

CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS: RE-EVALUATION AND RE-FORMULATION

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1. *Introduction*

A great many theoretical and practical contrastive studies have been carried out on different levels of language. In these studies, linguists were prepared a set of comparative descriptions of two languages on which language teachers could predict areas of difficulty and base their teaching materials and plans on the resulting predictions. Yet, since its emergence, the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) has had several critics most of them questioning “interference” as the important issue of the discipline. The present paper is an attempt to evaluate and reformulate the CAH from different angles such as definition, assumptions, and versions.

2. *Definition*

One of the biggest problems of most contrastive studies is the vagueness and generality of some particular terms central to the analysis. Therefore, this causes the results of most contrastive analyses to be unreliable to a large extent. For instance, Bugarski (1991) seems to be proposing an up-to-date elaboration on contrastive analysis (CA) by stating:

“Contrastive linguistics could at present be broadly defined as the systematic study of similarities and differences in the structure and use of two or more language varieties, carried out for theoretical and practical purposes.”

However, some key terms in definition given for CA are still found to be unclear and problematic. In fact, the concepts “comparison-contrast” and “similarities-differences” are vaguely defined; as a result, some crucial physiological, psychological, social, and other factors are not adequately taken into account. To justify the involvement of other factors, a line is to be drawn between the two important processes – acquisition and learning. A close look at the following diagram may illustrate the point:

Language A				Language B			
CLN	CLT	CAN	CAT	CLN	CLT	CAN	CAT
ALN	ALT	AAN	AAT	ALN	ALT	AAN	AAT

where CLN represents Child Learning the Native Language (NL),
 CLT: Child Learning the Target Language (TL),
 CAN: Child Acquiring NL,
 CAT: Child Acquiring TL,
 ALN: Adult Learning NL,
 ALT: Adult Learning TL,
 *AAN: Adult Acquiring NL,
 AAT: Adult Acquiring TL.

(The AAN case is very rare. Nevertheless, examples of linguistically retarded people and those separated, for a long time, from human communities could be relevant here.). Therefore, comparing and contrasting the linguistic competence (or even performance) of a CAT (Child Acquiring a Target Language) with that of an ALT (Adult Learning A Target Language) may lead to unrealistic generalizations. For many factors such as psychological status, individual differences, cognitive domains, and the like inevitably get involved in the language learning process.

As an example, as far as motivation is concerned, an adult's attitude toward a second language could be quite different from that of a child's because the latter finds himself/herself in the situation where the language is spoken; hence s/he will have much more motivation than an adult learning a second language in an environment where the use of target language is optional.

On the other hand, the adult learning a target language already has a linguistic background of his language whereas at the first stages of acquisition a child's brain appears as a *tabula rasa*, as behaviourists call it, capable of recording and restoring as many languages as s/he hears. Thus, talking of interference as a result of contrastive analysis may apply to only a specific group of second language learners, i.e. ALT in our example here.

Even more, in regard to learning and/or acquiring an item in TL, the understanding of "similarity" and "difference" varies from individual to individual and geographically speaking, dialect to dialect. In brief, a phonological item existing in TL may be similar to one in a particular dialect of NL but not in other dialects of the same language. The Persian phonological system, for instance, is believed to lack the English /h/ phoneme as in *singing*; according to linguists, then, this would be considered as a difference between the English and Persian consonant system. However, there is a certain variety of Persian whose speakers use the same sound.

Considering these examples, one might become convinced that *a fully sufficient definition of CA presupposes an adequate definition of language on the one hand, and of categories of language learners on the other.*

3. Versions

Another aspect to be evaluated concerns the versions proposed for the main hypothesis. Three positions have been taken on the contrastive analysis hypothesis, each interpreting it from a different viewpoint. According to the strong version, a description of any two languages must be prepared, based on a systematic comparison and contrast to find the similarities and differences. From these, the linguist predicts the learner's difficulties in learning a second language (see Lado 1957; Lee 1965; Wilkins 1968; Dennison 1966; Yarmohammadi 1970, Nemser 1971; Broselow 1984; Ferguson 1985; Krzeszowski 1990).

Later, Wardhaugh (1974) cautiously proposed another account called the weak version by which believed that an explanation of the learner's errors should follow an experiment to detect the degrees of interference in particular (aposteriori). He goes on to say that it starts with the evidence provided by linguistic interference and uses such evidence to explain the similarities and differences between the systems.

