SIHFLES CONFERENCE 2018

The "exercice" in the history of language teaching

17 - 18 May 2018

Rationale

Today, exercises constitute an omni-present part of language learning, for school, university and adult learners alike. Many collections of exercises are published, and all textbooks include exercises of some kind.

The intensity with which exercises are used may lead us to forget that their pedagogical use is relatively recent. Indeed, it would be interesting to discover how the development of exercises started. Paradoxically, from today's perspective, the use of exercises started much later than the numerous descriptions of the French language which started to be produced in the 16th century. Indeed, while there were many grammar books, both prescriptive and pedagogical, published between the 16th and 18th centuries, they did not include activities intended for systematisation, at least not in the form of exercises.

Language exercises, therefore, appeared gradually, in a very different form from those that are in use today. Oral exercises may have preceded written ones and their invention cannot be attributed to a particular person (even though J.-V. Meidinger deserves a special mention as, in the last quarter of the 18th century, he was one of the first to include a series of systematisation activities in his grammar book which are similar to the types of activities used today, and which he referred to as 'exercises'). The exercise therefore appears to be a collective invention which came about through numerous language teachers and authors of dialogues identifying a need for systematisation (thus, there are certain examples of dialogues in 16th-century texts by Berlaimont which are very similar to variation activities).

The spread of modern language teaching into European secondary school education which occurred at the beginning of the 19th century was certainly a turning-point in the incorporation of systemisation activities, this trend having led to languages no longer being able to be taught in the relatively open, reflective, natural way which may be associated with teaching by tutors and closer to what has been called the 'natural method'.

Still in this same period, we see the use of cacography / cacology (i.e. exercises involving correction of bad spelling) in France to deal with teaching spelling and how to "write well". These were also used in foreign language teaching in Spain and the Netherlands. A. Chervel also indicates that in certain manuals edited in England and the United States in the 18th century, there are examples of exercises on "bad English" or on "false English".

Many questions arise in relation to this area, particularly because systematisation and exercises need to be more clearly distinguished. Language tables appeared very early on, often adapted from Latin, posing problems with regard to coherence in the description (French is then presented as a language with cases), but also giving evidence of a perceived need to put the language in order for learning purposes.

While there are many works on the history of grammar (SIHFLES has dealt with this subject on numerous occasions, most notably at its conference in Ragusa and its contribution to the 2011 SHESL conference), there is very little research on this aspect of learning, which poses many theoretical problems, both in relation to type of grammatical description and to conception of learning. Points to be considered might include:

- The first exercises: where, when, by which authors, in what learning environments?
- The relationship between prescriptive grammar and exercises, and, more generally, the links between the "grammatisation" of vernacular languages and the gradual emergence of activities designed for assimilation of these new descriptions;
- The diversity and evolution of exercise types; their place in the learning process; how they have been used;
- The domains covered: for example, morphology has been, and still is, a favoured field of research, to the detriment of the syntagmatic field; tackling teaching pronunciation through exercises (before and after the recognition of phonetics as a scientific domain in the early 20th century);

- The relationship to students' own language (via translation exercises, for example). This then also relates to the existence of contrastive and plurilingual grammar books. Do these treat the mother tongue as a resource, or are exercises linked to the learning of the foreign language alone?
- Emerging sites for exercise procedures (individual practice, educational institutions, etc.), migration and circulation of exercise types (well-documented in the case of structural exercises but deserving to be looked at again and analysed), for example, between "French as a native language" and "French as a foreign language", between different foreign languages, between Latin and modern languages;
- When different types of exercise emerged / were diffused, from the perspective of comparative timelines;
- The link between the methodological domain and the forms of systemisation and exercises (for example, did the Direct Method produce new forms of exercise?) including for self-instruction.

Such questions are of evident interest to language-teaching historians, who seek to better understand their discipline and better define the evolutions and dynamics of the field. Answers to these questions will also be of use to the agents and users of foreign language teaching – educational specialists, textbook authors, teachers, students, in other words, the creators and consumers of exercises today – giving them the possibility to understand particular techniques more deeply and so better look beneath the surface of this often taken for granted phenomenon.

Dates

- Conference Dates: Thursday 17th and Friday 18th May 2018
- Location: University of Mons – Faculty of Translation and Interpretation – Avenue du Champ de Mars, 17 – 7000 Mons (Belgium)
- Deadline for proposals: 1st December 2017
- Responses from the Scientific Committee: 15th January 2018

Conditions for submitting proposals

Proposals can be written in French or English, and must be no longer than 500 words, including the bibliography (5 references max.) and key words (5 words). They should be sent to:

- michel.berre@umons.ac.be
- g.vigner@noos.fr

The author's name and the teaching and/or research establishment to which they belong should be indicated.

Presentations

The organisers intend to avoid having two sessions at the same time. Duration of presentations: 20 minutes + 5/10 minutes for questions. The conference will be held in French, but individual presentations can be given in French or English.

Registration

The registration fees cover the conference, the coffee breaks and the two lunches, as well as any documents issued at the conference (programmes, badges, certificates, etc.).

- SIHFLES and partner institution members: 60€
- Others: 70€
- Doctorals Students: 20€

Link to the online registration and payment form

Meals

The lunches will be held in the University's restaurant (Plaine de Nimy). A gala dinner is organized on Thursday 17 May in the evening at the Mundaneum (cf. cultural activities).

Cultural Activities

A visit of the Mundaneum is organized on Thursday 17 May from 18.00. This visit includes the discovery of the place (www.mundaneum.org), the presentation of its founding designers Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and Henri Lafontaine (1854-1943), founders of the International Institute of Bibliography (1895) and of the universal decimal classification system. A guided tour of the exhibition dedicated to the history of cryptography (Jules Caesar Edward Snowden, or how to decode cryptography - http://archives.Mundaneum.org/fr/expositions/top-secret-xpo) will also be proposed.

During the conference, the Central Library of the University of Mons proposes a presentation of French grammars from its own former and Education collections. The day and time of this event will be specified later (as well as registration details).

Practical information

- Accommodation
- Venue
- Map
- Visit Mons

Organising Committee

- Michel Berré (University of Mons)
- Elisabeth Castadot (University of Mons)
- Mylena Piccinelli (University of Mons)
- Barbara Radomme (University of Mons)
- Pierre Swiggers (University of Liège)
- Gérard Vigner (Academy Inspector, Éducation nationale, France)

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- Josette A. Virasolvit (University of Burgundy).

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