

# Corpus Linguistics and Contrastive Linguistics

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## Key Points

- This article traces the historical development of contrastive linguistics from early pedagogical contrastive analysis to its contemporary realization as corpus-based contrastive linguistics.
- It discusses core theories and shows how these support principled, falsifiable cross-linguistic comparison.
- It demonstrates how corpus linguistic principles of representativeness, sampling, and multilingual corpus design align with contrastive linguistic theory.
- It presents a reflective case study, illustrating how convergent and divergent corpus-based contrastive analyses can be applied in discourse and translation studies.
- It reflects on the potential affordances of contrastive linguistic theory to contemporary language pedagogy.

## Abstract

In this article, I trace the historical and conceptual development of contrastive linguistics and examine how the field has been transformed through the rise of corpus linguistics. I first outline the evolution of contrastive analysis, showing how core theories such as the *tertium comparationis* and equivalence were progressively refined. Building on this theoretical discussion, I review the alignment of representativeness, sampling, and multilingual corpus design with contrastive linguistic theory, and highlight the affordances of parallel and comparable corpora for contrastive linguistics research. I then present a reflective case study that illustrates how corpus-based contrastive linguistics can be applied across discourse studies, translation studies, and language pedagogy. I conclude by arguing that while corpus-based contrastive linguistics is now firmly established, further work is needed to deepen its theoretical coherence, broaden its multilingual scope, and expand its applied relevance.

## Introduction

Corpus linguistics has played a critical role in the redevelopment of contemporary contrastive linguistics research. As a consequence, nowadays, contrastive linguistics cannot truly be separated from corpus linguistics and, most often, research in this area is framed for its undertaking of so-called corpus-based contrastive analyses. However, this was not always the case, as contrastive linguistics has a complex past, characterized by 80 years of theoretical fragility, reimagination, and reinvigoration. In this article, I explore this historical context, showing how contrastive analysis transformed into contrastive linguistics as we know it today, following its theoretical reinvention, paradigmatic changes in linguistic research, and advances in accessible technologies and corpus linguistics approaches. I then address issues of sameness and comparability, and the different types of multilingual corpora that can be employed in a corpus study. Upon establishing contemporary contrastive linguistics in all its complexity, I present a reflective case study, designed to demonstrate how corpus-based contrastive analyses can be implemented across different areas of applied linguistics, with a focus on applications to discourse analysis, translation studies, and language pedagogy. This case study is followed by a brief conclusion, in which I summarize the article and propose some future directions for the field.

## From Contrastive Analysis to Corpus-Based Contrastive Linguistics

The historical development of contrastive linguistics is characterized by a story of success-decline-success (Granger, 2003). In its advent, contrastive analysis, as it was then called, was concerned with identifying similarities and differences across linguistic

systems, typically with a focus on linguistic forms. Most notable in this regard was the early work on language education in the 1940s and 1950s, by [Fries \(1945\)](#) and [Lado \(1957\)](#), which positioned contrastive analysis as a means of improving language teaching by using insights gleaned from systematic comparisons of a learner's first language with the language to be learned. This phase in the field's history was dominated by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which assumed that similarities between languages would facilitate acquisition, while differences would identify areas of difficulty and offer insight into likely learner errors. The hypothesis developed in strong, moderate, and weak forms, ranging from descriptive accounts of cross-linguistic difference to direct error prediction ([Oller & Ziahosseiny, 1970](#); [Wardhaugh, 1970](#)).

From the late 1960s through to the 1980s, contrastive analysis underwent a period of re-evaluation, prompted largely by growing dissatisfaction with the resultant explanatory and predictive power of the CAH. Empirical work demonstrated that learner errors could not be reliably derived from knowledge of structural differences between languages alone, leading to critiques that framed CAH as theoretically weak and methodologically limited ([Klein, 1986](#); [Selinker, 1972](#)). As confidence in its strong and moderate forms diminished, contrastive analysis was increasingly marginalized in favor of the emergent fields of error analysis and interlanguage studies, which foregrounded developmental processes and learner-internal systems rather than cross-linguistic comparison ([Corder, 1981](#)). As a consequence, for a brief period, contrastive analysis appeared to be rehomed within the wider field of linguistic typology ([Hawkins, 1986](#)), obscuring the field's role and limiting its remit.

