

CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR: TENETS AND CRITERIA

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0. *Introduction*

In the first part of this paper a brief outline is given of contrastive linguistic analysis in Belgium. Though Belgium should be an ideal place for contrastive linguistics to grow and flourish, the situation is remarkably less rich and diversified as one would expect.

The main part of the paper focuses on the contrastive grammar *Nederlands, Frans en Engels in contrast* [Dutch, French and English in contrast] and the contrastive verb valency dictionary which are being written at the University of Gent. The grammar will be the first systematic and exhaustive contrastive grammar of Dutch, French and English to appear in Belgium. We will present a survey of the aims, the guidelines and the contents of the grammar volumes, and have a closer look at what future research should concentrate on. In this section the tenets and criteria for a contrastive grammar will be outlined.

1. *Situating contrastive linguistics in Belgium*

In trying to trace the origins of contrastive linguistic analysis, one not only has to look within linguistics itself to the synchronic dimension of the Prague School and structuralism grafted onto 19th century historical-comparative linguistics, but one also should turn to the American language teaching philosophy of Fries (1945) and his followers (Weinreich 1953; Lado 1957); and to linguistic anthropology (the term "contrastive linguistics" was first quoted by Whorf (1941)).

Ever since the sixties, contrastive linguistics has known a real outburst. At that time, the discipline was strongly contested in the United States: the practical aims, the hypothetical tenets and the lack of theoretical foundations, not only of central notions like "interference", "equivalence" and "tertium comparationis", but also of the model used and the procedures to follow in contrastive analyses, were all contested (James 1971). While criticism arose in the United States, Europe gradu-

ally started taking the lead in contrastive studies. Notwithstanding the uncertain theoretical state of affairs, and though contrastive analysis is not the "only true" method, research should be stimulated especially because of its "value for teaching".

Of central importance, both in the American orientation of the forties and fifties, and in the European growth or revival during the sixties and seventies, was the practical usefulness of the discipline for foreign language teaching. For the past twenty years, contrastive linguistics has been oriented towards all possible linguistic subdisciplines, and because the practical application in language teaching has been the first concern, the lack of theoretical foundations and tenets was the price that often had to be paid for this proliferation. The seventies and eighties are a very productive period, as is evidenced by the many projects, publications, journals and conferences devoted to the subject. Research projects are to be found in, amongst others, Germany, Yugoslavia, Poland, Finland, Ireland, Rumania, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary and Bulgaria (Nickel 1972; Fisiak 1983).

Belgium has shared in this general growing interest, but to a lesser extent than the general circumstances and the ideal multilingual fertile soil in this country might lead us to expect. Not only does Belgium officially have three languages (Dutch in Flanders, French in Wallonia and German in the East Cantons), but it is also an international forum for business and administration (the E.E.C. and the NATO), and, as a result of its geographical position, a country surrounded by quite different language communities/cultures (France, Germany, Great Britain, but also the Netherlands and Luxemburg). Moreover, Flanders can boast of a long tradition in foreign language teaching and learning. Studying a second language (four hours a week in secondary schools, French in Flanders and Dutch in Wallonia) has been laid down in Belgium by a law dating from 1932. Since 1969 pupils have a free choice as to the second language they want to study (French, English or German). After the constitutional revision in 1970, the French speaking community in 1976 even gave free choice as to the second language to be learned in primary schools (Dutch, English or German), and in 1976 Dutch, English and German are put on a par in Teachers' Training Colleges. Only in the past ten years the interest in Dutch is growing in the French speaking part of the country.

Though Belgium should thus be an ideal place for contrastive linguistics to grow and flourish, the situation is remarkably less rich and diversified as one would expect. In their survey of contrastive linguistic analysis in Belgium Dirven and Afschrift (1979) write:

In spite of this intensive multilingualism, actually dominating the Belgian linguistic scene, the general picture of contrastive analysis in Belgium is less rich and diversified than this sociocultural background might lead us to expect, however. One of the reasons for the relative underdevelopment of contrastive analysis in Belgium may precisely be the great variety of areas, in which languages have to be contrasted and the lack of contact between researchers in the various areas. (Dirven and Afschrift 1979:19-20)

