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Redistributing Meaning: Translating English Existential Sentences into Slovene

Abstract

The paper looks at a self-compiled corpus of existential sentences in five English-language literary works and their Slovene translations, testing the hypothesis about the noun-orientation of English and verb-orientation of Slovene, as posited for instance by Klinar (1996). The results do not support this theory in the narrow sense but rather suggest that Slovene generally prefers a more balanced distribution of meaning in the clause compared to English. The analysis of the translations of English existential sentences with regard to translation shifts such as change of clausal pattern, verb choice and subject preservation points to what seems to be a fundamental difference between English and Slovene: while English readily accumulates meaningful material in one syntactic unit, which often happens to be a noun phrase (hence noun-orientation), Slovene patterns prefer meaning to be more evenly distributed across the clause and across various sentence elements, including but not restricted to verbal structures.

Prerazporejanje pomena: prevajanje angleških bivanjskih stavkov v slovenščino

Članek prek analize bivanjskih stavkov v namenskem korpusu petih angleških književnih del in njihovih slovenskih prevodov preverja hipotezo o samostalniškosti angleščine in glagolniškosti slovenščine, kot jo najdemo npr. pri Klinarju (1996). Rezultati ne podpirajo te teorije v strogem smislu, temveč nakazujejo, da slovenščina v primerjavi z angleščino na splošno daje prednost bolj uravnoteženi razporeditvi stavčnega gradiva. Razčlemba prevodov angleških bivanjskih stavkov z ozirom na prevajalske premike, kot so sprememba stavčnega vzorca, izbira glagola in ohranjanje osebka, kaže na ključno razliko med jezicoma: medtem ko se v angleščini rado dogaja, da se velika količina

informacij zgošča v posamezni skladenjski enoti, predvsem v samostalniški zvezi (od tod ideja o samostalniškosti), so slovenski stavčni vzorci načeloma bolj naklonjeni enakovredni porazdelitvi pomena v stavku in v različnih delih stavka, kamor sodijo – poleg drugih – tudi glagolske zgradbe.

1 INTRODUCTION

In an era of intensive contact between Slovene and English – in terms of exposure to media, everyday conversation, writing and translation – it is particularly important to ensure meaning is adequately transmitted in communication. In crossing from Slovene to English and vice versa, one area where considerable differences can be observed is information structure, tied inextricably to the issue of word order. The paper investigates the assumption, proposed by scholars such as Klinar (1996), that English is noun-oriented and Slovene is verb-oriented by examining a small corpus of existential sentences in five English-language literary works and their Slovene translations. The first part is devoted to an overview of the general characteristics of word order and existential sentences in English and Slovene, followed by the analysis, discussion and conclusions.¹

2 INFORMATION STRUCTURE AND EXISTENTIAL SENTENCES IN ENGLISH

The information structure of a sentence, or functional sentence perspective, is typically analysed in two ways. The sentence can be divided into two parts, which Halliday and Matthiessen (2013: 89), following the Prague School, call the theme – “the point of departure of the message” – and the rheme – “the remainder of the message [...] in which the Theme is developed.” Firbas (1992: 72), on the other hand, argues that the transition between the two should not be overlooked as it constitutes part of so-called communicative dynamism (CD): “Seen in the light of CD, the thematic elements carry lower degrees of CD than the non-thematic elements. Within the non-theme, the transitional elements carry lower degrees than the rhematic elements.”

This distinction between what comes at the beginning and what comes later typically reflects a development from elements which express information that is given, i.e.

1 This paper was originally conceived as part of a project embarked upon together with Katarina Fink and Nataša Zaplotnik and supervised by Irena Kovačič; I would like to thank them all for their valuable insights, with special thanks also to the anonymous reviewer for the many helpful suggestions.

recoverable by the recipient of the message, and elements that present new information, which is the focus of the sentence because it is unexpected or important.² A gradual rise in information can be observed, which is known as the information principle. Its goal is to simplify the decoding task of the listener and at the same time contribute to cohesion (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999: 897, Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1360–1361). Another typical trait is that long and complex elements as well as the focus of an information/tone unit tend to be placed towards the end of the sentence (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1356–1364), bringing about the so-called principles of end-focus and end-weight.

