

CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND ITALIAN TENSES

ANALIZA CONTRASTIVĂ A TIMPURILOR DIN LIMBILE ENGLEZĂ ȘI ITALIANĂ

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Abstract. *Language is the basic means of communication in human relations, as well as in business.*

The tense system is one of the most difficult areas of both English and Italian grammars for the non-native speakers to master.

The confrontation of two languages is important from the point of view of translation theory, language typology and the study of language universals. The principal aim of this paper is to present a general overview and discussion of the English and Italian tense systems, illustrated with examples from the two languages. Interlanguage interference is clearly a major source of difficulty; we try to bring into relief the areas of contrast and similarity between the two languages regarding tenses.

Rezumat. *Limba este instrumentul de bază al comunicării în relațiile interumane, precum și în afaceri.*

Unul dintre cele mai dificile elemente atât din gramatica limbii engleze cât și a celei italiene este sistemul timpurilor; de aceea este destul de dificil pentru cei care învată aceste limbi de a-și însuși particularitățile lor.

O analiză contrastivă a celor două limbi este importată din punctul de vedere al teoriei traducerii, al tipologiei limbii și al studiului universalilor limbii. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a face o prezentare generală și o discuție asupra timpurilor limbii engleze și italiene, evidențiate prin exemple din cele două limbi. Deoarece interferența intralingvistică poate crea dificultăți, se încearcă o prezentare a elementelor contrastive și asemănătoare ale timpurilor din cadrul celor două limbi.

Nowadays language is analysed as a living phenomenon not only from the point of view of the complexity of its uses and forms. Every day language and specialized language, literary and scientific texts represent an object of equal interest.

We consider that language always predominates over grammar, but a proper study of grammar is a "must" for a proper understanding of the problems of a language. Just as the vocabulary of every language is distinct and peculiar, so is the grammar of a language.

The study of the contrast between two languages gives us the possibility of solving some major problems in learning languages, namely that of the interference between the two languages.

If we consider the structure of the tenses of Italian and their functions and those of English we must establish the elements which, theoretically, determine the degree of difficulty in assimilating the target language. Keeping in mind that certain elements of the Italian tenses are similar to those of English, we realize that there is the danger of interference from one language to another. For this reason, there must be accentuated both the details where a greater or smaller interference from the languages exists and the positive transfer owing to the functional correspondence between the two languages. This is what we are going to present further on the basis of the analysis of the tenses made in the previous chapter.

Analysing the forms and functions of the tenses in English and Italian we can point out the morphological lack of variation of English at the word level which has consequences in the functioning of the tenses at clause level. Thus, person and number information has to be given at the clause level by means of an obligatory (pro)nominal subject.

The compulsory use of a subject in English is one of the essential features of the language. By contrast, the morphologically richer Italian verb form contains person and number information in itself. Hence, one important contrasting feature of English and Italian: obligatory subject in English versus optional subject in Italian, a feature which leads to frequent errors.

Another element of contrast is to be found in the negative form of the verb, While in Italian the negation is placed before the verb, in English the negation is attached to the auxiliary verb. The contrast between the two structures in English and Italian enables us to predict some mistakes which learners will make as a result of interferences from the two languages.

While Italian has a single structure for the verbs in the negative, English presents a totally different structure in the case of the modals and auxiliaries (*He must not, He cannot, He is not*). This structure has the same elements as in the other second language and interference may result in the omission of the pronoun and may produce incorrect word order: **not must*. However the similarity between the elements of the two languages determines a correct and rapid assimilation. After the assimilation of this structure other danger arises: due to the interference from the approximative system the learner may produce incorrect utterances of the type **/ go not for I do not go*.

The contrast between the interrogative structures of the two languages is a more difficult problem. Italian uses intonation as a signal for questions: *Vanno?* The use of interrogative words is another way of making the interrogative form: *Chi va?*

In English, the interrogation is marked by: a) intonation b) the use of special markers for questions ("*do-*") and c) different internal structure. The interrogative words and the change of word order are markers in English. Analysing the structure of *Does he go?* we notice the existence of an interrogative marker, the auxiliary verb *to do*. The difficulty in using this form in English comes from the fact that it also implies a change at the sentence level and, consequently, the marker of the interrogative construction *do* can, according

to the model of the other second language or of the base language,(Romanian) be omitted: * *he goes?* for *Does he go?*

In the case of a certain number of interrogative words, both the structural elements and the order of elements in the structure are similar in the two languages: *Chi va?* - *Who goes?* In such cases there is a positive transfer, and the structure of the target language is assimilated correctly.

Although both languages can easily be described as having three basic tenses, the number of tense forms is widely different in the two languages. Italian has fewer tenses because it does not have specific constructions to render the aspectual values present in English. In Italian the grammatical category of "tense" is subscribed to that of "mood" and "aspect" is a subscribed category of tense. Since in Italian, the verb does not have a formally marked category for rendering the aspectual contrast Progressive/ Non-Progressive, the idea of duration is given by determinatives and by special verbs used to express the aspect.

e.g. He is teaching.
Insegna adesso.
/ Sta insegnando.

