
Some Controversies in Present-Day Error Analysis : 'Contrastive' vs. 'Non-Contrastive' Errors*

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Abstract

On the relationship between Contrastive Linguistics (CL) and Error Analysis (EA) views have been changing. To some extent these changes in views display a recognizable geographical distribution. Thus it is interesting to note that CL studies are still strongly represented in the major part of Europe, Southeast Asia and the Far East, while they have declined in the USA, though in the field of pragmatics a rising interest in the latter country is noticeable. Where CL still has a firm basis, there seems to be agreement that the CL factor is still a very important one, and that phenomena like 'interference' and 'transfer' can still be explained, at least to a certain extent, in the light of CL.

Some scholars in the USA tend to assign little importance to the contrastive element, as is evident in some of the publications referred to in the present article. It is no longer disputable that CL and EA research in Europe and other parts of the world has never contended that errors are predictable entirely on a contrastive basis. Not even the majority of errors stem from contrastive interference. There are many social and psychological factors to be taken into consideration, but interlingual interference is still regarded as a very strong component in contrast to many other factors more difficult to analyse and define.

The great numerical discrepancy between errors interpreted as being 'interferential' and those categorized as 'developmental' still calls for explication. Some explanations for this discrepancy may be: (1) The complexity of the possible causes of errors; (2) the distinction between FL and SL situations; a great deal of research in the USA of the type mentioned above deals with SL situations. It cannot be pointed out too often that CL and EA are two important and separate disciplines in the field of applied linguistics, which are certainly not conterminous but which have an area of overlap the size of which varies depending on many pragmatic, psychological and social factors. It may certainly expand, under certain conditions (phonology, FL learning age group, emotional stress, to mention only some of the important ones), to something like thirty per cent of the entire field covered by both disciplines.

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First of all the present author would like to explain the reasons for having chosen the above title :

(1) Having to prepare the programme for a symposium of AILA's Scientific Commission on Contrastive Linguistics and Error Analysis for AILA's next world congress in Sydney from August 16 to August 21, 1987, and being under time pressure, he wanted to 'kill two birds with one stone', contributing to the Festschrift and at the same time preparing for the above-mentioned task.

(2) In two recent contributions the present author has dealt with some aspects of these controversies and felt that further statements and details were necessary.¹ Needless to say, the whole subject would deserve the length of a book and not just the following short article, which can only contain a few major issues of the present dispute without trying to go into detail.²

In an article on "Contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interlanguage : three phases of one goal", S.N. Sridhar tries to show the harmonious evolution and coexistence of these three areas of research and makes the following well-justified statement :

"Thus one sees a tendency in the current literature to downplay the role of first-language interference, and an overeagerness to explain away what seem to be patently interference errors in terms of some other strategy felt to be more respectable or consistent with the view of the target language, [sic] learner as an active experimenter with language."

He then continues :

"Consequently, while one readily grants that an explanatory account of target

language learner's performance must include other components besides interlingual interference, contrastive analysis still remains the most rigorously worked out component of the theory."³

He finally ends with the following interesting prediction :

"The next few years will probably see a flurry of proposals for the study of the other major processes claimed to influence the target language learner's performance."⁴

Undoubtedly the latter prediction seems to have been more than fulfilled when looking at statements like the following in H. Dulay, M. Burt, S. Krashen, *Language Two* (from now on *Language Two*) :⁵

"The first language has long been considered the villain in second language learning, the major cause of a learner's problems with the new language. . . .

To a large extent, controversies over the role of the first language in second language acquisition have resulted from vague and varying uses of the terms 'interference' and 'transfer'. When the terms are clarified and when empirical data is assembled, there appears to be a convergence of opinion on the role of the first language in second language acquisition. Despite a long history of assumption to the contrary, present research results suggest that the major impact the first language has on second language acquisition may have to do with accent, not with grammar or syntax. . . . (p. 96)

[One may wonder what is understood in this context by 'grammar' or 'syntax', especially since (p. 102) 'morphology' is added.]

"The change in the perceived role of the first language began with the observation that the number of errors in second language performance that could be attributed to first language influence was far smaller than had been imagined previously. ..."

