

# CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS — THE OUTLOOK FROM MODERN GRAMMAR

DENNIS R. PRESTON

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

*and*

*State University of New York, College at Fredonia*

The role of contrastive analysis within the framework of modern transformational studies is not particularly clear. The press towards universals in linguistics would appear to leave very little behind for meaningful contrastive study.

Although modern grammar may provide useful tools for gaining insights into language structure, it is argued here that an eclectic approach to transformational—taxonomic—revisionist—case—traditional grammars be taken by the linguist interested in contrastive analysis and that his choice be guided by the nature of the data and by certain considerations of the stage of language acquisition to which the data apply.

It has become increasingly clear that contrastive analysis is no longer such an easily justified or executed proposition as it was during the predominance of taxonomic models of language analysis<sup>1</sup>. In fact, even those not primarily concerned with theoretical models of linguistics, that is, language teachers, some psycholinguists, data collectors, and others, no longer emphasize the necessity of a contrastive statement between native and target languages.

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that a large number of contrastive projects are now in progress does not, I suggest, constitute proof to the contrary. In fact, it merely suggests that, as usual, funding agencies are a good twenty years behind in assessing the mood of academic and pedagogical communities. For lists and résumés of such large-scale projects see Selinker (1971).

This latter position is perhaps easily explained by the tendency for modern language teachers to turn away from explicit linguistic formulations, relying instead on such recent reinterpretations of the art as Wilga Rivers (1968), for example, and basing much of their new planning and development on the notions of "facilitation of communicative skills" and "cognitive development." Linguists, of course, note the irony of this, for it was a theoretician, Noam Chomsky, who gave sophisticated legitimacy to the doubts of the worth of linguistic analysis in foreign language teaching.

On the other hand, it is more difficult to explain the departure from the field of contrastive studies by those specifically interested in theoretical developments. I suggest that the main cause for the deterioration of interest in contrastive studies lies in such statements as the following, all taken from Chomsky's *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1965)

- 1) The grammar of a particular language, then, is to be supplemented by a universal grammar that accommodates the creative aspect of language use and expresses the deep-seated regularities which, being universal, are omitted from the grammar itself. Therefore it is quite proper for a grammar to discuss only exceptions and irregularities in any detail (6).
- 2) Real progress in linguistics consists in the discovery that certain features given languages can be reduced to universal properties of language, and explained in terms of these deeper aspects of linguistic form. Thus the major endeavor of the linguist must be to enrich the theory of linguistic form by formulating more specific constraints and conditions on the notion "generative grammar." Where this can be done, particular grammars can be simplified by eliminating from them descriptive statements that are attributable to the general theory of grammar... (35).
- 3) In short, the structure of particular languages may very well be largely determined by factors over which the individual has no conscious control and concerning which society may have little choice or freedom (58).

I characterize these three passages as distinct contributions to the current unenergetic state of contrastive analysis within the framework of modern theoretical linguistics. Passage one I shall call the "grammatical irrelevance" criterion; passage two the "theoretical irrelevance" criterion; and passage three the "personal irrelevance" criterion. All three germs are at work in the decline of contrastive studies, and I should like to evaluate each one independently.

First, "grammatical irrelevance." Chomsky notes, and, in fact brings forth supporting quotes from numerous rationalist philosophers, that grammars

of particular languages are no more than collections of idiosyncratic odds and ends. Thus, we may imagine that various suppletive forms (unless we discover to our horror that suppletion obeys some universal rule), pronominal irregularities, morphological curiosities, and specific selection features are the only items of interest in the grammar of a particular language. Such a list is an exaggeration, of course, as any competent speaker of even two related languages well knows, but the force of this comment, as in the following two, comes not so much from Chomsky's specification of any particular details about a given language as it does from the attractiveness of its appeal to a state of mind which would like to assume that the human condition is rather more like the rationalist's account than the empirico-behaviorist's. But enough of philosophy and on to the results of this statement in contrastive analysis. Easily enough, in this first case, we may see that the theoretical limitations on any set of contrastive statements would be very strong indeed. In fact, it would reduce contrastive analysis to its contrastive function and excise from it any comparative remarks. This would result in a futile operation, for even a cursory glance at any set of contrastive details would convince most readers that the worthwhile statements are those which draw heavily on the essential similarities of structures between languages. Sets of truly contrastive detail, too, are worthwhile only when they bring into explanatory contrast essentially comparable pieces of data. Purely idiosyncratic features of any two given languages are probably best covered in mutually exclusive lists which, if any comparative or contrastive statement is necessary, are best discussed in terms of semantic and or referential overlap. Following the "grammatical irrelevance" criterion, however, would lead to exclusion of all comparable pieces of structure, since, doubtless, they will be found to exist at the level of universal rather than particular grammar. Left for analysis, then, would be essentially non-comparable bits of peculiar and idiosyncratic information generally ignored in contrastive studies.

