

Im Gespräch: An Interview with Claire Kramersch on the “Multilingual Subject”

Claire Kramersch

University of California, Berkeley

Sascha Gerhards

University of California, Davis

In her recently published book *The Multilingual Subject: What foreign language learners say about their experience and why it matters*, UC Berkeley applied-linguist Claire Kramersch approaches language learning from a new, visionary perspective. Foregrounding the interplay of cultural aspects in language learning, Kramersch understands language learners as multilingual subjects whose experience is not grounded primarily in the memorization of grammatical rules, but rather in the subjective experience of learning and using the new language. In Kramersch’s view, the multilingual subject finds in the new language not simply an intellectual or “practical” undertaking, but also an outlet for all kinds of dreams and aspirations. These are often-times closely connected to issues of identity, as Kramersch shows in her book. Consequently, language shapes the learner and fosters her or his development and progress as a multilingual subject. The new understanding of the position of the learner also can impact expectation learners have of the teacher. Instead of regarding language solely as the accumulation of labels for the “familiar furniture of the universe,” Kramersch encourages teachers to focus much more on the visceral, physical, subjective experience of learning and using a language.

In February 2012, I met with Claire Kramersch to discuss *The Multilingual Subject* and to learn more about the idea of the embodied self in the language classroom, the aesthetic dimension in language learning and teaching, and the beauty of the German language in particular. Being a multilingual subject myself, one who interacts, writes, and publishes in a foreign language, I was particularly interested in Professor Kramersch’s take on the obstacles of foreign language learning and the effort to define one’s identity as a multilingual subject. My goal was

to find out why *The Multilingual Subject* is such an important and useful book for teachers, and why Kramersch so highly values the idea of “pleasure” in language learning.

SG: *Let me start by congratulating you on the success of The Multilingual Subject to date.*

CK: Thank you very much.

SG: *What was the impetus for the writing of The Multilingual Subject?*

CK: There has been a lot written about emotions and perceptions and subjectivities in the learning of English as a second language, but many of my colleagues in applied linguistics tend to think that foreign language learning is all of question of learning dry conjugations, declensions, vocabulary and grammar that have nothing to do with the emotional life of the learner, particularly learners who are thought to be elite learners, that is learners who do not have an absolute necessity to learn a foreign language. They are not immigrants that need to learn the language of the host country, and so there is this misconception that learning a foreign language in a classroom has nothing to do with subjective reactions to the language. I wanted to counteract that perception.

SG: *Very interesting, and this actually leads perfectly to my next question. Could you explain, in a few sentences: What is the “multilingual subject”? How is it different from just calling someone a “second-language learner” or “second-language user”?*

CK: The original title for this book was *Subjectivity in Language Learning*. It was clear that I wanted to

focus on the subjective aspects of language learning. But subjectivity in language learning, the reviewers felt, was a little too abstract. They felt that *The Multilingual Subject* was a much more concrete, attention-grabbing title. But the reason why I called it *The Multilingual Subject* was to attract the attention of the readers to the fact that learning a language even in a classroom and even outside of the environment in which that language is taught engages not only the learners' cognitive framework and their pragmatic communicative competence, but all kinds of subjective aspects including issues of identity. Particularly among adolescents who learn a foreign language in school, like most adolescents in most countries, they are by definition in search of self between ages 12 and 20. So they often find in that second or foreign language an outlet for all kinds of dreams and aspirations that they don't find in their own language.

SG: *So you wanted to present the multilingual subject vis-à-vis the classical or traditional perception of second language learner?*

CK: Yes. The word subject I take from Julia Kristeva. This is something that you *become*. You are not born a subject. Language shapes who you are and you become a subject throughout your life in contact with various symbolic systems, including language. That is why Kristeva talks about the "subject in process." By putting the subject in there I was focusing on the subjectivity and the identity of the learner.

