

# Exploring the conceptual landscape of contrastive linguistics

## Abstract

Conferences on Contrastive Linguistics (CL) are being held around the world in order to find a consensus on various disciplinary points. This study intends to explore the conceptual landscape of contrastive Linguistics as a new discipline. Provided that disciplinary newness is always questioned from various perspectives, the explorative approach will be helpful for the description of the discipline's conceptual landscape. Findings suggest that its conceptual landscape gets a wide variety of concepts classified as being specialized, discipline-related, operative, borrowed, coined, and methodological.

**Keywords:** contrastive linguistics, conceptual landscape, concepts, interdisciplinarity

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## Introduction

The birth of a discipline is often the result of original scientific approaches tackling an object of study. These scientific approaches are partly displayed through concepts which constitute an argument for the recognition of something as an autonomous discipline. The early years witness a debate on the disciplinary state of contrastive linguistics (CL), which resulted in its relative acknowledgement as a discipline. Henceforth, debates took another dimension related to specific aspects of CL. Despite the new turn of debates, the conceptual aspect of CL seems to be weakly tackled in pieces of research, i.e. as a main point. Instead, most studies are carried out either on a limited number of concepts or with the aid of some concepts or based on concepts in a piecemeal way. This situation makes us wonder about the nature of the conceptual landscape of CL and its peculiarities. This paper explores the conceptual landscape of the discipline.

We intend to convoke the exploratory approach to get some paths and to discover conceptual realities of CL. This exploratory approach is therefore laid on an explorative device which will be helpful in naming groups of concepts, in cataloguing elements of their inner structure, in providing as much information as possible on a specific subtype, and in mentioning authors who investigated on them. Three main points will be the focus of the paper: first of all, CL will be briefly presented; then, the conceptual landscape of the discipline is going to be described, and finally, we are going to argue on the management of varieties of concepts in a research context.

## Brief presentation of contrastive linguistics

Some aspects of the discipline will be presented such as: the meaning of the discipline, the perception it suffers in various places, its disciplinary relationships within a saturated disciplinary context.

## What is CL all about?

Many scholars have defined CL from the early years of its existence to recent years. According to Filipović<sup>1</sup> contrastive analysis is traditionally defined as the systematic study of a pair of languages ascertaining in which aspects they are alike and in which they differ. For Fisiak, Lipińska Grzegorek, and Zabrocki.<sup>2</sup> Contrastive Linguistics may be roughly defined as a sub discipline of linguistics which is concerned with the comparison of two or more languages (or subsystems of languages) in order to determine both the differences and similarities between them. Krzeszowski<sup>3</sup> thinks that the discipline focuses on pairs of languages and explores similarities as well as

differences between them and that it is an area of linguistics in which a linguistic theory is applied to a comparative description of two or more languages, which need not be genetically or typologically related. Johansson<sup>4</sup> suggests that it is rather the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences. Ping Ke<sup>5</sup> equally sees it as a branch of linguistics which studies two or more languages synchronically, with the aim of discovering their differences and similarities (especially the former) and applying these findings to related areas of language study or practice.

Considering the above contributions in defining what CL is, we think that a complete definition should mention its main task, its comparative perspective, its main goal, its major outcomes, and its scientific affiliation in order to identify its relationships with its mother discipline and sister disciplines. In this respect, Pan and Tham's definition seems more appropriate. For Pan and Tham<sup>6</sup> CL is considered as a branch in linguistics maintained by foundations in philosophical linguistics, comprising aspects in theoretical and applied studies with an object to contrast two or more languages or dialects to describe the similarities and particularly, the differences for an explanation in view of the relations between human language and its spirit, so as to promote advancements in general linguistics and facilitate the exchanges and understandings of cultures and civilizations for human harmony.

## How is CL perceived?

Various perceptions of CL are seen through its various denominations across time. For instance, Fisiak<sup>7</sup> makes the following appellation census for the discipline: Comparative Descriptive Linguistics, Linguistic Confrontation; Krzeszowski identifies the discipline's denominations like Diaglossic Grammar, Cross-Linguistic Studies, Confrontative Studies; furthermore, Kurtes<sup>8</sup> names several appellations proposed by authors among which Comparative Descriptive Linguistics, Descriptive Comparison, Parallel Description, Contrastive Linguistics; and Yllera<sup>9</sup> rather explores the discipline's denominations that emerged in the French part of the world namely: *l'Interlinguistique*, *Linguistique comparativo-linguistique*, *Linguistique confrontative*, *Linguistique différentielle*.

