

A BRIEF REAPPRAISAL OF CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS¹

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Abstract

The point of departure for this paper² is as follows: it is curious that contrastive linguistics thrives in a period when a serious crisis of confidence exists as to exactly what it is. Several examples are given of recent calls for "revitalization" of the field. Practical applications aside, several interrelated and perplexing problems remain: a) What is a contrastive grammar? b) What exactly is comparable across linguistic systems? c) What is the exact relationship of contrastive linguistics to linguistic theory, especially when that theory itself is in a state of flux? The first two problems are not discussed further, but (c) is handled in some detail.

Two, perhaps mutually exclusive, views are discussed: 1. a particular theoretical model is first chosen and two comparable substructures are then compared and contrasted; problems with the theory are considered irrelevant to this task, 2. a contrastive study is undertaken in order to shed light on a particular theoretical issue by gathering relevant data in contrastive framework. Studies undertaken within contrastive linguistics usually conform to the following examples: "aspectual" verbs, "performative" verb phrases, and the "like-subject constraint".

It was said well three years ago:

In giving a course called Contrastive Analysis at a University or Linguistic Institute the instructor often starts with a disavowal: he says he is not sure that there is such a field as contrastive analysis, or if there is such a field, he is not sure what the methodology is, that is how one should set about doing contrastive analysis. (Ferguson 1968: 101)

Ferguson in that article goes on to be positive, reaffirming the existence of the field which as Hamp points out (Hamp 1968: 144) is called "contrastive analysis" (or whatever noun you like)". What is remarkable in light of Fer-

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² I would like to thank James Armagost, Peansiri Ekniyom, Keith Sauer, and Leslie Wieman. In probing linguistic theory with them, I learned much. Any misconceptions I may still have are surely my own fault.

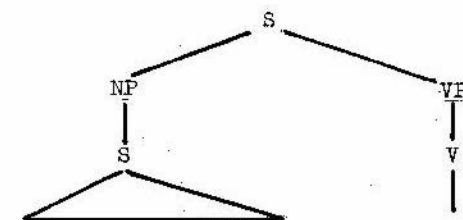
guson's accurate perception, is not the existence of "contrastive linguistics" (my favourite noun), but the *thriving* of contrastive linguistics. One sees, for example, conferences such as the Georgetown one (1968), the Cambridge one (1969), and this one. One also sees that there is no lag in the number of Ph.D. contrastive dissertations, as evidenced in *Dissertations Abstracts* (see Selinker and Selinker, 1971). Furthermore, this thriving is evidenced in the growth of large-scale research projects, which are solely devoted to contrastive studies: French-English (Besançon), German-English (Stuttgart), Irish-English (Tearglann), Serbo-Croatian-English (Zagreb), Polish-English (Poznań); projects are in the works for English with three American Indian languages (Washington), Roumanian-English (Bucharest), Serbo-Croatian-Hungarian, and so on. Much of the development of large-scale projects is documented in survey papers by Nickel (1969) and Nemser (1969 and 1970).

It is, of course, no accident that English is the language to be contrasted in most cases; the practical nature of these projects is not to be overlooked: namely, the promise of improving language teaching. In fact, Nickel specifically claims that contrastive linguistics has the "quite utilitarian aim of improving the methods and results of language teaching" (Nickel 1969: 64).

Validating this claim is an empirical task; the claim has been questioned by writers in the field such as Corder (1967: 162), Alatis (1968: passim), and James (1969: 83). James and others have called for a "revitalization" of contrastive studies, usually with notions of generative grammar in mind.

Concerning such a revitalization, there are many suggestions floating around these days. One of the more interesting has been provided by Keith Sauer (lecture, University of Washington, February 19, 1970), who claims that contrastive linguistics in a generative framework can provide insights into the nature and structure of language for the teacher which are not available under structural linguistics, but cannot tell language teachers how to put these insights to use. Sauer follows Saporta who claims in essence that if linguistics has any contribution to make to language learning it is this: to make explicit in general and in particular what is learned (Saporta 1966: 81). Sauer's point is that the contrastive linguist cannot tell teachers what to teach, but "what it is they are teaching". Current linguistics takes seemingly unrelated data and shows how many of these things come from the same source. For example, consider sentences 1-4 from English and Spanish (data from Sauer).

- (1) John will win certain
Juan ganará cierto
- (2) That John will win is certain.
Que Juan ganará es cierto.
- (3) It is certain that John will win.
Es cierto que Juan ganará.
- (4) John is certain to win. (likely, unlikely)
*Juan es cierto ganar.



Sentence (1) shows a basic semantic structure which is common to the two languages. Sentences (2) and (3) show that each language has identical transformations up to this point, whereas (4) shows a distinct difference in the transformations possible in the two languages. "Subject raising", i.e., taking John out of the embedded sentence and making it subject of the main sentence, is rare in Spanish. Interestingly enough, it turns out that language learning confusion often occurs right at this point for the English learner of Spanish (or French, for that matter).

I take the "thriving" mentioned above to mean that the bath water and baby scare of a few years ago has ended. People are not making wild claims for contrastive linguistics, but are seeking its potential use in a wide variety of endeavours. For example, besides obvious reasonable applications in language pedagogy, Ferguson (1968) and Ervin-Tripp (1967) have tried to show the use of contrastive analysis in child language-acquisition work; Gleason (1968) has tried to show its use in discourse analysis; I have tried to show that contrastive analysis statements provide the best source of hypotheses to be tested in psycholinguistic experiments related to the second-language learning process of "language transfer" (Selinker 1966 and 1969); and Nemser and Slama-Cazacu (1970) have shown the range of experimental possibilities in this domain.

