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Ecological perspectives on foreign language education

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Ecological approaches to language learning and teaching have captured the interest of language educators as both native and non-native speakers find themselves operating in increasingly multilingual and multicultural environments. This paper builds on Kramsch & Whiteside (in press) to conceptualize what an ecological perspective on foreign language education, based on complexity theory, would look like. It first explains some of the major tenets of complexity theory, and analyzes transcriptions of exchanges taking place among multilingual individuals in multicultural settings using the ecological approach offered by complexity theory. Based on what these analyses reveal about the ability of these individuals to shape the very context in which language is learned and used, it discusses the notion of 'symbolic competence' recently proposed by Kramsch (2006) and explores how symbolic competence might be developed through foreign language education in institutional contexts.

1. Introduction: changing times

Several recent developments show the spread of ecological ways of thinking about language, language learning and language use. In second language acquisition (SLA) research, the groundbreaking article of Diane Larsen-Freeman (1997) on complexity theory and SLA was followed by studies that encourage us to view growing competence in a second language as a non-linear, emergent phenomenon (Leather & van Dam 2002; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman 2006; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008). It was applied to the teaching of English as a second language (Larsen-Freeman 2003) and to foreign language acquisition within a sociocultural theory of second language development (Van Lier 2004), and an ecological approach to language acquisition and language socialization (Kramsch 2002; Larsen-Freeman 2002; Kramsch & Steffensen 2007).

In 2004, a group of ten faculty members from linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, education and the humanities at the University of California at Berkeley got together to co-teach a combined graduate/undergraduate course entitled Language Ecology. The course description included the following:

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This course is part of an emerging interdisciplinary effort at Berkeley to explore language within its individual, societal, cultural, and historical frameworks. We situate language in contexts of individual mental processes as well as contexts of interaction between individuals in a society and between social groups. We approach language learning and language use as a nonlinear, relational human activity, co-constructed between humans and their environment, contingent upon their position in space and history, and a site of struggle for the control of social power and cultural memory. (Berkeley Language Center 2004)

In March 2007, the Modern Language Association (MLA) issued the Report of its Ad Hoc committee on foreign languages, chaired by Mary Louise Pratt (MLA 2007).

The goal [of college and university foreign language majors] is translingual and transcultural competence. The idea of translingual and transcultural competence places value on the multilingual ability to operate between languages . . . In the course of acquiring functional language abilities, students are taught critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception. (MLA 2007: 3f.)

In spring 2008, an international research group, funded in part by the France–Berkeley Fund, published the result of a three-year research project *Plurilinguisme et pluriculturalisme en didactique des langues* [Multilingualism and multiculturalism in the teaching of languages], on which Richard Kern and I have been participating (Zarate, Lévy & Kramsch 2008). In their introduction, Kramsch, Levy and Zarate define plurilingualism[1] as follows:

Linguistic and cultural pluralism is more than the mere coexistence of various languages. It is primarily about the transcultural circulation of values across borders, the negotiation of identities, the inversions, even inventions of meaning, often concealed by a common illusion of effective communication . . . The teacher trainers of tomorrow will need to operate in a globalized space where verbal exchanges will be increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural. (Kramsch, Levy & Zarate 2008: 15, my translation).

These developments stress the social and historical dimensions of language learning and the need not just to teach one language/one culture, but to put languages and cultures in relation with one another. Indeed, the increasingly multilingual and multicultural nature of global exchanges has raised questions about the traditionally monolingual and monocultural nature of language education (Gogolin 1994, Zarate et al. 2008). The prototypical communicative exchange found in foreign language textbooks usually includes two or three interlocutors, who all conduct the interaction in the same standard (target) language, all agree on what the purpose of the exchange is and what constitutes a culturally appropriate topic of conversation, all have equal speaking rights and opportunities. But the reality is quite different.

Today, language users have to navigate much less predictable exchanges in which the interlocutors use a variety of different languages and dialects for various identification purposes, and exercise symbolic power in various ways to get heard and respected. They are asked to mediate inordinately more complex encounters among interlocutors with multiple language capacities and cultural imaginations, and different social and political memories. Conversational power comes less from knowing which communication strategy to pull off at which point in the interaction than it does from choosing which language to speak with whom, about what and for what effect. Kramsch (2006) and Kramsch & Whiteside (in press)

[1] While in the U.S. the adjective multilingual/multicultural applies both to individuals and to societies, in Europe it applies only to societies, and plurilingual/pluricultural is applied to individuals.

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have suggested that we teach our students less the ability to exchange information precisely, accurately, and appropriately in monolingual conversations with speakers of standard national languages, but, rather, that we develop in them a much more flexible capacity to read people, situations and events based on a deep understanding of the historical and subjective dimensions of human experience.

This paper builds on Kramsch & Whiteside (in press) to conceptualize what an ecological perspective on foreign language education, informed by complexity theory, would look like. I first explain some of the major tenets of complexity theory. I analyze transcriptions of exchanges taking place among multilingual individuals in multicultural settings using the ecological approach offered by complexity theory. I then draw some principles for the development of what I have called 'symbolic competence'. Finally, I look at what we can do in an institutional context to develop our students' symbolic competence.

