

CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

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Contrastive Analysis

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Language Pedagogy

Proponents: Robert Lado, Charles C. Fries

1. Core Principles

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is a systematic linguistic approach centered on comparing the structural elements of two different languages--a native language (L1) and a target language (L2)--with the primary objective of predicting and explaining learning difficulties encountered by L2 learners. The fundamental premise of CA rests upon the belief that the learner's existing knowledge of the L1 structure significantly influences, or interferes with, the acquisition of the L2. When the structures of L1 and L2 are similar, learning is predicted to be easy due to positive transfer; conversely, when the structures diverge substantially, learning is predicted to be difficult due to negative transfer, commonly referred to as interference.

The core methodology involves mapping out corresponding features across various linguistic levels, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. This comparison yields a hierarchy of difficulty, intended to guide the preparation of teaching materials and the sequencing of instructional effort. Areas of maximum difference are flagged as potential problem spots requiring intensive drilling and explicit instruction. This approach is highly pragmatic and was historically rooted in the structuralist view of language, where languages were seen as habits learned through repetition and reinforcement, aligning closely with behaviorist psychological models of learning dominant in the mid-20th century.

While the ultimate goal of CA is academic understanding of language relationships, its most influential application lies in the pedagogical realm, specifically in result-oriented foreign language or second language teachings. By diagnosing where interference is most likely to occur, CA aims to make teaching more efficient, allowing educators to focus remedial effort precisely where the learner's L1 habits are most likely to clash with the L2 system. This focus on preventative instruction distinguishes CA from subsequent methodologies like Error Analysis, which focus on describing errors after they have occurred.

2. Historical Development

Contrastive Analysis emerged prominently in the 1940s and 1950s, largely driven by practical demands for efficient language training, particularly within governmental and military contexts following World War II. The groundwork for CA was laid by American structural linguists, notably Charles C. Fries, who emphasized the need to compare two language systems before embarking on the teaching of the second language. Fries argued that the most effective materials were those

based on a careful, systematic comparison of the language to be learned with the native language of the student.

The theory was rigorously formalized and popularized by Robert Lado in his seminal 1957 work, *Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*. Lado explicitly stated the central hypothesis: "The plan of the book rests on the assumption that the fundamental problems in learning a second language are those of difference between the native language of the learner and the second language to be learned." Lado's framework provided a detailed blueprint for how such comparisons should be conducted across all levels of linguistic analysis, cementing CA's role as the dominant theoretical foundation for the audio-lingual method (ALM).

The dominance of CA coincided with the height of the behaviorist paradigm in psychology, which viewed language learning as the acquisition of a new set of habits. In this model, the L1 represented entrenched habits that needed to be replaced or modified to accommodate the L2 habits. CA provided the tool necessary to predict where the old habits would negatively transfer (interfere) with the formation of the new ones. Despite later challenges from cognitive and generative linguistic theories, CA established the initial groundwork for formal inquiry into the role of the L1 in the process of Second Language Acquisition.

3. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)

The methodological structure of Contrastive Analysis led directly to the formulation of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which existed in two distinct versions that profoundly influenced subsequent research in SLA. The distinction between these two forms is critical for understanding the theory's impact and eventual limitations.

The first version, known as the **Strong CAH**, posits that all errors made by an L2 learner can be predicted solely on the basis of systematic differences between the L1 and the L2. This strong form required linguists to perform an exhaustive, a priori comparison of the two languages, generate a complete hierarchy of difficulty, and then predict the entire universe of errors a learner would commit. If the two languages were identical on a certain feature, no error was predicted; if they differed, an error was guaranteed. This highly ambitious and rigid prediction power proved empirically untenable in practice, as studies quickly revealed that many common L2 errors were not traceable to the L1.

Consequently, researchers adopted the more pragmatic version, the **Weak CAH**. This hypothesis maintains that while contrastive analysis is valuable, it is primarily useful for *explaining* errors after they have occurred, rather than predicting them beforehand. The Weak CAH acknowledges that language learning is complex, recognizing the existence of developmental errors (or intralingual errors) that arise from the nature of the target language itself, independent of L1 influence. For instance, overgeneralization of L2 rules (e.g., adding '-ed' to irregular English verbs)

is a developmental error that the Strong CAH failed to account for, but the Weak CAH accepts it alongside L1 interference explanations. The Weak CAH is generally the version that retains influence in modern applied linguistics.

4. Key Components and Components

Description: The initial step involves providing a thorough and accurate description of both the native language (L1) and the target language (L2). This description must be conducted using a consistent, uniform, and structurally sound linguistic framework, typically drawing upon the principles of structural linguistics to ensure comparability.

