new potentialities for understanding meaning making (see Blommaert, 2010; Kramsch, 2014). It is in this context that we can situate the proliferation of terms circulating that attempt to further theorize meaning-making processes from varying perspectives. These include but are

² In his interview Eddie self-identified his family's social class as lower class.

not limited to the following: intercultural competence (Byram, 2000) and intercultural communication (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; Piller, 2011; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Sorrells, 2013); semiotic awareness (van Lier, 2004) and critical semiotic awareness (Kern, 2015), strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), literariness (Dobstadt & Riedner, 2011), multiliteracies (Etienne & Vanbaelen, 2006; Kern, 2000; New London Group, 2000; Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016), and translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2013; Canagarajah, 2014; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2017). (For a brief review of the distinctions between these meaning-making processes, see our Introduction; see also Kramsch & Zhang, 2018, Ch.1.) Juxtaposing understandings of these terms is a potentially fruitful intellectual exercise that opens up new lines of inquiry, particularly in relationship to understandings of symbolic competence. However, symbolic competence itself suggests more than just an awareness of or a critical reflection on these meaning-making processes because it also involves interrogating how power works through and in them.

In the case of Eddie, he did not have any previous experiences in Ethiopia with racialization processes because, as he explained, there “everybody looked like you.” He also had no prior experiences with the n-word. The meaning that he constructed from the racial incident he experienced was potentially very different from the meaning intended by the person that attempted to categorize him and judge him by invoking the word. Through his discussion with his father, Eddie was able to distinguish between these two very different truths and the realities they indexed. Yet, symbolic competence is more than being aware of meaning-making processes and it implies more than an awareness that meaning is constructed through semiotic resources, such as language. We are always already making meaning with language. In Eddie’s incident, exploring symbolic competence might encompass inquiry into how the relationality of black and white is understood in the U.S. and on a transglobal scale; how these understandings can be used to transgress the boundaries of white and black; and how the potential of making new meanings of black and white can be exploited and for what purposes. In this sense, it is important that further research explore the political and ethical dimensions of symbolic competence.

Symbolic Power

One of the unique contributions of the various understandings of symbolic competence is their exploration of the role, impact, and functioning of symbolic power (for a definition of symbolic power, see our Introduction; see also Kramsch, 2016). Each of the articles takes into consideration to varying degrees the operation of symbolic power. Specifically, Johnson (2017) places symbolic power at the center of her analysis, by exploring “the meaning-making that takes place through the embodied dimensions of language” (this issue, p. 41). Throughout, Johnson highlights the role of symbolic power, situating it, as does Bourdieu (1982), in the interstices of interaction and not in its imposition by an individual speaker/hearer. At the micro level, she considers how hearing and deaf students at a preschool make semiotic choices that affect the balance of symbolic power through their positioning. At a macro level, the analysis calls into question the privileging of the speaker/hearer over that of the signer/signee, as it simultaneously calls into question taken for granted dichotomous constructs such as “hearing” and “deafness” that operate to privilege and normalize the acquisition of spoken English in institutional contexts. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how participants blend and blur these constructions of deafness and hearingness as they simultaneously transgress their boundaries.

In the case of Eddie, it is obvious that the invocation of the n-word by the unidentified speaker was an exercise of symbolic power that attempted to reinforce larger societal racial inequalities. Even though Eddie does not report responding to his interlocutor, the exchange nevertheless provides an opportunity to envisage his potential resistance to this insult. According to Kramsch, symbolic competence is constituted by “the ability to see both *through* language (with a focus on the communication of content) and *at* language (as the display of linguistic or communicative performance) and to (re)frame the interaction according to the needs of the moment” (Kramsch, 2016, p. 519). If symbolic power is both relational and diffuse and therefore all are complicit in and consent to its operation (Kramsch, 2016) then, as Butler persuasively argues (Butler 1997), Eddie had a choice of responses. He could, as he actually did, try and find out what the n-word indexes in a U.S. context and understand the symbolic power of that insult in U.S. history in order to understand what it means to be constructed as being black. He could, as Barack Obama did, use his education and his position as an educated African man in the U.S. to fight against racism in all its forms. More concretely, he could, the next time around, use institutional channels to denounce such abuse of white power, or reframe the interaction by using humor or irony to counter the humiliating insult (see Hua & Wei, 2016).