2. Aspects of an ecological theory of second language acquisition and use

In the following I draw from the extensive literature on complexity science (e.g., Byrne 1997; Cilliers 1998; Capra 2005) as well as from emergentist theories of language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2002, 2003; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman 2006) and post-modern theories of language use (Rampton 1995, 1999a; Blommaert 2005) to identify five major aspects of an ecological theory of language acquisition and use.

2.1 Relativity of self and other

In complex systems like human relations, both the self and the other are intrinsically pluralistic, and possibly in conflict with themselves and with one another. Because the I is not unitary, but multiple, it contains in part the other and vice-versa; it can observe itself both subjectively from the inside and objectively through the eyes of the other. Hence the frequency of stylization, parody, double-voicing in the discourse of everyday life observed by sociolinguists like Rampton (1995, 1999a) and others. People very rarely speak only to transmit and exchange new information. More often than not, they say what they think others expect them to say, or what the situation requires, or they identify or empathize with others, or they present themselves as they would like to be seen by others.

2.2 Timescales

An ecological model of language use shows that the meanings expressed through language operate on multiple timescales, with unpredictable, often unintended, outcomes and multiple levels of reality and fiction. Our memories are not in the past but live on as present realities in our bodies to be both experienced and observed. Blommaert (2005: 130) refers to this phenomenon as 'layered simultaneity': 'We have to conceive of discourse as subject to LAYERED SIMULTANEITY. It occurs in a real-time, synchronic event, but it is simultaneously encapsulated

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in several layers of historicity, some of which are within the grasp of the participants while others remain invisible but are nevertheless present'. Simultaneity does not necessarily mean congruence. Blommaert notes that the participants in verbal exchanges might speak from positions on different scales of historicity, thus creating 'multiple and contradictory temporalities' that may lead to different intertextual references and to communicative tensions (p.128).

2.3 Emergentism

Complex systems like the acquisition of a second language are 'inherently evolutionary and historical' (Byrne 1997: 2). Rather than developing in the linear manner that syllabi and curricula want to us to believe, learning develops in non-linear, discontinuous ways. Rather than deriving from structures in the head – beliefs, rules, concepts and schemata – it emerges from the seamless dynamic of timescales. If we consider language learning and teaching as a complex system with emergent properties, we can no longer look for cause and effect in the simplistic linear fashion proposed by short-term proficiency tests. We have to take a much longer and more differentiated view of teaching and learning effectiveness. The meaning of a new piece of knowledge will emerge not from the syllabus, but from the connections the learner will make with his/her own prior knowledge and experience. As Blommaert writes, '[m]eaning emerges as the result of creating semiotic simultaneity' (p. 126).

2.4 Unfinalizability

Ecological theory sees encounters at the grocery store or conversations with the butcher not as discrete, bounded events, but, rather, as open-ended and unfinalizable patterns in a web of past and future encounters, enacted conversations or staged presentations of self. It counts under 'participants' not only the flesh and blood interlocutors in verbal exchanges, but also the remembered and the imagined, the stylized and the projected. Ecologically oriented sociolinguists have problematized the notion of bounded speech communities and focused our attention on 'deterritorialized' (Rampton 1998) communicative practices rather than on the 'territorial boundedness' posited by the 'one language – one culture assumption' (Blommaert 2005: 216). Indeed, in the data at hand (see below), the protagonists have open-ended identities and unfinalized territorial belongings. Don Francisco (DF) is just another Mexican 'Jose' for the Chinese clerk and a Yucateco for the Vietnamese grocer;[2] Anne Whiteside (AW) is a member of the dominant Anglo community for the Chinese clerk and a Spanish *maestra* for DF.

2.5 Fractals

Finally, ecological theory is concerned with patterns of activities and events which are self-similar at different scales, i.e., which are fractal figures for larger or smaller patterns. In the

[2] According to journalist Thompson (2006), Jose is a catchall name for all Mexican males in California.

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encounters below, we will look at the way individuals get named, how they greet and take leave from one another and in which language, and how these speech acts index larger social relationships between them and other native and non-native speakers. We will also look for evidence of refractions from one context of language use to another. For example, the way speakers use language in one context might be a fractal of the way they are made to relate to others in the larger context of a global economy.

Let us now look at the data through this ecological lens and see how it can illuminate the processes of language acquisition and use in multilingual settings.

3. An example of language ecology in practice

The data I discuss here were collected by Anne Whiteside as part of her research on Maya-speaking immigrants from Yucatan, Mexico, now living in San Francisco, California (Whiteside 2006). Attempting to understand patterns of language use among these immigrants, Whiteside spent over two years working closely with four focal Yucatecans, following them in their daily lives, helping to organize community events, and exchanging English, Spanish and computer literacy lessons for lessons in Maya. The data are taken from conversations she recorded in stores located in a predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood.[3]

Whiteside found that since many Yucatecans work two and three jobs, and with long-term residence uncertain because of undocumented status, learning English often takes a back seat. Her informants worked in restaurants where as many as eight languages are routinely spoken, with English, if spoken, as the highly accented lingua franca. Spanish use is common, linking Yucatecans with other marginalized Spanish-speaking workers and allowing undocumented individuals to blend with Latino legal residents and citizens. Yet informants also complained of discriminatory treatment by speakers of other varieties of Spanish, and noted a tendency of fellow immigrants to disguise their Yucatecan accents. English provided them with an escape from such distinctions. It was often seen as portable capital, motivating some to learn it to teach future migrants back in Yucatan. By contrast, Maya can be a social liability, and speakers described a sense of 'shame' speaking Maya in public, inhibited by racialized colonial discourse and stereotypes linking Maya with poverty and ignorance. Maya was used predominantly at home and among work teams, where it provided a safe code in which to vent about oppressive conditions.

