

Berndt, Rolf

## Lexical contrastive analysis

*Brno studies in English*. 1969, vol. 8, iss. 1, pp. [31]-36

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118035>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# LEXICAL CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

ROLF BERNDT

*University of Rostock*

'Contrastive Analysis', according to R. L. Hadlich, 'seeks to catalogue, through the comparative analysis of the native and foreign language systems, the points of difference, so that more effective language-learning materials, based precisely on these learning problems, can be developed.'<sup>1</sup> Whilst not doubting 'the validity of this procedure... at the levels of pronunciation, ..., and syntax, where second language grammatical errors often follow the pattern of native language analogies,'<sup>1</sup> Hadlich, however, considers the application of 'contrastive analytic procedure... to vocabulary learning' not only 'incorrect', but even 'harmful'. 'Contrastive lexical analysis', in his opinion, is 'harmful', at any rate, 'for the purposes of developing active oral production in a foreign language',<sup>2</sup> though it may be 'applicable to' and even be 'of prime importance' in 'certain other activities.'<sup>2</sup>

Actually, what Hadlich is concerned with in his article is not lexical contrastive analysis (LCA) at all, but language teaching techniques, or more precisely, the question of how to deal most effectively with (an extremely limited number of) divergent phenomena in foreign language teaching (FLT). Investigations into the application of the findings of contrastive analyses to FLT are, of course, of the greatest importance, for comparative synchronic linguistics itself is not in any way concerned with the development of more effective language-learning materials, although its findings no doubt will have to be taken into consideration in the elaboration of these materials. What Hadlich has to say about the efficiency of certain teaching techniques is of no concern to the linguist but will have to be discussed by methodologists and others working in the field of FLT. His article at any rate provides no sufficient proof of the inapplicability of the results of LCA to vocabulary learning, nor does it in any way discourage research work in this particular field or disprove the widely held opinion that 'a lexical comparison of... two languages... will help us to forecast many of the... vocabulary difficulties speakers of a particular language have in learning'<sup>3</sup> another language.

Lexical contrastive analysis, as we understand it, is a special branch of comparative synchronic linguistics which is in no way confined to bringing to light 'what can be labelled "problem pairs" in the second language',<sup>1</sup> as Hadlich seems to believe.

In dealing with the elementary lexical units or lexemes (here confined to those minimal semantic simplexes which are also grammatically simplexes, i.e. morphemes) or rather with the elementary meaning units (EMU's) called *semantemes* or *sememes*, LCA will, no doubt, have to bring much more to light than just 'problem pairs'. In investigations into the meaning correspondences in the two languages being compared, LCA will even fulfil no less an important task in exactly defining those correspondences which present the least problems of all, that is, genuine one-to-one

correspondences, especially of polysemous units in both languages. It will, of course, also bring to light much more complicated differences than one-to-two correspondences (Hadlich's 'problem pairs').

Ideally, LCA would have to take into consideration all elementary meaning units of the source language (SL) and their potential equivalents in the target language (TL) and so, in the end, provide the material for complete new dictionaries. In view of the enormous complexity of such a task it seems, however, much more rational to start with an investigation of those units lying in the highest frequency ranges, that is the 3,000 or 5,000 most frequent words and their TL equivalents, these being at the same time those units most urgently needed by the FL learner for productive purposes.

Step by step, then, each of these EMU's of the SL will have to be contrasted with its potential equivalents in the target language. This, however, presupposes exact definitions of its semantic range, or segmentation of the total meaning, the sem(ant)eme, into its individual semes, subvariants, or submeanings. The exactness of the definition of the correspondences will, no doubt, depend to a large extent already on the exactness of the semantic breakdown, particularization, or meaning discrimination in the SL itself. For what is actually to be contrasted is, except in the case of monosemous words, not the sem(ant)eme, but its individual semes. The finer the discriminations, the better will also undoubtedly be the chances of discovering semantic overlapping of two or more words in certain areas of meaning (i.e. partial synonymy).

Whoever expects to find satisfactory information of this kind in monolingual SL dictionaries will certainly be highly disappointed after consulting monolingual German dictionaries. None of them will supply him with discriminations fine enough to provide a sound basis for contrastive analysis. LCA of German and English will, therefore, have to start with further discriminations of the meanings of the SL elementary meaning units. Under the present conditions this will still have to be done along more or less conventional lines, as there is as yet 'no known discovery procedure for correct semantic descriptions'.<sup>4</sup> Although we do not doubt that further research in line with the latest explorations in semantic theory (such as those of U. Weinreich, J. J. Katz and J. A. Fodor or others) may yield even better and more precise results in the future, we feel that considerable improvements can even be reached in this way and be made available long before the time of the 'dictionaries of the future' arrives (which should naturally not prevent us from constantly searching for better and more useful tools with which to analyze meaning).

