

## Metaoperational Linguistics: Issues of Translatability and Visibility

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore the reasons behind the limited dissemination of Adamczewski's Metaoperational approach to language beyond the French academic sphere. The theory, which developed in and by contrastivity between 1976 and 2005, is built on the basic assumption that utterances exhibit on their surface observable traces of the utterer's invisible structuring activity. It is initially derived from a corpus-based approach to English and applied to languages as different as French, Arabic, Turkish, Madagascan, and Kwa languages. The theory's visibility is investigated primarily in relation to its readability and translatability. The findings suggest that visibility retarders and obstructers are more associated with a general context of global scientific publication marked by the hegemony of English as the language of science than with the theoretical framework itself. However, if the model's body of knowledge and conceptual apparatus lend themselves to smooth interlingual transfer, as shown in books of Metaoperational inspirations in Spanish (Matte Bon (1992)), Italian (Gagliardelli (1999)), English (Adamczewski (2002)), and Arabic (Kahlaoui (2010)), the theory's high degree of formalism and its dense metalinguistic description are in some didactic contexts generative of reader frustration.

*Keywords:* Enunciative approach, metalinguistic status, metaoperational linguistics, readability, translatability, visibility

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## Introduction

In spite of its valuable contribution to contemporary linguistic thought, the work of many French scholars and theoreticians has suffered poor visibility in the Anglophone academic world community and beyond. Eminent figures like G. Guillaume, E. Benveniste, B. Pottier, A. Culioli, C. Hagege and H. Adamczewski to name a few, are conspicuously absent from graduate and postgraduate linguistics curricula outside a few French universities. The case of Henri Adamczewski's work is discussed in this article with a special focus on its readability, translatability and intrinsic and extrinsic visibility obstructers.

The paper attempts to address the following research questions:

- To what extent is the visibility of a linguistic model dependent only on intrinsic factors, such as a coherent and firmly grounded theoretical construct, an explanatory and predictive power, verifiability and correctability of the new data, and a functional conceptual apparatus?
- How does a model's readability affect its translatability and promote its visibility within an epistemic community?
- How can non-Anglophone new research, especially in social and human sciences, gain due recognition in a disempowering monolingual global research environment where English monopolizes the scientific landscape?

### The Metaoperational Linguistic Model: "the linear is not the message."

Building on Guillaume (1960), Benveniste (1974), and Culioli (1970 and 1971), the work of Henri Adamczewski on "Be+ing" (1976) has gradually developed into a systematic approach not only to English but also to natural languages. It draws on the assumption that language, being directly unreachable, can lead to its functioning only via its surface manifestation. The final product of a complex and multi-faceted process, "utterances exhibit on their surface observable traces of an invisible activity" (1982, p.5-transl.mine). They codify "mental operations whose main object is not to enable the speaker to refer to the world, but to indicate how the utterance was built up (...), what the speaker's position is relative to what s/he is saying and also relative to the addressee" (Santin-Guettier, A.-M. & Toupin, F. (2006)). The visible/audible linear arrangement, therefore, alludes to the activity underlying discourse, but cannot help to explain the utterance. For Adamczewski (2000), the linear utterance is not the message but "the final product of simultaneous/successive cipherings, phonological, lexical and syntactic (p.12). English modalized utterances offer illustrative and almost transparent examples of this linear fallacy:

(1) *Peter must have forgotten his appointment.*

In (1), we cannot rely on the surface order to account for the working of the utterance; the grammatical subject *Peter* is not the real subject of *must*. The modal marker is there to codify the judgement of the linguistic subject.

