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Manuel Gomes Da Torre



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Between tradition and innovation: the teaching of English in Portugal at the turn of the century

Manuel Gomes Da Torre

- 1 Apart from a few individual initiatives that have focused on particular aspects of the teaching of English in Portugal¹, the history of this teaching is still to be written. And at a time when there is generalized uncertainty about a dominant approach of foreign language teaching in general it would be very helpful if a structured overview of what has been done in the past - covering not only its successes but also its failures - would certainly help present-day teachers of English in Portugal to make better decisions. No modern teacher can do his job conveniently if he or she is not well aware of what is going on in his/her field around the world, and this certainly includes the attitudes that have proved advantageous or negative in past times.
- 2 It is almost certain that during the second half of the 19th century Portuguese teachers of English were relatively abreast with what was going on in other European countries, namely in Germany and France, where more attention was given to the teaching of foreign languages. This is a conclusion one can draw from the observation of books that circulated in Portugal at that time. In our libraries and secondhand bookshops it is relatively easy to find copies of the complete battery of books published by Percy Sadler in Paris for the teaching of English in France such as the *Manuel de phrases françaises et anglaises*, the *Cours de thèmes gradués* as well as of the *Petit cours de versions*, and translations of French adaptations of German publications by the well-known Heinrich Gottfried Ollendorf (1803-1865), mostly intended, originally, to the teaching of English in Germany and subsequently adapted to the teaching of the same and other languages in France. The publishing power in Portugal was rather limited and for this reason teachers resorted to French editions as their potential users were familiar with French, the first foreign language in Portugal in the 19th century.
- 3 Therefore it comes to no surprise that the teaching methods adopted were the ones consecrated in the books used. The grammar-translation approach, the invention of the

German Valentin Meidinger (1756-1822), received general acceptance, and the 'phraseologies' were seen as the best solution for the centuries-old problem of foreign language teaching and from the methodological viewpoint advantageous alternatives to the texts from 'reputable authors', which had been used before and were often completely inadequate to the age and interests of the students notwithstanding their exemplariness as far as both doctrinal and linguistic contents are concerned.

- 4 As for methodology there is no doubt that the phraseologies represented some progress in comparison to the canonical texts that had been used before. It is not difficult for any of us to image the frustration felt by young learners in the first half of the 19th century when they were presented in foreign language classes with masterpieces of English, French or German literatures whose contents were both ideologically and linguistically far beyond their grasp. The belief at the time was that the prolonged contact with exemplary texts would leave in the students' minds some elements that they could retain and use in the future for communicative purposes. One of those who believed in the good results of this strategy was James Hamilton, responsible for a method that would be called the Hamiltonian System consisting in reading literary or biblical texts with the help of the so-called interlinear translation. In a Brazilian-Portuguese adaptation of the Hamiltonian System this type of translation was complemented by detailed grammatical comments and a curious form of conversation. The latter was a way of checking the learners' understanding of the texts they had been asked to read and translate. Only the questions asked by the teacher were in the learners' mother tongue, and all the learners had to do was produce predominantly single word answers in the foreign language. In the light of present-day theories this method was at once comic and absolutely useless, a sheer waste of time. This is the reason why I said some moments ago that the phraseologies represented some progress in relation to the Hamiltonian System and other similar practices. At least the sentences provided either for 'versions' or for 'thèmes' were organized in such a way that they exhaustively illustrated and exercised the rules of grammar previously presented to the learners. Besides this sort of organization there was another aspect that must be underlined ; the organization of grammatical matters in an alleged sequence from the most simple to the most complex. In principle, if the course was well done, the students were expected to reach some solid knowledge of the grammar of the foreign language and be able to translate from and into it the stereotyped sentences used for the purpose.
- 5 When the Portuguese publishers began showing interest in the production of manuals for the teaching of foreign languages, this was the method used.
- 6 The incoherent sequence of sentences that would feed international joking for long gained its Portuguese counterparts in the *Novo Methodo Pratico e Facil para o Ensino da Lingua Ingleza pelo systema de Ahn* (New Practical and Easy Method to Teach the English Language following Ahn's System), published in 1875, and the *Manual de Phraseologia Ingleza* (Manual of English Phraseology), published in 1899. The first of these books, whose author was M. H. D'Espiney, was the 'result of many years of teaching in Portugal' (p. 5) and devotes its eleventh lesson to the comparison of adjectives (p. 38) where it presents the following set of exercises, presented here only in part :

My cousin is more reasonable than you. - Your book was more useful than his copybook. -
Her thimbles are more useless than my needles.
Their sons are more attentive than my daughters. (p. 39) etc.

- 7 The examples in the *Manual* are not very different, as is shown by the following examples to illustrate the degrees of comparison of adjectives too :

The Dutch are the cleanest people in the world, - The sun rose higher and higher. - Collect your strength, said the weaker of the two birds.

- Better suffer wrong than do it. - Our best friends are those who tell us of our faults. (pp. 46-7).

