

Why and How We Should Compare Languages A Plea for Contrastive Linguistics

Contrastive linguistics has experienced ups and downs throughout its history. After a promising start in the 1950s, a turning point in the history of contrastive linguistics takes place in the late 1960s triggered by criticisms of the discipline and the rise of error linguistics, followed by a low point due to the identity hypothesis and the resulting non-relevance of transfer. However, since the end of the 1970s and especially the 1980s, due to the re-evaluation of transfer through the interlanguage hypothesis, the emergence of typologically oriented contrastive linguistics, as well as the broadening of the scope of contrastive studies through the pragmatic turn, contrastive linguistics has undergone a phase of consolidation, which continues to this day.

Despite this, contrastive linguistics still seems not to have found its solid place within and outside linguistics due to its variable theoretical foundations and its usefulness in practical terms. Therefore, this paper aims to address the questions of why and how we should compare languages, thus making a plea for contrastive linguistics.

With this aim in mind, after a brief definition of the term and the status of contrastive linguistics, we will first address the question of why we should compare languages. In a first step, the general contributions of contrastive linguistics in theoretical and practical terms will be discussed, referring to both linguistic and non-linguistic disciplines. In doing so, it should also be shown to what extent contrastive linguistics should interact with other linguistic and extra-linguistic disciplines in order to be able to guarantee the actual effectiveness of language comparisons in theoretical and practical terms. The specific example of foreign language teaching will then be used to illustrate how the concrete role of contrastive linguistics is or could be shaped in relation to foreign language learners, in relation to its use in foreign language teaching and in relation to foreign language errors.

In a further step, we will address the question of how we should compare languages. To this end, the scope of language comparisons will first be narrowed down, which includes standard languages and linguistic sub-standards, language system and language use, linguistic expression and linguistic content, as well as the permeability between the linguistic levels of description. Subsequently, the theoretical prerequisites of language comparison will be discussed, namely the postulate of describing before comparing, the determination of a *tertium comparationis* as well as the determination of a uniform theoretical basis. Finally, the methods of language comparison, including the descriptive-comparative as well as the descriptive and comparative method on the one hand, and the unidirectional and adirectional method on the other hand, will be analysed.

Key Words: *contrastive linguistics, theory, practice, benefits, limits*