Having tried to draw as clear and sharp distinctions as possible in specifying the submeanings of a SL morpheme, the investigator will then, of course, have largely to rely upon the meaning discriminations available in monolingual TL dictionaries (which, as far as English is concerned, are fortunately far better than those to be found in German dictionaries, at least) in his attempts at defining the correspondences between the already determined segments or semes of a SL unit and those of one or, mostly, more TL units.

After correspondence between one seme of the SL unit and one seme of a particular TL sememe has been established, careful examination will be necessary in order to find out whether the correspondence between these two sememes is confined to one of their individual semes only or applies equally well to others or even all of their remaining submeanings. For the results of our search for translational equivalents will be really effective only if they clearly point out which one of the potential

equivalents is, in fact, the most broadly applicable and therefore, at the same time, the particular equivalent that the student is most likely to need. Semantic overlapping of TL words in certain areas of meaning equally covered by the SL sememe should, of course, also be taken into consideration in order to provide the information needed for gradually increasing the student's ability to vary his expression in the FL.

It goes without saying that in cases where there is no genuine one-to-one meaning correspondence between one particular SL unit and one TL sememe, it will be necessary to look for potential equivalents of those semes not yet covered by this particular TL unit by using the same procedure already applied in the discovery of the first partial equivalent.

This being done and translational equivalents provided for all of the submeanings or semes of the SL sememe under consideration, one should, of course, expect to have, at this stage of the investigation, not much more or less than that kind of information easily to be gathered from at least the better of the existing bilingual dictionaries. This, however, in many cases at least, is far from true.

In one's search for English translational equivalents of German elementary meaning units one will, naturally, be tempted to consult—amongst others—not only German-English but also English-German dictionaries. One will, however, soon find out that the support to be had from English-German dictionaries is often of a very limited kind only, because the meaning discriminations of the potential German equivalents are in many cases far from satisfactory. The German user of such a book will, of course, be able to supply additional information from his own knowledge of his native tongue. But even he will be puzzled by entries, such as:

MODEST —  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} -1. \textit{bescheiden} \\ -2. \textit{anspruchslos} \text{ (Person od. Sache)} \\ -3. \textit{anständig, sittsam} \\ -4. \textit{massvoll, bescheiden, vernünftig.}^5 \end{array} \right.$

It is often argued that the shortcomings of bilingual dictionaries are dictated by considerations of economy of space. But this obviously does not apply to entries such as the one just cited, which could easily have been reduced to two German equivalents if the authors had clearly distinguished between sememes and their subvariants. For the German sememe *bescheiden* is, in fact, the most broadly applicable and closest possible equivalent of English *modest*. At least six of its submeanings or semes, and not only the two explicitly cited as equivalents 2 and 4, correspond to the subvariants of *modest*, with the single exception of seme 7 defined in English dictionaries as *'behaving according to a standard of what is proper or decorous, etc.'*

Insufficient meaning discrimination, however pardonable it may be in TL—SL dictionaries, will undoubtedly prove a most serious handicap for the authors of a SL—TL dictionary. The linguist working in the field of LCA will be even more disappointed at the information available in German-English dictionaries. The SL entries will, in very many cases, not provide him with the kind of semantic particularization indispensable for clear and exact definitions of the meaning correspondences (but, sometimes, tell him, in fact, the most curious things about his own native language). One of the inevitable consequences of this is, of course, that the user of such a dictionary will, more often than not, look in vain for the kind of information needed.

Other no less serious drawbacks are due to the fact that many authors of two-language dictionaries have not been sufficiently careful in defining those areas of meaning where an elementary meaning unit of the SL and another one of the TL may be said to be fully, or at least roughly, equivalent. Consequently we get, on the one hand, dictionaries, admittedly of a very poor type, showing words on a one-to-one meaning correspondence where there is actually nothing but a partial correspondence. On the other hand, however, we also get more serious dictionaries tending in the opposite direction and narrowing the area of congruence by not fully realizing that the potential TL equivalent given as corresponding to one or two (or some) semes of the SL unit does, in fact, likewise correspond to other semes of this same meaning unit. This may be less harmful, of course, than the opposite procedure, but results inevitably in undue complication and prevents the authors from giving exact information of the kind most urgently needed by the language learner, i.e. clear indications of the most broadly applicable translational equivalent.