Contrastive studies are indeed rarely systematic and tend to concentrate on specific problems either from the point-of-view of language teaching and learning (De Keyser 1983; Dirven 1972) or from the point-of-view of translation. Many analyses are oriented towards the description of difficulties in French as they present themselves to the foreign learner (Pauwels 1941; Germer and Carlens 1972; Zajicek 1973; Klein, Lamiroy and Desmet 1982; Van Baardewijk-Resseguier and Van Willigen-Sinemus 1986; Van Roey 1990). Van Roey (1974), for instance, argues:

Although the importance of contrastive language analysis has repeatedly been emphasized of late years, it is probably fair to say that many contributions in this field have been of a rather sketchy nature. (Van Roey 1974:7)

Equally illustrative of this point is the fact that Dirven and Afschrift (1979), the only bibliography on contrastive publications in Belgium so far, lists only about 170 titles, next to more than 960 unpublished dissertations written at (one of the many) higher institutes for interpreters and translators, especially on subjects dealing with (annotated and commented) translation, lexicography and terminology. It was also in the seventies that the "Contrastive Analysis Series" (CAS) was published in Leuven. It was a series of nine volumes publishing articles on Dutch-French, Dutch-English or French-English topics (Van Roey (ed.) 1976); Putseys (ed.) 1977). The series, having as general editors Dirven and Engels, originated in a number of lectures given in 1974 in the Postgraduate Centre Hasselt by Nickel, Kühlwein and Dirven. The CAS had three main objectives: the dissemination of information, the promotion of contrastive work in teaching and research, and the combining of theoretical and applied linguistics (Dirven and Afschrift 1979:3).

Unlike many other countries, real long research projects were not to be found, however, till a project was started at the University of Gent. This exploratory project, "Contrastive Grammar for Foreign Language Teaching", was carried out in the period 1981-1985 under Prof. R. Derolez, Prof. D. Willems and Prof. V.F. Vanacker, and in 1988 it was followed by the project "Dutch, French and English in contrast".

2. A contrastive grammar project

In a cooperation between the Departments of Dutch (DL), French (FL) and English Linguistics (EL) of the University of Gent, a research project on contrastive grammar for foreign language teaching was started in October 1988 under the auspices of the Department of Education (Fund for Joint Basic Research). The supervisors of the project were Prof. D. Willems (FL), Prof. A.-M. Simon-Vandenbergen (EL) and Prof. J. Taeldeman (DL), while the researchers were F. Devos (DL), R. De Muynck (FL), M. van Herreweghe and L. Martens (EL). The full title of the project was: "Study of common and language specific grammatical notions in Dutch, French and English. A grammar for foreign language teaching at the various levels of secondary education".

2.1. Aims

In general, the contrastive analysis project at the University of Gent aimed at a more efficient organization of foreign language teaching at secondary school level and especially concentrates on the grammatical analysis of French and English, the two main foreign languages in Flanders. Thus the first and foremost objective was to stimulate cooperation and feedback between teachers of different languages. This kind of interdisciplinary approach is highly desirable: one does not only observe a lack of co-operation, but there is also a widely divergent and hence complicated grammatical terminology. Obviously, a similar fragmentation results in a lack of understanding on the part of the language learner and a waste of time and energy on the part of the language teacher, not to mention the lack of enthusiasm on both sides.

A contrastive approach may help to eliminate these shortcomings, and this would also imply an important "rationalization", as in Belgium too language lessons are reduced, and real grammar lessons are given sporadically, rather than systematically.

2.2. Guidelines

The publication of a three-volume contrastive grammar is to provide language teachers with materials for an interdisciplinary approach. In order to achieve this aim the following guidelines have been and will further be followed in the course of the analysis:

- (1) maximum use of the language learner's competence in his native language in the foreign language teaching and learning processes;
- (2) devising of a common model of grammatical description, with a simple and uniform terminology to reduce the gap between the different grammatical systems;
- (3) clear delineation of possible problem areas in the foreign language teaching and learning processes, and an extensive pragmatic description of the differences between the native and the foreign languages.

The three-volume grammar will be the first systematic and exhaustive contrastive study of Dutch, French and English to appear in Belgium.