During this period of decline, contrastive analysis began to detach itself from its narrow pedagogical origins and was increasingly reconceptualized as a descriptive practice, concerned with mapping similarities and differences across languages in a systematic manner. Thus, rather than serving as a tool for error prediction, contrastive research came to be seen as a means of contributing to broader linguistic description. This shift marked an important transition in the field and was made possible through critical, theoretical innovation. Three scholars in particular played a key role in the field's redevelopment. These are James, Krzeszowski, and Chesterman, whose seminal work I now unpack.

First, I turn to [James \(1980\)](#), who provided one of the earliest systematic frameworks for contrastive research. James conceptualized contrastive analysis as a two-stage process of description and comparison, arguing that rigorous linguistic description must precede any attempt at cross-linguistic comparison. Central to his approach was the problem of equivalence, which he operationalized to determine what might count as sameness across languages. Specifically, James drew on Chomskian notions of deep structure as a theoretical anchor for identifying translation equivalence and cross-linguistic correspondence. He further delineated the capacity to undertake contrastive studies at lexical, grammatical, and phonological levels, and proposed a multi-step research procedure involving data collection, description, supplementation, and contrast formulation. While foundational, this approach relied heavily on bilingual competence and intuition, and later work noted its vulnerability to methodological circularity, owing to the absence of explicit, testable criteria for establishing correspondence across languages.

Second, I discuss [Krzeszowski \(1990\)](#), who built on James' work and enhanced the methodological and conceptual rigor of contrastive studies considerably. While also grounded in a broadly generative tradition, Krzeszowski advanced contrastive analysis by explicitly problematizing the notion of equivalence, thereby addressing longstanding concerns regarding methodological circularity. He proposed a detailed taxonomy of equivalence types, including statistical, translation, system, semanto-syntactic, rule, substantive, and pragmatic equivalences, which offered a principled means of testing correspondence across languages. Methodologically, his model also built on [James \(1980\)](#) and articulated a three-stage procedure of description, juxtaposition, and comparison, enabling linguistic features to be examined side-by-side in a structured and transparent manner. Central to this framework was the conceptualization of the *tertium comparationis* as a provisional assumption to be evaluated through systematic equivalence testing, rather than a fixed point of departure. Through his contribution, Krzeszowski redirected contrastive analysis away from the pursuit of absolute sameness toward the identification of maximum similarity.

Finally, I consider Chesterman's work ([1998](#)), which represents further methodological and conceptual refinement in the development of contrastive linguistics. In proposing his Contrastive Functional Analysis, Chesterman explicitly distanced the field from the generative assumptions that had informed earlier approaches, advancing instead a functionalist perspective, centered on language use and communicative purpose. Building on [Krzeszowski's \(1990\)](#) taxonomy of equivalence, Chesterman observed that many of Krzeszowski's proposed equivalence types closely paralleled those established in translation theory. He then drew on research in translation studies and argued that correspondence should not be treated as an objective linguistic property, but rather as a judgment grounded in translation competence and shaped by analysts' perceptions of correspondence. A central innovation in his framework was the further reconceptualization of the *tertium comparationis*. Building on Krzeszowski's advancement, [Chesterman \(1998\)](#) argued that the *tertium comparationis* can only be assumed provisionally and must be validated as the eventual outcome of a study through the systematic testing of a falsifiable hypothesis across multiple equivalences. Chesterman further introduced the notions of convergent and divergent analyses ([2007](#)), signalling a recognition of the impact of research design on contrastive studies. This reflexive, hypothesis-testing methodology offered a more rigorous means of avoiding methodological circularity and provided an important theoretical foundation for later corpus-based contrastive research.

During this transformation of contrastive linguistics in the 1980s and 1990s, a further parallel development greatly influenced and ultimately, reshaped the field: theoretical and technological advances in corpus linguistics. Owing to the proliferation of accessible technologies, the development of custom tools for scalable and multilingual text analysis, and the rising turn across applied linguistics toward empirical language study, advances in corpus linguistics in the 1990s created an ideal means of operationalizing contrastive linguistics' newly developed theoretical underpinnings. This "contrastive linguistics in a new key" ([Johansson, 2012](#), p. 46) has come to be known as corpus-based contrastive linguistics. In what follows, I outline some of the key contrastive and corpus linguistics theories, and types of corpora employed in contemporary corpus-based contrastive linguistics.

