

THE SERBIAN PRESENT TENSE AND ITS ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS IN A NARRATIVE TEXT

UDC 811.163.41'366.581:811.111'366.581

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to analyse how the Serbian present tense is translated into English in narrative texts. Since the tense systems of the two languages differ significantly and the Serbian present tense is used to denote a wide range of situations, theoretically, a great number of English verbal equivalents are possible in translation. However, this impressive divergence is often limited to a fewer number of forms depending on the type of text. The corpus for this analysis was taken from the first four chapters of the original and the translation of the book 'Garden, Ashes', written by the Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš and it contains 605 verbs used in the present tense in the original text. The translation equivalents of these verbs were analysed and the most frequent ones discussed.*

Palabras clave: *contrastive analysis, present tense, translation equivalents*

INTRODUCTION

The general term 'tense' applies to a system where the basic or characteristic meaning of the term is to locate the situation or part of it at some point or period of time (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 116). Although the natural division of time into 'past', 'present' and 'future' is widely accepted, it is difficult to find a linguistic system of tenses which completely corresponds to the extra-linguistic category of time (Đorđević 1996:248). Both English and Serbian can easily be described as having three basic tenses¹, but the number of tense forms is significantly different in the two languages. What makes the analysis even more complicated is the fact that the finite verb forms in English represent a combination of temporal and aspectual distinctions (Novakov 2008:15), whereas in Serbian aspect is a lexical category and not a grammatical one. Consequently, it is almost impossible to find a "one-to-one" correspondence through contrastive analysis of Serbian and English verb tenses. In Serbian, there is only one present tense, whereas in English there

Submitted January 2013, accepted for publication in May 2013.

¹ Being conceptually specific, the future is sometimes not treated as a tense, but this fact is disregarded here since the focus of the paper is the contrastive analysis of present tenses.

are two present tenses (the present simple and the present progressive), as well as two perfect tenses partially located in the present time (present perfect and present perfect progressive). Moreover, even some past tenses in English can be semantically equivalent to the Serbian present tense due to the sequence of tenses that occurs in English. Regarding the asymmetric relationship between the two tense systems, it is reasonable to assume that a wide range of English forms may be partially equivalent to a single Serbian verb tense form. On the other hand, translation equivalents and their frequency still remain limited owing to the specific function of a text.

THE SERBIAN PRESENT TENSE

A number of linguistic works have concentrated on English making comparison with the Serbian tense forms². In *English-Serbian Contrastive Examples*, a comprehensive compilation of English sentences containing the English present tense and its Serbian equivalents is given, grouped into categories based on their relation (Đorđević 2000: 295-301):

- Basic meaning – present of imperfective verbs (*I enclose an application form. – Prilažem prijavu.*)
- Basic meaning – conditional (*A person wants to see you, madam. – Neki čovek bi želeo da Vas vidi, gospođo*)
- Habitual present – habitual present (*He comes every evening. – On dolazi svako veče.*)
- Habitual present – future (*If an old man marries a young girl, it costs him a lot of money. – Ako se čovek u godinama oženi mladom devojkom, to će ga koštati mnogo novca.*)
- Habitual present – conditional (*In spring, the tall grass grows along its sides. – U proleće bi sa strane porasla visoka trava.*)
- Eternal present – eternal present (*The earth moves around the sun. – Zemlja se okreće oko sunca.*)
- Present referring to future – present referring to future (*She sails for New York tomorrow. – Ona sutra plovi za Njujork.*)
- Present referring to future – 'future exact' (*I shall let you know as soon as I hear from him. – Javiću ti se čim od njega budem imao vesti.*)
- Historical present – historical present (*I hear you made a speech yesterday. – Čujem da si juče održao govor.*)
- Historical present – perfect (*We call her in and we explain it to her. – Pozvali smo je da uđe i to joj objasnili.*)

This list, as Đorđević points out, does not represent a complete corpus of possibilities, but still provides a valuable insight into the complexity of these relations. Considering the fact that the Serbian present tense is used in an even greater number of situations than the English present simple a greater divergence may be expected in analysing its English equivalents.

² For example: Novakov (2008), Đorđević (2000).

