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CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT TENSE IN SERBIAN AND ENGLISH

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Abstract. This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the syntactic-semantic features inherent in the present tense in the Serbian language, juxtaposed with an exploration of their counterparts in the English language. Delving into the intricacies of specific meanings, we systematically incorporate indicative, relative, and modal meanings. Beyond delineating the fundamental constructs of the present tense, particular emphasis is placed on the temporal dimension, elucidating the property of the present tense not only to refer to past events but also to indicate future actions. Addressing the complex nature of tense as a linguistic category, the study extends its analytical framework to the category of aspect, thereby elucidating the varied verb forms of the English present tense, including the progressive, perfect, and perfect-progressive aspects. Employing a methodology combining contrastive and descriptive analysis, the research explores the degrees of equivalence inherent in the present tense, in an attempt to discern and articulate corresponding counterparts in English for each specified syntactic-semantic nuance. Upon the completion of the analysis, it was concluded that both linguistic systems convey specific syntactic-semantic meanings, attesting to a considerable degree of equivalence. This analysis underscores the attributes shared by both languages, indicating a high degree of alignment between their linguistic structures.

Introduction

Research with a focus on verbs has long been at the core of the scholarly effort of linguists, who persist in their endeavors to unravel the intricate facets of this grammatical category. This scholarly pursuit is grounded in the recognition that verbs, as primary conveyors of sentence meaning in nearly all languages, merit meticulous examination. The inherent complexity of verbs is manifested in the diverse grammatical categories they embody, each presenting a distinct dimension meriting linguistic inquiry. Within the grammatical framework of the Serbian language, verbs exhibit a range of grammatical categories, including *aspect*, *transitivity* (diathesis alternation or verb alternation), *tense* (temporality), verb moods, affirmative/negative polarity, grammatical person, grammatical number, and gender (Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, p. 109). It is noteworthy to acknowledge that certain categories, as highlighted by Klajn (2005, p. 106), are uniquely intrinsic to the verb word class, such as mood, tense, transitivity (diathesis), and aspect. This nuanced perspective acknowledges the interdisciplinary nature of linguistic categories, thereby going beyond the limitations of exclusive verb-centric attribution.

Extending this discourse to the English language, it becomes evident that English verbs share attributes with Serbian verbs, including categories such as tense, aspect, mood, person, number, and transitivity (Đorđević, 2007, pp. 284–285). This cross-linguistic alignment reaffirms the ubiquity of certain grammatical features, thereby underscoring the universality inherent in linguistic structures.

In this paper, we focus on the grammatical categories of verb tense and aspect, particularly in the contexts of Serbian and English. Our aim is to compare and contrast the performance of these categories, recognizing inherent differences. We introduce a theoretical framework on tense and aspect, providing the groundwork for a comprehensive examination of the present tense. Our objective is to conduct a detailed contrastive analysis of the present tense, elucidating its features and identifying equivalents or counterparts in both languages. Through this approach, we aim to clarify the fundamental meanings of the present tense and assess their equivalence across Serbian and English.

Category of Tense

The category of tense is exclusively associated with verbs, i.e., verb phrases. Verbs denote actions, states, or events, thereby facilitating their classification within specific temporal frames. This leads us to explore the concept of temporal frames. The conceptualization of time varies across languages and their normative grammatical frameworks. Consequently, time can be understood as both a physical and grammatical phenomenon. When conceived as a physical phenomenon, time is regarded as a universal, non-linguistic concept delineated into past, present, and future temporal domains. Conversely, when discussing the grammatical category of tense, we reference the alignment between the form of a verb and our temporal perception (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1972, p. 40). Hence, it can be inferred that the notion of physical time and the tense category are intertwined, with the latter contingent upon the former for its delineation.

The tense category is considered to consist of verb forms that indicate when the action of the verb in the predicate takes place, directly or indirectly linking that time to the temporal context of the speech situation (Пипер & Клајн, 2013, p. 166).² This underscores the correlation between the category of tense and the usage of verb forms in discourse, where the verb form is juxtaposed with the moment of communication. According to Novakov, the primary function of verb tenses is temporal localization, facilitating the determination of when a given situation occurred in physical time (Novakov, 2022, p. 203). Moreover, it is important to note that there is a direct correlation between the category of tense and the semantic category of temporality. The examination of temporality vis-à-vis the tense category reveals distinct syntactic-semantic features. Temporality fundamentally pertains to situating the event described by a sentence in relation to the moment of its communication, considering three basic possibilities and their permutations: whether the first situation partially or wholly precedes the second, whether it coincides with it, or whether it succeeds it (Пипер et al., 2005, p. 745). In essence, temporality determines the positioning of an event along the temporal axis, taking into account both the moment of its communication and the temporal relationship between the event and its communication. In discourse, exploring these relationships often leads to the identification of indicative and relative meanings.

