

UC Berkeley

L2 Journal

Title

The Hearer's Share: Symbolic Reciprocity in Multilingual Interaction through Film and Cooperative Games

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t95m387>

Journal

L2 Journal, 18(1)

Author

Keneman, Margaret

Publication Date

2026-08-19

DOI

10.5070/L2.62295

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

ARTICLE

The Hearer's Share: Symbolic Reciprocity in Multilingual Interaction through Film and Cooperative Games

MARGARET KENEMAN

College of Charleston

kenemanml@cofc.edu

What makes multilingual exchanges hold is not a gifted speaker alone, but a listener who agrees to play. This article names that agreement symbolic reciprocity—the hearer's willingness to share symbolic risk so that meaning and legitimacy are co-produced rather than tested. Framing interaction through a cooperative-game heuristic (without formal modeling) clarifies why equilibrium emerges when participants can do no better than meet halfway, and why “standard” norms so often shift the costs of convenience onto those coded as non-standard. To render these dynamics visible, I treat scripted multilingual scenes in two contemporary films as analytic models: a mahjong table in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), where recognition emerges through a strategically chosen loss, and a Spanish-language television interview in *Selena* (1997), where audience uptake—not perfect form—secures legitimacy over time. Read alongside ecological accounts of symbolic competence, these cases show that multilingual communication depends on the alignment of speaker risk and listener response. The article concludes with pedagogical and assessment implications that reframe listening as co-production and redistribute the labor of understanding more equitably.

Introduction

In October 2018 at the French National Assembly, journalist Véronique Gaurel posed a routine question to politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon. His response—mocking her accent and inviting “more comprehensible French”—circulated widely, not simply as rudeness but as a refusal to do the listener's share of meaning-making. Rather than participating in the cooperative work of interpretation, Mélenchon invoked an imagined monolingual norm that offloads interpretive costs onto the speaker. The exchange crystallizes the ethical stakes of multilingual communication: what happens when the hearer declines the game? Beyond this initial question, the issue becomes not only how such refusals operate, but under what conditions the game itself becomes possible again.

Scholars of multilingualism and symbolic competence have shown how speakers mobilize codes, timescales, and spaces to shape meaning and position self/other; ecological orientations emphasize that these choices are embedded in embodied memories and shifting social fields (e.g., Erikson, 2004; Kramsch & Whitside, 2008; van Lier, 2004). Yet even in these rich accounts, models of interaction often overweight speaker agency and underspecify the listener's obligations in bringing about fair, stable outcomes. Meanwhile, work on linguistic justice has traced how *laissez-faire* arrangements normalize unequal burdens, making “standard” usage the invisible benchmark and

rendering other practices costly or illegible (Van Parijs, 2011). This article argues that these strands converge on a missing piece: the ethics of listening as co-production.

I propose a reframing: that we treat multilingual communication as a cooperative game whose outcomes depend on mutual best-responses rather than unilateral effort. On this view, meaning, recognition, and legitimacy are the interactional payoffs that stabilize only when interlocutors share symbolic risk. To name that ethical stance, I introduce symbolic reciprocity: the listener's willingness to assume interpretive labor—accommodation, patience, repair, and openness to non-standard form—so that symbolic costs are distributed rather than disproportionately imposed on speakers. While this formulation foregrounds the hearer—particularly in contexts where listeners occupy positions of greater symbolic authority—it does not treat meaning-making as unilateral; rather, as the analyses will show, symbolic reciprocity emerges through interactional dynamics in which speaker risk and listener uptake become mutually constitutive. Game-theoretic language here functions not as a formal or predictive apparatus, but as a heuristic that clarifies why communication fails when one party refuses to play, and how it stabilizes when participants can do no better given the other's moves.

While the argument is motivated by a real-world interaction, the analysis that follows turns to film to render these dynamics more systematically visible. Methodologically, I treat scripted multilingual films as analytic models—laboratories that make interactional strategy legible without erasing sociohistorical resonance. I focus on two widely known examples: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), in which Rachel, a Chinese American economist, confronts family gatekeeping in Singapore, and *Selena* (1997), a biopic that follows an English-dominant Mexican American singer negotiating Spanish-language publics and authenticity. In each case, I examine a scene that foregrounds listener responsibility and redistributed interpretive labor: the confrontation between Rachel and her future mother-in-law, Eleanor, in *Crazy Rich Asians* and an early Spanish-language television interview with Selena Quintanilla in *Selena*.

