

A BRIEF FALSIFICATIONIST LOOK AT CONTRASTIVE SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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There are two reasons for which I have decided to write this brief paper. (1) One is that contrastive analysis has recently seemed to be losing its clout, and in connection with this, I have been thinking about why that actually may be the case. In a part of what follows I will address this question. (2) The second reason for writing this paper was my desire to look at contrastive analysis (especially its sociolinguistic version) from the point of view of the falsificationist philosophy of science, which I happen to have a particular respect for. Even if the view expressed in (1) above is wrong (i. e., the view that contrastive analysis is losing its clout), as some readers might want to argue, (2) still remains valid. (2), i.e., a falsificationist look at contrastive sociolinguistic analysis, is the major goal of this paper.

The paper consists of two parts. In Part I I very briefly present the relevant (to my analysis) fundamental tenets of K.R. Popper's falsificationist philosophy of science (Popper 1957, 1959, 1963) which I adopt for my work in sociolinguistics. In Part II I attempt an evaluation of contrastive sociolinguistics from the point of view of Popper's falsificationist philosophy, and, finally, I suggest reasons for the declining interest in contrastive analysis.

PART I – POPPER'S FALSIFICATIONIST PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

- (1) All observation is theory laden.
- (2) Knowledge gets accumulated through a continuous process of conjectures and attempted refutations.
- (3) Theories should be formulated in a manner that allows their falsification.
- (4) Scientists should continually try to falsify, and not verify theories.
- (5) Scientists should formulate universally valid hypotheses; the final decision, however, on whether the scientist addresses universal or spatio-temporally restricted hypotheses rests with the individual researcher.

- (6) The social sciences should be treated primarily as following the same methodological pattern as the natural sciences, in that in both conjectural hypotheses are formulated and refutations attempted. This is in spite of the differences within and across these two.

The above constituents of Popper's philosophy, and others, have raised a number of doubts and objections. In my opinion, Popper has convincingly answered all of the criticism directed at his views (Popper 1983), which, interestingly, was partly due to misunderstandings. For instance, he clearly defended himself on the issue of how to decide whether a theory has been ultimately falsified. In this respect, he showed that falsification as a logical term has to be distinguished from falsification as a practical social act; hence, it is researchers themselves who have to decide that a given theory has been falsified or not (Carr 1990).

Popper's general principles for proceeding in science easily translate into those pertaining to linguistics. As my own view of language is social, what follows is meant to apply to sociolinguistics, although I believe that large parts of what I say below are also relevant to other types of linguistics. Thus, in general I address here what is widely known as contrastive linguistics. However, I wish to specifically take a falsificationist look at what is frequently referred to as contrastive sociolinguistics.

PART II

In what follows I wish to show how the falsificationist philosophy could be applied in contrastive sociolinguistics. I primarily want to concentrate on the fundamental principles of contrastive sociolinguistics rather than merely on a single working instance. The primary reason for which I would like to take up the question of sociolinguistics is that, among others, as I mentioned earlier, contrastive (socio)linguistics has recently seemed to be losing its impact. As opposed to the 60-ies, 70-ies, and early 80-ies of this century (when interest in contrastive linguistics was significant) the last few years have shown a gradual decline of attention (measured in terms of, for example, conference organizing, conference participation, publications, private communication). In the meantime (especially in the late seventies and early eighties) contrastive sociolinguistics (by some authors referred to as contrastive pragmatics, by others as contrastive pragmalinguistics) has been a visible enterprise (especially in Europe; in Finland, West Germany, France, and Poland). As contrastive linguistics has always had both diehard proponents and enemies, I think it might be of some interest to see how the philosophical principles advocated above solve the contrastive sociolinguistics problem by which I mean the legitimacy or illegitimacy of distinguishing between sociolinguistics on the one hand and contrastive sociolinguistics on the other. In other words, I will try to discuss briefly the basic tenets of the undertaking known as contrastive studies (the sociolinguistic orientation). The presentation to follow should be thus treated as my own view of contrastive sociolinguistics emerging as a corollary of accepting the philosophical assumptions listed above. I understand contrastive sociolinguistics to be a working perspective toward language conceived of as a social phenomenon. Like in the case of contrastive, nonsocial linguistics, contrastive sociolinguistics analyses have been

