Time reference in indirect speech in Russian as a non-SOT language

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The talk deals with the interpretation of temporal reference during comprehension of indirect speech in Russian. In contrast to English, Russian doesn’t know agreement of tenses in related clauses. The same tense form is used in both direct and indirect speech (see example 1):

(1) “S biatlonnoj komandoj rabotaet zamečatel’nyj specialist”, - skazal professor. with biathlon team work.IPFV.PRS famous expert, say.PFV.PST professor
   “With the Biathlon team works a famous expert”, said the professor. («Izvestija», 2003.02.20)

(1’) Professor skazal, čto s biatlonnoj komandoj rabotaet zamečatel’nyj specialist. Professor say.PFV.PST that with Biathlon team work.IPFV.PRS famous expert
   ‘The professor said that a famous expert worked with the Biathlon team.’

In (1’), the embedded sentence is in relative present, expressing simultaneity with a subordinate preterite (Grønn & Stechow 2010). An embedded Russian past sentence (see (2’)) provides past shifted readings when the matrix (see (2)) is past:

(2) “S biatlonnoj komandoj rabotal zamečatel’nyj specialist”, - skazal professor. with biathlon team work.IPFV.PST famous expert, say.PFV.PST professor
   “With the Biathlon team worked a famous expert”, said the professor. («Izvestija», 2003.02.20)

(2’) Professor skazal, čto s biatlonnoj komandoj rabotal zamečatel’nyj expert. Professor say.PFV.PST that with Biathlon team work.IPFV.PST famous specialist
   ‘The professor said that a famous expert had worked/ was working with the Biathlon team.’

Whereas present under past always refers to simultaneity, past under past in Russian may evoke a shifted reading as well as an overlapping interpretation. In this context, overlapping means that the past embedded event has begun before the reference time. It is not yet completed but extended into the reference time. The crucial factor for overlapping reference is the verbal aspect of the embedded predicate. In case of an embedded past imperfective predicate (Altshuler 2008, Barentsen 1996, Khomitsevich 2008) an overlapping interpretation is possible (see (2’)), whereas an embedded past perfective predicate solely leads to shifted interpretation (see (3’)):

(3) Maša skazala: “Anton zakryl okno.” Maša say.PFV.PST: Anton close.PFV.PST window
   ‘Maša said: „Anton closed the window.”’

(3’) Maša skazala, čto Anton zakryl okno. Maša say.PFV.PST that Anton close.PFV.PST window
   ‘Maša said that Anton had closed the window.’

Hitherto, there were no experimental studies for Russian that dealt with the question of how the different time-referential interpretations caused by verbal aspect affect sentence comprehension. Therefore, I conducted two experiments to test how Russian native speakers construct indirect speech, and how they interpret the embedded events according to different
tense and aspect. The data of a sentence completion test and a picture recognition study demonstrate that Russian native speakers distinguish between simultaneous and shifted interpretation as well as between shifted and overlapping interpretation. In terms of sentence comprehension the reaction times differ depending on type of interpretation.

Based on these results, it seemed very interesting to compare sentence comprehension of indirect speech in Russian as non-SOT with English as SOT language. Suitable for my purpose appeared to me a self paced reading study on the „processing of temporal references in event clauses“, conducted by Gennari (2004) for English, that I transferred into Russian.

I assume that reading times of embedded sentences behave different in Russian than in English, because in Russian, there is no SOT and additionally, the time reference is conveyed by the verbal aspect of the embedded verb. In fact, the results of my investigation show diametrical results, first, to the study of Gennari (2004) and second, for perfective and imperfective embedded sentences.


