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**USING INDIRECT SPEECH IN GERMAN: CZECH NATIVE  
SPEAKERS' CHALLENGES**



Jana Ondrakova (a)\*  
\*Corresponding author

(a) University of Hradec Kralove, Faculty of Education, Rokitanskeho 62, Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic,  
jana.ondrakova@uhk.cz

**Abstract**

Through using specific linguistic means when expressing someone else's statements as indirect speech, speakers and writers indicate that they are not presenting their ideas. In German language teaching, little attention is paid to this issue, despite its importance in professional and academic discourse. Speakers and writers need to know how to present someone else's thoughts and how to dissociate themselves from the contents of the presented messages. Using comparative analysis, an analysis of errors made by 16 first-year students of German language and literature in their test in German morphology was conducted to determine the types and frequency of errors made. The findings revealed that the majority of errors involved inaccuracies in transforming of personal, possessive and reflexive pronouns, followed by the incorrect usage of the German subjunctives ("Konjunktiv"). More attention should be paid to addressing this issue in school and university language courses in order to equip the students with adequate linguistic competencies to speak and write accurately.

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*Keywords:* Verbal mood, German subjunctives, Konjunktiv I, indirect speech

## 1. Introduction

The sphere of teaching of foreign languages (FLT) in the Czech Republic began to be emphasised especially after the revolution in 1989, when German, English, French and Spanish started to be offered as school subjects. Thus, the choice of studying foreign languages was widened, and these foreign languages replaced Russian (which was a compulsory school subject up to then). After the Czech Republic joined the European Union, English became the first foreign language taught at Czech schools. The position of other foreign languages in the curricula of Czech schools constantly varies depending on various regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and government decisions – the obligation to teach the second foreign language as a compulsory subject is alternately re-introduced and re-abolished.

Currently, two foreign languages are taught at the upper level of primary schools, but the number of second foreign language classes is low. Then, there is no real continuity in teaching the second foreign language at secondary schools, so the number of classes remains limited. The main principle underlying the teaching of the second foreign language is to focus on the oral communication competencies in general conversational topics, which can be applied at informal meetings with foreigners. The role of grammar is not very important, as the essential approach is communicative, i.e. "to be able to speak and to make oneself understood". Students do not encounter a comprehensive overview of the grammatical system of the language until they enter university to major in that particular foreign language. Hence, important linguistic issues take the students by surprise, for instance, the number of verb tenses in German. At the beginning of the course in German morphology, students are asked how many grammatical tenses there are in German. The most frequent guesses are three or four (there are three tenses in Czech); the correct number of six is given by very few students. The issue of the category of mood surprises the students even more. The instructors, being aware of the students' inadequacies in linguistic knowledge of German, then try to involve these students in linguistic explorations, which is recommended also by Tauchmanova et al. (2017) who state that "The results of the controlled teaching depend on the level of a particular learner's active involvement into the studies of the given foreign language" (p. 107).

## 2. Problem Statement

Using specific linguistic means when using reported speech indicates that the speakers (henceforth taken to include writers as well) are not presenting their ideas but expressing other people's statements. In German language teaching, very little attention is paid to this issue, despite its importance in professional and academic discourse.

German verbs can express three kinds of mood and so can Czech verbs. Indicative and Imperative occur equally in both the languages. The third kind of mood is, however, different: Czech uses conditional mood while German uses so-called "Konjunktiv" (subjunctive), which can be formed for each of German verb tenses. In relation to its use, the "Konjunktiv" is divided into two groups: "Konjunktiv I" and "Konjunktiv II". Whereas "Konjunktiv II" can be semantically compared with the Czech (and English) conditional mood, "Konjunktiv I" (the "Konjunktiv" of indirect speech and of expressing someone else's opinion) has no parallel in the grammar behaviour of Czech verbs. This dissonance between the Czech and German grammar systems is therefore a source of frequent errors.

The correct interpretation and expression of someone else's opinion is vital, because the speakers declare in this way, that their discourse is expressing someone else's ideas. The speakers themselves are only presenting these ideas and are not including their own opinions within these ideas; in other words, they dissociate themselves from the contents of the messages.

The easiest way of expressing someone else's opinion is a direct quotation, i.e. using direct speech and identifying this quotation with quotation marks. This concerns especially academic and scientific texts, verbatim transcripts of official hearings or literal recordings of court trials.