On the other hand, the advocates of the so-called moderate version, Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970), threw a different light on the notion by proposing that most difficulties of the learners are due to the similarities existing between L1 and L2 (see Brown 1980). In my opinion, this sort of classification suffers from some serious shortcomings. In fact, there could be only two versions of the contrastive analysis hypothesis, strong and weak, although there are some minor differences between them. *Since the moderate version insisting on the similarities as the sources of difficulties is basically different from the other two, it may be considered as a different theory by itself and not a variety of the contrastive analysis hypothesis.* In other words, the theoretical and practical analyses based on this version lead to different sources of errors, e.g. intralingual errors which could possibly be accounted for by error analysis.

4. Basic assumptions

Although CA is basically originated in the last quarter of the 19th century (for the history of CA see Fisiak 1983, 1984), it is believed to be effectively influenced by both linguistics and psychology, i.e. structuralism and behaviourism respectively (cf. Kellerman and Smith 1986; Broselow 1984; Harder 1988; Odlin 1989; and others). As a result, from a psychological standpoint, the term "transfer", considered to be a phenomenon belonging to the behaviouristic learning theories, is supposed to play a very significant role in CA.

However, the fact to be kept in mind is that with the increasing growth of the concepts "consciousness-unconsciousness" in the process of language learning/acquisition, the problem(s) of transfer become highlighted. For the brain mechanism is so complicated that scientific investigations can not represent the processes involved in any detail. As evidence, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) proposed by Lenneberg (1967), though it has had several critics, has been related to the widely held belief that children have superiority over adults in learning the pronunciation of

a second language. Along a different line of argumentation, some authorities in the field have shown the superiority of adults' performance over children in perceiving and producing L2 sounds (Flege 1987; cf. Patkowski 1990).

These arguments and the like, lasting for many years after CPH was presented, indicate that the brain is functioning without its mechanism being observed. It could be compared to a black box through which a motion picture is in process (covert behaviour) with nobody being able to discriminate what is going on in there, except for hearing some sort of noise (overt behaviour). Yet, the overt behaviour is not always reliable, thus sometimes becoming contrary to one's judgement.

The following diagram illustrates the fact that other factors influence the internal processing.

