CHRISTIAN MARINO BAUDY

Verbal Play Production

Comparing Advanced German Learners of English with English Native Speakers

Meaningful verbal play deliberately explores and exploits the language system to get the audience's attention and manipulate their thinking and actions (at least for the moment). Verbal humour is a subtype of verbal play. It is intended to amuse the interlocutor(s) by creating incongruity and surprising the reader(s), listener (s) or viewer(s). Word play is one type of

interest
involvement
information
imagination

SUMMARY

Producing Verbal Play in English. A Contrastive Study of Advanced German Learners of English and English Naive Speakers. **Summary** of the doctoral thesis entitled *Producing Verbal Play in English. A Contrastive Study of Advanced German Learners of English and English Native Speakers* (Christian Marino Baudy, University of Hamburg 2008, Dr. Kovač Publishing)

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Abstract

Extending the conceptual and empirical scope of foreign language research towards the fields of play, creativity and humour, Baudys doctoral thesis pursues a two-fold aim: (i) to provide terminological clarity of the notions regarding verbal play and verbal humour, sense of humour, communicative competence etc and (ii) to identify the constraints typical in (German) foreign language users with respect to English verbal play production. To this end, the punning powers of the non-native and native English-speaking participants are tested with a translation experiment. Complying with the task's creative format, the individual performances are critically assessed in terms of creativity-inducing and creativity-hindering factors. The road to success appears to be the favourable conflux of a host of interrelated and inter-individually differing procedural, contextual and psychological factors, the core components of which are interest, information, involvement and imagination. The English learners' limitations include insufficient factual and procedural language knowledge, self-consciousness and risk-avoidance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Objectives

Tapping into the native and non-native process of planned (opposed to spontaneous) English pun production, Baudy's qualitative-explorative PhD thesis aims at a first needs analysis for (German) foreign learners of English with respect to playful, creative and humorous language behaviour. To this end, it compares the respective language production abilities and skills of adult English native speakers (= L1 users) to those of adult advanced foreign language learners of English (= L2 users) with a two-fold purpose: (i) to discern the similarities and differences between the two language user-groups in their attempts to *create* an English *version* (rather than a *translation*) of a punning German text and then (ii) to identify the factors that typically constrain L2 users of English in their efforts to intentionally play with their foreign language (FL). In so doing, the work extends the interdisciplinary scope of foreign language (play) research towards the highly complex and thus not easily captured phenomena of play, creativity and humour.

Rationale

Verbal play (or humour) production is generally a highly valued communicative skill, not least for its entertaining quality. It is frequently employed by native speakers in (English) conversations, TV or Radio comedy shows etc (cf. Ritchie 2004, Cook 2000, Alexander 1997) and often serves a particular "communicative intent" (Edmondson & House 1981) such as breaking the ice between strangers, defusing tension or changing the topic (e.g. Ross 1998, Attardo 1994, Norrick 1993). Undoubtedly, such communicative moves are useful to everyone participating in a 'communicative event' (Hymes 1964). Yet, even advanced FL learners hardly employ (humorous) language play (Crystal 1998) in their foreign language to achieve a social goal. Presumably, the (creative) abilities and skills involved in playful language conduct – being the result of deliberate language manipulation – are not at their disposal as far as the foreign language is concerned.

This certainly relates to the different linguistic and socio-cultural (= lingua-cultural) experiences of the two language user groups. Native speakers are exposed to language play from a very early age on. So-called "motherese" abounds with simplified language, repetitions, alliterations, high-pitched talk, onomatopoetic and nonsense words, rhythmic speaking, humming, mock conversations and syllable manipulation, and by the age of 3 or 4, young children engage in verbal play (Crystal 1998). In contrast, L2 learners (of English) do not encounter such (an extensive) "natural" preparation for language manipulating communication in FL classes and are naturally less equipped for language manipulative manoeuvres in their L2.

So, in order to benefit from a communicative asset such as (humorous) verbal play, L2 users obviously need some remedial training. This would offer FL learners – next to a pleasant atmosphere for learning and a raised FL language awareness (Lucas 2005) – a chance to expand and upgrade their communicative competence in their foreign language. In this way, (advanced) FL learners may no longer experience the "reduced personality" (Harder 1980) in FL interactions rooted in the inability to express themselves exactly as they wish in their L2. Rather, they could achieve their communicative goal by choosing between a playful (or language manipulating) and non-playful mode of communication in much the same way as they would in their mother tongue.