Utterer (*Peter* must *have forgotten his appointment.*)

In France, Adamczewski is fairly considered a precursor of subsequent changes in pedagogical grammar and theoretical linguistics. His linguistic and didactic endeavor is mostly directed toward

- i. rehabilitation of the surface of discourse, a conveyor of visible/audible indications about the working of languages, after the long-time generativist hegemony which privileges research on deep structures;
- ii. rehabilitation of the context of production and reception of utterances, a key parameter entirely ignored by both structuralists and generativists;
- iii. rehabilitation of the role and status of the utterer and the co-utterer in the production and reception of discourse;
- iv. rehabilitation of learners' autonomy by equipping them with adequate conceptual tools to enable understanding of utterance structure and working (such autonomy has been impaired by atomistic approaches inducing memorization of grammatical rules)
- v. rehabilitation of "unprivileged" languages which had long been marginalized by monolingual approaches to human language. In this respect, Adamczewski considers contrastivity a domain of linguistic research, not a just a methodological device.

As for first language, Adamczewski, (2000) rejected both Skinner's imitation-reinforcement theory (1957) and Chomsky's innateness hypothesis (1965). He (2000) argues that:

"the key to acquisition is neither in the exposure to language nor in the biological predisposition to learn but "in the organization of language itself: languages are built in such a way that children cannot fail to discover their secret. The intelligence of the child meets the intelligence of the system." (pp.12)

### **From *A University Grammar of English* to *Grammaire Linguistique de l' Anglais*: A New Episteme?**

Adamczewski and Delmas's seminal work *Grammaire Linguistique de l' Anglais* (1982), (GLA) appeared at a time when Quirk and Greenbaum's *A University Grammar of English* (1973) was the undisputed English grammar reference in tertiary education. A crude comparison shows that the French manual is not just one of the numerous English grammar books which overwhelm the market every new academic year. *GLA*, in fact, announces not only a transition from descriptive to explicative grammar but also a real paradigm shift that breaks with dominant approaches to grammar in the early 1980s. Table 1 shows the lines of demarcation between the two approaches to grammar.

Table 1. *A University grammar of English vs. Grammaire Linguistique de L'Anglais*

	<i>A University Grammar of English</i>	<i>Grammaire Linguistique de l'Anglais</i>
1	descriptive / structuralist	explicative / post-structuralist
2	monolingual approach	intra- and interlingual approach
3	direct assignment of meaning to formal categories / referential function	metalinguistic function of operators
4	context insensitive	context- and corpus-based analysis

5	linear description	"The linear is not the message."
6	centrality of the grammatical subject	centrality of the linguistic subject
7	sentences / language	utterances / discourse
8	focus on macro-structures	focus on grammatical micro-systems
9	taxonomic and rule-based	core-value approach / invariance theory

If the scope of both grammars is to provide a better understanding of how English works, the logic and the context governing them remain fundamentally divergent.

First, in the descriptive approach, language is observed, data is collected, sentences described and grammatical rules formulated, whereas the explicative model assumes that we cannot describe what we are not in a position to explain, or "the surface order in which the constituents of the utterance appear does not necessarily correspond to the order in which the mental operations underlying utterance construction were performed by the speaker" (Santinguettier & Toupin, 2006). The analyst has therefore to decode the processing operations at work (explanation) in order to properly describe the final product. The surface is a *sine qua non* insofar as it displays visible traces of invisible activity.

Second, the work of Adamczewski is the product of a highly prolific post-structuralist era of profound changes in language study. It witnessed the emergence and development of new domains of research heralding a new episteme in linguistic sciences and pedagogy. Fields such as Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Text Linguistics, Contrastive Rhetoric and Corpus Linguistics constitute a major source of influence not only on Adamczewski but on the tenants of the enunciation school in general. Theoretical linguistics at that time was shifting from mentalism and formalism to an empirical corpus-based study of language at work in socio-cultural contexts.

If the work of R. Quirk and S. Greenbaum and other descriptivists still enjoys a better worldwide visibility in academic curricula, this is not because it is more persuasive than explicative models. On the contrary, descriptive grammarians of English persist in their direct assignment of meaning to meaningless (formal) grammatical categories, such as the numerous meanings attributed to the modals *will*, *shall* and *should*; hundreds of counter examples invalidating the dominant explanation of *do*, *be+ing*, *demonstrative pronouns*, *articles*, *the subjunctive* and *verbal patterns*. Language teachers adopting descriptive approaches to grammar are not equipped to explain to their students the difference between minimal pairs, such as:

*I leave tomorrow.* vs. *I am leaving tomorrow.*

*Mary resembles her mother.* vs. *Mary is resembling her mother more and more.*

For Adamczewski (2000), "this particular weakness of practically all the grammars of English available in 2000, has dramatic consequences on the didactics of English. Even the latest manuals

for first-year learners of English still stick to the traditional but false opposition “habitual versus real present” (simple present vs. continuous present). (p.6)

### **The Dialectical Triad: Readability, Translatability and Visibility**

This paper claims that the readability, translatability and visibility of a source text (ST) interrelate dialectically. Each concept should be understood as a continuum ranging from a low to high extreme, not a discontinuous unit.

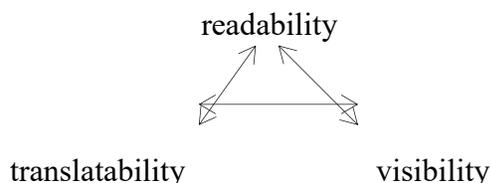
*Readability* has been approached by classical rhetoricians as an argumentative category and by applied linguists. Dale and Chall, (1948), McLaughlin, (1968), and Oakland & Lane, (2004) from a communicative perspective. The focus has been on those textual properties that would enhance or hinder persuasion, understanding or communication and often with the aim of developing readability formulas which define readable texts. Only recently has readability been approached from a translational stance in the context of corpus-based translation studies Baker, (1995) and (1996). However, given the elusive and relative character of readability which is governed not only by textual properties but also by the types of readers (for pleasure, understanding, translation, etc.) and their reading potential, our focus will not be restricted to textual properties; it will include learners and translators as readers of GLA and recipients of Adamczewski's theorizing linguistic discourse in general.

Second, text *translatability* is not a recent issue in theories of translation. It dates back to the early debates on the nature of language and the interchangeability of linguistic codes. In *The Task of the Translator*, Benjamin (1923) defines translatability as an essential quality of certain works of art which do not lend themselves to interlingual transfer. His definition dissociates the reader from the process. “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful.” (p.71) Catford (1965) proposed a method to assess text translatability and distinguished between linguistic and cultural untranslatability (1965, p.99). For Nida and Taber, “anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message” (1969, p.4), such as in poetry. With the advent of the Cultural Turn in translation studies (Bassnett & Lefevere 1992), the debate on translatability has been relegated to a marginal position. Kade (1968) (in Wills 1982) considers “the denial of translatability presupposes a subjective ranking of the various languages.” (p.46) In De Pedro's terms (1999, p.555) “postulating the untranslatability of a text implies sustaining the view that some languages are not apt for expressing certain aspects of human experience.”

In contemporary work, as the conception of interlingual equivalence is shifting from identity and sameness to similarity and approximation, we consider that all texts lend themselves to translation in various degrees. The process is always dependent on more than one contextual factor: the text type and function(s), the language and metalanguage at work, and the translators' knowledge and reading potential.

The three parameters under scrutiny interrelate dialectically. Readability bears on translatability as it may facilitate or impede the process of transfer. Both readability and translatability act as visibility triggers and the latter as a reflector of ST accessibility. On the

other hand, translatability is indicative of the extent of readability and visibility. The latter is a reflector of the ST's accessibility and a generator of prospective target text (TT) enhancement.



### The Metaoperational Model: Extrinsic and Intrinsic Visibility Obstructers

For a new linguistic model to enjoy academic visibility, it is not enough to build on sound theoretical foundations or to raise pertinent questions and provide ample evidence refuting a predominant explanation. Intrinsic factors alone are not necessarily conducive to wide dissemination of new approaches and ideas, especially when these announce a sharp break with well-established theories and convictions.

Several extrinsic factors combine to partially explain the very limited dissemination of Adamczewski's approach to language. These factors are associated with the general context of his publications, not with his texts themselves.