In the set of data I discuss here, DF, 49 years old, who runs an informal restaurant out of his apartment, is taking the researcher through his neighborhood as he shops for food. He has agreed to help her research project since she has been teaching him to read in Spanish, which he never learned. As DF chaperones AW around, he is regularly interrupted by greetings in Maya and Spanish from fellow townspeople, now San Francisco neighbors, who know

[3] There are now an estimated 25,000 Yucatecans living in the greater San Francisco Bay area, and some 50,000–80,000 in California, many of whom left Yucatan over the last decade. Like an increasing number of migrants crossing the Mexico/California border, many arrive without legal papers (Passell, Randall & Fix 2004; Passell 2005), lured by service sector jobs that have replaced entry-level manufacturing jobs in California's post-industrial economy. Their situation is typical of workers in a global economy that knows no national borders, no standard national languages, and thrives on the informal economic and social margins of national institutions.

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his status as a successful farmer in Yucatan. To local merchants DF is a preferred customer, one who makes frequent trips to supply his busy restaurant and who spends a lot of money. On this occasion he is stopping in to check out supplies and place orders, eager to show the researcher his routines and to demonstrate the rudiments of Maya the merchants are learning. (For transcription conventions, see Appendix.)

3.1 An ecology of multilingual spaces

3.1.1 At the Vietnamese grocery

The first excerpt occurs in a grocery store with Vietnamese writing on its awning. The Vietnamese owner, whom DF introduces as Juan, has been speaking to DF in English, who answers him in Spanish. Juan is busy loading meat from the freezer into the display case, and this exchange comes at the end of a short conversation about the meat that DF needs.

Excerpt 1

1	Juan:	how much *panza* you want?	(tripe)
2	DF:	*voy a comprar cinco libras de panza mañana*	I'm going to buy 5lbs of tripe tomorrow.
3	Juan:	OK *mañana*	
4	DF:	**^ma'alob**.	good
5	Juan:	_/OK!	
6	DF:	**vDios bo dik**	thanks
7	Juan:	_/ **bo dik**	
8	DF:	_/ **saama**	tomorrow
9	Juan:	@@,	
10		@@	
11		**_saama**	
12	DF:	ah	

In this Vietnamese store, DF's and Juan's little *pas de deux* around the use of English, Spanish and Maya indexes the various ways in which the protagonists wish to position themselves in the ongoing discourse. At the end of a transaction in which Juan has been speaking a mix of English and Spanish, and DF has been speaking exclusively Spanish, Juan and DF take leave – Juan in English, DF in Maya. Taking leave is always a delicate part of any verbal exchange as it has to sum up the exchange, make plans for future exchanges, and perform a recognizable and acceptable leave-taking routine. But in multilingual exchanges like this one, it is doubly delicate, as language choice can always become foregrounded. Since Juan had addressed DF in English and had been responded to in Spanish, Juan's 'OK' in line 3 can be seen to be oriented not only toward the content of DF's utterance, but toward the language that DF chose to speak in. A gloss of this 'OK' might be 'I agree to sell you 5lbs of tripe tomorrow' but also 'I agree to respond to you in Spanish' or 'I acknowledge the legitimacy of Spanish in my store'.

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In line 4, DF suddenly switches to Maya. Because the store is located in a predominantly Spanish-speaking area of San Francisco, DF's efforts to get Juan and other merchants to respond to him in Maya has been a form of public resistance to a Spanish colonial discourse which holds Maya in low esteem among Mexicans. Here, a Vietnamese clerk serves as an unwitting catalyst for DF's efforts to provide a place for himself between the polarity Spanish–English that divides much of California today. Whereas speaking Maya can be a social millstone in Yucatan and in California it marks speakers as belonging to a recent wave of migrants with dubious immigration status, in some neighborhoods of San Francisco Maya can be made to yield a different social capital. Vis-à-vis third ethnic groups, i.e., immigrants that are neither Mexicans nor Anglos, DF's use of Maya gives him a prestige of distinction vis-à-vis Mexicans, Spanish gives him a distinction at par with Anglos.

Laughing in lines 9–10, Juan is both amused and slightly embarrassed at having to produce Maya sounds in front of the Anglo visitor. In the usual hierarchy of codes in this Hispanic neighborhood, English and Spanish would be the two unmarked codes, followed perhaps by Vietnamese as the storeowner's language, but Maya is definitely marked. However, it has, in this case, acquired some historical presence due to DF's repeated efforts to teach the local merchants some Maya, so we can interpret Juan's chuckle as a sign that he is both willing to respect DF's language and ambivalent about his own legitimacy as a Maya speaker. It is worth noting that DF does not administer his little Maya lesson in all stores. In the Chinese store, for example, he uses Spanish throughout even when admonishing the clerk that her ability to understand Maya is improving (see excerpt 6, lines 138–141).

3.1.2 At the Chinese grocery

The next three excerpts come from a Chinese-run grocery store, where DF has stopped to find out how much *masa* (corn-flour dough) his son had picked up earlier in the day.