The leading question to be answered then was this: What are the lingua-cultural abilities and skills related to verbal play that FL learners (of English) presumably lack in comparison to (English) native speakers and what are the respective enhancing or limiting factors worth didactic consideration?

Theoretical background

The theoretical background of the study is built on an eclectic approach with a fair amount of conceptual work, reflecting the rather complex nature of Baudy's research topic and the absence of both a unifying theoretical framework and an unambiguous nomenclature. Drawing on the theoretical insights of play theory, creativity research, humour research, as well as general, computational, social and psychological linguistics, foreign language learning and teaching (FLL/T) and translation theory, the theoretical strive of the study unfolds in five steps:

(i) Elaborating the concepts of and the relationships between play, creativity and humour

(ii) Transferring conceptual aspects of them to the language domain

(iii) Presenting the lingua-cultural ingredients and know-how of punning

(iv) Detailing a speaker's communicative competence

(v) Focusing on the translation of puns

Terminological clarity ensures the communicative value of scientific research. Unfortunately, when it comes to the meaning and extent of verbal play, verbal creativity and verbal humour, FL researchers and (socio-) linguists alike do not differentiate explicitly between these three aspects of linguistic behaviour and frequently use them interchangeably. At best, some relationship between them is suggested in the few descriptive attempts made on language play – without, however, any indication of the conceptual basis of it all. One notable exception here is Cook (2000) who developed his conception

of language play from theoretical approaches to "play" (as a game) and included some functions of humorous language use.

(i) Baudy finds the aforementioned overall unreflective and indiscriminate use of verbal play, verbal creativity and verbal humour rather confusing and quite unhelpful for the meaningful communication of his own research, and embarks on a fundamental terminological clarification. He first looks at the major (and varied) scientific perspectives on the three underlying phenomena of play, creativity and humour in order to (a) identify the differences and (b) establish the conceptual overlaps between them.

(ii) The respective insights and conclusions are then applied to the language area. Baudy's aim: To ultimately discern what separates and what connects verbal play, verbal creativity and verbal humour, and advance his own definitions. Prior to this, the author discusses the way in which linguistic creativity – which has generally not attracted much attention in the linguistic literature on the whole – features in structural and behaviourist linguistics (Saussure (2001 [1931], Bloomfield 1967), in generative-transformational grammar (Chomsky 1965, 1964) and in conversational analysis (Carter 2004). As regards verbal play and verbal humour, Baudy elaborates the various aspects (and social functions) that have been implicitly or explicitly, but in a highly dissimilar manner, assigned to playful and/or humorous language use in a number of (socio-) linguistic descriptions or definitions (the most recent being Carter 2004, Sherzer 2002, Cook 2000, and Crystal 1998).

(iii) Since the ability to produce an English pun or word play – which in Baudy's terminology is one instance of verbal play combining play, creativity and humour – is part and parcel of solving the experimental language production task, the next theoretical block centres on the general make up of puns and what makes up the power of punning that is seemingly insufficiently (if at all) developed in FL learners of English.

In contrast to the linguistic taxonomic approaches towards language play, the small-numbered translation theoretical taxonomies of verbal play and word play (Teçza 1997, Delabastita 1993, Heibert 1993, Hausmann 1974 etc) showed a certain unity and thus proved to be useful to capture the general design of puns.

Baudy approaches the cognitive bases underlying punning performances from various, predominantly linguistic viewpoints taken in humour research. These comprise: (a) the input and output of different types of machine humour (e.g. Ritchie 2004, McKay 2000, Binsted 1996, Lessard & Levison 1995), (b) psychological considerations of sense of humour (e.g. Ruch 1998, Carrell 1997), and (c) Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) (1985) – postulating script (or semantic)

opposition (SO) as the core explanation of a joke and thus reverberating Koestler's semiotic bisociation theory (1964) – and its "follow-up", the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) that specifies six knowledge resources (KRs) 'which inform the joke' (Attardo & Raskin 1991: 312).

