

## THE TRANSFER OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE<sup>1</sup>

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Contrastive Analysis is concerned with the notions of 'transfer' and 'interference', and it is for this concern that it has borne the brunt of the discredit meted out in opposition to structure-based theories of language teaching by advocates of the movement for teaching communicative competence (CC). Note the word-play in some early writings from this movement. Newmark (1970) offered interesting and seminal suggestions on "How not to interfere with language learning", and Newmark and Reibel (1968 : 149) attacked CA directly as endorsing a teacher-centred rather than learner-centred approach to foreign-language learning, claiming that "The excessive preoccupation with the contribution of the teacher ... distracted the theorists from considering the role of the learner as anything but a generator of interference". It is not my purpose here to vindicate CA, but to determine whether and to what extent CA and teaching for communicative competence are in fact incompatible enterprises. My terms of reference are the classical Ladonian paradigm of CA endorsed by James (1971) and the discourse on the nature of Communicative Competence of Hymes (1971): their common date is to be taken as a fortuitous coincidence.

The CC movement seeks to deemphasise structure in favour of assigning priority to meaning. This is why it has blossomed in the intellectual climate of Generative Semantics, the contributions from ordinary language philosophers like Austin, Searle and Grice, and Halliday's Functionalism. Yet on the other hand the movement has relied for its endorsement on *structural* information of a particular kind: that pertaining to child language acquisi-

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tion. With some alacrity it has welcomed indications, albeit couched in structuralist terms (Dulay and Burt 1974; Ravem 1974), that second-language learning in a natural setting is not qualitatively, though it may be quantitatively, different from primary-language acquisition. This finding has been taken as a reliable indication that the student's natural language-learning capacity will ensure success, provided he has sufficient *meaningful* exposure to the target language "... if particular, whole instances of the language are modeled for him and if his own particular acts using the language are selectively reinforced" (Newmark and Reibel 1968 : 149). This proposal is vividly realised in the practices described by Allwright (1977) for managing the English learning of university-level students in a 'remedial' programme.

The study of child language has likewise now begun to turn its back on structural accounts of the process. Developing Brown's (1973) call for 'rich' interpretations of acquisition data, those which rely heavily upon situationally-cued meanings, Halliday (1975) has provided a Functionalist interpretation of the process of a child's (Nigel's) acquisition. Here are some representative statements from Halliday's work:

- i) "... language development is much more than the acquisition of structure". (1975 : 3).
- ii) "Early language development may be interpreted as the child's progressive mastery of functional potential". (1975 : 5).
- iii) [The child] "... learns to mean long before he adopts the lexical mode for the realisation of meanings". (1975 : 9).

Here, then, is one *crucial* difference between L1 and L2 learning: infants, while mastering the formal devices of language, are simultaneously, and thereby, learning "how to mean". Adult learners of an L2, by contrast, enter the experience with a well-developed command of a functional system: their problem is not to learn *how to mean*, but to learn how to *convey* an already internalised system of meanings through a different or partially different structural *code*. Obviously this code will have to be learnt, and the differences between L1 and L2 codes "... are the chief source of difficulty in learning a second language" (Lado 1964 : 21).

That at least one category of FL learners need not be taught 'how to mean', since they can transfer their L1 modes of meaning to L2, has been conceded by Widdowson (1975b : 6): "... the language user himself knows how to create and understand discourse of different kinds expressed in his own language". The 'meanings' he refers to however are rather specialised ones, since he is writing of English for Special Purposes: "fields of enquiry in the physical and applied sciences, as they are generally understood, are defined by their communicative systems, which exist as a kind of cognitive deep structure independently of individual realisations in different languages"

(Widdowson 1975b : 6) and further "the communicative systems of different scientific disciplines are independent of any particular linguistic realisation" (1975b:7). These statements are reminiscent of those in classical CA which refer to *meaning* as the constant in comparison (the 'tertium comparationis'), the difference being that Widdowson refers to the supposed universality of specialised communicative systems, familiarity with which he regards as constituting knowledge of "how to create and understand discourse". Although his concern is with ESP one might perhaps make the same claim, even more legitimately, in respect of a generalist or generalised communicative competence. It should be borne in mind that Widdowson's claim about the universality of technical and scientific rhetoric is purely conjectural, awaiting empirical validation, but if it is indeed universal then there can be no talk of 'contrastive scientific rhetoric' just as there can be no such thing as 'contrastive semantics', for the simple reason that universality precludes contrastivity. The same must be said of the generalist analogue to technical rhetoric, communicative competence, the proper study of which is the province of Linguistic Pragmatics: as I understand the term, from my reading of Stalnaker (1972) and of Lakoff (1976) such things as Grice's (1967) conversational maxims and Lakoff's rules of politeness are very probably universal, so there will be no 'contrastive pragmatics' to occupy us in the foreseeable future.

