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*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

An interview with Claire Kramersch

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*



Prof. Kramersch taught German language and literature at M.I.T. and Applied Linguistics at Cornell University before moving to UC Berkeley in 1990. She is now retired from the German Department and holds an appointment as Professor of the Graduate School. Her major publications include: *Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching* (CAL 1981); *Interaction et discours dans la classe de langue* (Didier 1984); *Reden, Mitreden, Dazwischenreden: Managing Conversations in German* (Heinle 1985); *Foreign Language Research in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Benjamins 1991); *Text and Context: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Language Study* (D.C.Heath 1992); *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (OUP 1993); *Language and Culture* (OUP 1998); *Language acquisition and language socialization – Ecological perspectives* (Continuum 2002); *The Multilingual Subject* (OUP 2002); *the Multilingual Challenge* (de Gruyter 2015). Her majors awards include 1988 ACTFL Nelson Brooks Award for the teaching of culture; 1994 and 2009 MLA Kenneth Mildenerberger Prizes for Outstanding Research in the study of foreign languages and literatures as well as the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award from the AAAL. She holds honorary doctorates from the Middlebury School of Languages 1998, St. Michael's College 2001, and the University of Waterloo 2010, as well as the Berkeley Citation or honorary doctorate from UC Berkeley 2015. What comes below is an interview with her (CK) by Karim Sadeghi (KS) on her contributions to AL.

KS: Thank you dear Prof. Kramsch for agreeing to do an interview with IJLTR editor. To start with, could you please briefly introduce yourself, highlighting your educational and academic background as well as your current position?

CK: I am honoured by your invitation and grateful for this opportunity to talk about my educational and academic trajectory. As you may know, I was born in 1935 in Reims (France) from an English mother and a French father and my native language is French. When it came time for me in 1947 to choose a first foreign language in school, I was one of the few to choose German. It was the language of France's hereditary enemy, but it was also for the French the language of high culture, philosophy, science and the arts. I decided to pursue a graduate degree in Germanic Studies, married a German and followed him to the United States where he wanted to practice medical research at Boston University. I joined M.I.T as a lecturer in German and taught German there for 25 years. In 1986, M.I.T promoted me to Professor of Foreign Language Acquisition and Head of the Foreign Languages and Literatures section of the Department of Humanities. After a visiting professorship of one year at Cornell University, where I taught applied linguistics, I moved to California and joined UC Berkeley, where I taught for another 25 years in the German Department and in the Graduate School of Education. I retired from UC Berkeley in 2015 and have continued to read, write and hold various academic and professional positions outside Berkeley in the field of Applied Linguistics.

KS: You got your bachelor's degree in 1953 and then a couple of other degree/certificates, the last one being in 1959 at Paris-Sorbonne. There seems there were no MA and PhD degrees on offer at that time. Could you please talk about your degrees/licences and the several honorary doctoral degrees you were awarded by different universities?

CK: I studied German language and literature at the Sorbonne from 1953 to 1959 with a scholarship from the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. After receiving the *Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures* – the equivalent of an M.A., I decided to go for the national competitive examination of the *Agrégation*, that provides successful candidates with a secure position as civil servant teaching in the French National Educational system, rather than pursue a doctorate, which in those days took ten years. For, I was the eldest of seven children and had to earn a living quite quickly. However my destiny had other plans for me. The man I married was intent on making his life in the U.S., not in France. I gave up my ambitions of having a career in France, and followed my husband to Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the U.S., it was indeed a handicap not to have a Ph.D, but over the years of teaching practice and with the outstanding philosophical and theoretical background I had acquired in France, I started putting in writing the many observations I made regarding my struggles with the French, the German and the Anglosaxon language and culture with which I was confronted on a daily basis. My research on language as discourse, culture and identity was published in the U.S., France, and Germany and found an echo in applied linguistic circles. I fervently embraced the new field of Applied Linguistics and I benefitted from the work of many eminent scholars in that field. The several honorary doctorates I have received in the last 20 years are for me a sign that my work has been useful to the profession and was found to have lasting importance.