As it mentioned above, German, unlike other languages, has a special verbal mood used for expressing someone else's opinion called the Konjunktiv I (Subjunctive I), which directly refers to the fact that the information was presented by someone else and that the person quoting the information dissociates himself/herself from the quoted contents. According to Ondrakova et al., (2019):

Konjunktiv I is usually used to convey someone else's opinion. The speaker does not present his/her ideas, but passes on the opinion of someone else (usually absent at the moment), or for some reasons repeats the original utterance of another person. Using Konjunktiv I, the speaker refers to the fact that s/he is not the author of the text, that s/he reports someone else's ideas. The veracity of the communicated facts is completely ignored. The main reason for using Konjunktiv I is to take the responsibility for the reported contents away from the speaker, to show that the speaker dissociates from these reported contents. If Indicative were used, it would mean that the speaker agrees with the contents, which could ultimately result in a risk of criminal liability. (p. 84)

For a better illustration, the following example is presented. First, direct speech is used, and that is why the verb forms are in Indicative forms:

*Der Zeuge sagt aus: „Ich habe X.Y. am 07. Januar 2010 gesehen. Es war in Stuttgart gegen 17 Uhr in Fachgeschäft Meier in der Stichstraße 6. Er wusste nicht, dass jemand ihn beobachtet. Er nahm eine Akkubohrmaschine Bosch und versteckte sie in seinem Rucksack, den er mithatte. Die Akku kostet 269 EUR. Er wollte sich das Gerät aneignen, weil er an der Kasse vorbeiging und die Ware nicht bezahlte*

[The witness says: "I saw X.Y. on January 07, 2010. It was around 5 pm in Stuttgart in the Meier specialty store at 6 Stichstrasse. He didn't know that anyone was watching him. He took a Bosch cordless drill and hid it in the backpack he had with him. The tool costs 269 EUR. He wanted to steal it because he passed the cash register and didn't pay for the goods"]

In court proceedings, witnesses' statements are recorded in Konjunktiv I forms. The above presented statement was transformed into the official form and recorded in the following way (Charchulla & Welzel, 2012):

*X.Y. wird angeschuldigt, er habe sich am 07. Januar 2010 in Stuttgart gegen 17 Uhr in das Fachgeschäft Meier in der Stichstraße 6 in Stuttgart begeben. Als er sich unbeobachtet fühlte, habe er eine Akkubohrmaschine der Marke Bosch im Wert von 269 EUR an sich genommen und das Gerät in dem von ihm mitgeführten Rucksack verstaut. Anschließend habe er den Kassensbereich passiert, ohne die Ware, die er für sich behalten wollte, zu bezahlen (p. 203)*

[X.Y. is accused of going to the Meier specialty store at 6 Stichstrasse in Stuttgart on January 7, 2010 at around 5 p.m. When he felt unobserved, he took a Bosch cordless drill worth EUR 269 and hid the tool in the backpack he was carrying with. He then passed the checkout area without paying for the goods he wanted to keep in his possession.]

Both Czech and German can indirectly report through using other linguistic devices. Czech uses words and phrases such as “údajně” (supposedly), “prý” (st. / sb. is said), or introductory clauses “říká se” (it is said that), “jak se uvádí” (as stated), etc., which identify the speaker and which indicate that the speaker is merely reproducing someone else’s words. German uses words and phrases like “angeblich” (supposedly) “Berichten zufolge” (according to the presented news) , “wie behauptet wird” (as it is said) , “man sagt” (it is said) , prepositions “nach” (according to) , “laut” (according to) , “zufolge” (according to) , and the verb “sollen” (sb. is said), which is in the form of Present Indicative. Past or present time is expressed through Past Infinitive or Present Infinitive forms of the lexical verb. Such reporting is used mainly in colloquial speech.