Let us take, as an example, the German sememe **KLAR** and its potential English equivalents. We find that in order to give a clear picture of the meaning correspondences and the subareas of meaning shared by other morphemes (partial synonymy) in the TL, it is at least necessary to specify up to nineteen submeanings or semes of this particular German sememe (with additional finer discriminations of some of these subvariants). None of the existing German-English dictionaries, however, gives a semantic breakdown of this kind, although there is no doubt that **KLAR** is, in fact, a term very broad and general in meaning. Of the potential English equivalents, **CLEAR** is undoubtedly the one most similar in form. Is it also the one most similar in meaning? After even the most careful scrutiny of the entries given in dictionaries like the 1963 edition of Wildhagen—Héraucourt,<sup>6</sup> one will certainly not be in a position to give a definite answer<sup>7</sup>. But **CLEAR**, nevertheless, is the most broadly applicable of all the potential equivalents of German **KLAR**. Apart from differences in distribution, it may actually be defined as corresponding to at least fourteen of the submeanings of German **KLAR**.

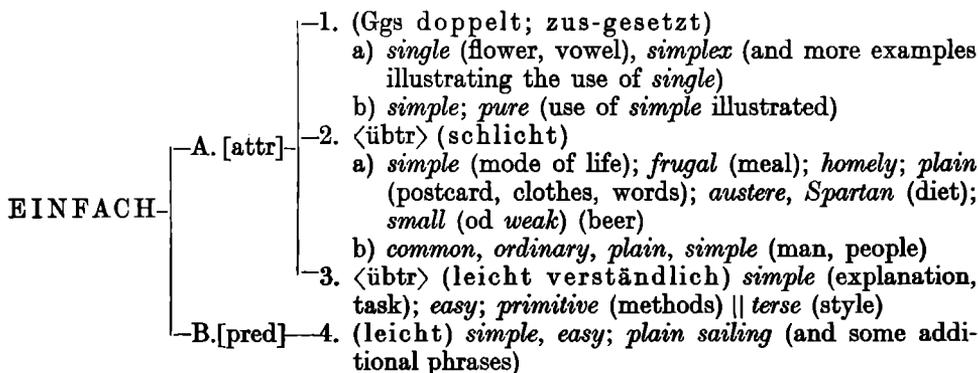
This having been established by contrastive analysis, it is now relatively easy to clearly define those areas of meaning demanding special attention in FLT: apart from special phrases and idioms, no doubt those semes of **KLAR** not corresponding to **CLEAR** but having other translational equivalents (such as **CLEAN**, **LUCID**, **DISTINCT**, **READY**, etc.), on the one hand, and those submeanings of **CLEAR** having translational equivalents other than **KLAR** (namely **REIN**, **SCHARF**, **GLATT**, **FREI**, etc.), on the other hand.

Results like these are significant in other respects as well. Apart from bringing to light semantic overlappings within each of the two languages compared, they also point out further meaning correspondences in the two languages. For nobody will fail to notice that **REIN**, for instance, overlapping in certain areas of meaning with **KLAR**, does, in fact, also correspond to a number of semes (at least eleven) of English **CLEAN**. The same holds true of **SCHARF**, partially synonymous with **KLAR**, and at the same time one of the potential equivalents of **DISTINCT**.

Having traced out the English equivalents of German **KLAR** (that is, with few exceptions, those lying in the frequency ranges under consideration), we will, therefore, undoubtedly be led on to search for the TL equivalents of such SL units as **REIN**, **SCHARF**, **HELL**, etc., coinciding in some areas, though not in all, with the sememe **KLAR**. We will certainly also not lose sight of such meaning units as **FREI** or **GLATT**, already established as potential equivalents of part of the semes of **CLEAR**.

In other words, progress in lexical contrastive analysis will be largely determined by the results previously obtained. Systematic contrastive analysis of this kind will, we have no doubt, succeed in working out whole networks of interconnections between the two language systems. This, on the other hand, will certainly give important new insights to all those engaged in developing more effective methods of selection, grading, and presentation of the lexical material of the FL in foreign language classes, textbooks, programmes, etc. It will definitely also lead to considerable improvements of bilingual dictionaries.