The cases presented in this paper are not intended as parallel illustrations, but as contrasting configurations of multilingual interaction. Whereas the aforementioned Mélenchon exchange illustrates a breakdown in communication when symbolic reciprocity is refused, the interaction in *Crazy Rich Asians* demonstrates how reciprocity can be produced within a bounded encounter. *Selena*, in turn, traces a more extended trajectory in which reciprocity is gradually cultivated across repeated engagements with publics. Viewed collectively, these cases delineate not only what symbolic reciprocity is, but the conditions under which it fails, emerges, and stabilizes.

The article makes three contributions. First, it re-centers the hearer as an ethical and strategic participant, extending symbolic competence with symbolic reciprocity. Second, it offers a cooperative-game vocabulary for talking about fairness in multilingual exchange (including a maxi-min orientation to shared understanding) without importing technical formalisms. Third, it advances a method for conceptual modeling through film that complements ecological approaches to language by isolating the relational logic of interaction while preserving sociohistorical texture. I return, in conclusion, to the Mélenchon exchange to show how this framework names the harm at stake when listeners refuse reciprocity—and to sketch implications for pedagogy and assessment that account for the hearer's share.

Listening as Justice: Language, Power, and the Cost of Convenience

Multilingual interaction as a problem of justice comes into focus through several intersecting strands: the dynamics named by glottophobia and its cognates, the quiet politics of standardization as convenience, and the ecological ear for time and space in every utterance. A modest cooperative-game vocabulary further clarifies these dynamics in terms of players, moves, payoffs, and equilibria (which

are defined more precisely in the theoretical section that follows). The throughline, however, is simple and urgent: multilingual understanding is fair only when the costs of listening are distributed, and that is precisely the work I call symbolic reciprocity—the stance that makes multilingual interaction legible as more than performance, but rather as a negotiation over who bears risk for meaning to come into being.

Linguistic Discrimination and Glottophobia

When a listener declines the work of interpretation, the harm is never only interpersonal; it is patterned. Glottophobia—discrimination on the basis of accent or language practice—names how symbolic hierarchies scale into material inequalities, constraining credibility, mobility, and access (Blanchet, 2016; Blanchet & Clerc Conan, 2018). Adjacent constructs such as *linguicide* (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1998), linguistic prejudice (*preconceito lingüístico*, Bagno, 1997), and language shaming (Piller, 2016) track similar dynamics across contexts: what “sounds normal” is protected as neutral, and what diverges is framed as costly. In public policy and everyday life, language rights are often thin or unevenly enforced, which allows refusals of listening to masquerade as common sense rather than discrimination (Fordsick, 2017).

Standardization as a “Convenience” Ideology

Appeals to standardization arrive as invitations to convenience—clear rules, shared forms, smooth circulation. But convenience is not cost-free. In practice, standards tend to ratify the speech of already powerful groups while shifting the symbolic labor of accommodation onto everyone else. Within higher-education language programs, efforts to “protect” rigor by privileging a standard variety can reproduce a monolingual mindset by other means—replacing anglonormativity with target-language normativity and continuing to externalize interpretive burden to those marked as non-standard (Fordsick, 2017). At the societal scale, Van Parijs (2011) shows how *laissez-faire* arrangements let dominant groups free ride on others’ communicative costs; even when English is not in play, a “neutral” standard quietly designates who must pay for understanding.

From Symbolic Competence to Shared Work

The ecological turn taught us to hear time and space inside language—how utterances carry embodied memory and position selves and others across shifting fields. Symbolic competence names the speaker’s ability to mobilize those resonances (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008); complexity-inflected approaches (e.g., Complex dynamic systems theory) clarify agency as the capacity to deploy semiotic resources for learning and positioning (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2019). Yet these accounts, powerful as they are, often overemphasize the speaker: dynamism is modeled within individuals, while the ethical obligations of listening remain underspecified.

Cooperative Games, Without the Math

A game-theoretic vocabulary also helps describe why some multilingual encounters stabilize while others unravel. Following Clark (2011), interaction is intrinsically strategic and cooperative: speakers design for uptake and hearers’ responses complete the action. Read this way, outcomes are not zero-sum. A Nash equilibrium is not “one wins, one loses,” but a best-response configuration in which neither party has a better move given the other’s stance—a shape communication takes when

participants can do no better than to meet halfway (Clark, 2011). For linguistic justice, Van Parijs reframes language choice as maxi-min: selecting the option that maximizes the minimum shared competence across participants rather than maximizing gains for already advantaged interlocutors (Van Parijs, 2011). This vocabulary does not require formal modeling. It simply names what ecological approaches already suggest: that meaning is co-produced, and that fair outcomes emerge when symbolic costs are distributed rather than externalized to the speaker (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Clark, 2011). By fairness, I mean not that equilibrium is inherently just, but that communicative arrangements can be evaluated as fair (or unfair) depending on how they distribute the labor and risks of understanding across participants.

