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**INTERVIEW: CLAIRE KRAMSCH**  
**TEACHING AND RESEARCH: ONE FEEDS INTO THE OTHER**

Informative contribution  
UDC 81'246+81'33]:929(047.53)Kramersch C.

At the Sarajevo FLTAL conference in May 2016, I had the pleasure to conduct an interview with Dr Claire Kramersch, one of the plenary speakers.

Claire Kramersch graduated in German Language and Literature from the University of Paris-Sorbonne before she emigrated in 1965 to the United States, where she first taught German language and literature at M.I.T. and Applied Linguistics at Cornell University and then in 1989 she moved to UC Berkeley where she taught graduate and undergraduate students in the German Department and the Graduate School of Education. She has since retired from the German Department and holds an appointment as Professor of the Graduate School of Education. Until 2006, she was founding Director of the Berkeley Language Center, which serves as a research and resource unit for all foreign language teachers on campus.

Her fields of interest are applied linguistics, second language acquisition, discourse analysis, multilingualism, and social and cultural theory.

She is the author of many books. Her major publications include: *Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching* (CAL 1981); *Interaction et discours dans la classe de langue* (Didier 1984); *Reden, Mitreden, Dazwischenreden: Managing conversations in German* (Heinle 1985); *Foreign Language Research in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Benjamins 1991); *Text and Context: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Language Study* (D. C. Heath 1992); *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (OUP 1993) ; *Language and Culture* (OUP 1998); *The Multilingual Subject* (OUP 2009); *the Multilingual Challenge* (de Gruyter 2015).

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Her many articles were published in renowned journals such as: *Applied Linguistics*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, *PMLA*, *The Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

Professor Kramersch is a recipient of many awards. The major ones being 1988 ACTFL Nelson Brooks Award for the teaching of culture; 1994 and 2010 MLA Kenneth Mildenberger Prizes for Outstanding Research in the study of foreign languages and literatures; [1998 Goethe Medal](#) for her achievements in promoting intercultural understanding between Germany and the U.S.A.; MLA Distinguished Service Award 2000; [UC Berkeley Distinguished Teaching Award 2000](#); Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award from the American Association for Applied Linguistics 2007; Berkeley Citation for distinguished achievement and notable Service to the University (honorary doctorate) 2015.

Dr Kramersch was co-editor of the journal *Applied Linguistics* from 1998-2003 and is the founder and editor-in-chief of the UC electronic *L2 Journal*.

She was President of the American Association of Applied Linguistics in 1994/95 and she is currently the President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics.

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**JELENA MATIĆ: Professor Kramersch, thank you very much for accepting to be interviewed for Communication and Culture – an online journal. Your area of research is applied linguistics, with emphasis on social, cultural and stylistic approaches to language study. Could you tell us how you became interested in the topic of language and culture, please?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: First, thank you for the opportunity. As you know already, I come from quite a multilingual family but that was not how really I became interested in language and culture. I grew up during the Second World War, and after the war I had the choice of which first and second foreign language I would take in school. My father being French and my mother being English, my father suggested that I learn German in addition to Latin and Greek. He didn't see the point of learning English at school since I could learn English from my mother. So, I learnt German and I had nine years of German in high school. But we didn't learn anything about German culture except for reading and translating German literary texts. When I graduated from high school, what I really wanted to specialise in was philosophy because I was good at philosophy. However, being the eldest of seven I had to earn my living

