

## **The Troublesome Subjunctive: An Examination of the Frequent Mistakes Made in Tense Conjugation**

**Durdica Anišić**

Senior Lecturer of English Language,  
Faculty of Political Science,  
University of Zagreb, Croatia  
djurdjica.anisic@zg.t-com.hr

**Maša Brala**

English teacher  
University College of International Relations and Diplomacy,  
Croatia  
masa.brala@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Why do some English grammar issues pose problems to otherwise fully competent and fluent students in Croatia? From our experience, reported speech and conditional sentences rank high on the list of such issues. The aim of this paper is to explore some problems Croatian students have with the concept of the subjunctive and its application in conditional sentences. The key problems for Croatian students in forming conditional sentences derive from their inherent desire to translate Croatian to English directly, which does not address the changing tense of the verb in the conditional clause. For example, the sentence, "If I were rich, I would travel the world" would translate into Croatian, "If I am rich, I would travel the world." In general, the concept of using a verb in the past tense to express a present or future desire is simply alien to native Slavic language speakers. Examples of common errors in the translation of conditional sentences type 2 and 3 from Croatian to English and vice versa are presented in the paper followed by some suggestions of how to help students master the concept of the subjunctive and successfully apply it in conditional sentences.

**Key words:** English grammar, conditional sentences, subjunctive, Croatian to English

### **Introduction**

Prior to analyzing on the concepts of the subjunctive and its application in conditional tenses, it is imperative to elaborate on our experiences with first-year university students at the Faculty of Political Science, Journalism Department and at the University College of International Relations and Diplomacy, respectively. At the beginning of each academic year, foreign language instructors conduct a diagnostic test to assess the language skills of the incoming students. Most of our students have graduated from grammar schools, i.e. schools that prepare students for higher education. The mean length of studying English is eight to twelve years. As a result, the majority of students have language skills that vary from B2 to C2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)<sup>66</sup>.

In addition, the respective institutions review the diagnostic exams to identify how the language skills of incoming students have improved over time, especially when compared to generations matriculating more than ten or fifteen years ago, which can be attributed to the current generation's heavy exposure to English-language television, movies, music and, most of all, the internet. These circumstances have made our teaching profession much more enjoyable and even easier, largely because today's students are competent, competitive, and eager to participate in the acquisition of language. Most, if not all, understand that English is extremely important to their future professional endeavors, not only because their mother tongue is relatively unknown outside the region, but as well due to the fact that English has become the *Lingua Franca* of the modern age. The topic of our paper, however, has not been chosen randomly. Rather, we have detected that an unexpectedly high percentage of otherwise language competent students continue to experience problems with conditional sentences (as well as indirect speech). Thus, we consider the topic worthy of further scientific research and

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<sup>66</sup>Council of Europe, Directorate of Education, Education and Languages,  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp)

welcome others to contribute similar inquiries in hopes that the use of the subjunctive in conditional sentences may be better understood for future generations of students.

## **Method of the Study**

In order to establish the number of students who failed to translate conditional sentences correctly (Croatian to English), we have used descriptive statistics. Conditional sentences were only one segment of the grammar exam that we used to test students' skills of the most demanding grammar issues (conditional sentences, indirect speech, and passive/active voice). The test time was not limited and students were encouraged to ask for help with words they could not remember under the pressure of testing (however, the demands for help in vocabulary were not recorded, most likely because vocabulary was intentionally made basic not to interfere with our primary interest in analyzing grammar skills). Spelling and preposition mistakes were marked as mistakes; however, they were not sanctioned.

The test comprised of six conditional sentences, three sentences with the condition in the present, (but the condition cannot be fulfilled) and three sentences with condition in the past (obviously not a subject of fulfillment). Conditional sentences with realistic condition (condition can be fulfilled) were not in the test because, in our experience, students do not have significant problems with the concept of translating the condition that can be fulfilled. This can be attributed to the fact that similar structures appear in both Croatian and English.

Following are the six conditional sentences that students were asked to translate from Croatian to English:

Condition in the present:

Ustajala bih ranije da sam na tvom mjestu.

