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Can Xenolinguistics be Effective in English Language Education in Japan?
– A Study of Descriptive Phenomenology of a Foreign Language –

Snitko Tatiana

Methodological inquiry: *What* do we learn when we learn '*a foreign language*'?

Languages undergo certain changes in teaching materials. Thus, English taught as a foreign language (EFL, ESL English as a second language) turns into 'Course Book English', and as such develops characteristics of its own.

'*What* is to be taught' depends greatly on the teaching situation and prevailing teaching practices at the time. The European history of language teaching methods vividly shows that in most cases language-teaching practices depended on the theoretical ideas about language prevailing at the time or, later on, on linguistic theories.

Before theoretical linguistics was born, teaching of Latin as a non-native language in European monasteries consisted in memorizing small dialogues and learning sentence patterns with the help of substitution tables. Later such teaching practices constituted the Direct Method.

The appearance in 1660 of The Port-Royal Grammar (Arnauld & Lancelot, 2010) marked the birth of the European theoretical linguistics. The Port-Royal Grammar book did not influence teaching practices directly, but from that time on, teaching practices were oriented on this or that theoretical model of language. One exception was the short-lived Direct method, born within the American Descriptive linguistics – it was a 20th century rediscovery of the medieval teaching practices. As Descriptive Linguistics excluded theory from the sphere of its interest, descriptive linguists suggested that learning a foreign language should follow the same paths as the acquisition of a mother tongue (Krause, 1916).

In the 17th century, the first grammars of different European languages were written, and so Grammar started to be thought as the basis for comparing and contrasting languages. In 1644 Lancelot, who himself had written Grammars for several European languages, stated that Grammar-Translation method was more effective than previous language-teaching practices

("Direct Method" teaching practices) at the monasteries (Lancelot, 2011). Grammar-Translation Method had been widely spread in Europe since the 17th century until the middle of the 20th century (however, it had not been the only method).

Within Grammar-Translation Method the theoretical ideas of Contrastive analysis and Language Interference were born. In its strongest formulation, Contrastive analysis is known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957, Wardhaugh, 1970). Comparing the structures of two languages, the learner's mother tongue (L1 – the first language) and a target language (L2 – the second language), *linguists* were trying to predict difficulties in learning a foreign (target) language. Though the idea that language teaching should be based on contrasting of two competing language systems was very popular among the linguists for several decades (born in the 1960s and especially popular in the 1970s), the theory appeared to be weak in explaining the reality of teaching practice. The learners would not make mistakes predicted by the theory, or made mistakes that were difficult or impossible to explain with regard to their mother tongue. In the 70s, Contrastive Analysis, along with Behaviourism (behavioral psychology) and Structuralism, provided the theoretical basis for Audio-Lingual Method, which gained popularity in the 70s and in using drills resembled Direct Method.

In the 90s, the situation changed radically: Communicative Language Teaching Method appeared on the world scene. It was born out of a political decision to promote English as a World language. In 1991 an intergovernmental symposium on "Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: Objectives, Evaluation, Certification" was held in Rüschlikon (Switzerland). As a result of the symposium, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, CEF) was published, and since then, along with European Language Portfolio, stating levels of proficiency in language, it has been playing a central role in language and education policy in the world.

The CEFR regards language users as social agents who develop general and particular communicative competences while trying to achieve their everyday goals. At this point, it can be said that only after the political decision had been made the linguistic grounding for it was searched for and found. According to Carlos César Jiménez of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, an action-oriented approach, adopted by the CEFR, can be traced back to theoretical proposals made by philosophers of language such as Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 1950s and sociolinguists such as Dell Hymes (Jiménez, 2011, p. 9).

It should be pointed out here that with the appearance of the CEFR for the first time in the history of a foreign language teaching coordinated efforts of different professionals directly

influenced teaching practices. In other words, *the phenomenon of language acquisition was* approached *in an interdisciplinary way*, with different professional spheres represented as topoi (toposes) of analysis (τόπος, Greek 'place'; pl. topoi). It goes on to note with regret that the professionals, taking part in the project, have not reflected theoretically on the *interdisciplinarity* of knowledge. The reason why the CEFR has not achieved substantial theoretical grounding is the interdisciplinary nature of the problem and the existence of no single science to deal with such types of problems. It is important to note that *heterogeneous knowledge resists integration*. One can find a good example in Schedrovitsky (1971), where the author speaks about the situation in the pre-Marxist political economy, "…V. Petty, A. Smith, D. Ricardo and other researchers tried to construct a general economic theory mechanically connecting the existing categories, such as goods, labour, capital, cost and so on. All attempts to unite these categories came to nothing" (Schedrovitsky, 1971, p. 8).