An examination of the verb tenses in Serbian reveals a categorization into seven distinct forms. They include simple tenses—the present, aorist, and imperfect—and complex tenses: the perfect, pluperfect, future I, and future II (Клајн, 2005, p. 114; Пипер & Клајн, 2013, p. 167). Comparing these verb

² All examples, quotations, and paraphrases from Serbian grammar books cited in this paper (except where explicitly stated) have been translated into English by the author of the paper.

tenses with the traditional division of time into the past, present, and future reveals that they do not align perfectly. Indeed, while some languages exhibit a surplus of verb tenses beyond the universal temporal categories, others may exhibit the opposite trend. Stevanović (Стевановић, 1989, p. 574) highlights this discrepancy, particularly noting the loss of temporal forms in most Slavic languages except for the perfect, present, and future.

Within the field of English grammar, Đorđević explores the conceptualization of time as both a universal phenomenon and a grammatical construct. She differentiates between *time* in reality, encompassing non-grammatical categories such as past, present, and future, and *tense* as a grammatical category (Đorđević, 2007, p. 330). This distinction is reflected in the discourse of earlier and contemporary grammatical analysis of the English language, where *time* refers to non-grammatical categories and *tense* to grammatical ones. When English verb tenses are examined, the focus is predominantly on two categories, the present and past (Đorđević, 2007, p. 330; Nelson & Greenbaum, 2016, p. 87; Burton-Roberts, 2016, p. 112). However, the treatment of the future tense within English grammar has been a subject of considerable debate and controversy.

Some grammarians posit a comprehensive list comprising twelve verb tenses, including the future tense, while others argue that only two primary tenses exist: present and preterite (or past). According to the latter viewpoint, all other verb tenses are regarded as derivative forms of these two fundamental tenses, varying primarily in form or aspect (Vuković-Nikolić, 1995, p. 18). Consequently, determining the exact number of verb tenses in a language remains elusive due to these contrasting theoretical perspectives.

Category of Aspect

As described by Comrie (1976, p. 3), aspect primarily involves different ways of understanding the internal temporal structure of a situation. This definition highlights the inherent overlap of aspectual categories with the nuanced semantics of situations. In accordance with this definition, research has focused on differentiating between aspectual and temporal categories. Comrie asserts that verb aspect is not concerned with the temporal alignment of a situation relative to other temporal points; rather, it pertains to the inherent temporal constitutiveness within the situation itself. Herein lies the conceptual separation between internal temporal dynamics (*aspect*) and external temporal references (*tense*)—a crucial distinction highlighted by Comrie (1976, p. 5).

In recent grammatical analyses of Serbian, scholars have defined verb aspect as a grammatical category related to the temporal duration of the action, state, or event expressed by a verb, as indicated by its lexical semantics (Ђорђевић et al., 2014, p. 365; Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, p. 109). In the Serbian linguistic

framework, verbs are classified into various groups based on the category of aspect, revealing distinct temporal features inherent in verb actions.

In Serbian, verbs are categorized into three distinct groups based on aspect: imperfective, perfective, and aspectual pairs. Notably, both imperfective and perfective aspects have subtypes,³ reflecting some inherent ambiguity in verbs. Imperfective verbs describe actions, states, or events characterized by temporal duration with no inherent limit (e.g., *čitati, raditi, donositi, dolaziti*), while perfective verbs denote actions, states, or events with finite temporal boundaries, indicating completion (e.g., *pasti, skočiti, zapjevati, pogledati, poigrati se*) (Ђорђевић et al., 2014, p. 365). This observation aligns with Comrie's analysis of internal temporal structure through the examination of imperfect and perfect tenses. Furthermore, alongside these two primary aspects, Serbian has verbs that exhibit both perfective and imperfective qualities. Klajn refers to these as *dvovidski* (biaspectual or aspectually paired) verbs (Klajn, 2005, p. 106). Identifying biaspectual verbs hinges primarily on the contextual cues in an utterance, as exemplified by verbs such as *čitati, telefonirati, ručati*, and others (Ђорђевић et al., 2014, p. 366).