## Aligning Theory, Data, and Method in Contrastive and Corpus Linguistics

Among the key theories in contrastive linguistics, the *tertium comparationis* (TC) is one of the most noteworthy. The TC constitutes the comparable common ground from which systematic contrastive analysis may proceed. It rests on the assumption that particular facets of linguistic features under investigation, such as meaning, form, or function, are sufficiently similar across languages to warrant comparison (Connor & Moreno, 2005). A defining principle of the TC is that there can be only one in any given contrastive study, and that it cannot be tested against itself, as doing so would result in methodological circularity, whereby the analysis is structured to confirm a presupposed similarity. Earlier approaches often treated the TC as a fixed starting point for comparison; however, subsequent theoretical refinement, most notably in Chesterman's (1998) contrastive functional analysis, reconceptualized the TC as the outcome of a study rather than its point of departure. Within this framework, the TC is treated as a falsifiable hypothesis that must be progressively tested and refined through the application of equivalence criteria.

The operationalization of the *tertium comparationis* (TC) is closely bound to the principles of representativeness and sampling in corpus linguistics, as all three are concerned with defining a population that can support analysis and, in the case of contrastive linguistics at least, comparison. Representativeness refers to the extent to which a corpus reflects a clearly delimited variety of language, genre, or communicative context, and is achieved through the systematic capture of detailed metadata that specifies the conditions under which texts are produced, among other things. Sampling denotes the structured and replicable procedures by which texts are selected for inclusion in a corpus, typically realized through a defined sampling frame. In corpus-based contrastive linguistics, corresponding metadata across multilingual subcorpora is essential, as maintaining the TC across strata such as text type, genre, audience, and communicative purpose guarantees that researchers are comparing like with like, thus ensuring that the results of any comparison are meaningful. This use of a TC to shape representativeness in multilingual corpora has given rise to both parallel and comparable corpora. Parallel corpora, composed of source texts and their translations, offer a relatively stable TC. This is because the texts are versions of each other. They share propositional content and communicative intent, and these corpora facilitate the study of translated language (Curry & McEnery, 2024). Comparable corpora, by contrast, consist of original texts matched through sampling criteria (Curry, 2021). These corpora require stricter control over representativeness but enable the investigation of natural language use without translation effects (Johansson, 2012). When a TC is established and constructed through corpora, it is then ready to be tested using the notion of equivalence.

Conceptually, equivalence has undergone considerable refinement within contrastive linguistics, as indicated in my discussion of James (1980), Krzeszowski (1990), and Chesterman (1998). Fundamentally, equivalence is the central analytical criterion through which the TC is tested and falsified (Curry, 2021; Krzeszowski, 1990). Notably, a TC can be assessed by applying multiple equivalences, such as frequency, semantic meaning, distribution, or pragmatic function to determine degrees of similarity. This process reveals where the facets of the languages represented in multilingual corpora converge or diverge. However, the nature of this revelation is influenced by the direction of the equivalence testing. There are two primary ways of testing equivalence and these pertain to convergent and divergent analyses. Convergent analyses begin with assumed comparable features and examine how they align across languages, while divergent analyses start from a single feature in one language and trace the range of possible correspondences in another. Each pathway results in very different outcomes, yet both involve the selection of equivalence items to test a TC in pursuit of some understanding of sameness. Notably, contemporary contrastive linguistics has abandoned claims to pure identity (i.e., sameness) in favor of identifying manifest similarities (i.e., all the ways in which searched items are similar) and determining degrees of maximum similarity (i.e., the most salient overlapping correspondences) across a range of equivalences. In this way, contemporary contrastive linguistics recognizes that similarity is determined on a gradient rather than being identified as something categorical or binary (Adamska-Salaciak, 2013; Oleksy, 1986).

As an empirical means of testing equivalences, corpus linguistics offers a suite of useful computational techniques to contrastive studies (Curry, 2021). Quantitative procedures such as frequency word lists, keyword analysis, and the extraction of collocations, n-grams or clusters provide an empirically grounded means of measuring the presence and relative salience of linguistic items, thereby supporting the testing of statistical equivalence (Krzeszowski, 1990). Moreover, frequency counts can be supplemented by distribution measures. Such measures may prove valuable for determining whether a feature is systematically distributed across a corpus or is disproportionately associated with particular texts or metadata categories, thereby enriching a view of statistical equivalence. From a qualitative perspective, concordance analysis allows researchers to move beyond abstract quantification toward a contextualized examination of language in use, enabling the analysis of items in their immediate co-text and broader textual and discursive contexts. From an equivalence perspective, this technique can support the study of functional and pragmatic equivalences (Curry, 2023), for example. Likewise, processes for studying dispersion can show where in texts searched features tend to occur. This may offer some insight at the level of text composition and support the use of genre conventions as a form of equivalence testing. In terms of annotation, the application of semantic and part-of-speech tagging can also help with equivalence testing, depending of course on the quality of the tagging and the relative comparability of the tagging processes for the languages being studied. Using semantic tagging, it may be possible to determine if linguistic features or textual elements share semantic meaning across languages. Likewise, for grammatical categories, it is possible to analyze TCs in terms of shared or differing parts-of-speech across languages. From a technological perspective, parallel concordancers can also facilitate the juxtaposition of translated texts, allowing for equivalence testing. Overall, the evident flexibility of corpus analysis software means that it can support both divergent and convergent analyses and, generally, corpus analysis techniques, broadly conceived, can be very neatly mapped to equivalence testing in contrastive studies.

