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SEQUENCE OF TENSES IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN REPORTED STRUCTURES – THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS IN SERBIAN-ENGLISH TRANSLATION PRACTICE –[2]

This paper aims to provide an account of theoretical principles related to the understanding of the so-called "sequence of tenses" phenomenon and practical issues occurring in treating reported discourse structures in Serbian-English translation classes at the university level. After a brief exposition of grammatical mechanisms concerning the phenomenon, the authors progress to explore the main sources of problems related to the application of sequence of tenses in translation practice classes. It has been established that the chief obstacles can be classified in three mutually dependent spheres: a) pedagogical sphere (use of out-of-date theoretical approaches and reference books); b) content sphere (lack of semantic differentiation between preterital and non-preterital temporal domains in English, contextual dependence of reported structures); c) stylistic sphere (introduction of narrative perspectivization in the analysis, orthographic particularities, application of free indirect discourse). Having examined the possible causes of errors, the authors offer a set of guidelines which should be followed to ensure the appropriate interpretation of analysed structures and full adoption of principles governing the sequence of tenses.

Keywords: sequence of tenses, translation, translation practice, reported speech, higher education

1. Introduction

Even at a rather high level of command of English, when translating relatively large textual segments from Serbian to English and vice versa, a certain number of Serbian-speaking students findthe linguistic phenomenon traditionally dubbed *sequence of tenses* (henceforth: SOT[3]) difficult to handle. The

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3 The term *sequence of tenses* can have a twofold interpretation. The first one, which will be dealt with in this paper, refers to a phenomenon in which the grammatical-temporal properties of some syntactic element restrict the choice of temporal forms of syntactical-

problem arises due to different ways in which verb forms combine in English and Serbian, manifesting different syntactic behaviour especially in fictional-narrative accounts. Generally speaking, the Serbian language is considered to be much more flexible in the sense of allowing verb forms to combine more freely without considerable violation of grammatical principles[4]. Conversely, English does not share this freedom and exhibits a certain obligatoriness concerning formal properties of verb phrases used in the narrative discourse. The differences in question are especially characteristic of *reporting structures*, where the application of the SOT is quite prominent. Such structures commonly occur in fictional texts, which are, again, the most frequent types of textual material to be found in a translation teaching classroom. The problems arising from the inappropriate understanding of the SOT in translation classes are associated with the narration in the preterital (i.e. *past*) domain, while the narration in the so-called 'historical' present poses no such problems. It is, therefore, understandable that the focus of this paper will be on issues belonging to the narration placed in the preterital domain.

2. Structural properties of reported discourse

As the very name *reported discourse* reveals, the main grounds of this linguistic phenomenon are found in the attempt to represent some verbalized content originally belonging to a person other than the one reporting it. Simply put, what we have here is a more or less accurate repetition of somebody else's words in the form of a conventionally established pattern, where the repeated content is conveyed by means of a formalized syntactic structure (*reported clause*) embedded within another, syntactically superordinate structure (*reporting clause*). The mechanism is illustrated in the examples below:

1. (a) "Mary is leaving", John says.
    (b) "Mary is leaving", John said.
    (c) John says that Marry is leaving.
    (d) John said that Marry was leaving.

These four sentences represent the canonical versions of reported discourse. The first two sentences represent instances of *direct* reported discourse, readily identified by the use of quotation marks, while the other two represent examples of *indirect* reported discourse, marked by the absence of quotation marks and the use of the complementizer *that*. Even at the first glance, it is clear that all four of them share many grammatical similarities and that there are only slight differences between them. They are reflected in the grammatical form of either the *reporting verb phrase* (*says/said*) or the form of the *report-*

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ly dependent elements; the second interpretation simply refers to the linear realization of temporal verb forms which represent successive sequencing of verbal events irrespective of the syntactical properties of any potentially hierarchically superordinate element (i.e. *What happened was this: he got up at 6.30, prepared for work and went to the office*).

