

Poetic Equivalence: Key to the Development of Symbolic Competence

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will attempt to trace my personal trajectory from growing up bilingual French and English, to becoming a French teacher of German trained in German literature and ending up having a career in the United States as an applied linguist invested in both literature and language. It is my encounter with Roman Jakobson's principle of equivalence that enabled me not only to make sense of what made a text "literary," but to reconcile the study of language and the study of literature, and to bring together the structuralist and the post-structuralist traditions of thought in applied linguistics. This will allow me to reflect on the role of the literary as an essential dimension of foreign language education and on the way symbolic competence can revitalize communicative language pedagogy.

THE SOUNDS AND SHAPES OF FOREIGNNESS

Sound as such, in and of itself, becomes one of the patent carriers of poetic meaning: There is a kind of 'verbal magic' in sound itself. (Waugh, 1980, p. 69)

My first memories are steeped in the foreignness of foreign sounds. Born as I was from a French father and an English-born mother, whose Jewish family had emigrated to London from Hungary and Poland at the turn of the 20th century, I was always confronted with foreign sounds. Not only with the content of what my Hungarian grandmother said to her Hungarian friends, but with the Jewish-ness (*mazel tov!*) and the Hungarian-ness (*Yoi ishtenem!*) of its message. The long, drawn-out conversations over the phone, the guttural falling cadences, interspersed with requests like: “Clare darrrling, put ze teller in ze zink” captured metaphorically the displacement of an immigrant family from Central Europe, fluent in German, Russian, English, Hungarian, and Polish, and speaking all these languages with an undefinable Danube basin accent. My travels to England as a child before the war crossed more than the stormy Channel; they confronted me with the double estrangement of Jewish immigrants desirous to be more British than the Brits in response to the rampant anti-Semitism and xenophobia of the day.

For the 5-year-old there was nothing arbitrary about those sounds; their meaning entered my ears, my muscles, my sinews with an immediacy that one cannot imagine if one learns these same sounds in a classroom. Each member of my family seemed to have their own language that captured not only their origins but also their position on the European historical power grid. My mother’s family’s Central European English meant cosmopolitan sophistication, exclusivity, and endless language games. In fact, language games were the sport I grew up with. My English aunt would correct my English when I went to England (“no, darling, it’s not ant, it’s aunt”) as if she were the gatekeeper of an English identity that she had fought hard to attain. Her superb English was not just a linguistic achievement, it was a badge of honor, similar to her change of name from Siratzky to Frances in order to gain legitimacy as an English teacher. To our shrieking delight, she recited by heart reams of poetry by A.A. Milne and Hilaire Belloc and helped us wrap our French tongues around *The jaberwocky* and English tongue twisters.

My father’s French family was on the other hand convinced of the superiority of French language and culture. While most of the family was composed of musicians, painters, and academics, my father was an electrical engineer, and quite an unusual one at that. He was professionally attracted to mathematical equations, strict rigid rules of physics, and industrial management. But he also had a quirky imagination and a distinct talent for storytelling. His bedtime stories, that he invented on the spot and that lasted for weeks on end, required on our part a heavy dose of suspension of disbelief and a willingness to engage with him in the construction of imaginary worlds filled with magic.

The sound of French evokes for me the world of my father, the sound of English the world of my mother. But the two worlds were as close and as distant

from one another as the two countries on both sides of the Channel, with a long history of alliances, rivalries, and wars. The verbal games and stories played and told on both sides worked their way into our family relationships and made language the crucible of all affect, emotion, and attachment. My interest in foreign languages was born out of this primordial conflict between French and English at the heart of our family, and from which I tried to escape by learning and then studying German when I reached high school in 1948.

THE USE OF GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION AND HOW I GREW OUT OF IT