KS: You have 25+ awards and honours, the last one being MLA Kenneth Mildener Prize for The Multilingual Instructor in 2019. You also have other similar projects/publications The Multilingual Challenge and The Multilingual Subject, for the latter of which you were awarded the same MLA prize in 2010. Could you talk about the nature of these projects/awards and which one of your prizes/awards you think is the most outstanding and why?

CK: The Mildener prize is given each year by the Modern Language Association for an outstanding contribution to the learning and teaching of foreign languages. I am extremely proud

of having received this award three times in 1993 for *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, and again in 2010 and 2019 – all three books published by Oxford University Press. The fact that these awards were granted by the major American association for the study of both language and literature is particular dear to my heart. I have been namely disappointed, upon arriving in the U.S., to see the teaching of language denigrated as mere “technical” activity as compared to the teaching of literature, viewed as the only “noble” profession. This was not what I was used to in the France of the fifties; then, language and literature were inseparable. So being recognized by the MLA both for my linguistic and my literary background was a particular honor for me. In this regard, I find *The Multilingual Subject* most worthy of this award. It contains my own personal vision of what it means to grow up in a bilingual family, to create your own family in three different languages and cultures, and to live your scholarly life at the intersection of multiple intellectual linguacultures.

KS: You started your academic position as an Instructor for German, Lycée de Sèvres, in France, moving to M.I.T. in 1965, transferring to University of Berkeley in 1990 after one year at Cornell University and a short period in Yugoslavia. Although you worked actively as a university professor for over 45 years until gaining an emeritus status at Berkeley, it is highly motivating for younger scholars to learn that you are still active at the age of 85 with your recent appointments at the University of Bielefeld (Germany) and Carnegie Centenary Professor at the University of Stirling (Scotland). Could you please talk about how rewarding or how challenging these academic positions have been and whether you would still like to take up further positions at other universities?

CK: I have been blessed with good health and after retiring from Berkeley in 2015, I have been honoured to receive invitations to go and teach for one semester in 2016 at Bielefeld University in Germany on a Harald Weinrich guest professorship, and in 2017 at the University of Stirling in Scotland on a Carnegie Centenary professorship. It was a challenge for me to teach applied linguistics in German to both undergraduate and graduate students in Bielefeld, but it opened my eyes to different questions asked from the field and different ways of answering them. It was fascinating to reflect on the role of German as a foreign language in today's world and to compare it to the role played by English as a global language, and to realize how much DaF teachers and ESL teachers could learn from one another. The many lectures I gave at various universities in Scotland brought me in contact with scholars of Gaelic and other indigenous languages, and revived my interest in Scotland's historical relations with France and England. COVID19 has now put an end to any national and international travel, so I will no longer take up further positions at other universities. The guest lectures I still give occasionally have to be delivered via zoom.

KS: In addition to your academic positions, you have had various administrative positions from the president of AILA to AAAL to MLA members at various capacities. Could you talk about some of these roles and how you managed these along with your other academic duties? What roles do these organizations play in serving the field of second/foreign language education and how your presidency/membership has helped these functions to materialize?

CK: Part of the role of a scholar at an American university is “service to the profession”. The profession is defined by the professional conferences you attend, the editorial responsibilities you have in professional journals, the letters of recommendation you write for filling the ranks of the professional community, and the administrative appointments you take on in professional associations. From 1990 to 1994, I served on the Executive Council of the *Modern Language Association*, that has as its mission to promote the teaching of foreign languages and literatures, in addition to English. Under the leadership of Mary Louise Pratt, a former President of the MLA, I was a member of an Ad Hoc Committee that issued new guidelines for teaching foreign languages in higher education. This MLA Report (2007) has been highly influential for foreign language education at the college level. In particular, it advocated structuring the major so as to “produce educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence”, and to

teach students “critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception” (pp. 237-238). In 1994 I was elected President of the *American Association of Applied Linguistics* and organized the Annual Convention of AAAL in Baltimore. In 2011, I was elected Vice President, then President, then Past President of the *International Association of Applied Linguistics* in which I served from 2011 to 2020, and chaired the AILA World Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 2017.