4 On reported discourse in Serbian see Ružić (2006), Stanojčić *et al* (1989) and Kovačević (2012); for comparisons between the main features of represented discourse types, see Karavesović (2010).

ed verb phrase (*is leaving/was leaving*). The four underlined clauses arguably convey the same proposition[5], provided that they refer to the same instance of John's uttering the words about Mary's leaving. The difference between the verb forms in direct discourse sentences (a) and (b) is shown only in the temporal specification of the reporting verbs, while the reported clauses remain structurally and semantically identical in both examples. This is due to the fact that the 'embedding' was implemented only superficially and it did not lead to the full integration into the syntactic structure of the sentences. This lack of integration enables the reporting agent to make no adjustments whatsoever to the original wording of the reported material, and is the reason why the reported material in both cases is not subject to any changes which may be initiated by the verb form of the reporting clause.

However, if the proposition is expressed in an indirect way, the reported material does get integrated in the structure of the sentences, and thus becomes more grammatically conditioned by the English syntactic rules[6]. Now the difference is not only manifested in the temporal form of the reporting verbs, but also in the temporal form of the verbs in reported clauses. The shift from the present tense (**is** *leaving*) of the underlined, i.e. reported clause in (c) into the past tense (**was** *leaving*) in (d) is triggered by the tense of the reporting verb used in the introductory clause of the sentence (d). This necessity to align the temporal domains of the introductory, matrix clause with the reporting, complement clause is the fundamental postulate on which the SOT is based. As presented above, the mechanism seems rather straightforward and clear. Yet, in the process of learning English, certain problems seem to persist even when the SOT principles have been theoretically adopted. Combined with the fact that Serbian does not require such temporal alignment to take place, it is to be expected that misapplication of the SOT will occur in situations where the two languages are necessarily confronted, namely in translation practice classes. The reasons why the SOT in English is not properly understood are various, and in the following sections we will address some of them which might bear relevance to the resolution of the problem.

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5   The term *proposition* is interpreted here as a specific semantic content which can be asserted or negated, roughly corresponding to what is sententially realized as a *statement*. However, it should be borne in mind that, along with statements, other sentential types such as *commands* and *questions* can also be reported.

6   The mechanism of indirect reporting requires that not only verbs, but all relational expressions whose meaning is closely dependent on specific referents (called *deictics* or *indexicals*), such as pronouns, temporal and spatial adverbials, be shifted into their corresponding forms in accordance with the relative stance of the reporter.

3. Key factors responsible for misunderstanding SOT mechanisms in reported structures

3.1 Pedagogical factors affecting the adoption of SOT principles

The category of *reported discourse*[7] has commonly served as a model of how the SOT in English works. Linguistic mechanisms pertaining to indirect types of reported discourse have been an indispensable part of a long-established EFL pedagogical tradition concerning the treatment of the English syntactic particularities. The first step in analysing the issues in question concerns the treatment of the SOT in the process of learning English, and will be illustrated by analysing the presentation of the SOT in some EFL grammar books. Traditional teaching approaches tend to focus on explanations how verb forms are formed and on the basic meanings for each verb form respectively. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to their interdependence in larger segments of texts. Popular reference grammars (e.g. Eckersley 1960; Thomson and Martinet 1986; Swan 2005) consider the SOT to be a strictly formal and conventional phenomenon, providing no coverage which may include a broader semantic and pragmatic elaboration. If mentioned at all, the notion of the SOT is usually restricted to a brief presentation of what reported speech functionally represents, followed by an enumeration of grammatical forms which mechanically change in accordance with the grammatical forms of the reporting verbs, providing examples which usually amount to single sentences or, rarely, quite short suprasentential segments. It is, therefore, evident that the complexities of the SOT cannot be mastered fully since the multi-faceted nature of the SOT is not taken into account. It must be mentioned, though, that, despite its limitations, the traditional approach is not without its merits when it comes to lower levels of learning, where the simplicity of presentation may be justified, while the extensive coverage of the ins and outs of the SOT could further complicate the adoption of already complex grammatical structures.

