

# THE FALL AND RISE OF TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH TEACHING METHODOLOGY

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## Introduction

This paper is a modest attempt to review the place that pedagogic translation holds in different methods of teaching English as a foreign language. It is written with three aims in mind: A) to trace how translation has fared in three basic methods of teaching English i.e., the Grammar Translation Method, the Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching ; B) to explain how the fall and rise of translation in these methods is due to shifts of paradigms in theories of second language acquisition, the linguistic view of language, and philosophies of education; C) to suggest ways of rehabilitating translation in English language programmes in Algeria.

## The Grammar Translation Method

The nature of language learning in the Classical method or Grammar Translation method is betrayed in the name of the method itself. The qualification of the method as classical can be traced back to the Renaissance period. With the rise of European vernacular languages like French, English and German and the simultaneous revival of Greek and Latin classics, pedagogic translation came to hold an important place in the learning of languages. It was

practically impossible for authors of the Renaissance period to receive the recognition of their scholarly peers if, as Ben Jonson had said of William Shakespeare, they had little Latin and Greek. An author deserved his title only if he could show that he could read Latin and Greek. In other words, unless he showed his capacity to translate the classical tradition in the manner of an Alexander Pope or a George Chapman, both of them translators of Homer, he was given little heed in scholarly circles.

This is partly why it is only two centuries later that Shakespeare had gained recognition at the hands of Romantic writers deeply steeped in an organicist ideology, which formed the basis of English nationalism in the nineteenth century. Shakespeare and his contribution to English language were recognised at the same time as Edward Thomson tapped the English folklore which represents the voice of the folk. William Wordsworth and William Coleridge's appeal to romantic authors to liberate poetry from classical linguistic restraints by steeping it in English speech indicates a relative decrease of translation of classics as *a sine qua non* condition for authorship, accompanied by an emphasis on originality and ingenuity in the use of the vernacular.

However, translation as a method of learning languages did not lose hold even with the building of literary traditions in the vernaculars all across Europe. The legacy of learning languages continued to be the same even with the displacement of Latin and Greek as *lingua franca* and the rise of vernaculars called *langues vivantes* in French in their stead. Indeed translation had assumed such an

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important place that the method was renamed as the Grammar Translation method early in the nineteenth century.

Hence, the Grammar Translation is heir to the Classical Method in most of its principles. For example, the nature of language is viewed as primarily literary. The *belles lettres* is supposed to supply the model of language to be learnt and taught in complete disregard of the aural/oral aspects of the foreign language. It has to be underlined that literature in the nineteenth century came to be restricted in its meaning to the best that was written. Cultural establishment in England and all over Europe envisioned literature as a possible replacement to the pulpit in the maintenance of faith in Western civilisation. This aesthetic vision of man was defended in different terms by Mathew Arnold in England and Frederich Nietzsche in Germany. It follows that the main motivation for learning foreign languages is the ability to read and appreciate the classical works written in them in order to round off one's humanist education.

Two aspects of the foreign language are emphasised in the Grammar Translation Method: grammar and vocabulary. It is competence in these aspects that are supposed to lead the attainment of mastery in the target language. The mastery of the foreign language is in turn thought to be observable in the ability of the students to translate stretches of literary language from the target language into the first language. It is attained through an emphasis on grammar and vocabulary analogies between the foreign and native language, the memorisation of table

of declensions, lists of vocabulary items, and rules of grammar, and their application in written exercises involving translation.

If the Grammar Translation Method had prevailed for a long time in teaching foreign languages it is not only because it borrows its principles from the Classical Method but also because the domain of foreign language teaching has for long been leased out to teachers of literature. Paradoxical as this may seem at first sight this leasehold over the pedagogy of foreign languages in the nineteenth century was accorded with the blessings of the emerging sciences of language like philology, which were basically prescriptive and historical in their views of language. The leasehold was further extended in the second quarter of the twentieth century with the emergence of literature studies as a university discipline after the apology for the English classics launched by literary critics like Frank Leavis in books like *English as Discipline*.

