

A SYNTACTIC CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND YORUBA LANGUAGE: A RE-EXAMINATION

Dr. Olalere Waheed Raji

Abstract

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is the technique for determining the similarities and differences between two or more languages with the principal aim of pinpointing their implications for language teaching and learning. CA posits that all errors made by a second language learner are attributed to interference between the structures of the source and the target language. This paper, therefore, examines the contrastive study of English and Yoruba at the syntactic level with a view to determining the possible problem areas which the Yoruba speakers learning English will have in the course of learning the language. The paper concludes that the theoretical linguist benefits from CA because it provides evidence for his theory of language and language acquisition.

Contrastive Analysis

It is a branch of language which is concerned with the study of different languages with the aim of bringing out their differences. C.A is a linguistic enterprise aimed at producing inverted (i.e contrastive, not comparative) two valued typologies (a C.A is always concerned with a “pair” of languages) and founded on the assumption that languages can be compared. C.A is more interested in differences rather than their likeness.

It should be stated that any comparative analysis involves two steps. A ‘description’ and ‘comparison’ in the order listed above. The most effective materials (for teaching an L2) are those based upon a scientific description of the language to be learnt, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.

The description of the L1 and L2 data could be done independently using the models (Transformation Grammar, Case Grammar etc),

which yield the fullest description of either language and then translating these two descriptions into a form which is model neutral. Again, less attention should be paid to the description of L1 than to L2 since the latter is what is to be learnt. This is what is called “contact analysis”. We should be more concerned with what the teacher does with the L2 than with what linguistic knowledge (the L1) he enters the learning situation”

Note that we are not saying here that the L1 does not affect the learning of L2; rather, we mean that since the learner has already got a better knowledge of the L1; attention then should instead be more on the L2 which he is just learning.

For comparison, utterances (in the two languages) are not compared as strings of sound, or graphic substances, but rather as structures (word, phrase, clause, sentence). Any structure represents an unlimited number of possible realizations; that is, if the structure is a sentence it is the basis of many utterances”.

What is basic from the explanations given above is the fact that C.A. studies two languages with the major aim of showing the differences that exist between them. C.A. is useful in that it brings out areas of differences between two languages and establishes how the differences between the two languages can result into errors in the course of learning L2. C.A studies all the aspects of language in order to establish observable differences between the languages under study. Since we are learners of English, we are going to do a contrastive study of English and Yoruba to establish syntactic differences between the two languages.

The Contrastive Analysis (CA) Approach: It is based on the premise that languages are different and that because of these differences, the second language learners will encounter difficulties. This basic practice of Contrastive Analysis is to first write a description of a particular subset of each language to be compared (i.e. descriptions of the phonology, morphology or syntax). One then compares these two subsets noting the differences and similarities. From this comparison, a prediction is made as to what the learners will find difficult (or easy) to learn.

While Birdsong (2006) is outstanding for his systematic exposition of the approach, quite a remarkable number of linguists had earlier demonstrated similar contrastive awareness. He asserted that CA owes its origin to the problem of interference which had been confronting L2 learners of English.

The idea of contrasting a pair of languages is guided by the following theoretical assumptions:

1. Language learning is habit formation.
2. An old habit (that of using one's first language), hinders or facilitates the formation of a new habit (learning a second language) depending on the differences or similarities, respectively between the old and new. Dornyei (2005) said transfer theory which originates from behaviourist psychology holds that previous learning habits influence the acquisition, performance and relearning of a second habit. When previously acquired task enhances learning of a subsequent task, "Proactive Facilitation" or Proactive Transfer" is said to have occurred.

On the other hand, when previously established task interfering with the acquisition of a subsequent task "proactive" inhibition in second or foreign language, language learning has occurred. This is the instance of a previously established first language habits interfering with

the acquisition of second language habits. The assumption here is that it is the first language habits which tamper with and hinder the acquisition of the second language habits.

Though CA has been found to be 'a useful preliminary to the development of good teaching materials', it has been criticized on a number of grounds: it has been argued that language is not a habit acquisition phenomenon but an active mental process governed by specific rules which enable the learner to generate and understand new utterances.

In addition, transfer theory has been found to be inadequate because the task and settings employed in transfer experiments are largely irrelevant to crucially important educational concerns and cannot therefore be validly extrapolated to serve a real theory of language learning.

