A Contrastive Analysis of –ing and –ndo for L2 Learning

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Abstract. With the deep cooperation between China and Spanish speaking countries, Spanish, the third widely spoken language in the world, is badly needed. Now many students are learning Spanish but they cannot handle the use of the gerund leading to their failure to acquire this target language. The thesis is focused on the Spanish gerund, which has no representation of features such as persons, number and tense. This paper elaborately analyzes the various functions of the gerund and also explains the characteristics of the gerund phrases. Our mother tongue, Chinese, has sparse morphological devices, which leads to the difficulties in studying the gerund. Drawing on linguistic Contrastive Analysis, this thesis is focused on the comparison between English and Spanish. The English –ing is explained in detail in the thesis and the concept of English gerund and present participle is distinguished. There are many similarities between English and Spanish. So after knowing the English –ing, the students can ask for help from English.

Introduction

If students describe China in Spanish for the first time, the majority will be accustomed to express it as un país desarrolando. But they are not concerned about their abuse of Spanish because the same structure in English a developing country is totally correct and this structure is firmly remembered in their mind. But this structure is not grammatically well formed in Spanish. Because of the similarities between these two languages, many students believe that the Spanish gerund is equal to English structure –ing.

As we know, in Chinese, there are no morphological changes that subject has no distinction in number and gender and the verb has no change. So there is no concept similar to gerund in Chinese grammar, which brings students many difficulties in study. Because of the lack of the support of mother tongue, they cannot fully understand the gerund and know how to use it correctly. What’s more, some students translate nearly all the functions of gerund of Spanish to Chinese in order to understand them by memory and some of them prefer to use two verb changes to express two actions that in reality are not coordinate between the principal sentence and the second one. This is unacceptable in the practice of Spanish.

The gerund is one of the three impersonal forms of verbs in Spanish. In general terms, it can be defined that the infinitive is verbal substantive. We can see that in English there is the concept gerund which is also an impersonal form of verbs. Its structure is to add the verb root –ing and its functions are not all the same with the Spanish gerund. Besides gerund, there are other concepts in English grammar with the same term –ing. If students don’t pay enough attention to the differences between the two, or apply the uses of English to Spanish directly, they will get negative effects.

So it is necessary to make a systematic comparison between –ndo and the structure –ing to clarify the similarities and differences. After this, students can be helped to form a clear idea of –ndo and –ing and dominate their uses correctly. With these differences professors can describe these possible errors in study, which serves as an effective technique of teaching in class and organizing oral exercises and writing to avoid the errors.
Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive Analysis was used extensively in the field of Second Language Acquisition in the 1960s and early 1970s, as a method of explaining why some features of a Target Language were more difficult to acquire than others. According to the behaviorist theories prevailing at the time, language learning was a question of habit formation, and this could be reinforced or impeded by existing habits. Therefore, the difficulty in mastering certain structures in a second language depended on the difference between the learners’ mother tongue and the language they were trying to learn. The theoretical foundations for what became known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis were formulated in Lado’s Linguistics across Culture (1957)[1]. In this book, Lado claimed that “those elements which are similar to (the learner’s) native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult”. While this was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systematic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of language. This involved describing the language (using structuralist linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning difficulties.

During the 1960s, there was a widespread enthusiasm with this technique, manifested in the contrastive descriptions of several European languages, many of which were sponsored by the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC. It was expected that once the areas of potential difficulty had been mapped out through Contrastive Analysis, it would be possible to design language courses more efficiently. Contrastive Analysis, along with Behaviorism and Structuralism exerted a profound effect on SLA curriculum design and language teacher education, and proved the theoretical pillars of Audio-lingual Method. In its strongest formulation, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis claimed that all the errors made in learning the L2 could be attributed to “interference” by the L1. However, this claim could not be sustained by empirical evidence that was accumulated in the mid- and late 1970s. It was soon pointed out that many errors predicted by Contrastive Analysis were inexplicably not observed in learners’ language. Even more confusingly, some uniform errors were made by learners irrespective of their L1. It thus became clear that Contrastive Analysis could not predict learning difficulties, and was only useful in the retrospective explanation of errors. These developments, along with the decline of the behaviorist and structuralist paradigms considerably weakened the appeal of Contrastive Analysis.

The fundamental technique of comparative linguistics is to compare phonological systems, morphological systems, syntax and the lexicon of two or more languages using techniques such as the comparative method. In principle, every difference between two related languages should be explicable to a high degree of plausibility, and systematic changes, for example in phonological or morphological systems, are expected to be highly regular (i.e., Consistent). In practice, the comparison may be more restricted, e.g., just to the lexicon. In some methods it may be possible to reconstruct an earlier proto-language. Although the proto-languages reconstructed by the comparative method are hypothetical, a reconstruction may have predictive power. The most notable example of this is Saussure’s proposal that the Indo-European consonant system contained laryngeals, a type of consonant attested in no Indo-European language known at the time. The hypothesis was vindicated with the discovery of Hittite, which proved to have exactly the consonants Saussure had hypothesized in the environments he had predicted.