Theory: Defining Symbolic Reciprocity

Building on work that frames linguistic hierarchy as a justice problem, that hears time/space within utterance, and that treats interaction as strategic and cooperative, I use symbolic reciprocity to name the listener-side complement to symbolic competence (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Clark, 2011; Van Parijs, 2011). If symbolic competence names a speaker's capacity to mobilize linguistic and semiotic resources across timescales and spaces to shape meaning and position self/other, symbolic reciprocity names the hearer's obligation to share symbolic risk: to accommodate non-standard form, to persist with repair rather than policing, and to treat meaning-making as co-produced rather than as a test the speaker must pass alone.

Where symbolic competence has often been understood primarily as a speaker-oriented capacity, symbolic reciprocity foregrounds how interpretive labor is distributed across participants, with particular weight placed on the listener's role. This distinction, however, is neither fixed nor oppositional. In face-to-face interaction, speaker and listener positions continually shift, such that participants move along a spectrum of symbolic labor. Symbolic competence and symbolic reciprocity thus function less as discrete abilities than as role-weighted orientations that slide across turns: speakers rely on listeners' willingness to take interpretive risk, while listeners anticipate their own repositioning as speakers. Meaning emerges not because one party bears the full burden of competence or interpretation, but because participants coordinate around a shared expectation that symbolic labor will be reciprocally assumed over time.

As previously mentioned, I frame this relationship using a cooperative-game vocabulary as a descriptive and heuristic lens rather than a formal analytical framework. The terminology of players, moves, payoffs, and equilibrium is used metaphorically to describe interactional tendencies, not to advance formal or predictive modeling. By players, I refer to interlocutors situated in uneven fields of recognition; by moves, the linguistic and semiotic choices through which interaction unfolds, including stance, repair, and accommodation; by payoffs, the interactional goods at stake, such as intelligibility, recognition, and legitimacy; and by equilibrium, the moment at which an interaction stabilizes because participants can no longer improve their position without undermining shared understanding (i.e., increasing the interpretive burden on others). Read in this way, multilingual interaction is not treated as a zero-sum exchange in which one participant's gain entails another's loss, but as a coordinated process in which outcomes depend on how participants distribute the costs and risks of understanding.

In cooperative terms, interlocutors seek outcomes—recognition, intelligibility, legitimacy—that are stable because each has no better response given the other's stance. Such an equilibrium is ethically meaningful only if symbolic costs (accent labor, code-switching effort, interpretive patience) are distributed rather than externalized to the speaker. The maxi-min heuristic (Van Parijs, 2011) captures this fairness orientation: participants orient toward choices that maximize the minimum

shared understanding available to all parties, rather than maximizing gains for already advantaged listeners. This vocabulary functions descriptively to clarify interactional obligations, rather than to advance formal or predictive claims. It simply renders explicit what ecological approaches already imply: that communication is a relational system in which both speaker and hearer must act for meaning and justice to converge.

What matters here is that symbolic reciprocity operates on two interrelated levels. On the one hand, it can be understood as an ethical orientation—a stance that interlocutors may adopt in advance of interaction, reflecting a willingness to share the interpretive labor required for meaning-making. On the other hand, and as the analyses in this article demonstrate, symbolic reciprocity is not simply given or withheld but is contingently produced, sustained, or refused through interaction itself. That is, reciprocity emerges (or fails to emerge) through participants' strategic moves, responses, and reinterpretations over time. Framing symbolic reciprocity in this dual way—as both an ethical orientation and an interactional achievement—allows us to account not only for its absence (as in refusals of listening), but also for the ways it can be gradually built, negotiated, and stabilized within unfolding multilingual encounters.

Approach/Materials

I work with two scripted multilingual films not as “illustrations,” but as analytic models—controlled laboratories where the dynamics of meaning, risk, and responsibility are rendered legible without stripping away their social grain. This is in the spirit of the ecological orientation that first drew me to symbolic competence: the conviction that language emerges across timescales and spaces, saturated with embodied memory (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008); the difference is that I momentarily freeze the scene so that the relational logic of interaction can be seen in depth.

