4th International Scientific Conference SEC-IASR 2019,
Galati, Romania, 7th – 8th June, 2019

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Iulian MARDAR

<https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc/sec-iasr2019/22>

How to cite: Mardar,I. (2020). Using Analogies in Teaching Indirect Speech to Romanian Students. In S. Marin & P. Moisescu (vol. eds.), *Lumen Proceedings: Vol. 12. 4th International Scientific Conference SEC-IASR 2019* (pp. 209-219). Iasi, Romania: LUMEN Publishing House.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc/sec-iasr2019/22>

Using Analogies in Teaching Indirect Speech to Romanian Students

Iulian MARDAR¹

Abstract

Turning a dialogue, i.e. direct speech (DS), into a reported text, i.e. indirect speech (IS), implies a series of substantial transformations undergone by the verb, among other parts of speech. Such changes are not difficult to operate by native speakers of English, even though natives also learn gradually how to report what other people say as they develop their communication skills in English.

Things are quite challenging in the case of non-native speakers of English whose native languages do not imply such strict transformation rules as English does. Although numerous, the logical changes in the verb form which have to be operated while reporting DS may be made more accessible to adult Romanian learners of English by using analogies with math formulae or with practical aspects from the real life.

The present paper is aimed at enlarging on some of the most original analogies which have been successfully used in order to facilitate the Romanian adult learners' understanding of the specific grammar rules to be taken into account when turning sentences from direct to IS.

Keywords: *Indirect speech; direct speech; transformations; analogies; teaching methods.*

¹ "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galați, Romania, iulian19722002@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that theory is nothing without practice, and practice is where most of the students learning English as a foreign language come to a stumbling block. There may be languages in which there are similar transformations to the ones occurring in English when turning sentences from direct to IS, but there are numerous other languages which do not imply such changes. In the latter situation, the effort made by learners in order to communicate correctly in English is significantly more complex and demanding.

Thinking in a different language may seem a far-fetched concept, but the practice has showed us that things are not always as complicated as they might appear. Many of the students who study English as a foreign language consider that they cannot fully understand this language simply because they were not born English. Such an opinion is wrong for a very simple reason: nobody is born a native speaker of any language. The native language we speak as adults is not in our genes from the first days of our lives. We communicate by using sounds, words and, only later, in childhood, do we learn the rules that should govern our grammatically correct communication. These are the exact same steps which we have to take as non-native speakers of any foreign language we might choose to learn.

Childhood is the age of “why?” or “the age of reason”. When children understand why they have to observe the rules imposed onto them by parents and teachers, they are likely never to break those rules. In order to help children cope with the teaching-understanding-memorizing-applying process, educators, more often than not, make use of relevant analogies. Unfortunately, the older the students are, the less this method is used, until it is considered too childish and it is completely avoided.

Taking the analogy method out of the equation, when teaching more complicated grammar, is a mistake which makes learning English more painful than it is supposed to be. Learning a foreign language means being born again, taking things from zero and going through the same stages a child goes. Therefore, using teaching methods traditionally selected when working with young students is something that adults should benefit from, as well. Unfortunately, some teachers are less flexible and wrongly consider that children are too young to be taught gradually more complex language structures and vocabulary and that adults are too old to be taught English or any other subject by using methods which work with children. Such an opinion may be easily contradicted by the practice. No student is too young to be taught the difference between Present Simple and Present Continuous, for example, and no adult is too old to be taught the same two tenses by

means of methods normally used with children. Although some analogies are more appropriate for young learners and some others are accessible only to adults, teachers should not fully reject the possibility of transferring teaching methods from a given age group to another.

In the case of students aged, for instance, 12 and of adults, IS and the specific transformations may be taught only if students have a good command of the system of tenses. Teachers may use various analogies with objects and situations which can be found in real life. Such an approach will eventually lead to a complete understanding of the transformations taking place while reporting a dialogue. The analogies presented in the following sections are useful because they help students get used to making analogies, facilitating their understanding of the philosophy behind the English system of tenses and their logical acquisition of the theoretical aspects involved.