(p. 102)
 "Error analysis has yielded insights into the L2 acquisition process that has stimulated major changes in teaching practices. Perhaps its most controversial contribution has been the discovery that the majority of the grammatical errors second language learners make do not reflect the learner's mother tongue but are very much like those young children make as they learn a first language. Researchers have found that like L1 learners' errors most of the errors L2 learners make indicate they are gradually building an L2 rule system." (p. 138)

In opposition to the latter statements one finds the following :

"In the face of increasing quantities of L2 data, researchers have begun to once again focus their attention on language transfer, realizing that the baby had been mercilessly thrown out with the bathwater. The pendulum in recent years has now begun to settle with language transfer being investigated as a phenomenon of importance in and of itself. In fact, a quick look at the table of contents of this volume should suffice to acquaint the reader with the breadth and pervasiveness of studies included in recent investigations into language transfer."⁶ (p. 7)

Indeed an interesting controversy!

Since both publications refer widely to CA, a few remarks should be allowed here,

which are far from being new and therefore will be kept very short. Since the literature on CA with or without reference to EA has become so immense, it is not possible here to refer to all individual articles. Fortunately many of them are contained in some of the well-known readers, AILA Proceedings, and anthologies on CA.⁷

Most of the critics, especially in the USA, based their criticism on the well-known CA statements made by taxonomists like C.C. Fries concerning the setting up of "most effective materials" and also problems "created by the first language habits."⁸ It is true that researchers like Fries and Lado were more optimistic, but even they were too often quoted out of context, and one can rightly assume that neither was against further empirical research, as for instance, Lado's statement "that individuals *tend* [emphasis added by the present author] to transfer..." seems to suggest.⁹

As J. Fisiak has clearly pointed out, CA has been fed by different streams and sources, thus explaining why research in different parts of the world was based on different assumptions, which applies particularly to some of the differences in this domain between research in Europe and the USA. Thus, for instance, at least to the present author's knowledge, behavioristic-taxonomic-structural principles did not underlie any European project. This geographical difference, interestingly enough, also applies to the highly disputed relationship between CA and EA as clearly seen, for instance, at congresses of applied linguistics.¹⁰ In principle the European projects were meant to deal mainly with problems of CA on a descriptive and theoretical level, not, however, excluding applied CA including its pedagogical

relevance within limited ranges in foreign language teaching particularly to advanced learners. EA was also meant to be one component apart from corpus data and the native-speaker element in research methodology as, for instance, used by Filipović, the present author and others. When more and more psychological and sociolinguistic elements were introduced, there was still room for the type of 'contrastive error', though, again, always in a limited function. No contrastive linguist thought that 'interference', 'transfer'¹¹ or whatever term may be used for it was the only type of error or even a dominating one. The role of CA was anyway not so much to predict as to rather explain errors that had happened. By using EA for the reasons mentioned above, some non-contrastive researchers in the field of applied linguistics may have got the wrong impression that EA was a main component in CA, which it never was. EA was used as long as it seemed to have something to do with CA. CA researchers also recognized very early that there were varying degrees of contrastive influences much stronger on phonological and, though less, on lexical than on grammatical and stylistic levels with many other factors of a linguistic, psychological and sociological type to be of effect,¹² thus leading to wider definitions of the 'transfer' phenomenon.¹³

Apart from the methodological reason mentioned above, there was also the insight that 'contrastive' errors constituted *in toto* an element substantial enough to be of interest for CA researchers. In this connection something may have happened that always tends to happen and, as will be shown below, happens in modern CA-independent EA research as well, namely that in some cases

an error was claimed for CA, which could have also been claimed by other sources, proving the well-known fact that in many domains of research, not only linguistic ones, sometimes several reasons may be responsible for one and the same phenomenon, in this case an error. This allowed scholars of different directions to claim errors for their own theory. This may, among other factors of the psychological and sociological type, account for some of the great differences within error statistics in present-day controversies.

