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What linguistics isn't contrastive?

Abstract

Some years ago a model of second language acquisition (SLA) concerns known as “contrastive analysis” (CA) was elaborated within the then-dominant structuralist tradition (Lado 1957). Although Prof. Jacek Fisiak was a sponsor of SLA research, he characterized the Poznań research program as one of “Contrastive Studies” (CS).

He couldn't have been righter or cleverer. What sort of linguistics is not contrastive? Certainly not general, theoretical, historical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive and neurolinguistics as well as sociolinguistics and dialectology.

To elaborate in greater depth, I will explore the uses of CS in accounts of regional vowel inventories and variability in a US dialect, the Inland North. Although a major aim of this endeavor is to illustrate the details of CS in a research endeavor that I have been closely allied with, some dangers in data collection, interpretation, and the application of results will also be discussed. I begin with what Labov, Ash, and Boberg (200) call the “Inland North” and focus on the vowel /æ/, the very vowel that has intrigued many Old and Middle English scholars, including Fisiak himself in his work on the “Morphemic Structure of Chaucer's English” (1965).