The Serbian present tense is used for a wide range of situations. The **referential**³ use of the Serbian present tense involves the use of imperfective verb forms to denote:

- situations simultaneous with the moment of speech (*Zašto me tako gledaš?*)
- situations encompassing both the moment of speech and the period before/after it (*Godinama leži kraj puta srušena ograda. / Ova pravila važe do donošenja statuta.*)
- lasting situations ("qualifying present") that involve:
 - lasting situations in nature (*Dunav se uliva u Crno more.*)
 - general characteristics of people or things (*Obrve mu se pri kraju povijaju*)⁴
 - gnomic/ proverbial utterances (*Riba po duboku pliva.*)⁵

The **non-referential**⁶ use of the Serbian present involves the use of both perfective and imperfective verb forms to denote:

- general statements (*Frazama se kupuju položaj i privilegije*),
- habitual actions (*Deca ponekad idu u drugo selo na sankanje*).

A special form of the Serbian present tense is the one that is used after the conjunction "da"⁷ as a complement of modal, impersonal and aspectual verbs or as a complement of certain phrases. (*Uvek je spreman da brani i kaže ono što je najbolje prećutati.*). This form is often replaceable by the infinitive (Stanojčić 2010:362).

In dependent clauses, the Serbian present tense can also be used **relatively** to denote situations that are simultaneous with:

- future situations (*Slušaćemo svake večeri kako vetar šušti u lišću.*)
- past situations (*Gledao je kako se kola spuštaju prema baruštini.*)

It can also be transposed to refer to situations in:

- the future (*Autobus polazi tek ujutru.*) or in
- the past (*Sedim tako juče za stolom i slušam prve vesti.*).

The latter is known as a narrative or historic present tense (Piper 2005:376, Stanojčić 2010: 360). Although Leech makes a distinction between the terms "historic" and "narrative" in analysing the use of the English present simple tense and defines the former as typical of oral narrative (Leech 2004: 11) and the latter as an artistic device used to describe imaginary happenings (Leech 2004: 16), such distinctions are not emphasized in other relevant works dealing with the English (Huddleston and Pullum 2002) or Serbian verb tenses (Piper et al. 2005, Stanojčić 2010, Mrazović and Vukadinović2009) and will not be made in this paper.

³ Referential - simultaneous with the moment of speech.

⁴ This example, as well as the previous ones, was taken from Piper et al. (2005).

⁵ This example was taken from Stanojčić (2010), while the previous and subsequent ones can be found in Piper et al. (2005).

⁶ Non-referential - not related with the moment of speech.

⁷ In Serbian, this form is often called "da + present".

THE LINGUISTIC EQUIVALENTS OF THE SERBIAN PRESENT TENSE

Since the Serbian present tense is used for a wide range of situations, a great number of English verb forms can be considered linguistically equivalent or, at least, partially equivalent:

- The present simple tense (*Ona živi u Berlinu. – She lives in Berlin.*)
- The present progressive (*Zašto plačeš? – Why are you crying?*)
- The present perfect tense (*Znamo se godinama. – We have known each other for years.*)
- The present perfect progressive (*Koliko dugo učiš engleski? – How long have you been learning English?*)
- The past simple tense (*Mislio je da ona njega mrzi. – He thought she hated him.*)
- The past progressive (*Shvatio je da ga prati jedan čovek. – He realised a man was following him.*)
- The past perfect tense (*Ispostavilo se da ona boluje više od deset godina. – It turned out she had been ill for more than 10 years.*)
- The past perfect progressive (*Nije znala da je on godinama vara. – She didn't know he had been cheating on her for years.*)
- Future forms (*Selimo se u Beograd sledećeg meseca. – We are going to move to Belgrade next month.*)
- Non-finite forms:
 - Gerund (*Moramo nastaviti da vežbamo. – We need to keep on practicing.*)
 - Infinitive (*Zamolio me je da otvorim prozor. – He asked me to open the window.*)
 - Participles (*Jedan čovek sedi ispred kuće. – There is a man sitting in front of the house.*)

Even though this list is not definite, such an analysis provides an additional insight into the complex relationship between the Serbian and English verb tenses. However, the choice of the appropriate equivalent depends on context and it is often limited to a few possible forms in practice. This is why an analysis of translation equivalents may reveal more interesting data than a pure linguistic analysis.