(iv) Inextricably linked to a language user's declarative (ie factual) and procedural language knowledge is her or his language competence. FL researchers commonly refer to this linguistic potential as the 'communicative competence' (Hymes 1972), unfortunately with various interpretations and refinements (for instance, Canale & Swain 1980) and specifications (cf Faerch & Kasper 1985, Edmondson, House, Kasper & Stemmer 1984). Thus, preparing the didactic ground of improving FL learners' communicative competence and with it their FL personality as a "joking interaction partner", the next theoretical focus is on the question of what exactly entails communicative competence. In the respective section then, Baudy details its components by including both the rule-governed and rule-breaking lingua-cultural potential of a language user. This capacity encompasses ordinary (or unmarked) and non-ordinary (marked, amongst other things, by creativity, playfulness and amusement) language knowledge.

(v) Finally, Baudy's theoretical venture moves towards the issues connected to the actual (creative) language production task of his experiment: the translation of a German pun. Questions of translatability (eg Attardo 2002, Koller [4]1992), relative translation equivalence (e.g. Chiaro 2005, Nida 2003 [1964]) and quality assessment (for instance, House 1997, Heibert 1993, Nida & Taber 1969) and – since knowledge about the intricacies and ambiguities of both languages and also about suitable transfer methods is key to the solution of this difficult task – the concept of translation competence (cf. for instance, Campbell 1998, Hewson & Martin 1991, Bell 1991) are dealt with here.

Empirical research methods and data analyses

Data collection

Designed to yield qualitative or ethnographic written and spoken linguistic data, the empirical set-up of the study (comprising of two pilot studies and the main study) adheres to a so-called 'experimental-qualitative-interpretative' (Grotjahn 1987: 59f) paradigm. It follows a data-driven and inductive, ie theory-independent path with the main research questions kept deliberately open at the outset, thus leaving "room for improvement" as the data collection progresses towards its analysis, and, at the same time, ensuring an unbiased and comprehensive data reading (cf. Seliger & Shohamy [2]1990).

The data corpus stems from an experiment with a predominantly introspective set-up of the following kind: Altogether twelve female adult advanced German learners of English (experimental group) and English native speakers (control group) were asked to produce an English version of a punning German sketch and record their translation attempts together with the accompanying trains of thought and actions in a hand-written diary. Each subject worked on their own without any contact with any of the other participants. On finishing the task, each informant took part in a tape-recorded unstructured interview, and if necessary, in another, more structured talk. Finally, they filled in a questionnaire specifying their linguistic and professional backgrounds.

The data analysis and reading proceeds along a set of research questions, which initially asked about (i) the differences between adult L1 and L2 users of English with respect to premeditated word play production and (ii) the "pun-preventing" factors in advanced adult learners of English. However, the actual language performances of Baudy's informants produced a mixed picture of punsters and non-punsters in both the experimental group and the English controls, thus blurring the differences (and temporarily setting aside the distinction) between the two study groups. Consequently, the opening research questions had to be fined-tuned as follows: (1) What do the participating non-punsters, and the punsters, respectively, have in common? (2) What are the differences (a) amongst the FL users, (b) amongst the L1 speakers, and (c) between the native and non-native speakers of English? (3) What rendered some of the non-native English translation products somehow inferior to the successful native speaker's attempts?

Data analysis and reading

The considerably rich data yield of the experiment allows for a rather extensive analysis. Of the twelve participants, four representative informants are portrayed in the study. The case-studies reveal a host of inter-connected (and inter-individually differing) factors that played their role in the successful and unsuccessful punning attempts of the author's informants. Since punning itself – which is key to solving the experimental task of creating an English version of a German play on words – is essentially a creative endeavour, Baudy groups the comprehensive data corpus analogous to the '4 P's' (Tardif & Steinberg 1988: 429) of creativity research: the product, the process, the place and the person.

First, Baudy examines the individual translational outputs and assess their adequacy, that is, their relative equivalence in relation to the German source text (ST). In search of an explanation of the native and non-native punning and non-punning language products, he then specifies the factors and factor combinations that either helped or hindered the participants in solving the task successfully.

Despite their inter-relatedness, these factors (or variables) are, for merely practical reasons, clustered into procedural, contextual and psychological factors.

The procedural variables – comprising of the Preiser's ([2]1986) eight creative stages plus translation strategy, working style or time investment – emerge from a detailed description of the individual working processes. The next factor group relates to the situational conditions (e.g. resources, time pressure) the informants encountered during their translation attempts. The final group of variables covers the psychological factors pertaining to the participants and split up into motivational, cognitive, affective and dispositional aspects.

