

# The Survival of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis: A Look Under the Hood

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**Abstract**—The contrastive analysis hypothesis is one of the theories that has considerably impacted second language acquisition research. Since the 1970s, this theory, which had piqued the interest of both linguists and teachers, has been heavily criticised. It has been described as unrealistic and impractical, and its basic assumptions have been questioned and unjustly debunked. However, re-reading *Linguistics across Cultures*, the book from which the contrastive analysis hypothesis was derived, in light of recent findings and re-examining the criticism levelled against it, reveals how valuable and insightful the book is and how irrationally it has been misrepresented. This paper attempts to clean this distortion up and demonstrate why this book is worth reading again. It sheds light on the criticism levelled against it and critically examines the alternatives (the moderate and the weak versions) offered to replace it. It also argues that, apart from its utility in comparing languages in terms of their sound systems, grammar, and vocabulary for pedagogical purposes, it can be an effective tool in comparing languages, particularly on bases above the sentence level, to uncover cultural traits. Hence, it can be a powerful means to further our knowledge of cross-cultural (mis)communication and (mis)understanding.

**Index Terms**—contrastive analysis hypothesis, behaviourism, language acquisition, second language learning

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis has been presented in three versions as a theory in second and foreign language acquisition: the strong, weak, and moderate (though less famous). These three versions of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) were not introduced concurrently. They are best viewed as offshoots of critique following a rethinking and considering the previously held assumptions. Interest in CAH peaked for a short while in the second half of the twentieth century but then waned (purportedly) due to growing scepticism about the applicability and reliability of its assumptions. A closer examination of the criticism levelled at CAH may reveal that it was debuted not because of the impracticality of its assumptions but rather because the intellectual wind had shifted with the emergence of Chomsky's revolutionary ideas and the widespread acceptance of communicative language teaching as the 'best' approach for teaching foreign languages. Although it is risky to take CAH's statements at face value as they were (mis)presented in later works, it would be legitimate to revisit the original work and re-consider it in light of recent linguistic research developments. Neophytes in the field of second language learning are often tempted to dismiss CAH as faulty and impractical while favouring more recent language learning theories. However, reading *Linguistics across Cultures* through the lenses of modern linguistic branches (pragmatics, discourse analysis, genre analysis) reveals how valuable and insightful it is, especially when we bear in mind that the majority of the research cited to refute CAH's assumptions was conducted under the tenets of traditional linguistic branches (phonology, morphology, syntax) and was solely concerned with learning language items below the sentence level (sounds, words, spelling and sentences). This paper is a brief attempt to demonstrate that CAH is still of interest today and offers potential predictive and diagnostic powers, particularly when attention is paid to language aspects above the sentence level (the pragmatic, discursive and cultural features of languages). After decades of neglect and discretion, it can still offer teachers and linguists valuable insights into language learning.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis as a theory in second language acquisition was first utilised in the mid-1950s as an effective tool in designing material for teaching and learning a second or foreign language. In plain words, it was used to compare the learner's first language and the target language, locate similarities and differences, and predict learning issues with the ultimate purpose of addressing them (Fries, 1943; Lado, 1957). At that time, the outcomes of contrastive linguistics or contrastive analysis were geared toward applied ends and served, first and foremost, language teaching (Rusiecki, 1976, pp. 12-13). According to Hammer and Rice (1965), the 'present' purpose of contrastive linguistics is not to establish typological relationships but rather to give language educators and textbook writers a body of knowledge that can help them prepare educational materials, plan language courses, and develop classroom techniques. Nickel (1971) concisely presented the that-day view of contrastive linguistics pointing out that "contrastive linguistics ... for the most part compares languages with the quite utilitarian aim of improving the method and results of language teaching" (p. 2).

Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957) was a milestone in discussing the utility of contrastive analysis in teaching foreign languages and from which CAH was launched. The core view presented in that book became known later as the strong version of CAH (Wardhaugh, 1970). During that time, CAH was at its peak, and many contrastive analyses comparing English to other languages for educational purposes were conducted (e.g., Stockwell, 1957; Schachter, 1960; Lehn & Slager, 1959).

CAH was first promulgated at the University of Michigan. The first universities that joined as centres of contrastive linguistics were the University of Texas, the University of California at Los Angeles, Georgetown University and Indiana University. Between 1952 and 1956, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), under contract to the State Department, sponsored the production of English courses for native speakers of Burmese, Greek, Indonesian, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Persian, Serbo-Croatian, Thai and Turkish (Rusiecki, 1976). The new curriculum considered the structural differences between English and these languages, although "in an informal way" (Marckwardt, 1967, p. 3).

