

Contrastive Analysis and the Language Learner: a Matter of Direction

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“Es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt.”

For as long too as Man has tried to learn a foreign language he has erred, and in his path have come all those of us who - as teachers or linguists - have been intrigued by the errors learners make. But error analysis has also provoked some of the bitterest controversies: in particular, to what extent can one attribute learners' errors to interference from the native language (NL), as the proponents of contrastive analysis (CA) would have us believe? The answer has been estimated at anything between 5 and 79%, so deep-rooted was the disagreement.

Today, however, that dispute appears to have been settled, with the growing realisation that many errors are inherently ambiguous and cannot be attributed with certainty to either NL interference or to any intralingual cause; several psychological processes are in fact occurring simultaneously. But if CA has been rehabilitated into the world of error analysis, much remains to be discussed and Lado's simplistic equation of difference and difficulty must be refined.

Two questions warrant our particular attention as language teachers. First, whilst much has been said about the relative extent of difference (or 'distance') between different pairs of languages, far less consideration has been given in determining the **causes** of error to the types of difference between a specific pair of languages. and, secondly, too little thought has been given to the question of directionality: for example, will English learners of French and French learners of English experience the same degree of difficulty with the same grammatical items?

These two questions in fact seem to be inseparable: it will be my contention that a knowledge of the type of difference between an L1 and an L2 structure can itself help us to understand why a particular error occurs and, in turn, whether learners of English and French as foreign languages will be equally affected.

My examples will be chiefly limited to verbal syntax: this is, both an especially

rich field for the error analyst and a more challenging domain for CA than either phonology or lexis. Any contrastive analysis, however - and this must be stressed from the outset - must examine each language equally and as such is intrinsically adirectional. It is only when we seek to exploit a CA pedagogically that directionalities emerge, and it is precisely for this reason that we, as language teachers, should be especially concerned with the matter of direction.

The same, but different:

The simplest kind of difference we may distinguish is when English demands one grammatical form and French another one to convey the same meaning. The case of English 'for/since' and French 'depuis' is notorious, leading to errors of tense such as:

I am living here since three years. (Angers)

J'ai travaillé à Woolworths depuis un an. (MGS)

The use of the present tense in French and the present perfect in English is a problem also in constructions such as:

I suppose it's the first time she comes in that restaurant. (Angers)

C'est la première fois qu'il s'est présenté à une élection. (MGS)

Errors of this kind appear to be equally common on either side of the Channel.

Rarely, however, is the asymmetry between English and French so straightforward. We may isolate a second type of difference where a form exists in one language and not in the other: the use of the so-called 'historic present' as a French narrative tense will provide an illustration. English does have a 'historic present' too but its use is now almost wholly limited to the colloquial, spoken variety of the language (e.g. in telling jokes) and it is rare in narrative; it would not be used to relate either the life-story of Arthur Koestler or the career of two gangsters on the run, where *Le Monde* and *France-Soir* respectively use the present in French. When these two texts were given to a third year university translation class many of the students did indeed try to use the present tense in English.

But if it is difficult to learn that a feature does not exist 'tel quel' in the target language (TL), to learn to omit it from the TL inventory, then it is even more difficult to learn to include or add something, particularly if the learner must decide what to include.

L'embarras du choix

Optional alternatives

Were an English student to be given Arthur Koestler's obituary to translate into French he would be relatively unlikely to use the present tense, probably preferring the 'passé historique'. Both would be correct, but where one of the possible alternatives is similar to a structure or usage found in his NL the learner will tend to prefer that one and risk 'over-indulging' in it.

A striking example of 'under-representation' and 'over-indulgence' is presented by the passive: at first the English student of French tends to use the French passive indiscriminately whenever English would use one. This may lead to erroneous (or, at best, improbable) utterances such as:

Vous êtes demandé de... (MGS)

et cette place a été prise par moi (acquaintance of the writer).

More natural French versions might be:

On vous demande de ...

C'est moi qui ai pris cette place.

It is relatively easy, in contrast, for the French student to master the use of the English passive.

Obligatory alternatives

These present a greater problem still to the learner since his choice may alter substantially the communicative content of his utterance. Consider the English 'must' and 'have/need to': in the affirmative these are virtually equivalent and the French learner will often use them interchangeably. In the negative, however, they are no longer equivalent; thus we find errors such as:

You don't have to complain (Angers).

The learner fails to distinguish between what Halliday terms 'thesis negative' (you must not complain) and 'modality negative' (you don't have to complain). In French, on the other hand, 'devoir' + 'ne ... pas' may represent both types of negative and so does not constitute a significant problem for the English learner. In short, it is generally easier to go from a complex system to a simpler one than vice-versa (although a learner may sometimes find it difficult to believe that a

simpler system can be sufficiently subtle or versatile).

Interlingual level shifts

The modal verbs will provide us also with an example of what James terms 'interlingual level shifts', potentially the most complex type of language difference for the learner to master. Both English and French allow the expression of a 'strong' obligation (he must do *it/il doit le faire*) as well as a weaker form (he ought to do *it/il devrait le faire*). Whereas French uses a different verb form (i.e. the conditional) to effect this distinction, English uses a different lexical item. If the French learner does not take this 'shift' into account, errors such as this may result:

We would must help him (Angers).

Further illustrations of such shifts are provided by the different mechanisms of English and French to give emphasis. For instance, where English uses an emphatic stress, French may use a syntactic repetition: compare 'Well, I'm not going to have it' and '*En tout cas, moi, je ne tolérerai pas ça*'. Emphasis is often one of the most difficult aspects of either English or French for the foreign learner; that it should so frequently require just this kind of interlingual level shift does much to explain that difficulty.

Contrastive analysis - for teachers ... and learners

CA, it is certain, can be a valuable tool for the language teacher with a monolingual class. But it is equally certain that CA must be used in a more sophisticated way than in the past: the model I provide above can only serve as a pointer to the way in which a teacher may decide which items are likely to cause greatest difficulty, and to whom.

Capisto-Borde and Malovany-Chevalier have already brought errors back from the cold and into the classroom and have encouraged their students to analyse their own mistakes. I cannot altogether share their explanation of error causes but feel that they would agree that the time is right to make CA work for the student as well as his or her teacher. We need to develop not only linguistic and communicative competence but metalinguistic and metacommunicative competence and awareness too. We as teachers - and increasingly our students as well - need to know how we communicate and the problems this entails; now, more than ever, contrastive analysis has a part to play and demands our attention.