The relationship that Widdowson sees between specialist and generalist English is one of complementarity. He assumes that if students have a knowledge of the structural properties of generalist English, they will be able to combine this with their L1 knowledge of their scientific discipline to master the rhetoric of scientific English. In that case I take it that structural knowledge of the L2 must be a prerequisite for specialist communicative competence in the L2. If it is the case that generalist structural knowledge can serve specialist communicative competence we are faced with a number of questions. First, would it not be better for ESP students to have specialist structural facility from the start? Widdowson (1975b : 3) dismisses this on the grounds that "a knowledge of how English is used in scientific and technical communication can ... [not]... arise as a natural consequence from the learning of the sentence patterns and vocabulary which are manifested most frequently in samples of communication of this kind". The next question therefore concerns the *order of priorities* for teaching usage and use: should structural knowledge, a sine qua non for communication, be imparted simultaneously with instruction and opportunities for use, or be imparted prior to these opportunities for use? As Allwright (1977 : 3) puts the question:

"Are we teaching *language* (for communication)? or  
Are we teaching *communication* (via language)?"



Yet, as we have already seen, the communication system *per se* "as a kind of cognitive deep structure" does not need to be taught, since it is already acquired knowledge in adult generalists and in scientists who know how to be scientists in the L1. What do need to be taught therefore are the structural or formal resources that realise communicative acts in the L2. Where some of these formal resources are isomorphic with those of the L1 they will not have to be taught either, since as CAists have long insisted, they can be transferred from the L1 to L2. The task at hand is to ascertain which formal resources can be allowed to be transferred, and the answer will be: only those which are both isomorphic and have the same semantic, rhetorical and pragmatic values as the L2 form with which they are matched. It seems that the communicative competence teaching movement is irrationally eclectic in recognising the learner's right to transfer his underlying systems of communication, but not their formal realisations, to the L2; even though the feasibility of their transfer *within* the L2, from generalist to specialist use, is endorsed by a writer like Widdowson.

The main reason why there is widespread disaffection toward the teaching of structure is that teachers' efforts have been negatively reinforced by their pupils: there is usually a great discrepancy between 'input' (what is taught) and 'intake' (what is learnt). Instead of learning the forms of the target language, learners exhibit an exasperating tendency to 'learn' deviant forms. Moreover, this deviance seems not to be always proportionate to the degree of mismatch between L1 and L2 forms (cf. Whitman and Jackson 1972). As if in despair, foreign-language teaching theorists have chosen to redraw their policies, and have accordingly decided that grammatical deviance can be tolerated provided learners are putting their message across. It has even been suggested that provided the L2 is being put to meaningful use, the incidence of error in fact drops, though I know of no supportive evidence for this speculation.

Now learners' error making has become big business and has engendered the subdiscipline of Error Analysis within Applied Linguistics. Widdowson (1975b) has interpreted the errors learners make as evidence for what Selinker (1969) called "strategies of communication", and identifies as their common denominator a desire on the learner's part to simplify: they provide "a partial account of basic simplifying procedures which lie at the heart of communicative competence" (Widdowson 1975b). This simplification, he contends, can involve either an increase or decrease in complexity, which is not so paradoxical in the light of the spectacular asymmetry that psycholinguists have revealed between linguistically defined complexity of derivation and psychological difficulty. The pedagogic implication that Widdowson sees is one that you have to be courageous to publish: rather than opting for "remedial teaching through which errors are eradicated" (as is standard practice),

Widdowson proposes "initial teaching through which errors are exploited. That is to say, one might devise syllabuses which actually presented the erroneous forms which particular groups of learners were prone to produce, gradually bringing 'correct' standard forms into focus as the course progressed". This approach, he adds, "... would be in line with current approaches to the teaching of communicative competence".

Widdowson's proposal has been made before, both in covert and in overt forms. In covert form, Hymes (1971 : 287) suggests "... one should perhaps contrast a 'long' and a 'short' range view of competency, the short range view being interested primarily in understanding innate capacities as unfolded during the first years of life, and the long range view in understanding the continuing socialization and change of competence through life". Hymes (1971 : 287) has particularly in mind disadvantaged children, whether they be American Blacks or speakers of Bernstein's 'restricted code', those "... whose primary language or language variety is different from that of their school". It is, claims Hymes, part of a person's communicative competence to adapt his speech styles as changing social conditions and experience demand. Having communicative competence means having this adaptability in matters of language.