The use of film as analytic modeling does not rest on claims of empirical representativeness, but on its capacity to render interactional dynamics unusually visible. Scripted scenes function as condensed social laboratories in which the distribution of symbolic risk, the sequencing of interpretive moves, and the consequences of listener response are made explicit through narrative design. Rather than standing in for naturally occurring interaction, these scenes isolate and amplify relational patterns that are often more difficult to observe in real-time discourse. In this sense, film, like game-theoretic vocabulary, serves as a heuristic device: not to generalize statistically, but to clarify the underlying logic through which multilingual interactions succeed, fail, or stabilize.

Materials

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, Rachel Chu travels with her boyfriend Nick Young to Singapore and collides with a social world organized by wealth, lineage, and language. English circulates as a high-prestige lingua franca, but interactional power often shifts with Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Malay, and Singlish (Singaporean English)—each indexing different forms of intimacy, authority, and social belonging. Accent and code choice are not decorative; they are gatekeeping resources that can include or exclude, and the film script's own paratexts flag accent as a charged social index. The film culminates in a mahjong game between Rachel and Nick's mother, Eleanor, where conflicts over legitimacy and belonging are concentrated at a single table.

In *Selena*, the English-dominant Mexican American singer performs for Spanish-speaking publics in the U.S. and Mexico, where Spanish is not only a medium of communication but a symbolic currency through which authenticity is conferred or withheld. Unlike settings where English is structurally dominant, Selena's Spanish becomes the non-dominant, higher-cost code for her, and the

audience's stance—generosity, patience, or punitive standardization—determines whether her outreach yields recognition. An early Spanish-language TV interview in Mexico foregrounds this asymmetry: the success of the exchange hinges less on grammatical precision than on whether listeners will meet the speaker halfway, redistributing the interpretive burden that English-dominant speakers often expect others to carry.

The materials are deliberately modest: (1) the mahjong confrontation between Rachel and Eleanor in *Crazy Rich Asians*, and (2) an early Spanish-language television interview with Selena Quintanilla in *Selena*. These two scenes carry different cultural freight, but they stage the same problem: who bears the symbolic costs of understanding, and when does a listener step forward to share them. While both scenes are analyzed through the same conceptual lens, they operate at different scales of social interaction. *Crazy Rich Asians* centers a bounded interpersonal encounter in which reciprocity is not assumed in advance but emerges through interaction between interlocutors, whereas Selena follows the production of recognition across repeated engagements with broader publics. Together, the cases illuminate both the micro-interactional and sociohistorical dimensions of symbolic reciprocity, showing how the shared labor of meaning-making can be negotiated within a single encounter or cultivated cumulatively over time. That said, the choice to treat film as a site of analysis is not a retreat from “real life,” but an acknowledgment that scripts, like models, concentrate social forces—their cues to accents, code choice, proxemics, and audience uptake make strategy unusually audible.

Analytic Lens

Using the game-theoretic vocabulary defined above, I read each scene through the four elements—players, moves, payoffs, and equilibrium—which make the analysis compact and comparable. By *players*, I refer to interlocutors situated in uneven fields of recognition; by *moves*, the linguistic and semiotic choices that shape a conversation—lexical and code choices as well as stance, silence, and responses to repair; by *payoffs*, the interactional goods at stake, such as recognition, intelligibility, and legitimacy; and by *equilibrium*, the moment an outcome stabilizes because each party has no better response available given the other's stance (Clark, 2011; Van Parijs, 2011). This framing translates the more abstract vocabulary of symbolic reciprocity into a practical analytic lens for reading interactional dynamics in context.

This framing also lets me keep faith with the ecological insight that meaning is never just the sum of turns-at-talk; it ripples through embodied time (what a language has meant to a life) and embodied space (where an utterance positions a person in relation to others) (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). In the mahjong scene, for instance, Mandarin and English do not merely transmit content; they index heritage, gatekeeping, and the price of belonging. In the interview scene, Spanish is not a hurdle to be cleared but a gift extended—and a test of whether listeners will answer with generosity or with standards that punish the very outreach they demand. Reading for players/moves/payoffs/equilibrium helps me show how those ecological resonances are taken up—or refused—by the hearer, which is where symbolic reciprocity lives.

Why Only Two Scenes?

Because depth matters more than coverage for the claim I want to make. My argument is conceptual: that multilingual communication behaves like a cooperative game in which outcomes depend on mutual best-responses, and that fair outcomes require listeners to share symbolic risk. Two sharply

drawn scenes are sufficient to demonstrate how this logic works across different cultural worlds without suggesting it is limited to either (Clark, 2011; Van Parijs, 2011).

