

## Issues in acquisition of non-temporal meanings of tenses in English by native speakers of Croatian

Ines Skelac & Ružica Stanić  
University of Rijeka, Croatia

**Abstract:** Native speakers of Croatian often have problems with appropriate usage of English tenses that do not exist in Croatian, frequently associating past forms in English with perfective meanings in Croatian and non-past forms with imperfective meanings (because Croatian has verb aspect). They also encounter difficulties with non-temporal uses of English tenses.

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Apart from the central meaning of tense as temporal reference, there are four non-temporal meanings of English tenses (Tyler, 2000): (1) emotional distance or intimacy; (2) the relative salience or status of the information being conveyed; (3) negative epistemic stance towards a particular scenario; (4) to express requests, commands and invitations.

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Although some non-temporal meanings are very similar to those in English, there are also significant differences that cause difficulties to native speakers of Croatian in learning English as L2. Some of the differences are caused by metaphorical and metonymical shifts in meaning between the source domain (time distance) and the target domain (distance between wish and reality, simulating of distance in order to avoid direct appeal, distance of the deictic centre, counterfactual possible situation, etc.). In order to examine those assumptions, 102 students – English learners – were tested. Differences mainly occurred in cases when the past tense is used in English to signal (1) a negative epistemic stance towards a particular scenario and (2) tense as an expression of attenuation: invitations, requests and suggestions, because Croatian speakers tended to use the present tense in some cases.

We argue that a consistent description of non-temporal uses of tenses in Croatian and English, with analysis of differences, can facilitate the learning of these frequently occurring non-temporal uses of English tenses.

## **Introduction**

Native Croatian speakers often have problems with appropriate usage of English tenses that do not exist in Croatian, frequently associating past forms in English with perfective meanings in Croatian and non-past forms with imperfective meanings (because Croatian has verb aspect); they also encounter difficulties with non-temporal uses of English tenses.

In order to investigate how differences in non-temporal uses of tenses in English and Croatian cause difficulties to native Croatian speakers in learning English as L2, four groups of non-temporal uses in English (as presented in Tyler & Evans, 2000) will be analysed and compared with non-temporal uses in Croatian. The data obtained by the research carried out with 102 students will be processed. The conclusions may be used in further investigations with the purpose of facilitating the learning and teaching of those frequently occurring non-temporal uses of English tense in the case of native speakers of Croatian and related languages.

## **Theoretical background**

Tenses are primarily used to determine whether an event takes place in the past, present or future; moreover, to express modality or some kind of distance (emotional, the change of reference point, unreality, etc.). Some authors, like Peter Ludlow (1999), argue that grammatical phenomenon called *tense* is a mixture of other phenomena, including modality and evidentiality, therefore *tense* is a compounded category developed by combining those categories.

As people have problems in comprehending time, especially its flow and direction, they often map features of space relations to time relations. Many scientists concluded that tense is a deictic phenomenon which refers to time with respect to a deictic centre (a reference point in relation to which a deictic expression is to be interpreted).

There is a strong connection between temporal concept 'now' and locational concept 'here'; we cannot perceive the present moment differently than in frames of our physical environment and sensory experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that time and space are conceptually strongly connected, which can be shown by conceptual metaphors such as TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 42).

In accordance with that metaphor, the future is considered as moving towards us, for example:

- (1) *The time has come to stand for all we believe in.*
- (2) *I look forward to your arrival.*
- (3) *Time flies.*

By virtue of TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT metaphor, time receives a front-back orientation facing in the direction of motion, as any moving object. These metaphors facilitate conceptualizing time by reducing it to something more familiar and concrete.

Non-temporal use of tenses entails the use of tenses not in order to talk about time, but some other phenomena. As the past tense is by default used to express that an event took place in the past, if the same tense is used when talking about the present, it obviously means something else than past reference. Hence, time distance is mapped onto some other type of distance, for example, distance between wish and reality, simulating distance in order to avoid direct appeal, distance of the deictic centre (in the case of reported speech), distance of a possible world that contradicts the real world, etc.