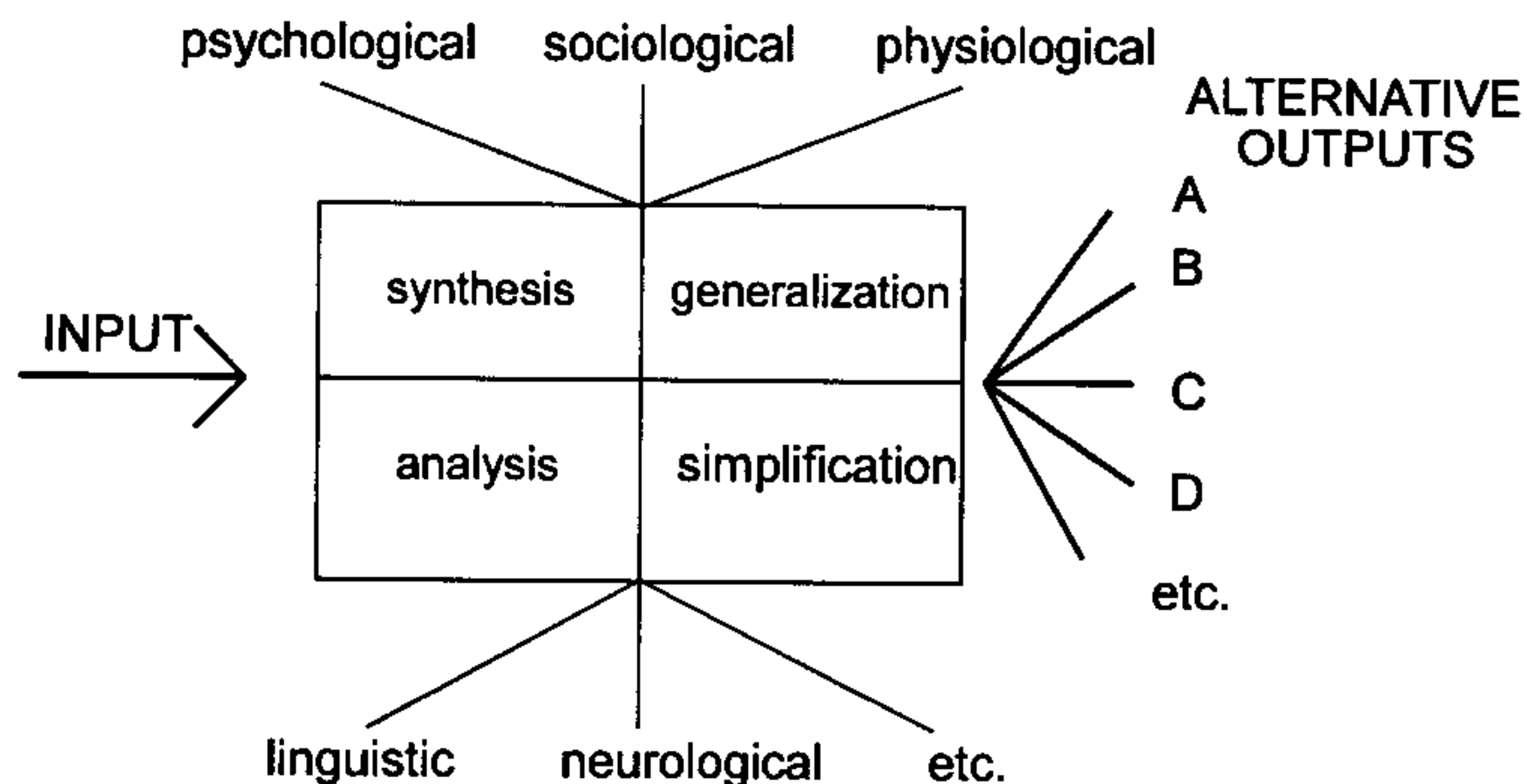


Fig. 1 Factors involved in the brain mechanism

For instance, concerning the sociological factors affecting linguistic competence, "It often happens that non-native speakers are aware of the sociolinguistic need to apologize, yet because this linguistic competence is limited, they use erroneous language forms and produce speech acts that sound deviant or even create communicative failure." (Cohen and Olshtain 1985:179). Even in the case of psychological influences, many factors such as shyness, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, and other aspects of personality may prevent one from using the correct form in a second language. In terms of the linguistic domain also one may not know the correct structural distribution of a grammatical, morphological, or phonological element in a second language. Thus, avoiding that specific structure, s/he probably falls into making erroneous structures. Moreover, some people happen

to understand a concept better through going from the general to the specific; others, on the contrary, may wish the concept to be presented the other way round.

In brief, as far as the assumptions are concerned, there are two common parts to the contrastive analysis hypothesis:

- a. Degree of similarity corresponds to the degree of simplicity
- b. Degree of difference corresponds to the degree of difficulty

In the light of the practical results obtained in the field of contrastive linguistics, it could be suggested that the above principles do not seem to be fixed rules of thumb because the L1 speaker may not be able to recognize the similarities existing between L1 and L2, and if s/he is aware of them, s/he may not know where they are. Therefore, how can it become simple and how simple can it become to the L1 speaker?

In all, CAH in its oldest form still seems to be entangled in a linguistic vicious circle, because talking of similarity and difference on the one hand and simplicity and difficulty on the other and accordingly making direct correspondences between them leads it to the problems of definition mentioned earlier in this paper. In other words, interference as an immediate outcome of CAH has been discredited because the theoretical assumptions that led to the concept have been forgotten for ever. The emergence of cognitive psychology, instead, caused the behaviourist theories in general and interference in particular to be strongly rejected from different standpoints.

There are many language users who speak their languages without having any conscious knowledge about the linguistic structures they are using. The same is true about those learning/acquiring a second language. However, in this case, it becomes a twofold problem. That is, L1 speakers having no or little conscious information about the linguistic structures of their own language are coming in contact with a second language about the linguistic system of which they have no or little theoretical knowledge. As a matter of fact, many other factors become involved in the process of language learning.

Fisiak (1980:219) believes, "the fact that differences in particular areas of the phonological systems of two languages cause interference only in some cases and not in all and that no linguistic solution can be provided is not due to the weakness of CS (Contrastive Studies) as has sometimes been stated but to extralinguistic factors which can only be accounted for by the theory of language errors."