The interlanguage (IL) phenomenon, which is sometimes seen as a completely new development, has rather to be seen as an evolutionary phase developing out of CA, though it is also connected with various other theoretical and applied factors. Some of these are linked with more recent socio- and psycholinguistic insights, and particularly, though not exclusively, with one of the pet ideas of the recent decades, namely the concept of universals. Another important factor was the attempt to establish as many parallels as possible between L1 and L2 learning.¹⁴

It would take too much time to describe the widely different views in this field, which often even vary chronologically within one scholar's academic life, a case in question being S.P. Corder, one of the main representatives of this idea.¹⁵ Many of the contributions in this field emphasize the important role of the L1 in connection with the learning of further languages. It is interesting to note that, as in the case of S.P. Corder, the contrastive element is considered to be strong in connection with certain factors, which are mentioned several times in his paper just mentioned, such as phonology, lexis,¹⁶ teaching methodology, and age of the learner.¹⁷

As shown above, one of the main protagonists of the IL idea, L. Selinker, concedes an important role to language transfer. Other contributions contained in the same book¹⁸ do so too and offer further proofs. Thus a certain continuity can be seen between CA and IL research, with CA researchers of the type described above having no problem in accepting the IL concept in spite of the reservations some of them may have concerning the homogeneity, definition and usefulness of the concept, particularly in practical contexts.

But now let us pass on to a kind of 'CA-independent' EA research¹⁹ as described in *Language Two* emphasizing the complexity of the learning process, not unknown to CA researchers, thus trying to be rather process- than product-oriented.²⁰ Their criticism of the role of CA in EA was already touched upon above. A detailed discussion of all points raised by them would require a whole book. Here only a few points will be discussed.

That the majority of the grammatical errors second language learners make do not reflect the learner's mother tongue is not really a 'discovery'. If there have ever been any CA researchers who have tended to the view that the majority of FL errors are mother-tongue induced, then these scholars have no doubt included phonological and phonetic aberrations in their catalogue of errors and perhaps interpreted 'majority' in relative terms of persistence and 'class membership', contrasting errors in the relative majority class to other categories of error, which, at least on the surface, are more difficult to identify because they belong to less homogeneous groups.²¹ The authors' criticism of error taxonomies, including criticism levelled against the confusion of explanatory

and descriptive aspects of EA (pp. 141 ff.), is relevant for several of the taxonomies based on surface descriptions (omissions, etc.). But their criticism of so-called 'comparative taxonomy' (p. 163 ff.), which deals with intra-, inter- and so-called developmental errors, presupposes rather too optimistically that we know more about the complexity of FL learning processes than we actually do. The error types mentioned in this chapter tried to reveal at least part of the psychological factors underlying errors. Only more knowledge about learning processes will lead to clearer statements.

It is a pity that a clearer distinction between SL and FL learners has not been made explicit from the very beginning, though, when describing experiments, the distinction between learning a language in the host country or under FL conditions is made, particularly with reference to experiments undertaken by other researchers. This is too important a distinction not to have been mentioned from the very beginning.²²

Only a minority of the tests and experiments referred to in the above-mentioned chapters take account of genuine FL conditions, i.e. teaching under highly artificial and restricted conditions. The present author would therefore suggest that more FL experiments are undertaken. It is the author's belief that this may be one of several factors accounting for differences in EA research during the last two decades. In connection with further experiments social and personal factors will have to be given more weight than hitherto. Only a few can be mentioned here.

It has been the author's long-standing experience that under conditions of stress, as in examinations, transfers will increase

even in the case of very advanced students. Inhibited and introverted learners very often succumb to interference more often than more extroverted ones, particularly in situations where spontaneous responses are called for. This psychological fact would also have to be taken into account in connection with 'indirect' transfer phenomena such as over-compensation and hypercorrectness.