The English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Michigan, where Lado was pursuing his PhD, was established in 1941 with the assistance of the US State Department as part of a wider US linguistic and cultural endeavour. The US government was competing at the time with fascist Germany whose efforts to penetrate Latin America included the teaching of the German language. The US government prioritised the spread of English in Latin America's mostly Spanish-speaking countries, as expressed in Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, to promote Pan-American collaboration (Kramsch, 2007).

From that point on, CAH was disseminated throughout the rest of the world, and interest in comparing English as a target language to other languages has grown ever since, particularly in settings where English is taught as a foreign language.

### III. CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS HYPOTHESIS (CAH)

In simpler words, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is a theory that investigates the similarities and differences between the learner's native language (existing knowledge) and the target language (new knowledge) in order to predict and explain learning difficulties that may arise during the learning process. Language teachers and linguists working in language teaching and producing second language materials found it particularly interesting. It was founded in the 1950s and 1960s when structural linguistics and behaviouristic psychology flourished. It originated in its ultimate form from Robert Lado's book *Linguistics across Cultures*, published in 1957, influenced by the intellectual currents of the period (Whorf, 1941; Fries, 1945; Hockett, 1948; Trager, 1949; Haugen, 1954; Piroch, 1955) and driven by the urgent need to provide effective second language teaching materials (the competition against Germany over Latin America). *Linguistics across Cultures* was the formal start of a new trend in second language acquisition research, and it triggered a lot of attention and interest right away (and severer criticism after a short while). This book presented linguists and teachers with models on how to conduct contrastive studies of two systems of sounds, grammar, vocabulary, writing and culture. The following are the essential assumptions stated by Lado in this work:

... individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture – both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives. . . . [It assumes] that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult (Lado, 1957, p. 2).

Three key concepts can be highlighted in the excerpt quoted above: transfer, similarity and difference association with ease and difficulty, and the role of culture. Lado assumed that second language learners would transfer forms and meanings from their first language and culture to the language and culture they are learning both productively and receptively. The second concept is that items that are similar across the two languages are easy to learn, while items that are different are difficult to learn. The third is the role of culture. This might be one of the earliest references to the impact of native culture on second and foreign language learning. Lado dictated a whole chapter for this issue. These concepts were influential and provoked many subsequent studies by linguists involved in the business of second and foreign language teaching.

It is important to note that Lado's assumptions were not made on the spot. For instance, in his *Languages in Contact*, which was released in 1953 (four years before Lado's), Weinreich made a similar assumption regarding the difficulties in learning caused by differences between the first language and the target language. Weinreich (1953) stated that:

The greater the difference between the two systems, i.e. the more numerous the mutually exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater is the learning problem and the- potential area, of influence (p. 8).

A year later (1954), Harris presented his notion of grammar transfer. He discussed the problem of the difference between languages and the possibility of measuring that difference. He proposed that methods of identifying differences across languages can be utilised in teaching and learning foreign languages. He argued that studying the distinctions between the target language and the mother tongue can be sufficient for language acquisition (leaving those features which are identical in both to be carried over untaught) (Harris, 1954).

These assumptions, however, were questioned in the eighties and nineties of the last century and have been the subject of numerous investigations (Oller & Ziahosseiny, 1970; Wardhaugh, 1970; Whitman & Jackson, 1972; Brown, 1987; Hughes, 1980; Yang, 1992). This criticism will be demonstrated and discussed in the next section.

#### IV. AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

1. Clean up the distortion about the strong version of CAH and Lado's book *Linguistics across Cultures* by re-examining its main assumption in the light of recent research and developments in linguistics and second language acquisition.
2. Examining (the weak and moderate versions) that have been proposed to replace the original version of CAH to point out why they fall short as alternatives.

#### V. METHODOLOGY

The methodology starts with discussing the historical context in which CAH was developed. The intellectual atmosphere at the time and the influence of the remarkable waves of developments in linguistics, psychology, and second language acquisition on CAH are then illuminated. Following this discussion, the study looks for evidence to support the main assumptions of CAH in its strong version in three different directions. These directions are: re-reading and re-examining its main assumptions in light of the original work (Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures*) and clearing up the misinformation and criticism about it; identifying any issues in the theoretical underpinnings and claims of the weak version and the moderate version of CAH; and considering contrastive analyses to find evidence in their findings supporting the assumptions of Lado's strong version of CAH.

