

EXPLORING LANGUAGE INTERFERENCES: SLOVAK LEARNERS OF SPANISH AND THE CHALLENGES IN PAST TENSE USAGE

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Abstract. *Different linguistic classifications of Spanish and Slovak make the differences between these two languages. The genetic criterion classifies languages, clustering them into language families, the largest among which is the Indoeuropean one. The typological criterion divides languages according to their grammatical structures. Meanwhile, Slovak is genetically a Slavonic language, and Spanish is a Romance language. Therefore, they both belong to different language families. Also, according to the typological criterion, Slovak is a synthetic language, and Spanish is an analytic language. Based on a theoretical study of the standard features and differences between the Slovak and Spanish verb systems, we formulated the hypotheses about language interferences, which are accepted or rejected at the end of the research. The current research aims to examine the errors in the use of past tenses by Slovak university students who study Spanish as a foreign language, and then analyze where these errors are due to interference with their native language. The present paper observes what errors students make in using past tenses in Spanish. The research question is: What interferences do Slovak learners of the Spanish language experience in the use of past tenses? We applied scientific methods (an observation, a textual analysis, a synthesis) to conduct the study. The first method was an observation. Applying this method made it possible to gather data by watching the process of doing grammatical exercises in Spanish during classes held from September 2020 to May 2022 for the first- and second-year students at the Faculty of Applied Languages of the University of Economics in Bratislava. These*

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students knew English and were generally better at it than Spanish. We also conducted a textual analysis that primarily looked at the learners' short-text writing skills. We used a form with 30 phrases the respondents needed to complete using past tenses. Then, we assessed the written and spoken communication skills of students. The analysis results show that, on the one hand, most respondents needed help distinguishing between the past continuous and simple past tenses, resulting in misuse. On the other hand, we found some slight errors in phrases in which the present perfect tense was supposed to be used.

Keywords: *language; Slovak; Spanish; past tense; interference; student*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching and learning is a complex process influenced by a broad range of factors, both within and outside the learner, linguistic and extra-linguistic. All these factors play, to a certain extent, their part in acquiring a foreign language. One of the decisive factors that play a role in this process is the influence of the learner's mother tongue. Of course, in today's highly globalized society, it is not uncommon for a person to speak one or more foreign languages apart from his or her mother tongue. These languages, whose linguistic structures the learner has already assimilated, influence the acquisition of another foreign language. In the context that concerns us in the present article – Slovak university students who have Spanish as their first or second language – the influence of their mother tongue and, in many cases, English as their first foreign language, which (in most cases) they master better than Spanish, comes into question. On the one hand, a good knowledge of the mother tongue or another foreign language can be an advantage that presupposes that it enhances and facilitates learning a foreign language. On the other hand, this prior linguistic knowledge may also negatively affect learning a foreign language by inhibiting the incorporation of new or different linguistic concepts. When these two worlds collide, i.e., the mother tongue (or the first language) with the foreign (or the second) language, the result is a phenomenon called "interlanguage," a concept defined by Selinker (1972) as a non-native linguistic system. It is a transitional grammar that the learner builds up throughout learning the second language and puts into action when trying to produce utterances in the second language (Gómez-Pablos, 2014, p. 204).

Any error can be explained as a transgression or deviation from a norm in the target language. It is natural and logical that the learner of a second language makes errors when trying to express him/herself in that foreign language. According to Ribas Moliné and D'Aquino Hilt, this norm may be linguistic, socio-cultural, pragmatic, and referential (Ribas Moliné, D'Aquino Hilt, 2004, p. 20). A distinction should be made between an error and a mistake, as Corder (1967) suggested: "Errors are committed when the rules of the second language are violated through ignorance (systematic errors)." Moreover, according to Corder, mistakes are committed when momentary accidents violate the rules". He also introduces the term "lapsus", understanding it as a lapse of attention due to tiredness, carelessness, or distraction (Corder, 1967, p. 164). Not all errors are of the same kind, but they are not all made for the same reason. We distinguish "grammatical or communication errors, errors due

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to lack of knowledge and errors made through inattention or tiredness” (Gómez-Pablos, 2014, p. 195), whereby the mother tongue (or the first language) always plays its part as well.