SG: *In The Multilingual Subject you engage in a critical reexamination of one of the central ideas of your 1993 book, Context and Culture in Language Teaching, namely that of the "intercultural third space." What led you to rethink that idea, and have you moved beyond that "third space"?*

CK: In my 1993 book, when I coined the term third place, I was directly inspired by Homi Bhabha's third space in his book *The Location of Culture*. I was not aware that almost at the same time there were a whole lot of people in education writing about third space or third place. These were people like Alex Kostogriz who were using the term third space for immigrants, in particular to the U.S. and in particular Hispanics and Spanish speakers, who were finding this third space between the dominant culture and the minority culture. And they were using this third space or place in that rather static way. I wanted to distinguish myself from the use of third place by scholars in education because I felt in foreign language education you

don't deal necessarily with minorities; or with immigrants. I wanted to get away from that. But mostly, since 1993, I have read many ecological perspectives on language learning and teaching, on complexity theory, on postmodern views of second language acquisition, so I've been influenced by a view of place, if you wish, not as a product but as a *process*. I wanted to find a term that is less static than third place and I wanted to embed it in a postmodern view of the process of acquisition. This led me to the notion of symbolic competence, which I found confirmed through data that my student, Ann Whiteside, collected in San Francisco's mission district. Observing multilinguals at playing with their different languages in everyday life showed me that it's not so much a question of place as it is a competence of a symbolic nature. It was a capacity or process that people were using to position themselves socially, culturally, and emotionally as subjects in conversations, etc. So I needed a concept that was more flexible and more fluid than the notion of place.

SG: *So what should language teachers be focusing on, what should they derive from this new perception?*

CK: What they should derive is that learning a language is not just a question of accumulating labels of what I call the "familiar furniture of the universe." It is an engagement of the whole person if only because you need to train your vocal chords to produce sounds that are not usually yours, to write in a way that is different from yours, and that the body is involved in that. Then I came to this idea that language teachers should be much more aware that the bodies they have in front of them in the classroom are, in fact, acquiring the language with all their senses; not just their brains, but their eyes, their ears, their touching, their smell, their taste, and that they should appeal to the senses in a much greater way than they usually do. Most teachers tend to focus on vocabulary, on exchange of information when they put students in groups.

SG: *That's what, in your book, you call the visceral, physical, subjective experience of learning and using a new language.*

CK: Yes.

SG: *Can you also comment on the apparent disconnect between the idea of the embodied self and the ways we usually teach languages in classrooms?*

CK: This idea of the embodied self is an idea

that has been proposed by feminist thinkers like Judith Butler, sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, and by postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault. While language teaching still is operating with bits of information and labels, codes, structures, and is focused exclusively on the structural aspects of the language, in Cultural Studies we have gone beyond thinking in terms of structures. Language teachers have to become aware of this disconnect between the way we usually teach languages and the embodied self. But there is another reason and that is a political reason. After 9/11, the American public suddenly realized that even though they might speak other languages, they don't understand other peoples' worldviews. So after 9/11, it's no longer a question of being able to speak the vocabulary of other people. It's a question of understanding where they come from, the knowledge that their historical bodies have accumulated: understanding their memories, understanding how they interpret history, and understanding how they imagine the future. It's introducing time and the time of the body. The body is like a body map. It has a memory that your mind does not have and your visceral reaction of like or dislike to other people or to other languages comes from age-old or childhood memories that are still active in what you associate with these different languages. That's what I call the embodied learning. It's linked to childhood memories, to adolescent dreams, fantasies, aspirations etc.

SG: In discussing "the narratorial self" in chapter 2 you write that SLA theory has mainly focused on "knowing that" and "knowing how to" but you indicate that "private memory and imagination in language learning: remembering how and imagining what if (future scenarios for action)" are absent from SLA theory. By extension, is this "narratorial self" absent in the language classroom?

CK: I like that question. Of course, it's not like communicative language teaching has not always used narration, and in fact to narrate is one of the skills on the ACTFL scale. It's been a skill that you use to make people talk. But it has been used within the framework of an exchange of information. You narrate, meaning you report, on events that are taking place, but you don't use narration as a way of exploiting the memories and the aspirations of the students. In other words, you are again using language just to exchange information or to convey information, but not to play around with different scenarios or to remember different possibilities, which I call the aesthetic dimension of learning.

SG: How then, can or should language teachers, particularly those teaching the introductory levels, integrate the physical, subjective experience of learning a language into what they do in the classroom? I am particularly thinking of teachers who are teaching a language that is not their native language, so they do not necessarily have the memory background, the cultural background, or the imaginative potential to really imagine "what if"?