Needless to say, however, if it is necessary to investigate the theory of language errors to solve the problems of CA, the area would not be called contrastive analysis any more but something beyond that with wider perspectives and greater expectations.

In reality, it is CA which is supposed to work on language phenomena as its raw material and not vice-versa. Therefore, contrary to Fisiak's opinion, the shortcomings still seem to go back to CA because extralinguistic factors can hardly be diminished. Now, suppose that somebody has got weak eye-sight, and is therefore not able to read normally typed manuscripts; what is, then, the more sensible and

reasonable solution to make this person feel easy while reading: curing his eyes or boldtyping all books throughout the world for his convenience?

In a word, Sajavaara (1984:398) believes that, "L1 influence on L2 is never a matter of a simple yes/no question..." This is true enough. Many authorities in this field have indicated that certain errors are made by nearly all learners of a given language, irrespective of their mother tongue (James 1980; Fisiak 1981; Sajavaara 1984; Broselow 1984; Bot 1986; Odlin 1989; Vroman 1990; Leather and James 1991; among others). Yet, it is not absolutely clear why certain types of learners or learning situations are subject to language transfer.

It now becomes evident that *it does not seem to be reasonable to talk about language, transfer, and accordingly language transfer so superficially as many did, because many aspects of human nature as well as the complexity of the languages to be compared should be taken into account.*

5. Reformulation

With reference to the observations made by many linguists and consequently considering the fact that not all errors are as a result of interlingual interference, a rather different reformulation of the contrastive analysis hypothesis is suggested. Since it is not so easy a task to measure the exact degrees of similarity and difference between two languages, in the following proposal it is assumed that the analyst has defined the key terms as *similar*, *different*, *easy*, and *difficult* by specifying some relative degrees of correspondence between the languages under analysis. To illustrate, references will be made to examples from English and Persian.

A. when an item is identical in L1 and L2, the learning of L2 will be easy. [/b/ in English and Persian]

B. when an item is similar in both L1 and L2, it is easy to learn but will still be non-native like. It does not block communication at any rate. [/t/ and /d/, alveo-dental in English but dental in Persian]

C. when an item is different in L1 and L2, depending on the degree of difference, it may actually not be difficult to learn the L2 item but easier to substitute it with a similar one existing in the first (or even the second) language [/q/ and /d/, present in English but absent in Persian].

There are at least two factors underlying this assumption: first, some learners do not seem to bother themselves learning the L2 items which are different from those of their native language. As evidence, if an English learner of Persian is asked to pronounce the voiceless continuant palatal /x/ which is present in Persian but absent in English, s/he will be able to do that. Persian speakers of English will also be able to pronounce /q/ and /d/. The problem, however, is that some speakers of the second language wish to facilitate communication. To them, then, accuracy in producing L2 structures may not be so important, though they may not be aware of the misunderstandings caused by faulty pronunciation.

Secondly, There are groups of learners who have been taught the wrong structures by their teachers. Therefore, these erroneous items have been repeatedly practiced and established in the learners' mind. Then, with reference to CPH (Critical Period Hypothesis), it can be said that learning of the correct form may become difficult not because the L2 structure is different to that of the learners', but the reason could be traced back to the establishment of the previously wrongly taught items.

Therefore, if the well-formed structure of L2 is presented to the learners and if they are told that misuse of the L2 structure may sometimes cause misunderstanding, the majority of the learners will learn the structure through sufficient practice. This is not invariably true, because there are other factors such as individual differences involved. For instance, some learners may be more intelligent in picking up the second language. This group will probably learn the language somehow sooner than others; yet, it does not mean that the L2 structure is difficult to others to learn.

The above generalization is closely related to and inspired by the psychological domains of language and learning. In fact, as long as a learner of English practices the structure of L2 it will go beyond the short term memory and will be transferred to the long term memory. However, if there is not enough contact with the second language, the L2 items will remain in the short term memory and after a while they will fade away. In Boyles and Kaszniak's words, "If the information in primary memory is not rehearsed instantly, so that it can be stored in secondary memory, it will be lost." (1987:49; see also Wardhaugh 1993:108). Therefore, in the case of the latter, whenever the learner needs to use a certain structure of L2 that s/he has already forgotten, s/he may or may not make errors; "May not" because error avoidance is another psychological and cognitive factor which must be taken into consideration as a complementary area in contrastive analysis.

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