There is also a problem not solved by comparative analysis. For example, where languages are derived from a very distant ancestor, and are thus more distantly related? The comparative method becomes impracticable. In particular, attempting to relate two reconstructed proto-language by the comparative method has not generally produced results that have met with wide acceptance. The method has also not been very good at unambiguously identifying sub-families and different scholars have produces conflicting results, for example in Indo-European. A number of methods based on statistical analysis of vocabulary have been developed to try and overcome this limitation, such as lexicostatistics and mass comparison. The former uses lexical cognates like the comparative method but the latter uses only lexical similarity. The theoretical basis of such methods is that vocabulary
items can be matched without a detailed language reconstruction and that comparing enough vocabulary items will negate individual inaccuracies. Thus they can be used to determine the proto-language.

The earliest method of this type was the comparative method, which was developed over many years, culminating in the nineteenth century. This uses a long word list and detailed study. However, it has been criticized for example as being subjective, being informal and lacking testability. The comparative method uses information from two or more languages and allows reconstruction of the ancestral language. The method of internal reconstruction uses only a single language, with comparison of word variants, to perform the same function. Internal reconstruction is more resistant to interference but usually has a limited available base of utilizable words and is able to reconstruct only certain changes (those that have left traces as morphological variations).

In the twentieth century an alternative method, lexiconstatistics, was developed, which is mainly associated with Morris Swadesh but is based on earlier work. This uses a short word list of basic vocabulary in the various languages for comparisons. Swadesh used 100 (earlier 200) items that are assumed to be cognate (on the basis of phonetic similarity) in the languages being compared, though other lists have also been used. Distance measures are derived by examination of language pairs but such methods reduce the information. An outgrowth of lexicostatistics is glottochronology, initially developed in the 1950s, which proposed a mathematical formula for establishing the data when two languages separated, based on percentage of a core vocabulary of culturally independent words. In its simplest form a constant rate of change is assumed, though later versions allow variance but still fail to achieve reliability. Glottochronology has met with mounting skepticism, and is seldom applied today. Dating estimates can now be generated by computerized methods that have less restriction, calculating rates from the data. However, no mathematical means of producing proto-language split-times on the basis of lexical retention has been proven reliable.

Greenberg, is mass comparison. The method, which disavows any ability to date developments, aims simply to show which languages are more and less close to each other, in a method similar to those used in cladistics in evolutionary biology. On the one hand, since mass comparison eschews the use of reconstruction and other traditional tools, it is flatly rejected by the majority of historical linguists. On the other hand, the method has been shown to be useful in preliminary grouping of languages known to be related, when such findings are backed up by in-depth comparative analysis.

Recently, computerized statistical hypothesis testing methods have been developed which are related to both the comparative methods and lexicostatistics. Character based methods are similar to the former and distanced based methods are similar to the latter (see Quantitative comparative linguistics). The characters used can be morphological or grammatical as well as lexical. Since the mid-1990s these more sophisticated tree- and network-based methods have been used to investigate the relationships between languages and to determine approximate dates for proto-languages. These are considered by many to show promise but are not wholly accepted by traditionalists. However, they are not intended to replace older methods but to supplement them. Such statistical methods can’t be used to derive the features of a proto-language, apart from the fact of existence of shared items of the compared vocabulary. These approaches have been challenged for their methodological problems, since without a reconstruction or at least a detailed list of phonological correspondences there can be no demonstration that two words in different language are cognate. The Contrastive Analysis is a branch of the linguistics whose theory consists in the synchronic comparison between the two or more languages, describing its similarities and differences with the motivation of applying in other fields such as the translation, the teaching of foreign language and the complication of bilingual dictionary (Xu Yulong, 2002, pp.286)[2].

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-ing VS -ndo

As for the title of this paper, -ndo, in Chinese we cannot find a concept which corresponds to it, so we lost the base of comparison. But in English there is the concept of gerund and present participle which has equal and different functions to Spanish -ndo.

The similarities in the theories of CA facilitate the acquisition much and at the same time, because of the similarities, the people often ignore the differences which exist where the errors are produces (Lado, 1957, pp. 7)[1]. So it is necessary to do an explanation of characteristics of Spanish -ndo and a systematic comparison step by step with English -ing form in order to see where the positive elements are for the acquisition and origin of the errors.

The Spanish version book Esbozo de una nueva gramática de la lengua española (RAE, 1979, pp. 488)[3] defines the gerund as: Gerunds often express a durative unfinished action in the tense coincidence with the verb of the sentence. That means that the gerund behave as an adverb which manifest the process of an action and its beginning and end are not important and conserves the qualities of the verb very well, for example: Desde allí veía a sus hijos jugando en el portal.

According to the spelling, the majority of the students believe that the Spanish gerund equals to the English gerund. In reality, this is a pair of false friends. English gerund, in its basic sense, is the verb noun: the noun derives from the verb. It is verbal substantive which is different from the basic quality of gerund, for example: Swimming is a good exercise. In this example, swimming serves as the subject. It we translate it into Spanish, we have the Spanish version Nada res un ejercicio bueno. It is clear that we do not often use the gerund but the infinitive as subject. In this sense, it is similar with gerund in English which mainly functions as the substantive. What is more, the gerund can be modified by the adjective, such as the old saying. This never occurs in Spanish.