CK: That's where my approach is different from the many approaches that have been advocating using feelings, emotions, and even psychotherapeutic discourse in the classroom. There are plenty of approaches to language learning that have advocated tapping into the physical experience of learning a language. Total Physical Response, the Direct Method, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia. In the sixties and seventies, there were various approaches to language that involved the subjective self. But it was never exploited to really capitalize on the personal memories, projections and fantasies of the student. And they never acquired an aesthetic dimension. The reason why they never acquired an aesthetic dimension is because they did not focus on the impact of language itself of words themselves on the senses. And that's where the non-native speaker is at a distinct advantage. For the native speaker, these words are used every day; you become numb to them, unless you are a poet or a student of literature. For the average native speaker, the language is part of the furniture. But for a non-native speaker, words have a newness to them that can be capitalized on. Why not ask the students not so much "how do you say this or that", but, "What is your favorite word?" or "What color is that word?" I've never heard a teacher say, "What color is the word haberdashery" for example. The French poet Arthur Rimbaud had this synesthetic approach to language, and I'm sure that several of our students in the classroom are able to see vowels and words in different colors. Take Nabokov as an example: Nabokov is full of colors and shapes for words. Why not capitalize on that? And that would tap the aesthetic aspect of the language. I have an example here. No native speaker would ever speak like that. One of our German students felt like the German word "Streß" is entangled and much more stressful than the English word stress because it's got this Eszett. Now that is fascinating.

SG: In the same vein, the perception of the word "Hass"...

CK: ... exactly, by the Japanese speaker...

SG: ... who has completely different associations when hearing the word "Hass."

CK: Absolutely.

SG: Now this was with respect to the teacher. What about the student? Not every student has had a subjective experience learning a language when entering, for the first time, the introductory level classroom. In their evaluations, my students tend to emphasize that I helped them connect to the culture of the target language, German in this case, by sharing my own experiences as a multilingual subject. How important is the identification with the target language/culture through a mediator? Can/should the teacher share his own memories?

CK: You should definitely share your knowledge of the culture. Even more important is that you share your love of the culture. Your love because it's your own or because you feel warmly enough vis-à-vis that language and the culture to teach it, sometimes for twenty, thirty, forty years. Anything that lets the passion of the teacher through is absolutely invaluable. That's what is going to bridge the gap for the students between self and other. And what I find to be quite honest in German. Many teachers of German never say what a beautiful language it is. They say, it's a useful language, it's a practical language, it's the language of Volkswagen and BMW, but I rarely hear my colleagues say: It's beautiful. Before I learned German, I had never been exposed to a rhythmic language, "mit Hebungen und Senkungen." In French, I had only had Alexandrine verses in which we counted the number of syllables, but all of a sudden I encountered German poetry and its rhythm. It can be sung so well, it can be recited so well, it has this rhythm that is absolutely irresistible.

SG: We will have to get back to the rhythm and melody of German in one of my last questions. So far, we've talked about teachers and we've talked about students. In this book you make use of a range of data to support your arguments. You use both conventional language data from classroom learners, such as one would see in other applied linguistics studies. But you also delve into language autobiographies, including Elias Canetti, Eva Hoffman, Nathalie Saurraute, and others. How do you see the experiences of those authors informing the everyday practice of language teaching?

CK: I'm delighted that language memoirs have come to be recognized as valid sources of data for Applied Linguistics. I'm very grateful to people like Aneta Pavlenko and Celeste Kinginger for having

used these language memoirs. We are dealing here with authors who write literary autobiographies. They not only have the rich experiential background to talk about these things but they also have the verbal ability to put those experiences into words and not everybody can do that. I'm using language memoirs now in my course on issues in bilingualism. Of course I have the students read the research, but each one of them also has to read one autobiography to get a sense of the fullness of the experience and that learning a language is not just communicative competence in that sense. It's also a celebration of language itself and a discovery of your own self through the foreign medium.

SG: Very interesting. Now to a completely different topic: In your chapter entitled "The virtual self," you explore learners' subjectivities through electronic communication. You describe how language learners' relationship to time, space, other speakers, and themselves is qualitatively different through digital media compared with conventional, face-to-face communication. Do you see the digital communication, then, as completely distinct from face-to-face communication, or has there been a blurring of the boundaries between the two? In either case, what are the implications for language teaching in general, or German language teaching in particular?