All this represented an enormous amount of work for which I received no help nor financial support from my own university. And professional organizations expect their members to finance their own travel expenses. But the numerous national and international contacts that such professional service provides are immensely valuable and so are the intellectual benefits. I was able in particular to help shape the scholarly program of international Applied Linguistics conferences, conventions and world congresses, by choosing keynote speakers and selecting symposia chairs. Serving for five years as the North American editor of *Applied Linguistics* further enabled me to influence future research in the field and draw the profession’s attention to new topics of interest, such as interdisciplinarity, multilingualism, and language and technology.

KS: You have had more than 150 conference presentations in different parts of the world. While most of your presentations have been on the link between language and context as well as the role of culture in language learning and teaching, more recently you have also been looking at symbolic competence both in your presentations and your publications. Could you talk about this competence and its relation to culture and language education?

CK: Since my 2006 article in the *Modern Language Journal* “From communicative competence to symbolic competence”, I have had the opportunity to refine my concept of symbolic competence in relation to the teaching of language and culture. It struck me that communicative competence, as the combination of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and pragmatic competence, was missing something. It was OK as a competence to get your message across, to exchange information, to make yourself heard and understood; but it ignored the fact that as speakers/writers we want something more. We want to be listened to, not just heard; we want to be respected, not just informed; we want to save face and save our interlocutor’s face, not just get our message across. In other words, we want the power to shape the very context in which we communicate. For that we need to understand language as symbolic power, and how the use of language positions the speaker/writer as a particular individual, not just as a member of a cultural group - an individual in all his/her historicity and subjectivity. The concept of symbolic competence has been picked up by language educators in Germany, who have used it to argue for using literature in language classes. Its application for the teaching of Spanish has been explored in the *L2 Journal* by Kimberly Vinall in 2012 and 2016.

KS: From among your 15 or so published books, while most focus on the issues of culture, context, intercultural communication and multilingualism in the context of foreign language teaching, learning and research, your most recent publication by CUP (2020) titled Language as Symbolic Power seems to have a slightly different focus. Could you please briefly discuss the content of the book and the significance of issues raised here for L2 education?

CK: My book *Language as symbolic power* seeks to deepen our understanding of what symbolic competence means. It shows the post-structuralist theoretical underpinnings of the concept and draws heavily on Pierre Bourdieu and his notion of symbolic power. From the very beginning language classes where students learn to categorize objects and people through linguistic symbols (*a wall is not a fence is not a barrier; a demonstration is not the same as a protest which is again different from a riot*), they should not only learn what each word refers to but also what it connotes, what associations it evokes in the mind of a particular listener in a particular context. When they learn to put words together to make meaning, they should realize that they are not only building grammatically correct sentences, but constructing socially appropriate utterances or

speech acts that are likely to have certain effects on their addressees. As speakers and listeners they wield and are subjected to the power of discourses that vehiculate rituals, ideologies, points of view, frames of mind that shape what they intend to say. The best way to teach symbolic competence is to observe it at work in plays, novels and short stories written for native users of the language in a particular society.

The book discusses the power we have as language users to 1) represent reality, 2) act upon reality, 3) construct reality. This latter power is particularly prominent in the use we make of digital media - Facebook, Google and Twitter, and of their algorithms that organize, classify and otherwise manage our knowledge and the very way we think about the world. The book is based on a popular undergraduate course titled “Language and Power” that I gave at UC Berkeley each year over 15 years between 2003 and 2018, and that attracted each time some 150 students from all disciplines.

KS: You have 80+ articles published in top-tier international journals in addition to 100+ papers as book chapters and 25+ book reviews. Could you tell us which works have been more rewarding to you? Which ones have been received more by the audience? If you would like to nominate a book/paper for the best work prize which one will it be and why?