## Case Study: Applications of Corpus-Based Contrastive Linguistics in Discourse Studies, Translation Studies, and Language Pedagogy

As a means of operationalizing the aforementioned underpinning theories, data, and methods in corpus-based contrastive linguistics, in this section, I present a reflective case study drawing on previously published work. With a focus on breadth, I discuss three areas of application, namely: discourse studies, translation studies, and language pedagogy. In the case of empirical studies, I describe the corpus data used, define the analysis (in terms of convergent and divergent analyses), discuss how I have operationalized the notions of TC and equivalence, and reflect on how the corpus approaches helped me and my collaborators to answer our research questions. I begin with a focus on discourse studies.

In [Curry and Brookes \(2025\)](#), our analysis draws on a comparable subset of the CDEFS corpus (the corpus of Climate Discourses in English, French, and Spanish, [Curry, 2024](#)), focusing exclusively on non-translated academic news blog posts published under the thematic categories of *Health*, *Santé*, and *Salud* in *The Conversation*. These public-oriented research communication texts are particularly suited to examining how academic knowledge is communicated to non-specialist audiences across linguistic and cultural contexts. All texts come from the same source, undergo the same editorial processes, and are concerned with the climate crisis, demonstrating a clear TC at different strata of the corpus. Methodologically, we adopt a convergent contrastive analysis, beginning with the identification of comparable linguistic features, specifically the cultural keywords *health*, *santé*, and *salud*. We then examine how these words act as vehicles for the discursive construction of the climate and health polycrisis across the three languages. The TC is further operationalized through the assumption that these keywords fulfill comparable representational functions when academics frame issues at the intersection of climate and health for public audiences. This assumption is systematically tested through equivalence criteria derived from framing theory ([Entman, 1993](#)), operationalized as three core framing activities. These include, (1) defining and contextualizing the polycrisis, (2) representing causal relationships, and (3) proposing solutions. The corpus-based approach enables a systematic, data-driven comparison of these framing practices, revealing patterned, cross-linguistic variation. In particular, the analysis shows that the English and Spanish data tend to favor a more horizontal, transdisciplinary framing of the climate–health polycrisis, whereas the French data more frequently construct a vertically organized, layered ecosystem, showing the interconnectedness of human life, non-human life, and planetary life more generally. By grounding the analysis in comparable corpus data, the study denaturalizes the notion of a universal climate and health polycrisis, demonstrating instead that scientific knowledge is discursively shaped in ways that reflect distinct cultural and linguistic epistemologies.

In [Curry et al. \(2021\)](#), our analysis is based on a parallel corpus comprising Anthony Burgess's original English novella, *A Clockwork Orange*, and its established French and Spanish translations. Helpfully, as a parallel corpus, the TC is more easily established. Analytically, the study adopts a divergent contrastive approach, beginning with a salient feature of the source text, the invented anti-language Nadsat, and tracing its range of correspondences and realizations in the target languages. The TC is further analyzed in terms of a shared function of Nadsat across all three languages. This TC is grounded in the assumption that Nadsat serves to alienate and subsequently indoctrinate readers, and that it helps to construct the protagonist's youth identity in each language. This assumption is tested through equivalence criteria adapted from [Vincent and Clarke \(2017, 2020\)](#), categorizing Nadsat items according to word-formation domains such as Russian-derived core Nadsat, babytalk, creative morphology, as well as processes such as overlexicalization. The corpus-based methodology is central to the analysis, as it enables the systematic identification of rare and low-frequency forms (through keyword analysis), which allows for the identification of apparent non-words (i.e., Nadsat). In order to search for correspondences of the identified Nadsat items, we used our aligned parallel corpus and Sketch Engine's parallel concordancer ([Kilgarriff et al., 2014](#)). Our approach supports the detailed comparison of the source text and its translations, which in turn helped us to reveal, among other things, significant intra-translation variation in the Spanish text, which is composed of translations by two different translators. Our corpus-based contrastive analysis demonstrates how the involvement of a second translator for the final chapter resulted in inconsistencies and partial erosion of Nadsat's semantic and stylistic coherence, exemplified, for example, by divergent renderings of the Nadsat term, *horrorshow*. Overall, the use of corpus techniques provides robust empirical evidence for evaluating how effectively each translation recreates Burgess's complex anti-language and the functional effects it produces for readers.