The criterion of "theoretical irrelevance" is, of course, closely related to the preceding one. But its direction is slightly different. It is not so much a prediction of what future particular grammars will look like as it is an exhortation to linguists, a specification of the area of most likely productivity. Chomsky clearly suggests that the notion of explanatory adequacy may be more quickly reached and more easily evaluated if we turn our attention almost exclusively to the problem of developing universal constraints on human language possibilities. While the criterion of "grammatical irrelevance" leaves the contrastive linguist only bits and pieces of language to toy with, the criterion of "theoretical irrelevance" assures him that, if he does trouble himself with such details, he will make no real contribution to linguistics. What a dilemma for the poor non-Boolean! It is rather like the child who first has all his fa-

favorite toys taken away from him and is then told that, if he plays with the ones which are left, it will be bad for him<sup>2</sup>.

That should be quite enough to send all persons engaged in contrastive analysis out looking for a new, worthwhile project, but some of us persist in the notion that contrastive statements are essentially worthwhile in non-theoretical areas of language. Unfortunately, the criterion of "personal irrelevance" waits for us there, and I shall add a few more quotes here to make that position clearer:

... creative aspect of language use... (Chomsky 1965 : 6)

... stimulus-free and innovative... (Chomsky 1966 : 46)

... it seems to me impossible to accept the view that linguistic behavior is a matter of habit, that it is slowly acquired by reinforcement, association, and generalization... (Chomsky 1966 : 44).

As happy as we may be with the psychological assumptions which form the basis of this undoubtedly correct position concerning certain aspects of human language, the unwary reader may conclude that the most productive area of language rests firmly in those universal principles which have been excluded from contrastive analysis by virtue of the "grammatical irrelevance" criterion. In short, both the tiny parts of language left available to the analyst and the broad structural comparisons taken away from him are of little use to the individual language learner, for they do nothing to foster in him the "creative aspect of language use."

I shall do nothing here with the numerous criticisms of these Chomskian positions, particularly those which call attention to the obvious fact that the "personal irrelevance" criterion applies perhaps exclusively to the native language learner, for those arguments, doubtless important to foreign-language teaching strategies, do not touch on the shape of post-*Aspects* contrastive statements.

There are very few of us now who are not convinced of the essential "correctness" of a generative model, though case grammar enthusiasts, lexicalists, and neo-revisionists argue about the various strategies for the realization of such a grammar. The problem presented to contrastive linguistics by the unanimity of grammatical opinion is, quite simply, whether or not contrastive analysis is such an endeavor which may fit comfortably within the framework of this new and obviously productive theory of language. Such linguists as DiPietro (1972) feel no uncomfortable impingement from transformational studies on contrastive analysis, for he urges, for example, that

<sup>2</sup> In fact, this is probably the kind of statement which has made those previously interested in contrastive analysis for its own sake try to justify it in terms of its possible contribution to universals in linguistics (cf Nickel 1971 a : 16).

increased intensity of contrastive research may bring us closer to the realization of such universal constructs as Chomsky seeks. This seems clearly counter, however, to Chomsky's notion of how such universals are found, for he says that the

... existence of deep-seated formal universals... implies that all languages are cut to the same pattern, but does not imply that there is any point by point correspondence between particular languages (Chomsky 1965 : 30).

Furthermore,

It is not necessary to achieve descriptive adequacy before raising questions of explanatory adequacy. On the contrary, the crucial questions, the questions that have the greatest bearing on our concept of language and on descriptive practice as well, are almost always those involving explanatory adequacy with respect to particular aspects of language structure (Chomsky 1965 : 36).

While the first quote makes it clear that the achievement of linguistic universals will not serve contrastive analysis, at least as it has been traditionally understood, for such universals will not provide a "point by point correspondence between languages," the second quote is even more disastrous. I take it to mean that a thorough investigation of large number of languages is really unnecessary, for, Chomsky maintains, the universal features necessary to explanatory adequacy are natural by-products of close, descriptively adequate work on the structure of a particular language. DiPietro, then, is taking heart where there is none if he believes that transformationalists are gathered in dark, smoke-filled rooms developing universals in linguistics from a carefully prepared set of contrastive data drawn from the world's languages. In fact, linguists have examined very few languages in their attempt to contribute to the growing set of universal assumptions, and it is very likely that such a procedure is essentially correct<sup>3</sup>.