The problems arise when the SOT principles need to be applied at a higher educational level and in structures larger than decontextualized and isolated sentential examples. In most such cases, the basic reasoning concerning the SOT still applies, but there are also instances which do not strictly conform to the previously presented explanations. Bearing this in mind, some modern EFL grammars provide a more comprehensive account of the SOT, giving a more thorough presentation of grammatical, semantic and variational components of the reported discourse relevant for a learner of English. One such account is given in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999). What distinguishes this grammar book from the traditional ones is that, along with the formal aspects of the SOT, it provides explanations and additional information on semantic aspects of the SOT and various pedagogical guidelines about

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7   The term *reported discourse* is used here as a more appropriate expression than a more frequent term *reported speech* because it also encompasses other types of reported verbalizations, namely the instances of *reported thought*.

how to avoid typical pitfalls. Having provided an introductory grammatical rationale on which reported speech is based (pp. 687-689), the book furthers the elaboration by introducing a concept of *deictic shift* (p. 690). This is an important innovation because, unlike traditional grammars, a connection is established between the analysed material and the relative nature of reported discourse. In line with contemporary linguistic research, the examples given clearly illustrate the difference between the non-preterital and preterital indirect reports, explaining the retention of the same grammatical form of the verb from the original utterance in non-preterital reports and the occurrence of the so-called 'backshift' in preterital reports as a matter of "shift in *perspective* with regard to the time of the utterance reported on, which is of necessity in the past" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 690). The authors also draw attention to the need for caution when teaching the SOT, pointing out that various languages may not share the English situation, since, unlike Russian, for instance, "English tends to index tense to the time at which the reported utterance was originally made rather than to the time that the utterance is reported" (p. 690). Russian and Serbian being cognate languages, it is reasonable to assume that the Serbian speaker reading the book will make an effort to evaluate the situation in her own language and not blindly transpose the SOT rules of English into Serbian, being aware of the fact that mechanical rendering of content into another language might lead to mistranslation. Also, the authors focus on some cases where no backshift occurs even with preterital reporting verb phrases (e.g. state-events that remain true; perceived general truths; immediate reports), while, perhaps the most important contribution of this grammar with respect to translation practice is the explanation of reporting structures in the *free indirect discourse*, a literary device characteristic of fictional narratives[8]. This varied presentation of reported structures and elucidation of untypical cases are here to remind us that such linguistic constructions should be explained and accounted for in a manner which involves more than just enumeration of their structural realizations. By providing such an account, the authors emphasise the fact that the SOT in English is a complex phenomenon, not just a mere automated routine as the authors of traditional, prescriptive grammars would sometimes have us believe.

3.2 Content factors – semantic/pragmatic aspects of the SOT

In teaching translation, semantic and pragmatic aspects of a text must receive no less attention than grammatical ones. To start with, it is crucial to emphasise the relational nature of the reported discourse by making the distinction between absolute and relative uses of tenses[9]. The distinction can be seen as a specific blend of formal and content factors, where a formally marked

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8 The phenomenon of free indirect discourse is dealt with in more detail in the section 3.3 of this paper. For an even more extensive elaboration on English free indirect discourse and its translation to Serbian, see Karavesović (2010).

9 Here the distinction is made between the specific *uses* of tenses, not their categorical identification as absolute or relative. Most, if not all, verb forms in English can have both their

verbal phrase in the text (e.g. past-tense form of a verb) is interpreted in relation to either the time point corresponding to the reader's here-and-now reference point (absolute interpretation) or some other temporal-spatial instance established elsewhere in the text (relative interpretation). These anchoring reference-points on which our perception of time and space is based is called a *deictic centre*. A typical 3rd person narration places the story into either the present or past domain relative to the reader's deictic centre, thus having absolute interpretation. In most instances, the time-frame of the narration is set in the grammatical past domain, although a narration in the present domain is also possible. If the latter is the case, the events taking place in the present of the narrative are grammatically brought into the same temporal dimension of the reader's present, thus creating a psychological effect of temporal immediacy of the narrated events. Similarly, what a reader considers to be the anterior domain of her experience shares the same temporal domain with the past verbal forms of the narrative, providing a sense of already experienced events which are genuinely being described.