Existential sentences (ES) pose a problem for information structure, since the subject, which is the most common realisation of the theme, here represents a new piece of information and cannot be linked to the preceding discourse. English still requires a subject and has a fixed word order, which results in using a special device providing some sort of “dummy theme” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1402), thus indicating “the ‘new’ status of a whole clause, including its subject”. In ES, this dummy theme is realised by existential *there* and acts as a signal to the recipient that an item of new information is to follow.

In addition to the *there*-construction (cf. Milsark 1974, Lumsden 1988, Biber *et al.* 1999), some authors use the notion of existential construction as an umbrella term to include sentences without the *there*-element but which feature another initial item, such as an adverbial or participle (e.g. Quirk *et al.* 1985, Breivik 1989, Klinar 1998), yet others (e.g. McNally 2011) exclude examples with verbs other than *be*. Several classifications, such as Milsark’s (1974), depend crucially on whether and how the notional subject is expanded. Biber *et al.* (1999: 949–950) find that different types of clauses occur in different proportions depending on the register. Minimal existential clauses (i.e. without either adverbial expansions or postmodification) account for between approximately 10% (academic discourse) and 25% (conversation) of all ES, existential clauses with a postmodifier for 20% (conversation) to 50% (news), and existential clauses with an adverbial for 10% (academic discourse) to 40% (conversation). Surprisingly, relative clauses are by far the most frequent expansions in Gómez-González’s study (2001: 258).

3 CONTRASTING ENGLISH AND SLOVENE

English is characterised by being a fixed word order language, which means that sentence elements in declarative sentences appear in a preferred order in relation

2 The given-new distribution is not typical of all world languages and there are also subtypes of English sentences that do not adhere to it, as shown, for instance, by Irwin (2018).

to each other. The subject usually occupies the default sentence-initial position and appears before the predicator, which is in turn placed before any complements (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 50-51). Limon (2002) argues that the function of this kind of strictly regulated order is twofold: (a) it is used as “a grammar signal” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 899) on the basis of which sentence elements are identified, and (b) it is also important “with regard to ease of processing” (Limon 2002: 45) by the addressee.

By contrast, the order of sentence elements in Slovene is much freer and Slovene word order is termed “variable” (Herrity 2000: 333), but this freedom is “relative and does not mean random word order.” Because of a highly developed inflectional system, the order of units realising sentence elements usually does not change their syntactic or semantic functions. Toporišič (1982: 161–181, 2000: 679) argues that word order in Slovene is normally determined by functional sentence perspective. The speaker thus usually begins by providing that piece of information which they feel can be understood from what has been mentioned before, and gradually builds up to the information that can be regarded as the most important or newsworthy. The theme is often realised by the subject, but any other sentence element can appear in its stead.³ There are, however, several instances of fixed word order in Slovene as well, especially with regard to the position of clitics.

Haiman (1974) extends the typological distinction suggested by Perlmutter (1971) between so-called “Type A” and “Type B” languages. Type A languages are characterised by having dummy pronouns which fill the slots of logical subjects that have been displaced from sentence-initial position. English is a Type A language, and existential *there* is an example of a dummy pronoun. Conversely, Slovene is a Type B language and may “dispense with superficial subjects” (Haiman 1974). This of course means that Slovene has no equivalents to dummy *there* in English:

[1a] *There is a danger of floods. The floods caused a lot of damage last year.*

[1b] *Obstaja nevarnost poplav. Poplave so lani naredile veliko škode.*

[2a] *It is of vital importance that our customers and business contacts form a favourable opinion of our company.*

[2b] *Zelo velikega pomena za naše podjetje je, da si naše stranke in poslovni partnerji o nas ustvarijo dobro mnenje.*

The above examples not only confirm Haiman’s (1974) theory regarding the use of dummy subjects but also serve to demonstrate that the problem of presence or