Finally, I turn to [Curry \(2022\)](#), in which I center on language pedagogy and offer a conceptual, as opposed to empirical perspective. In the chapter, I directly address the historical disillusionment experienced by language teachers in response to early contrastive analysis, particularly following its failure to reliably predict and explain learner errors in mid-twentieth-century pedagogical contexts. In so doing, I frame the marginalization of contrastive analysis within language teaching as an understandable reaction to its early theoretical and methodological limitations, especially in light of contemporaneous movements in English Language Teaching (ELT) that discouraged the use of learners' first languages in the language classroom. However, I move to make the point that the contemporary ELT landscape differs fundamentally from that of the 1950s and 1960s, having shifted away from an exclusive focus on error prevention and toward broader educational aims that include the development of plurilingual competences, intercultural awareness, and global citizenship. Against this backdrop, I introduce the contrastive linguistics and ELT dialectic as a framework for reimagining the pedagogical relevance of corpus-based contrastive linguistics. The model identifies three interrelated spaces in which contrastive approaches offer particular pedagogical value. These include the multilingual, the multicultural, and the specialized. The multilingual construct foregrounds plurilingualism, using multilingual corpus evidence to support learners' metalinguistic awareness and to help them draw productive connections across their linguistic repertoires, rather than treating prior linguistic knowledge as a source of interference. The multicultural construct enables learners to explore how language encodes social and cultural practices, thereby leveraging corpus data to develop the intercultural awareness required for learners to participate in

global communicative contexts. Finally, the specialized construct focuses on language for specific purposes, demonstrating how multilingual corpora can be used to reveal the communicative norms of specialized discourse communities across languages and cultures—norms that can prove valuable in the teaching of languages for specific purposes. Together, these constructs reposition corpus-based contrastive linguistics as a pedagogically relevant and theoretically informed response to the realities of contemporary ELT.

In reflecting on these studies, I aimed to show how corpus-based contrastive linguistics can be operationalized to examine cross-linguistic differences in discourse and translation studies. Through convergent and divergent analyses, my collaborators and I were able to ground our comparisons on firm TCs, and move beyond abstract notions of sameness to reveal how linguistic and textual features vary according to a range of equivalences. Each empirical reflection is grounded in an explicitly defined TC and systematic equivalence testing, supported by carefully sampled multilingual corpora. This same thinking can be applied to a wider range of linguistic domains, including lexis and grammar (Aijmer & Hasselgård, 2015), pragmatics (Curry, 2023), and many others (see Aijmer & Lewis, 2017 for a comprehensive collection of such studies). In addition, the pedagogical reflection highlights the need to view the affordances of corpus-based contrastive linguistics for language education through a contemporary lens. Collectively, the studies demonstrate that corpus-based contrastive linguistics offers a flexible, theory-driven means of undertaking and applying contrastive linguistic study.

## Conclusion

This article has traced the development of contrastive linguistics from its early pedagogical orientation to its contemporary realization as corpus-based contrastive linguistics, foregrounding the theoretical and methodological innovations that have enabled contemporary corpus-based contrastive linguistics to support systematic, data-driven comparisons across languages. By unpacking key concepts such as the *tertium comparationis*, equivalence, and graded notions of similarity, the article has shown how contrastive inquiry can be operationalized through corpus linguistics techniques. The case study demonstrates how corpus-based contrastive linguistics can be applied to a variety of domains, illustrating its value for analyzing discourse practices, literary translations, and informing language pedagogy. While important advances have occurred in this field, there remains a need for further work that deepens both the theoretical foundations and applied reach of corpus-based contrastive linguistics. Future research would benefit from continued refinement of the core constructs of the *tertium comparationis* and equivalence, closer engagement with questions of comparability and representativeness, and the expansion of contrastive analyses into under-researched languages and communicative contexts. By strengthening its theoretical coherence and broadening its empirical scope, corpus-based contrastive linguistics will be well positioned to make sustained contributions to the study of language in use across an interconnected world.

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