T. Krzeszowski, Contrasting Languages, Mouton de gruyter, 1990

Chapter II

Tertium comparationis[1]

To compare them would be tantamour
putting ten-ton lorries and banana s
in the same class on the grounds that
ther ought to be left on footpaths!
Carl James

One of the reasons why contrastive studies continue to perform the r
of the Cindarella of linguistics is the fact that its most fundamer
concept, *tertium comparationis*, remains as hazy as ever. The exist
contrastive analyses involve various platforms of interlinguistic referen
determined by specific linguistic models which they employ and spec
levels of analysis which they embrace. Thus different *tertia comparatio*
are used for comparisons in lexicology, in phonology, and in syntax.
few of these studies is explicit mention of any *tertium comparationis* ma
or any justification for a specific choice presented.[2]

All comparisons involve the basic assumption that the objects to
compared share something in common, against which differences can
stated. This common platform of reference is called *tertium comparatio*
Moreover, any two or more objects can be compared with respect
various features and, as a result, the compared objects may turn out
be similar in some respects but different in others. Thus, a square an
rectangle are similar in that both consist of four sides at right angl
But they are also different, since in a square, but not in a rectangle,
four sides are of equal length.[3] If we compare squares and rectang
with respect to the angles, we ascertain that the two types of figures
identical. If, on the other hand, we consider the length of their sides,
find them to be different. Depending on the platform of reference (
tertium comparationis) which we adopt, the same objects turn out to
either similar or different.

In cross-language comparisons, the choice of *tertium comparatio*
will also constitute the determining factor in establishing similarities a
differences between the phenomena compared (cf. Lipińska 1975:
Fisiak et al. 1978: 15). Since language is a complex hierarchical structu
operating at various levels of organization, and since it manifests its

as texts produced by its users, every aspect of language at every level of organization, as well as every text and its constituents, can undergo comparison with equivalent elements in another language. Therefore, various kinds of contrastive studies can be distinguished, depending on the *tertium comparationis* adopted and the kind of equivalence involved. Before we attempt to classify contrastive studies, let us take a closer look at various possible *tertia comparationis*.

Theoretical discussions tend to be limited to only two types: formal correspondence and semantic equivalence (e. g., Lado 1957: 52–53; Spalatin 1969; Ivir 1969, 1970). Even a cursory glance at the wealth of the existing contrastive studies suffices to notice that these two types of *tertium comparationis* are not the only ones that are used in practice. Formal correspondence and semantic equivalence can serve as *tertia comparationis* for certain types of contrastive studies, such as syntactic and lexical. Other types of contrastive studies, for example phonological, pragmatic, or quantitative, must be based on other *tertia comparationis*. Moreover, neither contrastive studies based on formal correspondence nor those based on semantic equivalence are free from difficulties. For example, it has been pointed out that formal likeness alone cannot serve as a *tertium comparationis* without support from semantic equivalence (Liston 1970: 44; Lipińska-Grzegorek 1977: 1–10). At best a comparison based on formal criteria alone is incomplete, at worst it cannot be performed at all, and in many cases it is misleading (see also Spalatin 1969: 31–34).

If, for example, one compares Polish and English personal pronouns, a formal analysis will ascertain the equivalence between the English *you* and the Polish *ty/wy* and will be accurate as far as it goes. But such an analysis is incomplete as it leaves out such forms as *Pan/Pani* and other possible equivalents of *you*. These equivalents can only be established if other than formal criteria are employed (see Chapter IV). English articles cannot be compared to anything in those languages in which there are no articles, if only formal criteria are considered. Finally, in the case of such phenomena as the present perfect tense in English and *passé composé* in French, a formal analysis is misleading since the formal similarity is not matched, at least in this case, by semantic similarity, which creates a kind of situation which often causes considerable learning problems (see Politzer 1968). Therefore, it is generally recognized that a contrastive analysis based on purely formal criteria falls short of both theoretical and practical expectations. We shall return to this problem in Chapter VI.

Somewhat less obviously, a contrastive analysis based on seman similarity alone can also be inadequate and misleading. In the contrasti practice, semantic equivalence is often erroneously identified with trar lation equivalence:

> To establish that these [systems of deictics] are comparable, we fi need to show their contextual equivalence; this can be done mc simply by reference to translation (Halliday et al. 1964: 115).