*CK: In 1982, I was invited by Daniel Coste to write a book directly in my native language *Interaction et discours dans la classe de langue* (Crédif, 1984) at a time when I was homesick for France. That book gave me immense pleasure to write and I know it has inspired some young French scholars to make an academic career in *didactique des langues* or applied linguistics. Otherwise most of my writings are in English. The one that I believe is the most well-known among teachers of English is the little book *Language and Culture* (1997) in the Oxford Introductions to Language Study. Among teachers of German as a L2 it is my 1985 textbook *Reden, Mitreden, Dazwischenreden* to teach how to manage conversations in German. But among researchers in Applied Linguistics I would say that my latest book, *Language as Symbolic Power*, captures what I have been wanting to say over the last twenty years.*

*KS: Two of your recent papers on ‘translating experience’ and ‘translating culture’ have recently been published in *Applied Linguistics* in 2020. Also a recent paper of yours on ‘transdisciplinarity in AL’ was published in *AILA Review* in 2019. Could you briefly talk about what these papers address and whether further work needs to be done on culture in language learning/teaching? Is so, in what further directions should culture be studied?*

*CK: I very much subscribe to the view of culture as discourse, as represented by the work of Ron and Suzanne Scollon (*Intercultural communication. A discourse approach*, Blackwell, 1995) and Barbara Johnson (*Discourse analysis*, Blackwell 2002). According to this view, culture is the way we make meaning through a variety of semiotic means: verbal, visual, musical, dance etc. and we share that meaning with a speech community to which we belong. Our experience is encoded semiotically not only in the verbal symbols we use but in the symbolic universe we share with others. But because of the intrinsic ambiguity of symbols, that can be interpreted and manipulated in different ways (beyond their dictionary definitions), meanings have to be “translated”, i.e., interpreted and recast in other words. As Clifford Geertz writes:*

*“Translation is not a simple recasting of others’ ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting (that is the kind in which things get lost), but displaying the logic of their ways of putting them in the locutions of ours; a conception which brings it rather closer to what a critic does to illumine a poem than what an astronomer does to account for a star.” (*Local Knowledge* 1983:10)*

Thus to make you understand my experience as a French woman teaching German in the United States, I have to “translate” that experience in English words (because we both know English)

that you will recognize and resonate to. For this I have to understand the culture you come from, but also my own. The result can only be tentative and will always be subject to reinterpretation, because meaning is historically and subjectively contingent, and I myself have interpreted my life differently over the years and depending on whom I am talking to.

KS: You have served on the editorial board of some well-known international journals such as Language Teaching and Modern Language Journal and the journals that I edit: IJLTR and RiLE. In addition to these you are the editor-in-chief of L2 Journal. Could you briefly talk about the development of this young journal and provide some hints for potential contributors?

CK: The *L2 Journal* was founded ten years ago by Robert Blake, then director of the Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching at the University of California, who invited me to be its editor-in-chief. Its current managing editor is the associate director of the Berkeley Language Center (BLC), Mark Kaiser. The *L2 Journal* is an open access, fully refereed, interdisciplinary electronic journal, sponsored by the e-scholarship platform of the University of California. Its aim is to promote the research and the practice of language learning and teaching. It publishes articles in English on all aspects of applied linguistics broadly conceived, i.e., second language acquisition, second language pedagogy, bilingualism and multilingualism, language and technology, curriculum development and teacher training, testing and evaluation. It features regular research articles and, under “Teachers’ Perspectives”, occasional testimonies from teachers of various foreign languages. Special issues highlight particularly important topics such as: *History and Memory* (4:1), *Symbolic Competence* (9:2), *Living Literacies* (10:2), and *Critical pedagogies: Teaching and learning languages in dangerous times* (12:2). The BLC website provides a list of all article titles and the opening lines of the abstract, together with links to the articles on the *L2 Journal* site; for the full abstracts, articles, citation information and complete search capability, please go to the L2 eScholarship site.

KS: As a pioneer in the field of second language education, how do you predict the future of research and practice in our field? What directions do you expect the future L2 research to take? Any advice for junior and even seasoned researchers and practitioners?

