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The Grammar Translation Method: WHAT grammar? WHY translation?

Abstract

The major aim of this paper is to show that certain recent developments in Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and Translation Studies (TS) could be used as arguments for reviving the long discredited Grammar Translation Method (GTM). It is argued that CL provides significant insight into the target language structure and helps FL learners to discover motivation underlying conceptualisations and their linguistic expression while translation, by bringing into light interlingual contrasts, exposes culturally motivated differences between the native and the foreign tongues at the same time making learners more aware of crucial universal aspects of verbal expression.

1. Introductory remarks

It is of course a platitude to say that Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) methodology must be based upon a theory of language; the label “Applied Linguistics,” which is generally (although not quite correctly) used as its synonym, reflects the principle *linguistica ancilla disciplinae*. The historical development of FLT methodology, marked by a long chain of subsequent theoretical proposals and their practical implementations, shows how closely main assumptions underlying consecutive theoretical frameworks for FLT reflect fundamental developments in linguistics at a given time. Moreover, while in earlier FLT models translation figured merely as one of the teaching or testing techniques, with recent emergence of Translation Studies (TS) as a scholarly discipline successfully striving for autonomy, the contribution from TS has been gaining importance.

It is not the aim of the present essay to offer even a cursory survey of either the *status ante* or the *status quo* in FLT. Instead, I would like to demonstrate how recent developments in Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and TS could be used as arguments for reviving the long discredited Grammar Translation Method

(GTM), without at the same time provoking potential criticism of FLT methodology “running in circles.” We shall claim that it is the spiral which is a better source for the metaphor.

2. The “old” Grammar Translation Method

2.1. Main principles

The classical GTM stemmed out of traditional (pre-structuralist) linguistics, and – within its general historical, social and cultural context – focused upon classical languages: Greek and Latin – the first, and the most important, languages to be described, learned and taught. It was based on three fundamental principles. First, its advocates believed that the best way to explain the meaning of words and phrases in the target language was through their translation into the source language. Second, it was assumed that the grammar of the foreign language is best learned when the learner compares and contrasts it with grammatical structures of his native tongue. These two principles account for the prominent position of interlingual translation as a main teaching technique. The third basic principle underlying the classical GTM was the assumption that the idiom of the target language is best remembered through reading and interpreting prominent literary texts, considered as paragons of perfect language use.

With its focus upon developing the skill of reading – at the cost of the remaining skills, often neglected or totally ignored – the method aimed at producing students proficient at reading works of literary art and translating them into their native tongue. In its primary original version, the ultimate purpose of teaching through translation was to develop the students’ mental discipline and cognitive capacities.

2.2. Grammar and lexicon

Grammatical rules, exemplified by extracts from texts used as teaching materials and then explained at great length, were laboriously memorised by learners and then – hopefully – applied to the translation process. The “building block” metaphor which underlies this model of grammar led students to believe that sentences are built by putting together individual words according to rigid and predictable grammatical patterns. Any deviation from the rules was judged as an error and strictly corrected. Words, given out of their contexts and arranged in long lists, were memorised with the intention of providing students with a number of building blocks with which the grammatical patterns could be subsequently filled.

2.3. Translation

In terms of the dichotomy generally accepted in TS and first proposed by Nida (1964) translation procedures used in the traditional GTM required adherence to the principle of formal rather than functional (dynamic) equivalence. In consequence, emphasis was put on structural differences between the source and the target language systems as well as upon the shape of particular grammatical rules: at the cost of standard requirements of everyday communication.

To facilitate the near-to-impossible task of building sentences in the foreign language back-translation was sometimes used, as exemplified by an often quoted classical example, taken from a lesson taught in the middle of the last century in one of Kraków schools, where pupils were asked to translate into English – word for word – the quasi-Polish sentence *Jesienne liście są miłe do chodzenia po* (“Autumn leaves are nice to walk on”).