There is a certain ambiguity in interpreting the potential of this interaction as well as in the operation of symbolic power, one that might reveal its own creative uncertainty and doubt. Ambiguity can operate to both exercise and to resist power. As Butler argues, if power is not fixed and meaning is never complete then situations can be reframed and words can be resignified. In both cases, the operation of symbolic power is connected to and reinforced by larger social, cultural, political and institutional realities and power structures, reminding us that the possibilities for the exercise of symbolic power and its resistance not only depend on the various positionalities of social actors in various social spaces but change with the different timescales in which they operate. The timescale of a Barack Obama or a young Ethiopian immigrant in the U.S. is very different from that of a U.S. white supremacist.³

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES: WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE TO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

To consider this question we briefly return to another part of Eddie’s interview about his language learning experiences. In this part of the interview Eddie was asked to complete the sentence ‘learning a language is like...’. Eddie responded:

Learning a language is like um is like um trying to go in a straight line when projectiles are being thrown at you yeah so it’s like it’s very it’s very um it’s very hard very hard but um once you get past the projectiles you know there’s no more projectiles you have conquered whatever it is you or the language that you wanted to learn I feel like cause

³ A stark reminder of this, and, what is at stake in symbolic constructions of blackness and their very real and violent consequences, comes as we complete the writing of this Afterword in the context of the White supremacist, neo-nazi Alt Right rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina, on Saturday, August 13, 2017 that left one dead and many injured. Not only does this event remind us all of the continuing presence and impact of this racist history, but also how language itself is employed to exert symbolic power and to resist it.

that's what I that's what I was when I was learning English and when I was learning Spanish I felt like um there was at least when I was learning English the projectiles obviously were the culture and learning like being forced essentially learn a language to make it in America um and so those were the projectiles um and for Spanish it was definitely like I had the anxiety of I definitely have to get an A I wanna learn in this class I wanna talk to my co-workers I wanna go to UC Berkeley cause of this and those were like the projectiles that I feel like I did pretty good in both of them I feel like I um I gave it my all.

When he came to the U.S. Eddie obviously learned the power of language, as evidenced by the earlier racial incident he described. Much was at stake for Eddie in his language learning experiences with both Spanish and English, as illustrated by his mention of “projectiles,” although he also acknowledges differences in the nature of these projectiles. On the one hand, learning English was about being able to “make it in America” and learning Spanish was about anxiety to communicate with his co-workers and to attend the University of California, Berkeley. This simile led him to recount a lesson from his mother, who frequently reminded him that “folks learn English to be treated like a human being but other folks learn a different language just to up their resume.” For a young, lower class immigrant man facing many barriers including but not limited to racism, he was forced to learn English in order to “make it,” because, in the words of his mother, it would allow him to be treated as a human being. He also desired to successfully learn Spanish, in this case in order to realize what society might consider the American dream: obtaining a university degree as he needed to fulfill the University of California’s language requirement for transfer, in this case two quarters of a foreign language.

Both of Eddie’s objectives came with very real material and symbolic consequences and both were connected to his language learning. Certainly not everyone’s language learning experiences are fraught with such violence and danger as Eddie’s projectiles suggest (however, see Kramsch, 2009). Nonetheless, as Keneman reminds us, even those who learn a language for the symbolic and cultural capital that it provides can benefit from a deeper critical understanding of meaning-making processes in order to explore the reframing of context, the repositioning of self, and the possibilities afforded from the manipulation of linguistic codes. As Keneman (2017) has argued in this special issue, “it is the individual who benefits from symbolic power the most that is aware of it the least...[t]his unfortunate reality can be addressed in an educational setting by exposing students to historical and cultural examples of symbolic power, as well as the ways in which it has the potential to sustain hierarchies and perpetuate injustices in society” (this issue, p. 87). What would this exposure look like in a language classroom? In his Spanish classes, Eddie could be encouraged to read accounts of the conquest and colonization of Mexico that take the perspective of the colonized and how they resisted colonial power. His understanding of these acts of resistance could then be assessed based on these texts (see Vinall 2012, 2016). The transformative effect of such a pedagogy could finally be evaluated as the development of Eddie’s meaning-making ability which is at the core of symbolic competence.