In various places in academic milieu nowadays, some denominations mentioned by Ping Ke Contrastive Analysis, Contrastive Studies, Contrastive Linguistics- are commonly used. This state of affairs further indicates that the discipline still suffers

different perceptions. Ping Ke sheds light on this issue: Contrastive linguistics is also known as “contrastive analysis” (CA) or “contrastive studies”. These three terms are largely interchangeable. In the United Kingdom and the United States, “contrastive analysis” is a regular term, but in Eastern Europe, China and some other parts of the world, the name “contrastive linguistics” is preferred, perhaps because the terms “contrastive analysis” or “contrastive studies” may give one an impression that they refer to approaches to specific problems in sounds more like a discipline in its own right, as it really is.

From our humble point of view, the discipline is perceived as contrastive analysis because of its scientific procedures and methods. Supporters of this denomination seem to have focused on the methodological aspect of the discipline. The perception of the discipline as contrastive studies shows its globalizing scope because, according to supporters of this denomination, contrasts can be identified at all levels of scientific research. Advocates of the perception of the discipline as contrastive linguistics lay emphasis on its scientific affiliation, i.e., they want to situate it with regard to its mother and to its sister disciplines.

## Disciplinary relationships of CL

CL is not a self-sufficient discipline; it needs the contributions of other disciplines in order to guarantee its survival as an autonomous discipline and recipient disciplines so as to assess the reliability of its research procedures and the effectiveness in the applicability of its findings. Pietri<sup>10</sup> considers CL as a crossroad discipline having filial relations with general linguistics, brotherly relations with typological linguistics, having cooperative relation with translation studies translation and interpreting; having a unilateral dependence relation with language didactics. We do not intend to be exhaustive as far as identifying CL’s various disciplinary relationships but the elements mentioned corroborate Pietri’s viewpoint on CL as being a crossroad discipline. Moreover, its flexible nature and scope allow it to create new relationships with other disciplines. The following figure summarizes what has been said until this point. On the left part of the table are input disciplines for CL and output disciplines are on the right part of the table. By input disciplines, we mean those that give material to CL and output disciplines are the ones that benefit from CL’s research findings (Figure 1).

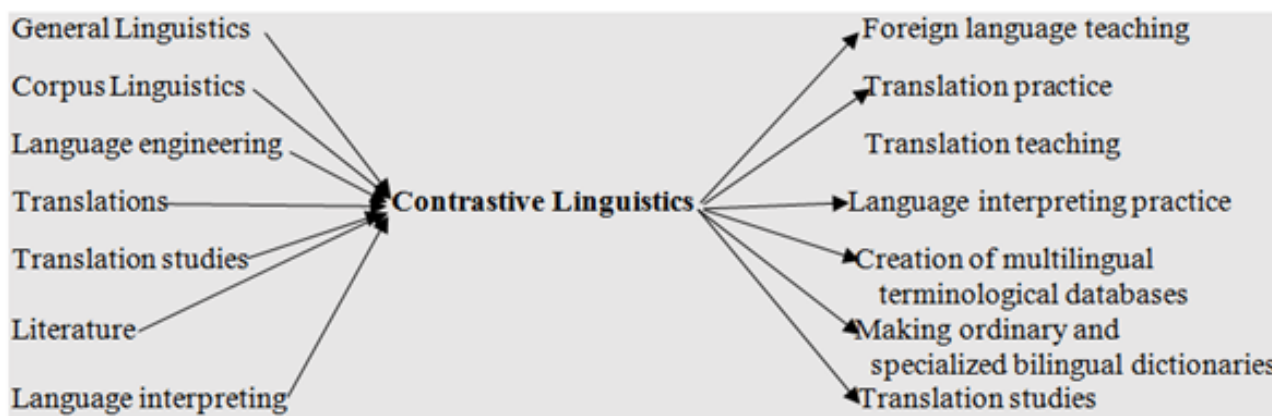


Figure 1 Contrastive linguistics as a crossroad discipline.

## Conceptual landscape of CL

Generally, the backbone of a discipline also consists of its body of concepts. Talking about CL as a discipline, it comprises at the first glance several concepts which can be classified according to features they have in common. The exploration of literature on the matter leads us to distinguish among 6 groups of concepts, namely: specialized concepts, discipline-related concepts, operative concepts, borrowed concepts, coined concepts, and methodological concepts.