2.3. Tenets and criteria

Aarts and Wekker (1988:5-6) claim a contrastive grammar should meet at least three criteria: (1) it should involve all levels of linguistic organization, (2) it should be bidirectional and (3) it should be nonselective. The authors also claim, however, that

(...) a contrastive grammar that meets all of the above criteria is an idealization. Complete contrastive grammars do not exist. What we have are partial, unidirectional and selective descriptions (...). (Aarts and Wekker 1988:6)

To the above-mentioned criteria we could add the following principles: (4) a contrastive grammar should be descriptive, and (5) it should contain an uniform terminology.

2.3.1. The levels of description principle

This criterion states that all levels of linguistic description should be integrated in a contrastive grammar: phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics.

Dutch, French and English in contrast is a "grammar" in the pure sense: it systematically and coherently describes and compares the similarities and the differences in the syntactic and morphological constructions of the languages. In starting from a basic or minimal structure and elaborating towards a maximal structure, all aspects of syntax and morphology at different levels (word level, phrase level and sentence level) can be integrated.

In both parts that have been published by now, a simple basic structure has been composed in which we can integrate different aspects of language and grammar (cf. 2.4.). Semantic and pragmatic issues are only mentioned in so far as they influence syntax and morphology. Sentence types, for instance, cannot be analyzed without paying attention to sentence (communicative) functions, i.e. to pragmatics. Formal-structural as well as semantical-communicative aspects are thus dealt with. As in most grammars, phonology is not dealt with.

The traditional division of grammatical description is ordered hierarchically into word level, phrase level and sentence level. On the phrase level, the noun phrase and the verb phrase are the most important groups. In these, other constituents can be imbedded as well. More concrete, our analysis focuses on three aspects: the noun phrase (construction and elements of the nominal constituent), the verb phrase (tense and aspect of the verbal group) and the sentence (sentence parts, functions and types). Two of the three 300-page volumes have been published by now: Devos et al. (1991) and Devos et al. (1992).

2.3.2. The multidirectional principle

This principle states that equal attention should be paid to the languages being compared. Usually, a contrastive analysis is bidirectional, as it compares two languages. Our grammar is tridirectional: Dutch, French and English are equally treated.

From the guidelines mentioned in 2.2., however, the role of Dutch is clearly evident: grammatical notions will be explained through the native language, and only in a later stage will they be introduced in the foreign languages. Moreover, the central importance of Dutch is quite logical, as the mothertongue interferes to a large extent in second language learning. For instance, Dutch *een driehonderd gasten* ("about three hundred guests") is not rendered in French by **un trois cents invités* or in English by **a three hundred guests*, but by *quelque trois cents invités* and *some three hundred guests* respectively.

As we already mentioned, all three languages are on a par. Dutch, however, is the initial language (the mothertongue), and the language in which the grammar is written. Aarts and Wekker (1987), on the other hand, seem to be more one-directionally oriented towards English, as their grammar contains a "concise English grammar", covering one third of the "contrastive" grammar.

2.3.3. *The non-selective principle*

A contrastive grammar should be non-selective, i.e. it should treat the similarities (the common rules) as well as the differences or contrasts (the language specific rules) between the languages. Contrastive analysis is more than the simple juxtaposition of two or more language systems or structures. These systems or subsystems should be compared systematically and in a coherent way. This implies that the same descriptive model should be used throughout.

Paying attention to interference phenomena does not automatically imply that the grammar would only deal with differences between the languages, and not with similarities. Such a "reductivist" view would imply that the grammar does not take account of the fact that the languages show more similarities than differences. Moreover, in practice the grammar would then become less "usable". Aarts and Wekker's (1987) main purpose for instance, though claims are made to the contrary in Aarts and Wekker (1988:5-6), is "to draw attention to learning obstacles and thus facilitate the language-learning process" (1987:8). They deal with "selected areas only" of the "syntax of English and Dutch".

From this it follows that *Dutch, French and English in contrast* does not contain clear-cut lessons, exercises or study packets. Instead it is a contrastive reference grammar for secondary school teachers, high school teachers and university students. It is already being used in colleges of education, universities and interpreters' institutes.