Excerpt 2

1	DF:	((TO BUTCHER IN MAYA))	
2	Butcher:	si si si	
3	DF:	((TO CLERK)) *buenas* . . .	
4		*vengo* <?> *mi maestra*	I'm with my teacher
5	AW:	<LO HI LO>	
6		teacher	
7	Clerk:	OH [@]	
8	DF:	[ah]	
9		*es mi maestra*\	She's my teacher
10		ah	
11		*eh-nomás, este, pasé a preguntar*/	I just uh came to ask
12		*la masa que agarró mi hijo*\	the masa that my son took,
13		*ochenta y ahora*/	80 and now
		. . .	
22	Clerk	*si bien.*	yes good.
23		*le toco masa acá ahora*	he'll take masa here now

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Excerpt 3

31	DF:	*estamos de paseo con = maestra*	we're out walking with the teacher
32		*por eso yo no ∧vine*	that's why I didn't come
33	Clerk:	ah/	
34	DF:	*si*\	
35		ah	
36	Clerk:	((to AW)) my Spanish is really limited	
37		but I try to understand him	
38		@[@@@@]	
39	AW:	[that's good]	
40			
41	DF:	[si ah ha]	

Excerpt 4

74	DF:	*mucho trabajo*.	a lot of work.
75	Older lady:	ah @@@@	
76	DF:	*eso es el* ticher.	this is the teacher.
77	Clerk:	((TO OLDER LADY: IN CHINESE))	
78	Older lady:	hi @@@	
79	AW:	hi	

In excerpts 2–4, the Chinese clerk plays with the languages available in her store. She alternately speaks Chinese with her older relative, Spanish with putative 'Mexicans' like DF, and English with Anglos like AW. These three languages index respectively: her ethnic or cultural identity as a Chinese, the accommodating role that she wants to assume and cultivate with Spanish-speaking customers, and the public voice she feels appropriate to adopt with Anglos. But she clearly uses these languages to align herself symbolically with the shifting centers of power in her store. For her, Chinese is the language of intimacy with fellow customers, family and friends; Spanish is the useful service language of local transactions, but it also indexes for her the stigma of non-assimilated immigrants; English is her public transactional language but she can also use it as a way of distancing herself from Mexican newcomers.

Viewing these exchanges from an ecological perspective enables us to see the various languages used by the participants as part of a more diversified linguistic landscape with various hierarchies of social respectability among codes, and added layers of foregrounding of the code itself rather than just the message. To the multiplicity of languages we must now add their subjective resonances in the speakers' embodied memories.

3.2 The ecology of embodied time

DF, who hardly understands any English at all, uses Spanish with the Chinese clerk and her older relative, thus forcing the clerk to respond in Spanish (excerpt 3) and the older lady, who doesn't know Spanish, to chuckle politely (excerpt 4). In excerpt 5, DF persists in speaking

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Spanish, introducing AW as '*el* ticher', a mixed utterance that the clerk translates into Chinese for her older relative.

Excerpt 5

80	Clerk:	((TO DF)) *mañana* when you come [I give you no *español*].
81	Older lady:	[@@@@@]
82	Clerk	[*solo* English]
83	DF:	[@@@]
84		NO, <@ no@>.
85	Clerk:	Jose, tomorrow when you come in
		I don't speak Spanish with you any more.
86		
87	DF:	[@@@@]
88	AW:	[no, no, I] not teaching him English.
89		I'm teaching him to read and write in Spanish.
90		I'm not teaching him English.
91	Clerk:	oh, oh,
92		read and write Span-[ish.]
93	AW:	[yah,] read and write Span-ish
94	Clerk:	that's good 'cause he like he not even recognize the numbers

The Clerk then addresses DF with the derogatory 'Jose', threatening to use only English with him. DF responds with a laugh (line 87). In line 88, AW jumps in, correcting what she perceives as an erroneous assumption on the part of the clerk that she is teaching DF English lessons. Her statement suggests that DF, who spends most of his time in his Spanish- and Maya-dominant restaurant and apartment building, has made learning Spanish literacy, not English, his priority. AW's emphatic 'no no' can also be seen as an attempt to save DF's face, which has been threatened by the clerk's teacherly tone, and by her use of a stereotypical name that is not DF's own. AW's repetition in line 90 can be interpreted as 'teacher talk' to the NNS clerk, and her repetition of the prosody of the clerk's English in line 93 as 'foreigner talk'. The clerk realigns herself with the revised teaching agenda in line 91, noting that DF can't read numbers. After a few other remarks the conversation returns to this topic.

In excerpts 5 and 6, the protagonists' choice of language is not dictated by some pre-existing and permanent value assigned to each of these languages. Rather, it emerges from the subjective perceptions of shifting power dynamics within the interaction.