The interference between Spanish and Slovak has been a topic of interest for Slovak linguists in recent years. The similarities and differences between the Slovak and Spanish languages draw the attention of scientists (Spišiaková, 2014; Ulašín 2020, 2021). The authors delve into natural bilingualism, exploring the specifics of the Slovak and Spanish languages. They also pay attention to transfer phenomena at all levels of the language system, including lexical, syntactic, and semantic transfer. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of the Spanish language and its grammar-related patterns has been conducted (César Hernández Alonso, 1973). Also, the Slovak language and its development have been studied (Alvarado, 1995; Krajčovič, 1988). Furthermore, there are numerous works and studies on the interference between Spanish and English, as both are languages that make international communication easier (Štefánik & Spišiaková, 2007; Mayordomo Fernández, 2013; Spišiaková, 2016, p. 13). Many scientists explored the issues related to the abovementioned themes (Bosque, 1990; María Luz Gutiérrez Araus, 1997; Kvapil, 2015; Sánchez, 2019). However, the interference between Spanish and Slovak, or the influence of Slovak on Spanish, has not been studied much.

2. METHODS

Given the results of the previous research, the authors intend to discover and examine the errors that Slovak students most frequently make in using the past tenses in the Spanish language and find out whether these errors are due to interference with their native language, Slovak.

Proceeding from the above, based on theoretical knowledge, we can formulate the following hypotheses concerning Slovak-Spanish interference:

- errors emerging from the sequence of tenses;
- errors in the use of the past simple and the present perfect: students will not differentiate clearly between them (in Slovak, the present perfect does not exist);
- the use of the past continuous instead of the past simple and vice versa due to several factors: modality, transitive or intransitive verbs, and the meaning of the verb.

The first method used was an observation: specifically, from the point of view of the Spanish language teachers, we observed several groups of university students whose Spanish language knowledge corresponded to B1-C2 levels. The observation took place during the lessons that were held from September 2020 to May 2022. The students who participated in this observation were first-year and second-year students who studied Spanish and English at the Faculty of Applied Languages of the University of Economics in Bratislava. The first-year students who had Spanish as their second language while studying at the Faculty of International Relations at the same university also participated. In total, we observed the oral and written expression of three groups of 53 students. All these students had English as their first language, which, in most cases, they mastered better than Spanish, i.e., from B2+ to C2 levels.

Another method was a textual analysis. Specifically, we analyzed the students' writing competence in short texts. In total, there were about 50 texts. These were short texts that the students had to produce on different topics of everyday life (environment, housing, work and leisure time, money, and others). Almost all the texts had to be written and carried out as homework, and only a few – in a class. We analyzed the written works of the students, which were, of course, completely anonymous. Along with the method of analysis, we also used the method of synthesis to draw conclusions from our research and to verify, confirm, or disprove the hypotheses.

As an additional tactic, we used a questionnaire consisting of 30 short sentences in which the respondents were supposed to fill in the gaps with past tenses. We offered the questionnaire to them through the MS Teams application. The questionnaire consisted of 39 verbs. We gained responses from 44 students, representing a sample of 1716 examples to be analyzed. The respondents were our Slovak students at the University of Economics. Up to 56,7% of respondents have a C1 level, 26,7% of them have a B2 level and 16,7% - a B1 level.

The scientific methods (an observation, a textual analysis, a synthesis) used in the study and the results of a questionnaire survey allowed us to examine the challenges that Slovak students encounter while using past tenses in the Spanish language.