The latter phenomena may not only be psychological ones limited to individuals, but also sociological ones. In this case we may even have to take into consideration different kinds of group behaviour and, perhaps, with a daringly high degree of generalization, national differences, though one would have to investigate first the role of different methods given preference in certain national contexts.²³

As also discussed in *Language Two*, elicitation types play a very important role.²⁴ Here again we need more data. It has been the author's experience that translation is not necessarily a type of elicitation resulting in more transfer errors than, for instance, free composition. Certain types of students realize that translations do contain transfer 'temptations' and therefore are more careful than they would be in doing free composition where they very often tend to neglect form because of their interest in communication and content. Needless to say, different kinds of method (for instance more formal *vs.* less formal ones) will also sometimes account for different results.²⁵ So, of course, will the often discussed question of whether L1 and L2 languages are related or not.²⁶ Also relevant is whether one or several FLs are being learned simultaneously or in succession, though the latter possibility carries less weight.²⁷

A long list of factors can be mentioned here which show how important it is to combine in modern research qualitative and quantitative considerations, while not overrating purely quantitative research.²⁸

Though practising teachers and participants of congresses on applied linguistics may have sometimes relied upon impressions when attributing a very important influence to transfer errors and may not in all cases have done statistical research, their findings should not be overlooked or neglected. Since most of them were not misled by preconceptions, their findings should not be swept aside by applied linguists who view errors from a different theoretical point of view. This seems all the more important to the author since, as in all research, theories very often modify interpretations of facts.²⁹

Especially the chapter on "Transitional Constructions" in *Language Two* shows another problem. Researchers interested in universals have selected for treatment only certain parts of grammar like negation, questions and relative clauses, very often in connection with child language. Negation indeed is perhaps one of the fields where there may be universal agreement. But even here analyses of the *do*-periphrasis and tag questions as controlled by German learners of English who are not aware of the problem of the '*do*-periphrasis' and 'tag questions' may show that some of the so-called universals are more in evidence in beginners rather than in adults.

But again and again one can find different and controversial views even on grammatical structures like relative clauses.³⁰ What is missing is a *systematic* analysis of errors in *all* grammatical areas. Such investigations would most probably discover

that there are constructions which are particularly prone to transfers.³¹ All German teachers of English know how difficult categories on the borderline between grammar and lexis are like prepositions, particularly in connection with idiomatic structures where German learners of English would rather say *‘characteristic for’ and *‘typical for’.

One cannot help avoiding the impression that ‘developmental’ errors are often given precedence in some of the modern EA research, as also happens in *Language Two*.³² But there are also other views.³³ This again is probably due to the trend to find universals. To begin with, the fact that errors of learners of a native language coincide with errors made by FL learners does not prove necessarily that they are of the developmental type. Though they look alike, they may still be due to different reasons. Besides, sometimes the concept of the definition of ‘developmental errors’ is conceived very widely so as to be able to account for as many factors as possible. Thus, for instance, R.C. Major tries to account for the well-known Brazilian pronunciation error in connection with stops not followed by vowels (ab[i]solutamente instead of absolutamente):

“However, learners who realize that [i] paragoge marks a heavy accent may suppress this tendency, but often substitute [e] instead. [e] paragoge is a developmental process since it does not occur in native Portuguese phonology, although it occurs in L1 acquisition of English (especially after voiced stops as a kind of ‘voicing insurance’, (e.g. dog [ə])). Thus, these two types of paragoge in Brazilian learners of English are suitable to investigate the relationship of transfer and developmental substitutions because

[i] paragoge is transfer (occurs in native Portuguese) and [e] paragoge is developmental (does not occur in Portuguese but occurs in L1 acquisition of English).”³⁴

First of all, the reason for using [ə] rather than [i] as is the case with babies in England is more of a morphological than phonological phenomenon, since this seems to represent a kind of diminutive form (mother’s talk?). But even if it were a phonological phenomenon, why should the substitution of [e] for [i] not be explicable in some other psychological framework which includes phenomena like ‘hypercorrectness’? The present author does not want to claim that all developmental errors are as weakly defined as this phenomenon, but he wants to draw attention to the problem that multiple interpretations are often possible, and even if, as suggested in *Language Two*, ambiguous cases should not be taken into account, this does not solve the problem because it would then, to say the least, constitute a kind of no man’s land which any kind of theory, including the transfer theory, could enter.

Many other factors could also be mentioned, such as the one well known to all researchers and also mentioned by the authors of *Language Two* (p. 125), who refer to Cazden’s warning when stating “that learners may very well produce structures when researchers aren’t there to collect them.”