3 For the purpose of emphasis, the writer or speaker may choose to place the rheme before the theme, whereby the order of sentence elements becomes marked. Due to the necessity of emphatic stress, this kind of marked word order is rarely found in written texts (Jug-Kranjec 1981).

absence of dummy elements in English and Slovene is in fact closely connected with the issue of word order. For instance, unlike in Slovene, where the predicator-subject order “establishes the existence and subsequent relevance of a new individual/thing, who/which then becomes the [...] theme of the next sentence” (Herrity 2000: 334), predicators in English simply cannot occupy sentence-initial position in declarative sentences. Since indefinite subjects expressing new information likewise cannot occupy initial position, dummy *there* is introduced to fill in the subject slot and ensure that there is no fundamental change in word order. The functional dimension is thus present in both languages but the expression of existence or appearance on the scene is realised differently: while Slovene supposedly has no problems maintaining the desired information structure, English has to resort to *there*-structures (cf. Rojko 1998: 66).

Importantly, Klinar (1996: 193) reports a marked noun-oriented tendency in English in comparison with Slovene, i.e. “an inclination to use nouns where Slovene prefers adjectives, verbs, or (idiomatic) phrasing”. In parallel sentences, the meaning of an English NP will often be included in a Slovene verb (Klinar 1996: 170):

[3a] *Everyone is pleased to see the emergence of new self-governing nations in Africa.*

[3b] *Vsi se veselimo, ko vidimo, da v Afriki nastajajo nove neodvisne države.*

In English ES the stress is laid on the notional subject, i.e. a NP, which suits the above-mentioned tendency, whereas different patterns are to be expected in Slovene. In her study, Kroflič (1994) seems to confirm this, finding Slovene translations of English ES to be strongly verb-oriented, with examples such as the following:

[4a] [...] *but the bright midmorning sunlight floods the room, piercing my skull, causing my hangover to throb, and because of this, there's no workout this morning.*

[4b] [...] *v lobanjo, zaradi česar drgetam od mačka, in zato zjutraj tudi nisem telovadil.*⁴

While it seems clear that English ES do readily accumulate great amounts of information in the real, postponed subject that follows the dummy pronoun *there* and the existential verb *to be*, it is less obvious that the corresponding patterns in Slovene should as a rule involve a different verb and a reduction in the presence of nominal elements at the right-most edge of the clause. The analysis to follow thus looks at how the content of the notional subject is redistributed in the translation process.

4 Cited as in Kroflič (1994: 32).

4 ANALYSIS

The sample used in the analysis comprises five literary texts: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Patricia D. Cornwell's *Post-Mortem*, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, thus including works of different genres written in different geographical areas at different times. The first twenty examples of ES are included from each source, yielding a total of 100 examples with their translations. A narrow definition of clause (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985) is used which excludes subordinate clauses, although indirectly embedded clauses as parts of phrases are kept in the material. Where several interpretations as to the number of existential clauses are possible (e.g. when a passage could be analysed as either a complex notional subject or as several coordinated elliptical clauses), the approach taken is generally to opt for a minimal number of clauses, motivated by concern that otherwise the same structure would come up relatively too often. Due to methodological concerns, ES are equated with the *there*-construction. To investigate the hypothesis that nominal material is transformed in Slovene into verbal expressions, the ES characteristics of verb choice, subject choice, and potential change of clausal pattern are analysed.

4.1 CHOICE OF VERB

In the English examples the verb *to be* is always used apart from two exceptions, *to linger* and *to establish*, which are preserved in the Slovene translations:

- [5a] *What dinners! How vividly there still lingers on my palate the suety after-taste of the Salisbury steak at Bickford's, or Riker's western omelette, in which one night [...]*
- [5b] *Kakšne večerje! Kako živo mi še zmeraj ostaja v ustih oljnat priokus po salisburyjskem zrezku pri Bickford'su ali po Rikers'ovi zahodni omleti, v kateri sem nekega večera [...]*
- [6a] *There had been suddenly established a bond between Morris and me, and I relaxed, filled with inquisitive zeal.*
- [6b] *Tako je bila na mah ustvarjena povezava med Morrisom in menoj in kar oddahnil sem si, ker sem se navzel pozvedovalne gorečnosti.*

