

University of Tikrit
College of Education for Humanities
Department of English
M.A. Candidates



What is Contrastive Linguistics?

Prepared by:

Ezzeddin A. Kareem

Submitted to:

Prof. Muhammed Barjes Salman (Ph.D.)

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1. What is Contrastive Linguistics?

Whenever we decide to study anything, we usually begin by learning about its nature, how relevant it is to our lives, and how best to approach it. Stated differently, we pose three fundamental questions: (a) what is it, (b) why is it necessary or significant, and (c) how should we go about doing it? We will now attempt to respond to these three fundamental queries regarding contrastive linguistics.

2. The Name and Nature of Contrastive Linguistics

2.1 Linguistics

It appears that contrastive linguistics is a branch of or a subfield of linguistics. Before defining the nature of linguistics, we can take into account the following facts regarding language and potential theories for comprehending its reality.

1. Language is a physically actual form of organized (linguistic) use of the auditory-vocal method of patterned human communication. Language is a social phenomenon that was developed, acquired, and used in human civilization. It is also evident that language has a social reality.

2. Language is psychologically real as human conduct. The 20th century saw the emergence of two significant schools of language: **generative and structural linguistics**. Both structural and generative linguists examine language in terms of human behavior, or "verbal behavior. Structural linguistics views language as a result of humankind's stimulus-response system, taking a behaviouristic approach to language. The behaviourist approach to understanding language has been criticized for its inaccurate or inadequate interpretation of language phenomena. Noam Chomsky argues that behaviourists do not propose a mental mechanism underlying organized human behavior, including linguistic behavior. The transformational theory of language suggests an underlying mental structure common to all people.

Linguistic theory aims to contribute to understanding human mental capacities, rather than linguistic behavior. Structural and generative linguists all view language as a psychological reality related to the human mind, with different assumptions about the mental mechanism operating under observable language behavior.

3- Language is not usually considered to be related to the nature of God and religious beliefs, so the study of language is rarely, if ever, approached from the theological (religious) perspective.

4- The hermeneutic approach, developed in the 19th century, emphasizes individual characteristics in language studies. It uses the term "verstehen," which refers to understanding a subject from within through empathy, intuition, or imagination, rather than observing or calculating it. This approach is not commonly used in modern language studies. The hermeneutic approach, a characteristic of history, literature, and social sciences, is often associated with these fields. However, the scientific approach, widely followed in contemporary language studies, is considered an empirical science, aiming to produce verifiable and falsifiable statements through the formulation of testable hypotheses. This approach is considered more suitable for the history and literature fields. Linguistics is the scientific study of human language, primarily focusing on its physical, social, and psychological realities, based on its essential characteristics and relevant approaches to the study of language.

2.2 Contrastive Linguistics (Contrastive Analysis)

Contrastive linguistics is a branch of linguistics that involves contrast or comparison, a fundamental method for studying and understanding things. It is widely used in linguistics, as it helps identify and elaborate on specific features of human language. Linguists often conduct comparative analyses (CA) of various forms of the feature and their parallels in other comparable or related systems to

understand its expression and its relationship with other systems. This method is essential for understanding and analyzing human language. For instance, to establish the grammatical feature of the plural, linguists have to compare different languages to find out the various possible forms with which it can be realized, like inflection (such as cats [kæts/] and dogs [dɒgz/], and classes [kla:sɪz/] in English). (فلاحه- فلاحات) for feminine plural and (فلاحون -) for masculine plural in Arabic.

We may come to a better understanding of the nature of contrastive linguistics by putting it in the perspective of a general framework of comparisons within and between languages. Comparison may be conducted intralingually or interlingually, on a synchronic basis or on a diachronic basis. So **four types of comparison** may be distinguished:

(1) Synchronic intralingual comparison:

Linguistic system comparison involves comparing the constituent forms of phonetic, phonological, lexical, grammatical, and other linguistic systems within a language during a specific period of evolution. Linguists need to compare all phonemes based on their articulation to identify and describe the phonetic system (e.g. front as /i:/ in beat, back as /oʊ/ in boat, high as /ʊ/ in put, low as /ɒ/ in pot) and manners of articulation (e.g. unrounded as /e/ in bait, rounded as /u:/ in shoe, voiced as /d/ in den, stopped as /t/ in team), their acoustic qualities as well as their distributions in the syllables of the language.