Methodology to analyze *a foreign language as a complex phenomenon*

In the 80s, a group of linguists and methodologists at Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University in Russia proposed the theoretical basis for *the interdisciplinary analysis of a phenomenon of a foreign language* (Пути к~, 1992). (I participated in the project). *Xenolinguistics* (Ancient Greek: ξένος , ksénos – 'foreign') is a General Theory of a Foreign Language, dealing with *xenofacts* (momenta of 'foreignness' of a language). The object of xenolinguistics is heterogeneous: a certain language becomes 'foreign' when opposed to another language (linguistic sphere) in a particular educational situation (language technology).

The methodology proposed by G.P. Schedrovitsky (see, e.g, Schedrovitsky, 1966, 1966a, 1971, Stschedrowitzki 1972, Щедровицкий 1986, 1995) became the theoretical and methodological basis for Xenolinguistics.

It seems appropriate here to include some information on how Schedrovitsky's methodology works, though the task exceeds the purposes and the possibilities of this article.

First, the very term 'methodology' may appear to be delusive. 'Methodology' is usually thought of as a branch of philosophy that deals with general principles and methods in sciences. In Schedrovitsky's system of thought, 'methodology' is a form of organization of thought and activities, encompassing different types of cognitive analysis.

Methodological analysis is not "pure" research. It also includes critique, schematization (arrangement of ideas into schemes), problem-posing, planning, reflexion (or 'reflexive work' – the term needs special explanation), setting of different standards, ontological

analysis, etc. The Russian term for Schedrovitsky's methodology («СМД-методология», системомыследеятельностная методология) can be roughly translated as 'systems-and-activities approach to thinking.'

The basic principle of methodological thinking is worded as follows: "A conception about a complex cooperative activity becomes a means of integrating different conceptions of the object of this activity. This integration follows not so much the logic of the way the object in question fits into our life but rather the logic of the way various forms of knowledge are used in cooperative activity" (Schedrovitsky, 1966a, p. 9).

Basing on the ideas of 'systems-and-activities approach to thinking' and citing Schedrovitsky, we can suggest here a rough sketch of methodological work to analyse a heterogeneous object, such as a phenomenon of English language education in Japan.

Different groups of professionals working in the sphere of English language education in Japan (teachers, linguists, specialists in language pedagogy, textbook writers, teacher trainers, examiners, educational administrators, etc.) have their own 'knowledge' about 'the object' (English as a foreign language in Japan).

In the process of communication, their knowledge models are to be constructed with the further aim of synthesizing existing knowledge about the object.

According to Schedrovitsky, in solving the problem of synthesizing different knowledge about one object, it is necessary instead of searching for some common bonds in the plain of that knowledge, to reproduce the structure of the object, and then proceed from it to reestablish those 'twists' of abstraction, which have led to the available knowledge (Schedrovitsky, 1971, p. 9). (See Fig. 2.).
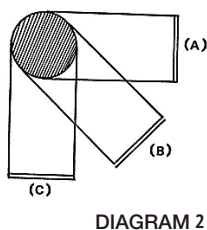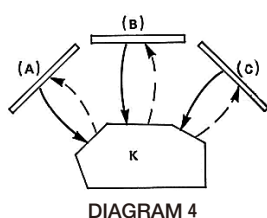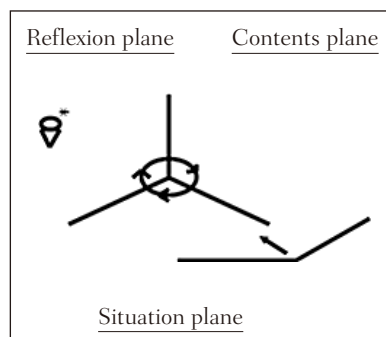

Fig. 1.　　　　　　Fig. 2.　　　　　　Fig. 3.