3. RESULTS

Concentrating on archiving the objective of this research, using chosen methods and appropriate approaches, we have looked at the errors that students often make in Spanish while using past tenses. We collected and analyzed a total of 1771 cases of past tenses. We found the following errors in the use of past tenses:

- the past continuous instead of the past simple: 258 cases;
- the past simple instead of the past continuous: 168 cases;
- the past simple instead of the present perfect: 87 cases;
- the past simple instead of the past perfect: 42 cases;
- the past continuous instead of the present perfect: 45 cases;
- the past perfect instead of the past simple: 39 cases;
- the past perfect instead of the past continuous: 36 cases;
- the present instead of the past continuous: 30 cases;
- the present perfect instead of the past simple: 18 cases;
- the past perfect instead of the present perfect: 18 cases;
- the past perfect instead of the past continuous: 12 cases;
- the present perfect instead of the past perfect: 12 cases;
- the present instead of the past simple: 6 cases.

It means there were 771 errors, representing a 43% error rate in using past tenses. The errors analyzed in this paper can be grouped into three broad categories according to the type of errors most frequently made by the students:

- the verbal aspect: the past continuous vs. the past simple and the past continuous vs. the present perfect: 483 cases (62,64%);

- the sequence of tenses: the present vs. the past continuous, the past perfect vs. the present perfect, the past continuous, the past simple: 177 cases (22,95%);
 - the confusion between the past simple and the present perfect: 105 cases (13,6%);
 - others (the present tense instead of the past simple tense): less than 1%.
- The percentage of the most common errors can be seen in Figure 1.

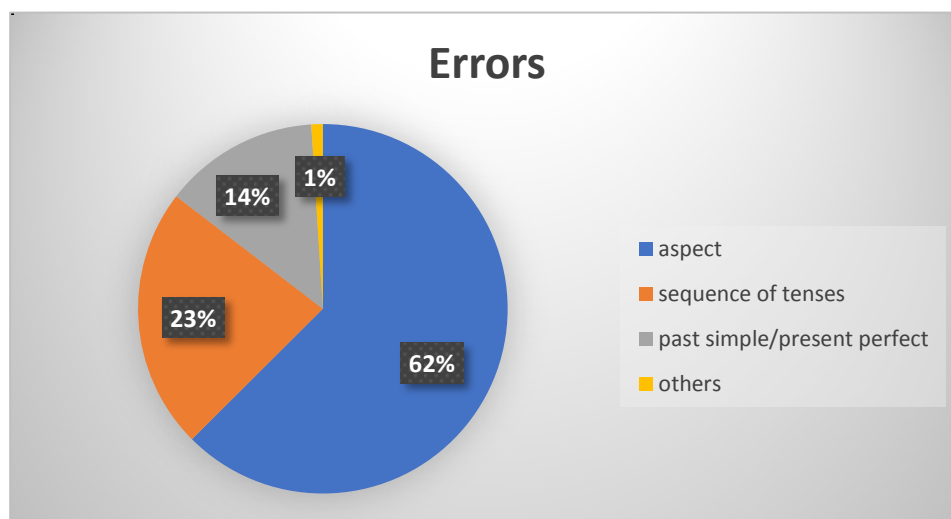


Figure 1. Errors according to categories.

The graph quantitatively illustrates the errors, which can be summarized into four basic categories. From the most frequently occurring phenomena to the less frequently occurring phenomena, these are the following errors: the most frequent errors were in the verb aspect (confusing between the past continuous and the past simple, and between the past continuous and the present perfect). The second most common error was the sequence of tenses because it does not exist in Slovak (the present vs. the past continuous and the past perfect vs. the present perfect, the past continuous, the past simple). The third most common error was the confusion of past tenses, namely the past continuous, the past simple, and the present perfect, but above all, the incorrect use of the present perfect because it does not exist in Slovak. Other errors resulting from differences between past tenses and verbal aspects were insignificant.

The above groups of errors coincide with the expected errors in our hypotheses: the past continuous instead of the past simple and vice versa, errors in using of the past simple and the present perfect, and errors resulting from temporal consistency.