However, narration typically includes characters, who also participate in narrative events and do not necessarily share the same temporal perspective as readers do. Since in preterital narration there is no overlap between the reader's and characters' idea of what the time-point *now* represents, it is only natural to conclude that the narrator and protagonists do not share the same deictic centre. Consider the example 2:

2.   (a) Jacob realized what Peter <u>suggested</u>.
      (b) Jacob realized what Peter <u>had suggested</u>.

On the basis of what we have considered so far, by applying formal criteria we can conclude that in the sentence (a) the instances of Jacob's realization and Peter's suggestion share the same temporal domain, and that the moment of realizing and suggesting can be interpreted as happening at the same time. The narrator provides a representation of the same event viewed as a past occurrence from the reader's perspective, and as a present occurrence from the characters' perspective. Since it is impossible for a single event to be marked by two temporal grammatical forms (i.e. present and past) to reflect both perspectives at the same time, a choice has to be made which form is to be used to linguistically represent the events. In such cases in English the choice is conventionally *past tense*, or more precisely preterital grammatical domain. In Serbian, however, the subordinate clause from the example 2(a) could be rendered both by using a past form or a present form of the verb. Consider the examples:

3.   (a) Džejkob je shvatio šta <u>je</u> Piter <u>predlagao</u>.
      (b) Džejkob je shvatio šta Piter <u>predlaže</u>.
      (c) Džejkob je shvatio šta <u>je</u> Piter <u>predložio</u>.

The initial, superordinate clause (*Džejkob je shvatio…*), which introduces the subordinate reporting clause, is attributed to the narrative description

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absolute and relative temporal interpretations, which is why we prefer to talk about their uses. For more on the distinction, see Comrie (1985).

proper, which is by rule objectively conducted by the narrator, and it belongs to the same preterital domain in both languages. The subordinate clause, on the other hand, is subject to different grammatical restrictions in the two languages. In English, the SOT principles require that it remains within the same temporal domain as the main clause (i.e. the preterital), whereas in Serbian, the choice of tense is optional, past being as acceptable as the present (sentences (a) and (b)). The only requirement for this interpretation is that the original complement clause in (a) must not be interpreted as bounded, which in Serbian is a matter of verbal *aspect*, rather than tense. If the complement clause 2(a) is translated into Serbian by using perfective form (like in 3(c)), the interpretation is diverted into the direction of a previously completed, bounded event. In English, such interpretation is made by using the past perfect form (as in 2(b)), thus clearly indicating the anteriority of the reported event in relation to the matrix verb. In Serbian, however, the corresponding anterior-past form, the pluperfect (*Ser. pluskvamperfekat*), has mostly been replaced by the preterite (*Ser. perfekat*), which itself draws its ante-preterital interpretation either from the aspectual-semantic structure of the verb (as illustrated by the use of perfective verb in the example 3(c)), or syntactic temporal modifiers, typically adverbials (e.g. Oni su *bili ustali* kada kad smo mi došli : Oni *su* <u>već</u> *ustali* kad smo mi došli (example taken from Stanojčić *et al.* 1989: 383)).

To make the problem even more complicated, Declerck (1990) provides a set of uncanonical examples of reporting structures in which the backshift was not applied and where the temporal relations between the contributing verb phrases are established on the basis of pragmatic factors or lexical-semantic properties of the verbs themselves. In light of such presentation, the sentence 2(a) could then be translated as 3(c), provided that the tenses used in 2(a) take an absolute reading and that the temporal domains of the main clause and the complement clause share the same deictic centre. This means that the sentence 2(a) can have both absolute and relative interpretation, while sentence 2(b) takes only the relative one. The fact that 2(a) can have two readings may seriously impede the process of translation, because then the translator needs to look for other clues in the text to make certain that one reading is more relevant than the other. If no such clues are found, she is left with a dilemma which is never easy to resolve.