We turn now to a brief consideration of potential areas of future inquiry into symbolic competence in relationship to the classroom—particularly focusing on two aspects: social justice and neoliberal assessment regimes.

Social Justice

Perhaps one of the most fruitful and as of yet unexplored potentialities of the concept of symbolic competence in the language classroom is its connection to and potential for contributing to a social justice framework. Social justice itself is something of an ambiguous concept, in fact it is one that Osborn (2006) resists defining because, as he argues, doing so limits its complexity and potential for further exploration. In broad terms one can understand social justice as involving at its core interrogations of systems of oppression and the operation of power in order to open up spaces of resistance and to ultimately address questions of equity. More specifically, when asked how he understood social justice Eddie replied, “I think that if I could put it in one word I feel like it's communication.” In this case, one would have to understand communication as going beyond the transfer of information or negotiation of meaning. It also goes beyond naming the “projectiles” that Eddie experienced as part of his cultural and linguistic development.

Placing communication at the core of social justice highlights the significance of understandings of meaning-making processes through semiotic resources as a means of exercising symbolic power and of opening up new and other possibilities to challenge questions of established meanings and privileged positionalities. In fact, “[a] pedagogy of symbolic competence can facilitate the recognition of how social, political, and economic structures have historically created and reinforced restrictive boundaries of space, personhood, and national affiliations, among others” (Vinnall, 2016, p. 15). In Eddie's case, this might involve understanding who constructed these projectiles, how they were constructed, what they were made of, how they reinforce larger structures of power, why he experienced them as projectiles, and how to not only outmaneuver them while walking a straight line but to actively deconstruct them and construct something new.

There have been others who have espoused a critical approach to language teaching as well as engaging with critical pedagogy (Crawford-Lange, 1981; Crookes, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Osborn, 2000; Reagan & Osborn, 2002). We would suggest that a social justice framework goes beyond just a critical approach as symbolic competence itself involves more than just critical reflection. A social justice framework involves attaching a critical pedagogy to the potential for social change, one that symbolic competence can facilitate. As Keneman (2017) argued, “[u]ltimately, language learners and language users should be able to interact and engage with others in such a meaningful way that they can provoke action and even social change” (this issue, p. 87). We find this a crucial consideration: can developing symbolic competence be a potential vehicle for achieving social change? Whereas this question simultaneously highlights additional considerations related to what a pedagogy of symbolic competence might look like from within a social justice framework, ultimately it also raises the potential ambiguity of our role as teachers. If we want to support learners' meaningful engagement with others through the development of their symbolic competence such that they can resist and change oppressive social structures then the power dynamic between teacher and learner must also be interrogated. Following the tenets of critical pedagogy, learners should be involved in deciding what social change they want to see, how they want to engage with it, and what forms of resistance might look like to them.

Neoliberal Assessment Regimes

Eddie assessed his own language learning successes with English and Spanish in the statement “I feel like I did pretty good in both of them I feel like I um I gave it my all.” He acknowledges that in the case of English he “definitely got pelted” but eventually “he got past the projectiles.” How would we as teachers or researchers or fellow language learners assess Eddie’s language learning successes? More broadly, in light of the topic of this special issue, how can we assess the development of symbolic competence itself?

The instrumentalization of knowledge in a neoliberal economy (Park, 2015), standardization processes involving both language and its development, and the push for accountability as markers of successful programs and good teaching (as well as federal funding) have created neoliberal assessment regimes that enforce rigid understandings of assessment measures (see Apple, 2004; Hursh, 2007; Giroux, 2008; Kubota, 2011). Furthermore, standards-based pedagogy, especially one rooted in the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2015) and a strongly communicative approach, does not account for either learner awareness of symbolic power across languages and cultures or learner development of symbolic competence. Thus, part of rejecting neoliberal assessment regimes and standardized testing involves considering assessment alternatives. In the future, we hope to see additional studies that document exactly the ways in which L2 users understand their own and others’ linguistic practices, historical trajectories, and personal values. This work is imperative if we are to know how to recognize symbolic competence at play in the classroom.