*Der Zeuge hat ausgesagt, er soll X.Y. am 07. Januar 2010 gesehen haben. Es soll in Stuttgart gegen 17 Uhr im Fachgeschäft Meier in der Stichstraße 6 gewesen sein. X.Y. soll angeblich nicht gewusst haben,, dass jemand ihn beobachtet. Laut des Zeugen soll er eine Akkubohrmaschine Bosch genommen und sie in seinem Rucksack versteckt haben, den er mithatte. Die Bohrmaschine kostet 269 EUR. Dem Zeuge zufolge wollte sich X.Y. das Gerät aneignen, weil er an der Kasse vorbeigegangen sein und die Ware nicht bezahlt haben soll.*

[The witness testified that he had seen X.Y. on January 07, 2010. X.Y. is said to have been in Stuttgart at around 5 p.m. in the Meier store at Stichstrasse 6. X.Y. allegedly did not know, that someone was watching him. According to the witness, X.Y. took a Bosch cordless drill and hid it in the backpack he was carrying. The drill costs EUR 269. According to the witness, X.Y., wanted to keep the device because he had passed the cash register and did not pay for the goods]

In written texts, direct reproduction of speech is often combined and overlap with indirect reproduction. However, there are press releases in which interviews are transformed into the Konjunktiv forms since the authors of these published texts do not want to be held responsible for the information provided. One such case was presented by Miroslav Kunstat from the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague. This case refers to a diametrically different interpretation of the Potsdam Agreement and its binding promise for Western Germany. Klaus Kinkel, the German Foreign Minister, is said to have made a following agreement with a reporter for the Frankfurter Allgemeine: The problematic part of the interview about the Potsdam Agreement, which was considered to be a mere political statement, would not be presented by the magazine in the form of direct speech, but in the the Konjunktiv form:

*Zu der zweiten Streitfrage, der Behandlung der Vertreibung, sagte Kinkel: ‚Ich habe die Verpflichtung, das Unrecht an den Sudetendeutschen mit in die gemeinsame Erklärung zu bringen.‘ Die Prager Regierung sei bisher nicht bereit, in der Erklärung auszusprechen, dass durch die Vertreibung Unrecht geschehen sei. Offenkundig hält Prag am Begriff der ‚zwangsweisen Aussiedlung‘ mit Berufung auf das Potsdamer Abkommen fest. Nach deutscher Auffassung bedeutet das Potsdamer Abkommen nicht*

*die rechtliche Annerkennung der Vertreibung, sondern war nur eine politische Erklärung.“ (C. G.: Kinkel wehrt sich gegen die Vorwürfe aus Prag. FAZ 18. 1. 1996, pp. 1-2).*

[On the second issue, i.e. the treatment of the expulsion, Kinkel said: 'I am obliged to include the injustice against the Sudeten Germans in the joint declaration.' The Prague government has so far not been ready to state in the declaration that a wrongdoing was committed through the expulsion. Obviously, Prague sticks to the concept of "compulsory resettlement" with reference to the Potsdam Agreement. The German view is that the Potsdam Agreement does not mean the legal recognition of the expulsion, but that it was a mere political declaration.]

Kunstat (2015) adds that “this article resulted in a stormy political debate, which was ended with the statement that it was a mere editorial interpretation. Nevertheless, the opinion that Klaus Kinkel apparently said the criticized sentence on purpose still remains” (pp. 78-79).

German indirect speech is characterized by three main signifiers: a) introductory clause, b) the Konjunktiv, c) change of personal and possessive pronouns. These signifiers can occur in speech performances at the same time, but this is not always the case. However, personal and possessive pronouns change every time.

When being transformed into indirect speech, declarative sentences can become subordinate clauses added to introductory clauses either through the conjunction "dass" = that (the finite verb form is then placed at the end of the clause), or the conjunction "dass" can be omitted and the word order is then the same as in the main clause. When using the conjunction "dass", Czech students often make mistakes: either they forget to place the finite verb form at the end of the clause, or they place this form (probably under the influence of Czech and English) right behind the conjunction and the subject of the clause (which is correct in the main clause).