The analysis shows that the most significant number of errors in the use of past tenses by Slovak students are errors in not distinguishing between the past continuous and the past simple tenses (258 cases) and errors stemming from the differences in the verbal aspect (almost 63%), which confirms our theory that the different typologies of the Slovak and

Spanish languages, which are manifested, among other things, in categories of verb tenses, significantly influence the sufficient mastery of the Spanish verbal system by Slovak students.

Although we predicted this error to be only in the third place after consistency and the use of the present perfect (since these phenomena do not exist in Slovak), it ranked first, and by quite a large margin compared to the errors in consistency (23%) that we expected in the first place and the errors in the use of the present perfect (14%) that we expected in the second place. In conclusion, errors in using the past continuous or the past simple are due to the influence of negative interference of a perfective and an imperfective verbal aspect in Slovak.

We believe that this is due to the absence of negative interference and conclude that the negative interference of the native language causes students to make more errors than a phenomenon that is new to them and does not exist in their native language. Thus, if students learn a new grammatical phenomenon, they can use it correctly. In contrast, phenomena that exist in the native language have a negative effect on the correct acquisition and use of a second language

4. DISCUSSION

Linguistic interference

Two languages come into contact when they coexist in a society or territory (Catalan, Galician, and Basque in Spain) or when their users alternate their use (speakers who master more than one language). It is precisely the second case that interests us in this article. In the alternation of two or more languages (except for bilingual speakers), it always happens that the more developed language interferes in the field of the less developed one. As Llop Silverio (2016) states, the less developed a language is, the more frequently it interferes with the dominant one.

In language learning, learners already have some linguistic basis to draw on during the learning process. It is all the previous linguistic knowledge that we possess, which, in learning a second language, acts as a “sieve” through which new knowledge passes. The linguistic base of each speaker varies, as it is highly individual and depends on many factors emerging from the speaker him/herself or from outside the language. Because of the individual nature of this base, its interference in second language acquisition is not homogeneous. This interference can result in a positive or a negative mechanism, depending on whether it facilitates or hinders the acquisition of a new language. Baralo (1996) refers to these positive and negative transfer processes. The negative one is being considered undesirable in language acquisition. However, experts on the topic maintain a more moderate stance: “The mixing and hybridization of languages is something positive, what arises naturally, should not be forced, but neither prohibited” (Nussbaum in Bergassa, 2020). Negative transfer is one of the issues that cause disagreement among experts on the subject. As Gómez Molina (1999-2000) points out, many scientists begin to perceive the phenomena arising from language interference as something natural, as an example of the plasticity of languages. In these cases, the predominance of the first language over the second may lead to ungrammatical,

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nonsensical structures, etc. At this point, hypergeneralization comes into question. Rodríguez García (2019) mentions cases when this occurs: e. g. when irregular verb forms are regularized (*comer – comí → tener – *tení; he comido → he *veido*). That means a rule is applied indiscriminately without considering possible restrictions (Alexopoulou, 2007). In second language learners, so-called false friends are also a frequent phenomenon. They appear “due to lack of deep knowledge,” confusing “the meanings of similar words and translating them erroneously into their own language (...), and this leads to misunderstandings” (Gómez-Pablos, 2016, p. 115). These are words or expressions from another language that, in pronunciation or writing, resemble a word or expression in the mother tongue but have a different meaning. Moreover, the more similarities between two languages, the more likely the phenomenon of false friends will occur (Gómez-Pablos, 2016). Thus, Slovak learners often use the word *tourism* to refer, in reality, to *hiking* (*senderismo* in Spanish). The word *tourism* is thus the false friend of the Slovak word *turistika*. Alternatively, they use the word *gimnasio* to mean *high school*; the word *gimnasio* is the false friend of the Slovak word *gymnázium*. According to Vinagre Laranjeira, “The result of interference is that a language evidence deviations or differences from the linguistic norm that corresponds to structures existing in the contact language” (Vinagre Laranjeira, 2005; p. 17). The author also says that interference occurs at all language levels, i.e., at the phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical level.