carried out for both theoretical and practical purposes. Independent of the type of objectives set forth one gets the impression that many a contrastive linguist (sociolinguist included) treat the discipline as in some way different from linguistics (or sociolinguistics) proper. This is particularly salient if one accepts the by now classical view of contrastive linguistics where the primary objective of analyses is to compare languages, or rather fragments thereof. In spite of the different philosophical assumptions underlying contrastive nonsocial linguistics and contrastive sociolinguistics (cf. Janicki 1984, 1985), I feel tempted to conclude that at least one characteristic is shared by the two, namely, the conviction on the part of many contrastive (socio)linguists that it is basically legitimate to promote contrastive (socio)linguistics as *in some principled* manner distinct from (socio)linguistics proper. In what follows I would like to show that while for some practical or organizational-institutional reasons such a distinction may not only be possible but also most welcome, for epistemological objectives to be reached within the falsificationist paradigm of linguistics such a division is not necessary at all. I will limit my discussion below to contrastive *sociolinguistics*. I believe, however, that several if not all conclusions may be safely extrapolated to non-social contrastive linguistics as well.

In Janicki 1985 I expressed the view that contrastive sociolinguistic analyses should be viewed and assessed differently depending on whether the objectives underlying them are practical or theoretical ones. While the practical objectives may be many (e.g., foreign language learning/teaching, translation, interpretation), the theoretical macro objective is in fact one: expounding language. With the theoretical objective in mind (for a discussion of the practical objectives I refer the reader to Janicki 1984 and 1985) the question arises of whether it is advisable to maintain or promote the distinction between contrastive sociolinguistics and sociolinguistics as such. When the question is approached from the point of view of the philosophy of linguistics that I advocate above, the answer is *no*. While, as some may want to rightly argue, the distinction is not harmful, neither, I think, is it necessary, or, what is more important, illuminating.

If one would like to view contrastive sociolinguistics as an extension of contrastive nonsocial linguistics which

“can be roughly defined as the systematic study of two or more languages, specifying all the differences and similarities holding between those languages in all the language components” (Fisiak et al. 1978:9),

one would expect for socially realistic fragments of at least two languages to be compared. As for the sociolinguist macro entities such as Polish and English are too large to contrast, one could thus expect comparisons of sociolects, sex-related varieties, age-related varieties, etc. The fundamental question that comes to the fore at this point is: “what for?”. In other words, why would one want to compare a theoretically motivated age-related variety of English with its corresponding variety of Polish for example?

Looked at from the point of view of the philosophy laid out above such comparisons simply do not need to be made, unless, importantly, the universe of interest is deliberately limited to two or more languages, in which case systematic comparison of two or more languages may perhaps contribute something to developing a the-

oretical stance (see also below). In other words, the situation is this: it is the sociolinguist's task to propose solutions to problems wherein descriptions are attempted and explanatory conjectures formulated. Provided a descriptive or explanatory hypothesis is meant to be universally valid, any language may provide reasons for corroborating or falsifying the hypothesis. (In fact many linguists to date, who have not referred to themselves as contrastive linguists, have used data from more than one language without any systematic contrasting of a pair of systems, and it has been so, it seems, because universal hypotheses may be assessed independent of whether one language is considered, a comparison of two, or possibly a comparison of more than two). If a universal claim is made pertaining for example to the article as a grammatical category in social context, it simply does not matter how for instance the article system in English compares to that in German. What does matter is how the empirical data collected on English, or on German (or on any other language for that matter) feeds back the theoretical statement concerning the article. Looking at the sociolinguist's work in such a philosophical perspective, laborious and meticulous comparisons of fragments of two languages might be viewed as simply superfluous.