It is worthy of mentioning that the gerund can behave as the complement referring to the subject. We think that function is equal to the Spanish gerund, but it is only used in a fixed form: subject +be +-ing (Zhang Zhenbang, 1995, pp. 346)[4], for example: Her only desire is studying music. The sentence in Spanish is El único deseo suyo es estudiar música. Here the correspondence in Spanish to this function of the -ing form is infinitive and there is nothing to do with the gerund although the two languages call this function the complement referring to the subject.

Through these examples, we can observe that the fundamental quality of gerund is the verbal substantive. It is quite different from the Spanish gerund.

Now, let us research the significance of the English present participle: word formed from a verb ending in -ing and used in verb phases (She is going) or as an adjective. From the functions in the sentences, the gerund and the present participle of English have much common, which is mentioned in the Diccionario moderno español-inglés (1976, pp. 607)[5], for example: Contestó sonriendo. (They stood by the roadside, watching the parade.) In these sentences, watching and sonriendo express the manners of producing the action of the verb and function as the adverb. But here watching, though it has the same term with the gerund, has not the function with Spanish gerund and is the English present participle. Let us look at the other example: I shall ensure you recieving the paper before the weekend. In this example, we can see that the -ing form refers to the direct complement your but the possessive pronoun is used as the subject of the -ing and it has the quality of the substantive. In this sense, the present participle is not only the gerund. Beside the functions which are mentioned above in the significance of English present participle, the present participle can serve as adjective, modifying the substantive, such as a singing bird which put an emphasis on the process and in Spanish, we do not say el pájaro antando but el pájaro que está cantando.

In Spanish, the active participle has been converted to the adjective and loses its verbal qualities such as equivalente, conveniente, etc. And it is seldom converted to the substantive such as estudiante, presidente, etc. These words have gender and number which as equal to the old saying which is mentioned above. In this sense, the active participle of Spanish has the same function as the English gerund. As the relations among these concepts refer from one to other, to avoid the confusions, the object for comparing is the gerund of Spanish and English.
-ing structure and we do not divide the gerund and the present participle. So it can include all the properties and functions of the gerund of Spanish.

The grammar of Spanish is much stricter than that of English because the verb contains abundant inflections that express mood, tense, person and number. The gerund can be simple and compound and express the simultaneous action or immediately anterior to the principle verb. The simple ends with adding the termination -ando or -iendo to the root of the verb such as amando, callando, temiendo and partiendo. The compound ends with the combination of the simple gerund of haber-habiendo plus the passive participle (termination -ado or -ido) such as habiendo llegado, habiendo sabido, habiendo corrido. The active participle has its own conjunction: add the termination -ante, -ente or -iente such as participante, presidente, conveniente. As there are more properties of substantive and adjective, there is the female form such as presidenta and sirvienta.

In English it is similar with Spanish. The gerund and the present participle can be simple or compound and serve the same conjunction: add the termination to the root of the verb or the combination of the simple gerund of have-having with the passive participle (termination -ed). Beside the common points, the passive voice is often seen in the -ing structure, for example: John is excited about being invited to the party. In Spanish, it is permitted that the gerund is the auxiliary as haber, estar, etc which have been converted into the instrumental verbs and express notions of the grammatical type (person, tense, mood, voice or aspect), for example: Habiendo sido apreado el jefe, el resto del equipo abandonó el plan. But the gerund of being much passive participle is seldom seen because what this form express is a terminate or passive state. This is on the contrary to the quality of the Spanish gerund that presents an action frequently. So much active sense in the Spanish gerund is used and when it is requested to express the passive sense in the sentences, the other form comes: passive participle rather than gerund, for example: Salió del país siendo persequido por la policía. Salió del país perseguido por la policía. Here the first example is incorrect and the use of gerund is not permitted. To correct it, there are two forms as following: one, change it in active sense as the second example and the other, use the passive participle directly as the third example. In the valuable papers the use of being + p.p is accepted but it is out of our concern in the analysis which concentrates on the academic grammar.

Conclusion

The number of students who choose to learn Spanish or go to Spain to study is greatly increasing. But the teaching of Spanish is not as good as we hope. It is very hard for the Chinese students to reach a high level of Spanish. The cultural and linguistic distance make the students have to face many difficulties in the course of study.

In this essay, I have taken examples as the type of the gerund, one of the points that bring many problems in learning and make the comparison between -ndo and -ing which serve to determine the differences between the functions of the two concepts. The theoretic bases and methodologies of this work come from Contrastive Analysis. It studies the forms of the development of the acquisition of a foreign language through the comparison between the mother tongue and target language. The differences and similarities are observed. After the comparison, we have observed that the common similarities help us much to learn it by memory and the differences often consist in the obstacle for the acquisition of the Spanish gerund.

This work only gives a beginning of the comparison of the grammar between the Spanish and English. In this field there is much space for its study in the future about the distinctive grammatical focus or about the use of the English grammars in the teaching of Spanish in order that the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language to the Chinese students will be perfected.
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References