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CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS AND THE TEACHING OF FL: A RECONSIDERATION

It is well known that contrastive studies are of two kinds: those that aim at the discovery of universal language features through the comparison of two or more languages and have been called «theoretical contrastive studies» (Fisiak et al., 1978:10), and those that compare and contrast languages «with the quite utilitarian aim of improving the method and results of language teaching» (Nickel, 1971:2). It is with the second kind of contrastive studies that we will be concerned here and the term «Contrastive Analysis» will be taken to stand for «applied contrastive studies».

Contrastive Analysis (C.A. from now on) was born out of the need for a better understanding of the workings of language learning in the U.S. in the 50's. As early as 1945 Charles Fries had written: «The most efficient materials are those based on a scientific description for the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner» (Fries 1945:9). Robert Lado, on the other hand, phrased a similar assumption that «we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student. In our view, the preparation of up-to-date pedagogical and experimental materials must be based on this kind of comparison. It has been our experience, further, that able foreign language teachers with proper guidance can carry out such comparisons with satisfactory precision...» (Lado, 1957: vii).

The names of Fries and Lado have since been connected with the beginnings of the move. Lado, himself of an immigrant family of Spanish origin, was in a position to appreciate the extent of the influence of the mother tongue on the process of learning a second language. Furthermore, it was his conviction that the teaching of a second language should draw upon the linguistic science as much as possible. To this end he based his book that was to become a landmark in the history of C.A., on sound linguistic knowledge: «The statements and suggestions contained in these chapters can be translated into rigorous formulas that should satisfy him [the trained linguist]» (Lado, 1957: vi), and addressed it to the trained teacher, the psychologist or educational psychologist, and the linguist. The same view was expressed eight years later in Agard & Di Pietro's *The Sounds of English & Italian*: «We would simply offer... the fruits of a systematic study undertaken within the discipline of the linguistic science. We have no doubt that the experienced reader will find many of our statements very familiar

indeed. We hope he will at the same time encounter much that is new and stimulating. For although the realities of Italian and English exist quite apart from any man's description of them, linguistic science does offer methods and techniques for arriving at accurate insights and for delineating learning problems not always evident in more eclectic approaches» (Agard & Di Pietro, 1965:3).

After *Linguistics across Cultures* saw the light of day in 1957, Ann Arbor, Michigan became the center for research into language teaching/learning matters. Before that, however, other names had appeared that contributed to the study of bilingualism, a related field, namely, those of Weinreich and Haugen. Weinreich's monograph, *Languages in Contact, Findings and Problems*, that had been published some years earlier (1953), became a classic of its kind, while Haugen's research into the linguistic integration of Norwegian immigrants supplemented the literature. In 1962 Professor Charles Ferguson, then Director of the Center for Applied Linguistics of the U.S., saw the need for the edition of a series of contrastive structure studies and the first work to appear was *The Sounds of English & German* by W.G. Moulton. In the general introduction to the series by Ferguson himself one reads the following: «The Center for Applied Linguistics, in undertaking this series, has acted on the conviction held by many linguists and specialists in language teaching that one of the major problems in the learning of a second language is the interference caused by the structural differences between the native language of the learner and the second language» (Moulton, *The Sounds of English & German* General Introduction, 1970, p.v.). Kufner's *The Grammatical Structures of English & German* came out at the same time with Moulton's (1962), while other works were soon to follow, such as Stockwell & Bowen's *The Sounds of English & Spanish* (1965), the above mentioned contrastive analysis between the sounds of English and Italian by Agard & Di Pietro (1965), Agard & Di Pietro's *The Grammatical Structures of English and Italian* (1966), Stockwell, Bowen & Martin's *The Grammatical Structures of English & Spanish* (1975). In parallel to the activities of the Center for Applied Linguistics, important research was carried out and the interest in C.A. increased. The *Monograph Series on Language & Linguistics* of the University of Georgetown, edited by J. Alatis, is one instance of this. In Europe we note a parallel rise of interest in this field of studies, predominantly theoretical, though the applied aspect was «not totally neglected»¹. In later years, a number of European countries, namely Germany, Poland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Roumania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Belgium and Holland responded to the demands of the time with

1. The names of Baudouin de Courtenay, Mathesius, Trnka and others of the Prague School are connected with the issue.

systematic contrastive projects between English and the respective native language² with noteworthy success.

For a number of years C.A. knew unprecedented popularity as professionals in language teaching and learning turned to it for inspiration and guidance. A climate of euphoria reigned and for some time it seemed as though C.A. had the answers for most of the problems encountered by teachers and learners of foreign languages.