I learned German like I learned Latin and Greek: with the grammar translation method. We read, translated, and memorized lists of words and their French translations, we recited rules of grammar every morning at roll call, we used little tricks to remember declensions, conjugations, and adjective endings. *Versions* from German into French, *thèmes* from French into German were meant to sharpen our appreciation of the nuances of our native language, French, rather than help us develop an understanding of German native speakers. Taking German as a first foreign language was considered to be more difficult than English and therefore more prestigious because more academic. As the language of the former enemy, it was also controversial: an opportunity for our teachers to highlight the superior nature of French over German, the incorruptible nature of French “rationality” over German “fanaticism,” and the superior analytic competence of French scholars in the analysis of literary texts over German obscure philosophy. But I found my *explication de texte* rejected by my professors because I had dared mention how a poem made me feel: “Mademoiselle Alvin, your opinion is of no interest to us. What does the text say?” My essay on the young Goethe was faulted for not conforming to the expected genre. The teacher’s sarcasm was crushing: “Is this a literary or a philosophical essay?” he exclaimed, slamming my paper on his desk. “I asked a colleague in literature who said it was philosophy, and a colleague in philosophy said it was literature. So, what is it?” Our professors insisted on asking us: “What did the author intend to say?” but never showed us how to find out. Instead, they proceeded to draw meanings from the text like rabbits from a hat and left us scratching our heads wondering how on earth the author could have intended to mean all that. Needless to say, I was not particularly good in German. It was one more chore that you had to do if you wanted to get through high school.

And yet, over the years, I found in the German language something that I was missing in my own. While Corneille’s and Racine’s alexandrines left me

cold, I found German poetry particularly seductive for its musicality. My French relatives had found their calling in the piano, violin, and violoncello; I found unexpected pleasure in the shape and sounds of German vowels and the meandering rhythms of German syntax. Since at that time, Germany lay in ruins and we did not learn German to travel to Germany and speak with native speakers, I found immediate meaning in the sounds of German poems. A word like *Frühlingswind* was so much more musical than *vent de printemps!* A line like: “*Es läuft der Frühlingswind durch kable Alleen*” by Hugo von Hofmannsthal added to my visual repertoire of French verse some mysterious German diphthongs and cadences that entered my adolescent body and made it dream of far-away places and romantic encounters. If French gave me the skills of rational academic debate and English the humor to make fun of French, German revealed to me the poetic meaning of form.

I remember several experiences in the otherwise bleak drudgery of my secondary school years that gave me a glimpse of what literature could bring to the learning of a foreign language. One was in my Greek class when I was 19. Our teacher, a little old lady with a sun-baked wrinkled face, came from Corsica. We called her *pomme cuite* (baked apple). She was trained in direct methods of teaching languages and was quite an anomaly at our school. She would interrupt our painstaking translation of Antigone’s lamentations, stand up behind her desk and with raised hands, proceed to recite the Greek text by heart, intermingled with gut-wrenching Corsican exclamations (“*O popoi! Popoi!*”). All of a sudden, literature came alive. Her performance, crude and unacademic as it was, made us realize in our bones what it meant for a 19-year-old to never see the sun again, to never again feel the wind in your hair and the sea salt on your lips, to remain “unlamented, unloved, unwedded,” because you were going to be BURIED ALIVE. Her rendition jolted us out of our academic complacency and forced us to identify with Antigone. In that moment, she made the jump from literacy to orality. In a flash I intuited that a literary text was nothing but a frozen conversation between an author and a reader and that, as Bourdieu would say later, “we learn bodily” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 141). Shortly thereafter, we returned to counting feet and dissecting verb tenses and aspects, but the memory of that scene has remained with me to this day.

THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUIVALENCE: A BRIDGE BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

I decided to pursue graduate studies in German language and literature and would have landed an academic appointment teaching German literature at a

French university had I remained in France. But my destiny led me to the United States where I suddenly had the opportunity to teach the German language at the collegiate level, first at M.I.T., then at UC Berkeley. Desperately trying to make sense of my immigrant experience and to adapt to a foreign academic environment, I drew on the habits of the mind that I had acquired in my youth: the strong French academic tradition of structuralist thought and attention to text, and my equally strong family tradition of storytelling, orality, and of language as discourse. The seventies in Cambridge were conducive to thinking outside the box. Trying to understand my M.I.T. students led me to explore research on language as discourse and interaction and the field of conversation analysis (Kramsch 1981, 1984, 1987, 1989). I got initiated to the exciting field of discourse analysis by reading Diane Larsen-Freeman and Michael Long (1980) in the U.S., Henry Widdowson (1984) in the U.K., Willis Edmondson and Juliane House (1981) in Germany. And the study of oral discourse led me to explore research in narrative and the morphology of folktales (Propp, 1958; Kramsch, 1985).