#### VI. MAJOR CRITICISM AGAINST CAH

CAH's assumptions have been under extensive criticism since the seventies of the last century. Some of the criticism was directed at its theoretical basis and some at the practicalities of its findings and recommendations. Wardhaugh (1970), for example, indicated that the demands made by CAH on linguistic theory and linguists are not possible. He claimed that CAH:

... demands of linguists that they have available a set of linguistic universals formulated within a comprehensive linguistic theory which deals adequately with syntax, semantics, and phonology. Furthermore, it requires that they have a theory of contrastive linguistics into which they can plug complete linguistic descriptions of the two languages being contrasted so as to produce the correct set of contrasts between the two languages (p. 4).

For him, such a procedure was not feasible: none of the linguists who claimed to use it in their work had actually conformed to its requirements. He described the procedure under which contrastive studies were conducted as pseudo-procedure (a procedure which can be followed to achieve definitive results only if there is enough time). To illustrate this, he mentioned that a linguist who seeks to contrast the allophonic variants of the phonological systems of two languages could not meet the requirements of the strong version of CAH within the 'present' state of linguistic knowledge. This could not be achieved because of the inadequacy of phonetic theory and the particular phonetic information at his disposal in that age of linguistic uncertainty. He questioned the maturity of the state of the phonological theory (phonological variables: segmentation, stress, tone, pitch and juncture, and syllable, morpheme, word and sentence structures) and the state of the contrastive theory (overall contrastive system: mergers, splits, zeroes, over-differentiations, under-differentiations, and reinterpretations) that a linguist could use for such analyses.

CAH was also criticised for its association with behavioristic psychology. Behaviourism had a significant impact on language acquisition and second language learning research at that time. This association "gave it [CAH] its academic legitimacy but ultimately led to its downfall" (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, p. 55). When behaviourist psychology, together with stimulus-response theory and habit formation theory, fell into disfavour through the prominence of Chomsky's innateness theory in the sixties of the last century, CAH was also abandoned, and the first wave of criticism started. The acceptance of mentalist linguistics, the withdrawal of structural linguistics and the appearance of influential concepts like Chomsky's competence and performance and Hyme's communicative competence, which later gave rise to communicative language teaching at the expense of the audio-lingual method, all led to discrete CAH without considering the merits it may offer to second language acquisition research.

The second stream of criticism springs from the limitations of the results of contrastive analyses and their benefits to practitioners. Researchers, for some reason, assumed that CAH promised to predict all second language learners' errors and that the only source of errors is first language transfer basing Lado's statement in the preface to his book. From there, they started their argument against CAH that it is unable to predict all the errors made by second language learners (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2006) and that transfer is not the only source of these errors (e.g., Odlin 1989). This trend may well be summarised by quoting Dulay et al. (1982):

For several decades, linguists and teachers assumed that most second language learners' errors resulted from differences between the first and second languages. . . . Studies show . . . at most 20% of the [grammatical errors] adults make can be traced to crossover from the first language (p. 5).

This point of criticism is "simply untrue", as Swan (2007, p. 416) points out. It rests on a false reading of Lado's basic assumptions and stems from assuming, without further investigation, that "he must have been talking exclusively about the transfer of specific features from L1 to L2" (Ibid.). In fact, Lado's work made references to examples of problems English speakers had with learning lexical tone and grammatical gender. These involve no first language equivalent; therefore, learning errors cannot be due to transfer from the first language.

## VII. ALTERNATIVES TO CAH

There were two attempts to replace CAH after the intellectual wind had changed with the prominence of Chomsky's radical theories in linguistics and language acquisition and the emergence of communicative language teaching as a replacement for the structural approach amid the criticism directed at CAH. Although the overall sentiment was to completely disregard CAH as a theory of second language acquisition, these two attempts were more delicate.

Wardhaugh (1970) put forth the first alternative. It was based on the difficulties and challenges CAH had in the field and the scepticism around the viability of contrastive analysis. He began to question the usefulness of contrastive analyses to language teachers and curriculum designers due to these flaws. According to him, a weak form of CAH might have some potential applications because the 'present' state of CAH, which he called the strong version of CAH, was "very unrealistic and unfeasible" (p. 3). In this context, Wardhaugh suggested the weak version, which, instead,

requires of the linguist only that he use the best linguistic knowledge available to him in order to account for observed difficulties in second language learning (1970, p. 8).

