

**TEACHING FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES SIDE BY SIDE:  
CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presently highlights the relation between the knowledge of grammar in the mother tongue and the second language. I would like to examine this particular relation from several aspects; i.e. from the point of view of linguistic methodology, from the developmental psychological perspective, and from the viewpoint of traditional descriptive grammar, with the additional hope of finding some exciting ideas in functional grammar.

1. GRAMMAR AS A TOOL, OR GRAMMAR AS A TARGET?

There is a long way from the *septem artes liberales* to the language classes of the BA level of the universities today. ‘Language competence’ has gradually assumed the role of grammar at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially from the first publication of the Common European Frame of Languages. Long ago the role of grammar used to be essential. It was thought to work out in the mind and it was the basis of logical thinking. For this purpose, a dead language, one that was not in constant development, was entirely suitable.

Today this role has been taken over by mathematics, with pupils learning analytical thinking based on mathematical operations. For instance, a new program is set to start in Hungary: chess has been added to the national curriculum with the purpose of developing logical thinking<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://index.hu/belfold/2012/06/08/modositjak\\_a\\_koznevelesi\\_torvenyt/](http://index.hu/belfold/2012/06/08/modositjak_a_koznevelesi_torvenyt/)

Nowadays English, rather than Latin, is considered the *lingua franca*, though opinions are divided as to whether English is really the best choice. An increasing number of language teachers (Barabás 2009) hold the view that English does not provide sufficient basis for acquiring other new languages. It is clear that the knowledge of English is indispensable, but it does not satisfy the requirements to lay the foundation for systematic grammatical thinking. As is well known from Adam Smith, English has stepped on the path towards becoming a simple<sup>2</sup> - isolating - language (Smith 1761).

Before getting into our real topic of examining the relation between the mother tongue and second language grammar acquisition, it should be stated that, with regard to language learning at university level – especially on the BA level –, students need the capability of working with complex structures and should be aware of the meaning of basic terms and concepts. By that time they should have passed the stage “in which they use a large number of unanalyzed chunks of language in certain predictable social contexts” (Nattinger – DeCarrico 1997: xv). These requirements are made more difficult by some technical problems. One of the results of the Bologna process is that students at the BA level are admitted to the linguistic departments at least with an intermediate level of language knowledge. In the case of the ‘great’ languages, such as English, German and Russian, such knowledge can be easily acquired, but this is not the case with less widely used and taught languages, such as Hungarian. Thus teachers are facing an incredible challenge: students must be taught each language within 100 – or in the best case 200 classes. The communicative method does not equip them with the knowledge necessary to study literature and language history later. Since most of the students have absolutely no idea about grammar, these one hundred or two hundred classes do not

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<sup>2</sup> “But this simplification of languages, through it arises, perhaps, from similar causes, has, by no means, similar effects with the correspondent simplification of machines. The simplification of machines renders them more and more perfect, but this simplification of the rudiments of languages renders them more and more imperfect, and less proper for many of purposes of language” (Smith 1761: 535).

give teachers a chance to explore the structure of language. It is not an isolated problem, connected only with the Hungarian language: we can find signs indicating this on an increasing number of university homepages, where what are termed grammatical introductory or preparatory courses try to explain the basic relationships of language structure.

## 2. WHY PUPILS AND STUDENTS DO NOT LIKE GRAMMAR?

To find the reason behind missing grammar-knowledge we can analyse the methods by which grammar in native languages is taught. There are two characteristic methods: in the Western countries pupils learn their native grammar through literature, while grammar is taught as a separate subject in Hungary and in some post-socialist countries. Regardless of how it is formulated and prescribed in the curriculum, the presentation method is very formal; it yields no more than a shallow understanding of the most basic rules, such as the rule in German that “the noun is the word which is preceded by *der/die/das*”, or “the verb is conjugated and the noun is declined”. These formal methods are imbued with a number of conceptual vagaries, the most important being the following:

1. In the case of the mother tongue, the established language competence will be supplemented by a kind of descriptive analysing grammatical material in the primary years, something that seems completely unnecessary for the very young pupils. This tradition does not take into account that especially abstract categories of grammar are incomprehensible to them. Children under ca. 10 years of age need concrete, exact, clear rules.
2. The traditional grammar-centred language teaching methodology identifies the knowledge of grammar with the knowledge of the language itself. Neither do the newer methods devote more time to the living language than the traditional ones: “The end-product of

this type of description is in some ways comparable to a geographical map, which likewise presents its subject-matter as if it were wholly unchanging and could be taken in at a single glance” (Hall 1967: 1). So these types of description are not sufficient for teaching because there is no reference to the process of how cognitive content receives its form.