CORPUS ANALYSIS

The corpus for this analysis was taken from the first four chapters of the original and the translation of the book "*Garden, Ashes*"⁸. As already stated in the introduction, 605 verbs were used in the present tense in the first four chapters of the original text in Serbian: 106 in the first chapter, 294 in the second, 38 in the third and 167 in the fourth chapter. Such great number of present-tense verbs is quite unusual in narrative texts where past tense forms are more common and this is why this corpus was particularly interesting for analysis.

The following table contains the list of the most frequent verbal equivalents used in the translation:

⁸ The original title of the book is "*Bašta, pepeo*". The English translation ("*Garden, Ashes*") was done by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Table 1

Chapter	Number of verbs in the present tense in Serbian	Type of verbal translation equivalent used	Frequency of the verbal equivalents (in numbers)	Frequency of the verbal equivalents (percentage)
1	106	Present simple tense	44	41.51%
		Past Simple tense	17	16.04%
		Present participle	12	11.32 %
		Infinitive	10	9.43 %
		Present progressive	8	7.55 %
2	294	Present simple	139	47.28 %
		Infinitive	56	19.05 %
		Present participle	22	7.48 %
		Past Simple	17	5.78 %
		Gerund	14	4.76 %
3	38	Infinitive	16	42.10 %
		Gerund	7	18.42 %
		Present simple tense	6	15.79 %
		Past simple tense	3	7.89 %
		Present progressive	2	5.26 %
4	167	Present simple tense	76	45.51 %
		Infinitive	28	16.77 %
		Past simple tense	12	7.18 %
		Gerund	9	5.39 %
		Present progressive	8	4.79 %

Table 1 shows that six verbal translation equivalents are most frequently used in this translation and that their frequency ranges from around 44 %to around 3 %.The following table summarises the frequency of these forms in all the four chapters:

Table 2

The verbal form	Number of examples in the first four chapters of translation	Frequency (%)
Present simple tense	265	43.81 %
Infinitive	110	18.18 %
Past simple tense	49	8.09 %
Present participle	34	5.62 %
Gerund	30	4.96 %
Present progressive tense	18	2.97 %

As shown above, the English present simple tense is by far the most frequent translation equivalent (43.81 %), which is relatively surprising. Although both the Serbian present tense and the English present simple can be used to express past or imaginary situations in fiction, the larger number of verb tense forms in English may lead to the assumption that, instead of such a frequent use of the English present simple tense in narration, one may expect a more frequent use of past tense forms. In the early stages of contrastive

analysis, Spalatin states that "the narrative present in SC⁹ is much more frequent for the past time period than the English present, which in this function is stylistically marked" (Spalatin 1970: 143). He also claims that "the narrative present is hardly likely to prompt a speaker of SC to use the English present as its equivalent" and that "the past time context will probably lead to the selection of the English past tense in most cases" (Spalatin 1970: 144). However in most of the examples analysed in this corpus the Serbian present tense verbs in the original, transposed into the past as the story goes back and past events are recalled, are translated by the employment of the English present simple forms. This excessive use of the present tense in fiction is worth commenting on (Thorne 2008: 286) and is often seen as a "deviation from normal practice" (Leech 2004: 16) as most fiction is written in the simple past tense. Since the present tense form is often used as a "device of dramatic heightening" (Leech 2004: 16) or to evoke a powerful atmosphere (Thorne 2008: 297) so that the reader is put in the place of someone actually witnessing the events described, the same form sharing the same functional potential is kept in the translation:

1. "*Katkad se učini da će doći do kvara...*" – "*At times it seems as though the engines will run down...*" (chapter 1).
2. "*Kolači s makom ispunjavaju sobu mirisom...*" – "*The smell of poppy-seed cakes fills the room...*" (chapter 2).
3. "*Katkad se zaustavljamo...*" – "*Finally we come to a halt...*" (chapter 4).
4. "*Otac isplaćuje kočijaša...*" – "*My father pays off the coachman...*" (chapter 4).

As the examples selected show, both perfective and imperfective verb forms were translated in the same way.

In just a few examples the Serbian present tense is used in direct speech to denote referential present situations (present states and abilities) and the English present simple denoting the same states or abilities is used in translation:

5. "*Čujete li?*" – "*Do you hear?*" (chapter 4).
6. "*Jer govoriš bogat sam i ništa mi ne treba...*" – "*For you say I'm wealthy, I need nothing...*" (chapter 4).