2. Problem Statement

One of the greatest challenges when teaching IS implies finding the necessary tools in order to make students, regardless of their age, understand that English grammar rules in this respect are significantly different from the Romanian ones. The transformations the English verb undergoes when turning a sentence from direct to IS are not traceable (or, at least, they are not common and natural) in Romanian, where verbs preserve their tense, most of the times. A sentence such as: *Mă duc la supermarket* (*I am going to the supermarket*) will not change when reported → *A zis/Zicea că se duce la supermarket* (**He said that he is going to the supermarket*). This is the main reason why Romanian learners of English find it difficult and illogical to apply any changes when confronted with similar contexts in this language.

English grammars approach IS in a very neutral manner, as if all the students, irrespective of their native language, found the specific transformations normal. Hewings[4] does not even explain the grammar rules to be observed, leaving the students guess them. Foley and Hall [3] describe only the transformations at the verb level explaining that *we use a tense one step further in the past (backshift), so the present forms become past forms*. Swan [6] takes into account the grammatical differences between DS and IS stating that *it is not necessary to learn complicated rules about indirect speech in English*. While this is true, Swan fails to see that there are students whose native languages do not imply any such *natural and logical* transformations.

For someone who is used to thinking in English, the corresponding grammatical transformations are not problematic, but for young Romanian learners, in particular, they surely are. One might expect the books used by

teachers in the elementary school to have explanations adapted to the students' age. Unfortunately, this is hardly, if ever, the case. One of the most successful classroom books, Virginia Evan's *Round-Up* [1], presents the transformations at the verb level starting from Round-Up 4, but does not come with any further explanations. The same approach is adopted by Powell [5] and Finnie and Roderick [2]. Under the circumstances, the students will strictly learn how to make transformations, without even attempting to understand the reasons why.

3. Teaching IS through Analogies

3.1. The Math-based model

From the students in the 8th grade (approx. 14 years old) to post-university students, Math is a bounding language. Most students have elementary Math notions and can understand simple formulae. The Math-based model works better in the case of languages which are symmetric in their structure and being thus, mathematically built. Since this is the case of English, the Math-based model may be applied with up to 100% rate of success.

Before presenting the Math-based model to the students, one important fact may be drawn to their attention: English is a Germanic language whose grammar seems to be built by a German engineer. The analogy with German engineering is very useful, numerous Romanian students knowing that most, if not all, German products are agreed to be faultless.

The next step in the teaching process implies demonstrating the German preciseness of the English grammar model. This can be done by using Math-like formulae. The easiest way to do it is by presenting four of the basic tenses of the Indicative Mood in parallel:

Present Simple

$$S + V_1$$

Past Simple

$$S + V_2$$

Present Continuous

$$S + \text{to be}_1 + V\text{-ing}$$

Past Continuous

$$S + \text{to be}_2 + V\text{-ing}$$

The students will quickly observe that the formulae are almost identical, the only difference between the two pairs of tenses being the number linked to the main/ auxiliary verb. The formal similarities existing

between the four tenses taken into account will be further supported by the obvious semantic similarities characterizing them.

For the Present Simple – Past Simple pair, students are asked to imagine four or five people sitting around a table, in a restaurant. They are talking, but nobody is doing the actions they are talking about. The people sitting at the Present Simple table are saying things such as *I like swimming so much; I go swimming three times a week at a local pool; I always read the newspaper in the morning; or I rarely take the bus when I go downtown; and so on.* The people sitting around the Past Simple table may talk about the same things, but referring to the past: *When I was young, I liked swimming very much; I would go swimming every time I had the chance; I read the newspaper two days ago; or The last time I took the bus to go downtown was last week and so on.* These analogies or graphic representations are meant to make the idea of *all talking, no action* easier to understand by referring to a common experience: sitting around the table and talking about what people do with a certain frequency (Present Simple) or what they did at a certain point in the past (Past Simple), without moving.