Excerpt 6

107	AW:	we're going to learn to read the numbers	
108		((TO DF)) *dice que vamos a aprender a leer los numeros para que*	she says we're going to learn numbers so that you can . . .
109		[*puedas* . . .]	
110	DF:	[hm]	
111	Clerk:	[that's the] most important part first:	

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112		one, two three four five six seven eight nine ten.	
113	AW:	that's right	
114		yah	
115		where did YOU learn English?	
116	Clerk:	America	
117	AW:	[oh=]	
118	Clerk:	[many] years ago	
119		<HI you know I start from beginning	
120		I start from one, two three four five. HI>	
121		I never know it in my life because my mother come	
122		when I come in 19 uh 80	
123		I still went to ESL program	
124		I still learn	
125		that's why he [can too]	
126	AW:	[yah]	
127		yah yah	
128	Clerk:	((to DF)) when me *aquí*	when I (was) here
129		twenty years early	twenty years ago
130		*nada* speak English	I spoke no English
131	DF:	*nada*	none
132	Clerk:	*nada*	none
133		*todo* English *aquí*	everything/all English here
134	DF:	ah	
135	Clerk:	learn first	
136		ABCD	
137		*todo aquí*	everything here
138	DF:	*ah, entiendes Maya,*	ah, you understand Maya
139		*año mãs*	(one) more year
140		*ah*	
141		*entiendes Maya*	
142	AW:	a lot of people speak Maya here, huh?	
143	Clerk:	yeah	
144	AW:	you're learning some Maya?	
145	Clerk:	uh:: not much	
146		Latinos is <LO??LO>	
147	DF:	*ahí esta?*	that's it?
148		*eh= en la tarde/* [*y=/*]	In the afternoon and
149	Clerk:	[OK]	

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150	DF:	*bueno, <?>*	Good.
151		*nos vemos*	See you.
152	Clerk:	OK	
153		good to see you.	

This exchange draws on multiple timescales of experience, for example, in excerpt 6, lines 118ff., on the Chinese clerk's memories of learning English in America; or in lines 138–141, on DF's reminders of past Maya lessons with the clerk and his prediction of her future progress. We have seen in excerpt 2, line 1 how DF chats in Maya with the Yucatecan butcher, thus reenacting in a Chinese grocery in San Francisco prior similar transactions between them in their native Yucatan. In this instant one could say that the timescale of Yucatan and that of San Francisco are conflated. This is particularly important for understanding the social prestige accorded to DF in this neighborhood of San Francisco. His weekly tours of the grocers and butchers recreate the network of Maya-speaking connections he had in his hometown. They also show that social capital varies greatly at different scales of space and time, so that in Yucatan, DF can be a wealthy respected merchant, while at the Mexican national level he may be perceived as poor, Indian and illiterate. The connections between these different timescales bolster the invisible symbolic power of his undocumented presence in the United States. They cast a halo around his words that cannot be captured by looking only at the utterances produced in the present. For example, the very Spanish used by DF with the clerk in excerpt 2, line 3 ('*buenas* . . .') still carries evidence of the self-assuredness displayed a minute ago by a successful merchant chatting with his fellow Yucatecan in their common language.

The conflation of timescales is given an additional layer of meaning inasmuch as part of DF's visit to merchants might be in fact what Rampton would call a styling of the self, a display performance (Rampton 1999b). The transaction might be the reenactment of an exchange that took place earlier and is now being performed again for the benefit of the guest of honor, the researcher herself, who is being 'toured around' (cf. excerpt 3, line 31 '*estamos de paseo con la= maestra*'). If that interpretation is correct, then the analysis has to take the words not as the spontaneous productions typical of natural conversations, but as a reflective replay for the benefit of a third party, a staging of sorts. Of course, this staging or styling serves also to nurture the human and commercial relations that DF is keen on keeping up with the merchants in his neighborhood.

Besides the conflation of timescales in the performing bodies of these social actors, we notice another aspect of embodied time. Spanish, Maya, English and Chinese, all acquire a subjective overlay of Mexican-ness, Maya-ness, etc. that makes uttering Spanish or Maya words more than the sum of their grammars or of the communicative roles they perform. Beyond haggling over the price of meat, the protagonists in these exchanges are performing not only themselves, but their cultures, their families, their countries of origin or the mythic and emotional memories that these historical realities have become. They are not just performing 'being Maya'. They are maintaining alive an idealized or 'de-territorialized' kind of Maya-ness that transcends geographic boundaries and awaits to be reterritorialized in the subject positionings of individual speakers (Rampton 1998). Each of their utterances is less the performance of a language than the enactment of a performative speech act that creates the very reality

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it avowedly refers to (Pennycook 2007: chapter 4). As Blommaert (2005: 232) notes,'[t]he performance of identity is not a matter of articulating *one* identity, but of the mobilization of a whole *repertoire* of identity features converted into complex and subtle moment-to-moment speaking positions' (emphasis in the original).

In sum, an ecological lens enables us to view multilingual transactions carried out in multilingual settings not only as the negotiation of meanings across turns at talk nor as the joint achievement of common communicative goals mediated by semiotic affordances like language, tripe or corn flour, but as the enactment, re-enactment, or even stylized enactment of past language practices, the replay of cultural memory, and the rehearsal of potential identities. By performing English, Maya, Spanish or Chinese, rather than only learning or using these languages, the protagonists in these data signal to each other which symbolic world they identify with at the time of the utterance. As complexity theorist Katherine Hayles notes, a qualitative analysis of conversational data such as these has much in common with literary analysis (Hayles 1990, 1991 cited in Byrne 1997: 4).

4. Symbolic competence

An ecological analysis of the data above reveals a much greater degree of symbolic action than is usually accounted for in the study of language acquisition and use. Social actors in multilingual settings, even if they are non-native speakers of the languages they use, seem to activate more than a communicative competence that would enable them to communicate accurately, effectively and appropriately with one another. They seem to display a particularly acute ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes. I have called this competence 'symbolic competence' (Kramsch 2006).