It may be surprising that the second most frequent translation equivalent is a non-finite verbal form – the English infinitive (18.18 %). In most cases it is employed when the present form of the original verb is used as a complement of a modal, aspectual or impersonal verb or phrase after the conjunction "da":

7. "*Mašinpochinje da ropće...*" – "*The engine starts to rattle...*" (chapter 1).
8. "*...svest mora da potone odjednom...*" – "*...consciousness has to sink at once...*" (chapter 2).
9. "*Govorila je nešto što nismo mogli da razumemo...*" – "*She was saying something we couldn't make out...*" (chapter 3).
10. "*....da treba da ispuni...*" – "*...he was supposed to fulfill...*" (chapter 4).

Since the gerund and the infinitive share common syntactic features, they appear as translation equivalents in similar situations. The choice between the two and the lower frequency of the gerund (4.96 %) are determined exclusively by the relevant grammatical

⁹ SC – Serbo-Croatian.

properties of the two forms as well as of the word class that precedes them. Thus, the gerund is often found to be an adequate translation equivalent when it follows a preposition:

11. "...*uprkos vrlo utilitarnoj i praktičnoj nameri **da spoji** more i kontinente...*" – "...*despite his utilitarian and practical intention of **joining** seas and continents...*" (chapter 3).

The overall frequency of the infinitive and gerund in the chapters selected was as high as 23.14%, which also shows the extensive use of the Serbian 'da' present form. The use of this form is not limited to narrative texts only and these equivalents may be quite common in other types of texts as well.

The next verb form in the order of frequency is the past simple tense (8.09 %). Most of the examples translated by the employment of this form are those where the Serbian present tense is used relatively in the original text to denote situations simultaneous with some past events or states:

12. "*Shvatih ... **da sam** ja jedini s tim imenom...*" – "*I suddenly come to understand...that I **was** the only one with that particular name...*" (chapter 1).

13. "*Hteo sam **da proverim** ko **je**...*" – "*I would have wanted to verify who the angel of sleep **was**...*" (chapter 2).

14. "*... i on nije bio sasvim siguran **da li se** ona **odnose** na sve nas...*" – "... nor was he certain whether they **applied** to us as well..." (chapter 3)

In some rare cases, the past simple tense was used for descriptions of the setting (15.) or – in very few examples – for single activities in the past (16.):

15. "*Uzak ravan obod **završava se** ovalnim lukom...*" – "*The narrow flat rim **ended in** an oval trough...*" (chapter 1).

16. "*'Ah, naša soba!' kaže Ana i mi **obuhvatamo** pogledom tu našu zaboravljenu sobu...*" – "*'Oh,' Anna says,'our room!' We **glanced** around our forgotten room...*" (chapter 2).

Another non-finite form, the present participle, was also found as a relatively frequent translation equivalent (5.62 %). It was often used to replace dependent clauses where shorter forms were appropriate so that the narrative style and atmosphere of the original text could be retained:

17. "*Samo još pamtim ... vatromet boja koji **se razbuktava** pod mojim čvrsto zatvorenim kapcima...*" – "*All I can remember is... a firework display **flaring up** in front of my tightly closed eyes...*" (chapter 1).

In some cases, the present participle was used to denote a number of simultaneous actions expressed by coordinated present-form predicates in the original text. In such sentences, the economy of language achieved by the employment of the participle form created a more dynamic atmosphere:

18. "*Nekoliko se trenutaka očajnički bori, hvatajući se zagrudi, **trza i vrti** glavom...*" – "*She would struggle desperately for a few moments, clutching her breasts, jerking and **swaying** her head...*" (chapter 2).

A finite form that is ranked relatively low in the order of frequency (yet, one of the six most common equivalents) is the present progressive tense (2.97 %) which is generally considered to be one of the two most common linguistic equivalents of the Serbian present tense. It may be assumed that the frequency of the present progressive tense is often considerably higher in other types of text (newspaper articles, business reports, etc.) since it denotes temporary states and activities going on around the present time, as does the referential Serbian present tense. In this corpus, the present progressive tense was found as the translation equivalent where the narrative present was referentially used in the original text:

19. "*Opustelim prazničnim ulicama **sustižu se** u svom besmislenom kruženju mali tramvaji...*" – "*Small streetcars **are racing** to catch up with each other in their senseless cruising through the deserted holiday streets...*" (chapter 1).