CK: The field of second/foreign language education is not only interdisciplinary, but intercultural and multilingual. The research conducted in that field is tightly linked to local teaching practices, themselves closely tied to the national, institutional, and cultural conditions of possibility of various educational systems, and to the geopolitical language policies of various nation-states. The overwhelming global presence of English as the second language of the planet skews any research on the teaching of other foreign languages – whether they be national, colonial, regional, or indigenous languages. In addition, the global spread of digital modes of communication and knowledge transmission – Facebook, Twitter, Google, with their invisible algorithms, is having an effect on how languages are learned and used. Applied linguistic research is only starting to investigate such effects, as I show in *Language as Symbolic Power*. There is an urgent need to theorize this digital revolution from the perspective of L2 acquisition. In order to understand the changes in language learners’ identity, subjectivity and cultural affiliation in an era of social media, populist politics, and large-scale migrations, we have to rethink our theories about language, language learning, and language use. For this, we need to draw on insights gained in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, literacy studies, critical cultural studies, and media studies.

KS: Are you happy being an applied linguist? If you were given a second chance to select your career, would you choose to be an applied linguist again? Why?

CK: I have often thought about this question. I do not regret at all having a literary and humanistic background, but if I were to start a career today, I would probably choose a field that

would offer more interdisciplinary perspectives on my passionate object of interest: Language. In the French academic environment in which I came of age in the fifties, boundaries between disciplines were strictly policed. I remember being rejected at one exam I took in which I was to write an essay on Goethe's youth poetry, and I dared argue that the passion of the young poet stemmed from a deep sense of self, born from a different subjective experience in 1774 from the one Descartes had had in 1635 with his "Cogito ergo sum". The examiner excoriated me for mixing genres. "*Votre composition – c'est de la littérature ou de la philosophie? Je l'ai montrée à un professeur de philosophie qui me dit que c'est de la littérature, et à un professeur de littérature qui me dit que c'est de la philosophie. Alors quoi?*" I was crushed. It is only much later, when in the U.S. I read the wonderful insights of comparatists like Mary Louise Pratt, cultural critics like Judith Butler, and sociolinguists like Barbara Johnson that I felt vindicated in my natural intellectual tendency to read across disciplines. The field I would choose today would be linguistic anthropology or sociolinguistics that have illuminated many of the questions I have had on the use, misuse, and abuse of language in everyday life

KS: Is there a question which you wish I should have asked you but I didn't? If so, please ask yourself and provide your answer.

CK: Thank you for this exchange, I have no question to add.

KS: Thank you very much again Prof. Kramsch for the time and the input. Do you have anything to add and any further recommendations for junior researchers wishing to follow your path?

CK: Junior researchers often come to me to know "how I did it", especially female researchers who want to know how I juggled the demands of being trilingual and tricultural, becoming a spouse, raising two children, emigrating to a foreign country, teaching full time, doing research, attending conferences, and publishing books and articles. They often say they want to be "like me". I tell them three things:

- 1) I would not have become who I am today without the highs and the lows that came before. As women, everything we experience – getting married, having children, grandchildren, losing a loved one, failings, rejections – deepens our understanding of who we are. It gives us unique insights into human nature and the role that language plays in shaping who we can be. In turn we pass on these insights to our children, our students, our colleagues. Nothing is ever lost. Throughout our lives, we never cease to build our legacy, what will remain of us in those we have cared for (and as teachers we have cared for many young people!) long after we are gone.
- 2) But I wouldn't have had the career I had without standing on the shoulders of giants in the field of L2 education in Europe and the U.K./U.S.: Chris Candlin, Catherine Chvany, Daniel Coste, Manfred Heid, Hans Jürgen Krumm, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Wilga Rivers, Henry Widdowson believed in me and gave me a chance at crucial points in my career. Everything I learned from them, I passed on to my graduate and undergraduate students and their wisdom found its way in how I brought up my own children in French, German, and English.
- 3) Finally, a personal observation. As academics we serve two masters: our institution, that pays our salary, gives us an office and a legitimate letterhead; and our field, that provides us with intellectual stimulation, enriching dialogues about important issues, and satisfies our thirst for knowledge. The first master may sometimes feel too constraining, unfair, or even politically biased. In such instances, it is good to remember that if our worth as a scholar is not recognized by our institution, it can be

recognized by our field, whose constraints are much more diverse, multiple and changing. As language teachers and scholars, we are by definition multilingual and can greatly benefit from this diversity.

References

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