All these authors opened my eyes to the uses of language in its social context and helped me reclaim literature through the oral, living forms of language as discourse in everyday use. To my amazement, I discovered that one could analyze a conversation the way one could a poem; that the meaning of a verbal exchange was based not on ideas, but on the systematic distribution of turns-at-talk, topic management, and communication repairs, in the same manner as a poem's meaning was to be found primarily in its poetic form, and on the exigencies of its meter. The one major insight I gained from my various readings was the idea that in literature the author's choice of words depended as much on its relation to other words inside the text as it did on its relation to the real world outside the text. If Homer called the goddess of dawn "rosy fingered" it was less because Dawn objectively resembles human fingers of a rosy color, but because he needed a certain number of feet at the end of the hexameter line and that the sound of *rhododaktylos Eos* fitted the overall sound of that line. The metaphor's function thus became its poetic meaning (Ong, 1982).

This principle of equivalence of function and meaning was so important to Roman Jakobson, who was teaching at M.I.T. at the time, that in his famous essay (Jakobson, 1960), he made it the very essence of *literariness* or literariness, as illustrated by his diagram of the six components of the communicative situation (context, addresser, addressee, contact, code, and *message*) and the corresponding six functions of language (referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and *poetic*). Of those six functions, the poetic function, he said, focuses on the message itself. The message, i.e., the meaning to be communicated, was to be found not only in its reference to the outside world, but in its position and function within the text as a whole. Emily Dickinson's short poem is a good example of this. "A word is dead / When it is said / Some say. / I say it just / Begins to live / That

day.” (Dickinson, 1993:13). The phrase “some say” differs referentially from “I say,” but the contrastive position of the two phrases, back-to-back in the center of the poem, and their similar function, namely, to establish a parallel between the life and death of language, illustrates an equivalence at work between saying and dying on the one hand, saying and living on the other. Paraphrasing the Jakobsonian scholar Linda Waugh (1980, p. 66), one could say that the equivalence between one verb and another as parts of speech is as important as the interrelation between a given verb and its context in the real world.

Language students usually learn that sentences are built by first selecting a word from a list of possible words offered by the dictionary, e.g. dead / killed / lifeless, and placing it into the appropriate grammatical slot on the “paradigmatic axis;” then by combining it with other words, such as “a-word-is-dead,” on the “syntagmatic axis.” Language learners believe that the reason for an author’s selection and combination of words is a purely referential one. But in a literary text, the reason is also poetic. For example, the choice of “dead” over “killed” is that it echoes the word “said” in the second line and contrasts with the sound of “live” in line 5. This echo and contrast in turn have meaning. By making “dead” the functional equivalent of “said,” the poet dramatically demonstrates the common belief in the evanescence of speech and the futility of words. But, by contrasting “said” and “live” and placing the two words in the same second line of each half of the poem, the poet shows how the poem reverses common beliefs and gives birth to life through spoken language. Linda Waugh comments:

Contrast is another means by which the selectional axis and the combinatorial axis are intertwined. In the referential use of language, contrast very often resides not in elements linked by various equivalent relations but rather in elements which are in simple contiguity with each other. The poetic function is different from the strictly referential function by the strong linkage of contrast with equivalence. (Waugh, 1980, p. 65)

I could see how the principle of equivalence built on Saussurean linguistics but took an added dimension through the metaphorical imagination of a scholar like Jakobson, who was at home in many languages and cultures. His principle of equivalence suddenly reconciled for me form and function, structure and meaning. It suggested ways to make the nuts and bolts of grammar intrinsically relevant to the meaning of a text. And that meaning was placed there deliberately by the author for me to discover and interpret; it invited me to search for equivalences between the functions of the words on the page. Without having a name for it, I had stumbled into the field of literary stylistics (Widdowson, 1975) and contrastive poetics (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). But I realized that equivalence was also a principle that went beyond literature. It governed also the workings of the mind and the meaning of culture, that were studied in cognitive science (e.g., Gibbs, 1994), and linguistic anthropology (e.g., Friedrich, 1986).

Jakobson's theory of literariness would be hotly debated by applied linguists involved in the teaching of foreign languages. In the U.K., Burton and Carter (2006) considered literary texts as the indispensable component in foreign language education, but criticized Jakobson for investigating only the formal aspects of literature; he had not considered the reader and the ideologies that readers bring to bear on a text in its context of reception. In Germany, Dobstadt (2009) and Dobstadt and Riedner (2013) found that the concept of literariness (*Literarizität*) was a fruitful path for using literature to counteract the instrumentalization of language that was happening in communicative language teaching (CLT). While CLT was exclusively focused on speech production, and intercultural language teaching was focused mostly on finding in works of literature clues to life in the target culture, they felt that literary texts deserved a greater attention paid to literariness itself.