My reasoning above should bring the reader to the conclusion that any strong version of contrastive sociolinguistics (= systematic comparisons of fragments of two languages in social context) pursued for theoretical/epistemological purposes incorporating universal statements is simply untenable. A weak version of contrastive sociolinguistics, understood as resorting to more than one language in the evaluation of hypotheses is by all means not only possible but also necessary; but in that case the label *contrastive sociolinguistics* may in fact be a little far-fetched.

As I argue on a different occasion (Janicki 1990) in addition to universal hypotheses sociolinguistic problems and hypotheses which are spatio-temporally restricted are also valuable for the sociolinguist, primarily as they potentially lead to universal problem solutions and universal hypotheses formulations. In the light of this fact, systematic cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g., sequencing in telephone conversations in French and Spanish) may function as tests for hypotheses that are spatio-temporally restricted (e.g., hypotheses that pertain to sequencing in Romance languages). What is extremely important, however, is that such comparisons must be principally seen as testing hypotheses. In other words, comparisons should not constitute a goal in itself but serve as techniques for bringing out empirical data feeding back the theoretical statement. In spite of all the above, it is my conviction, however that systematic cross-linguistic comparisons are not an extremely convincing technique, and this is because they require more effort than is in fact needed. Let us consider the following example:

Spatio-temporally restricted hypothesis: In standard varieties of Slavic languages word stress is placed on the penultimate syllable.

Testing the hypothesis: Polish corroborates and Czech falsifies the hypothesis. The way the hypothesis is formulated it is clearly wrong. It is wrong as long as one standard variety of a Slavic language falsifies it.

Question: Why would we need (in the light of our hypothesis, of course) a systematic comparison of the stress patterns in Standard Polish and Standard Czech?

It is clear to me that testing hypotheses such as the one above does not require

any systematic comparisons of two languages (no matter how much idealized).

Moreover, such comparisons do not seem to be necessary even if theoretical claims are limited to two selected languages, for instance,

Spatio-temporally restricted hypothesis: In German and in Polish, in private telephone conversations the distant caller identifies himself/herself.

Testing the hypothesis: German corroborates the hypothesis; Polish falsifies it.

Question: Do we need any detailed comparison of (fragments of) the two languages to either corroborate or falsify the hypothesis? The answer is a clear *no*, again.

It follows that comparisons as such do not contribute much (if anything) to the value of data that, independent of such comparison, are used for testing hypotheses.

All in all, from the point of view of the philosophy of sociolinguistics that I advocate above, any strong version of contrastive sociolinguistics, understood as promoting principled comparisons of two or more sociolinguistic systems, should be abandoned. As long as falsifiable claims are formulated 'contrastive data' are not required for such claims to be supported or weakened. This conclusion holds true for both universal claims and for those that are spatio-temporally restricted.

The opinion above should by no means lead the reader to the conclusion that contrasting languages is utterly useless. Such contrasting may prove valuable not only for practical purposes (e.g., language teaching) but also for theoretical purposes, in that in the latter case mere comparisons may for instance lead to arriving at new theoretical solutions or at identification of new problems. It must be remembered, however, that from the philosophical perspective which I promote in this paper, contrasting languages should not be treated as an end in itself, and should be viewed as basically redundant for any falsifiable theoretical statement to be tested.

In conclusion, if the reader agrees with the view that contrastive linguistics in general and contrastive sociolinguistics in particular have indeed been recently losing their force, then at least two reasons may be suggested as responsible for this state of affairs:

(1) For universally valid hypotheses to be tested no systematic comparisons of languages (or fragments thereof) are necessary. Some (or many) contrastive linguists may have realized that for quite some time they have been doing more than was necessary. The time may have come to stop doing this.

(2) Some linguists may have realized that contrasting languages should not be an end in itself. If (1) and (2) are accepted there is not in fact much, at least from the falsificationist point of view, that the contrastive linguist is left with.

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