CK: The digital medium is quite different from face-to-face communication. If the medium is the message, we already are in quite different configuration and quite a different environment. What I find interesting is that more and more of our students are blurring the boundaries between the two media. They chat in face-to-face the way they chat on Facebook. I find that the medium has changed the meaning of communication itself. The communicative approach was meant to enter into dialogue with the foreign Other in order to find out what this foreign Other thought, what his/her world view was, and to understand the Other. But you don't chat on Facebook in order to really understand the Other. It's like a monologue-dialogue. You post things, you respond to things, but you don't have a deep involvement in understanding the worldview of the Other. You're only happy to exchange posts. I'm concerned about that. What are we training our students for? To be good communicators on the Internet? Or to eventually, when they go to Germany, for instance, enter into face-to-face communication not only with other Internet users, but maybe with grandmothers and grandfathers who don't have Internet and who have quite a different

style of communication? That's a concern to me. Concerning the boundaries: I'm always for boundaries. I can't emphasize enough that we can't be creative without boundaries. While I welcome any mode of communication that will put us in touch with foreign speakers, I like to think that the foreign is not the self, the Other is not the self, and that we should focus on these boundaries and discuss these boundaries. We should not try to eliminate them because otherwise you will not know what is the self and what is the Other.

SG: *This brings to mind a question that I had not had on my list. Do you think that online communication affects filters, too? I'm thinking of a former student who addressed me before class one day, saying: "Hey dude, are you one of the TAs?"*

CK: In the U.S., there never was, as compared to Europe, any sense of social strata or appropriateness. A lot of our students speak in the classroom the way they speak with their peers, full of "like" and "wow." Every other word they say is "like." The case that you're mentioning is an extreme case. I think most students would know the difference between how to talk to a TA or a professor and how to talk to their peers. But it's true, especially in writing; the Internet fosters a certain kind of writing that you find reflected in the essays. Many essays are much more verbose, vague, and quickly written than they used to be. Students are not used to reading texts by paying attention to the wording. They get the gist and they're satisfied with the gist, but when you pin them down on the choice of words, they find you picky. And yet, it's that attention to details that gives you the tone, the style and the deeper meaning of the text.

SG: *The next question goes in the same direction. There are a variety of dangers in virtual communication that go beyond the realm of language learning. For instance, words cannot replace facial expressions, tone of voice, and other aspects of face-to-face communication. Misunderstandings can thus occur not only between individuals with a different linguistic and cultural background, but also between two speakers who share an L1. The misunderstanding between Marie and Rob described in your chapter "The virtual self" is a good example. To what extent is this problem (dis-)connected from/to language learning?*

CK: I think the computer exacerbates a problem that already exists independently of foreign language learning. One could imagine that Rob and another American girl, for instance, could have

had the same problem; if they came, one from the West Coast and the other from the East Coast, or one from a working class family and the other from the upper middle class. But these things are exacerbated by the computer, which enables you to get in touch with people from a different social class, from a different social milieu, from a different region, or from an urban or rural setting. Interlocutors get essentialized as one German and one American. One tends to forget the different historical backgrounds of the two interlocutors in the case of Rob and Marie. The computer just amplifies everything that already exists. But unfortunately, for many teachers and certainly for many students the computer is taken to be transparent. That's what I've been trying to counteract. The computer is a presence that makes itself felt. It's a player in the game.

SG: *The idea of pleasure is what this next question deals with: Near the very end of The Multilingual Subject you address the issue of "pleasure" in language learning and teaching. You wrote that "pleasure is not an expendable luxury, or a random by-product of the language-learning experience. It is the crucial experience of the gap between form and meaning, between signifier and signified that ... is essential to the formation of the multilingual subject." But you also distinguish "pleasure" from simple "fun." Can you say how you imagine this working in the day-to-day practice of teaching a foreign language? Why is pleasure so important?*