The analysed examples show that, in the process of translation, the identification of an adequate temporal domain cannot be simply accounted for by mechanical attribution of corresponding tenses in the two languages. Before any rendering takes place, it is crucial to establish which relevant factors indicate what the appropriate interpretation is, and only after clarifying which temporal sequence is accurate is it possible to decide on the verb form to be used.

3.3 *Stylistic factors – variations in expression and form*

Along with purely linguistic factors, certain negative impacts can be attributed to stylistic factors. Modern writing techniques deliberately tend to go against conventional principles employed in fictional narration for the pur-

pose of achieving a more immediate and authentic expression. However, the stylistic gain achieved in such a manner can sometimes turn into a deficiency when it comes to ease of interpretation, which in turn affects the translation process. The most common stylistic factors causing problems in translation are the use of the so-called *free indirect discourse* (henceforth FID) and deviations from traditional orthographic conventions. The former phenomenon has been widely discussed in the field of narratology (cf. Fludernik 1993), focusing primarily on the problem of *perspectivization* and emphasising the fact that the identification of the agents of verbalized content is crucial for the overall interpretation. In conventional reported discourse, the introductory clause is considered to be a part of the narrator's objective account, whereas the reported material is attributed to a certain protagonist. In FID, the reporting, i.e. introductory clause is omitted, leaving only the reported content, which is conveyed by means of combining the features of both direct and indirect types of reporting. The elimination of reporting indicators erases the formal boundaries between the story-teller and the characters, thus blurring the line between the narrator's evidential description and subjective verbal representations of the protagonists. Overuse or improper handling of FID may lead to vague and ambiguous expressions, causing a failure to assign the utterance to the proper addressee. As we noted above, this may not pose such a problem in the Serbian language, which shows a certain flexibility in this respect, but in English, the absence of formal markers of reported content complicates the understanding of the text. Since they do not constitute a formalized category, structural markers of the FID often vary from one author to another. The inconsistent applications of the FID further aggravate the problem of reference assignment, as is the case in alternate switching of temporal narrative domains illustrated in the following excerpt:

> Alice lay as stiff as a rod, staring at the shadowed ceiling, where lights from the cars in the road fled and chased, her ears assaulted, her mind appalled. She made herself think: Tomorrow, tomorrow <u>we'll get</u> the electricity done.... Money. She <u>needed</u> money. Where? She'<u>d get</u> it. She <u>wasn't going to cheat</u> Philip...
>
> (excerpted from: Doris Lessing: *The Good Terrorist*[10])

The excerpt begins with the sentence where the narrator describes the situation in which the character's physical condition is described together with her impressions concerning a prior event. The following sentence begins with a clause announcing the reported content (*She made herself think*), accompanied by a colon that serves as an orthographic marker which is typically employed to introduce the reported content in the form of direct discourse. As the narration progresses, the sentences become fragmented, which indicates that the verbal content thus conveyed is a part of the character's (Alice's) mental representation, stretching all the way to the end of the excerpt. If we look at the underlined phrases, we can see that in the first instance the temporal domain employed is non-preterital (*<u>we'**ll** get</u> the electricity done...*), i.e. with

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10 The marked segments were underlined by the authors of the paper.

future reference, whereas the other underlined segments are placed into the preterital domain (*She need**ed** money; She'**d** get it; She **wasn't** going to cheat Philip…*). Since these segments constitute the same mental whole, it is therefore expected and grammatically justified that the analysed segments should share the same temporal domain, or that an orthographic indicator of a sort, such as quotation marks, should be used to establish the boundaries of the direct report. But, as the examples show, this is not the case. These types of temporal inconsistencies in the use of narrative devices and deviations from orthographic conventions can be easily overlooked, which may lead to confusion in choosing the appropriate verbal form when translating the text. Similarly, the need to lend the immediacy and psychological note to literary expression through sententially fragmented and semantically fuzzy structures may cause confusing or ambiguous interpretations even for native speakers, let alone Serbian ones, which makes this type of narration particularly tricky to render.

