

LEARNING LANGUAGES: THE COMPARATIVE METHOD. A. R. Barter. *Newton Abbot, David & Charles*, 1970, pp. 171.

The comparative method is concerned with the facilitation of foreign language learning through a knowledge of the cognate words in the mother-tongue of the learner and the foreign language. The author recommends the close study of cognates as a prelude to foreign language learning. The first step involves compiling a list of cognates which 'would form an initial vocabulary on which further studies could be based'. This should allow the learner to obtain a basic minimum difficulty vocabulary and to see the patterns of correspondence between English and the foreign language. Knowledge of one foreign language means of course an increase in the fund of known cognates and thus facilitates the learning of another foreign language.

Such an approach to language invites a great deal of historical detail, but the author has wisely kept this to a minimum. The book deals mainly with modern Romance and Germanic languages, but some attention is paid to Arabic, Swahili, Malay, and some Indian languages. The influence of Latin and Greek on other languages is closely examined. There is a short historical account of the influence of each language on English and other languages, and this leads on to discussion of the formal relationships between the cognates in the various languages. Some word lists are given and there are several illustrative passages written using Latin or Germanic vocabulary. There are also passages made up of cognates which may be easily translated into English without a knowledge of the particular foreign language.

There are pitfalls in the comparative method. Cognates which are formally similar often have different meanings, or their meanings differ just enough to be misleading. Often some of the meanings of a word overlap with those of its cognate, but other meanings do not. *Demonstrasi* in Indonesian refers only to a political demonstration and cannot be used in the sense of 'showing clearly by giving proofs and examples'. Thus, when learning *demonstrasi*, the learner needs to be aware of the areas of overlap, and the areas of meaning where there is no overlap. As well as these problems with meaning, the various word groups in which a word occurs may differ from those in which its cognate occurs, and there may be a significant difference in the relative frequency of the related words. It would be unwise to teach an infrequent word in a foreign language simply because it had a cognate in English. Such teaching could lead to untypical usage. Helen S. Eaton's *Word Frequency Dictionary* is a guide in such situations.

The strength of the comparative method is also its weakness. By making use of correspondence between the mother-tongue and the foreign language, the teacher allows the learner to acquire vocabulary quickly and with little effort. However, the method also increases the possibility of interference between the mother-tongue and the foreign language.

In spite of these reservations, the comparative method is a useful one and plays an important part in some language teaching courses. Mr Barter's book is a useful and witty introduction to the approach. (The classic in this field is *The Loom of Language* by Frederick Bodmer.) It does not however provide an exhaustive fund of source material for different languages. For that information it is necessary to go to other sources.

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