

## **HISTORY IS NOT WHAT HAPPENED: THE CASE OF CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS.**

### **A follow-up to Claire Kramersch's review of *Linguistics across Cultures***

Reading Claire Kramersch's excellent 'Classic Book Review' (2007) of Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957) in the previous issue of this journal, I was reminded not only of how valuable I found the work of the Contrastive Analysis (CA) school when I was first teaching, but of how disgracefully misrepresented this work has been by succeeding generations. What follows is a brief attempt to set the record straight.

When the intellectual wind changed in the 1970s with the move towards cognitive and nativist models of language acquisition, CA, which had been a powerful force in the study of second language learning, was rapidly and comprehensively discredited. A key element in the discrediting was the claim that Lado and his colleagues were guilty of a very elementary mistake. This was their alleged attribution of all or most of second language learners' problems to the direct influence of the first language, as might seem to be implied by Lado at the beginning of *Linguistics across Cultures*.

Those elements (of a foreign language) that are similar to [the student's] native language will be simple, and those elements that are different will be difficult. The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of his students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them. (p. 2)

#### **'Overprediction'**

The indictment was in fact two-fold. The first charge was that CA overpredicted learners' problems. As recapitulated by Odlin (1989: 17): "The claims made by Lado and Fries about the predictive power of contrastive analysis ... faced serious challenges by the 1970s ... Some differences between languages do not always lead to significant learning difficulties." Odlin goes on to point out that while Spanish has two verbs, *saber* and *conocer*, corresponding to know, this creates problems for English learners of Spanish but not for Spanish learners of English. Lightbown and Spada, illustrating the same objection to the CA position, cite the fact that pronoun objects are problematic for English-speaking learners of French, but that the converse is not the case, although

A traditional version of the [Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis] would predict that, where differences exist, errors would be bi-directional, that is, for example, French speakers learning English and English speakers learning French would make errors on parallel linguistic features. (1999: 73)

In the face of these criticisms, the reader is tempted to shake his or her head in pity at the naivety of the contrastive analysts' views. Clearly they were onto something; but to assume that all language differences cause difficulty regardless of their nature and the direction of learning – really!

*Linguistics across Cultures* is a small book; it takes a couple of hours to read. In the course of those two hours, it becomes disturbingly clear that Lado did not in fact hold the view of cross-language influence attributed to him by the scholars cited above, and that the criticism is almost completely without foundation. Despite *Linguistics across Cultures*'s rather nebulous opening identification of 'difference' with 'difficulty' on page 2, neither Lado nor other contrastive analysts predicted that errors resulting from language difference would necessarily be 'bi-directional'. *Linguistics across Cultures* actually deals with a number of one-directional learner problems of exactly the kind instanced by the critics: for example, the fact that English noun modification is harder for Chinese speakers than Chinese noun modification is for English speakers, or that, while the English *beat/bit* contrast is hard for Japanese speakers, English learners do not find the Japanese single-phoneme equivalent difficult (p. 61). It was indeed a commonplace of CA that learning difficulties can be one-way. Weinreich (1963), for instance, looking at cross-language influence in populations rather than individuals, goes into admirable detail about the asymmetrical effects, in contact situations, of distinctions in one language which are not paralleled in another.

### **'Underprediction'**

So much for the accusation of overprediction. The second charge traditionally levelled against Lado and other contrastive analysts was the converse: that CA failed to account for a substantial number of errors which language learners do in fact make.

An even more serious challenge to the validity of contrastive analyses is the occurrence of errors that do not appear to be due to native language influence (Odlin 1989: 17).

For several decades, linguists and teachers assumed that most second language learners' errors resulted from differences between the first and second languages. ... Studies show ... at most 20% of the [grammatical errors] adults make can be traced to crossover from the first language. Learners' first languages are no longer believed to interfere with their attempts to learn second language grammar, and language teachers no longer need to create special grammar lessons for students from each language background (Dulay et al. 1982: 5).

Leaving aside Dulay et al.'s dubious statistics, and their bizarre claim that up to 20% of errors are not worth teachers' attention, the real point here is that, once again, the criticism is simply untrue. It appears to rest on a failure to read past page 2 of *Linguistics across Cultures*, where Lado talks about language difference, and to assume without further investigation that he must have been talking exclusively about the transfer of specific features from L1 to L2. (Note the covert sidestep from 'differences' to 'crossover' in the second citation above.) In fact, Lado gives ample consideration to learning difficulties which involve L2 elements with no L1 equivalent, and which cannot therefore be due to direct L1 'influence' or 'crossover': he discusses for instance problems English-speakers have with the learning of lexical tone (p. 45) and grammatical gender (p. 64).