Contrastive linguistics is not, then, a handmaiden to theoretical grammar, providing insights into universal characteristics of human language. If this is the case, is there any reason to assume that contrastive statements framed in transformational terms are more valuable than any others? The temptation to make this assertion is very strong, for one would assume that the best way to carry out a project deeply concerned with language would be to utilize the most elegant grammatical device available. I believe, however, that the very nature of the use to which contrastive statements are put makes this the wrong decision. Since we have seen that contrastive statements contribute only indirectly to theoretical statements concerning explanatory adequacy,

<sup>3</sup> It is not at all clear to me that any of the insights into covert categories have automatically come from contrastive studies. I regard such discoveries more the result of "fiddling around" with language (or Language). I have in mind, of course, such suggestions as James' concerning a deep "article" in the Slavic languages. Cf. James (1969).

we may assume, rather safely, that their prime utility lies in the area of foreign language teaching, though their exact relation to classroom procedures, techniques, methods, materials preparation, teacher training, and evaluation is not touched on in this paper. Suffice it to say here that such information as is provided in a contrastive statement is important to persons engaged in the areas listed above<sup>4</sup>.

Given the importance of such information, a practical rather than theoretical assumption, let us try to develop quasi-theoretical or, at least, consistent procedures for the portrayal of contrastive information. Let us accept, too, for the moment, a position I believe to be untenable — that is, that such contrastive details are best displayed by the best available grammar i.e., a generative grammar. Marton (1968) has developed strategies for identifying similarity and congruence of structures within a transformational framework, and I believe his conclusions are essentially correct. The difficulty arises not in such sets of contrastive information as he provides in "English and Polish nominal compounds: a transformational contrastive study" (Marton 1970), but in the further pursuit of using the best grammar available, i.e., not just a generative grammar, but, according to Chomsky's evaluation procedures, the best generative grammar. Let us submit a relatively simple set of contrastive data to one post-*Aspects* model. Suppose we are set the task of contrasting the pronouns of Polish and English in simple strings. Granted, within the framework of a pre-*Aspects* model or even a taxonomic model, certain difficulties arise, but they strike me as being the productive element of such a comparison — the limited case marking in English as opposed to the more extensive case system of Polish; the lack of a formal-informal split in the second person in English and the subsequent agreement adjustment in Polish; Polish gender marking in the third person plural which is, of course, absent in English; deletability in Polish; and a host of other comparative and contrastive details, including citations of forms. Such a presentation seems reasonable and seems to consist of essential information in teaching either language to the opposite group. Notice, too, that in pre-*Aspects* models of generative grammar such information could be derived from congruent, or, perhaps in a few cases, similar strings, using Marton's definitions of such relationships. Unfortunately, Paul Postal (1966) has told us, and rather convincingly, that English pronouns are much better derived from the node marked Article. Adopting this device for the comparison of Polish and English pronouns is, of course, contrastive suicide. The result will be that we may identify congruent derived P-markers for which we can find neither congruent

<sup>4</sup> I am more than aware that such utility is controversial. However, I am a strong believer in the explanatory value of such description. I regard predictive powers of contrastive analyses as marginally useful. See, for a further discussion of such issues, James (1971).

basic strings nor similar transformations. Unless Postal would derive Polish pronouns from some deep definitivizer or quantifier, usually realized on the surface as  $\emptyset^5$ , we have no hope for even marginally associating the obviously similar pronoun systems of the two languages.

Unfortunately, this example is not just by chance, for, as modern grammar pushes back towards universal underlying structures, particularly so long as theoretical grammarians are convinced that these structures are best developed in terms of ever-improving grammars of descriptive adequacy, there is less and less hope that conditions for congruence or even similarity may be met between the details of any two languages. That the drive for universality should deny comparative detail between even related languages should seem paradoxical is understandable at a superficial level, but if we recall Chomsky's assertion that universal grammar will eventually leave only idiosyncratic odds and ends and irregularity behind in particular grammars, the conclusion that better grammars, in the generative sense, provide less and less detail for contrastive analysis is self-evident.

The answer to this theoretical maze is, I think, quite clear, though the details for articulating the suggestion given here could not possibly be included in such a brief presentation as this. Quite simply, contrastive analysis does not constitute a part of theoretical linguistics, and, although knowledge of advances in theoretical grammar may aid the analyst in selecting appropriate strategies to display his findings, the shape of grammars for perhaps some time to come will not automatically provide the optimum model for contrastive studies.