The teaching of English as a foreign language in colonial Algeria came as a result of its promotion into a language of diplomacy alongside French in the Versailles Treaty of 1919. Until then, the supremacy of French as the language of diplomacy had gone unquestioned. The method of teaching this *langue vivante*, as can be expected, was the Grammar Translation Method. It could not be otherwise especially after World War II when French and English were seen as being capable of doing for the colonial world what Latin and Greek were supposed to have done for Western Europe in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. (Cf. Phillipson Robert, 1992 : 110)

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The prevalence of the Grammar-Translation Method as regards English in Algeria continued well after independence in 1962. It is not until the reform of 1971 that a replacement of the textbook *Anglais Langue Vivante*, a textbook inspired from the Grammar-Translation, was done, and that the University of Algiers which until then had been under the administration of a French Rector, decided to split the integrated instruction in translation and foreign languages into separate disciplines. In other words, translation moved from a status of method applied in teaching foreign languages to a discipline of its own just as foreign languages shifted the goal from that of translation to studying the language itself.

### The audiolingual method and the exile of translation

How did this fall of pedagogic translation in the teaching/learning of foreign languages come about? We can distinguish three factors in this paradigm shift in ELT detailed by Freida Dubbin as follows: change of viewpoint on the nature of language, language learning, and the philosophy of education. The change in the philosophy of education concerning foreign languages started in the United States during World War II. Until the start of the war, the United States considered it impractical to teach the oral skills, and persuaded foreign language learners to focus on reading. An emphasis on the oral/aural skills were then regarded as unnecessary because the United States returned to its isolationist policy just after World War I and the new waves of immigrants should not be encouraged to keep

their foreign tongues at least officially through the adoption of the emerging Direct method. The latter method, also called the Berlitz Method after the name of its most famous practitioner, Charles Berlitz, is called direct because it does not involve translation.

However, when World War II broke out, the US was thrust into a world-wide conflict, heightening the need for Americans to become orally competent in the languages of both their allies and their enemies. The time was ripe for a language teaching revolution whose main consequence was the fall of pedagogic translation into discredit because it was considered as being far removed from communication. The US military provided the impetus with funding for special, intensive courses that focused on aural/ oral skills. These courses came to be known as the Army Specialised Programme, or more colloquially the Army Method. Characteristic of these courses was a great deal of oral activity – pronunciation and pattern drills and conversation practice- with virtually none of the grammar and translation of literary texts found in the traditional classes.

The Army Method found its way into the foreign language curricula after World War II, legitimated by structural linguists of the 1940's and 1950's like Fries and behaviourist psychologists like Skinner. These linguists and psychologists provided the theoretical foundations lacking in the Direct method. Because the majority of the linguists and psychologists who had re-appropriated the method were mainly from Michigan University, the method was first renamed as the Michigan Method and later called the audio-lingual method. With the replacement of the

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Grammar-Translation curricula by audio-lingual ones, language educators ceased to look to their colleagues in literature for pedagogic guidance, and turned instead to applied linguists like Fries and Kaplan, to ESL and FL methodologists, syllabus designers, and curriculum developers.

On the whole, the audio-lingual method rests on the following principles. It shares with the Direct Method (The Berlitz) the idea that language is primarily speech not literature as in the Grammar-Translation Method. In addition to this, every language is viewed as a unique system. It follows that foreign language instruction should emphasise more the oral/aural aspects of the target language without interference of the first language. This re-definition of the nature of language is accompanied by a re-definition of the nature of learning. While the learning of foreign languages in the Grammar-Translation is thought of as primarily a mental process, in the audio-lingual it is basically perceived as habit formation, achieved through predominantly mechanistic drills involving repetition, backward build-up, chain, substitution, and transformation.

It is on the above grounds that audio-lingual methodology has proscribed translation from the foreign language classroom. Since languages are thought as unique systems affecting perception and thought differently teachers and learners of target languages are urged to steer away from L1 in the classroom. It could not have been otherwise when translation in the foreign language classroom has come to be associated exclusively with transfer from L1. As Ulla Connor (1996:13) writes, "the

role of transfer from the native language, or cross-linguistic influence, took centre stage for some thirty years from the 1950s to the 1980s'. During this period, the role of transfer is perceived as negative, since it inhibits the installation of the right habits in the target language. Most of the mistakes done in L2 are traced back to the phenomenon of transfer from L1. In this context the 'good' teacher is the one who manages to elaborate strategies of prevention of such a phenomenon.

The audio-lingual methodology of teaching languages in Algerian schools knew a definite consecration with the school reform of 1971. In the Algerian context of the period, it will be better to revert to the original name of Army Method to speak about the Audio-lingual method. The 1971 school reform has two important dimensions in terms of its philosophy of language education: arabicisation and modernisation. To implement it contingents of language teachers were recruited either on the basis of contracts or voluntary service to teach both Arabic and foreign languages. One of the consequences of the 1971 reform is the exile of pedagogic translation from school curricula.