The practical usability was one of the main concerns in writing the grammar. The grammar contains many appendices, in which language specific constructions or irregularities are listed (e.g. irregular plurals, irregular gender, the English-specific genitive of measure (e.g. *a two hours' walk*) or local genitive (e.g. *at my uncle's*)). In each volume, a list of grammatical terms, with their equivalents and synonyms in all three languages, and an extensive register are published. Moreover, the three volumes have an easy reference system.

2.3.4. *The descriptive principle*

Our analysis was based on the three major descriptive grammars of the separate languages: the *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* for Dutch, *Le Bon Usage* for French and *A Comprehensive Grammar of Contemporary English* for English, and on studies in books and articles. The description is "descriptive" rather than "prescriptive", and thus also "relative" in the sense that often variants in language use are pointed out, depending on context, situation or register (e.g. British or American English, Flemish or Holland variants, written or spoken language, formal or informal use).

2.3.5. *The terminological principle*

Uniformity as to terminology is striven for, though without flattening out the terms "at all costs". For instance, the more scientific Dutch term *direct object* (which is preferred to the term *lijdend voorwerp*, which is still used in secondary schools

is closer to French *objet direct* and to English *direct object*. Likewise, all three languages have the term *pronoun*, but this term covers quite different things in French, where it only stands for "something that stands in front of a noun". Both in Dutch and English, *pronoun* can also mean "something that stands instead of a noun". Hence, the term *determiner* was introduced to refer to the literal (local) meaning of *pronoun*.

2.4. *Contents*

2.4.1. *The noun phrase*

How did we go along in analyzing the noun phrase? Starting from "meaning" (as a *tertium comparationis*), one could say that language users build certain elements around a notion or referent. This notion is the "nucleus" or the head of the group, in this case the noun phrase. The language user can determine the (range of the) referent, or situate the referent in some state of affairs. In doing so he uses "determiners". He may also attribute a quantity or a quality to the referent, and use "quantifiers" or "qualifiers". These four elements (head, determiners, quantifiers and qualifiers) make up the basic structure of the noun phrase:

- (1) the nucleus of the noun phrase
 - nouns: semantic distinctions (concrete and abstract nouns, common nouns and proper nouns) and morpho-syntactic distinctions (number and gender)
 - nominalizations
 - other elements in nominal function
- (2) determiners (articles and possessive, demonstrative, interrogative, relative, exclamative and indefinite determiners)
- (3) quantifiers (definite, indefinite and approximative quantifiers)
- (4) qualifiers (adjectives and adjective phrases, participles, infinitives and infinitive clauses, relative, appositive and interrogative subclauses, main clauses, appositions, prepositional phrases, adverb phrases, conjunctive phrases, supplementary clauses).

In all subparts, the form, function, meaning and position of the elements are discussed. In this basic structure other syntactic units (e.g. subclauses or prepositions) or linguistic aspects (e.g. level and class shift from English *this book* to French *le présent manuel*, or from English *a medical student* to French *un étudiant en médecine*) can easily be integrated.

2.4.2. *The sentence*

The second volume analyzes the sentence. It starts from the notion "nuclear sentence" or "kernel clause", by which we mean a (prototypical) simple sentence in its most elementary and neutral form, i.e. a combination of a sentence operator or relator and the inherent or obligatory elements to this relator. The nuclear sentence is not marked as to polarity, sentence type, sentence structure or thematic structure. This volume has the following structure:

(1) The nuclear sentence

The nuclear sentence has as its central "link" the sentence relator (SR):

- form and position

The form of the SR can depend on person, gender, number and tense. Only in French, for instance, gender is important (e.g. *Il est venu. Elle est venue*). The form (simple or complex SR) determines the position in the sentence (e.g. Dutch *De politie heeft de moordenaar gearresteerd*; French *La police a arrêté le meurtrier*; English *The police have arrested the murderer*).

- function and valency

The valency is lexically determined (avalent, monovalent, divalent and trivalent sentence relators, valency reduction or valency extension).

(2) Obligatory elements

These elements (subject, object and complements) are evoked by the valency of the operator. For each type the following aspects are analyzed:

- criteria (e.g. subject: question-tag in English; forms of congruence (e.g. English *Several people lost their lives/*life*)).

- characteristics (e.g. French *J'habite Paris. J'habite Paris*; Dutch: *Ik woon in Parijs*; English *I live in Paris*).