Tyler and Evans (2000) argue that temporal use of tenses precedes the non-temporal one, but they emphasize the importance and appropriate treatment of non-temporal use, which is not arbitrary and peripheral phenomenon.

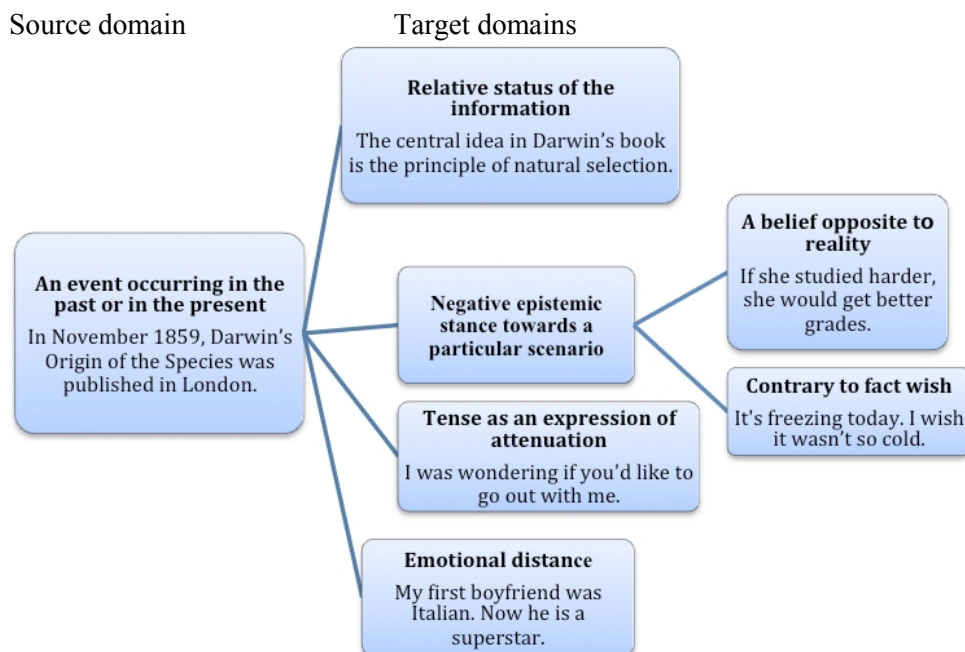
There are four main groups of non-temporal uses of tenses in English:

1. Emotional distance or lack of intimacy: *My first husband **was** Italian. Now he **is** a super star.*
2. Relative status of the information (i.e. the past tense signals background information, while the present tense signals foreground status: *In November 1859, Darwin's *Origin of the Species* **was published** in London. The central idea in this book **is** the principle of natural selection.*
3. Negative epistemic stance towards a particular scenario (contrary to fact wish or a belief opposite to reality): *If she **studied** harder, she **would get** better grades; I wish I **knew** what he'll say next.*
4. Tense as an expression of attenuation: invitations, requests and suggestions: *Excuse me, I **was wondering** if this **was** the train for York.*

There are some differences between non-temporal uses in English and Croatian. In Croatian, non-temporal uses are not necessary regarding epistemic stance, because sentences like *I wish I knew what he'll say next* can be translated in two ways, using the present tense or conditional mood and appropriate connective ('da' plus present or 'kad' plus conditional): *Da barem **znam** što će sljedeće reći; Kad **bih** barem **znao** što*

*će sljedeće reći*. Furthermore, in some cases of expressing attenuation, when there is past tense in English, the present tense is used in Croatian: Oprostite, **zanima** me je li ovo vlak za York. If the past tense were used in that sentence, it would have temporal meaning.

Non-temporal uses of English tenses are presented in the following schema:



The target domain is always temporal, i.e. talking about past or present events, while the source domains include metaphorical and metonymical shifts.

### Analysis of the data

In order to examine the issues native Croatian speakers encounter in the acquisition of non-temporal meanings of English tenses, 102 students at the University of Zagreb and at the University of Rijeka were examined. The average age of students was 23, there were no students of English language and literature and they had studied English for approximately 9 years in primary and secondary school.