There is no shift in verb tenses when transforming direct speech into indirect speech in German (the same applies to Czech). However, it is necessary to mention the fact that all three past tenses of the Indicative (Perfekt, Präteritum and Plusquamperfekt = Perfect, Past and Past Perfect) are transformed into the Konjunktiv I through the “Konjunktiv Perfekt”. The reason for that can be seen in the fact that the Konjunktiv Präteritum and the Konjunktiv Plusquamperfekt belong to the group of Konjunktiv II and express the conditional mood. Only if the “Konjunktiv Präsens” (Present Subjunctive) is identical with the “Indikativ Präsens” (Present Indicative, i.e. in the 1st person singular and plural, and the 3rd person plural, the Konjunktiv Präsens is replaced by the Konjunktiv Präteritum or (in the case of weak verbs) by the structure “würde + infinitive”. In case of verbs which form the “Perfekt” with the verb “haben”, the “Konjunktiv Perfekt” forms and the “Indikativ Perfekt” forms identically coincide in their 1st person singular and plural, and in their 3rd person plural, which is why this form is replaced by the “Konjunktiv Plusquamperfekt”. The ignorance of the rules applied to expressing the past time in indirect speech contributes to frequent mistakes made by Czech students.

Another problematic issue occurring in transformations of direct speech into indirect speech is the transformation of interrogative sentences. Wh- questions have a question word at their beginning (interrogative pronoun, interrogative adverb), which are added to the introductory clause through these question words. Yes/no questions begin with a verb, there is no question word at their beginning; In indirect speech, the conjunction "ob" (whether / if) is used to add such questions to the introductory clauses. The

conjunctions "jestli" or "zda" (whether / if) are used for indirect expressing of questions also in Czech, but students are usually unable to perceive this and make errors when transforming direct questions into indirect ones. At this point, it is convenient to mention the fact highlighted by Ondrakova and Tauchmanova (2020) that “Knowledge and skills acquired during the process of acquisition and learning of their mother tongue are consciously and unconsciously transferred by learners into the process of learning their first foreign language” (p. 167).

For expressing indirect commands or wishes, the modal verbs "sollen" (for a command) and "mögen" (for wishes) are used. The inflected forms of these verbs are used in the form of the “Konjunktiv Präsens”. Lexical verbs in the Infinitive forms are placed at the end of the sentences.

### **3. Research Questions**

There are two basic closely connected and related research questions to be answered in this paper:

Q1: What are the most common errors made by Czech students in expressing someone else’s opinions in German?

Q2: Is it possible to prevent these errors?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The competence to interpret information is important for students to complete various reports, seminar papers and theses. Speakers need to know how to present someone else's thoughts and how to dissociate themselves from the contents of the presented messages.

Although it may seem that the issue of Konjunktiv I is an issue of the academic environment and that this Konjunktiv is not important in real life, it is still a phenomenon commonly encountered in German. Current global topics (migration, Brexit, coronavirus...) have triggered an increase in the use of Konjunktiv I. The constant application of Konjunktiv forms can be seen in newspaper articles, press releases, radio and television news. The neutral way of citing of information is important also for university students when they prepare their assignments, reports and theses. That is why students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove who major in teaching of German are trained in correct reporting and citing of information.

Three terms are devoted to the courses in Morphology of the German Language in the curricula of students majoring in teaching of German language and literature. Transformations of direct speech into indirect speech through using the Konjunktiv are integral parts of tests in this course. Students take these tests at the end of the first term, in which the course focuses on verb forms. The indirect speech topic is also tested in the written assignments taken by students at the end of their bachelor and masters’ degree studies.

### **5. Research Methods**

The main research method was comparative analysis. At the end of the summer term in 2021, an analysis of errors made by the first-year students of German language and literature in their test in German morphology was carried out. The total number of 16 students (6 males and 10 females) was involved in this

research, i.e. all the first-year university students majoring in the German language teaching, except for one student (who did not even make an attempt to take the test at all and therefore he was excluded from the research). With regard to the pandemic and the prohibition of face to face teaching, the whole course was conducted online for the duration of 13 weeks comprising a one hour lecture and a two hour seminar, making it a total number of 39 hours). The whole term focused on the verb and the verb categories and nine teaching hours focused on the Konjunktiv. The students actively participated and cooperated during the online classes. From an instructor's perspective, the students should have grasped the subtleties of the topic, since additional attention was focused on the topic than in the case of face to face taught courses. Moreover, during the seminars, the students were able to complete the individual tasks focused on **transforming direct speech into indirect speech** without problems.

## 6. Findings

Unlike Czech, German has a special verbal form (Subjunctive I / Konjunktiv I) for expressing indirect speech. The Czech language does not have such a verb form, and this dissonance is a source of frequent errors in texts written in German by Czech students. German Konjunktiv I is one of the most difficult challenges in the study of German morphology. This was proved by the analysis of the errors made by Czech native speakers when transforming direct speech into indirect speech in their test.

