

FRENCH—ENGLISH CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS AT
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It is probably no exaggeration to say (as I already did elsewhere) that no other world languages have been in closer contact than English and French. This is true in more than one sense: we all know that the Norman Conquest was not only a territorial but also a very spectacular linguistic affair, that English and French have ever since been the privileged language of diplomats and scientists, and that today French is taught as a foreign (often second) language in most English speaking countries and vice-versa. It is rather surprising therefore that contrastive study of these two languages should not have been practised on a larger scale. True enough, a few great names are connected with such research (Mackey, Vinay, Darbelnet, Ullmann, Wandruszka and others), but there is, to my knowledge at least, no recent or systematic effort comparable with the contrastive projects undertaken in such countries as Poland, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Sweden or Germany. A look at two recent bibliographical lists confirms this: volume four of the Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics of the Polish—English Contrastive Project lists some 100 published books or papers for a period of hardly 10 years, whereas our own French—English bibliography in vol. 3 of the Contrastive Analysis Series lists about the same number of items for a period three times as long.

It would be preposterous on my part if I said that our Centre d'Etudes Anglaises of the Université Catholique de Louvain intends to fill this gap and has plans for something great and systematic. After all, our department is large only in terms of numbers of students; staff and budget are small, and hence mainly invested in teaching. Yet, ever since in the sixties our University of Louvain ceased to be a bilingual institution, the French speaking future teachers of English have no longer been a kind of subgroup in a numerically

and therefore linguistically dominant Flemish group, but have had their own, specific curriculum and teaching staff. This has taken us straight into problems of contrastive linguistics, for we share the general belief that the structure of the learners' first language should to some extent determine the way a second language is taught. On the other hand it would be wrong to say that pedagogical considerations have been our only incentive: it seems obvious that much relevant information about the grammar and vocabulary of a language emerges from careful and systematic comparison with another language. All linguistic description is, after all, at least covertly contrastive.

The present situation at our Centre d'Etudes Anglaises is one where English—French contrastive research centres round a few doctoral projects and a considerable number of "licence" dissertations. Only a small part of this has so far found its way to books or journals, but a few representative papers have been collected in volume 3 of the "Contrastive Analysis Series". A look at these writings will show that our Centre is not the place of worship of one particular linguistic faith. We have never thought of adhering to one theoretical approach or model of analysis to the exclusion of all other approaches or models. The fact that there is no school of thought but has produced excellent contrastive analysis probably shows that the choice of a model should be made subservient to the nature of the problem to be studied and to the aim of the investigation. A compromise position of the kind Randolph Quirk adopts in his recent *Grammar of contemporary English* strongly appeals to me personally (Quirk 1972).

Although phonology has on the whole so far been rather marginal in our activities, research has been conducted for some time by J. Heiderscheidt into the relation between graphic and stress phenomena and the possibility of working out strategies enabling French learners to cope more efficiently with stress problems when confronted with a written text. The starting-point for these strategies are the stress rules at word- and phrase-level as proposed in the Sound pattern of English, but further simplified in the sense suggested in Halle's reformulation (*Linguistic inquiry* 1973). The parameters considered at word-level are 1. word-class, 2. number of syllables and syllabic structure, 3. morphological structure and derivational history, 4. origin (Latin, Greek, French, etc.). The validity of these rules is tested, e.g., by means of Dolby and Resnikoff's "Reverse word list" (1967), and experiments undertaken with learners of our Department suggest that the rules are efficient in 85% of the cases.

Contrastive syntax has from the beginning been our favourite field of investigation. A considerable number of "licence" memoirs have been devoted to such various subjects as the structure of the noun phrase and the adjective phrase, the use of the tenses, the function of the infinitive and the participle, etc. More large scale research is at present being conducted on two

points: the use of the passive voice and the use of conjunctions in English and French, by S. Legrand—Granger and by J. Colson respectively.

The study of the passive starts from the analysis of all forms with *be* + past participle and *être* + "participe passé" and from the difficult question as to what criteria will sort out passives from such non-passive structures as *I was interested* or *ils sont déçus*. French and English on the whole raise the same problems here. From a descriptive point of view considerable differences emerge from the analysis of the novel corpus: first of all the passive is about twice as frequent in English as in French, which apparently has to do with restraints on subject selection and use of the infinitive in passive structures in French, as well as with the more frequent use of the indefinite subject *on* and of reflexive verbs in this same language. Investigations of the reasons why passive should be preferred to active leads to much the same answers in both languages: omission of the agent is a fundamental reason; in cases where the agent is expressed, the passive is accounted for by several factors, the main one being the order theme—rheme.

The contrastive study of the use of conjunctions by J. Colson is to be seen as an attempt to go beyond the level of the sentence and to explore text and context. Conjunctions appear as one class of the various markers on which the structure of a text hinges. If their specific role is associated with the logical articulation of discourse, it is clear also that discourse has its own logic, only partly overlapping with formal logic, to which the pragmatic context of utterance is not irrelevant. A characterization of conjunctions must therefore cover their function both at the semantic level of utterance content and at the level of the interlocutors' discursive interaction. This distinction among conjunctions between logical operators (*He is sick because he has eaten too much*) and speech act markers (*Where is he? Because I wanted to speak to him*) seems to be an overall linguistic phenomenon. Its manifestation in English and French at least seems to take place according to rather similar patterns.

