

Contrasting German and Danish in Language Teaching – Overemphasising Differences?

Languages can be compared in a number of ways, amongst them contrastive linguistics, but, as Krzeszowski (1990, 1) puts it: “Contrastive studies do not enjoy much respect among linguists.” One reason for the relatively low prestige could be, that contrastive linguistics were principally developed for the practical purposes of applied linguistics and language teaching rather than for the theoretical advancement of the discipline. Fries (1945, 9) is widely considered to play a crucial role in the early development of this branch in linguistics. In his seminal book entitled *Teaching and learning English as a foreign language* he states programmatically: “The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.” Unfortunately, contrastive linguistics has never been able to live up to these expectations, either because of the often criticised lack of a *tertium comparationis*, or because of the tendency to overemphasise the differences while disregarding the similarities, or because of an increasing re-orientation of language teaching methods away from a focus on grammatical structures towards communicative and action-oriented (task-based) learning.

In the case of German as a foreign language in the Danish educational system, however, contrastive linguistics in its mid-20th century form seems to be living a fully intact life. Emphasising idiosyncratic differences in morphosyntax between German and Danish, e.g., parts of inflectional morphology or the *Konjunktiv I* almost inevitably leads to an attitude that regards German as a very difficult, if not almost unlearnable language for Danes – despite of the fact that Danish and German are genetically and typologically very closely related languages.

In my presentation, I am going to show how the remarkable myth of the unlearnability of German for Danes could be challenged by using typological evidence on grammar and the lexicon, i.e. data highlighting the essential similarities of the two languages. Painting with a broad brush in this way (and including communicative functions of language as *tertium comparationis*) could make learning German a much more enjoyable enterprise for Danish students. Contrastive linguistics does not need to be abandoned in this approach, though. On the contrary, it can serve in a very meaningful way as a complement for conducting detailed and fine-grained analyses (cf. König, 1990) of selected linguistic areas (e.g., modal verbs), as will be discussed as well.

References

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