Though impressed by many of the findings and statements made by modern researchers included in *Language Two*, the present author wants to invite his colleagues to continue doing research, paying as much attention to qualitative as to quantitative issues, and remembering some of the traps

described above. New theories tend to look down upon older findings found outside new theoretical frameworks. As a contrastive linguist the present author is convinced that the CA element in EA will continue to be a very important one and that very often interpretations will tend to very subjectively be guided by theoretical preconceptions.³⁵ Once more he would also like to remind

researchers in the field of language acquisition that we do not know enough about language acquisition problems to give up some of the older 'taxonomic' categories. Some of the new terms may be as taxonomic and superficial as the older ones since we do not know enough about language acquisition to be really in a position to have only psychological interpretations.

'La linguistique contrastive est morte, vive la linguistique contrastive.'

Notes

1. Cf. G. Nickel (1986a) and (1986b).
2. After reading a private draft of part of a voluminous manuscript by L. Selinker, the present author hopes that sometime in the not too distant future a long and detailed history of the relations between contrastive analysis, interlanguage, and error analysis may be published.
3. For the important role played by a "very careful and exhaustive error analysis" within Filipovic' own research project at Zagreb, cf. R. Filipovic' article "What are the primary data for contrastive analysis?" (1984).
4. Cf. S.N. Sridhar (1981 : 235).
5. Cf. H. Dulay, M. Burt, S. Krashen (1982).
6. Cf. S.M. Gass & L. Selinker, eds. (1983 : 7).
7. Cf., for instance, the excellent bibliography by J. Fisiak at the end of his article "Present trends in contrastive linguistics". (1983 : 28-28).
8. Cf. *Language Two* (1982 : 98). In a footnote on the same page the authors include Nickel und Wagner (1968) among other authors in their criticism. Though they kindly state in footnote 2 on p. 99 : "Note that work written more than twenty years ago may no longer reflect the author's current views. Therefore, comments referring to such work should be seen in the context of the time of its writing. This comment applies to all such references in this book", the present author may be allowed to state that he never subscribed to Fries' statements. Besides, the Kiel and then Stuttgart project PAKS was based on TG assumptions and not on taxonomic-behavioristic principles. Note also the present author's statement on p. 253 of the 1968 article on "Contrastive linguistics and language teaching" mentioned above : "In our opinion, however, the direct application of contrastive techniques in the classroom is only of limited value."

9. Cf. R. Lado (1957 : 2).

10. Cf. G. Nickel (1986a).

11. While S.P. Corder suggests the banning of these two terms because of their being linked up with particular theories, cf. "A role for the mother tongue" (S. Gass & L. Selinker (1983 : 85-97), especially p. 86), the present author does not see such a danger because of their wide uses in all kinds of contexts. Cf. also B. Kielhöfer (1980). – For a selected bibliography on these two phenomena, cf. R. Palmberg (1980) and also W. Dechert, M. Brüggemeier, D. Fütterer (1984).

12. Cf., for instance, H. Ringbom (1978). Needless to say bi- or multilingual conditions as in Finland or Belgium are particularly useful and enlightening in studying the relation between different L1s. The present author has conducted several CA and/or EA seminars in the latter country and clearly noticed obvious transfer differences, though, unfortunately, he has not been able yet to quantify them due to time shortage.

13. Cf. S. Gass & L. Selinker, eds. (1983 : 372) : "What we can conclude is that for most researchers, language transfer is the use of native language (or other language) knowledge – in some as yet unclear way – in the acquisition of a second (or additional) language. Depending on the author, the definition includes factors such as avoidance strategies, over-production of elements, additional attention paid to the target language (resulting in more rapid learning), transfer of typological organization, and transfer of first language production strategies."

14. For a general criticism of such an assumption, cf. G. Nickel (1985, especially p. 143 f.).

15. Cf. S.P. Corder (1978); S.P. Corder (1981); A. Davies, C. Criper, A.P.R. Howatt, eds. (1984).

16. Something also acknowledged by IL researchers. Cf., for instance, E. Kellerman (1984), particularly p. 115 : "There are enormous quantities of evidence for the influence of the L1 on IL when it comes to lexis...". For the area of convergence between lexis and grammar, and here again between structurally related languages, cf. C. Adjémian (1983, particularly p. 251).