In recent years special attention has also been given to problems of contrastive lexicology. If the contrastive study of any two lexical systems is quite a rewarding (and perhaps also a much neglected) field for the linguist to explore, that of the French and English vocabularies is particularly challenging. As we all know, no transfer of words from one language to another is comparable with the massive influx of French lexical items into the English vocabulary in the centuries following the Norman Conquest. It was of such a radical nature that it led A. C. Baugh to conclude his survey of that process in *The history of the English language* (1957) with a reassuring paragraph "The Language still English!". Still English no doubt, but, as every English teacher in France or Belgium well knows, full of pitfalls lying in wait for the French speaking pupil. The study of deceptive cognates has therefore naturally enjoyed a privileged status in French—English contrastive studies, as Maxime

Koessler's sixth and three times enlarged edition of *Les faux amis des vocabulaires anglais et américains* (1975) clearly shows. Yet this impressive scholarly work is clearly intended for translators, and more particularly for translators of literary texts. We feel that there is still room — and even a real need — for a more systematic treatment of the “faux amis” frequently occurring in informal spoken and written English, perhaps in the light of recent componential analysis, whereby the referential components of meaning (E. *assassinate* has the feature (political reason), which Fr. *assassiner* lacks), stylistic components (E. *maternal* vs. Fr. *maternel*) and collocational ones (E. *a *rapid conclusion* vs. Fr. *une conclusion rapide*) are clearly distinguished. Other aspects of the “faux amis” problem need further investigating, of course. One such aspect is the formal one, i.e., the problem of what might be called “deceptive paradigms”, illustrated by the following sets:

<i>habiter</i>		<i>inhabit</i>
<i>habitable</i>		<i>inhabitable</i>
<i>habitant</i>		<i>inhabitant</i>
<i>habitation</i>	<i>habitation</i>	
<i>inhabitable</i>		<i>uninhabitable</i>
<i>inhabité</i>		<i>uninhabited</i>

When cognates are only partially deceptive, the problems are in fact the same as those one gets with “translational equivalents” in general (mainly that of wider or different extension of meaning), and here too some research has been undertaken. As we all know, even the best of dictionaries let the learner and the researcher down all the time. When working with monolingual dictionaries, they will find e.g., that the pipe-smoker's pipe is only the 4th meaning given for the word *pipe* in Webster's *New collegiate dictionary*,¹ whereas it is the basic meaning of F. *pipe* according to the *Larousse du XXe siècle* — which is not a very realistic image of the situation. When working with a bilingual dictionary, they may find e.g., that *tirer* has five English cousins: *pull, tug, draw, drag, haul*, which presentation suggests that they are interchangeable quins.

A few dissertations have so far been devoted to such problems, but the focus has been mainly on differences of a referential nature. Here again, a far more delicate but no less important task is the description of contrasts on the level of style, connotation and collocation. It is clear from the spoken and written English of even our most advanced learners that “collocational competence” is the most difficult foreign language skill to acquire, and this area of research is therefore a very challenging one. If *un vent fort* and *une forte marée* are F. *a strong wind* and *a strong tide* respectively, why then should

¹ See R. Quirk in “A world of words”, Times literary supplement, Oct. 22, 1976.

une forte brise be *a stiff breeze*, *une forte pluie* a *heavy rain*, *de fortes chaleurs* *intense heat*, etc., etc.? By combining the Firthian approach to the problem and the selectional restrictions of TG grammarians, a step forward has been taken by some (E. Roos 1975). But in fact even such a combined approach seems to cope efficiently only with “habitual” collocation types, leaving it an open question whether more can be said about “close” collocations than that they should be considered and learnt as lexical items.

This picture would be incomplete if I did not say a few final words also about a domain complementary to contrastive linguistics, i.e., error analysis. A representative amount of materials has already been examined (i. al. by T. Peeters, A. Sonck), and if we face of course the same theoretical problems as any researcher in any country in this field (is a given form grammatical or ungrammatical? acceptable or unacceptable? does it pertain to grammar or lexis?), the English of French speaking learners in bilingual Belgium poses a more intricate problem with regard to interferential analysis than in many other speech communities. Tentative figures show that, if of all grammar mistakes 31% can be accounted for by intralingual interference, no fewer than 15% of the interlingual ones might be due to Dutch (Belgium's second national language), as against 85% to French. The same figures show that the major trouble spots for our learners are 1. correct use of the article (esp. zero article with uncountables and plural countables in generic use), 2. the verbal oppositions progressive/non progressive and simple past/present perfect, 3. correct placing of adverbs in sentences, 4. selection of the appropriate preposition. The preparatory stage, we may say, is nearing its end in this field, and the time has come for more definite conclusions. We fully realize that here, as in other fields of investigation we have embarked upon, closer cooperation with other research centres is one of the things that would increase the quality and the pace of our work. First contact has recently been made with the Polish linguistic world: a book by one of our staff members, S. Legrand—Granger, and her colleague B. De Vlamminck is at present being translated into Polish (*Tendances interprétatives et génératives en grammaire transformationnelle*). May it be the starting-point for further fruitful cooperation and exchange.

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