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# On Contrastive Linguistics

**Esmail Faghih**



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دکتر اسماعیل فقیه

# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**Esmail Faghih**

This book is a collection of twelve selected papers on Contrastive Linguistics (CL) which I have written, or coauthored over a period of about twenty five years between 1990 to the present. I hope it will be of value to instructors, and advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students alike. In this introductory section, first I will explain what we mean by contrastive approach to languages concerned, and then very briefly I will give the synopses of the articles included in this volume.

I should also mention that in this brief introduction, I am mainly concerned with the application of the findings of CL to language pedagogy and to a lesser extent to Translation Studies (TS). That is, the present concise account does not delve into other applications of CL, such as linguistic typology, lexicography, and other related fields.

## 1. Preliminaries

The field of teaching foreign languages (TFL) is an interdisciplinary enterprise because as instructors of TFL not only we are supposed to have mastered the target language, which is the main concern of us as teachers, but also we should be well versed in at least the basics of linguistics and psychology. This is because linguistics is the science which describes language, or our subject matter scientifically. On the other hand, psychology is the science that, among other subjects, explains how learning, including

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for this volume.

learning of languages take place. Therefore, the field of TFL, in addition to the subject matter, i.e. the target language, draws upon the findings of notably linguistics and psychology and accordingly we as instructors in order to enhance our task of TFL should know the preliminaries of these two academic disciplines respectively.

It should further be mentioned that, generally speaking, with advances in linguistics as the scientific study of languages, we have had different schools of linguistics with resultant kinds of grammar descriptions, such as Structural Linguistics, Transformational-Generative Linguistics, Functional Grammar, and others, all of which apparently were the results of endeavors to avoid the shortcomings of the previous models and to better describe the phenomenon of language. Consequently, in doing contrastive research we have a choice as to which model of linguistic description should constitute the possible theoretical foundation of our work.

Having a choice, in selecting an appropriate linguistic model for our applied purposes, is also true of the science of psychology in that the act of learning languages, whether the first or second language, is accounted for in somewhat different ways, depending on the stage of human knowledge of the intellectual, cognitive and affective operations and factors involved in learning languages. Similarly, we have different schools of psychology, notably Faculty, Behavioristic and Cognitive psychology, and so on which explain the act of learning languages in somewhat different ways.

Finally, it should be mentioned very briefly that CL is also significant for Translation Studies because as Chesterman claims (as cited in Willems et al, 2004,p.7) "translation studies ... are contrastive in nature, with ... comparative practices of their own". However, there are two major differences between the two disciplines of CL and TS:

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1. In general, TS "focuses on divergent similarity", i.e. it starts from one source and "derives others from it", whereas CL focuses "on convergent similarity", i.e. it "starts with two different phenomena which are already assumed to contain some features of similarity." (Chesterman, 1998, p.15).
2. The other difference between the two cross-linguistic studies lies in the fact that in translation studies the products of the act of translation, are considered and studied in their own rights in order, as Baker observes (as quoted in Granger, 2003, p.20) to "understand what translation is and how it works". Whereas, in CL translations are utilized as a platform or means of establishing similarities or differences between the languages involved. However, this is not denying the fact that CL and TS have also much in common, because as Chesterman observes (as quoted in Granger, 2003, p.25) they both "are interested in seeing how "the same thing" can be said in other ways, although each field uses this information for different ends".

## **2. What is Contrastive Linguistics?**

According to Johansson (as quoted in Granger, 2003, p.31) "Contrastive Linguistics is the systematic comparison of two or more languages with the aim of describing their similarities and differences". The focus of CL can be relatively specific or general features, accordingly the findings can reveal language specific or features of language in general. The findings of CL can also be used for theoretical or applied purposes.

Contrastive Analysis (CA), as it was called in early days is especially associated with applied purposes, because it started with the observation of experienced teachers of different languages of the fact that apparently some

of the linguistic errors committed by language learners are related to the differences between learners' mother tongues and those of the target languages. Gradually it became an almost established axiom among instructors of different languages that the origins of errors committed by language learners can be traced back to the differences between the two languages. According to Granger (2003, p.17) it became a "general assumption that difference equals difficulty."

Two books played a major role in establishing CA as an academic activity: Fries' *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (1945) and, Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). Both Fries and Lado believed that contrastive studies should be an integral part of TFL, because according to Lado since "... those areas that are different, will be difficult" (1957, p.2), the findings could be used to produce more efficient teaching methods and appropriate materials.

Consequently, as mentioned above, originally CA started as an applied undertaking in order to help different groups of language learners to overcome the possible problems resulting from differences between their first and second languages. With advances in language studies and subsequently linguistics gaining the status of an independent academic discipline, the early intuitive observations of teachers on CA flourished and it became one of the main subdivisions of Applied Linguistics. In sum, *Contrastive Linguistics is the comparison of an aspect of very few, typically two languages with the aim of finding similarities and especially differences for practical or theoretical purposes.*

Historically speaking, the field of CA gaining the academic status of one of the subdivisions of Applied Linguistics coincided with the heyday of

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American Structural Linguistics and Behavioristic Psychology. Consequently, CA at the beginning was based on the theoretical foundations of Structural Linguistics and Behavioristic Psychology. In the course of time as the theoretical underpinnings of Structural Linguistics and Behavioristic Psychology came under attack, so did CA. According to Granger (2003) advances in second language acquisition in due course led to the belief that in addition to interlingual factors there are numerous other factors such as intralingual, e.g. overgeneralization and affective factors, e.g. motivation, among others, which might impede or facilitate the task of learning a target language. Consequently, for couple of decades contrastive studies somehow fell into disfavor in the West and large scale projects were not undertaken especially in the US. Granger put this very succinctly as "this led to the decline of CA, but not to its death." (2003,p.17). According to Kortmann (as cited in Breul, 2010,p.279f) the reason for the decline of CL in the US more than Europe, was the disappointment ensued because of too much applied expectations of the results for teaching purposes. However, during all this period different contrastive projects were carried out in the Eastern Europe. This is the main reason for the fact that a considerable amount of research on CA were designed and carried out by East European scholars. Even nowadays after the renewal of interest in contrastive studies in the West, which will be dealt with below, the contribution of East European scholars to this field of study is considerable.

