Abstract: In this paper we discuss the function of translation in highlighting systematic L1 (Greek) vs L2 (English) similarities and differences in the L2 class. More specifically, we postulate a set of constraints operating on potential L2 translation outputs in the area of word order on a ranked basis, in the spirit of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 1993, 2004, Archangeli 1997, Kager 1999). Constraint ranking and re-ranking, we argue, is regulated by learner conformity to Prince & Smolensky’s (1993) ‘do only when necessary’ principle. Intermediate grammar learner outputs are thus allowed to surface while also being treated as a continuum.

Key words: Translation; Optimality; Re-ranking; Word order; Process errors

1. Introduction: The rationale

The use of translation in the L2 class has gone through a number of phases, ranging from overt acceptance in the grammar-translation era to virtual exorcising in the years of the communicative revolution (see Cook 2006 for a review). Overall, the current state of things involves the language teacher resorting to L1 more or less randomly, mostly for lexical illustration purposes. In this paper I will attempt to show that linguistic evidence of the L1-L2 affinity or difference type can inform and structure the use of translation in the language class while also predicting interlanguage errors and treating them as part of a developmental continuum.

My proposal draws on Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 1993, 2004, Archangeli 1997, Kager 1999), a linguistic theory of the 90s which minimizes the linguist’s ‘equipment’ in seeking to explain universality and difference in natural languages and screens language outputs, which may well involve violations, with the help of a set of ranked constraints. In developing this proposal I will try to show that, by adopting an approach that allows violations to surface, we can predict transfer effects and allow them to be treated within a process-oriented perspective, the product of a specific constraint ranking, which may subsequently be revised as learners gradually approximate the target form.

The forms selected in the present discussion are word order patterns in the Greek-English language pair and, more specifically, subject-verb and verb-subject sequences, adjectival and genitive pre- and post-modifiers. The underlying idea, however, is for the framework presented to accommodate a number of L2 contexts and language areas.1

As we will see in section 3 below, the language employed for an illustration of what is proposed is poetic. This is related to the fact that literary and, especially, poetic language, unlike the language normally used in a formal teaching context, can relax deviance boundaries and thus help reveal deeper affinities between languages. To give an example, if post-verbal subjects are possible in English declarative clauses, for which there is robust evidence in poetry (see, e.g., Dillon 1980), then the post-verbal subject trend in languages like Greek – the L1 in the present discussion – may not after all be ‘so deviant’ if compared to the L2 sequences targeted. This may, in turn, suggest that post-verbal subject sequences in English as an L2 learners’ interlanguage may be

1 Aspectual differences might be fertile ground for such a comparison, for instance.
more readily accommodated. In other words, poetic language may enhance the idea of a developmental continuum by embodying forms, also present in learner interlanguage, which may be conventionally viewed as marginal or marginally deviant (Calfoglou 2000; see also Calfoglou 2004 for a somewhat different perspective).

It follows from the discussion so far that, in arguing in favour of an approach that allows – or even somehow encourages – non-standard L2 forms to emerge, I am adopting what I would call a process approach to errors. Errors assume a relativistic dimension and non-standard forms emerging in learners’ language are viewed as stepping-stones in their attempt to acquire the target structure. The framework can be visualized as facilitating the work of the language teacher, helping them gain further insight into the developmental process their learners are going through as well as intervene in this process more effectively.

In the sections that follow I first provide an outline of the framework proposed and then go on to show how it works with specific language data and how it is applicable in the foreign language class.

2. The underlying theory
Unlike other theories seeking to explain universality and variance in the natural languages of the world, Optimality Theory postulates richness of the base, which allows the generation of deviant outputs, as noted above, to be subsequently evaluated by means of a set of constraints. Thus, the desired – grammatical – output in a specific language is secured by ranking the constraint crucial to the grammaticality of the form at issue more highly than the violable constraints giving rise to the ungrammatical form. As an example of a constraint, consider Pesetsky’s (1997: 157-158) TELEGRAPH, allowing the complementizer ‘that’ to be missing in sentences like ‘I believe you are right’, a constraint which ranks more highly in English than RECOVERABILITY, unlike what happens in French, where the complementizer has to be present.²

How does this output-based model operate in the translation paradigm? Suppose that what constitutes the input for the generator is the fully developed system of the source language, in our case the subject-verb, adjective-noun, genitive-noun sequences in L1 (Greek). Suppose, further, that for each of these input items the generator generates a candidate set of outputs, namely a candidate set for the target language (English). It will now be the job of the evaluator to determine which is the optimal solution, after considering the constraints involved. It is these constraints that I turn to next.