Chapter VII will discuss differences between semantic equivalence a translation. It will be shown that translation equivalents are often s mantically non-equivalent. At this point, it must only be noted th semantic equivalence must be constrained formally, while translati equivalence may, but does not have to, be thus constrained. When o translates, one departs from semantic equivalence due to three types reasons: (1) errors in translation; (2) formal properties of respecti languages; and (3) what is loosely called "stylistic" reasons. These thr types of reasons lead to situations in which actual translation practi with the exception of that concerned with legal texts, seldom involv semantic equivalents in the sense defined below in Chapter VII. Th means that only some translations can be used as data for systema contrastive studies (cf. Ivir 1969), while translation as a method contrasting must be regarded with caution:

> Translation must be viewed amorphously as the rendition of a te from one language to another. This is translation from the standpo of *la parole*: the text, the act of speech or writing, is the thing. Or may be viewed as a systematic comparison of two languages: this translation from the standpoint of *la langue* (Bolinger 1966: 130).

In fact, the use of translation in systematic contrastive studies is high limited:

> Translation equivalence serves merely to help us isolate items of stru ture with shared meanings in the two languages (Ivir 1970: 15).

Even if we do distinguish translation equivalence from semantic equ alence and base contrastive studies on the latter, we still face probler As has been stated earlier, semantic equivalence involves "formal" co straints. Thus, semantic equivalence is inherently connected with at le some degree of formal correspondence. But the meaning of both conce is richer than is commonly recognized in contrastive studies. For instan "formal" can be extended to cover the entire plane of expression (

Hjelmslev 1961: 59), whereas in most American studies the word "formal" is restricted to word order, function words, inflections, affixation, and suprasegmentals. In a broader perspective, "formal" would also embrace such aspects of expression as aliteration, rhymes, and rhythm. Many of these "formal" properties would find their place in the study of functionally (pragmatically) equivalent texts (see Chapter XI).

The notion "semantic" is also often extended to cover matters of pragmatics, especially by those authors who identify semantic equivalence with translation equivalence:

> Our experience is that languages can be effectively contrasted only on semantic basis, specifically, on the basis of translation equivalence (Spalatin 1969: 34).

In reality many authors have shown that semantic equivalence is not a necessary prerequisite of a good translation (cf. Rülker 1973: 29–35; Krzeszowski 1974: 13, 1981 a; Kopczyński 1980: 41–42). What is expected of a good translation is pragmatic or functional equivalence (see Chapter V). It cannot be denied that pragmatic equivalence can serve as *tertium comparationis* for contrastive analyses of such matters as the structure of discourse, stylistic properties, and quantitative aspects of texts. But syntactic contrastive studies, the primary concern of earlier contrastive studies, must be conducted within the limits of the semantic component of the language, or more specifically that part of the semantic component which can be systematically and predictably correlated with the grammatical structure of sentences. This restricted sense of "semantic" still embraces some aspects of meaning which are traditionally relegated to "pragmatics" or "interpersonal function" of sentences (Halliday 1970: 143). According to Halliday, the systems of mood and modality are precisely those systems which relate sentences to their interpersonal functions. It seems obvious that the notion "sentence semantics" should cover those elements of "pragmatics" which can be correlated with the structure of sentences, even if consistency in this area is definitely out of the question; declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences do not necessarily perform the functions of statements, questions, and commands, respectively. In so far as some correlation between form and function does exist, those "functional" aspects of sentence structure constitute the border area between pragmatics and semantics and should be included in any semanto-syntactic contrastive studies (for details see Krzeszowski 1974). Therefore, James (1980) suggests that for the purposes of contrastive analyses translation equivalents should be limited to those which are

both semantically and pragmatically equivalent. However, this proposal also raises doubts.

Presumably, what James means by "semantic" refers to Halliday's "ideational" function of sentences, while Halliday's "interpersonal" and possibly "textual" functions fall under "pragmatic". Under James' proposal many sentences across languages would exhibit both "ideational" (semantic) and "interpersonal" (pragmatic) equivalence; yet one would hardly wish to use them as data for syntactic contrastive studies. For example:

(1) *Did he kill that dog?*
(2) *Zabił tego psa?*
(literally: 'killed-he that dog?')

are equivalent, both ideationally (agent, transitive verb, patient) and interpersonally (general question); yet, they falsely suggest a relationship between syntactic types represented by (1) and (2) in English and Polish. A systematic syntactic equivalence would have to be ascertained between (1) and (3) rather than between (1) and (2):

(3) *Czy on zabił tego psa?*
(literally: 'whether he killed that dog?')

since (3) typically represents interrogative sentences in Polish, just as (1) is a typical interrogative sentence in English.