- 8 This *Manual* was designed to complement a 'reader of easy texts' and included a section of 'composition exercises' that consisted in questions about the texts in the reader. So it seems that some importance was given to the skill of reading, and the questions in the composition section were designed to ensure that the texts had been correctly understood. However, the questions were organized in such a way that the answers required would not need to be more than one or two words. Here are some examples :

1. How did a big dog take at first the barking and snapping at him of a forward waspish little dog ? - 2. What is meant (ment) in Portuguese by the adjective 'waspish' ? - 3. What did the big dog do at last ? (p. 48).

- 9 The books published in Portugal, although sometimes written by native speakers of English who had taught in this country for some years - as was the case of *Novo Methodo Pratico e Facil...* - or in collaboration with native speakers - as is the case of the *Manual de Phraseologia* - had the advantage of taking the contrasts and similarities between the two languages into account. And we all know how important this was for the teachers who approved of the grammar translation method. For the very same reason a book intended for the teaching of English to French learners did not attend to the specificities implied in the teaching of English to learners whose mother tongue was Portuguese, even though French was a language that they already knew. Thus the necessary adaptations to local circumstances would have to be made by the teachers in the classroom where such books were used.
- 10 In any case translation exercises were the dominant practice in 19th-century classrooms. This is a logical conclusion not only from what we know from history but also from the analysis of what students used to write between the lines in their books : attempts to find correct equivalences in the target language to the words given by textbooks in the source language. It should be emphasized that when I say words I do mean it, as all concern with structure and full sentence was apparently absent from those exercises. Consequently no one could expect great results from this sort of activity, and this is the reason for the series of attempts made in several European countries to find new methods that might bring about better results in terms of language learning.
- 11 Because of the absence of a history of English language teaching in Portugal that I mentioned above I am not in a position to say whether the new methods were sufficiently known in Portugal. At least I myself have not found any reference to François Gouin's psychological method, to Claude Marcel's reading method or to Hennessy and Sauveur's natural method. But there are signs that the new movements were influencing some Portuguese teachers and materials writers, be the latter 'methods' or grammar books. The consciousness that speaking was a skill to be considered - unlike what had happened before when reading and writing were all important - is reflected in the prologue to the first edition of the *Novo Methodo Pratico para Aprender a Ler, Escrever e Falar a Lingua Inglesa* (New Method to learn how to Read, Write and Speak the English Language) by Jacob Bensabat, which reads as follows :

Learning English without being able to speak it appropriately and fluently in the end is being only half successful or, even better, it is failing to reach the desired goal, because unless you are a lover of English literature who content yourself with faithfully interpreting the great works of poetic and dramatic genius of that nation, the remaining individuals who train themselves in this language do so with the only and special purpose of becoming able to speak it perfectly. (p. vii).

- 12 This is the reason for the method to be called 'pratico' (practical). However, some lines below, the author says that he had decided to divide the contents of his book into three parts : 'The first part consists in reading, the second in conversation, and the third in phraseology' (p. vii), that is to say, this method, in spite of its author's awareness of the importance of speaking, is not substantially different from the more traditional approaches where similar divisions can be found. But the conservative bias of this book is confirmed by the contents of each of those three sections where grammatical rules, vocabulary lists and translation are to be found on almost every page. Tradition imposed its rule, and methodologists found it difficult to get rid of it.
- 13 Beyond the Pyrenees the reform method and its most successful development, the direct method, were attracting more and more attention. The principle of teaching a language by using it as much as possible, when not exclusively, seemed to be answering the chronic necessity of developing in the learners the capacity to speak the language. Defenders of the new method also appeared in Portugal, one of them being a secondary-school teacher who had been given a scholarship to attend Wilhelm Viëtor's course, very probably in Germany. The teacher in question was Luis Cardim, who would a few years later be invited to teach at the newly created Faculty of Arts of the University of Oporto. This man left some interesting texts in which he expressed his strong sympathy for the direct method, a fact that is to be attributed to his contact with Viëtor's proposals.
- 14 But Cardim's, at the level of theory, is the only voice to be heard in Portugal in favour of the new method and its controlled application in Portuguese schools. His articles and books were published already in the present century at a time when the struggle between tradition and renovation was more visible with the latter apparently gaining more and more ground, although the grammar translation method continued to have great acceptance, if not always by textbook writers, at least in classroom practice. The used books I have had the opportunity to browse exhibit interlinear notes made by the pupils that show that books conceived for the direct method were used in class for grammar-translation practices.
- 15 In 1911 Cardim recommended the new method 'whose practical effects have appeared extremely beneficial to me. Of course this is so if the teacher wants to try it and, therefore, explain it conveniently : there is no school book that can do without it' (1911 : 7).
- 16 Four years later Cardim reaffirms his confidence in the direct method in the following terms :

We have employed the direct method with results that seem satisfactory at the lower learning levels ; we have not used it with all its rigour nor have we banished the mother tongue completely, but in an attenuated form, resorting to Portuguese whenever there may be economy of time ; in more advanced classes we have not been able to try it as we have not had the opportunity to follow to these levels with our own pupils, nor have we found them there familiarized with the method. (1915 : 351-7).