In this way, the weak version does not claim what the strong version claims. It does not predict what learning points would be difficult and what points would be easy. Reference is made to the systems of the two languages only to explain actually observed interference. This exploratory rather than predicative version has proved to be "helpful and undoubtedly will continue to be so as linguistic theory develops" (p. 12), unlike the former, which has not proved to be workable.

This view of lessening the ambition of CAH was also shared by other specialists (Lee, 1972; Wilkins, 1972; Aws, 1992). They suggested taking it from a 'priori' orientation to a 'posterior' orientation. Snook (1971), at the same time, offered the same view that the main objective of the contrastive analysis is to explain the target language errors rather than predict them.

The second alternative came from Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970). Based on their study of spelling errors, they offered what they called the moderate version of CAH. They began their article with an adventurous statement:

The strong and weak forms are *rejected* (my emphasis) in favour of a more moderate version which predicts the results of a spelling error analysis on the dictation section of the UCLA placement examination in English as a second language (p. 1).

Moving on from this, they continued to vindicate why the strong version and the weak version should be refuted. The moderate version is based on Oller and Ziahosseiny's (1970) study of spelling errors on the dictation section of the UCLA placement test in English as a second language. They hypothesised that students whose native language employs a non-Roman script would make significantly fewer spelling errors than students whose native language uses a Roman alphabet. The effects of negative transfer for students who know a Roman alphabet are expected to outweigh the effects of correct generalisations. The results of their study showed that students whose native language used a Roman spelling system made more spelling errors than students whose native language did not use a Roman spelling system. Moreover, the latter made up a significantly lesser percentage of spelling errors ( $p < .005$ ), and by the analysis of covariance, the adjusted means of spelling errors differed significantly ( $p < .025$ ), also favouring the latter.

According to the hypothesis of the strong version, students whose language uses the Roman alphabet would have less difficulty learning the English spelling system than those whose language uses the non-Roman alphabet. In the light of their data, they said that the results proved it wrong. On the other hand, the weak version was also tested in the light of the same experiment. According to the weak version, it is expected that students whose native language uses a Roman alphabet would do better than those whose native language uses the non-Roman alphabet. This, again, was proved incorrect in the light of the results they gained.

A closer look at these hypotheses reveals that they are only based on a cursory reading of the CAH in its original shape, or at least built on the representation of the book by subsequent authors rather than the book itself. Meanwhile, one may be tempted to re-examine the basic hypothesis of Oller and Ziahosseiny's (1970) study. The authors assumed that because German, Spanish and Slavic, like English, use the Roman alphabet, students of these languages would make fewer mistakes in spelling English words than students who spoke Japanese, Chinese and Arabic, which use non-roman alphabets. It is unclear why they made this association. The alphabet and the spelling system are two different things. Just because both English and German use the Roman alphabet does not necessarily mean they have the same spelling system. The German spelling system is known to be more phonemic than the English spelling system. English orthography is considered far more opaque than German orthography (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

It should be noted that Slavic uses a Cyrillic alphabet, not a Roman alphabet as the authors assumed. Also, the languages that use the non-Roman alphabet are not homogenous at all; Arabic uses the Abjad alphabet, Chinese uses Hanzi, and Japanese uses Kanji. The sound-symbol correspondence varies considerably across these three different writing systems.

Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) took CAH from the concept of interference to the principle of stimulus generalisation and claimed that:

The categorisation of abstract and concrete patterns (including time sequenced events) according to their perceived similarities and differences is the basis for learning; therefore, wherever patterns are minimally distinct in form or meaning in one or more systems, confusion may result. Conversely, where patterns are functionally or perceptually equivalent in a system or systems correct generalisation may occur (pp. 20-21).

It may be relevant here to mention that the moderate version of CAH did not get much attention, and only scarce reference is made to it. We have not seen any subsequent discussions to support or refute Oller and Ziahosseiny's (1970) theory. It is as if this study was born to be forgotten. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no replication or duplication studies were conducted to test this hypothesis. However, it is referred to only when historical accounts of CAH are offered (Dost & Bohloulzadeh, 2017; Djiguimkoudre, 2020; Khansir & Pakdel, 2019).