To give just one more example, the German learner of English will get much fuller and more precise information about the potential equivalents of German EINFACH than that given to him in dictionaries like Wildhagen—Héraucourt,<sup>6</sup> namely (in a somewhat simplified representation):



The student will certainly learn, amongst other things, that it is at least possible—and for the sake of clear representation of the meaning correspondences and partial synonymy in the TL, even necessary—to specify not only four but eleven submeanings of EINFACH (and to break down a number of them into even smaller sub-units). Being well-versed in his mother tongue, he will easily recognize that *einfaches Bier* (*light ale* or *beer*, by the way) is not *schlicht* at all, but *nicht stark* or *von geringem Alkoholgehalt*. The same is true of *eine einfache Postkarte*, being nothing but *eine gewöhnliche Postkarte* (*keine Ansichtskarte*, etc.). A *simple task*, *eine einfache Aufgabe*, is, of course, *nicht kompliziert* and, therefore, *leicht zu lösen*, *erledigen*, etc., and *primitive methods*, apart from being *unkompliziert*, may, in fact, be *primitiv*, but are certainly not primarily *leicht verständlich*.

Apart from finding out that PURE, for instance, is (except perhaps in *pure vowel*) almost non-existent as a potential equivalent of EINFACH, he will, to his surprise, also come across a *simple vowel* and learn that *ein einfaches Mahl* may not only be a *frugal meal*, in English, but equally well a *simple*, *plain*, *homely*, or a *modest meal*, that there are, in fact, *simple clothes* or a *simple type of dress* as well as a *plain dress*, that nobody would object to calling *einen einfachen Stil* a *simple style* or a *plain style*, that there is something like *plain living* in English, or that an *easy task* is not fundamentally different from a *simple task*. He will, of course, be in a position to decide whether the 'synonyms' given are fully identical or only similar in meaning, and he will not accept that EINFACH is equivalent to LEICHT in predicative use only.

He will, above all, get much additional information, entirely excluded from

dictionaries like these, but indispensable for correct translation of German EINFACH and its various submeanings into English.

Lack of space unfortunately prevents us from presenting more of the results of the research work being carried on by our department. It should, however, be pointed out, at least, that lexical contrastive analysis is, by no means, confined to investigations into the meaning correspondences of those minimal semantic simplexes which are also grammatically simplexes. It will have to take quite a lot of other phenomena into consideration: grammatically complex units such as compounds and others, phrases, idioms and figurative expressions of the two languages compared, differences in distribution (collocational range) or connotation of the meaning units, to mention only some of the things which will have to be dealt with in separate papers.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R. L. Hadlich, 'Lexical Contrastive Analysis', *Modern Language Journal* 49. 426 (Wisconsin, 1965).
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 428.
- <sup>3</sup> W. R. Lee, 'Grading', *English Language Teaching* 17. 111 (London, 1963).
- <sup>4</sup> U. Weinreich, 'Lexicographic definition in descriptive semantics', *Problems in Lexicography* (eds. F. W. Housholder — S. Saporta) (Bloomington, 1962).
- <sup>5</sup> O. Springer (ed.), *Langenscheidt's Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the English and German Languages, Part I: English-German, First Volume A—M<sup>2</sup>, 860* (Berlin, 1963).
- <sup>6</sup> K. Wildhagen and W. Héraucourt, *English-German, German-English Dictionary in Two Volumes, Volume II: German-English* (Wiesbaden—London, 1963).
- <sup>7</sup> We readily concede that more satisfactory information of this kind may now be obtained from *Harrap's Standard German and English Dictionary* (ed. T. Jones), *Part One German-English, F—K* (London, 1967). Despite its astonishingly large number of entries and wealth of phrases and sentences to illustrate meanings, this dictionary is, however, remarkably poor in other respects. Apart from the highly insufficient segmentation of German semantemes into their individual senses or subvariants, very little attention is paid to semantic overlapping of TL words in certain areas of meaning, so that the German reader, at any rate, is not given adequate information about the possibilities of using other words than CLEAR, for instance, as potential equivalents (or near-equivalents) of certain submeanings of German KLAR (such as PURE, BRIGHT, FAIR, PLAIN, OPEN, DISTINCT, SHARP, DEFINITE, EXACT, OBVIOUS, MANIFEST, APPARENT, etc.). He will often also look in vain for clear indications of those senses of KLAR demanding translational equivalents other than CLEAR (such as CLEAN, in *clean features*, LUCID, DISTINCT and others).

## RESUMÉ

### Lexikální kontrastní analýza

Systematická lexikální kontrastní analýza je zatím ve svých počátcích. Je však možno dobře zdůvodnit názor, že další výzkum na tomto poli přinese poznatky o shodě ve významu slov ve srovnávaných jazycích daleko přesnější, než byly poznatky dosavadní, a přispěje tak k značnému zlepšení dvoujazyčných slovníků. Stěží lze pochybovat o tom, že získané výsledky současně přinesou potřebný přehled pro ty, kdo hledají účinnější vyučovací metody a lepší učební materiály pro výuku cizích jazyků.