In contemporary grammatical analyses of English, verbs are commonly categorized as perfective or progressive (Nelson & Greenbaum, 2016, p. 88). Beyond these categories, there is a subset of verbs that lack explicit aspectual marking. Such verbs are classified as either unmarked or, as described in *The Cambridge English Grammar*, as having non-progressive aspect (Huddleston & Pullum, 2016, p. 117). At a fundamental level, it can be asserted that verb aspect in English serves a function comparable to that in Serbian, conveying primarily information about the completion and duration of an action. Analyzing verb aspect in English and Serbian reveals the key differences between how each language marks this grammatical feature. Serbian uses distinct morphological markers to indicate aspect, with changes often introduced through verb prefixes (Subanović, 2023, p. 198). In contrast, English does not have distinct morphological markers for aspect; instead, it relies on tense, modal and auxiliary verbs, and context to express similar meanings. Therefore, the basis for comparing Serbian and English verb aspect forms lies in understanding how each language uses distinctive linguistic mechanisms to express similar aspectual meanings, despite their differing grammatical structures. However, a closer look at the features of aspect reveals a more complex system, with various subtypes and terminologies that have evolved over time, encompassing both historical and contemporary linguistic discourse.⁴

³ For a detailed discussion of the categorization of Serbian verbs into imperfective and perfective subtypes based on aspect, see Klajn (2005, pp. 105–106).

⁴ For a comprehensive exploration of the conceptions and characteristics of aspect in English, see Novakov (1988, pp. 170–179).

In discussing the formation of aspect in English, Glođović asserts that it primarily manifests at the syntactic-semantic level within the verb phrase or verb form, whereas in Serbian, differences in aspect are evident at both the morphological-lexical and syntactic-semantic levels (Глођовић, 2017, p. 105). Conversely, Novakov emphasizes the need to examine the extent to which aspect functions as a grammatical category, the influence of contextual factors on aspectual meaning, and the role of the lexicon, particularly the semantic nuances of verb meanings (Novakov, 1988, p. 178).

The distinction between verb tense and aspect has historically prompted scholarly debates. Novakov (1988) cautiously proposes the term *verb tense-aspect*, suggesting that finite verb forms integrate both tense and aspectual characteristics. This viewpoint, which emphasizes observing verb categories, serves as a guiding principle for this paper. Accordingly, the differences between the present tense in Serbian and English are thus examined within the framework of the tense-aspect category.

Present Tense

The present tense, grounded in the universal theory of time, typically denotes actions or states concurrent with the moment of speech. According to Stanojčić and Popović (Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, p. 387), the present tense, in its fundamental capacity of demarcating an action attributed to a subjective term—i.e., serving as a predicate—essentially conveys an action, state, or event transpiring at the moment under discussion. In linguistic analysis, the present tense proves to be more than just a reflection of the moment of speech, displaying a range of temporal subtleties. Its versatility allows for the expression of diverse temporal features, expanding beyond immediate temporal constraints. Further exploration of its role in discourse and its efficacy in conveying nuanced expressions promises valuable insights into the interplay of temporal semantics and linguistic structure.

In contemporary Serbian, the present tense is formed by adding suffixes to the base form of the verb, which are different for singular and plural. This process entails appending appropriate suffixes to the verb stem to indicate the present tense, thereby expressing the temporal dimension of the action or state described. This morphological process serves as a pivotal mechanism for inflecting verbs in Serbian, enabling precise expression of temporal distinctions in discourse.

Singular:

1. *-m*
2. *-š*
3. *-Ø*

Plural:

1. *-mo*
2. *-te*
3. *-e, -u, and -ju*

It is observable that in forming the present tense, suffixes are added for all persons except the 3rd person singular. Additionally, a notable phenomenon occurs in the 3rd person plural, where we find variation, with one three distinct suffixes added. This can be illustrated with the verb *trčati* [to run] in Example 1. Parallels can be drawn regarding the structural framework observed in Serbian, as in English, the construction of the present tense similarly involves suffixation.