20. "***Sedim** u sankama kraj svoje majke...*" – "*I'm **sitting** in the sleigh, next to my mother...*" (chapter 4).

Other English verb forms occur in a small number of cases. The past progressive tense appears in 13 examples (2.14 %) and it is used as an equivalent to a relative present transposed into the past (21) or as an equivalent to a narrative referential present (22):

21. "*On je hteo da kaže svakom da je on **Žrtva**, da je on taj koji **se žrtvuje**...*" – "*He wanted everyone to understand that he was a victim, that he **was sacrificing** himself...*" (chapter 2).

22. "***Plove** velike lađe sna po tamnom Stiksu...*" – "*The great ships of sleep **are sailing** the dark Styx...*" (chapter 1).

The frequency of the present perfect, present perfect progressive and the future tense ranges from 0.2 to 1.5 %. The present perfect is used in time clauses where it emphasizes the completion of an activity ("*Moj mamurluk namah **nestaje** čim popijem toplu belu kafu*" – "*My drowsiness vanishes as soon as I **have downed** a warm cup of coffee.*") and interestingly – once as an equivalent to a qualifying present ("*Bore joj se zrakasto **šire** od usta...*" – "*Wrinkles **have spread** radially from her mouth...*"). The present perfect progressive is used as an equivalent of the referential narrative present encompassing the moment described¹⁰ and the period before it ("*I čini mi se da bi već moralo da svane koliko dugo **ležim** bez sna.*" – "*I **have been lying** awake so long that it seems to me that dawn should already be at hand"). And, finally, the future tense is used a few times to express beliefs concerning the future ("*...jer u jedan čas **dođe** sud tvoj...*" – "*...your final judgment **will come** in one hour...*") or for offers and suggestions ("***Da odem?***" – "*Shall I leave?*").*

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the selected corpus shows that the whole range of English verb forms may appear more or less frequently as the equivalents to the Serbian present tense in a narrative text. The present simple tense is by far the most frequent translation equivalent, which reveals a considerably greater potential of the English present simple in narration than it is often assumed in theory. The grammatical analysis of translation equivalents could

¹⁰ In this case – it is the moment in the past that is described by the employment of the narrative present in Serbian.

provide certain "guidelines" for the use of particular verb forms in translation or in grammar learning. Namely, the present simple tense is often employed in translation in cases of non-referential, qualifying or historic use of the Serbian present tense as well as in cases when it is transposed into the future; past tense forms are common equivalents when the Serbian present is used relatively; the present progressive as well as the present perfect progressive are used to denote referential situations encompassing the moment of speech (with or without the period before it), whereas future forms denote those situations where the Serbian present is transposed into the future. As for the English non-finite verb forms, it is important to note that they often serve as adequate equivalents in cases when the Serbian "da+present" construction is used or when they replace dependent clauses. However, these "guidelines" should not be understood as rules since the options may be considerably extended or limited by the context, the style of writing, the intention of the text and the function of a particular verb form. Therefore, a further analysis of translation equivalents of the Serbian present tense in different kinds of texts may offer new interesting data and a better understanding of its complex relationship with the English verb forms.

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PREZENT SRPSKOG JEZIKA I NJEGOVI EKVIVALENTI U ENGLESKOM U NARATIVNOM TEKSTU

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Ovaj rad se bavi analizom srpskog prezenta i njegovih prevodnih ekvivalenata u engleskom jeziku u narativnim tekstovima. Pošto je sistem glagolskih vremena u ova dva jezika bitno različit i present srpskog jezika se upotrebljava za čitav niz vremenski različito lociranih situacija, veliki broj ekvivalenata je teorijski moguć u prevodu. Ova impresivna divergencija se, međutim, često svede na manji broj potencijalno primenljivih oblika zavisno od tipa teksta. Korpus za ovu analizu činilo je 605 glagolskih oblika prezenta upotrebljenih u original knjige Danila Kiša "Bašta, pepeo" i njihovih ekvivalenata u prevodu dela. Rad sadrži analizu izabranih ekvivalenata i diskusiju vezanu za najfrekventnije oblike.

Ključne reči: *kontrastivna analiza, prezent, prevodni ekvivalenti*