3. These axioms are so deeply enrooted in pupils’ minds that they remain relatively unaffected even by new linguistic relationships. This is a huge problem in the case of languages with different systems – a question that will be analysed later on from the viewpoint of Hungarian.
4. Last but not least, the fact that pupils do not like grammar – that they find it boring – is not insignificant. There is no challenge, there are no real tasks and questions and answers concern only slavishly learned material often full of fallacies, contradictions, or at least imperfect and partial body of knowledge. The issue of motivation is not a small one: transmitting the importance of metaphorical enrichment of pupils’ ways of seeing by linguistic means relates to the whole primordial task of education<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> An example of an insufficient teacher’s explanation (the case happened to my son) is the following. When he was about 8 years old, his homework was to choose 5 random verbs and to conjugate them in the definite and indefinite conjugation. My dear son sat and thought for quite a while, before finally breaking into tears, saying: “Mommy, I can’t find the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ps. Sg. Def. form of the verb ‘go’. I have the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person, but what is the correct form for the 3<sup>rd</sup>?” Well, the teacher probably did not put stress on the fact that in Hungarian only the transitive verbs can be conjugated in the definite form. So the suffix does not depend on our choice, nor does it depend on morphology: but rather it depends closely on the type of the accusative – and so the whole problematic can be explained based on the pragmatics. In this case two viewpoints of language-description meet: the structural – descriptive and the functional. The teacher simply forgot to mention the functional one, giving only the rigid morphological rule. This example highlights very well why pupils (and teachers) hate learning native grammar and feel it unnecessary.

All these problems have been proved by a survey conducted in 2005. Pupils in the 11th and 12th grades from several high schools were asked about the situation of grammar-teaching in their schools, and also about the connection between native and foreign language teaching, after which they were given two very simple tasks (see appendix).

The detailed evaluation of the questionnaire that involved 66 participants was published in Hegedűs (2006): here are mentioned only those issues that are relevant from the point of view of our subject matter. In particular, it is intriguing that contrastive grammatical problems were mentioned only in 15% in the Hungarian classes, while this percentage is remarkably higher, 33% in the second languages classes. The poor results of proportions show that contrastive issues are not discussed sufficiently, especially in Hungarian classes. Teachers and textbooks delineate only rigid, formal descriptions based on historical facts and these views of grammar are etched into the pupils' minds suggesting that this is how a grammatical system looks like. Pupils are deprived of facing the common fact that a grammatical system is only one possible way to reflect upon the world.

Neither are they provided with the key to the 'secret', that is understanding how to use grammar and what formal rules are applicable in different situations (see more about it in point 5).

In addition, there is another core problem that is connected with the formal side of Hungarian, which is exceptional among the European languages. The Hungarian language does not belong to the Indo-European language family, but it belongs to the Finno-Ugrian one. Its morphological system is characterised by an extraordinary richness, and the so-called 'free word order' is governed by pragmatics<sup>4</sup>. It

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the different inherent grammar rules, different teaching methods are needed for teaching Hungarian as a foreign language: to reach the level A2/B1 twice as much time is needed in Hungarian than in English. To teach Hungarian morphology we have to enable students to get the grasp of a lot of syntactical-functional phenomena at the same time, for example, the accurate classification of

means that Hungarian is not a configurational language, as most Indo-European languages partly are and English, the *lingua franca*, certainly is. Therefore, if pupils learn to look at Hungarian grammar as a fixed system, they are unable to see the world through the glasses of other languages later on.