Maxi-Min as a Fairness Heuristic

When I describe participants orienting to a maxi-min logic, I am naming a recognizable ethical tendency in multilingual encounters: to choose the code or practice that maximizes the minimum shared understanding available to all parties. In the analyses that follow, maxi-min will sometimes look like an overt concession (e.g., Rachel's "choose to lose" at the mahjong table), and sometimes like a listener's accommodation (e.g., audiences meeting Selena partway). The point is not that one always should concede, but that equilibrium—a stable, just outcome—emerges when interlocutors distribute the costs of understanding rather than offloading them onto the speaker alone (Van Parijs, 2011).

Limitations and Scope

Scripted scenes compress reality; they are not population data, and I do not treat them as such. The generalizations I make are conceptual, not statistical. I triangulate my readings with the films' own paratexts (script notes on accent and code, narrative framing of interactional risk) and with extant theoretical work on symbolic competence and cooperative reasoning in language (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Clark, 2011). In other words: film gives me an analytic clarity that everyday data often obscures, while the ecological and cooperative frames keep that clarity accountable to lived, multilingual experience (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Clark, 2011).

Analysis 1: *Crazy Rich Asians*—Mahjong, Strategy, and the Ethics of Losing

The mahjong confrontation between Rachel Chu and Eleanor Young in *Crazy Rich Asians* offers an unusually legible model of multilingual interaction as a cooperative game—one in which meaning and legitimacy hinge not on linguistic proficiency alone, but on the distribution of symbolic risk. The scene's power lies not only in its narrative stakes, but in its structural clarity: it renders visible the players, the strategies available to them, and the conditions under which a stable outcome—an equilibrium—can emerge.

Players and Stakes

The players are asymmetrically positioned. Eleanor, as matriarch, speaks from a place of inherited authority; her legitimacy is largely uncontested within the social field she inhabits. Rachel, though highly educated and professionally successful, enters this field as an outsider—Chinese American, English-dominant, and therefore subject to scrutiny as insufficiently "Chinese." Language choice throughout the film has already indexed these asymmetries: Mandarin and dialects operate as gatekeeping resources, while English functions both as global capital and as a mark of cultural distance. By the time the two women sit down at the mahjong table, the stakes are clear: Rachel's future with Nick, but also her symbolic right to belong.

From an ecological perspective, this encounter is saturated with embodied time and space (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). Mahjong is not a neutral pastime; it is a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), freighted with intergenerational knowledge, familial intimacy, and cultural continuity. Eleanor's authority derives not simply from what she says, but from what the game itself represents. Rachel's

participation therefore already involves risk: to play at all is to enter a symbolic world whose rules were not made with her in mind.

Strategies and Moves

Eleanor's strategy throughout the film can be described as playing not to lose. She polices the boundaries of legitimacy, insisting on standards that preserve her family's symbolic capital. In interactional terms, this strategy maintains a familiar payoff structure: Eleanor retains interpretive authority, while Rachel remains responsible for proving, translating, and adapting. The costs of understanding are thus externalized to Rachel from the outset.

Rachel's move at the mahjong table disrupts this logic. The scene makes explicit that she is holding a winning hand. She has mastered the game sufficiently to secure an immediate victory—a symbolic triumph that would demonstrate competence within Eleanor's terms. Instead, Rachel chooses to lose. This move is not naïve self-sacrifice, but a strategic reconfiguration of the interaction.

By revealing her winning hand and then conceding, Rachel alters the terms of the encounter. Winning, in this context, would not simply register as competence; it would reinforce the evaluative frame that positions her as a rival rather than a relational participant. A straightforward victory would show that Rachel can succeed within Eleanor's terms, but it would not transform the underlying distribution of symbolic labor that requires her to prove herself. In this sense, even highly developed symbolic competence would remain insufficient: it would confirm Rachel's ability to play the game without altering the conditions under which that game is judged.

Losing, by contrast, knowingly reframes Rachel's position. She signals an understanding of what is at stake beyond the table—the emotional and symbolic costs that Eleanor associates with her son's future. This is a maxi-min move in Van Parijs's (2011) sense: Rachel relinquishes a maximal gain (immediate victory) to secure a minimal but crucial payoff—recognition of her moral standing. At the same time, the move makes her competence visible while refusing to convert it into domination. It disallows a deficit reading (as incapable) and disrupts the competitive logic structuring the encounter. Rather than maximizing her individual payoff, Rachel restructures the interaction so that recognition becomes possible under different conditions.