- 17 Two conclusions can be drawn from Cardim's statements. First his confidence in the potentialities of the direct method, though tempered by a good dose of common sense: he felt that things could not change overnight and both students and teachers had to adopt the new method gradually, even if some of its basic principles had to be ignored, as was the case of the exclusive use of the target language. On the other hand, if we believe in Cardim's words, none or very few of his colleagues were familiar with the new methodology; otherwise students in more advanced classes would have been initiated in it, and he would not have problems with using the new approach when he was asked to teach such classes. One of the very plausible explanations for this situation was insufficient command of speech on the part of the common teacher, an obstacle, that was the result of the methods used before, including the training of the teachers themselves.
- 18 On the practical side, there was at least a valid attempt to apply the direct method to textbook writing. This occurred in 1915 with the *English Reading Book*. Its author was Arthur Ivens Ferraz, who defends in the prologue that the texts « *must be very simple, specially at the beginning, so that the teacher can make the pupils understand it through the well-know processes of intuition, synonyms, paraphrase, definitions, etc., avoiding the use of the mother tongue* » (p. V). He adds a little further down : « *On the other hand it is indispensable that the pupil gets interested in what he reads* » (*ibid.*). Then he exemplifies with a lesson plan how one of the texts of the book could be used in class. The problem again was that the student who used the copy I have seen filled the spaces between the lines with the Portuguese equivalences of the words in the text. This circumstance suggests that even when books were designed in accordance with new methodologies teachers tended to use them for the application of the grammar-translation approach². Thus it is by no means surprising that almost simultaneously with the publication of this book another occurs³ that exhibits all the characteristics of the phraseologies with the only addition of careful attention being paid to the pronunciation of words.
- 19 And Portuguese schools had to wait for another good 15-20 years until the direct method was the only approach used in manuals⁴, but even then many teachers resorted to grammar-translation practices. Renovation was extremely slow and the power of tradition remained. '

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NOTES

1. CARDIM, Luiz, 'Some notes on the Portuguese-English and English-Portuguese grammars to 1830', *Revista da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto*, 5-6 (1922) ; CARDIM, Luiz, *Portuguese-English Grammarians and Eighteenth-Century Spoken English* (Porto : Emp. Indust. Gráfica do Porto, L.da, 1930) ; TORRE, M. Gomes da, *Gramáticas inglesas Antigas : alguns dados para a história dos estudos ingleses em Portugal até 1820* (Porto : Faculdade de Letras, 1985) ; TORRE, M. Gomes da, 'O interesse pelo estudo do inglês em Portugal no século XVIII', in *Actas do Colóquio Comemorativo do VI Centenário do Tratado de Windsor* (Porto : Instituto de Estudos Ingleses da Faculdade de Letras, 1988) ; TORRE, M. Gomes da, 'Quem foi o autor de *A Compleat Account...* ?', *Revista da Faculdade de Letras, Línguas e Literaturas*, II Série, vol. VII : 211-24 (Porto, 1990) ; TORRE, M. Gomes da, 'Imported models : a tradition of English-language teaching in Portugal', *Revista da Faculdade de Letras do Porto, Línguas e Literaturas* (In honorem Prof. Oscar Lopes), Vol. XII : 135-48 (Porto, 1995) ; TORRE, M. Gomes da, 'Elementos para a história das relações linguísticas entre Portugal e a Grã-Bretanha', in Gualter Cunha (éd.), *Estudos Ingleses. Ensaio sobre Língua, Literatura e Cultura* (Coimbra, 1998) : 213-30. The first référence to English as a subject in the curriculum of a Portuguese institution is to be found in the statutes of the Colégio Real dos Nobres (Royal Collège for Noblemen), founded in Lísbon in 1761. The study of that language is recommended, but it is

only in 1785 that the collège finds a teacher to do the lessons. The same happens in relation to French (cf. Carvalho : 126).

2. As was pointed out to me in the discussion that followed the presentation of this paper, the circumstance of finding Portuguese translations above the English words is not enough proof that the method used in class was the traditional one. This cannot be contested. However, one can speculate that if the lessons were done predominantly in English and students were required to give synonyms in the target language, there should appear, somewhere in the book, some vestiges of the student's concern with such demand and examples of handwritten meanings in English, which never occurs

3. I am referring to *70 Lições de Inglês Prático*, published in 1918 by J. Guterres d'Oliveira Santos.

4. It was mainly due to the fecund of Catholic priest Julio Albino Ferreira, the author of readers, grammars and dictionaries that the teaching of English in Portugal receive a notorious impetus.

AUTHOR

MANUEL GOMES DA TORRE

Universidade do Porto