

Translating the Sequence of Tenses From English Into Serbian: A Case Study

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Abstract

The sequence of tenses (SOT) is a phenomenon which exists in English and some other languages, but not Serbian. Therefore, translating texts which contain SOT into Serbian frequently creates problems, and in the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology special attention is paid to teaching students to master that set of rules. This study was carried out with third-year students, by using the contrastive analysis method, which consisted of comparing the source and target texts, in order to draw conclusions as to why errors are occasionally made. First of all, when a novel written in English and its translation into Serbian were compared, it was noticed that many sentences in which SOT was used were wrongly translated because the same rules were applied to the target text. In some cases failure to adapt the tenses even led to misunderstanding of the entire sentence, mostly because past tense was used instead of the present. The sentences that were pinpointed as the most problematic were given to students to translate, and then their translations were contrasted with the original. It was concluded that detailed and comprehensive teaching of SOT within grammar classes proved worth the effort, since the students made far fewer mistakes than was the case with the published translation, so the sense of the text was much clearer. Those few errors that the respondents made were then analysed in order to discover deeper causes for their occurrence and suggest guidelines for future work with students.

Keywords: Sequence of Tenses, English, Serbian, Contrastive Analysis, Translation

Introduction

Among the characteristics of grammar in many languages worldwide is the so-called sequence of tenses (SOT), which regards complex sentences and includes a set of rules about using the respective tenses in the main and the subordinate clauses. To briefly clarify the essence of the SOT, it can be simply said that its rules generally encompass the use of tenses in reported speech – more precisely, in indirect discourse – to express simultaneity, posteriority or anteriority. The SOT rules apply to reported speech if the words or thoughts of a person are not conveyed exactly – in direct speech, but their content is reported in the form of indirect speech, that is, without quotation marks. Moreover, the SOT rules are in force over a much larger domain than that of indirect speech, because "it is important to remember that the forms of reported speech are used in many circumstances besides the reporting of words spoken" (Allen 1978: 265). In other words, "'Reported speech' is not only used to report what people say. We use the same structure to report people's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge etc." (Swan 1984: 220). For ease of reference, it should be noted that in reported speech the main or superordinate clause is usually called the reporting clause, while the subordinate one is the reported clause, whereas when we talk about indirect speech the corresponding terms may also be independent and dependent clause, respectively. In this paper, examples from reported speech containing the instances of SOT will be analysed, and these terms will be used interchangeably, without further explanation.

Though the specific rules of the SOT may vary from language to language, due to the differences in their temporal systems, the essence is the same: if the verb in the main clause is in the past tense, this will affect all other verbs in the sentence. The sequence of tenses is not only the feature of English (sometimes also called *the agreement of tenses*, *the concord of tenses*, *the succession of tenses* or even *tense harmony*), but also of Latin (known as *consecutio temporum*), as well as the Romance languages, including: Spanish (*la concordancia temporal*), Italian (*la concordanza dei tempi*) and French (*la concordance des temps* or *la correspondance des temps*). Furthermore, it is particularly interesting how different grammarians provide extremely different definitions of this phenomenon, so while some of them consider that this combination of tenses is only natural and stems from the meaning of the sentence, others think that the tense used in the main clause preconditions that of the subordinate one. For instance, in French grammars we can find a wide array of opinions regarding this issue: starting from Ferdinand Brunot's opinion that the SOT does not exist at all since the tenses used in the subordinate clauses are chosen according to the same principles as those in the main clause and the decisive factors are the sense and the context; to the opinion of authors – such as Jean Dubois and René Lagane – who consider that there are two kinds of the SOT: the one required by the sense, and the other which is mandatory and has nothing to do with the meaning of the sentence; and finishing with those who believe that there exists 'the grammatical constraint' to the use of tenses in such cases (see more about this in: Bibic 2017, pp. 3-4), including, among others, Slobodan Jovanovic who finds that "the tense in the subordinate clause is adjusted according to the tense in the main clause" (1993: 591).