Selection: Because an exhaustive comparison of every single linguistic feature is often impractical, researchers must select specific subsystems or areas of language (e.g., the vowel system, tense markers, or relative clause formation) that are known to be problematic or are prioritized for instruction.

Comparison: This is the core analytical step where the selected descriptions of L1 and L2 are formally mapped against one another. The linguist identifies points of convergence (similarity) and divergence (difference), systematically noting where the two languages employ identical, similar, or unique structures to express the same function.

Prediction: Based on the comparison, the linguist formulates hypotheses regarding the potential difficulties a learner will face. The greater the difference found during the comparison phase, the stronger the prediction of negative transfer and resultant error production in the L2 classroom.

Hierarchy of Difficulty: Building upon the prediction step, CA often attempts to establish a hierarchy ranking the expected difficulty of learning various L2 features. This ranking typically categorizes differences (e.g., L1 has feature X, L2 lacks it; L1 and L2 both have X but use it differently) to prioritize pedagogical intervention.

5. Applications and Examples

The practical utility of Contrastive Analysis is primarily situated within language pedagogy and material development. CA informed the structure of many curriculum guides and textbooks throughout the 1960s and 1970s, ensuring that instructional sequencing addressed anticipated interference points early and repeatedly. By identifying points of structural difference, teachers could create targeted drills to prevent the fossilization of L1-influenced errors.

A classic example of CA application, as mentioned in the source content, is the comparison of closely related languages like Spanish and Italian. Due to their high degree of similarity in morphology, lexicon, and syntax, learners often experience rapid initial progress. However, CA highlights the crucial areas of minor divergence, such as the use of articles, specific verb conjugations, or the existence of "false friends" (words that look similar but have different meanings, e.g., Italian *caldo* 'hot' vs. Spanish *caldo* 'broth'). In such cases, the L1 familiarity can

lead to high-confidence errors that require focused, contrastive instruction to eliminate.

Beyond curriculum design, CA is valuable in teacher training. It equips language instructors with the linguistic awareness necessary to understand **why** students are making certain errors. For instance, a teacher instructing German speakers learning English must be aware that German often places the main verb at the end of a subordinate clause, which may lead to predictable syntactic errors in English sentence construction. This knowledge allows the teacher to address the underlying L1 structural cause, rather than simply correcting the surface error.

6. Relationship to Error Analysis (EA)

Contrastive Analysis was largely supplanted in the 1970s by the methodology of Error Analysis (EA). This shift was necessitated by the empirical failure of the Strong CAH to account for a significant portion of observed errors. EA focused on systematically collecting, classifying, and analyzing the errors actually produced by learners, regardless of their source.

EA demonstrated that many errors were not interlingual (L1 interference) but intralingual or developmental, suggesting that L2 learners actively construct a unique, evolving system--an interlanguage--as they internalize the L2 rules. While EA initially positioned itself as a critique and replacement for CA, modern applied linguistics recognizes the complementary value of both approaches. CA provides a useful predictive baseline, highlighting potential hurdles based on structural difference, while EA provides the necessary empirical data to confirm which predictions manifest as actual errors, and to identify the developmental errors that CA overlooks.

7. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its historical importance, Contrastive Analysis faced substantial theoretical and practical criticisms. The most damaging critique stemmed from the failure of the Strong CAH to accurately predict the majority of learner errors. Research consistently showed that learners often failed to commit errors in areas of predicted difficulty and, conversely, made errors in areas where the two languages were structurally similar. This demonstrated that L1 transfer is only one of many factors influencing L2 acquisition.

Furthermore, critics argued that the methodology was overly theoretical and difficult to implement comprehensively. Performing a complete, unbiased contrastive analysis across all levels of two complex languages requires profound linguistic expertise and is exceedingly time-consuming, often requiring arbitrary decisions regarding equivalency. The structuralist framework underlying CA was also challenged by the rise of generative linguistics and cognitive approaches to SLA, which emphasized the innate capacity for language acquisition and the creative construction process undertaken by the learner, rather than simple habit formation.

A final practical limitation is that CA often fails to account for sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and cultural differences, focusing almost exclusively on formal linguistic structure. For example, while two languages may have identical syntactic structures, their usage conventions (e.g., when and how to use certain polite forms) may differ widely, leading to crucial communication errors that CA is ill-equipped to predict or explain.

Further Reading

[Contrastive analysis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Robert Lado \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Linguistics \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Language transfer \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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