2.4. (Intercultural) Communication

Within the framework of the traditional GTM culture was considered as tantamount to (classical) literature – the *belles lettres*. It was to be looked for in literary texts read, admired and translated in and outside the classroom, and never expected to be found at the level of individual words or structures. Words or phrases classified as “culturally loaded” (notably those referring to what is today defined as *realia*) – obviously most problematic in translation – were explained in the students’ native tongue and paraphrased. Since the ability to read was considered much more important than the ability to communicate in the foreign language, recognising cultural differences or finding ways of coping with them were not on the list of teaching priorities.

3. The “new” Grammar Translation Method

The brief description of the classical GTM given in Section 2. above does not bring any information that might be new to anyone but a total novice to the field. However, it was perhaps necessary to provide it in view of the fact that the “new” GTM, as proposed in this essay, means replacing most of the old assumptions and the resulting principles and techniques with their direct opposites.

The classical GTM was discredited following the recognition of crucial importance of communication as the ultimate goal of FLT. As it often happens with radical reactions, the pendulum swung too far the opposite way; after the emergence of American structuralism FLT methodology followed suit, and the advance of the direct (audio-lingual) method meant banning the native tongue from the classroom and pushing “mental discipline and cognitive capacities” out of the methodologists’ visual field.

Once again, it is not the purpose of this essay to discuss the different methods – and variants thereof – which developed after this breakthrough; instead, I would like to make a plea for a “new TGM” – based upon the model of language known as Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and using inter- and intralingual translation as a basic tool. As is well known – to “theoretical” and “applied” linguists alike – “cognitivism” has many meanings; likewise, there are numerous variations of what goes under the name of “cognitive linguistics.” For the purposes of the following discussion, I will use the term in reference to the model developed by the American linguist Ronald Langacker and his American and European followers (cf. Langacker 2009; Geeraerts 2006; Kristiansen *et al.* 2006).

3.1. Assumptions

Main tenets of CL stem out of the fundamental principle of primacy of meaning of linguistic messages over their syntactic structure. Since it is the users of language who convey messages relative to their intended communicative intention, these messages must reflect their particular conceptualisations of given semantic contents. Language (or *a* language) provides its speakers with a pool of possibilities (lexical and structural), out of which particular selections are made to fit particular characteristics of particular speech events. The choice is motivated by individual contexts of use, and since the context – both verbal (“co-text”) and nonverbal (situational) – is inherently dynamic, so is the meaning of words and structures, which are construed “online” as the speech event develops. And since the context is also processed “online,” language has to be seen as an element of the overall organisation of human cognition, and ultimately description of language becomes a description of human cognition.

In the process of cognition, categorisation plays the most important part. Unlike in classical systems of logic, which are built upon the Aristotelian system of categorisation, categories invented by the human mind to classify things and processes that make up the surrounding reality are inherently radial, with fuzzy borders and category membership being a matter of degree. Although the explicit description of languages in terms of radial categorisation comes from the CL theory, the principle has of course been present, *implicite*, in the selection and structuring of most FLT materials. Therefore, the plea would rather be for direct and systematic reference to the concept. Thus on the level of words, category central meanings differ from peripheral ones, and what underlies the lack of full semantic overlap is semantic and pragmatic motivation. For instance, the English noun *way* prototypically refers to a track for travelling along, but its less prototypical meaning, e.g. a course of action, can be easily explained as being motivated by conceptual similarity of the two domains.

The same principle refers – although less obviously – to grammatical categories: a concrete noun is a “better” member of its category than, for instance, a gerund,

which is situated in the (fuzzy) border zone between a thing seen as an object (as in *Put the washing on the line*) or an activity (as in *I am fed up with washing his clothes every second day*). Moreover, the principle can be also extended to grammatical structures. Thus an interrogative construction is a “better” question than an affirmative one, although – less prototypically – the latter can also be used.

In the process of cognition things which are yet unknown are “tamed” by being compared to what had already been mentally assimilated, and the comparison naturally results in metaphorisation – one of the main processes that underlie cognition. In consequence, the occurrence of metaphor is no longer restricted to literary (poetic) language, and rather than being an embellishment of rhetorically sophisticated texts, it becomes an ubiquitous element of all linguistic messages. Much can be revealed – to scholars and students alike – by analysing “metaphors we live by” (cf. Lakoff, Johnson 1980), which leads to questions like: How is the process of *drawing conclusions from a discussion* similar to that of *drawing water out of a well*? The novelty of such an approach would lie “in the presentation of non-prototypical uses of a given construction not as “exceptions to the rule” but rather as *motivated* extensions from the prototype” (Boers, Lindstromberg 2006: 330, emphasis – ET).