3.2. The timeline analogy and the copy-paste method

A more modern approach to teaching Present Simple and Past Simple in parallel would be the analogy with the *copy-paste method*. In order to apply it, a timeline needs to be drawn on the board and two or more sentences written around the ellipse representing the present.

The next step will imply encouraging the students to mentally *copy* the ellipse, with its formula and with the examples provided, and to *paste* it over the past. The students will normally *paste* it to the left of the initial ellipse for one good reason: the *minus infinite* symbol suggests that the past is to the left, on the timeline. Based on what students were taught, they will be asked to change V_1 into V_2 and to select the adverbs appropriate to the new situation. In order to make things easier to understand, the past ellipse is called *yesterday*.

If things may be a little more abstract, hence more difficult to understand, in the case of Present Simple and Past Simple, difficulty which is caused by the larger interval of time where actions may be placed (i.e. from *never* to *always*, going through *sometimes*, *seldom*, *three times a minute*, *once a millennium* etc.), the Present Continuous – Past Continuous pair is likely to convince the students that the English tense system is dominated by symmetry and that the *copy-paste method* is one of the best methods to be used in order to understand English tenses. In fact, if students can understand the

formal and semantic characteristics of Present Simple, Present Continuous, Present Perfect Simple and Present Perfect Continuous, their understanding of the corresponding Past tenses will be just two clicks away: the former click for *copy* and the latter one for *paste*.

The *copy-paste method* may be applied to the Future, as well, but such a transfer is not necessary because the tenses of the Future do not undergo the same transformations as those of the Present and Past, respectively. The drawings below have been used in the teaching process to demonstrate the formal and semantic symmetry of Present Tense Simple and Past Tense Simple:

The Present Tense Simple - Past Tense Simple pair

In the case of the Present Continuous - Past Continuous symmetry, the two tenses have to be represented by points on the timeline due to the fact that they express actions which are happening at the moment of speaking or which were happening at a definite moment in the past:

The Present Continuous - Past Continuous pair

The tenses in the Present Perfect Simple - Past Perfect Simple and the Present Perfect Continuous - Past Perfect Continuous pairs are represented by using parentheses because they express repeated actions or actions in progress between two time points:

The Present Perfect Simple - Past Perfect Simple pair

The Present Perfect Continuous - Past Perfect Continuous pair

3.3. The time river analogy

Students are asked to imagine that all the English-speaking people stand in a chest-deep river and talk to each other, in pairs or in groups. Some of them may be talking to themselves, for authenticity. After that, they are asked to imagine that the words coming out of their mouths (i.e. the mouths of the people in the river) materialize and fall into the water, following a ballistic trajectory. It is easier if words materialize in strings of letters forming the words uttered by the interlocutors. The next step is to ask the students what they believe will happen to the words which have just touched the surface of the flowing water. The majority of the students usually answer that the words are carried downstream, this being the right answer. They already know that downstream means the past, so they will quickly come to the conclusion that a verb such as *go* will turn to *went*.

Understanding the analogy with the time river is a very important component of the teaching-learning process, but it must always be doubled by extensive practice so as to allow teachers to correctly evaluate their students' understanding. There may be other useful methods, but we have discovered that the most efficient and entertaining one requires the students to say simple sentences using only Present Tenses while pretending that the teacher is the time river. In order to help students come up with sentences quickly, a

to swim a lot - today
to watch television - for three hours
to visit parents - this week
to walk to the office - now
to have to see a doctor - this afternoon
to fly to Japan - never

number common verbs should be written on the board, along with some adverbs suggesting the tense, as in the image below.

The teacher must prepare, in advance, the verbs to be used, and there should be more than those suggested in our example. The students will be asked, individually, to build sentences. Supposing that the first sentence is *I have swum a lot today*, the teacher, pretending to be the river in which the words have just landed, will say, looking at the student: *I had swum a lot that day*, followed by *She said that she had swum a lot that day* uttered while looking at the rest of the class. By doing this, the teacher suggests that a significant period of time passed between the moment when the sentence was uttered and the moment when it was reported. If the teacher considers that the students attending the class are ready to switch places, he/she will be the one saying the first sentence in DS and the students will be the river, one at a time. If necessary, the activity may be repeated (especially with small groups of students).