quickly, and with philosophy it was not easy to make a living. I was pretty good at German and I loved German literature and philosophy, so I decided to specialize in German – and I got my degree in German language and literature at the Sorbonne in Paris. By the time I finished my studies I was 24 and I went to Germany to perfect my German and get to know German culture. I ended up marrying a German who did not know any French so there was no way he would've wanted to settle in France. Instead he wanted to emigrate to the United States, so I decided to follow him there. We lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I got a job teaching German at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. That is when I encountered a real culture shock. I just did not understand American culture nor my American students. I did not understand why they knew so little about European history, especially the relations between the French and the Germans and why they were always so concerned about money. But mostly I couldn't understand why they didn't want to talk in my language class. I decided to try and find answers to my questions not in German literature but in the field that was starting to grow, which was discourse analysis and applied linguistics. And I found in that field an answer to all the questions I was asking about the relationship of language and culture. So that's how I ended up from being a teacher of German to becoming an applied linguist. And it is applied linguistics that enabled me to understand the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of culture – the topic of my 1993 book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Where do you feel at home? In the United States or Europe (France, England, Germany)?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Deep down I am really a European, no, first of all I'm French, then I'm a European and I'm an adopted American. I live in the United States but I don't really feel I'm an American even though I now have only one passport, that is, an American passport.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Thank you. Which languages do you speak in your family, at family gatherings and which at work?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: At work, English, exclusively. Occasionally German because I'm in a German department. In my family, of course, only French. I do have a grandchild now who speaks only German, so I do speak German with him.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Thank you. You have written many books, chapters in books, book reviews and you have published numerous papers. Are there any that stand out for you for any particular reasons?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: There's one article that I wrote in 1983 that was never referred to or quoted but it is really the article that contained already in a nutshell a lot of what I wrote about later on. It was titled "Culture and constructs: Communicating attitudes and values in the foreign language classroom" (*Foreign Language Annals* 16:6 (1983), 437-448) and it was about the cultural categories that differ from language to language and that form the basis for one's worldview, such as the category "teacher" in English vs. "Lehrer" in German vs. "professeur" in French. These words have quite a different social, cultural and emotional value in each of these languages!

**JELENA MATIĆ: Some of your majors awards include 1988 ACTFL Nelson Brooks Award for the teaching of culture; 1994 and 2010 MLA Kenneth Mildener Prizes for Outstanding Research in the study of foreign languages and literatures; 1998 Goethe Medal. MLA Distinguished Service Award 2000; UC Berkeley Distinguished Teaching Award 2000; as well as the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award from the American Association for Applied Linguistics 2007. Which do you find more rewarding: teaching or writing?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: That's a very good question because one feeds into the other. What I like about teaching is the thrill of passing on to younger generations things that I discovered myself. On the other hand, I cannot write if I had not had a dialogue with my students beforehand. So, one absolutely feeds into the other.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Thank you very much. You are now retired from the German Department at Berkeley and you hold an appointment as Professor of the Graduate School of Education. Do you teach graduate students at Berkeley now?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: I still have some doctoral students like two or three who are not quite finished with their dissertation. I can't take any new students at UC Berkeley but I will shepherd and guide the other tree until they have finished their dissertation. I have accepted two new students from Germany who are in the

process of writing their dissertation. They live in Germany and they are German students.

**JELENA MATIĆ: You also teach postgraduate courses in Athens.**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Yes, in fact these two students who are German come to me through the Hellenic American University in Athens, exactly.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Are there any differences between the US and European systems of PhD studies?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Yes, there are quite a few differences because the German or the European higher education system is quite different from the American. The American doctoral course of studies includes two years of coursework, rigorous coursework, then you write two or three position papers. Only then do you write your dissertation with the committee of three or four people. The whole thing is much more systematically and rigorously parceled out whereas in Europe there is much more freedom. You don't have coursework, you don't have, for instance, qualifying exams. You do have to write qualifying papers and a dissertation but it's really up to you to acquire the necessary knowledge to write your dissertation and it seems like that there is not a direct link between the coursework that you have done and the writing of your dissertation. Everything is much more regulated in the US.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Does this lead to any differences between the students from Berkeley and the students from Europe with respect to the zest/enthusiasm they have for research?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: In both cases, you have to have a lot of motivation to embark in a doctoral course of studies, and you need to have a passion for research. So Berkeley students and European students are equally motivated. But higher education in the U.S. is much more closely tailored to the needs of the academic market and to the entrepreneurial mindset that such a market requires, in terms of choosing a "hot topic" to write about, attending conferences, networking, publishing, and in general "making a name" for yourself. In Europe, doing research and writing a doctoral dissertation are still perceived as academic exercises that indulge in the "life of the mind"; the academic market is extremely restricted, and professors are not responsible (as in the U.S.) to help you find a job. But in Europe, because research is not as necessarily linked to immediate economic rewards, researchers are more free

to research controversial or unpopular topics and to study them with an intellectual depth that is often lacking in American PhDs.

