

On the encoder's perception of occurrences: parallel corpus-based study of tense usage in “*Kolymskie rasskazy*” by Varlam Šalamov and “*Sumchi*” by Amos Oz and their Hebrew and Russian translations

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Abstract

The primary focus of our study involves a comparative analysis of verb tense meanings in Russian and Modern Hebrew. Despite belonging to different language families, both languages possess the past, present, and future tenses of the indicative mood in their inventory. This similarity in grammatical forms may suggest a corresponding similarity in their meanings. These forms often reflect real-time relationships objectively. Nevertheless, systematic discrepancies between verb tense meanings and their use are observed in both languages. To address these discrepancies, we propose formulating general (invariant) meanings for each tense, which will underlie all its uses, including figurative ones. Based on the Columbia School sign-oriented linguistic framework (see Diver 1981, 1995; García 1975; Tobin 1990, 1995), our comparative analysis will focus on verb tense uses in two texts: “*Kolyma Tales*” by Varlam Šalamov (2013) and “*Sumchi*” by Amos Oz (1978), and their literary translations into Hebrew (2005) and Russian (2015), respectively. These texts constitute our parallel corpus. On the one hand, we postulate a common semantic content for the systems of Russian and Hebrew tenses, correlating with the *ego, hic et nunc* (moment of speech) of the speaker (writer). This explains the similarity between the original texts and their translations in terms of tense form usage, as evidenced by numerous examples. On the other hand, observed differences in the use of verb tenses are more likely attributed to regular or standardized combinations of invariant meanings to convey particular messages, commonly referred to as communicative strategies in Columbia School theory. The corpus study reveals an interesting feature: the more communicative strategies a verb tense possesses in the source language, the higher its frequency of use in translation into the target language. To test this hypothesis, we apply a z-test, which determines whether the difference between the expected value and the actual use of tense forms is statistically significant.

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