Fig. 1. The shaded circle is the object, the lines (A), (B), and (C) represent knowledge, which fixes the sides of the object (Schedrovitsky, 1971, p. 4).

Fig. 2. The group of continuous arrows shows theoretic-methodological movements in coming from existing knowledge (A), (B), and (C); while the discontinuous lines indicate that the available pieces of knowledge (A), (B), and (C) are 'projections' of the object, i.e. its new presentation (Schedrovitsky, 1971).

Fig. 3. Methodology strives to combine the knowledge about 'activity' and 'thinking' with the knowledge about the objects of 'this' activity and of 'this' thinking, or, inverting this relationship, to combine directly *the objective knowledge* with *the reflective knowledge*. To do so methodology has worked out specific methods of analysis. The three-dimensional scheme allows combining *the objective knowledge with the reflective knowledge*.

As methodological knowledge integrates within itself diverse forms of knowledge, it is internally heterogeneous. The methodological analysis results in constructing a *block-scheme of the object* which "…fixes all those subjects of study, which must be formed to make possible the solution of the set problem and, what is most important, determines the sequence of their examination" (Schedrovitsky, 1971, p. 13).

As methodological knowledge consists of two kinds of knowledge (knowledge about activity and knowledge about the object of activity) there arises "…the most important specific problem of methodological analysis … the *formulation of recommendations concerning procedures of research and description of an object*" (Schedrovitsky, 1971, p. 12).

Understood as such, methodology is a theoretical framework in analysing *heterogeneous objects*, foreign language being one of them. It is the way to synthesize the ideas and methods of a number of scientific disciplines to be able to embrace a very wide range of problems.

The interest for the Xenolinguistics Project was great. However, linguists criticised the theory because it was not "pure" linguistics. For the similar reason the theory was criticised by other professionals. At the time, a discipline 'Comparative typology of English and Russian' started to be taught at the faculties of foreign languages at Russian universities, and a number of teaching materials were being published.

Xenocharacterology of a language which is based on the theoretical ideas of xenolinguistics, is supposed to serve the practical aim of the improvement of a foreign language teaching. Phenomenological method of analysis aims at bringing forward all possible peculiarities of a phenomenon under consideration, disregarding their plausible "importance". Further, this can provide an opportunity for systematic reflection on it.

In the phenomenological study of a phenomenon of a foreign language, for example, *English in Japan* (Xenocharacterology of English in Japan), several topoi (heterogeneous,

unrelated spheres; Ancient Greek: τόπος, tópos, 'place'; pl. topoi, toposes) are to be analysed, to be juxtaposed and to be thought of as constituting 'the whole':

1. Non-linguistic: *situation in a society*, which includes analysis of a culture-specific situation, analysis of prevailing trends and ideas in education policy, systematic analysis of the roles of educational institutions, description of 'meaningful positions' of educational administrators, textbook writers, teachers, teacher trainers, examiners, etc.

2. Related to Linguistics and Language acquisition theory: *contrastive analysis of the two languages in teaching situations* with the aim to register features, essential for language acquisition

The problem of xenocharacterology of English in Japan

In order to address the problem of xenocharacterology of English in Japan, in what follows, we will register some *xenofacts* (momenta of 'foreignness' of English in Japan), which belong to different topoi. Still, the observations will be very sketchy in this short article, and of course, the task exceeds the competence of an individual.

Japan joined "the club of English learning countries" at the time when Grammar-Translation method dominated. In the 90s, the Communicative language-learning method replaced it. Let us consider several peculiarities of the teaching situation in Japan.

First, Communicative Method teachers are mainly native speakers of English, while the burden of grammar explanation lies mostly on Japanese teachers. For this reason, a mother tongue (Japanese) does not play a significant role in class in the way it used to in the times of Grammar-Translation method domination.

Second, many Japanese consider their knowledge of English poor and think of themselves as being incapable of mastering English, and this is despite the fact that Japanese people are famous hard-workers and perfectionists. The fact should not come as much of a surprise in the light of the above description of Communicative Method. Communicative Method does not aim at mastering English, but sets its goals as survival communication, business communication and so on. Regretfully enough, there exists no ideal method to master a foreign language, and Communicative Method is not an exception.