- i. Theorizing about English grammar in French: it is noteworthy that writing publications and even doctoral dissertations on English language in French at the time of Adamczewski amounts to a tacit national policy aimed at empowering scientific research, enriching collective intelligence, and halting a linguistically mediated Anglo-American disempowering soft power. Global hegemony is maintained not only through military, political, economic and ideological means. It is also instituted through language, Mayr (2008, p.14) and Clayton (2006, pp.202–03). This power relations argument is probably a contributing factor behind the Anglo-American apparent indifference to the original work of several French linguists, such as Guillaume (1964), Benveniste (1966 and 1974), Culioli (1990-1999) and Adamczewski (1976, 1982, 1991).
- ii. The long-time hegemony of Chomskyan linguistics in tertiary education: the profound impact of Chomskyan linguistics (1965) has affected academic consortiums and curricula worldwide. The dynamism of his theory, detectable in its different stages, and its applications to different languages have overshadowed other approaches to language and relegated them to a peripheral status. Academic linguistic departments have largely remained within the sphere of influence of Generativism and structuralism for decades.
- iii. A cautious, if not cold, welcome of Adamczewski's linguistic model in the French academic sphere: two possible reasons explain the reluctance of some French academicians to recognize the contribution of Adamczewski to theoretical and contrastive linguistics: first, at the intersection of Guillaume, Benveniste, and Culioli, the Metaoperational model has developed a hesitant epistemological identity almost devoid of clear theoretical demarcation. Second, Adamczewski's "incursion" into French grammar, which breaks with predominant traditional explanations, is an additional reason behind skepticism and reserve.

iv. Absence of a pedagogical version of Adamczewski's *Grammaire linguistique de l'Anglais* (1982): the notion of *linguistic* grammar itself is conveyor of theoretical connotations. It presupposes a pre-linguistic stage in which description, not explanation, is the ultimate scope of grammar manuals. Therefore, it announces a break with the predominant, as mentioned above. When GLA was first introduced as the grammar reference for English language students at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University in the 1980's, it was not endorsed by any workbook, analytical glossary or other pedagogical materials which would have simplified the didactic process. Pedagogically, the opacity of the metalanguage, as we will see below, neither facilitates the task of the instructor nor does it enhance student confidence and commitment. It amounts to a classroom injustice.

In this respect, GLA was also the main reference in the 1980's for candidates for the Capes and the Agrégation school teachers national exams.

v. With the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) which encourages the pragmatic and sociocultural dimension of grammar, editors understood the recommendation as a return to communicative grammar. This has had a great impact on the dissemination of "la grammaire raisonnée" (rational grammar) and the approaches which promote grammatical reflection (Lapaire, 2010).

### Textual Exigencies

Intrinsic factors include a few textual visibility retarders and translatability limiters which minimize interaction between reader/translator and text. They include:

- text difficulty,
- a high degree of formalism and abstraction, often inconsiderate of readers' background knowledge,
- unfamiliarity with new meanings assigned to old metalanguage (Ex. *Rhematic / thematic, metalinguistic, natural metalanguage, operator, vectorial organization, invariance, saturation*, etc.). and
- density of the metalanguage.

The last factor is of prime importance as it poses the problematic of learner/translator reception of theorizing linguistic discourse. In his DEA lectures at the Institut du Monde Anglophone (1987-88), Adamczewski reiterated that research is made up of continuities and ruptures with the stable mainstream, but it is only with epistemic breaks that serious progress is achieved. He made clear that he belonged to the category of rupture initiators. For Adamczewski and many of his disciples, linguistic grammar announces not just a shift, but a new episteme.

Didactically, when a linguistic grammar breaks with mainstream approaches to language, it is in fact breaking with a constitutive element of student linguistic background, steadily constructed during the formative years of primary and secondary education. For first-year university students, an abrupt switch from communicative grammar to GLA questions and destabilizes their extensively accumulated grammatical knowledge. In a study seeking to assess the metalinguistic knowledge of a group of students enrolled in the first year of the English B.A. course at a French university, Lapaire (2016, pp.8-21) shows that mainstream grammatical

explanations of *aspect*, *modality* and *tense*, based on direct assignment of meaning to formal categories, are often reiterated by respondents. "[T]he average answers which formulate in ordinary (but conventional) words what *should* and *must* "express", such as "*advice*", "*duty*" and "*obligation*" are numerous." (transl. mine)