### Specialized concepts

As the name suggests, this group is made up of concepts that are directly linked to the discipline. It serves as primary concepts for CL in such a way that one cannot talk of the discipline without mentioning them. Generally, identifying such concepts as being part of the discipline does not require a lot of effort. This group includes concepts like contrastive linguistics and language comparison. As a specialized concept, language comparison can be tackled in terms of the number of languages used in the comparison process. From there, we can talk about intralingual comparison and interlingual comparison. For more details, see Kocourek. This specialized concept can also be examined in terms of the comparative direction. Kocourek<sup>11</sup> explicitly says:

L'examen comparatif bilingue peut être neutre (réciproque) ou orienté (directionnel). Il est neutre s'il essaie de relever les ressemblances et les différences du point de vue des deux langues; par exemple le manuel Stylistique comparée est considéré comme tel par Alfred Malblanc. L'examen est orienté si une langue sert de toile de fond (langue de départ, thématique) pour la caractéristique de l'autre langue (langue d'arrivée, rhématique). Dans ce dernier cas, il y a en principe deux façons différentes de comparer la même paire de langues, selon que l'une ou l'autre est langue rhématique. Dans sa Linguistique générale et linguistique française, Charles Bally se proposait « d'éclaircir le visage du français par la comparaison de l'allemand ».

This concept can be further developed in terms of comparative approaches. Many comparative approaches are mentioned by scholars like Rousseau,<sup>12</sup> Sörès<sup>13</sup> and Kocourek. It can equally be studied according to comparative perspectives. This point has been investigated by Ping Ke when he mentions language comparison from synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Contrastive linguistics as a specialized concept helps in providing epistemological information on the discipline. More concretely, this specialized concept can be viewed in terms of its origin<sup>14,15</sup> in terms of its evolution,<sup>16</sup> in terms of the typologies of contrastive studies.<sup>17–21</sup> This specialized concept can

equally be examined in terms of the contrastive sensitiveness of the researcher and in terms of the discipline's branches.

### Discipline-related concepts

These concepts constitute the met language of the discipline. They are often concepts used and comprehensible by researchers of the disciplinary field. They can be presented in pairs as it is done in Bayiha's thesis (not yet defended):

- i. Comparability vs. Contrastivity<sup>22,23</sup>
- ii. Tertium comparationis vs. Equivalence
- iii. Correspondence vs. Congruence<sup>24,25</sup>
- iv. similarity vs. comparison<sup>26,27</sup>
- v. Descriptive concept vs. Comparative concept<sup>28,29</sup>

The above concepts give a rich insight for the understanding of the ins and the outs of CL. We cannot talk in detail about these concepts in this study; nevertheless, the authors we listed give in-depth explanations of these concepts.

### Operative concepts

Operative concepts are concepts on which investigation is done in a contrastive linguistics research. While contrasting, the contrastivists focuses on a language aspect in order to bring out similarities and differences. This language aspect is an operative concept: it may be a specific tertium comparationis or a specific comparative concept. According to Krzeszowski- *this common platform of reference is called tertium comparationis[...] is in fact the reason why any two texts are brought together as a 2-text and/or why any two items in two languages are juxtaposed for comparison*. Krzeszowski proposes tertia comparationis in relation to various types of equivalence, namely: statistical equivalence, translation equivalence, system equivalence, semanto-syntactic equivalence, rule equivalence, and pragmatic/functional equivalence. It means that these various types of equivalence are operative concepts for CL.

As far comparative concepts are concerned, Chuquet and Paillard<sup>30</sup> list a set of concepts in a glossary-form susceptible to be the subject of investigation in the field of CL. For instance, such concepts include items like dislocation, derivation, modality, tenses, negation, punctuation, gerund, affix, antonymy, etc. Such concepts are therefore operative for CL. The peculiarity of operative concepts is that only one is needed for a single study. With above precisions, it can be noticed that tertia comparationis are more abstract in the sense that they are not preconceived and consequently, not seized without a preliminary investigation; whereas comparative concepts seem to be more concrete since they are listed in such a way that the contrastivists just picks one to kick off investigation.

### Borrowed concepts

This group of concepts allows CL to be constantly open to enrich its conceptual basis. Such concepts are the result of the interdisciplinary co-operation between CL and other disciplines. For instance, the concept of congruence has been borrowed from mathematics and that of equivalence from translation. We cannot name them exhaustively, but we can say that concepts that behave the same must be inevitably classified under this group of concepts.

### Coined concepts

Coined concepts arise to fill a conceptual gap at a given moment while the discipline is growing. Such concepts usually refer to new

realities and account for the discipline growth. This group includes concepts like:

- i. 2-texts coined and developed by Krzeszowski (1990) who differentiate between translationally equivalent texts and + translationally equivalent texts;
- ii. Contrastivity developed by authors like Corre;
- iii. Comparability developed by authors like Krzeszowski, Chesterman, Kurteš

They focus themselves on linguistic comparability which is different from corpus-related comparability.