17. Cf. S.P. Corder (1978); and also G. Nickel (1980, particularly p. 63 f.).

18. Cf. S. Gass & L. Selinker, eds. (1983), especially table of contents p. XI.

19. Did it begin with J.C. Richards article "A non-contrastive approach to error analysis" (1974)?

20. Cf. particularly chapters 5 "The role of the first language", pp. 96-120; 6 "Transitional constructions", pp. 121-137; and 7 "Errors", pp.

138–199. Since errors are seen as phenomena occurring during a very complex learning process with internal as well as external factors, there are also references to errors in other chapters. Cf., for instance, the chapter on “Effects of personality and age”, pp. 74–95.

21. Cf., however, for instance J. Arabski (1979 : 107 f.) : “The results presented in the above tables show that transfer from L1 tends to increase slightly in the course of IL development, in terms of the percent of errors, and that more than half the errors are caused by transfer. Overgeneralization, in turn, increases considerably. In this respect our findings coincide with those of Taylor (1975c) i (cf. p. 25).

In this study we have analysed errors in compositions and translations and consequently we have dealt with errors occurring in different types of constructions. Taylor analysed selected constructions and came to the conclusion that transfer from L1 is ‘inversely proportional’ to proficiency. In this respect our findings differ.

In the course of the development of IL, transfer from L1 decreases with one type of construction but appears in others.”

22. Cf. G. Nickel (1986b : 456 f.).

23. Cf., for instance, “the overgeneralization of the use of EF in the case of actual present to habitual and ‘unrestrictive state utterances” (W. Zydariß (1979 : 44)). – For stylistic problems, cf. E.A. Levenston (1971).

24. Cf. also a doctoral dissertation by U. T. Fisher (1985) where the author states in her abstract : “It is shown that different communicative conditions for the three types of learner production result in different error types and error patterns as well as in varying concord error density.”

25. In spite of his belief in methodological multiplicity, the present author does not think it possible or even advisable to carry out FL teaching, particularly to adults, without cognitive elements. Nor does he, like a growing number of scholars, believe in a clear-cut distinction between language ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’. Cf. B. Spolsky (1988).

26. Cf. E. Kellerman (1984) and C. Adjémian (1984). But even here we might find different views. Thus, for instance, W.R. Lee (1972) stated that he found more problems in learning Chinese than trying to teach himself Italian after having learned Spanish. The present author had great difficulty in trying to learn Portuguese after having learned some Spanish. Here of course a distinction must be made between ‘productive’ and ‘receptive’ faculties, since reception is certainly facilitated by a knowledge of other related languages.

27. Individual learners may at certain stages of their learning succumb to interference more often between target languages than between a given target language and their mother tongues. This happens quite often to students

at our universities who combine two major subjects like French and English, and this is more frequently the case when they return from long stays abroad. For reasons of space the present author does not want to comment upon this phenomenon from a socio- and psychological point of view.

28. Cf. C. Chaudron (1986).

29. Cf. Mann's Law, generalized: "If a scientist uncovers a publishable fact, it will become central to his theory." Corollary: "His theory, in turn, will become central to all scientific thought. *Murphy's Law Book Two* (1980 : 41).

30. Cf. S. Gass (1983). – For the importance of the grammatical structure, cf. also J. Arabski (1979).

31. Cf., for instance, the complex problem of gerunds, infinitives, and *that* (*vs.* zero connections) for even advanced German learners of English on the university level. Cf. E. Burgschmidt (1979 : 13). – For morphology cf. also E. Burgschmidt & A. Cornell (1981).

32. p. 164 : "Researchers have consistently found that, contrary to wide spread opinion, the great majority of errors in the language output of L2 learners is of developmental type...". Cf. also pp. 165–170.

33. Cf. H. Krzyzanowski & K. Drozdziel (1978).

34. Cf. R.C. Major (1986 : 55–56).

35. Cf., for instance, M. Dagut & B. Laufer (1981).

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