Payoffs and Equilibrium

The payoff of this exchange is not linguistic accuracy, cultural fluency, or even acceptance in the conventional sense. It is recognition—specifically, Eleanor's recognition that Rachel understands the game Eleanor herself has been playing. Importantly, this payoff does not arise automatically from Rachel's move. Its meaning depends on Eleanor's response.

Faced with Rachel's decision, Eleanor can no longer sustain a purely evaluative stance. To make sense of the gesture, she must shift from judging performance to interpreting intention. This shift requires symbolic reciprocity: a willingness to share interpretive labor rather than enforcing unilateral standards.

Crucially, this reciprocity is not given at the outset. The meaning of Rachel's move is not inherent in the gesture itself but is constituted through Eleanor's uptake. Symbolic reciprocity is therefore actively produced in this moment. It emerges when Eleanor accepts the invitation to reinterpret Rachel's action and, in doing so, participates in reconfiguring the interaction itself. In this sense, reciprocity is not only an ethical orientation, but an interactional achievement.

This is the point at which a cooperative equilibrium emerges. Given Rachel's move, Eleanor has no better response that would preserve her own moral coherence. The interaction stabilizes not

because one player defeats the other, but because both parties orient toward a shared understanding of what counts as a fair outcome. As Clark (2011) argues, communicative action is fundamentally strategic and cooperative: speakers design their moves with anticipated uptake in mind, and meaning arises through that reciprocity. The mahjong scene renders this logic visible with unusual clarity.

Symbolic Reciprocity in Action

What the scene ultimately demonstrates is that symbolic competence alone cannot secure a fair or stable outcome. Rachel's ability to navigate multiple cultural and linguistic codes enables her to produce a strategically meaningful move, but it does not determine its success. Success depends on whether that move is taken up as meaningful by the listener.

Symbolic reciprocity, in this sense, is both anticipated and achieved: Rachel acts as if reciprocity were possible, but it only materializes through Eleanor's response. The resulting equilibrium is not the product of individual skill, but of a jointly produced reorientation of the interaction—one in which the burden of interpretation is, however briefly, shared.

The scene thus exemplifies symbolic reciprocity as both the ethical condition and the interactional accomplishment of meaningful multilingual exchange. The game does not end when Rachel plays; it ends when Eleanor responds. The equilibrium they reach is fragile, but real—achieved not through domination, but through a shared willingness to bear symbolic risk.

Analysis 2: *Selena*—Audience, Risk, and the Time of Recognition

If the mahjong scene in *Crazy Rich Asians* renders the cooperative logic of multilingual interaction visible within a bounded exchange, *Selena* shows how symbolic reciprocity unfolds over time, in public, and across multiple, unevenly positioned listeners. Here, the “game” is less explicit, but the stakes are no less real. Language becomes the medium through which cultural legitimacy is not simply expressed but actively negotiated and gradually conferred.

Although I focus here on a single interview scene, the analytic stakes extend beyond the filmic moment. The scene functions less as an isolated interaction than as a condensation of a broader trajectory in which Selena, as a public figure, repeatedly engaged multilingual audiences under conditions of asymmetrical competence. What the film renders visible in a single exchange corresponds, in lived practice, to an iterative process: the gradual production of shared understanding through repeated acts of linguistic risk and audience uptake.¹ In this sense, the scene models not only an interaction, but a pattern—one through which symbolic reciprocity can be built, stabilized, and sedimented over time.

Players and Publics

Unlike the intimate dyad of Rachel and Eleanor, the players in *Selena* are distributed across publics. Selena Quintanilla performs not only for interviewers or studio audiences, but for imagined communities: Mexican audiences, U.S. Latinx communities, industry gatekeepers, and future listeners whose recognition she cannot fully anticipate. Her position is structurally asymmetrical. Though

¹ Film vs. lived terrain: While *Selena* provides a stylized scene for modeling interactional dynamics, “authenticity” here is not merely a narrative device. It is bound up with Latinx identity formation, racialized and gendered visibility, diaspora markets, and the politics of public mourning—all of which unfolded beyond the film as contested processes of recognition and belonging. For a sustained account of this broader cultural field—coined as “Selenidad” to describe the political and affective work generated by Selena's life, death, and commemoration—see Paredez (2009).

marketed as a representative of Mexican heritage, Selena is English-dominant and only partially fluent in Spanish—a condition the film frames not as individual failure, but as historically produced within borderland life.

Language thus becomes a site of vulnerability. Spanish indexes authenticity, belonging, and cultural continuity, yet it is unevenly available as a resource. Selena's relationship to Spanish is learned, practiced, and incomplete. Her legitimacy cannot be secured through mastery alone, because mastery itself is evaluated by listeners who already occupy positions of symbolic authority.

