Introducing Contrastive Analysis

Introduction

> Freeman and Long (1991) claim that the study of language acquisition can be said to have passed through a series of phases defined by the modes of inquiry researchers have utilized in their work: contrastive analysis, error analysis, performance analysis and discourse analysis . (p.8)

In the 1950s, American linguist Robert Lado began to study errors systematically and developed theories about errors—contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system and that a scientific, structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe which are problems and which are not. Deeply rooted in behaviorism and structuralism, they held that human language learning was to change old habits and to build new habits. Errors occur when learners could not respond correctly to a particular stimulus in the second language. Since an error may serve as a negative stimulus which reinforces "bad habits", it should not be allowed to occur. So, in the classroom teaching, they placed more emphasis on mechanical pattern drills and attempted to correct any errors or mistakes wherever there were.

Contrastive analysis **(CA)** is the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences. CA has often been done for *practical/pedagogical* purposes. The aim has been to provide better descriptions and better teaching materials for language learners. There is more to CA than this, however. When we compare across languages, we can see the characteristics of each language more clearly, and the comparison can contribute to a better description of each individual language.

This type of CA has sometimes been called ***analytic comparison*** or ***linguistic characterology*** (Mathesius 1975).

Another linguist in the same tradition has put it in this way: *The contrastive method proves to be a useful heuristic tool capable of throwing valuable light on the characteristic features of the languages contrasted; […]. (Firbas 1992: 13) .*The importance of CA extends beyond individual languages. When we compare across a number of languages, we can also see more clearly what is characteristic of languages more generally. There is a lot of interest in *universals* of language – that is, what is characteristic of language in general.

I- Contrastive analysis and language teaching

The background for CA, as applied to language teaching, is the assumption that the native language plays a role in learning a second language. Mother tongue influence is sometimes very obvious, e.g. in the case of foreign accent. We can often recognise foreign speakers by their accent; an American speaking French normally sounds quite different from a Frenchman or a German.

Influence from the mother tongue is not just negative, however; learning a related language is much easier than learning one that is very different. These sorts of observations have probably always been made in language learning and in the contact between native and foreign speakers. When people have written textbooks for learners of foreign languages, there has regularly been an element of comparison between the native language and the foreign language to be learned.

Bilingual dictionaries are of course also contrastive, but when we refer to CA, we think particularly of a systematic comparison of the mother tongue and the foreign language in order to describe similarities and differences, to identify points of difficulty which might lead to interference.

The basic ideas

- Describe and compare the mother tongue / L1 / source language and the foreign language / L2 / target language.

- Predict points of difficulty.

- Use the results in order to improve teaching materials.

This sort of approach was developed in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Two prominent names were Charles Fries and Robert Lado, who explained the rationale for applied CA in this way:

> *The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.* (Fries 1945: 9)

There aree large number of contrastive studies in the 50s and 60s, both in the United States and in Europe, but gradually there was some disenchantment with CA, perhaps because contrastive linguists had made exaggerated claims or because teachers had expected too much.

- Only part of the learning problems can be predicted. Many problems are shared, irrespective of the mother tongue.
- Predictions may vary depending upon the linguistic model.

- There is a complicated relationship between difference and difficulty.
- The blinding-flash fallacy: a comparison of L1 and L2 implies that the whole of the two languages get in contact. But the meeting of the languages in the learner's mind depends upon the stage of learning.

The underlying problem is that language learning cannot be understood by a purely linguistic study. So those who were concerned with language learning turned instead to the new disciplines of error analysis, performance analysis or interlanguage studies and contrastive analysis was rejected by many as an applied discipline.

Critique of Aontrastive Analysis:

❖ The process of L2 acquisition is not sufficiently described by the characterization of errors

❖ Errors in L2 acquisition do not only arise from interference.

❖ The structural differences between two languages are not sufficient to predict the occurrence of errors in L2 acquisition.

Contrastive Analysis

Definition: Contrastive analysis is an inductive investigative approach based on the distinctive elements in a language.

Comparison: Here are some kinds of contrastive analysis:

- Intralingual
  - Analysis of contrastive phonemes
  - Feature analysis of morphosyntactic categories
  - Analysis of morphemes having grammatical meaning
  - Analysis of word order
  - Analysis of lexical relations

- Cross-linguistic
  - Comparative analysis of morphosyntactic systems
  - Comparative analysis of lexical semantics
  - Analysis of translational equivalence
  - Study of interference in foreign language learning

Glossary of frelated teerms

L1 Interference

- Definition : The negative influence of the learner's L1 on his/her use of the target language.

- Example : Italian learners may say "I have seen him yesterday" because of the existence of a similar pattern in Italian.

- The term is associated with audiolingualism, which saw L1 interference as detrimental to learning, and therefore attempted to exclude all use of the L1 from the learning process. Later, it was recognised that L1 influence could also be positive (eg. recognition of cognates can help learners understand words they have never met before) and the alternative term "transfer" was proposed.

Language transfer

- **Language transfer** is the effect, which may be positive or negative, of the L1 on the learner's use of the target language.

  For example : An Italian learner who has never heard the word "invention" before may still understand it because of its similarity to the Italian "invenzione" - this is a positive effect; however, the same learner may be inaccurate in the use of articles when describing generic facts - eg saying *I like the horses* because the definite article would be used in this way in Italian. This is therefore a negative effect.
  The term was coined by Pit Corder in the 70s to react against the Audiolingual view of L1 influence as "interference" - ie inevitably negative and detrimental to learning.

The assumptions of Contrastive Analysis

• Language is a habit and learning a second language is learning new habits

. • The major or the sole source of errors in language acquisition is interference from the native language.

• Second language learners' errors can be analyzed and predicted by studying the differences between two languages, the second language and the native language.

• The more the differences between a second language and a native language the more errors learners will make.

• A learner only has to focus on the differences between the native and the target language since the similarities will transfer automatically.

 • Repetition and practice of structures will lead to learning of the structures.