A difference between Widdowson and Hymes is that the former sees his proposal as emanating from "the findings of error analysis", while Hymes refers explicitly to the founder of Contrastive Analysis, Weinreich (1953) and his notion of *interference*, which Hymes defines as being concerned with "problems of the interpretation of manifestations of one system in terms of another". In fact, Widdowson's view is shared by Krzeszowski (1976 : 66) who illuminatingly categorises the five processes that Selinker (1972) considers contribute to the form of interlanguage. Three of these (L1 transfer, transfer of L1 training, and overgeneralisation from the target language) Krzeszowski (1976 : 61) calls 'horizontal processes' and the other two ('strategies of communication' and 'strategies of TL learning') he calls 'vertical processes' since "... they do not involve any transfer either from the source or from the target language" (1976 : 67). On the other hand Widdowson has claimed, as I have shown, that these procedures, at least those involving simplification "lie at the heart of communicative competence" and that this *is* transferable from L1 use.

The more overt support for Widdowson is my paper (James 1972) on applied CA where I likewise proposed that some status as institutionalised communicative codes should be given to the 'deviant' languages of foreign-language learners. I was encouraged in this by the American efforts to what was technically called 'dialect expansion' in the late '60s., which were associated with such linguists as Labov, Shuy, Baratz Fasold and Stewart. This movement sought to do two things: to recognise as legitimate and so assign



linguistic status to the nonstandard dialects of American Blacks, and to create pedagogic materials to facilitate social 'upward mobility' via the standardisation of these dialects. Politzer (1968:2) pointed out that any variant of a TL that is coloured by the native language of its learners can similarly be labelled a nonstandard dialect of that TL. The sentences of these learner-dialects are of two kinds, the idiosyncratic and the nonidiosyncratic, and it is the latter kind which CA has traditionally been concerned with: I call them nonidiosyncratic simply because they are common to populations of learners with a shared L1. They need not be obvious replicas of the L1, but their deviance will be systematically, if deviously, traceable to the L1. Since the learner's 'dialect' is in a sense a hybrid between L1 and TL I called it *interlingua*, a term adopted from translation theory.

Any foreign-language learner has a propensity to construct for himself this interlingua, though it has been pedagogic practice to stifle this act of creativity. It is unrealistic to insist that learners should circumvent it to proceed directly to the native speaker's version of the TL. A further justification for tolerating it is that where the class is L1-homogeneous, the individual learners will converge in tacit agreement on the form of this interlingua, and being institutionalised (Corder 1975) it will become a vehicle for in-class communication. Accepting the interlingua, like accepting the child's or the immigrant's nonstandard language, obviates the necessity to halt the communication process in favour of the learning process, which has been the traditional practice.

For the majority of language learners, the interlingua need not be assigned a low status by being viewed as 'transitional'. Being a viable means of communication, it might, for the majority of learners, represent their terminal competence. It is adequate for those whose foreign-language study ends with school and for those who have specialist and sporadic functional communicative needs. The minority, those who will become professional foreign-language communicators and those whose motives are literary, aesthetic, linguistic or pedagogic, will need to proceed beyond the interlingua. Thus 'advanced' language study will aim at naturalising the interlingua and to this end the procedures advocated by Feigenbaum (1969) are appropriate: the student is required to manipulate certain model sentences through repetition, substitution, and even translation. Often in the past such audiolingualist drills were criticised for their artificiality, but it is this artificiality which makes them suited for dialect expansion by the advanced learner, since they involve him in conscious comparison of differences between his interlingua and target competence. So this drilling involves not the mechanical conditioning of verbal responses but makes use of the learner's *cognitive* capacities. As Hymes says, such adaptability lies at the heart of communicative competence.

I have delayed my definition of communicative competence. Of the many

available definitions I shall concentrate on those of Dittmar, of Widdowson, and of Corder. Dittmar (1976:163) sees as central to communicative competence the language user's realisation of two facts:

- a) that two or more speech acts can be carried by the same linguistic pattern, and
  - b) that two or more linguistic patterns can convey the same speech act.
- Developing CC involves then an increasing *versatility*. For Widdowson (1975b) *simplification* is the key, so he talks of "... basic simplifying procedures which lie at the heart of communicative competence". For him they involve "... the process whereby a language user adjusts his language behaviour in the interests of communicative effectiveness". Moreover, they are exhibited by native speakers and are not "restricted to people engaged in the learning of a second language system". Corder (1975) places the emphases differently: rather than viewing interlanguage in terms of simplification or reduction, he prefers to study the processes of *elaboration* demonstrated by learners of a second language. It will be obvious that the naturalisation of the interlingua, as I have presented it, is an aspect of Corder's "elaboration" as well as of Hymes' 'adaptability'.