Llop Silverio (2016) says that the less developed a language is, the more often interference with the more dominant language occurs. In learning a foreign language, the learner also uses the prior linguistic and general knowledge that he or she possesses. Since our brains are not a tabula rasa, the structures we have learned in the past form a sort of filter through which new material passes. This knowledge can make learning a language easier or more difficult for the student. In the first case, the learner uses prior knowledge of the native language to his or her advantage when learning a foreign language. In this case, we speak of positive transfer. On the other hand, Baralo (1996) mentions the opposite case, when prior knowledge makes learning a foreign language more difficult because the emerging foreign structures are out of the standard form of the language. In that case, we speak of linguistic interference or negative transference.

Nussbaum (in Bergassa, 2020) holds that “those of us who speak more than one language alternate between them without distinguishing them. We think that mixing languages is bad (...). Nowadays, interference is seen as something undesirable, but mixing and hybridity is actually a positive phenomenon, it is something that arises naturally, without having to force it, but also without forbidding it”. Finally, language interference is a complex phenomenon involving many different factors. For this reason, it would be impossible to cover all the experts’ points of view on the subject. To close this section and link up with the following chapter, let us use the words of Hernández García (1998), who states that the different types of interference are related to the levels of the language system, that is to say – the phonic, the grammatical and the lexical as we are going to cover them in the following sections.

Linguistic features of Slovak and Spanish

When characterizing a language, three criteria are used to classify it: geographical, genetic, and typological. Due to the subject of our work, we characterize Spanish and Slovak from the typological point of view, i.e. a characteristic based on similarities in the grammatical system of the languages. Slovak is a synthetic inflectional language, which means that grammatical relations are expressed by form-changing suffixes. These suffixes are called grammatical desinences and correspond to declension or conjugation. In both processes, synthetic forms predominate, i.e., a desinence combines the grammatical and lexical parts into one orthographic unit directly attached to the root. Therefore, these morphemes in Slovak are polysemantic – one grammatical morpheme expresses more meanings (Ondruš & Sabol, 1987, p. 277). An example can be Slovak sentences like: *Zdravím/Zdravíš/Zdravíte (...)* *nového kolegu/nových kolegov/novú kolegyňu/nové kolegyně*.

Meanwhile, Spanish is an analytic language, which means that grammatical relations are expressed by means of prepositions, which means that the form of the root does not change. Therefore, in analytic languages, the lexical and grammatical parts of a word are orthographically separated. Let us use the same example of the Slovak sentence above to see the difference in English: *Saludo/Saludas/Saludan (...)* *al nuevo colega/a los nuevos colegas/a las nuevas colegas*. We can also note an exception in this example. We mean analytic languages that also have synthetic forms, e.g., in the conjugation of verbs. However, this only applies to part of the conjugation system if we consider compound verb forms. Nonetheless, the same can be said of synthetic inflectional languages. We refer to exceptional cases when grammatical information is expressed separately from the root. In Slovak, this is the case of the future tense (*budem/budeš robiť*) corresponding to *haré/harás*, conditional mood (*čítal/čítali by som/sme*) equivalent to *leería/leeríamos* or with modal verbs (*chcem/musím ísť*), in Spanish, *quiero/tengo que irme*.

Spanish has lost the neuter gender of Latin, retaining only the masculine and feminine ones. Still, the remnants of the neuter gender are present in the demonstrative pronouns *esto*, *eso*, and *aquello*. In an analytic language, nouns are always accompanied by an article (definite or indefinite). On the other hand, Slovak, as a synthetic language, has no articles and maintains the neuter gender. Since it has no articles, the category of gender is differentiated through inflectional morphemes (masculine, feminine, neuter, or plural), which govern the declension of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, numerals, and the conjugation of verbs, e.g., *napísal = masculine*, *napísala = feminine* and *napísalo = neuter*. In Spanish, both masculine and feminine gender would have the same verb form: *escribió*.