### **\* Communicative Language Teaching and the Rehabilitation of Translation**

Translation has continued to be held in discredit even with the rise of curricula based on cognitive views of language and language learning. The movement beyond method towards a notional-functional syllabus that began to be used in the United Kingdom in the 1970's did not put



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translation back in favour in language skills curricula best represented by the *Threshold Level* education in Europe. It is true that the students' native language is tolerated when used judiciously, i.e., in ways that are not supposed to act as obstacles for the development of communication in English. For example, instead of a teacher asking how some thing in English is called in the students' native or first foreign language, it is strongly recommended to ask how the word in their native language is rendered in English. Translation in this case is perceived as a one-way process from native to foreign language.

Since foreign language in communicative language teaching is viewed as a vehicle for communication and not something to be studied for its grammar as in the Grammar-Translation method, the use of materials authentic to native speakers is recommended. Such authentic materials range from timetables, recipes, menus, letters in the first stages of foreign language education to English classics in higher education. This explains the absence of works in translation coming from other linguistic areas than those written English in zones which were once under the domination of English. Hence, communicative language teaching has remained for long time a mono-lingual and mono-cultural approach.

The viewpoint of language as a transaction which influenced the shape of foreign language curricula was heightened with the trend for teaching specific foreign languages. This trend was not due merely to the discovery of linguistic registers by linguists like Labov but also to the fact that foreign language education has to adopt the

discourse of the funding source for its survival especially in the Anglo-Saxon world wherein foreign languages have traditionally had a low priority on the national educational agenda. The commercial discourse informing specific foreign language policies comes out strongly in the following announcement made by the Director-general of the British Council in the 1987/88 : "Britain's real black gold is not the North Sea oil but the English language. It has long been at the root of our culture and now is fast becoming the global language of business and information. The challenge facing us is to exploit it to the full". (Quoted in Phillipson Robert, 2000:49)

It follows that the orientation of the English language teachers towards English for Specific Purposes did not arise out of scientific considerations alone but also out of the interests of the sources of economic power. The E SP orientation was going to have a substantial impact on the teaching and learning of English abroad because it matched the traditional discourse of education as the delivery of knowledge, this time everyone according to her or his own needs very often related to those of modernisation.

The restoration of translation from exile was brought about by profile changes in the American society and the European community at the end of the 1980s. This change of profile can be seen in the increasing replacement of the idea of America as a melting pot by that of America as a multicultural and multilingual 'continent' caught in the metaphor of "the salad bowl". The same process can be seen in the transformation of the initial project of the European Economic Market into a political and cultural

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project of integration which has taken increasing impetus after the fall of the Berlin Wall. That political and cultural integration is behind the resurgence of both professional and pedagogic translation in Europe is borne witness by the following recommendation made in a recent review of English Studies in Finland:

We wish to preserve the character of the schools as schools of translation studies and to maintain and enhance their academic credibility, especially in view of the prospect that Finland will soon join the European community, which would make translation even more important... Schools of translation should become postgraduate institutions offering an MA degree with a well-balanced integration of the professional and academic aspects as well as a Ph.D. ... Resources should be deployed in such a way that the country has at least one or two schools of translation studies of substance and international standing. (Quoted in Connor Ulla, 1996)

However, it is not only professional translation that is promoted all across Europe but also pedagogic translation. The promotion of the latter comes out clearly in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* written in order to “provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe”. (2001:1) One of its recommendations is to include what is called “mediation activities” along with other language activities like reception, production and interaction. It is stated in the same document that mediation activities are of

two types "whercin the language user is not concerned to express his/her own meanings, but simply to act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages". (Ibid.,87)

The "mediation activities" are divided into two types in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*: oral and written mediation activities. Three important examples of language activities are included in oral mediation, all of them emphasising interpretation from one language to another in different contexts of language use : simultaneous interpretation that can be used, for example, in conferences, meetings and formal speeches; consecutive interpretation that can serve the language user/learner in such other contexts as speeches of welcome and guided tours; and informal interpretation meant to equip the language learner with an ability to play different interpretative roles in contexts involving "foreign visitors in own country/ native speakers when abroad/ social and transactional situations for friends, family, clients and foreign guests/ (and finally) interpretation of signs, menus (and) notices". (Ibid.,87)

