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Is Contrastive Linguistics possible without a theoretical framework?

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

The coiner of the term “contrastive linguistics”, Benjamins 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 of the so-called “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”. However, although in the following decades linguistic relativism is rejected in favor of a general theory of language, CL is mainly considered a means of comparison between languages that neither requires a theoretical framework nor can 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*, who says 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”, thus emphasizing 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 maximally general way and not in the choice of a specific theoretical format. Its *explanandum* is the contrasts between languages” (2012, pp. 21-23). However, if this *explanandum* exists, there is need for an *explanans*.

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 (see among others Ebeling/Ebeling 2013) 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 (a similar view is expressed by Coseriu 1970).

For (a) to be investigated, significant CL works from successive frameworks are examined, namely: a) Krzeszowski 1978; 1990; 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/Vogeleer (eds.) 2016), which result from the meeting of CL with corpus linguistics since the 1990s (cf. Enghels/Defrancq/Jansegers 2020, p. 1).

For (b) to be investigated, a case study of the definite articles in Greek and Italian is briefly discussed (Giannoulopoulou 2016). It is argued that the contrastive description of the different distribution of the definite article in each language depends on the

theoretical framework applied. It is argued that the presence or the absence of the definite article (e.g. before proper names) is analyzed in different ways according to the framework followed (formal or functional), with important consequences both for linguistic explanation and further applications (e.g. in language teaching).

The relationship of CL to theoretical frameworks raises epistemological issues too and seems to prove Willems' (1997) assertion that the scientific study of language is "an unstable equilibrium between changing argumentation and undeniable historical roots".

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