CK: Pleasure has not entered the vocabulary of Second Language Acquisition. It is not generally a word you use because most SLA research has not taken into account the sensuous material aspect of language learning. What people use is generally the word "motivation." Motivation is an instrumental adjective for me, it's something that moves you in a certain direction. Pleasure is fundamentally linked to your senses, to your perceptions, and to your sense of well-being and happiness. And that's why I like the word pleasure rather than motivation. I took Russian with a colleague of mine at MIT, Margaret Freeman, who very much inspired me when she assigned us to learn a Russian poem by heart. But in order to do that, she went around the room, asking everyone in the room: Which kind of poetry do you like? I had never been asked that question. What kind of poetry do I like? Any kind of poetry you would like me to learn. I had never been asked about my likes and dislikes. And she said, "well, do you like ironic poetry, lyrical poetry, romantic poetry, modern poetry?" And she forced me to say what I liked and then she distrib-

uted poems that each of us liked particularly. I've never forgotten that because it was the first time that anybody asked me what I liked. The poem that I learned by heart was not particularly profound—it was a Pushkin love poem—but because it was in Russian, it touched me to the core. I fell in love with that poem even though it was quite a simple poem. Since then, I've been assigning in my German courses little poems—by Heine “Du bist wie eine Blume so hold und schön und rein” For some native speakers this poem is quite trite. But for a learner, it's not trite at all. It really corresponds to the mood of the moment and is able to release emotions in the learner that are non-trivial.

SG: *Pleasure is the key...*

CK: Pleasure is the key!

SG: *And we are in the middle of talking about the curriculum. What should we teach in the language classroom? Can you envision The Multilingual Subject finding direct application in the creation of curricular materials? What would these materials look like? How would you advise language teachers to make the connection from your analyses to the design of syllabi and lessons?*

CK: I don't think that *The Multilingual Subject* is a blueprint for any kind of new materials and certainly not textbooks. I think the existing textbooks and the existing materials are fine but they require a different approach. What I want teachers to do is to put themselves on the line, to acknowledge that they love a particular poem and that's why they assigned it or didn't assign it because when you love a poem too much you don't want to assign it sometimes. I always say: Don't teach anything that you don't feel strongly about, whether you hate it or love it, but don't be indifferent to it. Too often, teachers feel that they have to be professionals, so that they don't have to put themselves forward. I am, for instance, for assigning learning poems by heart. Many teachers do that already. They sometimes even have the students stand up and recite it. But they do it *once*. I think it is worth reciting the same poem several times. Everybody knows that the pleasure of a piece of music, or a poem is hearing it again. The second reading or the second recitation increases the pleasure. Ask a student to recite a poem to another student, and then this student has to recite it to the next student. Every time you have a different interlocutor, it gives you a different pleasure because you get a different response. I also advocate giving students things to reread. They will discover things that they haven't discovered the first time.

SG: *There has to be pleasure in the student and pleasure in the teacher.*

CK: Exactly.

SG: *The next set of questions is rather personal. These questions came to mind when reading the book. As an individual who is teaching, publishing and interacting in an L2 myself on a daily basis, I empathized with many arguments of L2 speakers quoted in The Multilingual Subject. In addition to the subjective experiences outlined in your book, my personal experience shows yet another aspect of L2 learning: There are days when I am taken for a native speaker of (American) English. On other occasions, I feel unable to hide my German-ness. I tend to say: “I have good days and bad days.” Could you elaborate on this subjective impression?*

CK: We've all been there. It sounds very familiar. I wouldn't say now that I have good days and bad days because I know the thrill of being taken for a native speaker. There is nothing that gives you more pleasure. And there's nothing more crushing than being made to feel you are no longer the native speaker you used to be. For example, I am together with native speakers of French and I realize that after 50 years in the U.S., I don't have the exact word or I am missing words in my mother tongue, which is extremely painful. So I know all these feelings. But what I catch myself thinking is that my proficiency in the language is very dependent on the circumstances, and on my interlocutors. A colleague came up to me one day as I had just given a plenary in French and said “I had realized that you were French the way you speak it, but then tell me something: There were plenty of English words in your speech. Why did you pronounce them the American way?” And I replied: Well, they are English words, so I pronounce them in English.” He then said: “Well, if you were REAL French, you'd pronounce them the French way.” You can't win, I thought to myself.

SG: *So there is always ideology involved, as well?*

CK: Oh yes, absolutely, and prejudice against American English.