One possible explanation is that theoreticians often show more concern for their discourse content and coherence than for metalinguistic description and reception. Their theorizing endeavor is formulated in technical language and concepts. Vygotsky (1934/1986, pp.148-149) points to the weak aspect of these concepts, what he calls "verbalism", i.e. "excessive abstractness and detachment from reality." The fact these concepts are neither rooted in student linguistic experience nor defined in pedagogical glossaries is susceptible to maximize memorization and minimize mastery and effective use to solve subject-related problems.

What is paradoxical about theorizing grammatical discourse is while it announces itself a reader-oriented description or explanation of a language, the theory production act, to use Jauss's term (1982), is of such complexity that it transforms discourse into a writer-responsible process that impedes interaction and generates reader frustration. Unlike the student-reader, the translator-reader is not necessarily implied during the theory production phase. This renders interlingual transfer a very demanding activity especially when the translator is not knowledgeable enough about the theoretical framework to negotiate viable equivalents in the target language (TT).

### Theorizing Grammatical Discourse: The Provisional Challenge of Translation

As a potential ST awaiting transfer from French into other languages, the work of Adamczewski requires a specific translator profile and detailed competencies in relation to the content, approach and metalanguage used in metaoperational linguistics.

Over the last three decades, translation has undergone profound transformations associated with the all-embracing technological achievements of the current digital era, as well as the profound changes in theoretical and applied linguistic research with the advent of performance-related disciplines, such as discourse analysis, text linguistics, pragmatics and corpus-linguistics. These changes have greatly alleviated the translation of most types of texts. They are detectable in a set of shifts, summarized in Table 2, which redefine the basic assumptions underlying translation itself and affect the translator profile.

Table 2. *Conventional vs. Contemporary Translation Approaches*

Conventional Approaches to Translation	Current Approaches to Translation
Equivalence is approached as sameness and identity.	Equivalence is approached as similarity, incorporating difference and relativity.
A ST has an ideal end-product.	A ST has more than one viable translation.
Translation effectiveness is approached as a binary conception (right/wrong).	Translation effectiveness is understood as a continuum.

Translation is a solo equivalence-based task.	Translation is interpretative and collaborative process.
Translation competence is skills- and language-based.	Translation competence has been radically altered in the age of electronic tools.
Translation quality enablers include human memory, dictionaries, grammar manuals and paper-based resources.	Translation quality are extended to include massive online collaboration, parallel and comparable corpora, web search engines, translation memories, etc.
Translation is a static linear activity.	Translation has become a dynamic, multi-medial and multi-modal activity.
Translation is approached as an isolated occurrence.	Translation is approached as a part of a continuum of texts (consensus translation).

A non-conventional translation of Adamczewski's linguistic discourse should therefore be relative, collaborative, interpretative and consensual that approaches a ST as a continuum of texts. It is also expected to build not only on the Metaoperational model, but also on enunciative linguistics in general.

The conceptual apparatus at work in this discourse falls into three categories:

- original metalanguage coined at different stages of the theoretical model by tenants of metaoperational linguistics and members of the CRELINGUA, such as Adamczewski, Delmas (1983, 1987 and 19993), Delechelle (1989 ) Girard (1993), Lancri, (1993) and few others. (Ex. *natural metalanguage, opérateurs-protées...*)
- metalanguage borrowed from other linguists: *metalinguistic* (Jakobsan, 1960) , *rheme, theme* (Halliday, 1967), *paradigmatic choice* (Saussure, 1916) or disciplines and charged with new meanings, such as *cyphering, encoding, decoding* (communication theory), *operation, operator, axis, invariant, vector, symmetry, Ø* (mathematics), *homeostasis* (biology), *phase, cyclicity principle* (sociology), *saturation* (chemistry/physics), *double keyboard* (music), *Protean operators / opérateurs protégés* (Greek mythology)
- metalanguage owed to linguists from different persuasions and other disciplines and recharged with new meanings, such as *metalinguistic, rheme, theme, vector, symmetry*, etc.