Past tenses and verbal aspects in Slovak and Spanish

One of the most significant differences between Slovak and Spanish is the use, meaning, and function of verb tenses and verb aspects, which causes problems for Slovak learners in correctly using tenses. Before proceeding to the corpus analysis, we theoretically analyze a *tense* and an *aspect* in Spanish and Slovak. First of all, when using some tenses in Spanish, we have to take into consideration that there are three types of tenses:

1. The real, linear time: future, present, past.

2. The time with a point of reference: this influences the use of compound tenses (the present perfect – if the point of reference is a point in the present, future perfect progressive if the point of reference is a point in the future, and the past perfect if the point of reference is a point in the past).

3. Time expressing simultaneity, posteriority, and anteriority.

In Spanish, an *aspect* is only a marginal, unimportant category; some linguists even say that an *aspect* is purely a category of Slavic languages. “The term ‘*aspect*’ is specific to the Slavic languages. To speak of ‘*aspect*’ in Romance languages is a forced transfer of data from the Slavic languages: importing a category lacking in linguistic reality” (Bosque Muñoz, Demonte Barreto, 1999). Štrbáková states, “in Spanish linguistics, the concept of verbal mode of action has been slow to establish itself and to be distinguished from the verbal aspect and its interpretation does not coincide with that of Slavic linguistics. Compare: *Mi abuelo nació en Madrid - Mi abuelo estudió en Madrid - Mi abuelo vivió en Madrid*. While in the first example, the verb in the past perfect simple tense denotes a punctual event, we are dealing with a durative event in the other two examples. The opposition is deduced from the meaning of the respective verbs, and not from their morphology” (Štrbáková, 2022, p. 254). Nevertheless, in the Spanish verb paradigm, the category of aspect exists and is understood, firstly, as a lexical category, where the meaning of the verb in the infinitive itself expresses the imperfective or perfective feature of the verb (e.g., verbs *llegar*, *morir* are perfective, and verbs *amar*, *leer* are imperfective) and, secondly, as a grammatical category, where *aspect* in Spanish is governed by tenses, as follows:

- tenses with the perfective aspect: the past perfect, the past simple, the present perfect, and the future perfect progressive;
- tenses with the imperfective aspect: the past continuous, the present, and the future perfect.

Previous studies on the verbal aspect in Spanish consider it a category regarding the predicate, not just the verb itself. “The difference between the types of predicates is based on the presence or absence of certain features, components of meaning, namely duration, delimitation and dynamism” (Nueva gramática de la lengua española, 2010). The Slovak verb system is very different from the Spanish one. There is only one point of view on using tense in Slovak, and that is the objective, linear time. Therefore, we have only three tenses in Slovak: future, present, and past. However, almost all verbs in each of these tenses have the perfective and imperfective aspect, so the total number of grammatical forms (tense and aspect) is practically equal to the grammatical forms of the future tense of Spanish verbs.

Although there are only three verb tenses in Slovak, the Slovak language can express all the temporal relations of Spanish sentences through *aspect*. *Aspect* in Slovak is, unlike in English, a lexical-grammatical category, which means that the same verb differs both in lexical meaning and grammatical form (*písať*: *podpísať*, *napísať*, *zapísať*, *vpísať*..., *písaváť*). We present here the definition of *aspect* by the Slovak linguist Mistrík, where he summarizes very well the characteristics and functions of *aspect* in Slovak: “The verbal aspect is the circumstance of the event which informs about its duration, definition, and repetition (Mistrík,

1988). Slovak verbs may designate events with an unlimited duration – *hádzať, skákať, kupovať, padať*, as well as those with a limited duration – *hodiť, skočiť, kúpiť, padnúť*. Depending on the finiteness of the verbal action, we distinguish non-finite verbs (*písať, voliť, nosiť*) but also finite ones, where finiteness is expressed by prefixes (*podpísať, vyvolať, roznosiť*). The first type represents imperfective verbs, and the second type – perfective verbs. Slovak verbs can designate a repetitive action – *kupovať, skákať, sľubovať*, or an action that happened only once in a precise moment – *kúpiť, skočiť, sľúbiť*. The first is imperfective, and the second is perfective verbs. For a better orientation, these differences are compared, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Aspect in Slovak verbs