In a talk delivered at AAAL, Kramersch (2017) reminded us to “beware of tweets, texts, and tests.” This reminder came in the context of taking up Gibson-Graham’s (2006) post-capitalist politics, arguing for a “postdisciplinary politics in applied linguistics” which was interpreted as a call to find new ways of thinking and talking about language and language users that suggests a change in episteme. It includes techniques of creativity as a means of resisting “any attempt to adopt uncritically any single discourse, to be socialized into any one community’s worldview” (Kramersch, 2017). Simultaneously, we need to be cautious of tests as representing the only means of assessment as we must be cautious of the very neoliberal assessment regimes that rely on facts and statistics as the only means of evaluating success.

Perhaps the first step in thinking about assessing the development of symbolic competence involves considering how we recognize it and what language we use to talk about it. Is symbolic competence something that is activated, deployed, manifested, demonstrated, exercised, enacted, or unfolded? For example, if we think of symbolic competence as the ability to recognize features of style (symbolic representation), we will assess not only learners’ knowledge of syntax and morphology, but also their ability to appreciate stylistic devices like deixis or parallelism. If we talk about symbolic competence as the ability to recognize and interpret symbolic action, we will assess the learner’s understanding not only of the referential content of a text, but also of its performative and pragmatic aspects (see our Introduction). The second step can involve employing these techniques of creativity in order to resist standardized testing and to consider alternatives that might include reconsidering project-based learning, civic engagement, and portfolios in light of what they offer in supporting the development of symbolic competence.

3. RESEARCH: HOW DO WE CONDUCT RESEARCH ON SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE, ITS THEORETICAL POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS, AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES?

The articles included in this special issue have slightly different methodological foci. Richardson (this issue) develops case studies based on data gathered on students' language learning experiences as expressed in three in-class written unit reflections. Johnson's (this issue) research is part of a larger one-year ethnographic, critical discourse analysis project that relies on field notes and observational data from multimodal interactions between four- to six-year old deaf and hard-of-hearing children and their parents, teachers, and hearing pairs. Etienne and Vanbaelen (this issue) conduct inductive and deductive content analysis of written responses to a Semiotic Gap Questionnaire, a Post-Viewing Questionnaire, and students' comments in class. And, Keneman (this issue) presents exploratory data including researcher observations and notes and student work, including the recorded performances.

We would argue that all of the articles in this special issue to differing degrees have taken an ecological perspective on language education. In their new book, Kramersch and Zhang (2018) demonstrate the potential of situating research on multilingual language teachers within an ecological framework. Drawing on work from Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), they argue for viewing language education as a complex dynamic system that involves the following aspects:

1. identifying the different components of the system, including agents, processes, and subsystems (emergent processes rather than structures)
2. describing the relations between and among components (non-linearity)
3. for each component, identifying the timescales and levels of social and human organization on which it operates (timescales)
4. describing the dynamics of the system: how the components change over time, and how the relations among components change over time (double arrow of time)
5. describing how the system and context adapt to each other (reflexivity). (Kramersch & Zhang, 2018, p. 213)

Adopting this perspective, Kramersch and Zhang have applied this complex thought model to their research. This, in turn, has opened up spaces in which they:

have seen again and again how they [multilingual teachers] negotiate a subject position between various unpredictable encounters and interactions within and outside a monolingual monocultural academic environment (points 1 and 2 above); how they deal with the various timescales on which they live (3 above); and how they understand their transformative role as language educators (4 and 5 above). (Kramersch & Zhang, 2018, pp. 213–214).