The constraints I propose are FAITHFULNESS, ACCEPTABILITY and CONSISTENCY. Let us look at each of them separately. The FAITHFULNESS constraint stipulates that the translation output should be faithful to the source language input. This presupposes a ‘conservative’, ‘minimalist’ approach whereby one opts for identity rather than difference whenever possible; ‘be faithful if you can’ or ‘do only when necessary’ in Prince & Smolensky’s (1993) terms. As Kager (1999: 343) puts it, “outputs will be identical to inputs … except when divergence between them is forced by a high-ranking well-formedness constraint. But even then, the divergence between input and output will be kept at a bare minimum”. In other words, “violation must be minimal” (ibid.: 343). This is, I believe, a principle with particularly interesting implications with regard to language acquisition, especially if combined with the relativistic element introduced into our evaluation of what is optimal by the potentially varied ranking of constraints acting on language output in Optimality Theory (ibid.).

² For a more recent as well as sophisticated discussion of the presence or absence of the complementizer ‘that’ in Optimality Theory terms, see Gordon (2006).
This element is nicely summed up in Pesetsky’s (1997: 150) “if you can’t say something nice, say the best you can”. Below we will see how this relates to the overall framework proposed.

According to the second constraint, namely ACCEPTABILITY, resembling the well-formedness constraints in Kager’s quote above, the translation output should conform to acceptability criteria in the target language. For, obviously, in translating a language we aim at an end-product which is acceptable within the target language system. Satisfying this constraint might require a breach of FAITHFULNESS. In other words, the translation output will often need to deviate from the L1 input to comply with the well-formedness constraints of the target language. Finally, CONSISTENCY, the third constraint, decrees that input patterns should be heeded. If, for example, L1 word order follows a post-modificational pattern at some point, e.g. with adjectives systematically appearing post-nominally, this may somehow need to be taken account of in the switch to L2.

What about the ranking of the constraints, now? In translation theory terms this ranking may be an issue of ideology in the sense that ‘appropriation’ (Lefevere 1998), that is dominating the L1 text and making it conform to L2 standards, will favour ACCEPTABILITY, while ‘foreignisation’ (ibid.), namely keeping its foreign flavour, will favour FAITHFULNESS. In actual fact, things are by no means so straightforward, however. In the case of ‘expressive’ language, like that of poetry, for instance, FAITHFULNESS may somehow strain grammaticality standards and rank higher, quite independently of foreignisation, allowing verb-subject sequences in English generally disallowed in more mainstream functions of the language, as noted in the previous section.

In developmental terms, the ranking might be determined by the fact that learners start off by producing the minimally distinct version, observing FAITHFULNESS and conforming to the fringes of the L2 system. This would lead to FAITHFULNESS ranking higher than ACCEPTABILITY. Yet the ranking may also vary depending on the specific language pair; if both languages are equally tolerant of both sequence types, neither of these two constraints might need to be ranked higher, for the framework is not called upon to perform a discrimination function. Finally, a violation of CONSISTENCY, as in the successive production of VS and SV in a similar context may reveal that the target form has not been fully acquired. The optimality of a translation/interlanguage solution will be determined on the basis of its violating fewer or fewer higher-ranking constraints. An output form that is more peripherally acceptable but faithful to the input form may thus outdo one that is more mainstream but conflicts with FAITHFULNESS. But, importantly, as learners move on acquisitionally, this may be revised, FAITHFULNESS gradually stepping by for ACCEPTABILITY concerns to take over. Let me now provide some examples to illustrate what I have said so far.

3. Implementing the theory
In (1) to (7) below we can see examples of the sequences considered in this paper: verb-subject, adjectival post- and pre-modification and genitive post- and pre-modification:

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Footnotes:
3 For instance, Calfoglou (1998) demonstrated that the frequent use of resumptives in the relative clause output of (L1) Greek learners of (L2) English observed especially at the initial acquisition stages but also partially persisting well past these stages suggests resisting changes.
4 On yet another niveau, observing CONSISTENCY may correspond to awareness of the more refined, stylistic aspects of language (see Calfoglou 2000).
5 This means that the principle of inherently conflicting constraints in Optimality Theory (see, e.g., Prince & Smolensky 2004) is at least partially abandoned.
Let us now see what becomes of these structures in English. Verb-subject order being particularly common in Greek (see, e.g., Lascaratou 1989, Alexiadou 1999), it would be interesting to see what becomes of it in English, a pre-verbal subject language par excellence. In other words, how would L2 learners process these structures? There seem to be three possible versions: a faithful post-verbal subject sequence (1a), a partially faithful post-verbal subject structure with a ‘dummy’ ‘there’ filler in pre-verbal subject position (1b) and a ‘mainstream’ pre-verbal subject one (1c):

1a. in your body deepens an old wound
1b. in your body there deepens an old wound
1c. an old wound deepens in your body.

How would the evaluator treat these outputs? As can be seen in Table 1 below,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAITHFULNESS</th>
<th>ACCEPTABILITY</th>
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<td>√</td>
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the first choice is optimal, since it violates neither constraint, with the second following suit, since the post-verbal subject is still kept in the L1 position. Finally, the third, a FAITHFULNESS violation, is the order most frequently instantiated in English, though not necessarily in the specific context. Clause-initial adverbials involving location/movement in particular license post-verbal subjects. Also, ‘there …’, the second-best candidate, could prove to be optimal in the absence of such an adverbial in clause-initial position.