As a result of the criticism leveled against transfer theory, alternative explanations have been proposed to replace it. Two of such alternatives are George's "Cross Association Theory" and new mark's and Rebel's "Ignorance Hypothesis". Cross-Association Theory explains typical errors of interference in terms of the redundancy of the second language e.g the fact that English has two words-woman and wife-for the one German word "afraid" in interference error for the L1 German learner of English. Adegbija (1989) argued that this kind of redundancy identified in English will only constitute a learning problem if the L1 does not show a corresponding redundancy.

Ignorance hypothesis, on the other hand seeks to explain L2 learners errors in terms of ignorance of the rule involved in a given situation. But this hypothesis has been discredited on the ground that there are instances of ignorance which do not necessarily result in interference.

The above has shown part of the counter arguments presented to defend the position of CA.

The Relevance of C.A to Educational Practices

There are eleven areas for which CA is significant and applicable. These are teaching, evaluating the language and culture context of a textbook, preparing new teaching materials, supplementing inadequate materials, diagnosing difficulties, testing pronunciation, testing grammatical structures, testing vocabulary, cultural understanding, research design and general understanding.

Syntax: Syntax is a branch of language which is concerned with how the rules of grammar are applied in the ordering of words to form phrases, clauses or sentences. There is no doubt that the rules of grammar of both English and Yoruba are different. Hence, there are bound to be differences in how the rules are applied and the outcomes of such application.

First, in English an adjective comes before the noun it modifies in attributive position. This is however, not the case in Yoruba where the adjective follows the noun. So, while English has the following attributive modification.

- i. *Red* cloth is good
- ii. The *tall* boy is gone
- iii. *Some Subborn* students were punished.

Yoruba has the following variants of the above;

- i. *Aso pupa* dara
- ii. *Omo giga* naa tilo
- iii. *Awon omo ile iwe buruku* kan jiya

The adjectives are underlined in the sentences above *Aso*, *Omo* and *Omo ile iwe* are the nouns in sentences (iv), (v) and (vi) respectively.

The pronominal system of English distinguished three persons (1st, 2nd and 3rd) two numbers (singular/plural) and two gender (masculine and feminine). Yoruba too, distinguishes three persons and number but does not have gender distinction. The two languages

differ fundamentally when it comes to number making. While English has four plural pronouns; you (subject) you (object); they (subject) and them (object), Yoruba has six of such plural pronouns; the usual plurals *eyin* (subject), *yin* (object), *awon* (they), *won* (them) and the honorific plural pronoun *eyin* (you, singular object pronoun).

The Yoruba people are noted for their high sense of respect for elders and (constituted) authorities and thus it is reflected in their language. So, it is usual to hear a Yoruba speaker addressing an elder person or a young person in position of authority as “*eyin*” instead of the usual “*iwo*”. A Yoruba learner of English might then be tempted to import this culture of his people into English, and unacceptable structure like; ‘They are calling them’, ‘I saw them yesterday’ instead of ‘He/she is calling him/her’ and ‘I saw him/her yesterday’ are often produced. The learners with time grow out of this.

Again, Yoruba does not distinguish gender. The same pronoun “O” is used to mark both English ‘he’ and ‘she’. As for the objects of ‘he’ and ‘she’ a wide range of pronouns is available to the speaker to choose from I, un, a, e, e, u. The choice of any of these is determined by the vowel ending of the verb (of the sentence) which precedes, the object (pronoun). None of the object pronouns above identified specific gender.

In Yoruba, therefore, context plays a significant role in determining the gender unlike in English where the gender is overtly stated. Consider these:

O wa lanaa	He/She came him/her yesterday
Mo ri i	I saw him/her
Won fun un lowo	They gave him/her money
O lojo	He/she is cowardly
O mo’we	He/she is brilliant
O bu u dada	You insulted him/her very well.

Still on pronominal, English distinguishes between reflexive pronouns and

reciprocal pronouns. Thus, distinction is missing in Yoruba Reflexive pronouns which show what nouns do to themselves while reciprocal pronouns show what nouns do to others and what others do to them in return. The reflexive pronoun ends in suffix 'self' or 'selves' depending on the number of the pronoun. Reciprocal pronouns are 'each other' and 'one another'. 'Each other has preference if the nouns under reference are not more than two while 'one another' is used when the nouns are more than two. Yoruba has the reflexive pronouns "ara re" (yourself), "ara mi" (myself), ara wa (ourselves), ara yin (yourselves), ara won (themselves) and ara re (himself/herself).