The call for reclaiming literature in foreign language education was forcefully made by British applied linguists associated with the communicative approach to teaching English (see e.g., Carter, 1997; Cook, 1994; Widdowson, 1984) and has been vigorously pursued by scholars in the field of discourse stylistics (e.g., Fowler, 1986; Simpson, 1993). Burton and Carter (2006) offered a typology of discourses that are more or less "literary" on a cline of literariness for the teaching of texts in foreign language education: awareness of semantic density, intertextuality, discourse patterning, polysemy and ambiguity, medium dependence. The more a discourse focused the attention of the reader on these aspects of the message, rather than merely on the referential content, the more the foreign language learner learned about the poetic dimensions of language itself.

The idea of literariness was picked up by the field of German as a foreign language that has tended to draw not from linguistics but from intercultural studies. Dobstadt proposed the concept of *Literarizität* or literariness to take into account the aesthetic dimension of literature and culture (Dobstadt, 2009; Dobstadt & Riedner, 2013) and Schiedermaier (2018) has recently included the concept of symbolic competence in her survey of the field of German as a second/foreign language. Both the British and the German approaches point to the need for a competence that goes beyond the ability to "get your message across," and that focuses on the nature, i.e., the structure and the function, of that message. Both in the UK and Germany, educators have applied the poetic function of language to the teaching of literary texts in FL education.

I was excited by the educational implications of Jakobson's principle of equivalence. Parallelisms, contrasts, metaphors were not just stylistic niceties (Ortony, 1975), they were intrinsic to the meaning of a poem, a short story, a novel. But they were also, as cognitive scientists have shown, the key to understanding how we apprehend the world and ourselves in real life (Lakoff, 1987). Our minds themselves have a metaphoric conceptual structure that makes sense of things by

identifying relationships, connections, patterns, by discovering how one utterance echoes another across turns-at-talk in conversation (Kramsch, 1987), how one activity at the beginning of a lesson parallels and has an equivalent function as another at the end of the lesson, and how that equivalence gives meaning to the students' learning experience (Kramsch, 1989). If we could make our students grasp the meaning of the beginning of a story in terms of its end, or the function of a character in terms of the function of another, we could help them make sense of their own lives in terms of larger patterns in their biography, family history, and cultural roots. Nurturing this metaphorical imagination could help language learners make connections between what they learned in one class with what they learned in another. It could move them from the focus on grammatical form and syntactic structure to post-structuralist insights into the deeper uses of literature than just entertainment.

I carried this important insight over into the teaching of literary texts in my language classes (Kramsch 1993; Kramsch & Zhang 2018, Ch.7), in my understanding of foreign cultures and intercultural discourse (Kramsch 2009a). It informed my understanding of the ability of multilingual speakers to evoke different but equivalent cultural worlds when speaking different languages, and to speak one language while thinking in terms of another. But I was getting carried away. In the United States, the teaching of language as literature conflicted with entrenched academic hierarchy and prejudice. And I had not counted with the resistance of many American undergraduates and the reluctance of their teachers to engage in such a reflection.

WHO NEEDS LITERATURE?

I should have been warned. Already in the seventies at M.I.T. I was told that one could not have students read literature in fourth semester language classes if one called it "literature." In the U.S, literature smacked of elitism, a useless exercise that did not help you communicate with native speakers in everyday life. It had to be called "good readings" and help you acquire vocabulary. I was suddenly confronted with a characteristic of American academia, namely the split between the perceived esoteric study of literature and the practice of vernacular language use, with prejudices on both sides as to the stark divide between the two. In addition, the advances in computer technology and in communication studies were slowly transforming the way Americans conceived of language and communication. Language was being reduced to a mere code; communication was viewed as the mere encoding, decoding, and transmission of information bites.

