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CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

In the course of learning a second language, learners regularly produce utterances in speech and writing which judged by the rules of the second language are erroneous, or ill-formed. Traditionally the attitude to errors was that they were an indication of the difficulties that the learners had with certain aspects of the language, which could be explained by the persistence of the habits of the mother tongue and their transfer to the new language (Lado, 1957). Errors were the result of interference and in an ideal teaching situation could be avoided. From this notion has developed the whole industry of “contrastive linguistics”, with research projects and regular publications of results in a number of countries, including South Africa.

The topic of this article suggests that there is something called “Contrastive Analysis” and before one can pursue its “relevance to language teaching” it seems appropriate to define and discuss what is meant by the term. The modern view of contrastive analysis as the analysis and interpretation of interference errors is not to be confused with the Contrastive Analysis approach to interference phenomena as an instrument of prediction, proposed by applied linguists such as Fries (1945) and Lado (1957). In his preparation of teaching materials at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, Fries stated the guiding principle to his view of the acquisition of the target language:

“The most effective 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” (1945, p. 9).

This view presupposes that difficulties in the acquisition of the target language may be predicted and if eliminated will cause the learning of the target language to be facilitated. The aspect of prediction in a CA, especially in so far as it concerns its practical application in the teaching procedure of the target language, was stressed throughout. Lado emphasizes this point when he states: “The plan of the book rests on the assumption that we can *predict* and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student” (Lado, 1957, p. vii). The principle of target language learning was based on the assumption that the major problem was caused by inter-lingual identification and that the differences

between the source language and the target language once they had been predicted could be diminished by exposing the learner to drills specifically designed to change his linguistic behaviour at the relevant points. Theoretically, this seemed a perfectly valid argument and consequently during the 1960's a spate of contrastive studies appeared all over the world.

Since 1960 however, development along these lines has been severely checked and for a variety of reasons of which the most important were:

1. the close links the approach had with structural linguistics which at that time was being ousted by the transformational generative theory; and,
2. its close ties with the theory of behaviourism which also at that time seemed to be completely negated by psychologists and linguists.
3. More important, scholars working in the field of Applied Linguistics also criticized the approach, firstly on the grounds that it had very little practical application in the classroom situation (Nemser, 1971, p. 115-123), secondly that not all errors could be traced to interference by the source language (Dusková, 1969, p. 11136) and thirdly that what CA predicted as likely difficulties did not always turn out to be so (Nickel, 1971, p. 219-227).

As a result of the intense debate that has raged around the value of the CA hypothesis, two distinct versions have emerged: CA *a priori* or predicative or strong version and *a posteriori* or explanatory or weak version. Initially the distinction between the two versions rests on a difference of point of view. The strong version, as has already been said, departs from a point of view in which it wishes to *predict* errors which will occur in the target language. The weaker version makes no such claims. It wishes to *explain* why errors in the target language occur. Assuming that learners of language A are found by the process known as *error analysis* to make recurring errors in a particular construction in their attempts to learn language B, the analyst makes an analysis of the construction in language B and the comparable construction in language A in order to discover *why* the errors occur. In this way the analyst discovers what learners actually do in their attempts to acquire another language instead of predicting what they will do (Schachter, 1975, p. 206). This approach seems to be more worthwhile to the practising teacher.

What then, is an error analysis?

In his use of a language the language user employs a set of cognitive structures acquired by some process of data-processing (rules of grammar) and hypothesis formation (language exposure) in which the making of errors is evidence of the actual learning process. It may even be argued that the making of errors is a prerequisite to this learning activity (Nickel, 1973, p. 24). "You can't learn without goofing." (Dulay and Burt, 1974, p. 95). At the same time it may also be argued that the degree of error is indicative of the degree of competence achieved by the learner; that is, if target language acquisition is seen as the possession of a certain kind of knowledge (competence) instead of dispositions to respond to certain stimuli.

N. Chomsky's well-known distinction between what the speaker knows about his language (competence) and what actually happens when he speaks the language (performance) is of relevance here. The analyst has to distinguish between the speaker's intrinsic knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the LT and his "mistakes" which are similar to mistakes made by native speakers and classified by other speakers as "ungrammatical". Very often performance is an imperfect reflection of competence: e.g. the fact that people occasionally have "slips of the tongue" in every day conversation does not mean that they don't know their language, or don't have fluency (i.e. competence) in it. Dusková (1969, p. 12) makes the following distinction between errors in competence and errors in performance: "... mistakes which are defined as adventitious, random errors in performance due to memory lapses, physical states, etc. of which the speaker is immediately aware, and systematic errors which reflect a defect in knowledge".

The key words that should be noted are "random errors" and "systematic errors". "Random errors", such as *hte* for *the* may be ignored in an Error Analysis.

