

IS CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS POSSIBLE WITHOUT A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK?

This paper aims at discussing the relationship between Contrastive Linguistics (CL) and theoretical linguistic frameworks as viewed from a historical perspective.

The coiner of the term “contrastive linguistics”, Benjamin Lee Whorf, is usually not mentioned in histories of CL. For instance, Carl James leaves out Whorf in his *Contrastive Analysis* (1980), probably because of the bad reputation (and rejection) of the so-called “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”. However, although linguistic relativism is rejected in favor of a general theory of language, CL is mainly considered as a means of comparison between languages that does not require any theoretical framework or, at any rate, cannot contribute to linguistic theory in an original way.

This tendency of regarding CL as neutral to theoretical frameworks can be traced back to Charles Fries’ Preface to Robert Lado’s (1957) *Linguistics across Cultures*, mentioning that “this book, arising out of [Lado’s] long and fruitful experience, presents a practical approach to the kind of systematic linguistic, cultural comparisons that must form the basis of satisfactory teaching materials for the new approach”, which gives emphasis to the “practical” nature of contrasting languages. Many decades later, in formulating the essential components of CL König suggests that “[t]he challenge for Contrastive Analysis lies in discovering the contrasts and describing them in a maximal general way and not in the choice of a specific theoretical format. Its *explanandum* is the contrasts between languages” (2012: 21-23).

The aims of the present investigation are: (a) to examine CL research since its beginning and discuss how different theoretical frameworks influenced the kind of contrastive linguistic work through time and (b) to claim that comparing languages is impossible outside a theoretical point of view (functional, formal, or else) that each scholar or school of thought adopts, either explicitly or implicitly.

For the former point to be investigated, significant CL works from successive frameworks are examined, namely: a) Krzeszowski (1978), Van Buren (1980) and Lipinska (1980) in the context of generative theory, b) research in the context of functional typology (e.g. König 1996), following the “typological turn”, and c) contrastive studies of discourse features (e.g. Lefer & Voegeleer (eds) 2016), which result from the meeting of CL with corpus linguistics after the 1990s (cf. Enghels, Defrancq & Jansegers 2020: 1).

For the latter point to be investigated, a case study of the definite articles in Greek and Italian is discussed (Giannouloupoulou 2016). It is argued that the contrastive description of the different distribution of the definite article in each language depends on the theoretical framework followed. In formal frameworks definite articles are considered as markers of definiteness, whereas in the context of functionalist approaches the evolution of deictic elements in definite articles is a paradigmatic case of grammaticalization. Therefore, the presence or absence of the definite article (e.g. before proper names) is analyzed in different ways according to the framework followed, with important consequences both for linguistic explanation and further applications (e.g. to language teaching).

The relationship of CL to theoretical frameworks must be situated in the context of the historiography of linguistics; as Koerner (2004) put it, “it is the knowledge or informed awareness that makes the essential difference between the scientist and the laboratory assistant”.

References

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