**JELENA MATIĆ: At Berkeley University you taught courses such as Language and Power, Bilingualism, Second language acquisition. Do you have your favourite one and why?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Oh, yes, I loved to teach *Language and Power*. It was a very large undergraduate course for students between 18 and 22 years old. I had some 200 students in one big amphitheatre and it was quite an event; it was like a theatre play. I could discuss all my favourite authors: Barthes, Bourdieu, Foucault, de Certeau, Bakhtin, Robin Lakoff, Judith Butler, Deborah Cameron. It really opened their minds. The feedback I received was that that course changes their lives. Years later I still receive letters of students who tell me how that course has influenced what they have done since then.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Is there still a course you haven't taught but you would love to?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: I have always dreamed of giving a course on symbolic competence and I'm teaching it right now in Germany, in Bielefeld.

**JELENA MATIĆ: What is your newest project or research that you are working on?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: I just finished a study of foreign language instructors in the university of California system with my Chinese colleague Lihua Zhang. The University of California has twelve different campuses all up and down the state of California and we have just surveyed some 78 instructors and interviewed 35 of them, native and non-native instructors, teaching 17 different foreign languages. We wanted to know how the world looks like from the perspective of instructors who are themselves multilingual, but are expected to behave in the classroom as monolingual native speakers. What do we need to know about foreign language teachers and how they see the world? Lihua and I have been working at putting our findings in a book that will be coming out with Oxford University Press in 2018 under the tentative title *The Multilingual Instructor. How complexity theory can help us understand the foreign language teacher's experience*.

**JELENA MATIĆ: You were the 1994/95 President of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and you are currently the President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA). Do you find these roles challenging?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Yes, challenging in the sense of exciting and also presenting all kinds of unexpected tasks. Being the president of AAAL in 1994/95 AAAL was still relatively small. We only attracted 800 maybe 900 participants. Nowadays, it's more like 2000. When I was president, AAAL was still relatively young but it was very nice to be able to have a feel for the whole association in the US. Now as the president of AILA I'm delighted to be able to be in touch with all the people around the world who do applied linguistics in the different countries that are affiliates of AILA. We have 35 affiliates and I do quite a bit of travelling between China and the Middle East and Japan and Africa. I'm constantly on the road. So, it's nice. I will be doing that until the end of next year.

**JELENA MATIĆ: You were co-editor of the journal *Applied Linguistics* from 1998-2003. You are the founder and editor-in-chief of the UC electronic *L2 Journal*, which was established nine years ago. You were the guest editor of *Modern Language Journal*. Do you find this work rewarding?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Yes and I can only recommend to young doctoral students to get involved with the editing business. It's very exciting. I don't think people realize that when you are the editor of a journal you not only choose, select and sometimes reject papers that are submitted but you are asked to enter the mind of somebody else and really understand what that person is trying to say. You then act as a bridge between the mind of the writer and his/her audience - the readership that is going to be benefitting from that article. It's an exciting task and I can only recommend it. It is a lot of work but it's extremely rewarding.

**JELENA MATIĆ: You travel a lot as a plenary speaker and you are very much engaged in discussions with your colleagues as we have seen in this conference as well. How do you relax? Can you find the time to pursue interests which are not related to linguistics?**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: I love to read and write, in the three languages I know well, French, German and English - and that is my way of relaxing and escaping into other worlds. Up to now I haven't had much time to read novels, except on long flights,

but then I really enjoy them such as Thomas Bernhardt's *Auslöschung* and Stefan Zweig's *Das ungeduldige Herz*. But I love reading poetry before I go to bed and the newspaper. That's about the sum of it because I need to keep abreast of the publications in my field and that takes up all my time in addition to all the rest. I look forward to being really retired and being able to go back to reading literature and things like that. But I do like to take long walks and I like to hike. And I have started to write up my memories of times past in the three languages in which I have lived them, and that is the most rewarding kind of escape from old age.

**JELENA MATIĆ: Professor Kramersch, thank you so much for this interview and for your time that you dedicated to us.**

CLAIRE KRAMSCH: Thank you. You were very gracious.