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* urges taking consideration of further written mediation activities in the elaboration of language programmes. Four types of written mediation activities are listed. First, there are exact translation activities, the aim of which is to train the language learner to use language for translation of contracts, legal and scientific texts, all of them domains requiring exactitude in rendition from one

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language to another. The second type of written mediation activities are aimed at developing literary translation of “novels, drama, poetry (and) libretti”. However, written mediation activities are not circumscribed to translation between L1 and L2. They include a third type of activity consisting of “summarizing gist (newspaper and magazine articles, etc) within L2 or between L1 and L2” , and a fourth type which is paraphrasing texts in the same language in the case for example of specialised texts that are not understandable to lay persons. (Cf. Ibid., 87)

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* describes even the strategies that might assist language learning/use while they are involved in the above mediation activities. According to the same document, “mediation strategies reflect ways of coping with the demands of using finite resources to process information and establish equivalent meaning”. These strategies range from learning how to “organise and maximise resources” through the preparation, for example; of glossaries, to the consideration of how “to tackle the task at hand ...(by) considering the interlocutors’ needs (and) selecting the size of interpretation”. (Ibid., 88)

There is no need here to go further in detailing how pedagogic translation has been rehabilitated in second language acquisition in Europe. However, it is worth observing that the re-discovery of the virtues of translation in the context of second language acquisition is result of several factors. The transformation of the project of an Economic European Market into a cultural and political project in the late 1980s has already been mentioned as one

of the decisive factors. Yet, this alone cannot explain this radical change of attitude towards translation. It has already been mentioned that change in language teaching methodology is also the result of a shift of paradigms in theories of learning. In this respect, recent studies in second language acquisition have shown that inter-language transfer from L1 is more a problem-solving procedure than an obstacle in learning the target language. With this new look at inter-language transfer, translation is cleared off the sins for which it is blamed by the behaviourist theories of language learning.

Translation theorists like Toury have even gone to the extent of affirming that if translation and transfer in second language acquisition are similar in the sense that they involve the processing of two languages at the same time, they remain different in other respects. One of these differences concerns the scope of transfer. In the case of transfer in L2, the learner activates his complete knowledge of the source language to interact in the target language whereas in the case of transfer in translation the learner has at hand a source text which remains the main object of transfer. (Cf. Toury G: 1986)

It follows from the discussion above that translation is restored from pedagogic exile over the recent years, but its restoration is not made under the old dispensation. It has come back to an honourable place in different curricula not in the garb of the Grammar Translation Method because translation is not longer solely confined to the translation of literary texts. Behind this change of focus in pedagogic translation lies another change closely linked to the relation

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established between citizenship and translation. This relation can be seen in the emphasis placed on intra-lingual translation for purposes of cementing the body politics of the different nations of the European Community. Similarly, it can be seen in the big hope placed on inter-lingual translation as a means for the reinforcement of European citizenship.

### Conclusion

The above international state-of-the-art about the place of translation in language curricula and the pedagogic practices that sustained it in various contexts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is made because it can help throw light on what has gone and keeps going on in the field of teaching and learning the language and (English) literatures at the level of the English Language Departments in Algeria. Brumfit is to the point when he writes that “something which teachers must necessarily have is an awareness of what is going on in other contexts and in other parts of the world, because it is only from other parts of the world that we get an awareness of the *limitations (sic.)* of the particular institution in which we operate intensively. Creating the conditions within which such international cross-breeding of ideas can operate is the basic requirement for any organisation, or any individual, who is concerned with true professionalism”.(1995: 35)

My hope is that the above discussion about how translation fell and rose in second language acquisition will make us think about ways to rehabilitate translation in Algerian schools and departments of foreign languages. For

instance, it is time to reshuffle the English language programme at the university level by including such disciplines as translation, comparative literature, comparative stylistics, and contrastive rhetoric in replacement of the redundant disciplines in the same programme. The inclusion of such new disciplines will certainly contribute to the demise of the monolingual and mono-cultural approaches prevalent today in foreign language teaching. The adoption of multilingual and multicultural approaches in their stead will bring about the 'de-colonisation' of the institution of foreign language departments, which so far have functioned as some sort of "territorial outposts" of the powerful countries whose languages are currently taught in them. The objective behind this proposal is not to adulterate the character of departments of foreign languages but to seek a new relevance for them in the light of the current changes in regional and global geopolitics.

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