### VIII. EVIDENCE SUPPORTING CAH

The unfortunate fact about CAH is that contrastive analyses focus in practice on a surface comparison of languages: sounds, grammar and selectively vocabulary (Lennon, 2008). Nevertheless, culture and its role in second language acquisition have not received much attention under CAH's realm. With the advancements in linguistics, particularly discourse analysis and pragmatics, the role of culture has been made prominent by researchers and teachers. With the emergence of key linguistic concepts (e.g., politeness, speech acts theory, cross-cultural communication, pragmatic competence, pragmatic transfer, cohesion, coherence, generic structure, clause relations, conversation analysis, etc.), the role of culture has become no longer confined to how people behave. It is now seen as embodied and reflected in the construction of discourse and can be manifested in any language use. In the present day, culture plays a significant role in the study of cross-cultural (mis)communication. Studies that focused on EFL pragmatic competence, for example, demonstrate that the traits of first language transfer can be quite salient in that although learners can often produce grammatically correct utterances, their mother tongue nevertheless influences them. In a study conducted by Qari (2017) to investigate how politeness is manifested in the speech acts of request and apology produced by Saudi students, EFL Saudi students and British students as native speakers of English, the researcher found that Saudi EFL learners showed a preference for using indirect styles but at a somewhat lower rate than did British native speakers, while Saudi students preferred to use direct strategies.

Furthermore, it appeared that Saudi EFL students limited their use to specific strategies, primarily to query preparation forms. The British, on the other hand, used a wider set of indirect strategies using a variety of linguistic devices. In addition, the research revealed that EFL Saudi students' responses demonstrated negative pragmatic transfer from Arabic as their mother tongue. Most of these responses were linguistic realisations translated directly and literally from Arabic into English. They also showed negative pragmatic transfer in their perspective choice. EFL Saudi students, for example, favoured the hearer perspective above the speaker perspective, just as Saudis did. The British students used the speaker perspective more as native speakers of English.

Al-Failat (2017) looked into the differences in politeness strategies of offers between Palestinian MA students at Hebron University and US native speakers of English. The study found that American participants employed negative strategies at a higher level than Palestinians, while Palestinian MA students utilised positive strategies and BOR at a higher rate than the US speakers of English. On the other hand, based on the directness/indirectness of the strategies scale, the results demonstrate that Palestinians prefer direct strategies, whereas Americans conventionally prefer indirect strategies. This demonstrates how culture plays an important role in shaping second language production. The traits of the native culture are apparent in the learners' use of English even though they are able to produce perfectly correct grammatical structures.

Based on similar English and Arabic studies, teachers and linguists can predict that Arab EFL learners will have socio-pragmatic failure in producing these speech acts, not because of a lack of knowledge of the target language but because of the lack of cultural-linguistic transfer, as the strong version envisaged. This may also refute the weak version of CAH because it is not that learners do not know how to say this in English, but it is clear mother tongue transfer. This, at the same time, brings Oller and Ziahosseiny's (1970) hypothesis (the moderate version) into question. According to their hypothesis, because Arab culture is distinct from English culture, Arab EFL learners will not make any cultural errors (socio-pragmatic failure), while EFL learners whose cultures are not distinct from English will make errors in producing these speech acts. Research shows the opposite. Studies comparing the performance of EFL learners whose cultures are also looked at as negative politeness cultures, like English, show positive pragmatic transfer and produce culturally and pragmatically sound speech acts.

### IX. CONCLUSION

Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* is a reminder of a sad fact: sometimes judgment is not incurred by examining the work itself but rather by how others have evaluated that work. This work has been the victim of the change in intellectual trends: from structuralism to mentalism, from habit formation to innateness theory, and from the audio-lingual method to communicative language teaching. It is saddening how successors have misrepresented this book's basic assumptions and how much of its criticism has stemmed from superfluous (sometimes incomplete) readings. Even when alternatives were suggested to replace the original version of CAH (the strong version), they were not based on an objective examination or the practical studies conducted under its tenet.

This paper is an attempt to continue Kramsch (2007) and Swan (2007) move toward rehabilitating and vindicating "an eminent scholar whose work was important and formative, and whose reputation has been particularly badly served by his successors" (Swan, 2007, p. 418). This paper joins the project by offering a critical reading of the suggested two alternatives to the original CAH and providing evidence of why and how its basic assumptions are still of interest to linguists and teachers today.

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