An Application of Contrastive Linguistics

David Shillan

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If the 2nd International Congress of Applied Linguistics (held at Cambridge, England, in September 1969) produced at least one line of work that stood out among the general complex variety, it was « Contrastive Linguistics ». Experience in conducting a course in the comparative and contrastive grammar of French and English at the University of Ottawa recently brought out some aspects not covered in the Congress and perhaps of some interest to readers of META. I will indicate one of these.

For a course limited to six weeks, though intensive, it was desirable to restrict the field of comparison, and as far as possible to follow the sound tenet of contrastive linguistics that it is the area of difference that counts, i.e. we find what is not isomorphic (what is anisomorphic) between L1 and L2, and study it with a view to facilitating both teaching and translation procedures. The students in this course (mature students, some of considerable seniority and professional experience) were almost all French-speakers, so that it was opportune to concentrate on certain English features which are not found in French, and of course to investigate what the French-speaker does instead. The field was confined to that of the verb-phrase, as the principal area of morphological contrast. The main body of the course was a study of the 25 verb patterns of English (see A.S. Hornby, *A Guide to Pattern and Usage,* Oxford University Press, 1954), with numerous examples, and of the very complex English tense uses; but it was also necessary to go thoroughly into two features which have no French structural « counterpart » (this word had to be abandoned because of interference from *contrepartie,* and was replaced by « equivalent », which is indeed the recognized contrastive linguistic term).

These two features were the Anomalous Finites, that remarkable group of 24 verbals sharing some 8 specific functions; and the Phrasal Verbs (with their distinction from Prepositional Verbs and Prepositional Phrasal Verbs).

It may be pointed out parenthetically that the Scale of Rank offers a useful framework, of special interest to translators. The important basic fact is that the

two languages share the same scale of 5 or 6 ranks, but at the rank of *sentence* the two languages are not structurally isomorphic, since we may wish to replace one English sentence by two French sentences, or (more rarely) *vice versa*. At the rank of *clause* the same may apply. At the rank of *group* (as also of « phrase » in the strictly English sense of « grammatical phrase », i.e. the non-sentence, which is not necessarily synonymous with « group ») we have a reasonably close state of equivalence. At the rank of *word* we clearly do not have an isomorphic situation (e.g. « look at » — *regarder*). At the rank of morpheme the lack of correspondence is obvious. Thus the ranks are isomorphic only at the central level, of the phrase and group.

To summarize : English-French structural correspondence

<div style="margin-left:6em">

rank :   sentence   —
             clause   —
             phrase ⎫
             group ⎬   +
             word   —
             morpheme —

</div>

However much the *internal* structure of a phrase may differ as between English and French, the phrase-for-phrase correlation is, on the whole, 1 to 1. It is this fact which has encouraged us in developing a « phrasing-for-phrasing » system of English-French translation — the « phrasing » being an articulatorily-based unit equal to or greater than the phrase, but not exactly coterminous with any of the accepted units of rank (see my articles in META, XI, 3, (1966) and XIII, 2, (1968).

To return now to the contrastive analysis of verbal forms (leaving aside the 25 patterns of verbal collocation with different kinds of objects, complements and adjuncts) we find that in spite of the extreme paucity of inflected forms in the English verb — essentially only 4, e.g. talk, talks, talking, talked — there are 40 different ways in which we can express the verb « talk » as against 25 for *parler*. Diagrammatically we can show a many-to-one correspondence from English to French.

There is a very great deal that can be done exemplifying and expanding all this, as for instance in showing 7 different ways of translating a French simple present tense into English.

I wish now to point out one instance that operates in the contrary direction : one-to-many from English to French. It is concerned with the very complex English use of « should », for which there are 4 different possible French equivalents. I am referring to British English (English) as distinct from British English (Scottish, etc.) and from various kinds of North American English. As the « shall-will », « should-would » situation is rather confused between them, I think it prudent to make this clear, though I doubt if it significantly reduces the value of the example :
a) the use normally called « conditional », because a condition of some sort is expressed or implied : If I had time I should write every day;
b) a use clearly defined in more inflected languages as a subjunctive, which may be *present* : She has a magnifying glass in case I should write too small;
or *c*) *past* : *She had a magnifying glass in case I should write too small;*
and *d*) the quite different use implying an « ought » : I know I should write, but

I can't do everything. (This might come as the answer to *You should write!*) The same use is often seen in commercial prose, e.g. : *This liquid should be kept away from flame.*

It will be seen that each of these uses is distinct and is of course differentiated by the form of the French equivalent :

$$I \ should \ write \ \begin{cases} \text{j'écrirais} \\ \text{que j'écrive} \\ \text{que j'écrivisse} \\ \text{je devrais écrire} \end{cases}$$

Thus we have Conditional, Subjunctive (present and past), and for the fourth case I propose Desiderative « should ».

It must be pointed out that this is not quite identical with « desiderative » as sometimes used by classical grammarians to express « wish » on the part of the subject — here it is confined to the sense that the action is considered desirable *by some one*. Compare also : *The train should be in any minute now.* We need a term for this use of « should », and if any reader can offer a better one than « desiderative » I shall be glad to know.

The Course work on the verb patterns was both stiffened and facilitated by a simple application of formalism borrowed from generative grammar, which sharply differentiated the numerous variants even within a single pattern. But these formalized structures proved only partially satisfactory as the basis for transformation into French. And they do not deal with complexities such as the « should » problem indicated here.

DAVID SHILLAN