In an earlier work (Krzeszowski 1981 b: 123), I suggested that syntactic contrastive studies should be performed on data restricted in the following way: a contrastive grammar will take as its primary data (to be assigned the status of semanto-syntactic equivalence) the closest approximations to grammatical word-for-word translations and their synonymous paraphrases, if such forms exist. Such a constraining of primary data as the basis for syntactic contrastive studies bypasses the inherent difficulties of the proposals suggesting the use of unrestricted semantic equivalence as the basis for comparison. Accepting any translation as a possible basis for syntactic contrastive studies leads to two mutually exclusive and undesirable consequences. Either (1) no comparative generalizations become possible, as the number of well-formed translations of a particular sentence into another language cannot be predicted *a priori*; or (2) purely arbitrary decisions concerning formal correspondences in unconstrained translations must be made. Any non-arbitrary decision involves circularity: the investigator has to assume formal correspondences on the basis of syntactic and/or morphological features which the compared texts

share. This circularity is even reflected in the use of the word "comparable" in certain contrastive grammars. For example, Stockwell et al. thus write about determiners in English and Spanish:

> Both English and Spanish have two sets of determiners, commonly referred to as definite and indefinite articles. In many respects they are *comparable* [emphasis is my own]; in others they are different (Stockwell et al. 1965: 65).

The circularity consists in the following: we compare in order to see what is similar and what is different in the compared materials; we can only compare items which are in some respect similar, but we cannot use similarity as an independent criterion in deciding how to match items for comparison since similarity (or difference) is to result from the comparison and not to motivate it.

To avoid this undesirable circularity, in deciding about formal correspondences, one needs a common *tertium comparationis* outside the formal properties. The underlying meaning of the closest approximations to well-formed word-for-word translations provides such a *tertium comparationis*. Sentences and constructions sharing identical semantic representations at the level of sentence semantics (but necessarily exhibiting certain idiosyncratic differences at the level of word-semantics) are semanto-syntactically equivalent and constitute a constrained set of data for syntactic contrastive studies. The approach through constrained translations does not require the initial recognition of shared syntactic categories as *tertium comparationis* for syntactic contrastive studies. Such a recognition would illegitimately anticipate the results of contrastive studies. A detailed proposal along these lines will be presented in Chapter VIII. (See also Krzeszowski 1974 and 1979).

Summarizing, let us say that formal properties alone do not provide an adequate *tertium comparationis* for syntactic contrastive studies, while a semantic *tertium comparationis* must be constrained through restricting the scope of translation equivalents as primary linguistic data for syntactic contrastive studies.

Such constrained but rigorous contrastive studies have a very limited pedagogical relevance. Any extension of the scope of contrastive studies to make them pedagogically more useful increases the likelihood of their becoming less rigorous and hence less respectable as a "scientific" procedure. One has to look for ways of extending the scope of contrastive studies without losing any of the rigour characterizing syntactic contrastive studies. Formal and semantic *tertia comparationis*, discussed so far,

will not suffice as bases for extended contrastive studies. For
phonetic and phonological contrastive studies cannot rely on
equivalence as *tertium comparationis*.

The crucial notion in identifying various kinds of *tertia comp*
and determining their character is the concept of equivalenc
relation which provides justifications for why things are ch
comparison, keeping in mind that only equivalent items across l
are comparable. The various principles motivating equivalence
ipso, contrastive studies will provide grounds for dividing *tertia*
ationis and, consequently, contrastive studies into various categor
being connected with a specific kind of equivalence which moti
comparisons (see Chapter III). In other words, equivalence is the
whereby *tertium comparationis* is established inasmuch as only
ments are equivalent for which some *tertium comparationis* can b
and the extent to which a *tertium comparationis* can be fou
particular pair of items across languages determines the extent
these elements are equivalent. Thus, equivalence and *tertium*
tionis are two sides of the same coin.