Finally, CL claims that linguistic messages are never complete, in the sense of conveying the entire content and meaning; instead, language is seen as an “instruction of use,” signalling interpretations via inherent metonymic words and structures. It is only pragmatic factors (or cultural expectations) that make us think that the utterance *Give me a red pencil, please* is a request for a pencil that can be used to write in red rather than one that is red on the outside. But do we want the red pencil just for a while, or do we intend to keep it? Do we intend to actually use it or, perhaps, just to put it in the breast pocket for an aesthetic effect? Such questions, prompted by semantic and pragmatic incompleteness, can be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

3.2. Grammar and lexicon

General assumptions, as outlined in 3.1. above, shape the CL view of lexicon and grammar – traditionally two separate language components, now seen as elements of a continuum. Both lexemes and constructions are given the status of linguistic units, defined as conventional pairings of meanings and phonological forms. The units are “cognitive routines” (the term introduced by Langacker, *passim*), *sui generis* shortcuts leading from concepts to expressions, and not requiring laborious compositional or derivational operations. Such units can be small, but they can also be quite large: for instance, the noun *anthem* has the same status of a linguistic unit as, say, the entire text of a particular anthem, recalled “holistically” whenever it is sung by members of a national community.

Like shortcuts understood in the primary physical sense of the word, linguistic units can be well beaten tracks or narrow paths, or, in traditional terms, more or

less strongly conventionalised. However, “weakly conventionalised” is not tantamount to “incorrect.” Once this principle is accepted, FLT will concentrate on the conventionalised, but at the same time take account the dynamic character of the process of conventionalisation. To refer to an ongoing phenomenon, consider, for instance, the growing frequency of use of the adverb *like* in such expressions as *She, like, really understands the problem*.

The tenets of CL require that words be no longer seen as mere containers for meanings, since their verbal and nonverbal contexts, as well as differing scopes of encyclopaedic knowledge shared by language communities or individual language users, condition particular ways in which the ubiquitous metonymies are completed. A *red pencil* will be – at least in our culture – most probably (conventionally) interpreted as a pencil that writes in red.

In CL, grammar is seen as being symbolic in nature, carrying schematic meanings, which are specified by inserting particular linguistic units into the schemas. For instance, as constructions, English Continuous tenses symbolise actions whose beginning and end are situated outside the visual field of the speaker (and of the listener, if he “understands” the message).

Grammatical categories are based on semantic rather than formal criteria. At the highest level of categorisation the division is dichotomous: the split between “things” and “relations” reflects the fundamental cognitive ordering of meanings: the surrounding world yields to perception via events that involve participants undergoing processes and performing actions; this fundamental cognitive dichotomy gives rise to grammatical systems of all known human languages.

3.3. Translation

While the traditional GTM assumed that the ability to translate literature is the quality of all well disciplined minds, modern TS assume that translation is a skill in its own right, which requires a combination of linguistic knowledge with a particular mental set-up and specialised instruction. Therefore, within the modern process of FLT it cannot be considered as the ultimate purpose of teaching procedures. Yet it can be used as an invaluable tool. The merit of translation lies both in its “positive” and “negative” impact. The former involves cases traditionally defined as equivalence. For instance, if we demonstrate to the native Polish learners that in their language questions can be asked – as they are asked in English – by means of constructions in which the interrogative forms are actually lacking, the universal principle of economy of expression is taken for granted and becomes profitably extended over novel speech events. If it appears that the English verb *to butter* must be translated into Polish as the syntactic structure *smarować masłem*, the lack of a sharp borderline separating morphology from syntax becomes easy to perceive, accept and implement. Examples are legion, and mostly too obvious to deserve mentioning at this point.