Via 'triangulation' (Denzin [3]1989) of all the ethnographic information (diary notes, e-mails, audio-taped retrospective talk, Baudy's own observations during informal meetings before the study) tentative conclusions are drawn on the different factor combinations with their joined pun-promoting or pun-preventing impact in each individual case under inspection.

Results

Conceptual work

The terminological ground-clearing culminates in conceptual clarifications the outline of which reads as follows: On the whole, *play* (as an activity), *creativity* (as an ability) and *humour* (as a product) are linked via exploration and the creation of alternative realities. *Play activities* prepare creative (ie divergent) thinking that is indispensable for *creative achievements*, such as the production of *humour*.

Verbal creativity encompasses ordinary and non-ordinary lingua-cultural novelties (the opposite poles of a scale). The latter include *verbal play* (humorous and non-humorous) – highlighting the entertaining aspect of play – and *verbal humour* (= humorous verbal play), which additionally shares the aspects of fun and make-believe with play. W*ord play* presents one subcategory of verbal humour, and is, in Baudy's terms, restricted to the meaning of a pun. These terminological solutions are depicted in the diagram below.
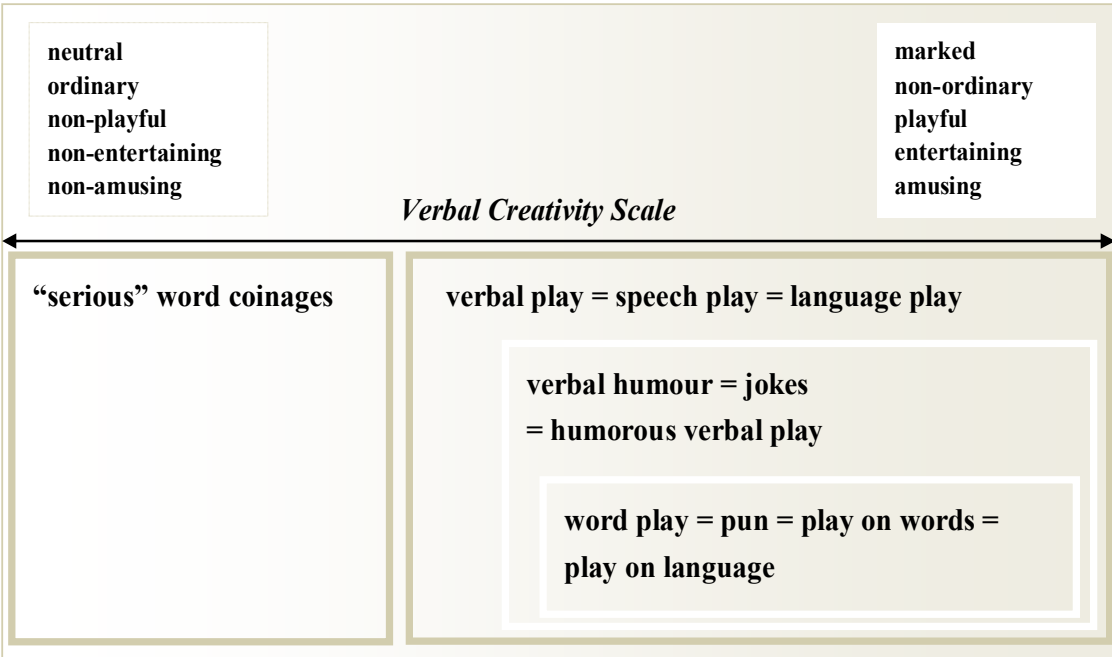

| neutral
ordinary
non-playful
non-entertaining
non-amusing | marked
non-ordinary
playful
entertaining
amusing |

Verbal Creativity Scale

"serious" word coinages	verbal play = speech play = language play
	verbal humour = jokes = humorous verbal play
	word play = pun = play on words = play on language

Figure 1 Verbal Creativity Scale (Baudy 2008: 97)

The cognitive basis of a person's ability to identify, comprehend and/or produce humour *(joke competence)* is her or his *sense of humour*, i.e. the way s/he perceives the world. (*Verbal) humour competence* enables interaction partners to assess the funniness and appropriateness of humorous performances, both verbal and non-verbal. Joke competence and (verbal) humour competence are an integral part of a speaker's *communicative* competence, the extent of which materializes in her or his