- special types (e.g. "empty direct objects" in Dutch *het warm hebben*, French *Tu me les casses* and English *You'll catch it if he finds out*).

- position (e.g. French **J'ai donné Paul un livre*; English *I gave him it*; e.g. Dutch S - AUX - OBJ - PAST PART in *Ik heb dat boek gelezen*; French *J'ai lu ce livre* and English *I've read that book*, i.e. S - AUX - PAST PART - OBJ).

(3) Optional elements

These elements (adjuncts, addressee elements and interjections) are not evoked by the valency of the operator. For each type an analysis along the lines of the obligatory elements is made.

(4) Marked sentences

(a) marked polarity or negation (e.g. French "ne...pas"; *Il n'ose parler. Bouge pas. Je ne doute pas qu'il (n') ait raison*. French "ne-expletif" is not really a negation and it does not have negative equivalents in Dutch and English. (Standard) French has double negation too (e.g. *Il ne fait jamais rien*. English **He never does nothing*; Dutch **Hij is nooit niet thuis*). English has assertive and non-assertive forms).

(b) marked sentence types (e.g. interrogative, imperative and exclamative sentences) and communicative functions (e.g. question, request, instruction). A clear distinction is made between form and function/meaning.

(c) marked sentence structures: passivization, existential sentences, cleft sentences, fronting, recapitulatory phrases and contrastive stress. The prototypical (nuclear) sentence is active and has a subject in initial position. At this level of description, we are gradually leaving the sentence level,

and moving towards the text level. Cleft sentences, for instance, are sentences that focus the subject. They consist of "introductory *het/it/ce* + operator + focalized element + relative clause". In Dutch, there is congruence between the verb and the real subject, in English between the verb and provisional *it*, and in French between the verb and the provisional subject, except when the subject refers to a third person (e.g. Dutch *Het waren/*was de studenten die...*; French *C'était/étaient les étudiants qui.../ C'était/*étaient nous qui...*; English *It was/*were the students who...*).

(5) Compound and complex sentences

In the final section on coordination and subordination we find a further elaboration of the basic pattern (e.g. Dutch *Ze wil dat je direct komt* [**She wants that you directly come*]; English **She wants that you come straightaway/ She wants you to come straightaway*). Different types of subordination are distinguished, depending on form (e.g. nominalizations, gerunds, (*to* +) infinitives, finite clauses) and function.

As in the first volume, the analysis goes from small units (the kernel clause) to larger and more complex units and structures (complex and compound sentences). Taking account of pragmatic-communicative aspects, the "minimal" structure is thus gradually filled in to a "maximal" structure.

2.4.3. The verb phrase

The third volume of the contrastive grammar focuses on the verb phrase, and will be structured around the following aspects:

- (1) the central "link" in the sentence: the sentence relator (functional verbs or auxiliaries, and lexical verbs)
- (2) tense of the verbal group (present, past and future)
- (3) aspect (e.g. duration)
- (4) verb modality (e.g. necessity, possibility)

When we were preparing the second volume on the sentence, and the third on the verb phrase, it became clear that the combination of a sentence relator and the inherent elements to this relator poses enormous difficulties in second language learning. Indeed, the contrastive grammar project has clearly demonstrated the importance and usefulness of exhaustive lexical descriptions of verb constructions, in particular valency and verb complementation. Recent error analyses, too, clearly reveal extensive interference of the mother tongue in the foreign language learning process, in the field of lexicalised grammar. There are, for instance, many differences in the ways in which verbs are complemented in different languages (e.g. Dutch *naar de televisie kijken*; French **regarder la télévision*; English **to watch at the television*). A dictionary of valencies would point out those constructions that show most of the differences and also often lead to negative transfer

and to errors in foreign language learning. Such a valency dictionary is the aim of a new project which we will briefly discuss in the next section of this paper.

