

CONTRASTIVE ASPECTS OF ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN INDICATIVE TENSES

**Colegiul Național de Informatică “ Matei Basarab “ Rm. Vâlcea
Prof. Împăratu Lăcrămioara**

Confronted with the richness of the English tenses-system, the Romanian learner often finds it difficult to choose the right form; his task is unusually complex. The process of assimilating the English tense system implies a reinterpretation of the seven tenses forms corresponding Simple and Progressive English tense forms. This requirement must be based on an adequate knowledge of the meaning of the English tenses and on a better understanding the tenses in Romanian. The English system is richer and more explicit in as much as it systematically marks formally the belonging of a given tense form to one of the subsystems.

The abstract character of analytical language raises difficulties in understanding the logic functioning of their verb mechanism. Romanian learners face such difficulties because Romanian has a synthetic character, which is incongruous with the in most logic of the English verb. The learner is provided with a better instrument to handle the verb mechanism by the parallel study of different classes of verbs and tense morphemes and time adverbial, which partially duplicate the function of the tense morpheme.

Meaning can be conveyed in terms of only one level at a time. We can observe that a level contains three order symbols oriented towards the moment of speech. We can convert all the other temporal meanings into a tense system if we start from the moment of speech. Thus, maximum of nine tenses can be described and this system operates on two levels.

Since all events take place in time, there are only three possible order relations in terms of which any given event is used as an axis of orientation, thus the two systems +_SIMULTANEOUS and +_BEFORE deal with time and events. Time is infinite, but divisible in intervals: all events take place in time, have a start, middle and an end they can be simultaneous or sequent. Time and all events in time are unidirectionally and serially.

So, we are dealing with an open system in which the designed possibilities are theoretically infinite. The open nature of this system requires the conclusion that the number of parallel events expressed temporally by morphemes which are adopted as a base of a system, may be different from language to language.

A close look at the English tense-forms that can be fitted in the system and the corresponding verb forms in Romanian reveals a striking similarity with respect to the temporal specification in the concepts: five forms exhibit similar concepts with the corresponding English forms, three other forms (present perfect, future-in the – past and future – perfect – in the – past)

existing only in English fit in the pattern of the system, but do not have Romanian formal counterparts, which arises difficulties for a Romanian learner who is obliged to reshape the areas of the Romanian tenses to cover these forms, too, a difficulty accentuated by the existence of a tense – form only in Romanian - imperfect – which, to a certain extent doubles the function of the ‘perfect compus’, being synonymous with regard to the concepts of ‘non-simultaneity’ and ‘anteriority’.

The Perfect Simple is preserved in Romanian as a free variant of the Perfect Compus in some dialects, though the information it carries is totally irrelevant to the basic functions of the tense construct and thus it is employed in completely artificial and irrelevant in usage.

The corresponding Romanian tense values are more numerous if the collocation tense-time adverbial is taken into consideration. The adverbial modification is connected to basic tenses with obligatory occurrence in English. Not only simple tenses, but also perfect tenses may emphasize this relation in Romanian. Nevertheless, the difference is of no functional effect because the ‘perfect compus’ is only formally different from the past tense. They play the same functional part in the sentence.

The Romanian verbs, unlike the English ones, do not have specialized forms indicating the progressive aspect of the action as opposed to its indefinite character, in Romanian this distinction results from context. What in Romanian appears as a semantic feature dependent on the context, in English is realized morphemically as a distinct aspect form.

The Romanian learner has to choose between the two forms of each English tense he wants to use, which implies knowledge of the restrictions on their use according to the class of verbs employed, or to the context. Thus, the rendering in English of such Romanian tenses as the ‘prezent’ and the ‘imperfect’ of the indicative mood involves for the Romanian learner a choice not just between two, but between four English tense forms, which greatly increases the number of selected rules he must master.

These two basic differences account for the considerable difficulties with which Romanian learners meet and the many characteristic mistakes they make in rendering of the Romanian ‘prezent’ and ‘imperfect’ or ‘perfect compus’ in English. The problem becomes complicated as the Romanian ‘perfectul compus’ and ‘mai mult ca perfectul’ as opposed to the English present perfect and past perfect, always express a completed action as therefore cannot be used to indicate an action that having begun at a point time in the past, is still going on at the moment of speaking and was respectively still going on at the moment of reference in the past.

In Romanian, such an action is rendered by the ‘prezent’ or ‘imperfect’ of the indicative mood, in conjunction with the same time modifiers as in English.

Comparison with Romanian tenses is likewise provided – for didactic rather than scientific reasons. “English”, writes and Englishman surprisingly aware of the difficulties of his mother tongue “is no

joke, at any rate to people possessing the logical mind of Frenchman, or that passion for solid and dependable rules which distinguishes the German.”

“Nevertheless, there is a certain grim humour about the language itself. English is the easiest of all great languages to begin to learn; every student is cheered and charmed by the ease and speed with which he can make himself understood. It is when he ventures into the labyrinth of idiom, or finds himself entangled in the endless eccentricities of spelling and pronunciation, that it begins to draw upon him that an entire lifetime devoted to the study of the language would still leave him with an immense amount to learn.” (W. Freeman, “English for Foreigners”, London 1945).

All that should be added to the quotation is that “*the endless eccentricities*” are not only of spelling and pronunciation, but also of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and style – and everything that properly belongs to the sphere of linguistics.

John B. Carrol (“Contrastive Linguistics and Interference Theory”) looking at contrastive linguistics from the point of view of the psychology of learning takes a positive view of the subject. He and others have given attention to the well-known fact of interlingua convergences and divergences and the learning process. Apparently, the convergence phenomena are advantageous in encoding but disadvantageous in decoding. This fact, therefore, has different implications according to whether active or passive language skills are to be taught.

The psychology of learning will have to contribute to the investigation of interference phenomena since the latter may be highly idiosyncratic in many cases. The question of whether interference phenomena depend in some ways on the particular language concerned must be investigated by the psychology of learning.

Applied contrastive linguistics does not aim at drawing the pupil’s attention constantly and systematically to language contrasts. Its objective is to aid the textbook author in collecting and arranging his material and to help the teacher in presenting his subject matter. The teacher is able to predict, explain, correct and eliminate errors due to interference between source and target language. The effect of contrastive linguistics will vary according to teaching objectives and age of learners, but not all the results of contrastive analysis will be used for practical work. Thus, the most convenient way of teaching the meaning of the Present to Romanian learners is to point out to the equivalent meaning of “Prezent”.

The aim of contrastive analysis of two temporal systems is the description of a system made up of the sum of the differences between the subsystems of the source language and that of the target language. This differential system is the focus of the didactic programme.

As a remark, even after several years of learning English, teenage students may

often feel a sense of frustration and boredom. Although they have covered a large amount of grammar, they are not always confident about using the language and they still make mistakes. The teaching material must offer clear progression as well as continuous revision.

In other words, ability to communicate effectively is probably not attained most quickly or efficiently through pure communication practice in the classroom – not, at least, within the framework of a formal course of study.

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