The underlying assumptions of traditional CA according to Aarts and Wekker (1990) can be summarized as follows:

1. Interference of mother tongue habits makes the task of learning a second or foreign language harder.

2. A systematic comparison and contrast of students' mother tongues and the target language could reveal the similarities and differences between the two.
3. On the basis of the results of the second step, it could be predicted that those areas that are different in two languages would cause problems, and similarities would facilitate the task of learning the target language.
4. The finding of CA could be used for preparing appropriate instructional materials with emphasis on differences for different groups of learners with different language backgrounds.

In the course of time, further research findings in TFL, and especially the recognition of the fact that transfer is still one of the major, if not the only factor contributing to the success or failure of learning foreign languages, led to the reemergence of CL. Selinker (as cited in Granger in Aijmer, Altenberg and Johansson, 1996, P.46) observes that "transfer can now be considered as "SLA fact".

Two other major factors are believed (see e.g. Granger, 2003, p.18) to contribute to the renewal of interest in CL and its' extension to other areas and fields. Globalization and the resultant demand for interlingual and intercultural communication and interaction between different societies and people was one factor which had a significant role in the revival of CL. The development of corpus linguistics and its rapid spread and utilization in different branches of the related fields especially in projects with emphasis on cross linguistic and cross cultural similarities and differences was another major factor which significantly contributed to the reemergence and revival of CL. Consequently, one of the characteristics of recent contrastive

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research is that, unlike the traditional practices, they are based on empirical evidence and not only on scanty intuitive evidence provided by a researcher. Thanks to corpus approaches, recent contrastive research are based on huge amounts of data and consequently more natural kind of data. Thus, according to Altenberg and Granger (2002,p.7) "The information gained from corpora is both richer and more reliable than that derived from introspection." Consequently, Johansson (as quoted in Granger, 2002, p.40) believes that "Corpora are absolutely essential for macrolinguistic studies..." In addition, now bilingual and multilingual software tools have been developed which enhance the chances of researchers in identifying and retrieving different small or longer linguistic units. Granger observes that (2003, 9.19) "In short, researchers in CL and TS have come to rely on corpora to verify , refine or clarify theories ... and to achieve higher degree of descriptive adequacy."

Traditionally, CA is generally carried out in three major stages "... not always clearly distinguishable in the analysis itself but always tacitly assumed: 1. *description*, 2.*juxtaposition*, and 3. *comparison* ..." (Krezeszowski, 1990, p.35, italics added).

1. Description is the prerequisite stage of comparison and contrast, whereby the selected linguistic unit, rule, system or communicative function or task or whatever entity which is the focus of the study, is initially described adequately for the pedagogical purposes. Adequately, means that the selected entity should be described by taking into consideration all of the possible aspects of both conceptual and contextual factors which affect its use in real life communication one way or the other.

This in turn means that, in the first place, the descriptions should be based on the same theoretical model (see 3.1. below). Secondly, because complete contrastive study of any two languages is beyond the capabilities of individuals, therefore the scope of the study and accordingly the descriptions should be limited to manageable entities. That is, most of the contrastive work done by individuals are usually selective, partial and are limited to only one of the areas of immediate need and or interest in the polysystemic act of verbal communication in any two languages in question.

2. Juxtaposition is the stage of establishing equivalence or cross-linguistic relationships. At this stage it is decided "... what is to be compared with what." (Krezeszowski, 1990, p.35). Traditionally, this judgment was based on the intuitive bilingual knowledge of the researcher. This intuitive judgment was usually based on formal and semantic similarity of the entity under investigation. Therefore, considering the recent findings, this kind of juxtaposition which was based mainly on formal criteria had serious limitations; the treatment of this point will have to wait for another opportunity.
3. Finally, and on the basis of results of the previous steps, comparison proper takes place, whereby "the degree and type of correspondence between the compared items are specified." (Altenberg and Granger, 2002, p.14).

In short, Breul (2010, p.13) observes that "The value of contrastive analysis in general lies in its potential to supply other (theoretical and applied) linguistic disciplines (notably ...



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This book contains 12 papers on Contrastive Linguistics (CL) which were published in different scholarly journals between 1990 to the present. In addition the 'Introduction' which is especially written for this volume introduces the discipline of CL, tracing its evolution in recent history and outlining in particular the crucial role played by CL in TEFL/TESL. The papers present reports of different research projects, which range from traditional topics on syntax, to error patterns, interlanguage, metaphorical language, and different aspects of discourse analysis including contrastive rhetoric. The approach of the present collection is broad, therefore in addition to comparing and contrasting English and Persian, the volume also contains papers on CL between English and Azerbaijani-Turkish languages on diverse topics such as thematization, and lexical and syntactic collocations. This collection should be of interest to instructors, advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students alike.

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