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English Contrastive Studies

From the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century

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Introduction

Contrastive linguistics has a much longer history than is commonly assumed in the literature on the subject. Di Pietro (1971) traces the beginnings of contrastive linguistics to the fall of the 19th century and mentions such names as Grandgent (1982), Viëtor (1984), and Passy (1906) as the authors of the first contrastive studies.

In his Introduction to Di Pietro's monograph Dwight Bolinger says: "Contrastive linguistics was born of classroom experience. Every teacher of a foreign language knows, and every student of a foreign language soon finds out, that the native language of the learner interferes in specific and predictable ways at each new step in acquiring a second language. The teacher's bag of tricks consists mainly of ways to overcome that interference." (Bolinger 1971: vii). Also Szwedek observes that "It is very difficult to trace the beginnings of contrastive linguistics. Comparison of languages is as old as languages themselves and as old as contacts between speakers of different languages." (Szwedek 1976: 4). However, neither Bolinger nor Szwedek substantiate these general observations with any examples of earlier contrastive studies.

On the other hand, Fisiak claims that early contrastive studies "were predominantly theoretical" (Fisiak 1978: 11) and, in addition to the studies mentioned by Di Pietro, he adds works by Baudouin de Courtenay (1912) and Bogorodickij (1915).

Yet, so far there have been no attempts to produce historical evidence supporting the claim that contrastive analysis, regardless of what term one uses to refer to it, indeed goes back to many centuries preceding our own. The present monograph is an account of contrastive studies conducted in Great Britain and documented in written materials originating between the middle of the 15th century and the end of the 18th century. These materials show that contrastive studies were conducted systematically, covered a large scope of language data in various languages and occasioned a number of theoretical and methodological problems, some of which anticipated those that have constituted the mainstream of modern contrastive studies. Though one cannot talk about explicit reflection and formulation of various methodological and theoretical issues, which became clear only as a result of the progress in general linguistic theory, in their germinal shape and implicitly they were present in those early studies. Thus, negative and positive transfer, with the accompanying efforts to counteract the former and utilize the latter, though referred to by different linguistic expressions, quite clearly motivated these earliest contrastive studies. The perpetual concern of all involved in comparisons, i.e. *tertium comparationis*, determining what is and what is not

equivalent across languages, though not expressly formulated, was inevitably hovering in the wings, and occasionally prompted new methodological techniques.

Though the word “contrastive”, not to mention the expression “contrastive studies”, was not systematically used until the heyday of contrastive linguistics in the middle of the twentieth century, the procedure of comparing various aspects of the native and the foreign language has a very long tradition. Naturally, theoretical and methodological difficulties inherent in cross-linguistic comparisons were not stated in those early studies, nor was the identity of contrastive studies as a separate branch of linguistic research realized. Yet, it is evident that many of the difficulties which bedevil modern contrastive studies were very much part and parcel of those early studies to the extent to which such studies were made possible by the state of the art in grammar writing. One of the reasons why contrastive studies, for centuries, failed to establish themselves as a separate scholarly discipline was that cross-linguistic comparisons were taken for granted as an integral part of any efficient teaching method. It was simply unthinkable that anyone could attempt to learn a foreign language without making some contrastive references to one’s native language. This tendency to compare is merely an expression of the fundamental human faculty of learning new things by likening them to those already familiar, which led to the formulation of the well known didactic principle of proceeding *a noto ad ignotum*.

Among the crucial methodological difficulties of contrastive studies are those connected with equivalence, which is practically manifested as the difficulty with finding a *tertium comparationis* motivating the selection of particular items considered to be comparable. (cf. Krzeszowski 1984, 1989). It is axiomatic to say that only things which have something in common are at all comparable. For centuries, the decisions about what in one language can be compared with what in another one were based on intuitive judgments of grammarians themselves, who never questioned the existence of some universal properties present in all human languages, against which languages could be compared. Yet, though based on intuitive decisions, these early studies worked out comparative techniques permitting extensive contrastive analyses of sounds, of various grammatical phenomena and of lexical items. These studies were, moreover, motivated by the deeply nourished conviction that the knowledge of the native language may be both beneficial and detrimental in learning another language, and that in either case comparisons of the two languages are necessary. Their results were expected to lead to the elimination of the problems emerging from differences and to taking the best advantage of similarities. As we shall see a number of early contrastive grammarians expressed these views quite extensively (cf. Hewes, Lewis, Coles and others), and in this way they laid factual foundations of modern concepts of positive and negative transfer (interference) as well as methods of controlling the former and counteracting the latter.

The earliest methodological framework associated with contrastive descriptions of two languages became known under a rather unfortunate term “the sign theory”. The word “theory” in collocation with the word “sign” was used by Vorlat (1963) to provide a label for a method of describing certain grammatical phenomena in English, in contrast with Latin. For the first time the method was used in the middle of 15th century, and it continued to be used until the end of the 18th century. Although the concept “sign” is frequently mentioned by various authors dealing with history of English grammars (e.g., in Poldauf 1948, Vorlat 1964, Michael 1970) “the sign theory” as a method in contrastive studies was recognized by the present author in 1985. It must be noted that the word “theory” in collocation with the word “sign” was not used by contemporary authors even if the method of comparison which Vorlat chose to call “the sign theory” was employed in very numerous works in the course of about four centuries. To avoid proliferation of terms I am going to use the term “the sign theory” in the present work, with the understanding that the “theory” was only implicit in the comparisons.