Let us consider the situation in general. According to the 2013 report of the EF EPI Index (Education First English Proficiency Index), based on the results of 750.000 adult test takers in 60 countries and territories, Japan occupied the 26th place with 53.21 points (percent-correct scores), which was qualified as moderate proficiency. The evaluation scale consists of

five grades (very high proficiency, high proficiency, moderate proficiency, very low proficiency); Japan is in the middle of the ranking list (EF EPI Index, 2014).

Interestingly enough, France occupied the 35th place (low proficiency) with 50.53 points, and the French also think of themselves as poor speakers of English. In the last two or three decades publications entitled "Pourquoi les jeunes Francais sont si mauvais en langues étrangères? (Why French youths are so terrible in foreign languages?)", "Pourquoi les Français sont-ils nuls en anglais? (Why are the French nil in English?)", "Qui sont les plus mauvais élèves d'Europe en anglais? (Who are the worst students of English in Europe?)" regularly appear in French periodicals. The most common answers to the above questions are as follows.

1. Historical reason: In Europe the French language has been an international language for quite a long period of time (lingua franca), so it was not necessary to learn foreign languages.

2. Necessity to protect the French culture. Comparison may be biased, but this reason of Japan and France not being at the top of the list may be common. L. Zuckerman, an American teaching English in France, stresses that *the French are notoriously protective of their language*. She points out that "the French language has *a unique role in the psychology and culture of France* in a way the English language does not in the US or Britain… As a result, France is constantly on the defensive, protecting French against 'the enemy'. That enemy is English" (Willsher, 2007, p. 1).

3. Social reasons. Most of the French do not need to use English in their everyday life. Many French students choose to learn German or Spanish instead.

4. Psychological reasons. People avoid speaking with foreigners if they consider themselves poor speakers of English.

5. Problems in language pedagogy. Living languages are being taught in the way as if they were dead languages (like Latin).

At this point one question needs to be asked, and it is whether English is *a difficult language* to learn at all compared to other languages. A language is usually thought of by the linguists as difficult, if there are many rules and exceptions in its grammar.

The main characteristics of English are a huge vocabulary (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, unabridged, includes some 470,000 entries) and *relatively simple grammar*.

In vocabulary acquisition, Japanese learners of English have the biggest problems with the pronunciation and use of loan verbs. Japanese, together with Tagalog and English, is one of

the three languages in the world with the largest numbers of borrowings (in English 70 % are borrowed words). In Japanese loanwords are written in katakana, "distorting" the original words both in spelling, and in phonetic images. Besides, Japanese learners of English have difficulties in distinguishing and pronouncing some English sounds. Here are some cases often leading to a negative transfer:

[ɜː] (Br.E) [ɜːʳ] (Am.E)　　→　　(Japanese speakers of English)

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[ɔː]：*'work', 'walk'*

　　　　　　　　　→　　[ʌ]：*'turn', 'tongue'*

English [l]/[r], and [v]/[b] are often difficult to distinguish for the Japanese speakers of English:

[l] ← → [r]　　→　　「 ラ ブ 」：***'love', 'rub'***

[v] ← → [b]　　→　　「トラベル」：*'travel', 'trouble'*

Some of the borrowed words have developed new meanings in Japanese, and that again may cause a negative transfer in English language acquisition, for example:

'talent' (natural aptitude or skill)　　→　　「タレント」 (TV-personality)

'glamour' (an attractive or exciting quality that makes certain people or things seem appealing)　　→　　「グラマー」　1) large-breasted woman (new meaning)

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　2) grammar ([l] are [r] are indistinguishable)

In its grammatical characteristics, English resembles Chinese more than other Germanic languages. As is known, Old English of The Anglo-Saxon Era (550 - 1066 AD) had rich nominal and verbal inflection and was very close to early Germanic, but during the 12th to 14th centuries nominal and verbal inflection of Old English were lost. The linguistic situation of the mixture of two languages (Anglo-Saxon language and Anglo-Norman language, spoken by the Norman ruling class) led to the usual consequences – simplifying of grammar and morphology. Words became shorter in length and the word order in the sentence became fixed, the latter leading to the possibility of grammatical conversion, such as 'she prefers *to name* (verb) him by his *name* (noun).'

Conversely, English spelling is difficult to master not only for learners of English as a foreign language, but also for native speakers. The reason for this is the old orthography, which is multilayered, with elements of French, Latin and Greek spelling on top of the native Germanic system. According to Seymour (2001), English-speaking children take up to two years more to learn reading than do children in twelve other European countries.