The majority of Slovene translations, 52 out of 100, keep the same verb as in the original, with *to linger* and *to establish* occurring once, which means that exactly half of the Slovene translations use the verb *biti*, a direct translation of the verb *to be*. In 8 cases it is impossible to ascertain which verb corresponds to the original one, generally due to the fact that the clausal patterns are changed. This means

that in 40 examples the verb *to be* is replaced with a different verb in Slovene. The decision to use a verb different from the original one cannot be attributed to either personal inclinations of the translator (change of verb is attested with all translators, the number of such instances varies from 6 to 11) or development over time (the samples from the two novels translated in 1982 include 6 and 11 examples of verb change, respectively, and the extract from the book translated in 2004 contains 8 such examples).

In 19 cases the verb that replaces *to be* comes from the original, and a full 16 of these verbs come from the extension, as shown in example [7]. These data do not confirm the discussed discrepancy between the alleged noun-orientation of English and verb-orientation of Slovene as there are only two examples with the headword of the notional subject turning into a verb, cited here as [8] and [9].

[7a] *Breakfast was an hour later than usual, and after breakfast there was a ceremony which was observed every week without fail.*

[7b] *Zajtrk je bil uro kasneje kot običajno in po zajtrku so vsak teden dostojno opravili poseben obred.*

[8a] *The vote was taken at once, and it was agreed that [...] There were only four dissentients, the three dogs and the cat, who was later [...]*

[8b] *Glasovanje je bilo naglo in velika večina je odločila, da [...] Samo štirje so glasovali proti, to so bili trije psi in mačka, a pozneje [...]*

[9a] *On Sundays there was no work.*

[9b] *Ob nedeljah niso delali.*

In as many as 10 of these examples, the main part of the English notional subject (such as *too much information* in [10] and *small mice* in [11]) remains the subject in Slovene (*preveč podatkov* and *majhna miška*, respectively) and it is only the extension (or rather a part of it) which is transformed into the verb, for instance:

[10a] *I make this noise when there is too much information coming into my head from the outside world.*

[10b] *Te glasove spuščam vedno, kadar v mojo glavo prihajajo preveč podatkov iz zunanjega sveta.*

[11a] *It looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils.*

[11b] *Videti je bilo, kot bi se mu v vsaki nosnici skrivala majhna miška.*

In 21 translations the verb *to be* is replaced with a different verb which does not originate in the English text. The Slovene verbs used in the translations can be divided broadly into two categories, more or less idiomatic combinations and *be*-approximations, with the verb in some cases semantically weakly related to

the context (e.g. *videti*, *pokazati*). In 5 cases the verb is largely determined by the noun (subject or object) as part of a collocation (MI > 6, 5L 5R, Gigafida corpus):⁵ *potoki vode so odtekali, zaslišal se je hrup, navdal me je občutek, vlada naj enotnost, prikradla se je lisica*; 2 similar combinations are also attested in the Gigafida corpus as frequently co-occurring, although they are not as common as the previous set: *oglasili so se koraki, delo se ponuja*. In the remaining 14 examples the most common verb is *imeti* (have) with 4 occurrences: in all 4 cases the subject is animate and changed, either introduced as an intervention by the translator or adapted from a non-subject noun phrase in the original, as evident in the following examples:

[12a] *At 1: 28 a.m. a policeman opened the door of the cell and told me that there was someone to see me.*

[12b] *Ob 1.28 je policaj odprl vrata celice in mi rekel, da imam obisk.*

[13a] *But now there was DNA profiling, newly introduced and potentially significant enough to identify an assailant [...], provided the police [...]*

[13b] *Zdaj imam analizo DNK, nanovo vpeljano, ki je zadosten dokaz za identifikacijo napadalca [...]; seveda pa mora policija [...]*