3.4. The blood circulation analogy

The schematic representation of direct to IS transformations resembles the blood circulation system, but this does not mean that medicine students can learn how blood circulates through people's body just by looking at it. It is a schematic representation which has been used for almost a decade and which seems to be the most helpful one. The blood circulation analogy comes from two facts: the lines linking the tenses involved in DS and the ones involved in IS look like blood vessels through which the physical time flows causing obvious changes. In addition, just as our blood goes up and down, from our heart to our legs and from our legs to our heart, a sentence may be turned from DS to IS and vice-versa. As a matter of fact, the second transformation is a more advanced way of practicing the initial one. Another aspect which encouraged us consider such an analogy is the fact that there are two types of *circulation* inside the tense system: the big one and the small one. The big one is from Present to Past while the small one is inside the Past group of tenses, namely from Past Simple to Past Perfect Simple and from Past Continuous to Past Perfect Continuous. The image is designed to shed a clear light on the analogy created.

3.5. The *first name – last name* method

It is of great help if the students are encouraged to draw the lines themselves (not by coming to the whiteboard, but by saying things such as *Present Simple flows into Past Simple*. They cannot possibly make mistakes if they are explained that every Present tense will “look for” a Past tense having the same last name, and by “last name” they have to understand the name which occurs in the end position, and not the family name. Except for the words written with capitals, i.e. PAST and PRESENT, the rest of the drawing shows a perfect similarity. This is the second function of the *first name – last name* analogy used in teaching IS: students have the chance to see, once again, that the English system of tenses is symmetrical in more than one way. Although the transformations to be observed when turning a text from DS to IS lack an equivalent in Romanian, students should not stumble. They should be guided to understand that languages are different and the people speaking different languages may have different views on the time-tense relationship.

3.6. The “hearing-impaired man” analogy

Originally named “the deaf man game”, the more politically correct “the hearing impaired man” is an analogy with a common situation in which, hearing-impaired or not, people do not understand or do not hear well what a person says, but do not ask the person who has just said something to repeat, and ask somebody else the next day. It goes without saying that the person named here *somebody else* was there, too, and heard what the first person said. The game is very simple: at the beginning, the teacher plays the role of the hearing-impaired person, the first student from left to right, for instance, is the interlocutor who says a sentence in DS and the next student is the one who uses IS to report what the first student says. To help students concentrate on grammar only, a list of verbs and the adverbs leading to certain tenses will be written on the board. The game has to involve all the students. After one round, the roles may be changed. Every student should ideally play this game at least twice. In order to avoid getting boring, the questions used may vary (e.g. *Boy, I don't know what happened to me yesterday, but I couldn't hear a word from what he said. How embarrassing! Can you, please tell me what he said?*)

4. Findings

The transformations which take place when turning a text from direct to IS are a lot easier to understand if the path to them is laid carefully, as in

the demonstrations above. Nevertheless, illustrating the obvious formal symmetry existing between English tenses in direct and IS alone is not enough. Teachers can and ought to go beyond the mere formal transformations and explain the relevant aspects conditioning them.

Certain schemata based on the obvious symmetry of the English tenses may be found in various grammar books and may be easily memorized and applied. Nonetheless, a deeper understanding of the grammar rules conditioning direct to IS transformations, based on logical analogies may significantly facilitate the students' ability to memorize and use the new notions for a longer period of time.

Instead of a conclusion, logical analogies are, undoubtedly, great practical tools for both teachers and students. Numerous analogies may be adapted to the audience. If students are in Secondary School and are familiar with the principle of communicative vessels, they may be explained the DS-IS transformations by using a very suggestive drawing:

Regardless of the graphic representation, the students will always understand a new idea faster and better if they find the idea in something that they already know. The human brain is built this way, and fighting it is a mistake which, unfortunately, some teachers still make.

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