(2) Diachronic intralingual comparison:

Diachronic intralingual comparison is a method used by researchers in language history, etymology, and related branches of linguistic study to study a language's history. For example, English has gone through four stages of evolution: Old English (mid-5th century to 1150), Middle English (1150–1500), Early Modern English (1500–1700), and Late Modern English (1700 onwards). This analysis

reveals the language's evolution, with grammatical meanings increasingly expressed through word order and function words.

(3) Diachronic interlingual comparison:

Comparative historical linguistics, also known as philology, emerged in the late 18th century and became a dominant branch of linguistic study in the 19th century. It focuses on linguistic genealogy, or the establishment of genetic "families" of language-groups. This branch of linguistics, which began in the late 18th century, compares the linguistic systems of different related languages in their historical development stages. The goal is to postulate or reconstruct the proto-language of a group of related languages by comparing historically related forms in different languages. Sir William Jones, an English orientalist, compared Sanskrit with Greek and Latin in 1786, revealing its strong resemblance to Latin. This led German scholars to reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language, which was also known as "Indo-Aryan" or "Indo-Germanic." The findings influenced the reconstruction of the language.

(4) Synchronic interlingual comparison:

Synchronic interlingual comparison aims to identify common features or patterns in all languages, known as "language universals." This comparison focuses on identifying "linguistic universals" or "language universals" present in all languages, aiming to uncover the basic structures of these languages. This method is crucial for understanding and promoting understanding of different languages.

The second kind of synchronic interlingual comparison is conducted for the purpose of finding out the typical differences between different languages of the world in their structure so that these languages can be classified according to their formal features.

Contrastive linguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies two or more languages synchronically, aiming to discover their differences and similarities,

particularly in their structures. This method is also known as "contrastive analysis" (CA) or "contrastive studies." Contrastive linguistics is often used in the United Kingdom and the United States, but in Eastern Europe, China, and other parts of the world, it is preferred as it sounds more like a discipline in its own right. Contrastive analysis or studies may give the impression that they refer to specific problems in a field, while "contrastive linguistics" sounds more like a discipline in its own right.

3. Micro-Contrastive Linguistics and Macro-Contrastive Linguistics

Contrastive linguistics can be categorized into micro-contrastive linguistics and macro-contrastive linguistics. **Micro-contrastive linguistics** is the traditional mode of contrastive linguistics, focusing on the "code-oriented" aspect of language systems and internalized grammar. It aims to compare universal and specific structural properties of human languages, focusing on four levels: phonetics, phonology, lexis, and grammar. This approach is oriented towards the system of language and the ability to create and understand sentences, including unfamiliar ones.

Macro-contrastive linguistics represents a broader perspective of linguistic analysis and offers considerable scope for new work in contrastive linguistics. The goal of macro-contrastive linguistics is to compare and understand how people use different languages to communicate with each other. Specifically, it addresses problems on two higher levels—the textual and the pragmatic levels—of linguistic description .

4- Why contrastive linguistics?

It is essential for two primary reasons: **theoretical and practical**. It helps us understand and navigate language, enhancing our understanding of different cultures and languages, and providing a comprehensive understanding of language.

4.1 The theoretical need for contrastive linguistics

Contrastive linguistics is crucial for the development of general linguistics, as different models can describe language features with varying success rates. Transformational Grammar, a major theory in generative linguistics, can explain native English speakers' intuition that certain constructions are related and others are ambiguous, such as the relationship between active and passive sentences. On the other hand, Case Grammar, another major theory of generative linguistics, provides an exceptionally efficient device for explaining the semantic affinity between more related sentences, e.g.

- This key opens that door.
- That door opens with this key.
- You can open that door using this key.
- That door can be opened with this key.

Linguistic typology research indicates that human languages are categorized based on their preference for grammatical, phonological, or lexical features. Some models, such as American linguistics, Transformational Grammar, and Russian linguist Shaumjan's Applicative Generative Grammar, are better suited for describing complex languages like Russian. Chao Yuen Ren, a Chinese American linguist and amateur composer, argues that linguistic theory is derived from a comprehensive contrastive study of languages from different nations. Most modern linguistic theories are based on western languages, and to develop a powerful, universally valid language theory, researchers must constantly test and modify their theories against findings from contradictory analyses across different languages, including oriental languages. This approach helps researchers form a more universally valid language theory.