The negative impact of interlingual translation results from lack of formal equivalence: differences in conceptualisations reflect differences in grammatical structure. Therefore, difficulties that students encounter when looking for dynamic (functional) equivalents make them aware of cultural conditioning of conceptualisation of semantic content and its resulting expression. As a “discovery procedure,” translation reveals aspects of linguistic systems and linguistic messages that usually go unnoticed in monolingual communication. For instance, the supposedly missing article in a Polish version of an English expression appears hidden in a preverbal prefix, as in *He ate all the cherries out of the basket* translated (adequately) into Polish as *Wyjadł wszystkie czereśnie z koszyka*, compared to *He bought some cherries* translated as *Kupił czereśni*, using the Genitivus Partitivus.

Additional benefit is provided by back-translation (cf. Tyupa 2012), used in a modernised form. Once the discredited principle of word-for-word equivalence is abandoned, back-translation of products of translation back into the source language readily reveals possible inadequacies of conceptualisation and expression.

3.4. (Intercultural) communication

Finally, I would like to argue that the “new” GTM makes it possible to organise FLT in such a way that it aims at the goal of developing the skill of (intercultural) communication. Contrary to the traditional claim that grammar is culturally neutral while in the lexicon it is possible to set apart a set of items that are “culturally loaded,” it might be claimed that some “cultural load” is present in all words and structures of a given language, although in differing degrees. In other words, culture is embodied in language. Strong arguments for this claim can be found in works that are situated within the new discipline called ethnolinguistics, notably by such Polish scholars as Anna Wierzbicka (1991) or Jerzy Bartmiński (2009). Bartmiński has proposed and elaborated the notion of a “linguistic worldview” (*językowy obraz świata* – JOŚ), defined as the set of concepts that, taken together, build up the image of the world as conceived and accepted by members of a given speech community.

This “cultural turn” in linguistics is paralleled by a “cultural turn” in TS, which sees translation as the process of transferring cultures rather than “mere languages.” Embodied in grammar, cultures are juxtaposed and contrasted in the process of translation.

4. A few additional examples

Attempts at implementing the “new” GTM in a FLT classroom are not very numerous. Among early attempts one should recall Brygida Rudzka-Ostyn’s manual for teaching English phrasal verbs (Rudzka-Ostyn 2003). Recently a proposal to teach

English articles to Polish learners was made in doctoral dissertation by Agnieszka Król-Markefka (2011). A synthetic review and a comprehensive bibliography can be found in Boers and Lindstromberg (2006) and in Littlemore (2011).

Possible sample implementation of the CL-cum-translation approach which are given below are not in any sense systematic. They come from everyday teaching experience of teachers acquainted with main principles of CL, but might perhaps prove helpful when looking for solutions to FLT problems – especially those involved in teaching English to native speakers of Polish and teaching Polish to native speakers of English.

4.1. The Dative

Within the CL framework, the grammatical meaning of the Dative is marking what is called a *sphere of influence* (cf. Rudzka-Ostyn 1996); an abstract sphere, including all persons, objects, places, events, possibilities, emotions, etc. connected with the referent of the noun in the Dative case. A construction employing the Dative signals that the sphere of influence of the referent was entered (or invaded) by an Agent, as in: *John gave Mary a flower* (where the referent of *flower* enters Mary's sphere of influence), but also – by extension – in *This gave me an idea*. The description motivates at least two constructions, baffling to FLT students:

1. English Dative Shift; e.g. *John wrote Mary a letter* vs. *John wrote a letter to Mary*. While in the former construction the flower had most probably actually “entered” Mary's sphere of influence, in the latter one metaphorical distance between the letter and its prospective recipient is iconically marked with the preposition *to*, reducing the probability of the letter having actually “entered” the Dative sphere.

2. The Polish reflexive pronoun <sobie>. Found puzzling by linguists and learners alike, *sobie* occurs in constructions with some intransitive verbs, e.g. *Posiedział sobie na słońcu* (“He sat a bit in the sun”), but not with others, e.g. *Poleżał sobie w szpitalu* (“He stayed a bit in hospital”). When we consider the schematic meaning of the Dative, the explanation becomes obvious: who would like to introduce into their own sphere of influence things or events that are unpleasant, harmful or generally bad or evil?