3. *A contrastive verb valency dictionary*

In the past two years, a research project financed by the Fund for Joint Basic Research (Belgium) was conducted at the University of Gent. It was called: "A contrastive research into verb valency and verbal polysemy in Dutch, French, English and German" (FKFO project no. 8.0009.92). The project ran from 1/4/1993 till 31/12/1994. It was followed by a long-term project. On 1/1/1995 a GOA project ("Geconcerteerde Onderzoeksacties") started under the auspices of the Research Fund of the University of Gent. The full title of this project is: "Verbal constructions in Dutch, French and English: a contrastive theoretical study with practical applications". The supervisors of this project are Prof. A.-M. Simon-Vandenberg (spokesperson; EL), Prof. D. Willems (co-supervisor; FL), Prof. J. Tældeman (co-supervisor; DL) and Prof. L. De Grauwe (co-supervisor; GL), while the researchers are F. Devos (DL), B. Defrancq (FL) and D. Nol (EL).

In contrast with valency projects which are primarily aimed at automatic or computer-controlled translation and not at the didactic practice, or at purely theoretical aspects of valency, the present research project has a pedagogical implication. The verb valency dictionary will quickly inform teachers and learners on similarities and differences between individual verbs in the different languages, and moreover, facilitate the understanding of the systems of the languages involved. The grammar project described in 2., covering purely grammatical aspects, i.e. syntactic and morphological components, will thus be completed at the lexical level and more specifically in the field of the grammatical aspects of the verbal lexicon. The way in which grammatical structures are realised in the lexicon is a fundamental aspect of the language system. Such a "lexical translation" has, however, long been neglected both in descriptions of individual languages and in contrastive analyses.

Not only does the project follow naturally from the above-mentioned contrastive investigation, it will also be an essential contribution to fill the gap in research into verb valency and verb polysemy. Especially for Dutch and English, and to a lesser degree for French (Busse and Dubost 1983), there are no extensive studies in this field. The valency of German verbs, however, has been investigated much more thoroughly, as is shown by studies like Helbig and Schenkel (1969) or Engel and Schumacher (1976).

4. *Future research*

The preparation and publishing of the third and final volume in the grammar series, a contrastive analysis of the verb phrase, is the first objective for future work.

Scientific work in contrastive analysis is a prerequisite and a necessary step to pedagogical grammars, grammars based on scientific research and using a suitable

methodology. The basic grammatical material should be implemented with practice materials, and used in handbooks for foreign language education. As Fries (1945) stressed, contrastive analysis is not an aim in itself:

"It is not enough simply to have the results of such a thorough-going analysis; these results must be organized into a satisfactory system for teaching and implemented with adequate specific practice materials through which the learner may master the sound system, the structure and the most useful lexical materials of the foreign language." (Fries 1945:9)

To this extent, the researchers already contacted secondary schools inspectors, and the (contrastive) list of grammatical terms, for instance, is being used as basic material in a commission that tries to reform grammatical (school) terminology.

In the very same spirit of trying to promote contrastive studies the Department of Dutch Linguistics organizes (biennial) workshops on contrastive grammar for third and fourth year students of Germanic philology, and in all three language departments licentiate's theses are written on contrastive subjects. The research team also edits a quarterly newsletter, called *Contragram*.

In its advice to the Minister of Education, the research team stressed the usefulness of a (systematic and explicit) contrastive approach to foreign language teaching.

Both the scope of contrastive linguistic analysis, the usefulness of the discipline for foreign language teaching and learning, and for linguistics in general, on the one hand, and the gaps in contrastive analyses, and hence the lack of basic materials, on the other hand, all clearly indicate the need for longer and more extensive research programmes.

5. *List of publications*

The relevant publications of the research group listed below are ordered chronologically and updated till March 1st, 1995. Some internal reports and some papers in press or in preparation are mentioned as well. The correspondence address for further information is:

Contrastive linguistics project, c/o Filip Devos, Department of Dutch Linguistics, University of Gent, Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Gent (Belgium). Tel: +32/9/264.40.82. Fax: +32/9/264.41. 95. E-mail: filip.devos@rug.ac.be

Devos, F., Van Herreweghe, M. and De Muynck, R. 1990. "Een contrastieve schets van de adnominale *te* + infinitief-constructie in het Nederlands, het Engels en het Frans" ["A contrastive outline of the adnominal *to* + infinitive-construction in Dutch, English and French"]. In Vandepitte, S. (ed.). 1990. *Second language acquisition* (Studia Germanica Gandensia: 20). 53-88.

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