Seeing the lack of interest for understanding the grammar of the native language, a number of implications in foreign language teaching arise:

- Why do not language teachers take advantage of the opportunity to show comparisons among languages?
- Why do not teachers show the differences and similarities in structures and usage between two given languages?
- Why do not they seek to understand and convey the understanding of the real significance and weight of the different languages we speak?
- Why are the questions that are meant to invite students to think about grammar issues so formal and do nothing to increase receptivity of the different ways of thinking of different languages?

The answer is very simple: it happens because it does not belong to the curriculum of the native language teachers' education. Teachers of the mother tongue have not been taught to exploit the vast opportunity of giving a new perspective to the mother tongue teaching by showing the subject in a greater context, from an external point of view.

In the absence of this external point of view, all language learners tend to fall into the pitfall of translating mere grammatical forms. Due to the form-centred language teaching, it happens many a times that the learner – instead of looking for an appropriate form that performs the required function – tries to translate only the grammatical form of the source language into the host language. It means that he/she looks for an equivalent form on the same level in the structure of the target language. Students are not prepared to consider that this function will

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objects, the idea of directness and indirectness. The formal side of morphology is not an easier one either: the root-changing verbs and nouns contradict the legendary transparency of agglutinating languages.

be formed on another level, with other tools. For instance, the passive voice of the verb is expressed by an auxiliary in most Indo-European languages, while in Hungarian it is expressed by a suffix:

- |     |  |             |
|-----|--|-------------|
| (1) | The little girl <i>was offended</i> .      | (English)   |
|     | Das kleine Mädchen <i>wurde verletzt</i> . | (Deutsch)   |
|     | A kislány <i>megsért-őd-ött</i> .          | (Hungarian) |

The only way to avoid this general problem is to observe the mother tongue and the foreign language from the same distance, externally, and this external point of view would help to find the *tertium comparationis*, which is the general idea of verbal inflection.

### 3. *TERTIUM COMPARATIONIS*

The concept of *tertium comparationis* has been known in applied linguistics for a while. It serves as a common basis for two separate phenomena in two different languages. To apply this method, teachers have two possibilities: they either divide a greater unit into smaller parts, as the Greatest Common Divisor in Mathematics; or they have to find a larger category into which these two items can be ranked, as the Least Common Multiple. Nowadays the cognitive approach with top-down and bottom-up strategies is increasingly popular. The bottom-up process is similar to finding the Least Common Multiple and the top-down process resembles to the Greatest Common Divisor in Mathematics. “Psychology defines bottom-up processing as an approach wherein there is a progression from the individual elements to the whole” (Ramskov 2008: 22). In the case of top-down process, we start deciphering the phenomenon from a higher category, from understanding a more general operation and narrowing it down to the given case.

Both methods, the top-down or the bottom-up, are well-known in pedagogy and can be covered more or less by the deductive or

inductive methodology. I have to note that from our point of view, when we are trying to define the common ground between the mother tongue and a foreign language, the terms of the Greatest Common Divisor and the Least Common Multiple are the most tangible concepts.

‘Phenomena/items’ on the field of language teaching generally belong to a lexical or a functional category. ‘Grammar’ teaching focuses on the functional, also on grammatical categories that explain relations between lexical categories. As it has been demonstrated by the example of passivity (chapter 3), borders between structural levels must have been transcended in the contrast of two languages.

What is to be done, if the knowledge of grammatical rules in two languages seems to be insufficient to cross the borders between structural levels? To find a *tertium comparationis* we should also apply semantic or pragmatic tools.

It is possible that pupils in early stage of their grammar education have too poor understanding to grasp the Least Common Multiple as it is too abstract for them. To illustrate this issue with examples, for instance, in order to enable students to understand the use of Hungarian verbal prefixes, we have to contrast them with the tense-system of English or with the lexical category ‘aspect’ of the Slavic languages. I assume that the Least Common Multiple, that is the top, is in this case the resultivity (effectiveness) and telicity, or rather the quality of the action or event regarding to the circumstances of the utterance. But if a language teacher starts highlighting the phenomenon of this aspect in this way, then probably he or she will be alone in the classroom next class. In these cases to handle issues with the less sophisticated Common Divisor is acceptable. The decisive factors are what is the given language pair, what is their shared operation field, and into how many parts the phenomenon needs to be broken into to become manageable. The most productive approach is to sort out this problem, if we try to find what fills the same function in two languages.