Linguistic Risk as Strategy

An early Spanish-language television interview in Mexico crystallizes these dynamics. The scene is marked by hesitation—measured pacing, moments of lexical searching, and audible awareness of accent. From the perspective of symbolic competence, Selena's choices reflect strategic awareness. She does not retreat into English, nor does she adopt an exaggerated or hyper-correct register. Instead, she speaks as she can, effectively inviting interpretation rather than asserting control.

This is a strategic move whose success cannot be determined unilaterally. Selena's utterances place her in a position of exposure, where the payoff—recognition as a legitimate interlocutor—depends on how listeners respond. Crucially, what is at stake is not the success of a single performance, but the establishment of a relationship over time. Selena's linguistic risk is oriented not only toward immediate comprehension, but toward the possibility of future recognition. Each instance of non-fluency becomes part of an extended interactional arc in which audiences must repeatedly decide whether to accommodate, reinterpret, or reject the speaker's effort.

In this respect, Selena's stance parallels Rachel's move in the mahjong scene. In both cases, the speaker does not simply demonstrate competence, but risks misrecognition by refusing to secure legitimacy on dominant terms. Such risk is not merely expressive; it is interactionally generative. By speaking without guarantees of success, Selena creates the conditions under which listeners must decide whether to share the burden of understanding. Symbolic reciprocity, in this sense, depends not only on listener generosity, but on a prior act of exposure that invites it.

Listener Response and Symbolic Reciprocity

What distinguishes this scene is that the outcome hinges on audience response. Laughter, warmth, and continued engagement signal a willingness to share the burden of understanding. The interaction succeeds not because Selena suddenly “gets Spanish right,” but because her interlocutors and viewers choose to listen generously, persisting through moments of non-fluency and accepting partial understanding as sufficient.

This is symbolic reciprocity in action. Listeners assume symbolic risk by relaxing rigid standards of correctness and allowing meaning to emerge across uneven competence. In cooperative terms, they participate in stabilizing an interaction in which Selena's presence is affirmed and future exchanges are made possible.

Importantly, this reciprocity is not confined to a single moment. The responses depicted in the interview scene index a broader pattern of listener behavior extending across performances and contexts. Selena's audiences do not simply evaluate her; they participate in the gradual construction of her legitimacy by choosing, again and again, to meet her halfway. Symbolic reciprocity here is distributed across a public: enacted not by a single interlocutor, but by a shifting collective whose repeated acts of accommodation allow recognition to accumulate over time.

Time, Memory, and Distributed Payoffs

Unlike the decisive moment of the mahjong table, recognition in *Selena* unfolds across embodied time (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). Each performance, interview, and public appearance accrues symbolic value, such that early interactions requiring substantial listener accommodation lay the groundwork for later moments of relative stability. The cooperative dynamic is thus iterated rather than resolved in a single exchange.

This temporal dimension complicates accounts of multilingual interaction grounded solely in individual proficiency. Selena's success cannot be explained by increased competence alone; it depends on repeated acts of listener reciprocity that normalize her participation and recalibrate expectations. What begins as accommodation becomes, over time, recognition.

In this sense, Selena's career can be understood as an extended interactional process through which symbolic reciprocity is not merely requested but actively cultivated. By persistently engaging Spanish-language audiences despite uneven competence, she creates the conditions under which listeners can—and ultimately do—share the burden of understanding. What emerges is not a single equilibrium, but a series of stabilized moments whose cumulative effect is a reconfiguration of what counts as legitimate participation.

Fairness Beyond Mastery

What *Selena* ultimately demonstrates is that symbolic reciprocity can emerge not only within bounded interactions, but across time through iterative engagement. Unlike the mahjong scene, where reciprocity is achieved within a single encounter, here it is distributed, contingent, and cumulative. No single interaction secures legitimacy. Rather, legitimacy emerges as audiences repeatedly choose to interpret linguistic difference as effort rather than failure, and to value participation over conformity. Without symbolic reciprocity, no amount of effort on the part of the speaker can yield a stable outcome; with it, multilingual interaction becomes not only possible, but transformative at the level of public culture.

Conclusion: The Hearer's Share

The exchange between Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Véronique Gaurel that opens this article is, on the surface, unremarkable: a politician refuses a journalist's question. What renders it analytically and ethically salient is how that refusal is enacted. By mocking Gaurel's accent and invoking an imagined standard of "comprehensible French," Mélenchon declines the cooperative work of meaning-making. He refuses not only the question, but the game itself—offloading interpretive responsibility onto the speaker and converting linguistic difference into grounds for exclusion. The interaction collapses not because understanding is impossible, but because symbolic reciprocity is withheld.