Let us return to the ultimate users of contrastive information for a final turn at practical justification. First, it is a relatively safe assumption that most users of such studies are not well-schooled in the most recent advances in linguistics; some, unfortunately, are not schooled in linguistics at all. Even though hold quite strongly to the view that linguistic information is especially relevant to the foreign-language classroom, I would admit a measure of practicality to many contrastive studies which simply reflects the linguistic sophistication of a large number of persons engaged in foreign-language work. Second, contrastive studies which rely on ever-decreasing details simply do not provide the information required by the foreign language teacher, particularly in those cases involving non-native speakers as teachers of the target language. Finally, a fully-developed transformational comparison commits one of the transformational sins—over specification. In numerous cases the machinery necessary to even a partial transformational account of two strings is so formidable that the points of contrast are quite buried.

It seems to be the case, unfortunately, that recent developments in gram-

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, precisely what James does in James (1971).

mar will not supply us with a theory of contrastive analysis, any more than they have provided yet a theory of translation. Of course, such advances in linguistics must not be under-rated; we have come to an understanding of similarities which were quite unknown before, ones which lie so close to the surface that they may be called into play in the second language learner's cognitive development of a new tongue. Perhaps you are disappointed to have read so far and found only another plea for eclecticism, but this seems to be the essentially correct path for contrastive studies. Some data present themselves quite naturally and clearly in a transformational framework; others seem to cry out for a taxonomic presentation; still others seem better described on the basis of the newer case studies<sup>6</sup>. There may be some reason, too, to assume that contrastive studies may be best presented with some developmental background of the learner in mind. That is, certain gross semantic similarities; perhaps borrowed from a simplified case grammar, and certain gross syntactic arrangement patterns, borrowed from pre-*Aspects* transformational studies or even taxonomic models, are best shown in the forms suggested at beginning stages of language learning, and certain complex transformational processes and idiosyncratic events are better displayed through more elaborate generative devices or even traditional statements at a later stage in second language acquisition.

Clearly, such a suggestion as this would demand more thorough analyses along broader lines rather than complete analyses within a category, touching on as many constructions as possible for the category under investigation. That is, rather than developing a full set of contrastive details concerning, let us say, the adjective, or even a sub-category, a contrastive analysis of the sort I am suggesting here would spend as much time developing items of agreement and disagreement between full strings of minimal complexity before moving on to more complex strings, even though similar categories might play similar roles in the simple and complex strings. Even so, some of the comparisons offered at one level might demand different strategies of presentation, using at one moment an essentially structural (taxonomic) description and at another some variety of a generative model. Hopefully, however, in every case the essential details of the contrast and some indication of the developmental stage of the learner approaching the contrast would provide the primary motivation for the grammatical selection. We might note, too, at least in passing, that contrasts developed between different languages might demand the use of different grammars at precisely the same points. For example, a significantly different work order might make useful an early introduction

<sup>6</sup> I am aware that such a suggestion goes against one of the few generally-agreed on principles of contrastive analysis. Cf., for example, Nickel (1971 : 4 - 5) for remarks on the uniformity of models in contrastive studies.

of rather complex case notions, while languages with basic similarities in word order probably require no more than phrase structure compartments, at least in the beginning stages of instruction.

Excluded from this discussion is the possible relevance of advances in phonology and semantics. Distinctive feature phonology, combining as it does articulatory and acoustic statements, may be well-suited for determining developmental strategies but seems, at least for the moment, not particularly relevant to certain articulatory contrasts which are essential to contrastive phonology. Doubtless, however, the application of distinctive feature considerations to intelligibility studies will allow us to make sounder statements regarding non-ideal foreign language learning situations (i.e. those with limited objectives) than were possible within the framework of phonemic analysis. Semantics is, of course, not completely ignored here, for semantics and syntax have become so much a part of one another that much of what was said earlier about syntax may be taken to apply to semantics as well. The problem here, however, is an obvious one. If we rely on older, taxonomic models or even on pre-*Aspects* generative models, we lose the semantic input common to most post-*Aspects* statements. That which is purely lexical is naturally idiosyncratic, but semantic projection rules (if they exist) and the specification of general selection and subcategorizational rules seem relevant. It is reasonable to assume, however, that much of the semantic detail which was found relevant to selectional and subcategorizational restriction is available for comment in grammars of another shape. In fact, its compatibility is rather striking when compared to essentially irreducible complex transformational elements, particularly cyclic ones, or similar rules of the phonological component.

Finally I should like to suggest that much sociolinguistic information belongs to contrastive study and that it belongs "in place," not in a special language and cultural appendix. By sociolinguistic detail I mean situational restrictions on constructions, regional and class variants where relevant, and occupational and interest group language habits when they may be shown to be important to a group of learners (e.g. in "Special English").

In conclusion, no matter what the decision of the investigator of contrastive data as regards his selection of grammatical devices, it is fairly certain that he will be better guided by notions of utility than by considerations of theoretical adequacy.

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