C.A. owes its success to a number of reasons. We will briefly go through some of them. It is the tendency of human nature to be attracted by what is new and promising in every field of activity. This is true not only of aspects of human behaviour such as trends in designing, clothes fashions, modes of speaking, etc. but also of theories of disciplines which may be of a longer or shorter duration as their applicability is conditioned by constant research and the progress that is made with every passing day. Naturally, language teaching and learning could be no exception to this rule, especially as C.A. came at a time when the current approaches seemed to have exhausted their weaponry of methods and solutions. «In the heyday of structural linguistics and the pattern practice language teaching methodology which derived insights and justification from such an approach to linguistic description, nothing seemed of greater potential value to language teachers and learners than a comparative and contrastive description of the learner's mother tongue and the target language». This is how Christopher Candlin begins his Preface to Carl James's *Contrastive Analysis* (1980:iii). Indeed, C.A. did seem then of great potential, especially as it was moving away from the taxonomic structural model that had been the typical C.A. approach in its beginnings³, by embracing the notion of transfer grammar as «a theoretical basis and a technique of analysis» (Rusiecki, 1976:23)⁴.

Apart from its newness as an approach, C.A. drew the attention of the specialists in the field by pointing to the direction of the mother tongue. In this way, it placed language learning in a different light by shifting emphasis from teaching strategies towards the learning processes. By bringing the learner's tongue into the scene, C.A. could provide teachers with a better understanding for the occurrence of certain errors. Furthermore, it could provide useful

2. Most of these projects are still in progress with the exception of those of Germany and Sweden that have expired.

3. C.A. has often been linked to the audiolingual approach (Roberts 1982:119) and to structuralism as this was the linguistic frame within which C.A. developed. However, C.A. seems to be more akin to the Sapirian structuralist tradition than the Bloomfieldian or the neo-Bloomfieldian one. (Rusiecki, 1976:33-40).

4. In 1954 Zellig Harris suggested the notion of «transfer grammar» and discussed the problem of the differences between languages and the possibility of measuring those differences.

suggestions as to how one could handle errors of this kind; that is, help the students refrain from repetitions of such errors by reinforcing in them the new L2 habits. Hopefully, C.A. would provide the teacher with the means to eventually eliminate errors of the sort from a student's interlanguage altogether. The particularly strong point of the C.A. approach was the predictability it professed to provide for the occurrence of errors due to L1 interference or negative transfer. By comparing and contrasting two language systems one would be in a position to predict problematic areas, «points of difficulty» (Oller, 1971:79), that would lead the learners of a L2 commit errors because of their L1 habits, as «individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture» (Lado, 1957:2). One would also be in a position to predict the tenacity of some errors that might resist correction (James, 1980:145).

To the above mentioned reasons we may add that the names that connected themselves with the approach and the bulk of serious research that ensued constituted the best guarantee for the success of this «venture in the field of applied linguistics» as Professor Ferguson has called it in his General Introduction to the Contrastive Studies Series editions.

The climate of euphoria that prevailed for almost two decades came to be replaced by scepticism. The criticism that varied from mild to impatient, was threefold: a) theoretical, with regard to the feasibility of comparing languages, b) doubts as to the pedagogic relevance and the effectiveness of the C.A. approach, and c) doubts as to whether predictability, the strong point of C.A., was a reality or simply wishful thinking.

Out of these kinds of criticism b) and c) seem to be the most important ones that admittedly caused a major crisis in the C.A. hypothesis. The practical questions that appeared to press for solutions, such as the designing of the proper courses and materials to be used by teachers, etc. were no little matters and teachers had to be provided with actual assistance. The «insights» and «implications» (Wilkins, 1972: 217 ff) that C.A. had provided so far did not seem to cater for actual classroom situations. The accusation, then, levelled against C.A. was that it had «stopped short of classroom *application*» (James, 1980: 143).