4.2 The Practical Need for Contrastive Linguistics

Contrastive linguistics is beneficial as it can provide solutions to practical linguistic problems, particularly those that cannot be solved without analysing

evidence from multiple languages. For instance, in interlingual translation, there are numerous problems of this nature. One such issue is translating poetry in the form of poetry, which differs from plain prose and resembles music in that it displays an easily recognizable rhythm through the repetition of a certain pattern (metric pattern). Different languages have different ways to achieve the desired rhythm in a poem. When translating a poem, the translator should either copy its metric units and reproduce them literally in the target language or use metric devices typical of the target language that are comparable but not corresponding to those in the source language. A contrastive analysis of the verse meter (the regular and rhythmic arrangement of syllables according to particular patterns) of the languages involved is essential for finding a reasonable solution.

American anthropological linguist Edward Sapir (1884–1939) (1921) contrasts the verse meters of several major languages of the world and finds that Greek and Latin verse uses a metrical system characterized by quantity-timed rhythm because in those two languages syllables of short and long durations typically alternate with each other in a word, e.g. “I think, therefore I am.”

English words are noted for alternating stressed (heavy) and unstressed (light) syllables. Rhyme, which entered English verse rather late, is something decorative and far less important than the stress. So English (as well as German) verse relies on an accentual, or stress-timed rhythm, e.g.

˘Deeply ˘I ˘sigh for the ˘fallen ˘flowers in ˘vain;

˘Vaguely ˘I ˘seem to ˘know the ˘wallows ˘coming a˘gain.

This is an example of contrastive analysis of the Arabic translation of an American song: Song title “Circle of life”, from *The Lion King* (1994)

Source Text:

From the day we arrive on the planet

And blinking, step into the sun

There's more to see than can ever be seen

More to do than can ever be done

منذ اول نهار نحياء

والشمس هي سر الحياة

والعجائب لها عديد الاشكال

وتزيد عما رجوناها

5- The history of contrastive linguistics

Contrastive linguistics emerged in the United States during World War II, as immigrants sought to learn foreign languages to escape the war. The need for effective and economical teaching methods led to the development of contrastive analysis. This approach involves scientific descriptions of the language to be learned, compared to a parallel description of the learner's native language. The birth of contrastive linguistics in the 1940s and 1950s was influenced by three factors: the need for quick and effective second language teaching, the popularity of the behaviourist theory of learning, and the flourishing of structural descriptions of language.

The stimulus-response and associative learning of behaviourism is a psychological theory that explains language teaching as the formation of associations between stimuli and responses. The decline of pedagogic interest in contrastive analysis can be attributed to two main reasons: the theoretical basis of contrastive description being challenged by new approaches to psychology and linguistics, and a more complex real-life condition that adds to the decline of interest in the pedagogical power of contrastive analysis. Interlingual errors occur due to language transfer, resulting from the learner's native language, while intralingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of the target language. Intralingual errors may be caused by the influence of one target language item on another, such as producing He is comes based on a blend of English structures. Contrastive analysis has lost some of its pedagogic impact due to a lack of

fulfilment, and researchers are now skeptical of applying its results to curriculum planning or teaching material design. This has led to a reluctance to apply contrastive analysis to teaching materials. The text emphasizes the importance of implicational value, its role in experimental studies on learner difficulty predictability, its theoretical contribution to interlanguage studies, and its need to be combined with Error Analysis as a practical classroom research tool for teachers to adjust their teaching to learners' knowledge levels (James, 1980).

Contrastive analysis faces challenges from cognitive psychology and Transformational Grammar. While claims made by behaviourist, cognitive psychologies, and structural and generative schools of linguistics about language learning are not entirely incompatible, they have different degrees of explaining power for different types of problems in foreign language learning. Contrastive analysis has much to offer to the theory and practice of translation, L2 writing, understanding and description of particular languages, language typology, and the study of language universals. The field has seen significant developments in countries such as Europe, the United States, as well as some Asian countries. Since 1975, international conferences and symposiums have been held in various countries, and many contrastive libraries and monographs have been published.

Contrastive linguistics has been a subject of interest for Chinese scholars since 1933. Many universities now offer courses in contrastive linguistics, and numerous research works have been published. Despite facing challenges in recent decades, contrastive analysis remains highly vigorous. This is a plausible and obvious thing for language workers, learners, and teachers of foreign languages, as it is a sound practice in search of a sound theory.

References

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