	the perfective verb forms	the imperfective verb forms
duration of the verbal action	<i>hodiť, padnúť, skočiť, kúpiť</i>	<i>hádzať, padať, skákať, kupovať</i>
repetition of the verbal action	<i>kúpiť, skočiť, sľúbiť, uvariť</i>	<i>kupovať, skákať, sľubovať, variť</i>
finiteness of the verbal action	<i>napísať, vyvolať, roznosiť, dovariť</i>	<i>písať, voliť, nosiť, variť</i>

Thus, based on the abovementioned information, the grammatical category of tense is more critical in expressing temporal contexts in Spanish. Also, we formulate a simple rule that governs the relationship between the use of tense and mood in Spanish and Slovak: the perfective aspect in Slovak = past perfect tenses in Spanish (the past perfect, the past simple, the present perfect); the imperfective aspect in Slovak = continuous tense in Spanish (the past continuous). Let us look at various examples and situations to demonstrate this rule:

Lo **dije** ayer.
 Lo **he dicho** hoy.
 Pensé que lo **había dicho** antes.
 Se lo **decía** cuando ocurrió.
 Se lo **decía** todos los días.

Povedal som to včera.
Povedal som to dnes.
 Myslel som, že to **povedal** predtým.
Hovoril som mu to, keď sa to stalo.
Hovorieval som mu to každý deň.

We notice that three different tenses in Spanish express three different tense situations (the perfective ones). At the same time, in Slovak, it is always the same tense: (*dije, he dicho, había dicho = povedal som*). In this case, the difference arises from a different view on the matter when the action took place. In Spanish, we recognize a distance from the present or another reference point, which in Slovak, we do not take into consideration. However, we can see that all three tenses have a perfective aspect in Spanish and the verb in Slovak. On the contrary, for the progressive tense in Spanish (the past continuous), the same verb (*decía*) is used to express the imperfective feature in two different situations. However, in Slovak, two verbs are used – *hovoril som and hovorieval som*. Although both are in the imperfective aspect, one informs about the duration of the action (*hovoril som*) and the other about the repetition (*hovorieval som*), using different morphemes in Slovak (*-il and -ieval*).

Despite these slight differences, the rule has been confirmed. The problem may arise with modal verbs since these have only the imperfective aspect in Slovak, and, in this case, there may be interference and thus a tendency to use the past continuous in Spanish. In the following examples, we can see that one form of the modal verb in the past tense in Slovak corresponds to two forms, i.e., two tenses, in Spanish:

musel som – tuve que/tenía que
chcel som – quise/quería
nemohol som – no pude/ no podía
mal som – tuve/tenía
aký bol – cómo **era** (adjective)
ako bolo – cómo **fue** (adverb)
Nevedel som, čo povedať – No **supe** que decir.
Nevedel som to. – No lo **sabía**.

The fact that *aspect* in Slovak is a lexical-grammatical category means that the same verb changes its meaning depending on whether its *aspect* is perfective or imperfective (e.g., *ísť* – imperfective vs. *prísť* – perfective). In Spanish, we have to translate this meaning with different lexemes. In this connection, the category of aspect changes the meaning of the verb, which in Spanish results in entirely different verbs (*ísť* = *ir*, *prísť* = *llegar*, *odísť* = *irse/salir*, etc.).

Včera **som išiel** autobusom.
Včera **som prišiel** autobusom.

Ayer **fui** en autobús.
Ayer **llegué** en autobús.