Indeed, language learners in the 70's and 80's were discovering the benefits of the communicative approach to learning foreign languages. They wanted to

talk, interact, communicate—not talk about talk, or reflect on ways of conducting conversations. Their goal was to become as close as possible to an unselfconscious native speaker, with the fluency and idiomaticity that would make them accepted as “one of them,” make them belong to “communities beyond their borders.” They wanted to grasp the main idea of a text by skimming and scanning, skipping the words they didn’t know and guessing the referential meaning of others from the context. They were impatient to use the knowledge retrieved from texts to exchange ideas and opinions with others in pairs and groups. And their teachers were evaluated according to how much “student talk” vs. “teacher talk” took place in their classrooms, how “motivated” and lively their students were. The literary text, in this dispensation, became a pretext to talk, an opportunity to use the linguistic structures arduously learned and to perform speech acts in the imagined settings of role-plays and other communicative activities. Texts themselves became empty vessels, filled with information to retrieve, share, and exchange. And, in an attempt to address the diverse learning styles and conceptual abilities of an increasingly diverse student population, educators called on multimodal, multiliterate forms of knowledge of which the reading of literary texts was only a minor part (Kern, 2015; Cenoz & Gorter, 2015).

Things were no better in the pre-service training of future English teachers at secondary schools. An undergraduate course I gave in the nineties at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education to minors in education, *Literacy through Literature*, was met with general disinterest in analyzing the discourse of literary texts. It didn’t meet the expectations of undergraduates who insisted that discussing literature or film was a matter of sharing subjective emotions, imagining alternative plots, and psychoanalyzing characters. It was meant to be fun, and this course, they said, wasn’t.

In the German department, my colleagues who taught literature were not at all keen on my teaching anything else than grammar and vocabulary in my language classes. They wanted students to arrive in their upper division literature classes equipped with conversational and reading skills, which they understood as the ability to decode texts and encode turns at talk for discussing those texts. But they reserved themselves the right to interpret literature based on a variety of theories and historical precedents. Language teachers, generally poorly paid and in nontenure track positions, were primarily to motivate students by giving them interesting material to read and screen, and teaching them useful conversational skills, but they were to know their place in the academic hierarchy. They could teach literature or film, but not as literary or cinematic art, only as a grammatical and lexical exercise. And that was what language learners expected.

After 1990, with the advent of globalization and the internet, the speakers of foreign languages increasingly learned English as a global language and the demand for languages other than English decreased drastically. Such languages

were still seen as a valuable form of symbolic capital, but as a mode of communication, not as a gateway to understanding foreign cultures, histories, and mind-sets. In order to boost their enrollments, foreign language departments started teaching foreign works of literature increasingly in their English translation. The specificity of the foreign language got lost, thus widening the gap between the teaching of literature and language: literature for the discussion of themes and ideas, language for everyday communication. But communicative language use came to rely no longer exclusively on the linguistic structures of a particular target language. Under the motto of “multimodality,” songs, pictures, videos, films, and the resources of other linguistic codes through code-switching and translanguaging practices were being rallied to supplement the use of the target language. And since English was slowly becoming the world’s lingua franca, Google Translate refined its abilities to conveniently translate any language into any other...via English. Who needed to read a foreign literature in the original?

TEACHING LANGUAGE AS SYMBOLIC POWER AND LANGUAGE USE AS SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE

Mais, mon cher Degas, ce n'est pas avec des idées qu'on fait les poèmes, c'est avec des mots. (Malarmé to Degas in Valéry, 1937)

It is tempting today to believe that literature is no longer needed in foreign language education. And yet, the very outburst of language unleashed by digital technologies, the desire to be heard over the communicative chatter of social media, and the need to be respected, listened to, valued, all require a higher level of symbolic power than just the power to exchange information (Kramersch, 2021). It is no longer sufficient for language learners to get their message across, accurately, and appropriately. They need to become legitimate speakers and writers, command attention and respect, be able to read and interpret a situation and put themselves into other people’s shoes. The expectation of originality and creativity brought about by the explosion of communication for communication’s sake is requiring ever higher levels of general education as well as of cognitive and emotional maturity to cut through the noise, not to mention the spiritual resources needed in order to have something important to say. The desire to give language learners a “voice,” the power to command attention, the legitimate right to have their experience taken into account, their interpretation of events validated and adopted—all must be accompanied by the discourse resources necessary to do so. Communicative competence needs now to be supplemented by an understanding of language as symbolic power, that I have called symbolic competence. Given the

more multimodal, oral, and action-oriented educational environment in which foreign language education takes place today, I propose to go beyond exploring, as Jakobson did, the literariness of literature, and instead to explicitly acknowledge the poetic function of all language use as a semiological process of equivalence.