The other serious matter that worried researchers was the assumption that C.A. could account for all errors as well as predict their occurrence. This is at least what Corder seemed to believe: «Another attitude to errors is that *they are all* the result of the influence of the mother tongue on the learning

5. Dulay & Burt's results are in sharp contrast with the results of other researchers in the field. (Grauberg (1971), 36%, L1 German, George (1972), 33% Mixed first languages, Tran-Chi-Chau (1974), 51%, L1 Chinese, Mukattash (1977), 23%, L1 Arabic, Flick (1980), 31%, L1 Spanish, Lott (1983), 50%, L1 Italian). (From Ellis, 1983:29).

process, «interference» as it was called, from the habits of the first language» (Corder, 1982:65, our italics). Empirical research was undertaken; researchers had to turn to tests and statistics for an answer. Dulay & Burt's experiments with Spanish - speaking children of a mixed level showed a very low percentage of 3% in the total of errors to be caused by L1 interference. (Dulay & Burt, 1973, 1974a). Although this outcome was an exception and other researchers came up with striking numbers varying from 23% to 50%, Dulay & Burt's results were considered as constituting «a powerful attack on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis» (Ellis, 1985:28). Moreover, to quote Ellis: «...the main doubt about Contrastive Analysis, from a pedagogic point of view, has arisen from changing attitudes to the role of error in language learning. Contrastive Analysis was predicated on the need to *avoid* error, but if error is seen as a positive aspect — evidence of continued hypothesis testing— then the importance of devising a teaching programme geared to its prevention becomes less obvious. Is it worthwhile, then, doing a contrastive analysis? The answer is that it is only worthwhile if it is considered important to explain why some errors occur...» (Ellis, 1985:32-33)⁶. In short, the bulk of literature gathered to disprove the utility of C.A. can only be compared to the actual C.A. «industry», as Corder would call it (Corder, 1981:65). As research progressed criticism against C.A. would continue in this or that direction until one felt that one had better forget about C.A. and turn for help to other, newer and definitely more effective approaches. C.A. came to be considered as a rather naïve, idealistic assumption, if not an altogether false one. Fortunately this view was not shared by everybody concerned with the issue.

On the other hand, what is of vital importance in the decline of C.A. is not so much the «weaknesses» in its theoretical gear or the impossibility of conducting full scale C.A.s. for teaching purposes. Such works of comparison between English and some of the most common languages in Europe were published and they were quite successful. Those published by The University of Chicago as part of the activities of the Center for Applied Linguistics of the U.S. that we have mentioned earlier, are excellent analyses whether on phonology or structure in general. Other works that appeared in Europe such as those by Filipovic⁷ and Fisiak⁸ are notable.

6. The «hypothesis testing» theory in language acquisition views errors as a learner strategy of testing progress in acquiring a language system be it a L1 or a L2 one. According to this errors cannot be viewed as something to be avoided but as positive steps towards the acquisition of a language.

7. Filipovic, R., Ed., *Contrastive Analysis of English and Serbo-Croatian*. Institute of Linguistics, Zagreb, 1975.

8. Fisiak, et al., *An Introductory English-Polish Contrastive Grammar* Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw, 1978.

However, one thing that one would have to admit, is that it may be uneconomical to conduct apriori analyses of languages when Error Analysis is a more economic way to such problems. Furthermore, «C.A. as a basis for determining a syllabus could only be truly practicable when any particular language class contained learners *sharing the same L1, and only then only of real value if the teacher of the class had a good contrastive knowledge of the L1 and the TL*» (Roberts, 1982: 20, our italics). It is true that if classes are made up of students with no common L1, as the rule is in most English-speaking countries, C.A. cannot be of much use. But what is the case with non-English-speaking countries? With the following words Roberts touches upon the heart of the matter. «... when one is engaged in ELT in an English - speaking country, *it is perhaps sometimes easy to forget that elsewhere in the world, with certain notable exceptions, linguistically and culturally homogeneous groups constitute the norm, and that there is consequently likely to be a greater continuing interest in contrastive studies both with regard to language and to culture*» (Roberts, 1982:120, our italics). Indeed, in those countries where the L1 is a common denominator the teacher will, sooner or later, have to turn to C.A. for help that he cannot expect to find in other approaches. This is why C.A., not so popular in Britain, has flourished in non-English-speaking countries, such as Poland, Finland and Holland, to name a few. The question then that arises is: «Do language teachers have to know other languages?» Or, to carry the point a bit further, «Do they have to know their students' L1?» Naturally, language teachers cannot be expected to be polyglots. It is, however, definitely an advantage for a teacher to be teaching an L2 other than his L1 to students who happen to possess the same L1, over a teacher who teaches his L1 as an L2 to speakers of other languages. In this case, the «insights» that one may gain and the «implications» that he may come upon through a formal C.A. are more easily accessible than they would be in a case of a monolingual language teacher, or a teacher whose knowledge of languages would not include his students' L1. This, in our opinion, explains why C.A., an unpopular issue in English-speaking countries⁹, proved a productive one in non-English-speaking countries. It is noteworthy that the contrastive studies in Finland, that are conducted «under the auspices of the Department of English at the University of Jyväskylä¹⁰», have progressed further than any other similar project in the sense that the aims are more far-reaching and embrace «cross cultural communication analysis», which goes beyond static linguistic analysis. At the same time, being largely empirical in nature, this

9. One should note here, though, that «contrastive studies have attracted *particularly much hope and attention in the United States*» (Marton, 1981:158, our italics).