In Yoruba, "ara won" which can mean themselves, each other or one another is the pronoun which a Yoruba learner of English is exposed to. When there is need for the learner to make distinctive use of either reflexive or reciprocal pronoun, the learner is confused since his knowledge of another tongue is not sufficient to help him do this. Semantically ambiguous utterances are thus common among Yoruba speakers of English. Consider the sentences below:

Won na ara won
They beat themselves
Awon omo yen feran ara won
The children like themselves
A mo ara wa
We know ourselves

The Yoruba examples stated above show how the expressions are made in the language and the English translations show how they are realized in English. Thus, this type of error is very common among 'young' learners of English. The reason for the errors as stated earlier is the wrong use of a reflexive pronoun where reciprocal pronoun should be used. The correct English versions of the examples should be:
They beat each other (one another)

The children like each other (one another)
We know one another

English and Yoruba also differ in the area of plural marking in nouns Morphemes 's', 'es' or 'en' are added to nouns to get their plural forms depending on the ending of such nouns. Some English nouns however do not take any plural morpheme, that is, they remain as they are in the singular, some have their internal vowels changed to reflect plurality. For examples, book+s = books, bag+s = bags, tomato+es is tomatoes, potato +es, is potatoes, ox+en is oxen, child +ren is children, man is men, woman is women, sheep is sheep.

Yoruba does not have this kind of direct pluralization rather than pluralizing the noun directly, Yoruba puts the plural mark (a word) being the noun to be pluralized. The word that is commonly used to do this is "awon", which ordinarily is a plural pronoun. So in Yoruba, pluralization is done in the following way:

Awon + omo	Awonomo	children
Awon + iwe	Awon iwe	books
Awon + isu	Awonisu	yams
Awon + obinrin	Awon obinrin	women

From the above, it can be seen that Yoruba has a single plural marker 'awon'. The pluralization process in English thus appears complex to the Yoruba learners of English. Wrong application of plural markers of English is what results 'sheep' can thus be pluralized as 'sheeps' 'tomato' as tomatos, children as 'childs' etc.

In the area of preposition, English has a large number of prepositions each of which is used to establish appropriate relationship between it (the preposition) and the noun it governs. Just as there are single preposition, there are equally compound ones. In fact, it can even be said that apart from verbs, prepositions pose a great challenge to Yoruba L1 learners of English. The reason for this is that Yoruba has

smaller number of prepositions, which are used to express all the meaning relations that the many (more) English prepositions are used for. Appropriate choice of prepositions is, therefore, difficult to make because Yoruba often uses a single preposition to express different meaning relations.

In English, for instance, the prepositions between and among are used to signal a relationship of division or sharing between two or more persons, things or groups and sharing to each or more than two persons respectively. Yoruba uses a single preposition *laarin* to signal the two relationship above. *Laarin* can equally have the meaning of 'within'. It is therefore not unusual to hear a Yoruba L2 learner of English say:

- i. Share the oranges between yourselves
- ii. There is division within the robbers
- iii. Within Lagos and Abeokuta, there are several checkpoints

The intended meaning relations of the three sentences above should be expressed as follows:

- i. Share the oranges among yourselves
- ii. There is division among the robbers
- iii. Between Lagos and Abeokuta, there are several checkpoints.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is shown that the information provided by CA is of tremendous value to the teacher in predicting potential problem areas of interference between L1 systems and L2 systems. This is coupled with the fact that the theoretical linguist can benefit from CA because it can provide evidence for his theory of language and language acquisition. For example, transformational grammar posits a common deep structure and universals for related languages. It is argued that transformational changes affect only the structure of the languages in question.

References

- Abbc, V. (1965). Audio-lingual methods in modern language teaching. In *a guide to modern language teaching methods*. Brian, London: Cassel and Company
- Adegbija, E. (1989). Teaching English in Nigeria: The Importance of the Pragmatic and Sociolinguistic Context. *Language Culture Curriculum 2*
- Allen, J.P.B. & S.P. Corder, Eds. (1974). *Techniques in applied linguistic*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bender-Samuel, ed. (1974). *Studies in Nigerian languages, 4: Ten Nigerian tone systems*. Jos: Institute of Linguistics.
- Bennet, W.A. (1974) *Applied linguistics and language learning*_ London: Hutchinson Educational Limited.
- Birdsong, D. (2006) Age and Second Language Acquisition and Processing: A selective overview. *Language Learning* 56 (SI):9-49.
- Breitenstein, P.H. (1978). The application of contrastive linguistics. *English Language Teaching Journal*.
- Brown, H. (1980). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Chomsky, (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The MIT Press.

Dr. Olalere Waheed Raji

Dornyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dornyei, Z. (2009). *The psychology of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dr. Olalere Waheed Raji
Department of Languages (English)
Al-Hikmah University,
Ilorin.