I will concede that many of the learner's simplification strategies are universal. Váradi (1973) has discussed these under the title "Strategies in Target-Language learner communication Message Adjustment". He recognised three strategies: message abandonment (full or partial); formal replacement; and message adjustment. Results of applying the strategy for the communication of the 'balloon' were: 'air ball', 'special toy for children', 'light bowls (balls) to fly', 'filled with gas'. I am sure that there are syntactic counterparts to these lexical ones. I am also sure that, apart from the universal strategies, there will be those that rely heavily on the L1 of the learners: this is where Contrastive Analysis comes back into the picture.

In her Bangor research project, de Echanó (1977) set out to investigate the strategies employed by 'authors' of simplified Readers<sup>2</sup> in making an original text more accessible to foreign learners of English. The procedures recognised by Váradi were in evidence. In addition, de Echanó submitted syntactically difficult English sentences to two populations of informants, one English native-speakers, the other Spanish teachers of English, with instructions to simplify each sentence, if possible, so as to make it easier for foreigners to understand. The informants were being invited to indulge in 'foreigner talk' (Ferguson 1975) of a rather sophisticated type in the written mode. She selected the test sentences on the basis of high English-Spanish contrastivity, as suggested in Stockwell et. al. (1965). Significantly, the Spanish informants tended to suggest simplified versions which were syntactically

<sup>2</sup> Longman's Bridge Series and Simplified Readers.



convergent toward the nearest Spanish pattern. She concluded that Readers, to be truly effective and significantly simplified, should be composed with the native language of the target reader population in mind. The main inference I wish to draw from de Echano's work is that, although, as Widdowson claims, the ability to simplify language is shared by foreign learners and teachers and native speakers, some of the directions of that simplification are determined by the L1. The second point, following from the first, is that the paraphrase relations recognised by a L1-homogenous group of foreign learners will make communication more possible than when the group does not have a common L1. I feel that Allwright's experiment in Essex would have yielded a functional interlingua even more rapidly if his learners had all been L1 Spanish speakers.

It might be objected that I have overemphasised the structural aspect of communicative competence. As Hymes (1971 : 281) says "There are several sectors of communicative competence, of which the grammatical is just one". My apology might be either that I am concerned with the acquisition rather than the possession of C.C., or alternatively that it is time to reinstate the grammatical dimension, which is in danger of being lost sight of. Instead of apologies though, I prefer to consider the four 'sectors' of C.C. that Hymes identifies, namely:

- 1) "Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible". (1971 : 281) This is the grammaticality sector and it is best approached through the linguistic study of error gravities, as in James (1974) and James (1977).
- 2) "Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible". (1971 : 281) This is the acceptability sector and concerns 'performance' factors such as memory and cognitive factors. It has been studied by Cook (1977).
- 3) "Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate". (1971 : 281) This is defined in relation to contextual features or how sentences match situations.
- 4) "Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done". (1971 : 281) This relates to probability of occurrence. An example is F.R. Palmer's (1965 : 63) contentious claim that *will/shall* are not the commonest forms for future reference in English. As Hymes (1971 : 282) says: "A linguistic illustration: a sentence may be grammatical, awkward, tactful and rare". And so may an interlingual sentence from a second-language learner. The Polish learner of German, for example, might be allowed or even encouraged to use the alternative German way (a) of asking a question that is structurally close to his L1 (Polish) way rather than the 'more natural' way (b):

<i>Polish (L1)</i>	<i>German (L2)</i>	
Czy pan go zna?	Ob Sie ihn kennen?	a)
	Kennen Sie ihn?	b)

His communicative competence at this stage will be deficient in that the (a) version may be too [-casual] to be appropriate and may be relatively rare. But basing the interlingua or 'reduced code' on a contrastive study will ensure that his sentence is grammatical and, for him perhaps even more than for a native speaker of German, feasible. It will be during the naturalisation of the interlingua that attention will be paid to appropriacy and to relative frequency.

As I said at the outset, it is not my vocation to vindicate Contrastive Analysis. But I hope to have shown that the welcome shift of attention to the communicative ambitions of language learners is not a completely new page in history and that structural considerations, while they should not preoccupy us, should, in their *contrastive* aspect, be continually borne in mind.

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