4. *Conclusion*

Despite the seemingly straightforward nature and the students' reasonably extensive theoretical grasp of the SOT phenomenon in reported structures, mistakes concerning both its temporal interpretation and syntactic realization tend to persist throughout the entire course of studies. As seen above, some factors are identified as contributory to this issue, starting from the outdated and overly rigid grammatical presentation of the SOT, through inadequate syntactic and semantic interpretation, to the particularities in the stylistic expression of individual writers.

Undoubtedly, many problems in understanding SOT principles should be attributed to the interference between the Serbian and English linguistic systems. Rather flexible combinatory principles of Serbian reporting structures are transferred into English and applied by Serbian-speaking students without taking into account all the components which may affect the inference. The learned prescriptive rules and decontextualized examples do not provide a satisfactory basis for the proper comprehension of semantic-pragmatic and structural aspects of the SOT. This leads either to oversimplification or overgeneralization of the principles and their indiscriminate (mis)application. Therefore, at the higher levels learning, the onus of ensuring that SOT principles are adequately explained and properly adopted is mostly on teachers and language instructors, who need to not only expand their coverage of all relevant factors, but also modify their attitudes concerning the methods of teaching the SOT.

Through the semantic, pragmatic and stylistic criteria in the treatment of the SOT, the students are directed towards a necessity to reconstruct not only the original words of the reported utterance, but also an entire fictional micro-world which operates according to its own temporal timeline and which is inhabited by protagonists who establish their own temporal relations. Every step of translation process is associated with the translator's gauging whether a particular translated content adequately corresponds to the content of the ma-

terial being translated. In order to achieve an optimal and balanced result, the translator must be able to discern subtle nuances in meaning in the original text which may escape the untrained eye. She also needs to have a firm grasp of a grammatical systems of both languages employed in the process. On top of that, it is inevitable to be aware of extralinguistic factors affecting the interpretation, and combine all these components into a process of creating a successful translation. Granted, it is no easy task, yet if a thorough understanding of the SOT is to be achieved, all mentioned aspects need to be observed.

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СЛАГАЊЕ ВРЕМЕНА КОД ПРЕНЕСЕНОГ ГОВОРА У ЕНГЛЕСКОМ И СРПСКОМ
– ТЕОРЕТСКИ И МЕТОДИЧКИ АСПЕКТИ У НАСТАВИ ПРЕВОЂЕЊА–

Резиме

С обзиром да код одређеног броја студента укључених у наставу превођења са српског језика на енглески (и обрнуто) опстају грешке везане за неадекватно разумевање појаве *слагања времена* у структурама везаним за пренесени говор, у овом је раду извршен покушај да се установе главни фактори који доводе до проблема. Поред чинилаца везаних за интерференцију између принципа синтаксичког организовања глаголских облика у два језика, као могући узроци су поменути: недовољно посвећивање пажње савременим приступима везаним за глаголско време, деконтекстуализовани и неадекватни примери, изостанак значењских компоненти при ширем разматрању, као и стилске особености савремене прозе које могу утицати на интерпретацију оригиналног текста. Образложивши и илустровавши представљене чиниоце како кроз теоретски оквир, тако и кроз методичке приступе, аутори чланка дају предлоге како се разумевање феномена слагања времена у енглеском, а самим тим и његово превођење, може унапредити и ускладити са савременим језичким поставкама.

Кључне речи: слагање времена, настава превођења, глагол, граматичко време, пренесени говор, високо образовање