C.M. Baudy (2008) Verbal play production – summary

language performance (proficiency). Figure 2 illustrates the author's conception of communicative competence.
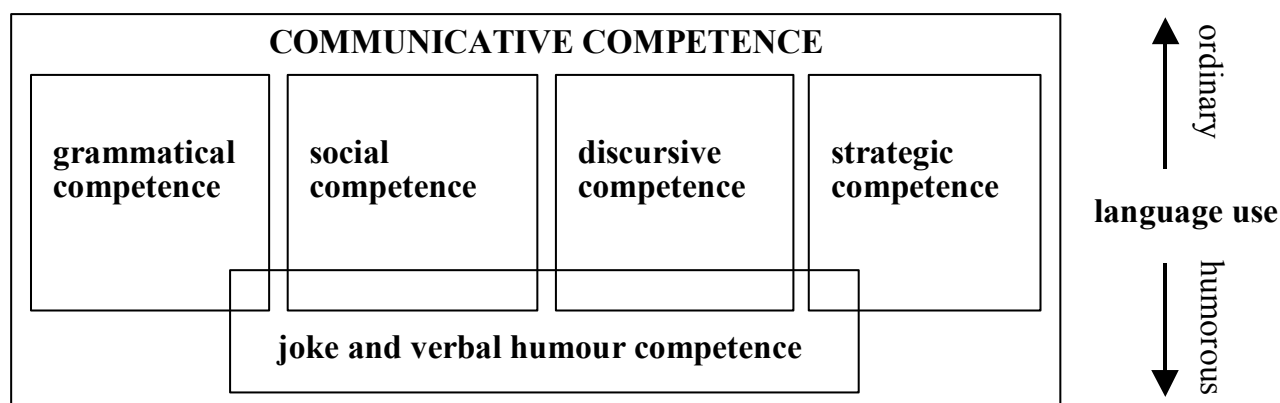

Figure 2 The five components of communicative competence (Baudy 2008:129)

A skilful language mediator benefits from a high degree of *translation competence*, that is, a bilingual communicative competence of the source and target language, translation problem-solving skills as well as inter-lingual and cross-cultural knowledge about the language systems and lingua-cultures involved.

Empirical work

The detailed data analysis of the four representative case-studies produces a number of insights in answer to the research questions specified above (see section on data collection). All in all, the similarities and the differences between native and non-native creators of premeditated word play productions and ultimately, the subsequent and potential target language constraints in advanced adult learners of English can be summarized as follows:

The "power of information", which correlates with the language user status, appears not to have been the sole factor in the process of solving a creative language production (here: translation) problem, since not every native English speaking subject put her informational advantage (as an L1 user) to optimal use and not all the non-native English speaking informants failed to create a punning solution despite informational gaps in their L2. In fact, the ability to come up with an adequate target language (TL) solution depended on the interplay between inter-individually differently combined procedural, contextual and psychological factors, the essence of which is the confluence of what Baudy terms the '"4 I's" of creative (general and) language problem-solving (see figure 3 below): *interest* (intrinsic task-motivation), TL *information* (lingua-cultural knowledge), *involvement* (dedication or commitment) and *imagination* (flexible and inspired cognitive processing).
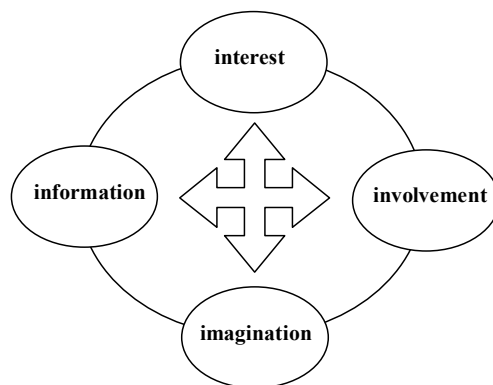
Figure 3 Confluence of the 4 I's for playfully-creative and humorous linguistic achievements Baudy, 2008:268)

Apparently, an optimal blend between these four core factors leads to best results, whereas the unfavourable combination of them results in inadequate (or even no) TL productions – regardless of the participant's language user status. In other words: faced with a creative language production task, native and non-native language users are in the same boat