SG: *In your chapter “The multilingual narrator,” – this goes in the same direction – you emphasize, “authors resonated to a theme, a genre, a style [...]” Do themes, genre, and style influence the multilingual subject in different ways?*

CK: You're referring to the chapter where I was astonished to see the writings of my students,

especially Sean and Camila with her telenovela—who sort of relives her telenovela—and the words she says are basically constructed through the telenovela, the soap opera. It gave me the idea that bilingual people very often replicate a certain style or a certain genre that belongs to one culture or another. It's not just that they are pronouncing words or constructing sentences in the two languages. They fit into different text types that come from their various languages. It built on some of the work I did on summaries. For instance: I asked students to write a summary, and I compared the summaries written by American students and written by German students, what German students call "Zusammenfassung." A "Zusammenfassung" in high school—*auf dem Gymnasium*—is quite different from a "Zusammenfassung" "in der Realschule" and quite different "in der Hauptschule." So the genre "Zusammenfassung" is already different in different schools in Germany and again quite different from French *résumé*. It was interesting for me to see that bilinguals are not only bilinguals in terms of the vocabulary and grammar but also in terms of the genres that they're familiar with.

SG: *How would you explain the fact that while one is perceived as a native speaker of English in one situation one feels like a beginner when attending a performance of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night or when trying to explain to the hairdresser what exactly he should do?*

CK: You are dealing here with two different kinds of English, two different languages one could say, or two different registers, that's for sure. For me, this raises the question: what register are you supposed to teach in the classroom? Are you supposed to teach Shakespeare's register, or the register that you need to get a haircut at the barber, or a kind of a standard national TV anchorperson register? You're supposed to teach authentic German, but what is authentic German? When you go to Germany, there are times when it would be appropriate to code-switch to English. So are you supposed to teach them how to code-switch? These are interesting questions right now with multilingual Europe. What does it mean to teach them the language of Goethe?

SG: *One final personal question: My impression is that using two languages equally (as if they were both my L1) affects the level of proficiency in both languages (mother tongue and English as L2). Would you confirm this subjective impression and/*

or is there an objective explanation? Quote: "We become cautious of words" (p. 195).

CK: That is an interesting question and it intersects with a larger question: the influence of English right now in the world, English as a lingua franca, as a global language. And German, like French, like Italian, like a lot of European languages, is being influenced, of course, by a pop culture, by rock music and all these things coming from America; the French to a lesser extent than the Germans because the French are extremely jealous about their language. But they will occasionally code-switch and sometimes also use a French that is more anglicized than it used to be. There are global genres influencing the various languages, and they are associated with English. For example, there is a very attractive – especially for young people – global culture and global way of talking, especially on the social networks, that is slowly influencing the way these young people use their own mother tongue, and that's of concern to me.

SG: *I feel like we have at least touched upon the next two questions on language teaching and pedagogy. In the field of applied linguistics, what advances in our understanding of second-language learning should every language teacher be aware of, whether at the primary, secondary, or university level? We've already heard it's all about passion and pleasure. Is there anything you would add to that? Furthermore, despite your scholarly work, and that of others, arguing for the inseparability of language and culture, in the foreign language classroom culture is still often taught and learned as a separate topic from language. What advice would you give to language teachers for achieving a greater integration of linguistic and cultural learning in the classroom?*

CK: This is a problem that I've addressed throughout my career. Passion of course does have a role in there, but my concern is that language teachers should not view language as a bunch of adjectives, nouns, and verbs, but as discourse. My first book was called *Discourse Analysis in Language Teaching*. My whole work has been to teach language in discourse, which means language in use, the sociolinguistic dimension, the pragmatic dimension of language, so that when you start teaching discourse, you can start teaching culture because culture is embedded in the discourse, in the choice of words. Language as choice. If we teach language as choice as early as the first semester German: they have a choice of saying "guten Tag" or "Grüß Gott," for instance. They have a

choice of politeness, and of terms that have other meanings than just their dictionary definitions. When they say “We don’t have time to teach culture” in reality they teach nothing else but culture. Every time they teach a word in a sentence and a sentence in an utterance, they’re teaching culture because culture is “how do you want to come across to an interlocutor.” Do you want to be polite, do you want to be rude, do you want to be ironic? All this is culture. So I don’t understand when they say, we don’t have time to teach culture, because every single utterance is a speech act and every speech act is culturally meaningful.

SG: I like how you used German examples to answer this question. This is the perfect transition to my questions on German language teaching. As an open question: Why study German in our post-9/11 world?