The point of view that the tense in the subordinate clause should be selected according to the sense has been named *the natural sequence of tenses*, whereas the belief that there are rules, or even laws, about the tense in the subordinate clause being influenced or governed by the one in the main clause has been called *the attracted sequence of tenses*. Similarly, such contrasting ideas have also been voiced in English grammars. The grammarians of the English language have also expressed many different opinions, from that of Audrey Jean

Thomson and Agnes V. Martinet who do not limit this phenomenon only to indirect/reported speech but classify as the sequence of tenses any and every agreement of tenses between the main and the subordinate clauses including temporal adverbial clauses (1988: 195); then Martin Hewings who explains how "The tense we choose for a *that*-clause is one that is *appropriate at the time that we are reporting* what was said or thought. This means that we sometimes use a different tense in the *that*-clause from the one that was used in the original statement" (1999: 90, italics in the original text); to Michael Swan who thinks that it is 'natural' to use past tenses for situations which happened in the past and that students should not learn or practice the use of complicated rules but simply use the 'normal' tenses which describe the situation they are talking about (for this opinion, which is similar to Brunot's, if not even more extreme, see more in Swan 1984, Chapter 534); and all the way to Professor Radmila Djordjevic who discusses the notions of hypotaxis, subordination and dependency (1997: 707) which dictate the sequence of tenses in the dependent clause as "the form of grammatical agreement with the introductory verb" (1997: 342).

To Shift Back or Forth, the Question Is Now

However, it is undisputable that in the languages in which the attracted SOT exists there is a certain sort of correlation between the tenses used for the verbs in the main and subordinate clauses. Contrary to that, in the grammar of many other languages there is no such relation between the verbs of the main and the subordinate clauses, for instance, in Slavic languages, like Russian or Serbian. Therefore, it can be said that these languages are characterised by the natural sequence of tenses.

This is confirmed by all the renowned grammarians of the Serbian language (previously known as Serbocroatian, until the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in 1991, when it branched into Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian). For instance, Professor Ivan Klajn explicitly maintains that "there is no agreement of tenses in Serbian" (2005: 121), while Professor and Academician Mihailo Stevanovic clarifies that in the Serbian language "indirect speech, either by its essence or its form, is nothing else but a dependent clause used to express the object of the reporting verb" (1989: 838) and concludes that in Serbian "there is no difference in form between indirect and direct speech" (1989: 839).

That being so, the use of the attracted SOT in French or English may come as 'natural' or 'normal' to the native speaker, like it was mentioned above as the opinion of some grammarians. However, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students whose mother tongue does not include this phenomenon cannot find it either 'natural' or 'normal' since they have a completely different worldview and their perspective is not focused on the context and the temporal relationship of the subordinate verb itself (the meaning of which is, indeed, related to a reference point in the past), but on the subject of the sentence whose words or thoughts are not influenced by the tense of the verb in the main clause. Therefore, the tenses in subordinate clauses in these languages remain those used in direct speech, since their reference point is not the predicate but the subject. In consequence, the students whose maternal language is Serbian automatically select the required tense according to the relevance of the verbal process for the speaker's mental state at the moment of speaking. Simply put, if the speaker said something in the present tense, that clause should remain the same in reported speech regardless of the tense of the verb in the main clause, and the same goes for the past and the future.

Quite the opposite, the main characteristic of the attracted SOT is the so-called rule on *backshifting*, which "refers to the changes we make to the original verbs in indirect speech because time has passed between the moment of speaking and the time of the report" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). The famous grammarian of the English language Randolph Quirk, whose team probably coined this term back in 1972, explains that a shift of the main verb into the past must be followed by "a corresponding shift into the past (or if necessary, further into the past) in the reported clause" (1973: 786). So, when the verb of the main clause is in a past tense, this overtly positions the entire sentence in the past, and due to that fact we must introduce "the changing of a tense when reporting what somebody said" (*Oxford Dictionaries*), or in other words, all the tenses in the subordinate clauses have to be further shifted into the past as compared to the original sentence. According to these rules, which are compulsory with a few exceptions, a present (Simple or Continuous) tense in the dependent clause becomes a corresponding past tense, a past or perfect (Simple or Continuous) tense is turned into a respective past perfect tense, and a future tense into future-in-the-past.