Each test consisted of a short continuous text which was either in the form of a monologue by one person or in the form of a short dialogue of about ten lines. The percentage of the successfully passed tests was rather low, so the students could repeatedly re-take the test a week later (there were seven different test variants in total). There were 45 tests available for the final analysis, which means that each student took the test 2.81 times on average. Only one student successfully passed the test on her first attempt. The total number of the attempts is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Testing in transforming direct speech into indirect speech

Number of attempts	Number of students	Pass	Fail
1	2	1	1
2	7	5	2
3	3	3	0
4	2	0	2
5	1	1	0
6	0	0	0
7	1	0	1

Ten students in total successfully completed this part of the course, which the six remaining students still had the opportunity to pass the test at the end of the academic year (i.e. the last week in August), or to re-enrol for the subject Morphology I.

A total number of 272 errors occurred in all the versions of the test (there were 45 tests in total, as mentioned above), which means that the average total number of the errors made in each test was six.

The main objective of this research was to detect the most common errors, or to detect the groups of the most common co-occurring errors. The largest group of errors with a total of 78 errors involved

transforming of personal, possessive and reflexive pronouns. This is not surprising as it is related not only to German indirect speech. The same issue is also mentioned by Tauchmanova (2020), who discussed English indirect speech from Czech native speakers' point of view. She stated that "Moreover, at first the students were rather frustrated due to the rather complicated changes in the deictic expressions" (p. 213). The second largest number of errors, numbering 43 in total, occurred in the form of the "Konjunktiv Perfekt" – the students used it instead of the "Konjunktiv Präsens", or they formed it incorrectly, or they forgot to add the past participle to the auxiliary verb at the end of the sentences. Frequent errors were made in transforming the past forms of the auxiliary verbs "sein" and "haben" into the indirect speech: for example, instead of the form "er sei gewesen, er habe gehabt", the students used the forms such as "er wäre, er hätte". Additionally, some students used Indicative forms instead of Konjunktiv forms. Another common error was using the substitutive form "würde + infinitive" instead of the Konjunktiv Präsens also in cases in which the forms of the Konjunktiv Präsens and the forms of the Indikativ Präsens are not equivalent. In 23 cases, the students were not able to transform the Imperative into indirect speech. The same number of errors (23) occurred when the word order was analysed. It can be assumed that these errors may have been at least partly caused by a negative transfer from the first foreign language, i.e. English. A smaller number of errors (6 cases) related to non-forming of introductory clauses was also found.

The research did not reveal any errors being interrelated.

## 7. Conclusion

Subjunctive I (Konjunktiv I) is a common phenomenon occurring in German oral and written public speech (newspaper reports, radio and television news). However, due to the lack of German classes in Czech secondary schools, students are not familiarised with this phenomenon until when they major in German at universities. Therefore, it is essential to pay increased attention to this issue.

The issue of expressing indirect speech is crucial but complicated, because there is no parallel in Czech for expressing another person's ideas through a particular verb form. Due to the insufficient time available to teach this topic at secondary schools, students are not familiarised with it until they major in the German language at university. This is despite the fact that this linguistic phenomenon features prominently in the media, and that students need to be competent in this topic to complete their academic assignments and theses. To practise structures required to master indirect speech, it is convenient to start with isolated sentences, but gradually, it is necessary to move to continuous texts containing direct speech, and to create introductory clauses which enable the use of indirect citations. It is also recommended to use current articles occurring in media published in German (in the press and on the Internet). The reverse practice (the transformation of indirect speech into direct speech) is another interesting activity.

Referring to the importance of being able to correctly report someone else's ideas, it is recommended that Konjunktiv I is worth mentioning during FL courses in German at secondary schools (at least marginally, and thus draw attention to its existence). In courses offered to university students majoring in the German language, it is necessary to pay focused attention to this linguistic phenomenon, through targeted practice, not only in morphology courses, but also in practical language seminars. Moreover, students can find numerous examples of this phenomenon in literary works. While Heinrichova (2020) says that "a novel is a powerful pedagogical tool to enhance students' interest to read a literary text as a way to



learn about history of 20th century” (p. 79), it can be added that the reading of novels can also enhance the readers’ awareness of grammar structures used in the target language.

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