A translationally helpful structuralist property of the metalanguage used is that it often works in binary oppositions and sometimes in triads as shown in these examples:

- Dichotomies: *rhematic / thematic status, linguistic subject / grammatical subject, binary / ternary predication or structure, utterance right / left orientation, open and closed paradigm, posé/presupposé, language and metalanguage, referential / metalinguistic value, visible operators (traces) / invisible operations, langue/ discours, énonciateur / co-énonciateur,*

*intralingual / interlingual analysis, system / microsystem, V1 TO V2 vs V1V2-ING microstructures, invariant value / discourse effects, phase 1 / phase 2 markers.*

- *Triads: extralinguistic / linguistic / metalinguistic, marker, operator, metaoperator, tense / phase / aspect, phonological / morphological / syntactic cyphering, status / scope / orientation, Ø-to-ing microsystem, etc.*

Decoding these oppositions is a pre-requisite to successful interlingual transfer. It entails close collaboration with members of the epistemic community, unless the translator is fairly knowledgeable with the theoretical model.

Adamczewski's discourse offers further comprehension and translation facilitators related to his writing strategy and persuasion techniques. It has demonstrated a manifest pedagogical concern marked essentially by systematic exemplification, careful corpus selection, comparisons with other languages, diversification of explicative and persuasive techniques and metadiscursivity, such as anticipating questions and providing explanations of why a given book chapter follows and precedes other ones. The writing strategy is linear and reader-responsible. It aims at empowering readers with the tools of analysis, not with lists of grammatical rules to memorize. The linear development by explanation-comparison-exemplification sporadically interferes with an almost mystical narrative tone revealing a deep admiration for grammatical systematicity as "a chef d'oeuvre de l'intelligence humaine" (DEA lectures, 1987). This form of unexpected expressivity is also detectable in the extensive use of metaphorical allusions: *la structure intime de la grammaire* / *opérations souterraines* / *soudure prédicationnelle* / *secret architecture of grammar* / (*à/de as 'clignotons du discours'* (indicators of a strategy shift) / *diabolical pair* / *les faits de langue* / *l'épopée langagière, genèse de l'énoncé etc.*

The reader will find in "*La Philosophie Spontanée d'un Savant*" (Toupin, 2015), additional constitutive features of Adamczewski's theorizing discourse. Such expressivity, although incompatible with conventional academic discourse is readable as a form of appeal to retain the reader in the text, and also as a sign of demarcation from dominant descriptions of languages.

In the pre-translation phase, reading a ST with an eye on its context of production, type of textual development, persuasion techniques, rhetorical specificities and affinities with other theoretical models is a very informative move that amounts to a translation quality enabler.

### **Conclusion: Enunciative Linguistics, Invisibility or Survival?**

If the contribution of Adamczewski, and even Culioli, to the general linguistic theory has not been defined or assessed so far, there is no doubt that its emergence and development reflects the productivity and dynamism of the enunciation school. After more than three decades of intensive activity and application of the findings on different languages, the Adamczewskian model has not progressed since 2005. What is paradoxical is that the theory which developed in and by contrastivity has not received much confirmation from other natural languages, not because of a deficiency in the model but simply because there has been no systematic application to other languages. The problem now is no more of poor visibility, but rather of the survival of a linguistic model, if not of a whole school. Invisibility undermines motivation, but unproductivity accelerates extinction.

On another hand, a collective funded strategy to promote collaborative translation and dissemination of research in human and social sciences is more than a requirement. Rather, it is a form of resistance and empowerment. It is commonly accepted that scientific thought is universal, not a private property as it is indebted to and developed out of inter-tradition transfers (Greeks, Arabs, Europeans...); yet, the supposed universality ceases to be a noble principle and breaks with its historicity when the password for visibility and scientific credibility becomes the monopoly of a dominant language. One of the side effects of such linguistic monolithism is the reduction of the translation flow from and into languages other than the dominant one.

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