## Difference and transfer

The failure to see that not all difference-based errors involve transfer is not confined to the critics of CA. It is surprisingly common in discussions of learner language to find errors divided into two watertight classes: ‘interlingual errors’ (due to L1 interference), and ‘intralingual errors’ (attributable to complexities in L2, and supposedly having nothing to do with L1–L2 differences). This leads to a recurrent self-inflicted conundrum in cases where the intrinsic ‘intralingual’ difficulty of an L2 feature is magnified by the ‘interlingual’ absence of a parallel feature in L1: does one then talk about ‘transfer’ or not?

As Kellerman (1987) has pointed out, researchers tend to reflect their theoretical biases in what they interpret as transfer effects. He notes that Arabski (1979) made the somewhat surprising assertion that the 974 article errors in his Polish-English corpus were not transfer errors on the grounds that, because Polish does not have articles, there is nothing to transfer. Clearly, though, the absence of a structural feature in the L1 may have as much impact on the L2 as the presence of a different feature (Ellis 1994: 311–312).

This was not a confusion shared by the contrastive analysts. Unlike their critics, they were perfectly well aware that the effects of language difference on learning are not limited to the transfer of L1 features to L2. In principle, of course, the first language can do three things for a learner: it can help, hinder, or simply stand aside. In the behaviourist language of the period:

A student may have some habitual responses which are contrary to the responses required for a new skill which he is trying to master (negative) or which are similar to the new responses (positive), or which have no relation to them (zero) (Bowen and Stockwell 1965).

Both of the traditional charges against CA, then, are unfounded. Lado and his colleagues did not say what their critics say they did: that all language differences necessarily result in learning difficulty; and they did say what their critics say they did not: that some errors are not due to first-language interference.

## Why?

What happened? Why were the views of the contrastive analysts so grossly misrepresented by mainstream scholars of the following generation (though there were distinguished exceptions), and why are they still misrepresented? One factor, as Kramsch points out, was certainly the association of CA with behaviourism, which by the 1970s was subjected to a degree of vilification more normally associated with undesirable political attitudes, with candidates for academic posts no doubt being routinely asked “Are you, or have you ever been, a behaviourist?” This was not a climate conducive to a careful reading and balanced consideration of the CA literature. In addition, however, some of the most vociferous 1970s and 1980s critics of CA, such as Dulay, Burt and Krashen in their widely-read book *Language Two* (1982), had a very clear intellectual agenda which was deeply hostile to CA. They were concerned to show, in accordance with the new orthodoxy of the time, that all

language development was driven by unconscious mechanisms whose operation was similar, if not identical, for both L1 and L2, involving inter alia the acquisition of specific morphological and syntactic features in a relatively predetermined sequence. The belief that specific L1–L2 differences were an important determinant of the content and sequencing of language learning was not at all compatible with this view, and needed to be discredited. While one is reluctant to attribute deliberate bias to scholars, it does seem that many of the critics of CA may have been more concerned to scan works such as *Linguistics across Cultures* for ammunition to suit their polemic purposes than to look objectively at what was actually there.

## The result

The discrediting was certainly extremely effective. As a result largely of the criticisms of that generation of critics, Lado and his colleagues have virtually sunk without trace below the intellectual horizon. Although important work continues to be done on cross-language influence, this is no longer widely regarded as being part of mainstream linguistics. Gregg (1995) goes so far as to tell us firmly that "... contrastive analysis, error analysis, etc., are not simply unrelated to linguistic theory in particular, they are dead meat in general." Howatt's history of English language teaching (2004) has very little to say about the contrastive analysts. Where accounts of CA are given in present-day reference works, these tend to be black-boxed repetitions of earlier misrepresentations, rather than descriptions derived from the original sources.

...the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis ... claims that difficulties in language learning derive from the differences between the new language and the learner's first language, that errors in these areas of difference derive from first language interference and that these errors can be predicted and remedied by the use of CA (Johnson and Johnson 1998: 85).

(Note the sidestep, once again, from 'difference' to 'interference'.)

Kramsch's review of *Linguistics across Cultures* is a welcome move towards the rehabilitation and vindication of an eminent scholar whose work was important and formative, and whose reputation has been particularly badly served by his successors. It is also, unfortunately, a timely reminder of the sad fact that, in our discipline as perhaps in many others, history is not what happened: it is what people say happened.

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