Više bih vježbala da imam vremena.

Stigao bi na autobus da krene na vrijeme.

Condition in the past:

Bila bi položila ispit da je više učila.

Marko bi bio kupio novi automobil da je dobio zgoditak na lutriji.

Bila bih joj pomogla da je zatražila pomoć.

In one test group (G1), conditional sentences were grouped one after the other in the order given above. In the other test group (G2), conditional sentences randomly appeared among other grammar structures (indirect speech and active/passive voice). The reason for creating two distinctive groups was to check whether the grouping of similar structures improves overall performance.

Based on our experience of correcting and grading exams, our primary assumption was that students encounter problems with the protasis clause. On the contrary, we expected the apodosis clause to be less of a problem. In order to discern which elements pose most problems, we divided each conditional sentence into two parts, the apodosis clause and the protasis clause, and marked correct or incorrect for each. The results of the test, however, proved our initial expectations were incorrect.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Each group comprised of 34 tests, which made for a total of 408 conditional sentences to be translated. We considered that more than four hundred sentences was a large enough population to gain an insight into not only the patterns, but also the types of mistakes students routinely make. By dividing sentences into elements, we ended up with 1,632 elements for analysis according to the type of mistakes. The primary difference between the groups is that G1 had conditional sentences grouped while G2 had conditional sentences intermingled with other parts of speech. For the purpose of analysis, we divided each conditional sentence into two parts, entitled A (for apodosis) and P (for protasis), in order to ascertain a clearer understanding of what primarily (at least in terms of statistics and percentages) is the root of the problem. For the purpose of measuring grammar performance, we ignored other mistakes, including spelling, incorrect use of prepositions, etc. The tables below depict the performance of the two groups, G1 and G2.

### **G1**

|  | Correct sentences |     | Incorrect sentences | Percentage of incorrect sentences |
|--|-------------------|-----|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Conditional sentences total</b>       | 204               | 99  | 105                 | 51.5                              |
| <b>Condition in the present (type 2)</b> | 102               | 54  | 48                  | 47.0                              |
| <b>Condition in the past (type 3)</b>    | 102               | 45  | 57                  | 55.9                              |
| <b>Apodosis total</b>                    | 204               | 141 | 63                  | 30.9                              |
| <b>Protasis total</b>                    | 204               | 128 | 76                  | 37.3                              |

## G2

|  |     | Correct sentences | Incorrect sentences | Percentage of incorrect sentences |
|--|-----|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Conditional sentences total</b>       | 204 | 109               | 95                  | 46.6                              |
| <b>Condition in the present (type 2)</b> | 102 | 59                | 43                  | 42.2                              |
| <b>Condition in the past (type 3)</b>    | 102 | 50                | 52                  | 50.1                              |
| <b>Apodosis total</b>                    | 204 | 157               | 47                  | 23.0                              |
| <b>Protasis total</b>                    | 204 | 135               | 69                  | 33.9                              |

## G1 + G2

|  |     | Correct sentences | Incorrect sentences | Percentage of incorrect sentences |
|--|-----|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Conditional sentences total</b>       | 408 | 208               | 200                 | 49.0                              |
| <b>Condition in the present (type 2)</b> | 204 | 113               | 91                  | 44.6                              |
| <b>Condition in the past (type 3)</b>    | 204 | 95                | 109                 | 53.4                              |
| <b>Apodosis total</b>                    | 408 | 263               | 110                 | 26.9                              |
| <b>Protasis total</b>                    | 408 | 298               | 145                 | 35.5                              |

As can be seen from the tables, there is a difference of 5.9 % in the performance of groups G1 and G2 in favor of group G2, where conditional sentences were randomly placed among other grammar structures. This suggests that the grouping of the same grammar structures does not add to student performance. In other words, students do not see the same grammar pattern grouped as a facilitator. Quite the opposite, it seems that the grouping of the same structures only adds to the multiplication of errors.