4.2. Genitive Partitive vs. Accusative

While the schematic meaning of the Genitive Partitive is that of marking reference to only a part of the overall reference mass, the Accusative makes reference to its referent conceived of in its entirety. The novelty lies in postulating motivated meaning extension: the notion of partiality can refer not only to space but also to time. In consequence, the Polish utterance *Pożycz mi komputer* differs from its apparently puzzling alternative *Pożycz mi komputera* in that the latter implies a shorter duration of the intended loan.

4.3. Articles

An example of a “hidden” article in Polish was given in 3.3. above. Other instances stem out of the CL notion of bounding, i.e. abstract “drawing” of a conceptual contour that delimits objects in mental spaces, thus accounting for the well known but not so easily learned opposition between countable and uncountable nouns. In languages like English the indefinite article marks bounded objects: *a (news) paper*, but not unbounded things, conceived of as substances: *paper*. Translation into Polish, allegedly an article-less language, reveals a cross-linguistics cognitive principle: one can read a single paper – *gazetę* (a paper) or several individual papers – *gazety* (papers), but when there is no rag available, the floor can be only wiped with the singular *gazeta*, conceived of not as a single specimen but a substance of a certain quality. The lack of bounding – and therefore of the indefinite article – is marked by the seemingly unjustified singular number of the noun.

4.4. “Conspiracy”

CL claims that target structures are not directly given by grammar. Ultimately, they are arrived at as product of *sui generis* conspiracy between schematic meaning of grammatical constructions, inherently metonymic meaning of lexical items and background knowledge (general or culture-sensitive) used to supplement the metonymies. Evidence is found, for instance, in Polish expressions that prove difficult to acquire by foreign language learners. A case in point is the following set of expressions:

1. *napić się herbaty* – GEN Part (**herbatę* – ACC) – “drink as much tea as was desired;”
2. *wypić herbatę* – ACC (**herbaty* – GEN Part) – “drink (up) the tea;”
3. *słodzić herbatę* – ACC (**herbaty* – GEN Part) (cf. Tabakowska 2001) – “sweeten the tea/put sugar into one’s tea.”

Within the CL semantics, the constructions (as well as the restrictions) are easily explained. In 1. the verbal prefix *na-* marks the perfective aspect, but its semantic import (derived from the meaning of the preposition *na* that is its origin) adds to the expression the meaning of ‘having enough’ (in itself an extension of the meaning of “piling up”). The tea drinker has drunk enough, but there is no implication of the entire mass of tea available having been consumed – hence the Genitivus partitivus. In 2. the verbal prefix *wy-* marks the perfective aspect, and its semantic import (derived from the meaning of the original preposition *wy*: “out of”) adds the meaning of emptying a container, which bans the use of the Genitive partitive. Finally, in 3. the partitive is excluded for pragmatic reasons: we know that in our world the sugar put into some/the tea dissolves, changing the taste of the entire amount of it.

5. Conclusions

Unlike its predecessor, the “new” GTM not only “develops” learners’ mental capacities, but actually *uses* them to discover motivation underlying conceptualisations and their linguistic expression. Through translation, contrasts are exposed to illustrate aspects that are universal (i.e. induced by general human experience) or language- (i.e. culture-) specific, thus showing culturally motivated differences between the native and the foreign tongues. In consequence, enhanced general language awareness leads to raising cultural awareness (cf. Boers, Lindstromberg 2006), developing the ability of intercultural communication.

Finally, in the context of FLT, the changed status of “an error” should be mentioned. Accepting the CL model of grammar means a modification of the notion of “correctness.” With the inherently subjective nature of conceptualisation – and in consequence, of meaning – less entrenched conceptualisations are just as legitimate as more strongly conventionalised ones, and non-conventional ways of looking at the world are no longer seen as the sole domain of poets. Admittedly, in view of the culture-sensitivity of languages, non-conventionality can be due to interference, understood as imposition of native cultural patterns upon the foreign language ones. The problem surely deserves investigation. However, its more detailed discussion has to be left to some other occasion.

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