Whereas the data collection and analysis techniques in the current special issue might vary, all of the researchers have taken into consideration the subject positions of the learners in

the classroom in relationship to each other and in connection to the pedagogical practices. They take into account the learners' own reflections and how these are altered or not through the pedagogical interventions and/or the classroom interactions over the course of learning units and/or semesters of study. They consider the relations between the language used and the learning materials as a medium for exploring meaning-making processes, ambiguity, and symbolic power.

We urge future researchers to continue this analytical trajectory by employing an ecological perspective in order to explore the theoretical potentials and limitations of symbolic competence in relationship to classroom learning and pedagogical practices. In the case of Eddie, such a framework would allow explorations of his understandings of the symbolic games he plays with language, how he positions himself in these games and how he is positioned, how he understands the workings of power, and how his language and culture learning experiences have potentially facilitated these understandings.

CONCLUSION

The articles in this special issue have already helped us to consider possible answers to the questions posed at the outset of this Afterword with respect to Eddie's racial incident. In order to reframe the context of this utterance of the n-word, to reposition himself while being constructed as black in the U.S., and to manipulate the linguistic code to resist the operation of power and its judgment initially requires a critical awareness of symbolic representation, symbolic action, and symbolic power. His encounter with being racially othered seemed to create an opening for Eddie, this initial critical awareness, a space in which he could contemplate the symbolic. Eddie continued to inhabit this space throughout his educational experiences. He explains that in high school he began to notice that in his textbooks "all uses of black was synonymous with bad and evil" whereas "if you see anything that is white it is like pure great." He elaborates on the impact of this realization:

[T]he language made me feel like ok what about my history you know why is it that you know the language is so strong that it made me reevaluate or it made me and my friends um it had like a negat- it had like the opposite effect and it made us want to know more about our history you know cause like we would see how powerful the language was in the textbook.

However, as he recounted, he did not have the opportunity as part of his educational experiences to learn more about his history, to analyze the powerful language he encountered in the textbook, or to reflect on its meaning-making potential and impact.

The articles in this special issue have demonstrated other ways of creating critical openings: embracing ambiguity as learners encounter multiple textual meanings and possibilities (Richardson, this issue); reflecting on how semiotic resources are employed in order to resist or exert power (Johnson, this issue); engaging with the deeply layered histories of cultural myth (Etienne & Vanbaelen, this issue); and reframing a scene from a foundational text (Keneman, this issue). However, in each of these openings learners do more than become critically aware. They engage with subject positioning, historicity, performativity, and framing, all key elements involved in the development of symbolic competence (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). Through the analyses presented by all of these

researchers these moments of exercising symbolic representation, symbolic action, and symbolic power have now started to become recognizable.

The possibilities for Eddie to develop his own symbolic competence might then provide us as language and culture educators with opportunities to think about how to provide critical openings in the classroom in order to both contemplate the symbolic and learn how to act on it. Contemplating a textbook as text and as genre opens up a potential analysis of how it represents otherness, how it positions the learners, how it frames history and speaks to cultural myths, and what it silences. Inviting learners to share their own experiences of being othered through language, both inside and outside of the classroom, encourages them to consider the cultural myths in which they operate, the multiple ways of engaging with otherness, and their own shifting positionalities as they begin to engage with the new possibilities opened by their study of another language, other cultural myths, and other processes of meaning making.

Being called the n-word is certainly a formative example of Eddie's getting "pelted" by one of many projectiles that his English language and culture learning experiences involved. One could argue that it might be a utopian dream to think it is possible to achieve Eddie's goal, to make it to the point where "there's no more projectiles you have conquered whatever it is you or the language." In fact, understandings of symbolic competence might suggest that one of the goals of language and culture learning might be better understood as learning how to name the projectiles, how they yield power, and how one might consider resisting them. This special issue has raised important critical questions that can only facilitate the further exploration of symbolic competence and its theory and pedagogical practice. Finally, it may be a utopian dream to think that it is possible to "achieve" symbolic competence. It may be, instead, that it is something that we encounter repeatedly over time as we get closer to understanding the dynamics in the symbolic game and we learn to wrestle with more and more rules, always cognizant that we never fully have the complete rulebook and that at the same time we can wield power to create new rules or to even redefine the game. This may then be the utopian imagination.

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