The questionnaire contained ten statements and four translations for each of the statements. Eight of the statements were in Croatian with English translations and two were in English with Croatian translations. The students were instructed to choose one or more translations for the statement in question. They were also given

an option of providing a different translation. There was no time limit for completing the questionnaire.

### **Emotional distance and lack of intimacy**

(1) a. Moj je prvi dečko bio Talijan. Sad je velika zvijezda.

The correct translation of these sentences is

(1) b. My first boyfriend was Italian. Now he is a superstar.

The vast majority of the students (85%) selected the correct answer. However, some respondents chose incorrect translations:

(1) c. My first boyfriend is Italian. Now he is a superstar.

(1) d. My first boyfriend has been Italian. Now he is a superstar.

A possible explanation for these mistakes could lie in the second sentence: the first boyfriend is still alive (*Now* he is a superstar) and he hasn't change nationality, therefore, he hasn't stopped being Italian. In example (1) a. the use of *was* does not code time, as the first boyfriend is still Italian. Since the sentence describes a romantic involvement, some degree of intimacy is implied. The degree of intimacy is distal because the adjective *first* suggests that there were other boyfriends. The use of past simple implicates a relationship which is no longer intimate.

Tense is employed in reported speech also to express distance, but between the reference point and the speaker in direct and indirect speech act: the hearer in the direct speech act becomes the speaker in the indirect speech. In English, the change of the reference point and the distance regarding transfer of someone else's words result in the change of tense, while in Croatian the tense remains unchanged. The respondents chose the correct translation predominately (71%), as it was expected, because they have learned how to convert direct speech into indirect speech.

### **Relative status of the information**

Tense is employed to express saliency and to signal the relative status of the information. Even if an event took place in the past, if it is still relevant, it can be expressed using the present tense.

(3) a. U studenom 1859. godine u Londonu je objavljena Darwinova knjiga Podrijetlo vrsta. Središnja je ideja te knjige princip prirodne selekcije.

The predicate in the first sentence in (3) a. is in the past tense and the predicate in the second sentence is in the present tense. Though there is a correspondence between tenses in English and Croatian, almost one-third (32%) of the students didn't choose the appropriate translation:

(3) b. In November 1859, Darwin's Origin of the Species was published in London. The central idea in this book is the principle of natural selection.

The publication date is not the central idea of the paragraph. *Was* in (3) b. establishes background information (Origin of the Species' publication date) for the important information, which is in the second sentence – the principle of natural selection.

### **The appropriate epistemic stance towards a particular scenario**

#### ***A fact or belief opposite to reality***

In counterfactual conditionals and similar constructions containing if-clauses, hypothesizing a situation that seems highly unlikely to occur, for example *Imagine if you were the president of the USA. What would you do to make the world a better place?*, the past tense in the if-clause does not signify a past event, but the fact that the content expressed by the if-clause is not true or even does not have the real possibility to become realized. In Croatian, if-clauses in those constructions can contain both the past and the present tense.

In both examples used in the questionnaire students needed to select the correct translation of a Croatian sentence containing present tense in the if-clause. The majority of them chose the right translation in both cases, but 32% chose translations with the present tense in the if-clause in the case of counterfactual conditional. This result may be explained by the occurrence of present tense in the Croatian original.

#### ***Contrary to fact wish***

As in the previous examples, English past tense is used to express a contrast between the speaker's wish and the state of affairs. In Croatian the same information is expressed by present tense and the connective 'da' or conditional mood and the connective 'kad', which are used in if-clauses of counterfactual conditionals.

Therefore, English sentence

(6) a. It's freezing today. I wish it wasn't so cold.

has two correct translations:

(6) b. Danas je mrzlo. Da barem nije tako hladno.

(6) c. Danas je mrzlo. Kad barem ne bi bilo tako hladno.

Almost all of the students (99%) chose one or both of the right answers.