Symbolic competence is the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else's language, but to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used. Such an ability is reminiscent of Bourdieu's notion of *sens pratique*, exercised by a habitus that structures the very field it is structured by in its quest for symbolic survival (Bourdieu 2000). Here, however, we are dealing with a multilingual *sens pratique* that multiplies the possibilities of meaning offered by the various codes in presence. In today's global and migratory world, distinction might not come so much from the mastery of one or several linguistic systems as much as it comes from 'the multilingual ability to operate between languages' (MLA 2007). Because it depends on the other players in the game, we should talk of a 'distributed' symbolic competence, which operates in four different ways.

4.1 Subjectivity or subject-positioning

In the data above, speakers take on subject positions regarding the symbolic power of this vs. that language, the respective social values of Maya, Chinese, Spanish and English. Subject positioning has to do less with the calculations of rational actors than with multilinguals' heightened awareness of the embodied nature of language and the sedimented emotions

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associated with the use of a given language. For example, in excerpt 2, the butcher and Don Francisco adopt a subject position that puts them at par with each other as they use the language of their common village in Yucatan. The subjective sense of power elicited by this common subject position is still visible in DF's self-assured demeanor when he turns around and switches to Spanish in line 3. In excerpt 6, the clerk's volubility in English indexes her evident pleasure at being able to position herself on equal conversational footing in English with the researcher, something she cannot do with DF in Spanish. In that same excerpt 6, line 108, AW's switch to Spanish aligns her emotionally with DF, who may have felt affronted by the clerk's use of English.

4.2 Historicity, or understanding the cultural memories evoked by symbolic systems

Throughout the data presented here, we have been confronted with cultural memories carried by words, gestures, body postures, scripts taken from a different timescale in a different place and reterritorialized in a Californian grocery store. We have noticed the timescale of Yucatan irrupting in the timescale of San Francisco, but there are other examples. During a visit to another Vietnamese grocery, AW and the clerk engaged in a comparative account of the ancient history of the Maya in Mexico vs. the ancient history of the Chinese in Vietnam (Kramsch & Whiteside 2007). Neither the clerk nor the researcher were really teaching each other a history lesson; rather, each was lending weight to her words by performing ritualized utterances about the ancient nature of Maya and Chinese civilizations – an exchange of social symbolic power that put both parties on equal footing. The utterances in these exchanges sounded formulaic because they were what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, realms or archetypes of social memory (Nora 1997). Any utterance or turn-at-talk can become a *lieu de mémoire*, formed by the sedimented representations of a people. Whether these representations are accurate or not, historically attested or only imagined, they are actually remembered by individual members and serve as valid historical models. As Blommaert (2005: 131) writes, '[t]he synchronicity of discourse is an illusion that masks the densely layered historicity of discourse'. Indeed, symbolic competence is the ability to perform and construct various historicities in dialogue with others.

4.3 Performativity, or the capacity to perform and create alternative realities

Within an ecological perspective of human exchanges, utterances not only perform some role or meaning, but they bring about that which they utter, i.e., they are performatives. We have seen how the utterances of the protagonists in our data recreate environments from other scales of space and time, produce fractals of patterns from one timescale to another. Multilingual environments can elicit complex relationships between speech acts and their perlocutionary effects. Take excerpt 4, for example. The clerk clearly devalues DF by ignoring that his utterance '*eso es el* ticher' (line 76) names the researcher as 'the teacher', and by taking on herself the teacher role (line 80). In excerpt 5, she puts down his Spanish by embedding it in her English, '*Mañana* when you come I give you *no español*, *solo* English', then

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calling him 'Jose' in line 85. The cartoon-like foreigner talk is not lost on the older lady and on DF himself, who burst out laughing. But we understand that it was an insult and not just a joke from its perlocutionary effect on AW. Her immediate overlapping response in English in line 88 ('No no I'm not teaching him English') seeks to cancel the potential perlocutionary effect of the insult by resignifying the ESL issue into a Spanish literacy issue ('I'm not teaching him English. I'm teaching him to read and write in Spanish') – a symbolic move that reestablishes DF at par with the clerk: in the same manner as the clerk learned English, DF is now learning Spanish literacy. Such a move exploits the time lag, materialized here by the general laughter in lines 81–87, between the illocutionary force of the clerk's derogatory utterance and its perlocutionary effect on DF, and reconfigures the whole environment. The actors in the Chinese grocery store are quick to adapt to the alternative configuration introduced by AW in line 88 and DF regains the symbolic space that was his at the onset of the exchange. Thus, a third aspect of symbolic competence is the capacity to use the various codes to create alternative realities and reframe the balance of symbolic power.

4.4 Reframing, or the ability to change the social context

Finally, the data highlight the importance of reframing as a powerful means of changing the context. We have just seen how, in excerpt 6, AW's intervention reestablished DF's legitimacy by reframing the clerk's insult into an erroneous statement of fact, thus reframing her relationship with DF from an ESL teacher to a Spanish literacy *maestra*. This little intervention also reframed the two different subject positions adopted by the Chinese clerk and the Maya customer. While for the Chinese clerk, legitimacy as an immigrant comes from having learned English, knowing how to count in English and the English alphabet, for DF, legitimacy comes from having money and clout from the old country, and influence in the neighborhood, even though he is illiterate. Fifty lines later, lines 138–141, DF suddenly turns the tables as the Maya 'teacher'. His insistence that she will end up understanding Maya is less a statement about her than about him contesting and reframing the view that '*todo* English *aquí*'. Maya, he suggests, will be an increasing part of this world, as will Spanish.