In other words the difference is given by the formally marked actions in progress (English) as opposed to the bifunctionality of tenses in Italian. Nevertheless the tenses coincide. It follows that the binary verbal form tense is characteristic of English only and the almost lack of "be+ing" mark in Italian is compensated for by different means i.e. determinatives, as well as by situational and lexical meaning, which also compensates for the lacunae in the morphological system.

The analysis of the meanings of tenses in English and in Italian proves that the problem posed to a learner of the two languages is not that of the place of a tense in the system of tenses, but the problem of understanding aspectual properties exhibited by a tense form.

The Italian "Passato prossimo" and "Trapassato prossimo" in contradiction to the English Present Perfect and Past Perfect, always express a completed action that, having begun at a point of time in the past, is still going on at a time of speaking and was, respectively going on at a time in the past. In Italian, such an action is rendered by means of the "presente" and the "imperfetto" of the indicative mood in conjunction with the same types of time indicators as in English:

ITALIAN	ENGLISH
a) <i>Vissi</i> là un intero anno.	<i>I lived</i> there for a whole year.
b) <i>Avevo vissuto</i> là un anno intero quando ero studente.	<i>I had lived</i> there for a whole year in my student days.
c) <i>Vivo</i> qui dal 1990.	<i>I have lived</i> here since 1990.

From what has been presented, it follows that the rendering of such Italian tenses as "Il presente" and "l' imperfetto" of the indicative mood in English involves for the Italian learner a choice not just between two, but between four English tense forms, which greatly increase the number of selectional rules one must master.

ITALIAN

leggo

ENGLISH

I read

I am reading

I have often read

I have been reading

The difference noted above account for the considerable difficulties learners meet with and the many characteristic mistakes they make in their rendering of the Italian "Presente", "Imperfetto", or "Perfetto" in English and in their use of the English perfect tenses.

In view of this complexity a contrastive study of Italian and English tenses will have to specify all the relationships established between them in all the relevant contexts, as well as the rules for the selection of the English equivalent of every meaning of an Italian tense form. To bring this assertion into greater relief we shall also present the English equivalents of the Italian "passato prossimo".

ITALIAN

- a) *Quando sono sceso dal treno ho visto Alessandro.*
- b) *Non ho visto Anna da due anni.*
- c) *Ho letto molto questa settimana.*
- d) *Mi ha detto stasera che era piovuto nel mattino.*

ENGLISH

- When I *got off the* train, I saw Alexander.
- I *haven't seen* Ann for two years.
- I *have been reading* a lot this week.
- Last night he *told* me it *had rained* in the morning.

The examples clearly show that the rendering of the Italian "Passato prossimo", which is a common Past Tense in Italian, most of the time corresponds to the English Present Perfect and only sometimes to Past Perfect and Past Tense.

"Il presente" and "l' imperfetto" freely occur with expressions designating open periods of time ("for a week" etc). This accounts for the following correspondences which represent another important source of errors:

ENGLISH

- a) *I've been studying* English for three years.
- b) *It had been raining* for three days.

ITALIAN

- Imparo* l'italiano da tre anni.
- Piove* da tre giorni.
- Pioveva* da tre giorni.

As we already know, it is but a truth that in language generally, as a reflection of human thought, there is a logic of temporal relations which is widely acknowledged and accepted by those who consciously or unconsciously speak it correctly. This "general logic" relies primarily on such basic notions as: anteriority, simultaneity and posteriority and is differently applied in different languages. As regards English, it seems to have a much tighter logic reflected in the distribution of tenses in general and especially in sequence of tenses constraints, whereas Italian is characterized by greater freedom (compare the three ways of expressing a conditional sentence referring to the past, as against only one correct version of English):

Italian: *Se fossi
venuto,
l'avrai vista.
Se venivi, la
vedevi.
Esser venuto,
l'avrei vista.*

English: If you *had come*, you would have seen her.

The use of the Present Perfect instead of the Italian "future anteriore" (or "futuro semplice" or even "presente") in temporal clauses attached to a future in the main clause can be explained in terms of the English logic: as the Present is employed to show simultaneity with the Future in temporal and conditional clauses, it is but natural for the tense prior to the Present to be employed with the view of showing anteriority to the Present or Future:

ENGLISH	ITALIAN
I'll help you as soon as I <i>have finished</i> my lessons.	Ti aiuterò' appena <i>chefinisco / finirò/avrò finito</i> i compiti.

The elements of contrast presented so far explain the most important difficulties that learners come across when acquiring the tense systems of English and Italian.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout our paper we have endeavoured to emphasize the importance of studying foreign languages, to define the tenses in their relationships with one another, to deal with the basic meanings and uses of the English tenses and the principal aspects of contrast and similarity between English and the Italian tense systems. In other words, the aim of our paper was not only a better understanding

of the structures under study, but also applied deductions meant to facilitate learning.

Here are some of the conclusions we have reached:

A proper study of grammar is essential for a proper understanding of the problems of a language.

One of the principal elements of contrast between English and Italian which lead to frequent mistakes refer mainly to: the morphologically richer Italian verb tense forms which contain person and number information in themselves versus the morphological lack of variation at the word level in English, different word order in interrogative and negative verb constructions, changes of tenses in reported speech and various types of subordinate clauses in English.

The contrastive analysis of the English and Italian tenses has pointed out that English has a much tighter logic reflected in the distribution of tenses, whereas Italian is characterized by greater freedom.

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