On the other hand, that is not the case in Serbian (and other languages that have the natural SOT), in which there is no backshifting – regardless of the tense of the verb used in the main clause. Thus, for instance, a present tense in the dependent clause must not become a past tense because that would create confusion as to when the action denoted by the verb in the dependent clause took place: at the same time as the action denoted by the verb in the main clause (which would have been the case in English), or before that (which is the case in Serbian). Professor Ivan Klajn thus explains this specific use of the Present Tense in the subordinate clause, in order to make a distinction compared to its regular use, which is to denote the action that actually happens in the present: "In the dependent clause, since there is no agreement of tenses in Serbian, the Present Tense can denote a past action simultaneous to the past action in the main clause (relative present)" (2005: 121).

While the rules of the attracted SOT demand the use of a past tense for expressing simultaneity, when it comes to expressing anteriority a past perfect tense has to be used. Though in the Serbian language the use of the Past Perfect – rather called Pluperfect (*pluskvamperfekat*) in Serbian – is not ungrammatical, not only is there absolutely no need to use it in order to denote anteriority, but it also sounds awkward and artificial, since pluperfect has been less and less in use in the Serbian language, therefore such backshifting should always be avoided and the Perfect Tense (called *perfekat* in Serbian) should be used, as the equivalent of the English Past Simple Tense. All Serbian grammarians mention this characteristic of pluperfect in our contemporary language: for instance, Professor Klajn ascertains that "In dependent clauses it is usually replaced by the Perfect Tense" (2005: 123). Zivojin Stanojcic and Ljubomir Popovic explain that "According to its syntactic character, the Pluperfect is always a relative tense (the action which was performed or being performed in the past is determined indirectly from the point of view of the time when it is spoken about). It has been in use less and less frequently, and when it is still used, it gives the text an archaic tone, and especially emphasises that the action which it denotes had already been carried out at the time when an action indicated by another past tense began or was being performed" (2000: 386). In his grammar, Milos Milosevic emphasises that "The Pluperfect Tense is nowadays rarely used in the [Serbian] literary language, where it is usually replaced by the Perfect Tense" (2001: 116).

The most comprehensive explanation is provided by Professor Stevanovic: "Pluperfect is generally getting more and more rarely used; in recent times, it is utilised only when it is particularly necessary to emphasise that what is expressed by it had already been carried out

at the moment when another action indicated by another perfect tense, related to which the action indicated by the pluperfect is denoted as already finished, had started being performed or was being performed. Besides, to this purpose using a relative perfect tense is both possible and very common, especially when some other linguistic sign marks the supplementary function, which makes the disappearance of pluperfect from use all the more understandable" (1989: 670). Thus, for instance, if *already* is used in the sentence, it denotes anteriority by itself.

In order to emphasise that backshifting in indirect speech in the Serbian language is not only unnecessary but even wrong in most of the cases, and inspired by the phrase *back-and-forth*, I made up the term *forthshifting* to denote that in translating a text from English into Serbian the tenses in the sentences which are in indirect speech should be moved forward instead of backward – which happens in reported speech when a text is translated into English. Briefly and more generally, if tenses were moved back due to the attracted SOT rules of a specific language, in the process of translation that move has to be reversed for languages without such SOT rules – that is, languages with the natural SOT.

To summarise, let us see what the consequences of this comparative analysis of temporal patterns in English and Serbian reported speech are. In the translation of English texts (ST) into Serbian (TT), there are basically two types of mistakes regarding verbs in reported speech:

- If a past tense in the subordinate clause in the ST is translated by using a past tense in the TT, this can be misleading since in Serbian that past tense denotes that the action was already finished before it was reported, so instead of simultaneity its meaning is anteriority and this error can lead to misunderstanding of the entire sentence;
- If a past perfect tense in the subordinate clause in the ST is translated by using pluperfect in the TT, although this is not a grammatical error, such a sentence can – and usually does – sound unnatural and clumsy, since pluperfect is rarely used in the Serbian language nowadays and it seems rather archaic.