In light of the various “turns” in Applied Linguistics, e.g., the subjective turn (Norton, 2000), the post-structuralist turn (e.g., McNamara, 2012), the emotional turn (e.g., Dewaele, 2010), the multilingual turn (e.g., Cenoz Gorter, 2015), and heeding the calls for taking into account the subjective, emotional, multilingual identity of the language learner, the time has come to teach learners how to cast their identity in terms that can be recognized, empathized with, and valued by others. It is a question of understanding the power of language as discourse, the poetic function of language in all genres, all conversational contexts, all textual productions. As Burton and Carter (2006) pointed out, this function is not intrinsic to words, it is found and exploited by language users in discourse. “Literary language is not special or different, in that any formal feature termed ‘literary’ can be found in other discourses” (p. 273). Reframing the principle of equivalence in social symbolic terms could help learners understand why they experience the foreign language the way they do, why it resonates with their innermost aspirations, and elicits in them such deep emotions (see Kramsch 2009b) and how they can harness the language to enhance their own symbolic power (Kramsch, 2021).

Such a reframing and extension of the equivalence principle builds on the communicative activities suggested for the study of literary texts: awareness of semantic density, intertextuality, discourse patterning, polysemy and ambiguity, medium dependence (Carter, 1997). It would make parallelism, connection, relationality the guiding principle of language study and would make discourse reflexivity its most important component (e.g., Clark & Dervin, 2014). This extended principle of equivalence is what I have called symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2006; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Kramsch, 2011), that I have defined as the ability to manipulate symbolic systems, to interpret signs and their relationship to other signs, to use semiotic practices to produce and exchange meaning, and to position oneself in everyday symbolic power games (Kramsch 2009b, p. 201). Such a self-positioning includes the ability to assess the cultural memories evoked by symbolic systems (symbolic representation), to participate creatively in multilingual practices (symbolic action), and to construct alternative realities (symbolic power). This symbolic activity would be systematically named and pointed out, commented upon by the teacher, verbalized and interpreted, whether in the ongoing discourse of the classroom, in groupwork or reading material, or in learners’ own spoken and written productions (Grimstein & Hille 2018; Heidenfeldt & Vinall 2017; Vinall 2012, 2016).

The development of symbolic competence does not replace the hard won notion of communicative competence that has served us so well in the last 25 years, but it includes a systematic reflexive component that encompasses some subjective and aesthetic as well as historical and ideological dimensions that communicative language teaching has largely left unexplored (Kramersch 2011:355).

CONCLUSION

At the end of his novel *Candide*, Voltaire, after depicting the trials and tribulations of his hero, comes to the conclusion: “*Il faut cultiver son jardin*” (One must cultivate one’s garden). This statement has been interpreted as an encouragement to focus on your own little corner and ignore everything else. By contrast, as a language teacher, I have always chosen to interpret it as an incentive to view myself as a gardener, invested in making my “flowers” grow in wondrous ways and in giving my “garden” the richest possible meaning.

The frequent question: “What prompted you to learn the language you teach and to become a language teacher?” is deceptively simple but not easy to answer. Chance, serendipity, a good teacher, a love affair, can all trigger the desire to learn someone else’s language and teach others to do the same. But we all know that these are only partial answers. Deeper reasons can be found in relations of equivalence and contrast within the language(s) one grew up with and between the speakers of those languages (Kramersch & Zhang, 2018).

My dedication to language teaching was, as I now understand it, the equivalent of my father’s narrative talents. I have been trying to make my classroom lesson into the richest possible narrative. His engineering skills have morphed into my attempts to teach the nuts and bolts of German grammar and the structure of Grimm’s fairytales. Equivalence in function has led in my understanding to equivalence in meaning. For example, my yearning as a French speaker to become a fluent speaker of German contrasted with my mother’s decision to marry a Frenchman and become fluent in French, and yet we both displayed an equivalent desire to be different from others. And that desire fulfilled an equivalent function, namely a way of eschewing or escaping the monolingual way of doing things. The poetic function, at work both in literature and in life, in poems and in conversations, has been the key to understanding the various provinces of my life.

If symbolic competence is the name of this understanding, teachers can be encouraged to develop a view of language not just as communicative referentiality, but as poetic potentiality. Such a view will help them assess not only the grammatical, but also the poetic value of their students’ writing, the persuasiveness of their arguments, the timeliness and judiciousness of their contribution to

classroom discourse. They will find ways of rewarding not just accuracy but voice, complexity, originality in a monolingual or a multilingual mode. But above all, they will find new ways of giving meaning to their own lives, as teachers and educators, and as multilingual instructors (Kramersch & Zhang, 2018).

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