“The sign theory” was a product of an attempt to reconcile the grammatical description of Latin with the description of English. Such a reconciliation was necessitated by the contact of the two languages in the medieval classroom. Very early in the history of Latin instruction schoolmasters realized that the knowledge of grammar of one language may facilitate the learning of another language. Some traces of this realization can be found in Ælfric’s *Grammatica* written ca. 1000 A.D. According to Michael (1970) Ælfric’s grammar is a forerunner of a certain tendency in the writing of both Latin and vernacular grammars to form a single volume. This approach developed gradually and was promoted by various practical and theoretical reasons. Firstly, there was a need to teach Latin in the vernacular tongue. Secondly, the concept of universal grammar attracted growing attention grammarians and schoolmasters. Universal grammar provided grounds for discovering similarities between vernacular and classical languages. The awareness of these similarities (and consequently of differences) could be used, it was hoped, both to facilitate the learning of Latin through the vernacular and to increase the command of the vernacular languages through Latin. This is how Ælfric stated the purpose of his grammar:

I have endeavored to translate these extracts from Priscian for you, tender youths, in order that, when you have read through Donatus’ eight parts in this little book, you may be able to appropriate the Latin and English languages for the sake of attainment in higher studies.

(After White 1898: 110)

Yet, in Ælfric’s grammar, in spite of Ælfric’s introductory words (see Chapter I), the emphasis was on Latin, while references to English were unsystematic

and far between. Even if it is true that, as Robins observes, Ælfric “was aware of differences between the two languages” (Robins 1967: 71), differences between Latin and Old English were not conspicuous enough to merit great attention in any theoretical terms. Both the languages were “synthetic” and could be described in terms of the same grammatical categories.

More than four centuries later, when “the sign theory” began to emerge, the situation had changed radically. By the end of the fifteenth century English had dropped most of its endings and shifted towards the status of a positional language, in which many grammatical relations were expressed by means of word order and function words. Any attempt to bring the two grammars under one cover was now bound to result in a clash caused by the now conspicuous grammatical differences between Latin and English which had come about in the course of the four centuries. It was no longer possible to equate Latin inflections characterizing particular cases of nouns or tenses of verbs with parallel phenomena in English since Early Modern English lacked inflections, so abundant in Latin and in Old English. “The sign theory” was a result of the realization that English expressed by “signs”, ie. mainly by prepositions and auxiliaries, what Latin did by inflections. Thus, “the sign theory” was a method of comparing grammatical phenomena in two languages, initially Latin and English, whereby equivalence was established between different grammatical signals on the grounds that they express identical notions. In this way a tacit assumption was made about some *tertium comparationis* as a necessary basis for comparisons. Naturally enough, the crucial notion in “the sign theory” was that of “sign”, which was a cover term embracing a variety of English function words as expressions of those categories which in Latin were expressed by means of inflections.

It is interesting to note that the few authors who concern themselves with “the sign theory” are divided in their views on the role which it played in the emancipation of the English grammar from Latin. Meech (1935), who discovered the earliest materials showing the application of “the sign theory”, seems to underrate its significance. He writes about his materials in the following way:

They afford by far the earliest explicit evidence we have of the influence of Latin grammar on Englishmen’s concept of their own language [...]. They identify the genitive, dative, and accusative by the use of certain English prepositions as the “signs” of the genitive, dative, or accusative.

(Meech 1935: 1013-1014)

On the other hand, Vorlat is of the opinion that

The sign-theory is the first important step toward freeing English grammar from Latin.

(Vorlat 1963, I: 190)

The disagreement is probably a consequence of the fact that neither author realized that “the sign theory” implicitly anticipated what many years later became clear due to the advances in linguistic theory, viz. that grammar mediates between content and expression (cf. for example, Hjelmslev 1963: 47). Seen in this light “the sign theory” was the first implementation of the basically correct intuition about different, language specific, realizations of similar, or perhaps identical, concepts.

The texts discovered by Meech established a long tradition of contrastive approaches to English, and similar passages can be found in various grammars of English in the subsequent centuries. But other contrastive techniques developed as well and some of them were rediscovered much later, following the development of modern linguistics. We shall demonstrate that various crucial problems connected with contrastive studies and foreign language teaching, such as interference, error analysis, and equivalence, though unnamed, were very much present in those early studies, and they largely affected the format of many pedagogical grammars written in those days.

The historical materials substantiating these general observations will be presented by authors, in the chronological order, except when talking about “the sign theory” and some methodological developments in the 17th and 18th centuries, where thematic considerations may override chronological ones. Biographical notes are based on the *Dictionary of national biography* and, partly, in some cases, on information found in the cited works, particularly their title pages. Therefore, title pages of all major works, usually quite lengthy, are given in full since they sometimes provide invaluable information about authors and almost always about the contents of the works referred to. In most instances they inform the reader about the contents of particular books and in this way play the role of modern “tables of contents”. Whenever possible original sources were studied, though in some cases facsimile reprints published by The Scolar Press and edited by R.A. Alston (1970) were resorted to. The catalogue numbers of these reprints are given in the appropriate places. References to Alston concern the Editor’s introductory notes preceding the facsimile reprints. Longish quotations from original sources are primarily intended to provide the reader with those samples of the most representative works dealing with early contrastive studies which best demonstrate methods and techniques employed by the respective authors. It is my belief that they may also provide some amusement.