It is obvious that in translating reported speech from English texts into Serbian forth shifting is obligatory in both cases: in order to preserve the temporal pattern of simultaneity, a past tense has to be translated with a present tense; and a past perfect tense used to express anteriority should be translated with a past tense in Serbian due to stylistic reasons. Nevertheless, as it has been demonstrated in this chapter of the paper, the use of Pluperfect tense in Serbian is not by itself wrong or ungrammatical, so the examples regarding anteriority will not be discussed in the following chapter, which will focus on the errors made in expressing simultaneity by translating a past tense from the English ST as a past tense in the Serbian TT, since this is something that must not be done.

The Contrastive Analysis of the English ST and the Serbian TT on Two Levels

The previous chapter has demonstrated that translating source texts which contain the sequence of tenses in English into Serbian may frequently create problems, since English grammar includes the rules of the attracted SOT, while Serbian is among languages with the natural SOT, which means that a past tense used for the reporting verb in the main clause does not influence at all the tenses of the verbs in the subordinate clauses, unlike those in English.

However, while I was reading the Serbian translation of a novel originally written in English, I noticed many sentences in which the past tenses used in indirect speech were translated with Serbian past tenses, and at times I even felt confused as to the right meaning of the TT. When I consulted the ST and compared it to the TT, I discovered that it was indeed the translator's mistake, and concluded that failure to adapt the tenses that should be used in Serbian at times even led to misunderstanding of the entire sentence, mostly because a past tense was used rather than a present tense. Instead of sticking to the tenses used in the ST, the translator should have forthshifted, that is, used the tenses that would have been used in direct speech – since this is in line with the rules of Serbian grammar.

Then I contrasted selected sentences taken from the ST, all of them comprising the use of the SOT, and their translations found in the TT, in order to pinpoint the most problematic examples, which will be analysed in this chapter. The next part of my research, and the second level of contrastive analysis, was to give these sentences from the ST to my students to translate them into Serbian. This study was carried out with 26 third-year students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology, all of them native speakers of Serbian, with English levels between C1 and C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The students were explained the wider background for each sentence by supplying whole paragraphs where it was necessary for understanding the meaning of the sentence. However, they were asked to translate only those sentences that are in the focus of this research as they comprise the use of the SOT, but it was not specified that their real task was to render correctly the tenses affected by the SOT rules into the target language.

Prior to that, grammar classes for third-year students incorporated detailed teaching of the SOT rules, including exercises in both directions. More specifically, besides the usual "Put the following sentences into reported speech" exercises, the students were also asked to reverse their process of thinking and either convert the reported speech sentences supplied in English into direct speech or translate them into Serbian. Both of these cases demanded forth shifting in order to obtain correct sentences in Serbian.

Due to the page length limit of this paper, I have chosen the following five sentences for more detailed analysis, since their published translation completely changed the sense of the TT:

1. She knew *she was beautiful* and now, dropping the thin silk veil, she unleashed the beauty she had kept hidden and he was lost. (Rushdie 2009: 51)

Znala je *da je bila prelepa*, a sada, spustivši svileni veo, oslobođila je lepotu koju je krila i on je bio izgubljen. (Ruzdi 2009: 58)

The use of the Perfect Tense in the Serbian translation signifies that she had been beautiful at some time in the past, but was no longer beautiful, which would be in contrast with the rest of the sentence.

2. The ambassador of Queen Elizabeth understood that this was the first test *he had to pass*. (Rushdie 2009: 66)

Ambasador kraljice Elizabete znao je da je to prvi test *koji je morao da polozi*. (Ruzdi 2009: 74)

In the ST, the underlined phrase refers to a necessity related to future and the action expressed by the verb in the dependent clause has not yet been implemented, whereas the use of the Perfect Tense in the TT suggests that the action has already taken place.