Once embarked on the design of an Error Analysis the analyst is usually confronted with the problem of what to do with the error analysis. It is agreed that a mere listing of errors will be of limited value only. "No errors are errors in themselves" (Enkvist, 1972, p. 19). The aim should be to provide an adequate linguistic explanation of the nature of the errors found in a particular learning situation. A possible framework of a typical error analysis could include the following:

- (a) types of errors (classification with regard to the target system) i.e. classification according e.g. to grammatical categories;
- (b) frequency of errors, in order to determine the seriousness of various errors;

- (c) explanation of errors in linguistic terms;
- (d) degree of disturbance caused by errors; and,
- (e) therapy (how teaching should be arranged so as to eliminate the errors).

(a) *Types of errors:*

Grammar can be divided into sub-categories of morphology, noun phrase, verb phrase and syntax. Lexis may have three subcategories; content words, function words and common expressions. Performance mistakes may be ignored. The system has many advantages as it is easy to handle, it may be extended to include new subcategories and comparisons can be made between main categories and sub-categories. It is suggested that the analysis be based on free production — i.e. short paragraphs. In other types of test material, such as grammar tests and multiple choice tests there is a danger in that they have an inherent classification built into them because a test constructor will include items which he thinks are important for the students to know whereas the analyst wants to determine the actual competence of his students.

(b) *Frequency*

The errors are evaluated to determine frequency of occurrence. The frequent occurrence of a specific form or the evasion of a specific form leading to circumlocution and consequently, clumsy constructions is indicative of the learner's lack of competence at this point in his learning process. The seriousness or degree of deviation from the norm is open to various interpretations. James (1974) proposes an assessment based upon the rules transgressed. Johanssen (1973) suggests that the degree of disturbance an error may have on the efficiency of communications should be investigated. There is obviously a difference in the degree of comprehensibility between

“the two men is walking down the street”, and

“a poem should be short and sinful”.

(c) *Explanation*

It is necessary to find some linguistic and psycholinguistic explanation for the occurrence of the errors in the analysis.

1. A linguistic explanation

Back-translation may be used to discover what the pupils intended to say and then the equivalent Afrikaans structure e.g. is compared to the correct English structure, to determine the type of error committed by the pupils.

E.g. * a poem should be short and sinful
'n gedig behoort kort en sinvol te wees.

Use was made of a one-to-one relation in translating from the source language.

From a lexical entry such as:

aktueel: actual, real, timely, topical, of current interest,

learners select *actual* because it is close to the source language in sound and structure.

* He writes about something that is actual.

2. A psycholinguistic explanation

Three principal causes for error can be investigated:

2.1 Interference from the source language:

* He walk home
Hy loop huistoe.

2.2 Intralanguage interference resulting not from the source language but from the target language itself.

* The girls walks home.

2.3 Faulty teaching techniques of materials or developmental errors referred to as a process of "hypothesizing false concepts" or as "induced errors".

e.g. The use of the present progressive tense where the present indefinite tense suffices.

(d) Degree of disturbance caused by errors

A "tolerance study" or degree of irritation that native speakers have for an

error is another criterion for evaluation purposes. Efficiency of communication is however of major importance.

(c) Therapy

To my mind, language teaching is no more than the provision of suitable conditions for language learning. A contrastive analysis should provide each learner with the right conditions at the right time.

What then is the relevance of all this to language teaching? What is the "normal" situation in a classroom? The average teacher has a syllabus, from which he draws up a scheme of work which he proposes to teach to his pupils. It may be argued that the teacher knows intuitively which errors his pupils are going to make, but this is a debatable point. We so often find that teachers teach and re-teach elements of grammar at Secondary School which the pupils had already mastered at Primary School level. At the same time they give little or no attention to other components of the language (e.g. extension of the pupils' lexicon). If the teacher really wishes to achieve target teaching he has to determine what the needs are of his pupils. Once he has determined the problem areas of a specific group of pupils, he can devise a meaningful scheme of work (and this may differ from group to group). Therapy or remedial work can only be attempted if and when the teacher has determined which errors pupils really make.

Indications of the pedagogical relevance of the studies discussed fall into three categories: the problem of correction; the design of syllabuses and remedial programmes; and the writing of pedagogical grammars. All these are related to those studies which I have called error analysis.

The problem of correction is two-fold: what to correct and how to correct. The first question is concerned with the assessment of the gravity of the error in terms of its interference with comprehensibility or the degree of linguistic deviance. The need must be stressed that we have to encourage learners to communicate and that we have to devise correction techniques with this always in mind, for example by requesting rephrasing or amplifying the message, in the way that adults react to infants' utterances in their mother tongue.

The relevance of the actual performance of the students as revealed by the EA to the designing of syllabuses is based on the notion that there is some "natural" sequence of elaboration of the approximative system of the second-language learner, Nemser (1971) and that when this can be well established it would provide a psychological logic to the ordering of material in a

syllabus.

As far as the design of pedagogical grammars is concerned, the effectiveness of the presentation and practising of linguistic materials must ultimately depend upon what is discovered about the actual process and strategies of language learning, Allen (1973).

What is required is a more intelligent realistic appraisal of language materials based on a Contact Analysis approach especially in a language contact situation as we have in South Africa.

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