Comparing Italian and English
An Introduction
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Comparing Italian and English

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A good deal of help might be afforded by systematic summaries of the conflicting associations — the confusions and divergences — in each pair of languages.

Henry Sweet, *The Practical Study of Languages* (1899)

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**Introduction**

Anyone who has attempted to learn a foreign language or to translate from one language to another has acquired a vast amount of direct proof that languages differ in many ways. Such differences often represent difficulties and may lead to mistakes. So researchers have defined and developed a field of enquiry — now about fifty-years old — aimed at comparing two languages at all levels of analysis in order to identify (convergences and) divergences. Various names are used to refer to it: ‘Contrastive Linguistics’, the international label; ‘Contrastive Studies’, used in an Anglo-Saxon context, where the word ‘studies’ is present in the naming of many academic disciplines, such as Translation Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies; ‘Contrastive Analysis’ (hereafter abbreviated CA), the more traditional label, used in this volume.

Why is there a need for a textbook comparing Italian and English? Reflection on language — learning about language as distinct from learning language — is intended as a tool of linguistic and cultural education. The inclusion of a contrastive component in the syllabus of degree courses in English Language is proposed for two reasons. First, in the opening chapter of the *Common European Framework* (2001), we can read:

The plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its own cultural context expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples, he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact [italics mine]. (§ 1.3)

in a person’s cultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact [italics mine] to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence. (§ 1.4)
The interrelation taking place in the learner’s mind can be brought to a level of awareness by presenting and discussing contrastive information.

Secondly, Italian and English exhibit different structural features, due to their belonging to two different branches of the Indo-European family — Romance versus Germanic languages — and two different types — the inflectional and synthetic versus the isolant and analytic type.

The contrastive perspective can achieve relevant aims both at a pedagogical and analytic level, as Marton (1981) and, more recently, Arcaini (2000), Rossini Favretti (2002:64-72) and Pierini (2003) have pointed out. By fostering students’ awareness of the differences between Italian and English, it contributes to preventing possible negative interference from their native language and may facilitate their learning of the foreign language. By juxtaposing Italian and English, the characteristics of English are highlighted and clarified. Thus, comparison helps students to understand that the two languages function in a different but equivalent way from a communicative point of view.

This volume follows on from the monographic course “Problemi, obiettivi e metodi dell’analisi comparativa” (1993-94), developed and taught at the Faculty of “Lettere e Filosofia”, “Roma Tre” University. Part of the material has been tried and tested over several years in various contexts. It presents up-to-date information on Contrastive Studies illustrating key concepts and providing contrastive analyses in the main areas. It is self-contained: linguistic notions, categories and terms are glossed within the text. One point needs to be made here: the contrastive investigation concerns language system as well as language use, taking into account socio-cultural aspects.

The textbook is divided into two parts. Part I: The Basics of Contrastive Analysis (units 1-6), consists of short units discussing the rationale behind research. It introduces scope, aims, methods and basic notions in CA. Part II: Italian and English in Contrast (units 7-12), consists of lengthy units comparing the two languages in selected areas, covering all levels of analysis, from phonetics/phonology to discourse analysis. It is designed to allow students to navigate the subject with ease, through cross-referencing within the volume: references to specific sections are indicated with the number of the unit and the number of the section, for example, (see 3.2).

Each unit of Part I is followed by a number of exercises to help practise the points dealt with and topics for discussion. Each unit of Part II ends with homework activities which can then be discussed in the classroom. They are designed to guide learners, as active agents in their learning process, to convert theoretical and analytic insights into practical work.

The volume concludes with an extensive bibliography, which accounts for the works on which this book is based. It can be exploited as a list of titles for further reading: section A offers a list of descriptive studies of Italian and English; section B lists studies dealing with various aspects of contrastive research, and section C studies comparing Italian and English in selected areas.
This textbook has been specifically designed to meet the needs of the degree courses in “Lingue e Culture Moderne” and “Scienze della Mediazione Linguistica”. But it should be of interest to anyone interested in the English language.