The analyses of *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Selena* show what becomes possible when that refusal does not occur. In each case, multilingual interaction unfolds as a cooperative enterprise in which outcomes depend on how symbolic costs are distributed. Rachel Chu's decision to lose at the mahjong table and Selena Quintanilla's willingness to take linguistic risks in public do not guarantee recognition, but they create the conditions under which recognition becomes possible. In both cases, success hinges on a coordinated dynamic: speakers expose themselves to potential misrecognition, and listeners respond by sharing the burden of interpretation.

This article has argued that symbolic competence, as powerful as it is, remains incomplete without an account of this relational dynamic. Symbolic reciprocity names the hearer's role in sharing

interpretive labor. But the analyses also show that reciprocity does not arise from listener accommodation alone. It depends on a prior willingness—however constrained—for speakers to act without guarantees of uptake. Meaningful multilingual interaction thus emerges not from competence in isolation, but from the alignment of speaker risk and listener response.

This reframing carries important implications for pedagogy and assessment. Language classrooms have long privileged production—accuracy, fluency, grammatical control—while treating listening as a largely receptive skill and positioning misunderstanding as a failure of the speaker. If symbolic reciprocity is central to multilingual communication, then this model is insufficient. Learners must be prepared not only to produce language, but to participate in the co-production of meaning as both speakers and hearers.

On the one hand, this entails cultivating listener responsibility: the willingness to accommodate, to persist through partial understanding, and to interpret difference as a site of possibility rather than deficiency. On the other hand, it requires creating conditions under which learners can take interactional risks. This does not mean encouraging error for its own sake, nor romanticizing vulnerability, but recognizing that meaningful participation often involves speaking without full control, and without assurance of recognition. As the cases of Rachel and Selena suggest, such moments of exposure are not failures to be corrected, but necessary components of interactional dynamics in which shared understanding becomes possible.

The classroom, in this sense, can function as a protected site for rehearsing these dynamics. Within pedagogical spaces that normalize partial understanding and redistribute the burden of interpretation, learners can experience what it means to engage in exchanges where meaning is co-constructed rather than policed. This does not eliminate the possibility of refusal—there will always be interlocutors who, like Mélenchon, decline the work of listening. But repeated participation in environments where symbolic reciprocity is expected and practiced may shift the norm from one in which speakers bear the cost of intelligibility alone, to one in which understanding is treated as a shared responsibility.

Ultimately, symbolic reciprocity reframes multilingual communication not as the achievement of perfect form, but as an ethical and interactional practice. It reminds us that meaning does not reside in the speaker or the listener alone, but in the space between them—in the willingness to risk, to respond, and to meet one another halfway.

References

- Blanchet, P. (2016). *Discriminations: combattre la glottophobie*. Éditions Textuel.
- Blanchet, P. & Clerc Conan, S. (2018). *Je n'ai plus osé ouvrir la bouche... Témoignages de glottophobie vécue et moyens de se défendre*. Éditions Lambert-Lucas.
- Bagno, M. (1997). *Preconceito lingüístico o que é, como se faz*. Edições Loyola.
- Chu, J. M. (Director). (2018). *Crazy Rich Asians* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Clark, R. L. (2011). *Meaningful Games: Exploring Language with Game Theory*. MIT Press.
- Erikson, F. (2004). *Talk and Social Theory: Ecologies of speaking and listening in everyday life*. Polity Press.
- Forsdick, C. (2017). Global France, Global French: beyond the monolingual. *Contemporary French Civilization*, 42(1), 13-29. doi:10.3828/cfc.2017.2
- Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2008). Language Ecology in Multilingual Settings. *Towards a Theory of Symbolic Competence*, *Applied Linguistics*, 29(4), 645–671.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (1997). Chaos/complexity science and second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 18(2), 141-165.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2019). On Language Learner Agency: A Complex Dynamic Systems Theory Perspective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(S1), 61-79.
- Nava, G. (Director). (1997). *Selena* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Paredes, D. (2009). *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. Duke University Press.

- Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice: An Introduction to Applied Sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Phillipson, R. (1998). Linguicide. In Mey, Jacob, L. (Ed.). *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* (pp. 506-507). Pergamon Press.
- van Lier, L. (2004). The semiotics and ecology of language learning: Perception, voice, identity and democracy. *Utbildning & Demokrati*, 13(3), 79-103.
- Van Parijs, P. (2011). *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*. Oxford University Press.