Finally, the verbs *priiti* and *nastati*, which can be understood as inchoative variants of *biti*, occur twice each, similarly also *zgoditi se* and *pojavit se*; another possibility approaching the static value of *biti* is the expression *iti za*:

[14a] *One thing seems certain, and that is that there was a great deal of unresolved guilt and hatred pervading that sad home.*

[14b] *Zdi se mi, da je ena stvar jasna, in sicer, da gre za večinoma nerazberljivo krivdo in sovraštvo, ki je prešinjalo to žalostno hišo.*

4.2 SUBJECT AND CLAUSAL PATTERN

The analysis of the subject in the Slovene translations suggests that in Slovene a notional, and if possible animate, subject works best, although it is also possible to use subjectless (impersonal) constructions. In a fairly high number of clauses, 25, the subject is changed (in 8 additional examples the correspondence is difficult to determine). The plurality of these feature an inserted animate subject (11 cases; example [15]) but animate subjects derived from non-subject noun phrases are also common (4 cases; example [16]):

[15a] [...] *Today we begin the hay harvest. But there is another matter that must be attended to first.*

5 Gigafida corpus, <http://www.gigafida.net/>. Accessed 30 June 2018.

[15b] [...] *Danes začenjamo s košnjo. Vendar pa se moramo prej lotiti nečesa drugega.*

[16a] *There was nothing I could say to him.*

[16b] *Nič mu nisem mogla reči.*

Similar cases of inanimate changed subjects are also present (2 inserted, 2 derived). It is a peculiarity of some Slovene predicates and constructions that subjectless clauses are possible and the translators make use of them in 6 translations, for instance:

[17a] *Set into effect after the second strangling was a new policy. If there was another, Vander was to meet me in the morgue immediately.*

[17b] *Biti nenehno v pripravljenosti je po drugi zadavitvi postal nov način dela. Če je prišlo do novega zločina, je moral Vander nemudoma v mrtvašnico.*

In 9 cases the clausal pattern (correspondence between the original ES and its translation) is disrupted. In 6 cases the original ES (or its main clause) is shrunk into a single sentence element:

[18a] *The doctor had arrived, a ray of hope where there was none.*

[18b] [...] *zdravnik je prišel, žarek upanja v brezupu.*

In 1 case the original clause is expanded and becomes a subordinate clause, and in 2 cases the clauses are interestingly jumbled:

[19a, 20a] *I knew it would not end until Lori Petersen was turned inside out, every inch of her photographed, and all of it on display for experts, the police, attorneys, judges and members of a jury to see. There would be thoughts, remarks about her physical attributes or lack of them. There would be sophomoric jokes and cynical asides as the victim, not the killer, went on trial, every aspect of her person and the way she lived, scrutinized, judged, and, in some instances, degraded.*

[19b, 20b] *Vedela sem, da temu ne bo konca, dokler Lori Petersen ne bo pregledana od glave do peta, vsaka ped njenega telesa fotografirana, vse razstavljeno in na vpogled strokovnjakom, policiji, odvetnikom, sodnikom in članom porote. Ko bo kot žrtev v sodni preiskavi, se bo o njej govorilo marsikaj. Izpostavljene bodo njene telesne značilnosti in pomanjkljivosti, včasih najbrž neokusno in cinično; vse strani njene osebnosti in njenega življenjskega sloga bodo skrbno in temeljito preiskane, mogoče celo osramočene.*

Table 1 summarises the translation shifts that occur in the translated ES in the corpus comparatively across clauses with and without extension, which is defined

as any material that follows the headword of the notional subject. The only statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) difference arises in the proportion of ES with a change in the verb used. It seems that the more material there is in a sentence the more likely it is that some of that content will yield a new verb. The implications of all the observed translation shifts are discussed in the next section.