CK: I’ve often thought about that. What I’m going to give you is a very personal answer. There is no reason why an American should learn German rather than French, or Italian, or Chinese, except for employment possibilities that are more and more iffy in the world today. BUT: I’ve ALWAYS felt that Americans—particularly given their ideology, the history of their country, their universal ambitions—could benefit a great deal from learning German, and learning the experience of Germans, for instance, in World War II. I find that what Germany has gone through was uniquely tragic. An incredibly sophisticated culture, civilization, and history with a democracy that was only a decade long but admirable, that managed to get into such a quagmire and such horrible historical events, was then divided and grew out of this to become the Germany of today, is a beautiful case study of a cautionary tale. An excellent educational system and a highly intellectual, artistic, and musically inclined elite are no guarantee against the atrocities likely to be committed in times of war and under a fascist government and I think Americans can learn a great deal from learning German.

SG: A follow-up question to that: We are in an era in which the learning of languages considered strategically important to U.S. interests has gained more support, both in the popular imagination as well as in university budgets. Recent MLA statistics show continued relative growth in languages such as Arabic and Chinese, with Spanish enrollments also still far in the lead in numbers of enrollments. At the same time, in the 2009 survey German had maintained its overall third position in total univer-

sity enrollments in the U.S. Are you encouraged by this trend?

CK: Of course. There will always be a number of American students who are fascinated by the dark history of Germany. But probably it also has to do with the German-Jewish connection and the role played by the U.S. in World War II. But whatever their reasons for learning German, I’m delighted and I wish it continues.

SG: We’ve been talking a lot about cultural implications in language learning. In your chapter “Teaching the multilingual subject” you raise the question whether critical reflection in the classroom should be carried out in L1 or L2? Could you elaborate on your opinion?

CK: The question is always posed as you have posed it. Should these discussions take place in the L1 OR the L2. But there are many varieties of configurations. For instance, in Europe now I give talks where I speak in French but I project my slides in English. Or I speak in German and I project my slides in French, which is current practice in Europe. Why can’t the teacher in the German classroom speak in German to keep the monolingual immersion project going, but then write notes and translations in English onto the blackboard? You don’t have to hear English in the classroom; it doesn’t break the rhythm. But the teacher can capitalize on different configurations of English and German or other languages that are present in the classroom if the teacher knows these languages. I’m looking for ways of making the classroom more multilingual in that respect, all the while teaching them standard national German. But there should be possibilities. [...] I don’t understand why we are not more flexible. And I think we’ve done disservice to the profession to eliminate translation. I find there is good reason to bring back translation, not in the first and second semesters, but at the latest in the fourth semester, you can have literary translations that illuminate quite a bit and it’s a very useful and beneficial practice.

SG: The final question brings us back to the rhythm and beauty of German. In one of the analyses of the subjective experience of L2 learners, you write that they tend to perceive German as a harsh-sounding language. In surveys, many Germans perceive certain dialects as ugly (#1: Saxon, which is considered the “ugliest dialect in German”), while they particularly emphasize the melodic, pleasurable sound of dialects such as Kölsch (or Rheinisch, as they tend to call it in Düsseldorf).

Reaffirming this impression, one of our neighbors (a native speaker of English who works as a flight attendant) recently claimed that she hated the sound of German. When asked to specify, she explained that she frequently flew to Leipzig in Saxony on intercontinental flights. What role do dialects play in the German language classroom?

CK: She did not like the way they speak in Leipzig?

SG: *She thought it was horrific.*

CK: I accept what they say but, in my opinion, it has nothing to do with the objective sound of Sachsen. Every language can be beautiful. If a native speaker speaks it and it's one with the person, it's beautiful or interesting per se. The reason why she doesn't like German maybe is because she associates German with negative memories. But people often hear what they want to hear. Some people find that I have a very German accent in English. Why would I have a German accent in English? But they hear Kramersch and they hear the German accent.

SG: *So it's preconceptions?*

CK: I think so, yes. But the question is how many language varieties should you introduce in

the language classroom. And there is, right now, a renewed interest to bring in different ways of speaking German. In fact, at the Berkeley Language Center, next year, we are going to have two fellows who are going to be looking at Francophone ways of speaking (of speakers from Sénégal or Québec) to see how they can be used in the French language classroom. You can't do that before the second year, I suppose. But I think we can acquaint the students with the wonderful variety of styles and accents – again in the name of pleasure and beauty. We always focus on whether an utterance is informational or clear... how about beautiful? It's an adjective I'd like to see used for German.

SG: *Absolutely. Thank you very much for this interview.*

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