Nearly half of the sentences were incorrect. We looked further into the types of mistakes in both apodosis and protasis and divided all of the mistakes into two categories: the first category (C1)<sup>67</sup> refers to the incorrect use of a grammatical unit, e.g. *would had* instead of *would have*, *would have eat* instead of *would have eaten*, etc. The second category of mistakes (C2)<sup>68</sup> refers to the incompatibility of the concept in Language One (L1 = Croatian) with the grammatical structure that expresses it in Language Two (L2 = English). Our initial consideration of this topic was that the problems for most native Croatian speakers with the conditional is their inherent desire to translate Croatian to English directly, which does not address the changing tense of the verb in the conditional

<sup>67</sup> Some examples of C1 mistakes are: *would had helped*, *would had pass*, *would had passed*, *would made*, *would have buy*, *would have help*, *would practiced*, *would have catched*, *would have had helped*, *had went*, etc.

<sup>68</sup> Some examples of C2 mistakes are: He would catch the bus *if he goes on time*, I would have helped her if she *asked* for help, I would practice more if I *have* time, I *would have practiced* more if I had time, *I would have practiced more if I have time*, etc.

clause. Hence, we expected more protasis clauses to be incorrect rather than apodosis clauses because the concept of using a verb in the past tense (i.e. present subjunctive) to express impossibility of fulfilling a condition in the present seems to be unnatural to native Croatian speakers. Below is the table that shows the types of mistakes, according to the above explained categories.

G1

|               |          | Total | Correct |       | Type of mistake |       |    |       |
|---------------|----------|-------|---------|-------|-----------------|-------|----|-------|
|               |          |       |         |       | C1              | C2    |    |       |
| <b>Type 2</b> | apodosis | 102   | 76      | 74.5% | 26              | 25.4% | 0  | 0%    |
|               | protasis | 102   | 65      | 63.7% | 18              | 17.6% | 19 | 18.6% |
| <b>Type 3</b> | apodosis | 102   | 65      | 63.7% | 7               | 6.8%  | 30 | 29.5% |
|               | protasis | 102   | 63      | 34.0% | 34              | 33.3% | 5  | 4.9%  |

G2

|               |          | Total | Correct |       | Type of mistake |       |    |       |
|---------------|----------|-------|---------|-------|-----------------|-------|----|-------|
|               |          |       |         |       | C1              | C2    |    |       |
| <b>Type 2</b> | apodosis | 102   | 81      | 79.4% | 4               | 3.9%  | 17 | 16.7% |
|               | protasis | 102   | 75      | 73.5% | 20              | 19.6% | 7  | 6.9%  |
| <b>Type 3</b> | apodosis | 102   | 76      | 74.5% | 4               | 3.9%  | 22 | 21.6% |
|               | protasis | 102   | 60      | 58.9% | 25              | 24.5% | 17 | 16.6% |

G1+G2

|               |          | Total | Correct |       | Type of mistake |       |    |       |
|---------------|----------|-------|---------|-------|-----------------|-------|----|-------|
|               |          |       |         |       | C1              | C2    |    |       |
| <b>Type 2</b> | apodosis | 204   | 157     | 77.0% | 30              | 14.7% | 17 | 8.3%  |
|               | protasis | 204   | 140     | 68.6% | 38              | 18.6% | 26 | 12.8% |
| <b>Type 3</b> | apodosis | 204   | 141     | 69.1% | 6               | 2.9%  | 57 | 27%   |
|               | protasis | 204   | 123     | 60.3% | 59              | 28.9% | 22 | 10.8% |

The analysis of the correct use of the apodosis in conditional sentences Type 2 and Type 3 reveals that 23% apodosis in Type 2 were incorrect, compared to 29.9% incorrect apodosis clauses in Type 3. The analysis of the correct use of the protasis in conditional sentences Type 2 and Type 3 shows that 31.4% protasis clauses in Type 2 were incorrect, compared to 39.7% incorrect protasis clauses in Type 3.