I would suggest that there is a double advantage in presenting learners with an L1 sequence that may most readily lead to such an output. First, learners can gradually discover the contextual requirements of such sequencing. Second, they can see that

6 These examples have all been taken from the work of the Greek poets A.Nikolaides (1991) and D.P.Papaditsas (1997).
direct transfer from their mother tongue may not always be fatal once grammaticality standards are slightly stretched to accommodate the more marked forms of the language. That such transfer is common can be seen in Greek undergraduate learner data\textsuperscript{7}, somewhat marginally but not negligibly featuring sequences like those in (8a):

(8a) ??? Helen never went to Troy; with Paris was/lived/ was living through that long decade of manslaughter an effigy, a ghost of Helen which …,

in attempting to render the Greek

(8) I eleni den pije pote stin tria; me ton pari emene, oli ekini ti foveri dekaetia tis anthroposfajis, ena idolo, ena fantazma tis elenis pu … .

This evidence becomes much more robust if the overwhelmingly large number of instances\textsuperscript{8} marked by ambiguity in rendering (8), as can be seen in (8b) below, is added to it:

(8b) ??? Helen never went to Troy; she lived with Paris … an effigy, a ghost of Helen’.

Here learners seem to hover between a semantically anomalous subject-complement construal and something like a dummy ‘she’, with a post-verbal subject proper.

As noted above, we could hypothesise that learners gradually move from the more to the less faithful output, thus re-ranking constraints as they develop acquisitionally. This would mean that ACCEPTABILITY will eventually outrank FAITHFULNESS in contexts licensing no post-verbal subjects in English. CONSISTENCY is also particularly relevant at this point, as it appears that a number of undergraduate learners produce a post-verbal and a pre-verbal sequence in successive sentences.\textsuperscript{9}

Let us now see what happens with adjectives. Greek learners of English would have to abandon post-nominal adjectives, universally – and derivationally, see Stavrou (1996, 1999) -- more marked, if they are to produce non-deviant pre-nominal forms. In other words, they would have to violate FAITHFULNESS (as in skepsis eliptikes in our example) in favour of ACCEPTABILITY (eliptikes skepsis). Interestingly, however, despite James’s (1998) argument against marked forms being transferred, there is acquisitional evidence for post-nominal adjectives persisting in Greek learners’ interlanguage. Thus, forms like

(9) * a night dim and quiet

\textsuperscript{7} The specific post-verbal subject examples come from the data collected in the academic year 2006-7 from 200 English Department undergraduate students invited to translate a brief text by the Greek poet G.Seferis in their translation class workshop. It should be noted, however, that there are a number of similar instances obtained in students’ class assignment translation output over a number of years.

\textsuperscript{8} The option presented was adopted by 66 out of the total of 200 (33%) students referred to in ft.7.

\textsuperscript{9} It would also be interesting to consider object-verb-subject sequences like ‘me kimizan i aposperites’ (me lulled the evening stars), where a passive rendering, leaving the agent intact, may compete with the corresponding active structure. In any case, joint consideration of all these sequences might give learners the chance to explore potential links between post-verbal subjects and passive subjects or verb-subject, existential phrases, non-ergatives and perhaps also clefts, by extension.
instead of ‘a dim and quiet night’ are relatively frequent in undergraduate students’ written translation output, suggesting that FAITHFULNESS may outperform ACCEPTABILITY even at a relatively advanced stage.

Finally, in the case of genitive pre- and post-modification it appears that the pre-nominal – Saxon – genitive in English is more selective than its Greek counterpart and that its use depends on the nature of the H-noun, so pre- and post-modification are not exactly interchangeable (Haegeman & Guérin 1999: 413-414), as a look at examples (4) to (7) after all suggests. Once again, learners would have to feel their way from an L1- to an L2-resembling sequence and there is plenty of informal evidence suggesting that they treat the two sequences interchangeably, as in (10) below:

(10) *the ceiling’s stains,
thus resisting changes.

4. By way of a conclusion
The main purpose of the proposal presented in this paper is to capture what happens in the interlanguage space by formalising some comparative language facts. Viewing intermediate forms and structures as a continuum as well as allowing optimal but not always perfect solutions encourages a process-oriented approach to errors which can be supportive of L2 development. Learners’ knowledge of other languages could also be taken advantage of by comparing the trends outlined above with regard to the Greek-English pair with what happens in these languages. In the case of L1 German and French, for instance, our expectations with regard to constraint ranking would be different. Among other options available in these two languages the subject slot needs to be filled in, unless it is preceded by an adverbial, so there may be no winning constraint in switching to L2 English. In the case of post-nominal adjectives in L1 French, on the other hand, FAITHFULNESS has to be given up soon if conformity to L2 English is to develop.

Finally, as regards the implementation of the framework in the foreign language class, depending on learners’ age and level, the application may be used in class ‘raw’, with some or none of its metalanguage, or as a compass for the design and evaluation of language work and/or material. In any case, it is hoped that it can help shed some more light on the nebulous concept of ‘transfer’.

References


