

Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, Interlanguage¹

Paul Lennon

1. Contrastive analysis, structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology

The main idea of contrastive analysis, as propounded by Robert Lado in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957), was that it is possible to identify the areas of difficulty a particular foreign language will present for native speakers of another language by systematically comparing the two languages and cultures. Where the two languages and cultures are similar, learning difficulties will not be expected, where they are different, then learning difficulties are to be expected, and the greater the difference, the greater the degree of expected difficulty. On the basis of such analysis, it was believed, teaching materials could be tailored to the needs of learners of a specific first language. Lado himself was an English and Spanish bilingual, who was born in America of Spanish parents, grew up in Spain and then went to college in the USA. He was all too aware of the importance of cultural difference in mastering a foreign language. However, his appeal to compare cultures was not taken up, and in practice contrastive analysis focussed on a surface comparison of languages, starting with the sounds, then the grammar and finally - and only selectively - the vocabulary.

This emphasis reflected the focus of American linguistics at the time, which was still very much under the influence of structuralism as espoused by the great American structuralist Bloomfield in *Language* (1933). Structural linguistics viewed language as a rule-governed system which could be separated into hierarchically arranged sub-systems, each of which had its own internal patterns and structure. The lowest level in the hierarchy was phonology, then morphology, then syntax. The lexicon received scant attention from structuralists and the discursive level of language was quite ignored. In fact, structural linguistics coped best with closed or finite linguistic systems, and, for this reason, deliberately excluded semantics from its description. Bloomfield's (1933: 140) conclusion that "the statement of meanings is therefore the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state" is often quoted.

In the period immediately after World War II there was renewed interest in language learning and language teaching in the United States, and efforts were made at the University of Michigan to apply the ideas of structural linguistics to language teaching, perhaps most influentially by Charles Fries (1945). The approach to language teaching advocated by the Michigan School laid great emphasis on the principled selection and grading of linguistic items for instruction. It was essentially an analytic, atomistic approach, which took a language apart in order to then put the parts back together again in their logical order during the teaching process, and in this sense it claimed to be scientific. Lado himself actually studied at the University of Michigan with Fries, and contrastive analysis became the basis for the strict selection and grading of material for teaching which was characteristic of language courses at the time. Fries advocated a bottom-up approach to language learning from phonology to morphology to syntax with vocabulary being held to a minimum:

[...] the chief problem is not at first that of learning vocabulary items. It is, first, the mastery of the sound system[...]; second, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language. (Fries 1945: 3)

This structuralist emphasis of the Michigan School found its expression in audio-lingual language teaching, which sought to drill structural patterns, proceeding from the simple to the complex, while filling the slots in the patterns with a limited number of lexical items and insisting on correct pronunciation (e.g. *I brush my teeth with a tooth-brush, I brush my shoes with a shoe-brush, I brush my hair with a hair-brush*).

Contrastive analysis became associated with behaviorist psychology, which was another separate influence on language teaching, particularly on audiolingual language teaching, and especially in the United States. Behaviorism was a general theory of learning. It viewed learning as habit formation brought about by repeated patterns of stimulus, response and reinforcement. For language teaching this fitted in nicely with the pedagogue's piece of folk wisdom that "practice makes perfect". In other words, learners should be provided with a linguistic stimulus (for example a question to answer, a sentence to put into the negative form, a word to put into the plural form) and be told whether their answer was right (positive

¹ From S. Granley and V. Granley (eds) (2008) *Bielefeld Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. Bielefeld:

Journal of Applied Linguistics, 49, 1-10

Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1

Brendan G. Carr



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Table of Contents Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1

1. Understanding the eBook Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 User Reviews and Ratings
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 Free and Paid eBooks
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 Public Domain eBooks
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 eBook Subscription Services
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 eBook Formats

- ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 Compatibility with Devices
 - Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1 Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Interactive Elements Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 8. Staying Engaged with Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Setting Reading Goals Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Contrastive Analysis Error Analysis Interlanguage 1
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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