3. [...] behind those memories [was] the knowledge that those who loved you were dead, *that there was no escape*. (Rushdie 2009: 189)

[...] a u pozadini tih secanja saznanje da su oni koji su te voleli mrtvi, *da nije bilo izlaza*. (Ruzdi 2009: 197)

Instead of using a present tense in Serbian to mark the current impossibility of escaping, the translator used the Perfect Tense, which is rather confusing in this context.

4. Marietta started thinking that her life was not as hard as she had erroneously believed it to be, *that her husband loved her, her children were good children, and these visitors were after all the most distinguished guests* it had ever been her privilege to receive. (Rushdie 2009: 254)

Marijeta je pocela da misli da joj zivot i nije tako tezak kao sto je, pogresno, verovala, *da ju je muz voleo, da su joj deca bila dobra, a da su ovi posetioci ipak bili najotmeniji gosti* koje je ikada imala privilegiju da primi. (Ruzdi 2009: 262)

Although the Past Simple Tense in the first dependent clause is correctly rendered by using the Present Tense in Serbian, and the Past Perfect Tense in the second clause is correctly translated by using the Perfect Tense in Serbian, which denotes a previous action, the verbs in the remaining three dependent clauses are erroneously translated by using the Perfect Tense instead of the Present Tense, thus placing the entire situation back into the past.

5. Argalia understood at once that the new ruler of Florence *was a weakling*, and so was that young nephew of his, riding by his side. (Rushdie 2009: 264)

Argalija je odmah shvatio da je novi vladar Firence *bio slabic*, kao i onaj njegov mladjahni necak koji je jahao uz njega. (Ruzdi 2009: 272)

In this sentence, the incorrect translation of the Past Simple Tense by using the Perfect Tense denotes that the action had already been completed in the past, when in fact the sense is quite the opposite because the Past Simple Tense is used in the ST only due to the SOT rules, while its meaning is in the present.

The last step was to implement contrastive analysis to the corpus consisting of sentences taken from the ST and their translations provided by students. In the translations done by students, the problems mainly occur in two cases: the first one is when the reporting verb did not refer to somebody's words – as these clauses are usually introduced by *say* or *tell*, and the students easily recognise the need to forthshift – but to their thoughts or beliefs or inner speech (in the above analysed sentences those include: *know, understand, think*); and the second one is when a sentence consisted of the main clause and not one but several dependent clauses, in which case some students translated correctly the tense in the first of these, and then seemed to forget the SOT rules for the rest of the sentence (the example for this is sentence no. 4).

Nonetheless, the results show that in most of the examples the students either forthshifted the tenses used in the ST due to the reported speech rules of English and opted for the appropriate tense in the Serbian language, or found some creative ways to express the tense demanded by the context, by paraphrasing the sentence with an equivalent that is the most suited to the nature of the target language.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to analyse the translation of texts affected by the SOT in English into Serbian, which is a language with the natural SOT. Since the verbs in the dependent clauses in the ST are subject to backshifting, Serbian grammar rules demand forthshifting, because the mapping of same tenses from English would be incorrect.

The contrastive analysis was carried out on two levels: by comparing sentences with the SOT from the ST written in English and their counterparts from the published translation in Serbian; and then by contrasting those same sentences with their translations into Serbian done by students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology. It was ascertained that, although in the published translation certain sentences were wrongly translated because the English SOT rules were applied to the TT and this sometimes even led to misunderstanding of the entire sentence, the translations provided by students contained far fewer mistakes than was the case with the published translation, so the sense of the TT was much clearer.

Therefore, it was concluded that detailed and comprehensive teaching of the SOT rules within grammar classes proved worth the effort. When educating students for their future work as translators, teachers should pay special attention to exercises that include forthshifting and make students understand that while they translate a text, they should be guided by the grammar of the target language. It is suggested that forthshifting exercises be practised with the students whose first language has the natural SOT, and for those languages that have the attracted SOT but with rules that are different in the source and the target languages, the tenses in such sentences should be forth shifted and then translated according to the rules of the target language.

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