

Didactique? Is it a plaisanterie? You must be joking!
A Critical Comment on Vocabulary

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François V. Tochon kindly asked me to comment on the decision to keep the French word *didactique* untranslated in the papers that make up this thematic issue. I regret to have to say that I strongly disagree with this choice, for I can see no sensible reason for refusing 'didactics'. In the first place, it should be stressed that there is no real problem with the word itself, a version of which is available, for instance, in German (*Didaktik*), Spanish (*didáctica*), Italian (*didattica*), etc. – all these words being derived from the Greek root *didaktikos*, 'intended to instruct', 'relating to teaching'. English, in this respect, is no exception to the rule, as *Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionnaire* (1980) plainly shows: '*Didactique* [didaktik]. 1. *a.* didactic. 2. *s.f.* didactics.' '*Didactic* [d(a)'dæktik], *a.* didactique.' '*Didactics* [d(a)'dæktiks], *s.pl.* (*usu. with sg. const.*), *la didactique.*' The problem, therefore, is about the *uses* of the word.

Words, in any language, do not have just one authorized meaning. Words have meanings, which change in the course of time, because things change around us and because we need new meanings to keep on thinking about our doings in a changing world. Words are the raw material on which we draw in order to create, offer and – with luck – convey (new) meaning to others. In the *Introduction* to his rightly famous *Keywords*, Raymond Williams relates how, on returning to Cambridge after World War II, he was struck by new uses of 'culture', which had then become a very active word (especially in its anthropological meaning), and which he had heard previously in two senses only: 'one at the fringes, in teashops and places like that, where it seemed the preferred word for a kind of social superiority, not in ideas or learning, and not only in money or position, but in a more intangible area, relating to behavior; yet also, secondly, among my own friends, where it was an active word for writing poems and novels, making films and paintings, working in theatres.' Now it seems that, in choosing not to translate *didactique*, the only meaning that was taken into account is, in fact, the 'teashop sense' of 'didactic' – I mean, its pejorative meaning. In this respect, it should be emphasized that the derogatory ring in 'didactic' also exists in French. About a quarter of a century ago, when some of us decided to use *didactique* as we do now, we were faced with two main obstacles. Firstly, *didactique* was used in French essentially as an adjective, *not* as a noun. Secondly, the word had only two received meanings in common parlance, neither of which – understandably – tallied with what we had in mind. Indeed, the 'state' of the word was – and, up to a point, still is – exactly what dictionaries of current English point to: it was an adjective relating to, in *sense 1*, anything *intended to teach or instruct* (as in *didactic poetry*, for instance), and, in *sense 2* (the 'teashop sense'), a *tendency to instruct or lecture others* – much as a teacher is, or was, supposed to do. Let me add here that there are very good *didactic* reasons – in *sense 3* of 'didactic', *i.e.* its present-day *scientific* meaning – to find *sense 2* following close in the wake of *sense 1*. For, whenever it occurs outside those situations in which a 'didactic contract' clearly prevails over ordinary social contracts, any intention to instruct, *i.e.* any 'didactic intention', has little or no legitimacy, and is therefore likely to meet with stiff resistance.

Of course our choice was made *against* *sense 2*, the 'teashop sense', which we decided to ignore entirely. But it was not meant to eliminate the use of the word which had developed (especially in German and Italian) in the line of *sense 1*, to designate the realities, including the supposed practical 'laws', of teaching and instruction. Just as 'economy' (or 'geography', etc.) refers to a certain reality *and* to the study or science of that reality, so

‘didactics’ can be taken to mean – depending on context – either the object to be studied or the study and science of it. Words do not ‘mean’; *we* ‘mean’ *by* words. ‘The didactics of algebra’, for instance, can thus refer at will to what is going on in algebra classes, *or* to the scientific study of what is going on in algebra classes – a reasonable and classic ambiguity, which allows one to avoid recourse to words of more scholarly formation, such as the outrageous ‘didactology’ (which, fortunately, in the French context, had a remarkably short life).

The decision to use *didactique* in an English text as if it were untranslatable into this language would normally lead to keep also *Didaktik* and *didáctica* in translations from the German and the Spanish, respectively; unless of course one chose to render these words uniformly by *didactique* alone – a strange and, in my opinion, discriminatory option. Scientific communities around the world should beware of linguistic daintiness, which surreptitiously fosters protectionist attitudes that will wreak havoc in the ‘Global Village’.

In this line of thought, mention should also be made of the choice to translate *transposition didactique* as ‘instructional transfer’. Even if we ignore the adjective – it should be clear by now that the proposed rendering means (about) the same as ‘didactic transfer’ –, we must question the appropriateness of ‘transfer’, which has been preferred, once again, to the more literal (and liberal) ‘transposition’. In this context, ‘transfer’ and ‘transposition’ are both metaphors. But not all metaphors are equivalent. If I understand correctly, the case against ‘transposition’ boils down to the fact that this word would conjure up visions of two (or more) things changing places, whereas ‘transfer’ does not. This, it seems, is a one-sided summary of a longer story. Both in English and in French, for example, ‘transposition’ also belongs to the vocabulary of music (as in *transposing a piece from G to B*), in which case, as far as I can see, no two things change places. Moreover, as a musical metaphor, ‘transposition’ may aptly call to mind images closer to what the theory of ‘didactic transposition’ tells us: knowledge is *not* a *substance* which has to be transferred from one place to another; it is a world of experience which, through a creative process, has to be... transposed, to be adapted to a different ‘key’ – the child – and to a new ‘instrument’ – the classroom. Therefore, even if the proposed expression looks buoyant enough to launch, in view of the misinterpretations that it is likely to encourage, I would certainly do nothing to keep it afloat.

Scientific communities are responsible for the tools they use, including their linguistic tools; and no living language can legitimately shrink away from their demands – all the more so if it claims to be the international language of science. In teashop English, ‘didactic’ and ‘transposition’ may be rather easy words. In the English needed to express and understand the theories and views expounded in this thematic issue, they become a little more difficult. To leave them untranslated or to distort their intended meaning is certainly no solution to the problem.