Below is a summary table of incorrect apodosis and protasis according to the type of mistakes.

| Types of mistakes in percentages |          |       |       |       |  |
|----------------------------------|----------|-------|-------|-------|--|
|                                  |          | C1    | C2    | C1+C2 |  |
| <b>Type 2</b>                    | apodosis | 14.7% | 8.3%  | 23%   |  |
|                                  | protasis | 2.9%  | 27%   | 29.9% |  |
| <b>Type 3</b>                    | apodosis | 18.6% | 12.8% | 31.4% |  |
|                                  | protasis | 28.9% | 10.8% | 39.7% |  |

| Types of mistakes in percentages |       |       |       |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                  | C1    | C2    | C1+C2 |
| <b>apodosis</b>                  | 33.3% | 21.1% | 54.4% |
| <b>protasis</b>                  | 31.8% | 37.8% | 69.6% |
| <b>total mistakes</b>            | 65.1% | 58.9% |       |

As can be seen from the above table, and to our surprise, a higher percentage of mistakes in apodosis and protasis clauses belong to the incorrect formation of grammatical structure (C1 = 65.1%) than to inappropriate grammatical structure (C2 = 58.9%). Yet when the general mistakes are compared in apodosis and protasis clauses, the difference is 27.3%, i.e. 27.3% more protasis clauses were incorrect. The difference is significant enough to seek further explanation.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

When we decided to research the causes for the numerous mistakes that Croatian students commit with conditional sentences, we began from the simple premise that there is no subjunctive in the Croatian standard language, i.e. that the concept of hypothetical discourse in Croatian is expressed by the construction with the relative conditional adverb “da” and the present indicative for the hypothesis in the present (“Da sam bogata,...”), and the past tense indicative for the hypothesis in the past in the protasis clause (“Da sam bila bogata,...”).

We believe that our research proved this hypothesis because out of all the mistakes, 71.2% were recorded in the protasis clauses. In other words, the problem of speakers of Croatian lies in the fact that they do not bind hypothetical discourse in Croatian with structures that express it in English. This is why speakers of Croatian mirror the present tense indicative into the English protasis clause where they should use present subjunctive. Another way to look at this type of mistake is to understand that speakers of Croatian see the present indicative in a Croatian sentence as a time reference, ignoring the implied content of hypothetical discourse. In the course of their study of English, students come across the concept of subjunctive in the English language, but since this category is expressed in a different way in Croatian, students seem to ignore the concept. The numerous mistakes within the category C1 and the incorrect formation of grammatical structures were the biggest surprise for us. The total number of this type of mistakes is 6.2% higher than the number of mistakes in the application of the correct grammatical structure. What is the reason for this? We believe that such a high number of mistakes in the formation of grammatical structure lie in the fact that conditional sentences use grammatical structures that have at least two or three forming elements, which make native Croatian speakers more prone to committing mistakes. It is instructive to assess some of the mistakes that students made, for example in the structures with two elements ... if he had *win*, ... He would *caught* the bus, ... I would *got up* earlier, ... She would *passed* the exam if; or in the structures with three elements ... I would *had* helped her if..., ... she would *had pass* the exam, ... Marko would *be* bought a new car..., ... I would *been* helped her if ..., Marko would have *buy* a new car if ..., etc. This Rashomon type interpretation of the formation of complex grammatical structures is, in our opinion, easy to solve. The solution is in exercising particular structures that cause problems, both in oral and written form. In our experience, students master the area after consistent exercise and repetition over a relatively short period of time.

The next, and more demanding task, is to explain and make students understand the concept of hypothetical discourse. We have observed that providing explanations in connection with grammar issues in Croatian gives much better results because students rarely have the knowledge of specialized grammar vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to follow explanations in English. We make them understand that different languages use a variety of conditional constructions and verb forms to form conditional sentences discussing hypothetical situations and their consequences. The instruction about the present subjunctive as not connected to past time reference in conjunction with translation exercises quite soon brings positive results. We begin translation exercises with English conditional clauses that are translated to Croatian and, after that, vice versa. After a period of pause, we do the same exercises again and, most often this is enough to help students understand and master the concept of conditional sentences in both languages.