#### 4. *TERTIUM COMPARATIONIS* IN THE PRAXIS

The route to *tertium comparationis* is below illustrated with two examples.

It is quite simple to understand the differences between the Hungarian, German and English adjective and adverb usage by applying the top-down method. The Least Common Multiple seems to be the *tertium comparationis* that embodies the syntactic role. Both are ‘accompanying’ words’: attributes are connected to nouns, and adverbs are connected to verbs. They can occur also in predicative function combined with a copula verb.

Congruence-rules in two languages are totally different, so different that they could even be seen as perfect mirror reflections or as being in sharp contrast with each other. The marked forms are highlighted with small capital letters.

##### (2) Adjectives and adverbs in Hungarian German-English comparison

Word examined as a(n)	Hungarian	German	English
attribute	<i>Egy SZÉP kis-madár szállt a fára.</i>	<i>Ein SCHÖNER Vogel flog auf den Baum.</i>	<i>A NICE bird has flown on the tree.</i>
verb modifier	<i>A madár SZÉPEN énekel.</i>	<i>Der Vogel singt SCHÖN.</i>	<i>The bird is singing BEAUTIFULLY.</i>
predicate	<i>Ezek a madarak SZÉPEK.</i>	<i>Diese Vögel sind SCHÖN.</i>	<i>These birds are BEAUTIFUL.</i>

Cfr. Hegedűs (2007: 45)

In this case, though, the comparison is not very difficult. The *tertium comparationis* is situated at the same level in grammatical structures of different languages and we easily identify it by structural analysis.

It is much more complex and intricate to understand the usage of completed and progressive verbs in Hungarian, as it is illustrated in the chart below, than to understand this phenomenon.

(3a) Imperfect aspect

Tense			
Past		Present	Future
<i>almát ettem</i> I ate an apple		<i>almát eszem</i> I am eating an apple	<i>almát fogok enni</i> I will eat an apple
Time	in the past	Now	next time

(3b) Perfect aspect

Tense			
Past	Present	Future	
<i>meg-ettem az almát</i> I have eaten the apple	<i>meg-eszem az almát</i> I am eating the apple	<i>meg fogom enni az almát</i> I will have eaten the apple (by the time)	
Time	in the past	the eating will be finished in the future	in the future

Cfr. Hegedűs (2007: 16)

We tried to explain this complex grammatical category with the bottom-up method by finding a common component between Hungarian and English. Meanwhile it has become necessary to divide this issue into grammatical and pragmatic functions and differentiate between them. In Hungarian one of the main functions of the verb prefix – if not the most important one – is to indicate the completeness of action. In our case it expresses the agent's intention to finish the action with definite results in mind. In the given situation we have an intention which has not been confirmed inherently in the moment of utterance, therefore it automatically shifts the conversion's time relations. This conjures a paradox: a paradigm in the present tense

fulfils a function in the future. The counterpart of this phenomenon in another language may not be tantamount to a hundred percentage application, which means that, due to typological differences between two languages, there is no perfect *tertium comparationis*.

The Greatest Common Divisor is in this case the relationship between Time and Tense, which are concrete, but are only partly grammatical constructions. Besides the grammatical construction of this relationship, the grade of definiteness/indefiniteness also plays an important role in the usage, and the whole will be integrated into the category of efficiency and/or resultivity.

## 5. SUMMARY

In my paper I tried to point out especially challenging areas of grammar teaching methodology at the BA-level. Difficulties, however, could be outlined by defining some obstacles. The most important of them are the following:

- Students are not prepared to use operational linguistic logic and structural visions that would be prerequisites for understanding grammar basics even in their mother tongue;
- When they actually study a language system, their tools are too rigid and formal to grasp the essence of a language.