Notwithstanding, the decisive difference between the two language user groups seemingly was the lingua-cultural information on English humorous verbal play: factual knowledge about verbal humour production (joke competence) including language material and mechanisms of language manipulation. Furthermore, less and more advanced adult German non-native speakers of English alike were insufficiently experienced with English verbal humour production and lacked the respective procedural knowledge. Yet, the higher the TL mastery (and closer to a native speaker's performance), the more confident the German participants went about the task and succeeded in creating an adequate play on the English language, whilst the efforts of the more self-conscious and less risk-taking English learners came to nothing. Yet again, even a highly confident and somewhat risk-embracing approach of the more advanced English learners displayed a lower degree of translation equivalence compared to the successful native English renderings.

C.M. Baudy (2008) Verbal play production – summary

Implications

(I) Apart from offering a clearer distinction between play, creativity and humour and their "linguistic counterparts", Baudy's entire conceptual work provides FL researchers, educators, (applied) linguists and translation theorists with a sound scientific nomenclature. Academic discourse and didactic applications that exceed the usual curricular emphasis on correct (and non-experimental) language use benefit from this terminological clarity. It allows for a more focused specification of didactic goals and respective realizations, thus opening FL classes up to the entire scale of creative language use as an additional didactic tool of (a) furthering the learners' linguistic development and (b) improving their communicative competence.

Tuned to the respective FL level of the students and in line with Baudy's "creativity cline" (cf fig. 1 above) ranging from ordinary/marked word coinages to non-ordinary/marked language innovations, lingua-cultural creativity could be introduced in roughly three steps – beginning with the easier ways of linguistic creations and ending with the more difficult types of playfully-creative and humorous creative language use.

First, formal L2 input and practice could centre on unmarked (recent) examples and possible creative language innovations that (could) denote new (real or fictional) lingua-cultural concepts, technological inventions or medical discoveries etc. This should be accompanied by input and consolidating practice on the morphological rules and means of English word formation. Then, playful FL use could be introduced and experimented (i) without and (ii) with the intention to amuse: In combination with sound discrimination practice, the students could, for instance, be presented with and create alliterations and tongue-twisters in English. Later, in a blend of syntactic, lexical and pragmatic issues of the English language the FL learners could discover the power and pleasures of multiple meanings that are (a) brought about by either (conventionally or contrived) identical or similar sounding and/or written words and phrases and (b) employed with the intent to amuse.

(II) As regards the empirical findings, the over-all implication is that even (very) advanced German FL learners of English can do with a receptive verbal humour sensitization and a productive verbal humour training to improve their English joke and verbal humour competence and with it their English communicative competence. Obviously, such measures have not yet, but should have been integrated into the English language curricula at least at the tertiary educational level (in Germany).

Complementing the aforementioned hierarchical didactic plan, the four core components (or factors) of creative general and linguistic problem-solving (sustained interest combined with sufficient information, involvement and imagination) particularly indicate the basic conditions for the successful

extension of an advanced FL learner's communicative skills: To foster the students' interest in creative, playful, and humorous language, they apparently need to be frequently exposed to a variety of such language use, their literary and linguistic analysis and introduced their strategic communicative value. In this way, the L2 users can build up the respective declarative linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge and start experimenting with the FL. Repeated encouragement and ample room for (a) toying with the rules and norms of the foreign language (just for fun and in compensation for a missing expression) and (b) assessing the individual (planned and spontaneous) performances in terms of novelty and adequacy in class will most likely have the following effects: (i) producing a sufficient level of cognitive and positive emotional involvement and (ii) furthering the FL student's individual's confidence, risk-taking, and above all, her/his mental flexibility. This will, in turn, enhance the necessary, yet hardly teachable, imaginative capacity of the language learners.

These implications are based on the findings of a small-scale experiment. Naturally, many more empirical studies are needed to substantiate and complete the picture on playful, creative and humorous language use in English (as a foreign language) and related (didactic) issues. Perhaps, the study outlined here provides a vital impetus for further (foreign) language learning and teaching research in this direction.

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Abbreviations

FL   Foreign Language (second or third etc.)
FLL/T   Foreign Language Learning and Teaching
L1   Native Tongue
L2   Second Language
ST   Source Text
TT   Target Text