The category of aspect changes the meaning of the verb in Spanish. That is the reason why we have to translate it using different verbs: *ísť* = *ir*, *prísť* = *llegar/venir*, *odísť* = *irse*, *zísať* = *juntarse*, etc. When translating Spanish verbs in the past tense into Slovak, we have noticed another difference that can act as interference. Many intransitive verbs in the simple past tense are translated into Slovak as imperfective (they cannot be translated in the perfective aspect). On the other hand, transitive Spanish verbs are translated as perfective and imperfective ones, not changing their meaning. The difference is given by the features of the Spanish predicate, where the verbal aspect (or finiteness or non-finiteness) is connected to its dynamism, delimitation, and duration. We can observe it in the following examples.

a) intransitive → imperfective:

Ayer **llovió**.
Vivió allí dos años.
Habló mucho.
Caminó por el campo.

Včera **pršalo**.
Býval tam dva roky.
Hovoril veľa.
Prechádzal sa/chodil v prírode.

b) transitive → imperfective/perfective:

Estudió filológiu.
No se lo **creí**.
Dijo la verdad.

Študoval/vyštudoval filológiu (5 rokov).
Neveril som/neuveril som mu to.
Povedal/hovoril pravdu.

The relationship between past tenses and aspects in Slovak and Spanish can be summarized as follows:

- the Slovak past tense of the perfective verbs corresponds to three Spanish tenses: the past perfect, the past simple, and the present perfect;
- Slovak modal verbs in the past tense correspond to both tenses in Spanish (the past simple, the past continuous), which express both the finiteness and non-finiteness of the verbal action;
- Spanish verbs in the past continuous correspond to both of the two Slovak verbal aspects (duration, repetition);
- many Spanish intransitive verbs in the past simple (imperfective verbs) correspond to the Slovak imperfective aspect;
- both the perfective and imperfective aspects can translate Spanish transitive verbs in the past simple into Slovak.

Another essential difference between the verbal systems of Slovak and Spanish is the temporal consistency. In Romance and Germanic languages, the past tense is used in the past, whereas in Slavic languages, only the tenses (present, past, future) are used in the past tense as if we were speaking in the present.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Slovak and Spanish are two different languages from several points of view: they correspond to different linguistic classifications according to specific criteria: firstly, according to the genetic criterion, Slovak belongs to the branch of Slavonic languages. Meanwhile, Spanish belongs to the branch of Romance languages. Secondly, according to the typological criterion, the Slovak grammatical system corresponds to the synthetic language type, while the Spanish one corresponds relatively to the analytic language type. The last criterion that sets the difference between these languages is the geographical one: both languages are applied to geographically unrelated territories – not only nowadays but also during the whole evolution of the nations and cultures we can call Slovak or Spanish.

In this context, in our present paper, we examined the linguistic relationship between Slovak and Spanish in terms of the mastery and the use of past tenses in Spanish by Slovak university students. Mainly, we parted from the different verbal systems in both languages regarding past tenses and the verbal aspect. Meanwhile, Spanish has a more complicated system of past tenses, while Slovak has reduced them to only one past tense. Nevertheless, in Slovak linguistics, the question of the verbal aspect plays a more critical role than in Spanish linguistics, where it is considered a marginal grammatical category.

From the didactic point of view, we can assume that acquiring a new language is a complex process, especially in today's highly globalized era. When acquiring a new language, the mother language always plays an important role, as it can be an accelerator or an inhibitor. It means the other language can help us learn new languages, building up new linguistic structures on an existing language system. However, it can also represent a kind of obstacle when the old structures negatively influence the acquisition of the new structures. Moreover, we can observe multiple situations when it is not only the mother language that

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comes into question when speaking about linguistic interference while acquiring a new language, for it can be English that plays a more decisive role in influencing the acquisition of a new language. The linguistic interference in this context means that structures and rules of the stronger language start to dominate the weaker language, e.g., language that is about to acquire as newer or less developed.

In this research, we examined the interference of Slovak and Spanish on a sample of our proper university Slovak students who study Spanish as a foreign language. Many of the students indicated that they dominated English better than Spanish, a phenomenon that we were also able to discover in the results of our analysis. In this regard, our analysis has shown that most respondents needed to distinguish and correctly use the past continuous and the simple past tense. On the contrary, we observed minor errors in sentences with the present perfect tense.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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