Example 1.

| Singular: | Plural: |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. <i>trči-m</i> | 1. <i>trči-mo</i> |
| 2. <i>trči-š</i> | 2. <i>trči-te</i> |
| 3. <i>trči-</i> | 3. <i>trč-e</i> |

Specifically, in the Serbian linguistic context, the present tense serves as the primary means for indicating actions occurring in the present. However, its function extends beyond present actions to include the expression of past events, future occurrences, and actions with modal nuances (Танасић, 1996, p. 7). In probing the intricate connection between action and temporality, grammatical inquiry often hinges upon Reichenbach's concept of the "moment of reference," a seminal addition to the temporal framework of English. As underscored by Tanasić, prior to the incorporation of the moment of reference, temporal analysis predominantly revolved around aligning the moment of action with the moment of speech. However, the advent of Reichenbach's framework has broadened the scope to include the nuanced interplay between the moment of action and the moment of reference (Танасић, 1996, p. 23). Consequently, in literary discourse, actions are classified as either referential or non-referential, based on both morphological and syntactic factors. At the morphological level, attention is directed towards identifying the verb forms associated with referential and non-referential actions, while at the syntactic level, the focus shifts towards explaining their semantic functions.⁵

In Serbian, the present tense covers various modalities of action, leading to subtypes outlined in literary discourse. These subtypes are characterized by the subtle meanings conveyed by the present tense and include the following:⁶

1. Indicative (real or absolute) present
 - Qualifying present
 - Proverbial gnomic present

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of present referential and non-referential actions, see Piper et al. (Пипер et al., 2005, pp. 353–365).

⁶ The classification of the present tense into types and subtypes based on the semantic significance of actions is explained in greater detail in Stanojčić and Popović (Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, pp. 387–388).

2. Relative meaning-based distinctions of the present
 - Narrative (historical) present
 - Future present
 - Relative qualifying present
 - Relative gnomic present
3. Modal meanings of the present

In the next section, a contrastive analysis is employed to examine the listed meanings of the present tense, with the aim of outlining distinctions through illustrative examples. Given the paper's focus on contrastive analysis and the reference to English, it is important to include an examination of the present tense in English as well. While the fundamental function of the present tense in English mirrors that in Serbian—situating actions within the current temporal framework—it also conveys additional meanings encountered in Serbian. Notably, English uses the present tense to express absolute, qualifying, and relative (narrative and future present) aspects (Declerck, 2006, pp. 171–191). Exploring the nuances of the present tense in one language will help to draw parallels with the other.

To effectively approach the contrastive analysis of the present tense in Serbian and English, it is essential to first clarify the significance of Serbian present tense morphology. The Serbian present tense is characterized by a complex system of suffixes that differentiates between singular and plural forms and conveys various temporal aspects. This intricate morphological structure is crucial for understanding how Serbian expresses different dimensions of time. In contrast, the English present tense is primarily marked by the addition of *-s* or *-es* for the third person singular, with other subjects using the base form of the verb. English also employs additional forms such as the progressive (e.g., “am running”), perfect (e.g., “have run”), and perfect-progressive⁷ (e.g., “have been running”). Comparing these forms highlights the differences in how each language handles temporal distinctions and provides a solid foundation for analyzing the present tense across both languages. In this paper, we adopt a comprehensive approach to examining the English present tense by considering all its forms (simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect-progressive) from the perspective of the tense-aspect category.

⁷ The perfect-progressive aspect (e.g., “have been running”) combines the features of the perfect and progressive aspects, which is why some linguistic literature does not consider it as a separate aspect. Instead, it is often viewed as a blend of the perfective aspect, which emphasizes the completion of an action, and the progressive aspect, which focuses on the ongoing nature of the action.

Contrastive Analysis

The primary objective of contrastive analysis is to compare specific linguistic elements across two or more languages. In this paper, we focus on contrasting the subtleties of the present tense in Serbian and English. Our central aim is to examine analogous constructs within both linguistic systems. Employing a descriptive method, we first analyze the semantic properties of the present tense in Serbian. We then assess the extent of correspondence between these constructs and their English counterparts. Given the inherent differences between the two languages, including distinct lexical and morphological structures, we acknowledge that achieving absolute correspondence is unlikely.

We begin our analysis by examining the indicative meaning of the present tense in Serbian. In scholarly discourse, the indicative present is often referred to as the absolute or real present. This form of the present tense signifies concurrency or simultaneity with the moment of speaking (Ђорђевић et al., 2014, p. 366). Essentially, it describes situations that persist at the time of discourse. Given that the action in question begins before the moment of speech and its completion time remains unspecified, verbs in the imperfect form are often used alongside the indicative present. For illustration, Example 2 presents a series of sentences demonstrating the indicative function, which are then translated into English to evaluate their overlap.

