



## THE GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD: IMPORTANCE OF THIS METHOD IN DEVELOPING EFL STUDENTS SPEAKING SKILLS

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**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 linguistic ancilla discipline. 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.

### **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. 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.

### **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.

#### **(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 see translation as the process of transferring cultures rather than “mere languages.” Embodied in grammar, cultures are juxtaposed and contrasted in the process of translation.



## 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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