In sum, symbolic competence could be defined as the ability to shape the multilingual game in which one invests, i.e., the ability to manipulate the conventional categories and societal norms of truthfulness, legitimacy, seriousness, and originality, and the ability to reframe human thought and action. We have seen that this kind of competence is multiply distributed and that it emerges through the interaction of multiple codes and their subjective resonances. It is true that symbolic competence is not reserved to multilingual actors in multilingual encounters, but multilingual encounters increase the contact surfaces among symbolic systems and thus the potential for creating multiple meanings and identities. In the late modern stance offered by an ecological perspective, symbolic competence is both a semiotic competence (van Lier forthcoming), and an ability to actively manipulate and shape one's environment on multiple scales of time and space. Symbolic competence adds a qualitative metalayer to all the uses of language studied by applied linguists, one that makes language variation, choice and style central to the language learning enterprise.

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5. Implications for foreign language educators

5.1 A post-modern focus on language

Symbolic competence is not yet another skill that language learners need to master, nor is it yet another theory of language acquisition. It is a variationist frame of mind adapted to our post-modern times. Even though our students might never be in the same situation as the protagonists in the data above, their ability to 'operate between languages' (MLA 2007) will not be so much a matter of bringing their message across accurately and appropriately than it is of creating affordances, i.e., 'relationships of possibility' (van Lier 2004: 105). However, these relations will be created only if they learn to see themselves both through their own embodied history and subjectivity, and through the history and subjectivity of others.

The questions raised by the recommendations of the MLA report and by an ecological theory of foreign language education are momentous. What kinds of opportunities are there for developing symbolic competence? How might teachers develop an awareness of power dynamics in their classrooms? What role do embodied memories play in the context of classroom interaction and language development? To what extent should teachers give a place to other languages in their classrooms and what should the medium of instruction be? If the MLA report explicitly advocates teaching, beyond functional language abilities (such as communicative competence), 'critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception' (MLA 2007: 3f.), it is because it considers the teaching of language, literature, and culture as having to do with one and the same thing: the study of LANGUAGE. Language in all its facets – conversational, functional, literary, cultural – and in all its modalities – spoken, written, filmic, virtual. In a foreign language curriculum such as can be found in schools and universities, Language is taught not only in language classes, but throughout the curriculum in various subjects, sometimes in English (as when courses are given on Language & Power, Language & Identity or Critical Language Awareness), sometimes in other languages (as in foreign language classes or literature seminars), sometimes in the learners' own country, sometimes during study abroad. 'Operating between languages', as the report advocates, means focusing on Language in all its manifestations and in all the courses taught in the curriculum, and not just the foreign language curriculum. It means finding more ecological means of evaluating critical language awareness, interpretation, translation and an understanding of the historical and subjective dimensions of language use than multiple choice and true/false questions.

5.2 Becoming teachers of meaning

From an ecological perspective, both teachers of English and teachers of foreign languages are not teachers of a linguistic code but teachers of meaning. Meaning in all its stylistic choices and variations. For foreign language teachers, here are a few examples to illustrate some of the ecological tenets I have discussed earlier. As pedagogic practices, they are not new, but

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they might acquire new meanings when viewed from an ecological perspective. They are formulated here only as suggestions and as potential food for thought.

MEANING IS RELATIONAL/MULTIDIMENSIONAL. An ecological perspective on foreign language education encourages us to teach what Bakhtin calls 'the internal dialogism' of words (Bakhtin 1981: 282): What other words/texts do words and texts respond to? What larger questions do textbooks respond to? (i.e., What assumptions underlie the choice of words, topics etc.? What representation of native speakers and their culture is offered by the textbook? Are they the same as we are, different from us?). Open up the polarity between the language and culture of the students (L1/C1) and the foreign language and culture (L2/C2). Bring to the fore the diversity of meanings given to news events and texts read by the students themselves based on their own cultural experiences. Put in relation their interpretations of events and interpretations by native speakers or non-native speakers of the same news event or story (for a concrete example from the classroom, see Kramsch 2003).

MEANING IS MEDIATED. How do pictures in the textbook mediate the input – as entertainment, as support, as counterpoint to language? How do the pictures express through shapes, volumes, vectors etc. what the text expresses through words, clauses, and paragraphs? Exploit the transition surfaces between media, but also between linguistic codes. Ask students to reflect on the way the meanings they attribute to a text are mediated through their own feelings, memories, projections (for concrete examples, see Kramsch 2001).

MEANING IS MULTISCALAR AND RECURSIVE (TIMESCALES). Think of a lesson in terms of timing, cycles of repetition, re-iteration on various levels of complexity or content, contexts, rhythm. Break the linearity of textbook and syllabus. Explicitly restructure old knowledge in light of the new – for example, reassign at the end of the term a short story read at the beginning of the term and have the students discover new meanings in a familiar content. Revisit former points of grammar, former issues, former dictionary meanings now with more complex ones – for example, the *tu/vous* distinction, presented as lexical/grammatical items or as informal/formal forms of address in the first week can get picked up in the eighth week as a study of social stratification in French society, and in week 15 as the paradox of power and solidarity (Liddicoat 2006).