From all these follows that when a student is studying a second language, then she/he actually learns grammar for the first time. Since she/he has no experience in handling grammatical structures, her/his underlying linguistic assumptions of the mother tongue starts causing interference problems during the course of second language learning. In other words, the rigid categories of the native language grammar tend to be confusing, and as a result a number of interference-related errors occur.

In addition to these, another deficiency should be mentioned, that is the lack of functional aspects in the explanations. It is not sufficient to learn the rules of grammatical systems, because the rule's applicability

depends on the given situation, on the ‘state of affairs’, that is to say, it depends on extra-linguistic properties. The given embeddedness, that is the linguistic situations, are in permanent change, and it is, it could not be taught to children as a simple rule because it requires transformational analysis, but students can only become gradually acquainted with it. The problem is: there are uncountable structural rules applied in various ways, thus the teacher’s task is to show the wide spectrum of applicability of the rules in different types of situations. The method that could relate the mother tongue to foreign-language teaching is an analytic one. In case of the mother tongue the starting point is the analysis of functions, and in a foreign language it is the scrutiny of the grammatical structure. The formal structure of the mother tongue should not be taught, as it becomes automatically a part of the language competence. What is unavoidable is a deep understanding of the functional approach, which explains how to use the grammatical forms. “Common is between the functional grammars, that they take into consideration semantic, textual and communicative categories also, out of grammatical ones” (Menzel 1998: 8).

With the discussion above, I tried to show what options a caring language teacher has to make his or her work more effective. Dedicated language teachers greatly enhance their work by highlighting the working and usage of a new language in parallel with the mother-tongue. Language learning should contain an inconspicuously strenuous effort to make intra-lingual analyses of the mother-tongue, which is a really interesting detective-task. In this way, the analysis that makes room for deeper understanding develops the competence for making good analyses and syntheses. It is really creative, pupils are not forced to answer unnecessary prefabricated formal questions on the side of the teacher: they themselves have to formulate the question and find the basic differences between surface features of the two languages. Nothing could be more rewarding for the teacher, when a student recognises the underlying connections

within the phenomena, and can perceive and draw conclusions (with some careful guidance in the background, of course)<sup>5</sup>.

I am aware it is not the task of BA-curricula to correct the methodological and content mistakes of the secondary school education. However, to work successfully we must try to eliminate the functional deficiencies of pedagogy at lower levels and to enable our students to learn a more up-to-date approach to language learning.

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<sup>5</sup> In the questionnaire of the above mentioned study, the last question was formulated as: “How would you explain the following problem to a foreigner? Why is there an imperative in the next subordinate clause?”. The most promising answer, though not absolute correct, was given by a pupil studying Italian: “It is somehow similar to Italian”. This means that he had realised all by himself one of the most important common functions of the Hungarian and Italian subjunctive, but she did not know the precise term for it. The very disappointing type of answers was: “We haven’t been taught this”.

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## APPENDIX

What foreign languages are you studying?	English + 37% German, 28% French 22 % Italian 6% Japanese 7% other
What is your opinion regarding the benefit of Hungarian grammar-classes?	
What percentage of Hungarian grammar-classes have been turned into literature classes?	73%
Have you ever encountered any of contrastive problems between a foreign and the Hungarian language mentioned in Hungarian grammar classes?	15%
If the answer is yes, which problems were mentioned?	Most common answers: difference between the agglutinating and fusional languages
Have you ever encountered any of the contrastive problems between foreign and the Hungarian language mentioned in a foreign language class?	33%
If the answer is yes, which problems were mentioned?	word order 80% tenses 99%
Do you find any phenomena in the foreign language you study which you find extremely difficult, and which do not exist in Hungarian?	passive constructions 80% subjunctive (!) 10%
Do you find the statement that 'there are richer and poorer languages' to be correct?	30% yes Hungarian vocabulary is richer 7%
How would you explain the Hungarian direct and indirect conjugation to a foreigner?	50% did not have any idea
How would you explain the following problem to a foreigner: why is there an imperative in the following subordinate clause? <i>Sietek, hogy még nyitva találjam a boltot.</i> <i>I am in a hurry to find the shop still open.</i>	70% did not have any idea 1 answer: it is similar to the Italian subjunctive.