### Methodological concepts

Methodological concepts are linked to the investigation methods proper to CL. They are used to ensure the on-going of the methodological procedures in the piece of research. These concepts include concepts like convergence, divergence, similarity, differences,<sup>31</sup> contrasts,<sup>32</sup> starting language vs. another language, translation corpora vs. comparable.<sup>33</sup> We do not pretend exhaustivity, but we rather urge that every concept that ensures the intelligibility of methodology in a CL research be classified under methodological concepts for CL.

Our task did not consist in explaining the meaning of different concepts that are classified in different groups of concepts. It was rather about naming groups of concepts regarding their tendency, cataloguing elements found in the inner structure of each group of concepts, providing if possible some information on a specific subtype of the concept, and opening up paths by mentioning authors that can be consulted for detailed and more technical information about concepts.

### Managing varieties of concepts in a research context

The management of concepts in the research context greatly depends on a certain number of factors: the order in which groups of concepts need to be considered when carrying out research in the field of CL, the selection principle of useful concepts susceptible to enlighten the research route, and a good clarification of selected concepts.

### The ranking of groups of concepts

This ranking is not done according to the importance of concepts, but according to the order of their consideration when researching in the field of CL.

1. Specialized concepts
2. Operative concepts
3. Discipline-related concepts
4. Methodological concepts
5. Borrowed concepts
6. Coined concepts

Specialized concepts occupy the first position because they play the role of a conceptual avant-garde by indicating the field in which research is being done. In other words, they inform about the discipline within which the research is being carried out. We advise that the researcher should say a word on one or more specialized

concepts explicitly to indicate the route he will follow. Operative concepts come next because they are used as executors in the piece of research. The latter can be conducted effectively without them. The researcher should therefore make a careful selection from the provided glossaries of operative concepts to avoid ambiguities. They should equally elaborate on the selected concept so as to provide readers with a good grasp of it. Discipline-related concepts occupy the third position because they are considered as a guide. Their selection of some concepts in this group indicates how the selected operative concept will be treated; consequently, such a group of concepts give the orientation of the study. Methodological concepts come after discipline-related concepts as pillars for the research methodology adopted. These concepts give a clue on the methodology adopted in a piece of research.

As for borrowed concepts, they highlight disciplines which cooperate with CL and they ensure the conceptual enlargement of the discipline. In fact, they have a double role, that is, inside, they enrich the conceptual basis of the discipline and outside, they create a link between the discipline and the discipline from which the concept has been borrowed. The last position is occupied by coined concepts because they are the last resort where other groups of concepts are found inefficient. As borrowed concepts, they enrich the conceptual basis of the discipline by also meeting a conceptual need or lack. We think that a good conceptual framework in CL research must contain concepts falling at least under four groups of concepts namely: specialized concepts operative concepts, discipline-related concepts, methodological concepts.

### The selection principle

Selecting useful concepts for a study in the field of CL is not an easy task. In order to take up the challenge, one should be aware that there is a basis for applying the selection principle i.e., having a supplied catalogue of concepts under each group of concepts. From there, the researcher can easily decide which concept is useful or not for his/her study before lingering on them.

### A good clarification of selected concepts

In the context of CL, it is not much good to present a concept using its realities in a single language. Our piece of advice is that selected concepts need a good clarification i.e., a presentation of a concept that takes into consideration its realities in the comparison languages. Despite the fact that it can be disadvantageous especially with the required working time, it is advantageous because it gives a mastery of conceptual realities in two or more linguistic systems and it facilitates the location of the operative concept inside a corpus.

### Conclusion

This study consisted in three major aspects that have allowed us to explore the conceptual landscape of CL. The first aspect dealt with the brief presentation of the discipline by examining its definitions, the manner in which it is perceived, and its relationship with other disciplines. The second aspect concerned the exploration of the conceptual landscape properly said. With the aid of the literature on the matter, six groups have been identified and elaborated. The last aspect provided paths in managing these groups of concepts with the research context in the field of CL. It has been noticed that three main factors are helpful in such management namely: the ranking of groups of concepts by the order of consideration in the research process, the selection principle of useful concepts for a specific study, and a good clarification of selected concepts.

The conceptual landscape of CL is very rich and diverse. This makes CL be once more proven as an autonomous discipline and this sets boundaries between CL with other neighboring disciplines. The rich nature of this conceptual landscape can only be discovered through the use of these varieties of concepts in practical research. The diverse nature of its content is appropriately perceived when research in CL is considered on a larger scale.

This study therefore provides landmarks from a conceptual viewpoint to contrastivists so as to perfect the way concepts are tackled in CL research.

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### Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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