But use aside, we still have the problem of what is a contrastive grammar (see e.g., Hamp 1968), a problem that may not be separable from the following problems exactly what is comparable across linguistic systems? (Alatis 1968: passim). A third problem which is not unrelated is: what is the relationship between a linguistic theory in a state of flux and contrastive studies? We will try to explore the last issue in the remainder of this paper.

Lado (1957: 67), in essence, told us to get the best matching descriptions we could find of two languages and compare and contrast them in terms of specific discovery procedures. The difficulty with such "procedures" and the kind of linguistics they refer aside, the point still stands. *One legitimate view*, it seems to me, of a contrastive study is (rephrasing Lado's injunction) as follows: get the best explanatory view of two comparable substructures of

two languages or dialects and fiddle with them. The notion of "substructure" has to be left vague, since the size of the particular contrastive study is an important variable. For example, one could study questions in two languages or only "primary questions" (Langacker 1969) in two languages (cf. Armagost 1970).

In this first view, one which is quite prevalent in the field, a contrastive linguist chooses a model and considers problems with the theory irrelevant to the task. For instance, many contrastive dissertations (e.g., Fox 1968), have presented the *Aspects* model with little questioning of the basic framework. But today this view of a contrastive study is very hard to follow, when most of the basic notions of linguistic theory, concerning the form of the "grammar" itself, are considered rather tenuous. Which brings us to the second view.

The second view of contrastive linguistics we wish to consider is the following: one of the major purposes of a contrastive study might be to shed light on theoretical issues by gathering relevant data in a contrastive framework. In fact, Nickel, head of the Stuttgart project, goes so far as to state (PAKS 1969: iv) that his hope is that research done in that project

will also yield some interesting results for two major problems of linguistic theory: the construction of a theory of contrastive linguistics and the construction of a general theory of language.

With this view, it is not surprising that many of the papers in these volumes (e.g., Wagner 1969) are primarily attempts to do linguistic theory, not attempts to consider theoretical questions in a contrastive framework. One feels that De Geest *et al* (1969, in press) are really doing the same thing, i.e., using contrastive linguistics to do theoretical linguistics. One wonders why; the latter is its own justification. What one would really like to know, in a detailed manner, is how these authors would handle theoretical questions with data organized in a contrastive framework.

But one might also think of this second view of contrastive linguistics as an attempt to respond positively to what for our purposes could be called "contrastive challenges". By this, I mean one of the many statements in the recent theoretical literature which specifically call for an examination of languages other than English to "follow up" a universal hypothesis. For example, Newmeyer (1969: 25) states that *in no language can an aspectual verb co-occur with adverbials, tense or aspect* (italics his) — a strong claim, but one which I feel certain could be systematically investigated in a contrastive framework.

A linguist who is constantly throwing out contrastive challenges is John Ross: for instance, his major claim that declarative sentences are derived from a clause embedded in a higher "performative" verb phrase (Ross 1970).

Ross himself provides some detailed contrastive data from Arabic, Thai and Basque (*ibid.*, especially pp. 4 and 40 - 42).

Getting a lick in for contrastive linguistics, we can note that the much argued about "like-subject constraint" was called into question first of all on the basis of a Dutch-English contrastive paper. This constraint refers to the often-observed identity between the subject of a verb and the deleted subject of its infinitive complement, as for example *I* in

(5) I want to go.

Presumably *I* is the subject of both verbs. Sentence (6), which was first noticed in a contrastive study, shows a counterexample to the constraint, since the subject of the second verb is presumably different from the subject of the first verb.

(6) I tried to be arrested.

Sentence (7) is the Dutch translation-equivalent of (6).

(7) Ik probeerde mij te laten arresteren.
I tried me to let arrest.
'I tried myself to be arrested'.

This datum appears in Perlmutter (1968: 56) who argued for the constraint³ by positing an intervening sentence in both the Dutch and English deep structures since the two sentences (7) and (8) are equivalent and since *let* must be used to get a grammatical Dutch sentence. For Perlmutter, then, the deep structures for this synonymous pair of sentences in English and Dutch are the same; the languages differ in a transformational rule of verb deletion.

In the latter part of this brief paper, we have discussed two, perhaps mutually exclusive, views of contrastive linguistics: (1) a particular theoretical model is first chosen and two comparable substructures are then compared and contrasted; problems with the theory are considered irrelevant to this task, (2) a contrastive study is undertaken in order to shed light on a particular theoretical issue by gathering relevant data in a contrastive framework. Studies undertaken within contrastive linguistics usually conform to the first view. Whichever view of contrastive linguistics is accepted, we can end up by saying that Schachter (1966) is widely considered as providing the essentially correct form of a contrastive grammar: the major differences in the structures contrasted are not in underlying structure, but in transformations which map these "essentially similar structures" onto the surface (cf. Ekniyom 1970). That Schachter is tied to the *Aspects* model in that paper does not negate his basic insight.

³ See Newmeyer (1969: 47) for arguments against Perlmutter's analysis using only English data.

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