10. J.T. Roberts, *Recent Developments in ELT*, 2, Surveys 2, ed. Kinsella, Cambridge Language Teaching Surveys, 1982, p.120.

particular branch of C.A. may eventually lead to «soundly based pedagogical practices, and above all, perhaps, to a better understanding of the relationship between language and culture» (Roberts, 1982: 121). In Greece C.A. constitutes an autonomous course at the Department of English of the University of Athens that has been on the syllabus for over ten years. Explicitly contrastive works, of both theoretical and practical nature, have also appeared; one should not fail to mention here the considerable contribution to the field by Professor Efstathiades. The annual Contrastive Studies Symposium organised by the University of Salonica every spring, gathers a number of people interested in the discipline from both the Greek and the international forum. In short, though not an issue of the foreground of FL teaching any more, C.A. is still considered by the professionals in Greece a very important issue.

What, then, one would ask, is the overall impact of C.A. on the teaching and learning of FL? What were the actual benefits to be got out of C.A. eventually? This question can be answered on two levels, a practical and a philosophical one. In actual fact, the contribution to language teaching and learning that C.A. can be credited with is that it opened up a new view, one more window into the workings of language acquisition by bringing in the concept of the mother tongue influence. This is an incontestable fact that should not be ignored. And one cannot deny that C.A. will continue to play «an important role as a contribution to better organization and guidance in foreign language teaching and learning» (Marton, 1981:169).

On the other hand, the fact that C.A. became the cause for a great research activity about teaching and learning matters is in itself a positive step forward. In parallel to the criticism researchers seemed to voice against the inadequacies of C.A., they came up with very interesting results concerning the subtleties of the language learning process; for, the more research was carried out the more sophisticated it seemed to become. Had it not been for C.A. other issues related to the process of learning a FL might not have appeared as self-evident truths as some of us seem to believe. This is the way progress is made, with small steps rather than with great leaps. C.A. in itself is such a step; a natural outcome of the climate of its time, though an inspired one. To this day works are still coming out¹¹, on a major or minor key, that show that C.A. is not an issue of the past but of the present.

11. Such works are the following: *The Fergusonian Impact*, Vol. I, From Phonology to Society, edited by Joshua A. Fishman et al., (Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 1986), and *Learner English: A Teacher's guide to interference and other problems*, edited by M. Swan & B. Smith, (C.U.P., Cambridge, 1987).

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

A. Αποστόλου-Πανάρα, *Η Αντιπαραβολική Ανάλυση Γλωσσών και η Διδασκαλία Ξένων Γλωσσών: Μια αξιολόγηση.*

Η Αντιπαραβολική Ανάλυση είναι μια θεωρητική προσέγγιση στην προβληματική της διδασκαλίας και μάθησης Ξένων γλωσσών η οποία διαγράφει μια ενδιαφέρουσα πορεία στο χώρο αυτό. Τριάντα περίπου χρόνια από την εποχή που εμφανίστηκε εξακολουθεί να είναι μια αμφιλεγόμενη περιοχή με θερμούς υποστηρικτές και φανατικούς πολέμιους. Με την εργασία αυτή αφενός προσπαθούμε να διερευνήσουμε μερικούς από τους λόγους για τους οποίους η θεωρητική αυτή προσέγγιση προκάλεσε τόσο ενδιαφέρον και αφετέρου επιχειρούμε μια αξιολόγησή της ως φάσης στην εξέλιξη των θεωριών του χώρου. Οι θέσεις που προτείνονται είναι ότι α) η επιτυχής εφαρμογή της προσέγγισης αυτής είναι συνδεδεμένη με το γλωσσικό περιβάλλον μέσα στο οποίο γίνεται η διδασκαλία και η εκμάθηση μιας ξένης γλώσσας, β) η συμβολή της Αντιπαραβολικής Ανάλυσης έγκειται στο ότι επεσήμανε τη σημασία του ρόλου της μητρικής γλώσσας στην εκμάθηση γλωσσών, και γ) απετέλεσε σημαντικό βήμα για την εξέλιξη των νεωτέρων θεωριών του χώρου.