Systematic differences between English and Japanese grammar are notable, but not all of

them lead to mistakes in the acquisition of English by the Japanese. Objectively, mistakes are predictable to appear in places, where categorical thinking of languages differs. Thus, the lack of thinking in the categories of 'indefinite/definite' or 'single/plural' in Japanese is sure to lead to mistakes in the use of articles and plural forms of nouns by the Japanese learners of English.

Next, the word-order strategy of the Japanese sentence follows the rule: attributes precede all other sentence elements. The (S – O - P) word order of the Japanese sentence can be rewritten as (At)T - (At)S - (At)O – P (At – Attribute, T – Topic, S – Subject, O – Object, P - Predicate). This peculiarity allows omitting the subject of the Japanese sentence if it is clear out of the context. Omitting subjects in English sentences by the Japanese learners can be explained by the above-mentioned peculiarity of Japanese grammar.

Now let us consider tense and aspect expression in two languages. In English aspect meanings (completion, duration) belong to the grammatical system of tenses (Perfect Tense and Progressive Tense) leading to the existence of grammatical tenses (though opinions about the exact number differ, and some linguists speak of fifteen tenses in English).

In Japanese, there are only two aspect forms (non-perfect and perfect). Japanese non-perfect forms express meanings that belong to the sphere of the Simple Present Tense and the Simple Future Tense (明日私は旅に**いきます** *I'll start my journey tomorrow*') in English.

A great number of aspect expressions, unknown in other languages, compensates the "scarcity" of grammatical tense forms in Japanese (e.g.,「ておく」：トイレに行っておきます。).

In English, the inclusion of aspect meanings into the grammatical system of tenses causes the necessity of tenses sequencing. Hence, the *incompatibility* of grammatical expression of tense-aspect meanings in English and Japanese.

The following examples show that the Japanese「・・・ている："て"に終わる動詞＋"いる（おる)"助動詞」corresponds in meaning to several English tense forms:

「ている」→ Progressive
今手紙を書いています。*(I) am writing a letter*

「ている」→ Perfect
彼は三度もここにたちよっています。*He has visited the place three times.*

「ている」→ Simple (Present)
学生たちは教室に入っています。*The students are in the classroom*
彼は本を全く読まないでいる。*He does not read books at all.*

Further, English Present Perfect and Past Indefinite are often confused. Mistakes can be significantly lessened by the explanation that in a lot of cases Present Perfect corresponds to the Japanese construction with「ことがある」:

パリーへ行ったことがありますか。 ***Have*** you ***been*** to Paris? (Present Perfect)
去年パリーへ行きましたか。 ***Did*** you ***go*** to Paris last year? (Simple Past)

Next, one group of Japanese adjectives behave largely like verbs. They can be inflected to show tense and condition:

良かった 'was good'
良かったら 'if you like'

This can lead students to treat English adjectives as verbs and omit the verb 'to be': *This book (is) good*.

Grammar influences communicative strategies. Let us consider, for example, English 'yes' and Japanese「はい」. 'Yes' means 'I agree with what you are saying.'「はい」means 'I am listening to you, and I understand what you are saying (not necessarily agree with you)'. A Japanese agrees with the *interlocutor*. An English speaker agrees with *what* the interlocutor *is saying*. Cp.:

- *Do you like classical music?* クラシック音楽はすきですか。
- *Yes, I do.* はい、すきです。
- *So, you **don't** like rock, do you?* ロックは**すきではない**でしょう。
- ***No**, I **don't**.* **はい、そうです。**

Advanced Japanese speakers of English have difficulties with expressing in English different nuances of feelings and relations between people, peculiar to Japanese culture. Even different colour perception of Japanese and, say, Americans may have similar consequences. In this connection, it is worthwhile mentioning the famous linguistic relativity hypothesis, which states: "Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about" (Whorf, 1956, p. 5).

The search for and registration of the xenofacts carried out by different professionals is very important *as the first stage* of the xenocharacterological description of a phenomenon of English language education in Japan. To have a positive influence on the situation of English language teaching in Japan theoretical knowledge about a phenomenon of a foreign language should be a "product" of *configuration* of different types of knowledge from various professional spheres.

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