MEANING IS EMERGENT. As Hayles (1990, 1991) demonstrated, the 'emergent order' of a short story or novel brought to light by literary analysis can illustrate with considerable power the ecological perspective on meaning evoked here. Practice round robin storytelling not only to increase fluency, but to show how different meanings emerge at each retelling. New meaning emerges in the contact zone between two renditions of the same story, between two linguistic codes, two written or conversational styles (for examples, see Kramsch 1993: chapters 3–4).

MEANING IS UNPREDICTABLE AND DOUBLE-VOICED. Leave a margin of surprise in language. Surprise arises not from the theme but from the variations on the theme. Teach grammatical and lexical accuracy and communicative effectiveness, but leave room for and, indeed, encourage stylistic variation, irony, humor, subversion (for an example, see Bannink 2002).

MEANING IS FRACTAL. The *tu/vous* distinction can be seen as a fractal of social relations in French society. For example: Jacques Chirac says 'vous' to his wife; Ségolène Royal and the whole socialist party say 'tu' to one another; French police often say 'tu' to Arab

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immigrants; for example, a face-threatening act like a personal compliment in Chinese should be responded to by downplaying the object of the compliment, rather than saying 'thank you' (which would sound conceited). With globalization and the trend to adopt American customs, some Chinese today have been observed to respond to a compliment with 'thank you'. However, although the compliment is expressed in Chinese, the 'thank you' is said in English, so that face is preserved. This anecdote may be presented as a fractal of a changing Chinese society under the pressure of globalization.

MEANING IS SUBJECTIVE. Build on students' memories, emotions, perceptions, fantasies linked to sounds, and intonation. Ask the students: What does this word evoke for YOU? What does it remind YOU of? Bring back the emotional and the aesthetic dimension of language. Teach not just the meanings of the dictionary, nor even the speakers' intended meanings, but make explicit the conceptual categories that these words represent in the collective cultural imagination of native speakers as well as non-native speakers. For example, the word *challenge* in American English represents an entrepreneurial, you-can-get-it-if-you-really-want-it attitude to life, and the individual overcoming of obstacles (Kramsch 1993: chapter 1) – a quintessential American worldview, not just 'an invitation to take part in a trial or contest' (*Oxford English dictionary*).

MEANING IS HISTORICALLY CONTINGENT. Subjective meaning is not just the referential meanings of words, but also the historical antecedents of words/expressions and their connotations. For example, VATERLAND evokes for a German not fatherland and patriotism but 19th- and 20th-century militarism. COMMUNAUTARISME evokes for many French citizens today not community spirit, but ethnic separatism and anti-republican spirit. The meaning of these terms has to be understood in their particular historical context.

MEANING IS REFLEXIVE. Finally, an ecological practice is a reflective practice that encourages explicit metalinguistic, metadiscursive, metastylistic reflexion at every step of the way. Talk, and talk about talk is what the classroom does best (Edmondson & House 1981; van Lier 1996). Talk in class with the students about the meaning of meaning, make them aware of how they make meaning as bi- or multilinguals. Have them transcribe conversations, academic lectures, political speeches in the L2, not only to improve their own fluency in particular registers of spoken language, but also to reflect on stylistic choice and genre as social practices.

6. Conclusion

It is of course easier to teach a course on language ecology than to put language ecology into practice in foreign language education. Ecological theory doesn't offer a blueprint for what to do on Monday morning, but it does offer a new perspective on what foreign language educators should be in the business of doing. Most institutions are still teaching standard national languages according a 19th-century modern view of language as a structural system with rules of grammatical and lexical usage, and rules of pragmatics reified to fit the image of a stereotyped Other. The 21st century is all about meaning, relations, creativity, subjectivity, historicity and the trans- as in translingual and transcultural competence. We should conceive

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of what we do in ways that are more appropriate to the demands of a global, decentered, multilingual and multicultural world, more suited to our uncertain and unpredictable times.

An ecological approach offers a more sober view of the benefits of learning foreign languages than the one currently offered by departmental websites and publicity brochures, which promise world peace and harmonious communication across cultures if only we learn each other's grammars and vocabularies. It reminds teachers and educators that there is more for students to understand about Language than the syllabi of German, French or Chinese classes would lead them to believe. There is much to language learning and teaching that is not measurable by standards of proficiency and that cannot be taught directly, only modeled and reflected upon. Foreign language educators might have to develop what Bakhtin called 'cunning' rather than expertise, a dialogic rather than a scientific approach to the educational enterprise. They might have to operate in the interstices of institutional guidelines and testing mandates. Which is why ultimately language ecology in practice is a politics insofar as it is an art of the possible. Paraphrasing the Bakhtin translator and scholar Michael Holquist, one could say that 'curriculum guidelines and national standards are not everything, a monolingual worldview may be overcome, as long as cunning reigns'(Holquist 1981:182).

Appendix: Transcription conventions (based on Dubois 2006)

Terminative tone	.
Continuative tone	,
Truncated intonation unit	-
Appeal	?
Rising tone	/
Falling tone	\
Low to high tone	_/
High-low-high	∨
Low-high-low	∧
Speech overlap	[]
Lengthening	=
Laugh	@
Voice tone	HI <LO>
Unintelligible	(??)
Comment	((WORDS))

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