Surprisingly, a similar conclusion cannot be drawn regarding example (7) a., which seems similar to (6) a.:

(7) a. I wish I knew what he'll say next.

Only 64% of the students selected the right answer:

(7) b. Da barem znam što će sljedeće reći.

One student offered an alternative, also correct answer:

(7) c. Kad bih barem znao što će sljedeće reći.

A significant number of respondents (35%) picked one of the wrong answers, which included the past tense in the if-clause. In Croatian, the past tense cannot appear in those sentences because it would change the meaning, i.e. the sentences would refer to an event occurring in the past, not in the present.

### **Tense as an expression of attenuation: invitations, requests and commands**

#### *Attenuated invitations*

The English past tense is sometimes used where the present tense could be expected, its intention being to avoid directness of the question and decrease the amount of imposition on the hearer. The Croatian past tense is sometimes used for the same reason, but as far as requests are considered, it is not as important to attenuate them by tense, therefore the present tense is used.

In (8) a. the past tense is used to avoid directness of the question because the situation is probably unpleasant for both the speaker and the hearer.

(8) a. Ona: O čemu razmišljaš? On: Pitao sam se bi li izašla sa mnom.

The correct translation also has the past tense, so the majority of respondents selected translations containing the past tense. 72% chose the accurate translation (8) b. and 6% chose translation (8) c., containing the past simple, instead of past continuous, while 22% thought that the present simple or present continuous was the correct tense.

(8) b. I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me.

(8) c. I wondered if you'd like to go out with me.

### *Attenuated requests*

It was different in a Croatian sentence with the present tense:

(9) a. Oprostite, zanima me je li ovo vlak za York.

Only 44% of the students chose the correct translation:

(9) b. Excuse me, I was wondering if this was the train for York.

Others assumed that the present simple or present continuous should be employed. English expression “I was wondering” is considered more polite than “I am wondering...” In this particular case, it's not possible to employ past tense in Croatian with the same intention, because it would mean that you were interested whether the train was for York sometime in the past.

### *Attenuated commands*

Finally, past tense is used to attenuate commands, making them more polite by mitigating the amount of opposition on the hearer. For that purpose the past tense is used in the English subordinate clause, contrary to the present tense in Croatian.

(10) a. Krajnje je vrijeme da odemo.

Only 26% of the respondents chose sentence (10) b. as the translation of the given sentence:

(10) b. It's high time we left.

A high number of students (70%) selected the sentence that contained present tense:

(10) c. It's high time we leave.

This mistake occurred because of the difference in tense in Croatian and English iterations of the same statement: sentence (10) b. contains only present tense. A small number of students (3%) recognized the difference in tenses, yet chose the incorrect translation:

(10) d. It was high time we left.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has given an account of the issues native Croatian speakers encounter when acquiring non-temporal meanings of English tenses. Our research has shown that native Croatian speakers are often misled by the tense used in their native language, except in the cases when they had learned the rules for e.g. counterfactuals and reported speech. Due to the fact that the past tense is employed in both English and Croatian, no significant deviation was found between expected and obtained responses in examining an example expressing emotional distance and the lack of intimacy. Croatian indirect speech uses the same tense as direct speech; consequently, native speakers sometimes have problems with converting direct



speech into indirect speech in English. The research has shown that Croatian speakers have some difficulties understanding the use of English past tense when it expresses actuality, especially when the past tense appears in the if-clause of a conditional sentence. The past tense cannot be employed in Croatian to attenuate invitations, requests and suggestions in all of the same situations as in English, because in Croatian it sometimes has temporal meaning. For that reason, Croatian speakers displayed difficulties concerning the non-temporal use of past continuous to attenuate requests and invitations and past tense to attenuate commands.

In conclusion, if native speakers were referred to the differences between non-temporal use of tenses in Croatian and English, especially if the approach were focused on presenting non-temporal use as a systematically organised and structured appearance in language, it is conceivable that learners would show better comprehension and therefore better use of those non-temporal meanings, as in the cases of reported speech and counterfactual conditionals.

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