Table 1 Distribution of translation shifts across ES with and without extension

	ES without extension (29)	ES with extension (71)	Total (100)
<i>Changed clausal pattern</i>	3 (10.3%)	6 (8.5%)	9
<i>Changed subject</i>	8 (27.6%)	17 (23.9%)	25
<i>Changed verb</i>	8 (27.6%)	32 (45.1%)	40

5 DISCUSSION

When translating from English into Slovene, many changes affect bare ES, as the analysis shows, and this is hardly surprising. ES with some sort of extension, on the other hand, seem to yield to translation more readily in some ways. This is due to the interaction of several known and unknown factors; these are not limited to functioning in the environment of *there*-structures, but operate throughout language patterns. In 25 cases, i.e. in one quarter of all examples, the subject is changed, and the analysis points to a predisposition in Slovene to meaningful, animate subjects. In as many as 40 examples the verb is changed: instead of the original *be*, a verb originating in some other part of the English ES (generally the extension) is used in 19 examples and an entirely different verb in 21 examples (two prominent groups being collocations with the head nouns and *be*-approximations). It seems that often the verb *biti* simply feels too empty, too devoid of meaning.

Nevertheless, the overall picture does not support the theory about the verb-oriented nature of Slovene. The analysis of the translations of English ES with regard to the verb and the subject instead points to what seems to be a fundamental difference between English and Slovene: while English readily accumulates meaningful material in one syntactic unit, which often happens to be a noun phrase (hence noun-orientation), Slovene clausal patterns prefer a less varied information structure. Here is what idealised representations of communicative dynamism and information structure in English ES and their Slovene counterparts might look like:

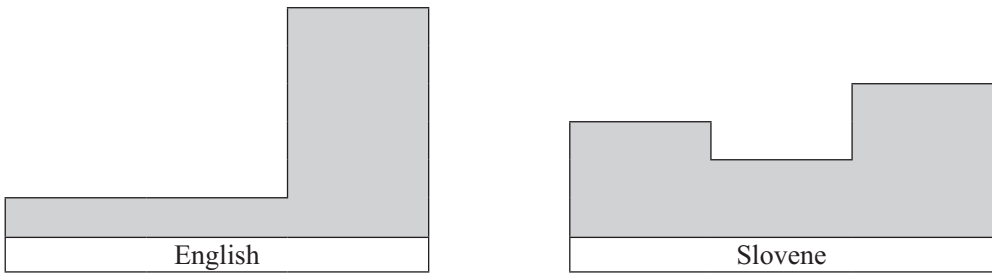


Figure 1 Dispersion of meaning in English and Slovene existential sentences

While the most rhematic parts of clauses do not show that many differences, Slovene seems to need more meaningful themes and transitions than English. The original assumption that Slovene as a Type B language has no problems maintaining the desired information structure does not turn out to be altogether unproblematic. While the dummy subject *there* can quite satisfactorily perform the function of the theme in English, Slovene generally demands an item with more lexical import, usually either a real subject or some kind of adverbial. If there is no candidate for the theme preceding the verb,⁶ the verb will usually be something other than *be* (13 out of 19 cases in the analysis), but the tendency to change the verb also applies when the verb does not occur initially. To extrapolate, it seems that Slovene as a language prefers information packaging where the meaning of a clause is relatively evenly dispersed without great amplitudes in communicative dynamism.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The study presented suggests that Slovene is not, as is generally believed, verb-oriented in contrast with the noun-oriented nature of English; in the analysed translations of English ES, the verb does not act as a substitution for the noun phrase, with its function instead being to balance the clause. While the analysis is necessarily handicapped due to the limited amount of data and further research is necessary, the findings suggest that what Slovene requires is a relatively even thematic and information structure, and it is this characteristic of Slovene that triggers the specific patterns found in Slovene translations of English *there*-structures. It would be particularly important to test this hypothesis on a larger corpus and to examine other ways of redistributing information in the process of translation, especially in terms of elements that end up functioning as theme in Slovene

6 The question of whether the verb can function as the theme of the clause is an interesting one especially in pro-drop languages (cf. Petroniene 2011).

counterparts to English ES. Finally, there is no obvious reason why the posited tendency towards meaningful themes and transitions should be limited to existential structures; consequently, more studies are needed to examine the issue of theme and rheme contrastively in English and Slovene.

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