Example 2. Indicative present

Original sentences in Serbian (Ђорђевић et al., 2016, p. 366) and their English translations:

1. *Trenutno se nalazim kod kuće.* [I'm at home right now. / I'm staying at home.]
2. *Marko ove godine pohađa kurs iz sintakse srpskog jezika.* [Marko is taking a course on Serbian syntax this year.]
3. *Utakmica koja je u toku prenosi se na televiziji.* [The ongoing match is being broadcast on television.]

The indicative present in Serbian signifies actions that occur simultaneously with the act of communication about them. This temporal immediacy is further emphasized by temporal adverbs or expressions such as *trenutno* [right now], *ove godine* [this year], and *u toku* [ongoing], which support the meaning of the present tense, particularly in the sentences above (Танасић, 1996, pp. 48–50). In sentence (1), the temporal adverb *trenutno* [right now] emphasizes the synchronicity of the event with the moment of speech. For its translation, two options were considered. Initially, the present simple with the auxiliary verb *to be* was used for naturalness. However, to more accurately convey the sense of the action being underway, the present progressive tense with the verb *stay*

was chosen. This better reflects the continuous aspect of the action compared to the static or “absolute” nature of the present simple.

Similarly, in sentence (2), the temporal marker *this year* indicates the transient nature of the action, warranting the use of the present progressive rather than the simple present. This choice emphasizes the temporariness and infrequency of the action. In contrast, sentence (3) uses the passive voice in the present progressive to highlight the ongoing duration of the action at the moment of speech, reflecting the temporal immediacy of the original sentence. Upon analysis, it becomes apparent that the indicative present in Serbian often aligns more closely with the present progressive in English. However, due to their inherent characteristics, some verbs may require translation using the simple present. This distinction underscores the nuanced interplay between the two languages and the complexities involved in achieving absolute equivalence.

Additionally, it is essential to analyze the aspectual characteristics of the selected verbs. The Serbian verbs *nalaziti se*, *pohađati*, and *prenositi se* are in the imperfective aspect. Their English equivalents are also rendered in the imperfective (progressive) aspect, typically expressed with the present progressive. An exception occurs in the first sentence, where two translations are provided. When using the present progressive in English (I’m staying at home), the aspect remains imperfective. However, when the present simple is used (I’m at home), the aspect becomes unmarked. This distinction highlights the variability in aspectual representation between the two languages.

The analysis then expands on the indicative meaning of the present tense by incorporating the “qualifying” aspect. This addition involves describing actions that are ongoing and continuous, persisting even during the act of discourse. Scholarly literature refers to this semantic feature as the “indicative qualifying present” (Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, p. 388).

Example 3. Indicative qualifying present

Original sentences in Serbian (Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, p. 388) and their English translations:

1. Sava *se* kod Beograda *uliva* u Dunav. [The Sava *flows* into the Danube near Belgrade.]
2. Život nam *vraća* samo ono što mi drugima *dajemo*. [Life only *gives* back to us what we give to others.]
3. Marija *govori* nekoliko jezika. [Maria *speaks* several languages.]

Given that the indicative qualifying present conveys actions characterized by perpetual continuity with the moment of speech, we expect its English counterpart to be the present simple tense. This assumption is supported by the examination of sentences (1), (2), and (3). Analysis of the verbs *uliva* [flows], *vraća* [gives back], *dajemo* [give], and *govori* [speaks] in their respective contexts

reveals a recurrent temporal pattern, signifying repeated duration. Consequently, we deduce that the present simple tense, due to its inherent function of denoting habitual actions, serves as a direct equivalent of the indicative qualifying present. Given the habitual and repeated nature of the actions described in the Serbian sentences, the English translation employs the present simple tense. This choice is crucial because the present simple is the most appropriate tense in English for expressing habitual or repeated actions.

In Serbian, the verbs *uliva*, *vraća*, *dajemo*, and *govori* are in the imperfective aspect, which clearly marks these actions as ongoing or habitual. In contrast, in English, aspect is conveyed differently, primarily through the choice of tenses rather than verb forms. In this context, the present simple is used because it effectively represents the habitual or general nature of the actions. Unlike Serbian, where the imperfective aspect is directly indicated by the verb form, English relies on the present simple to convey similar meanings, leaving the aspect unmarked. This approach differs from previous examples where Serbian imperfective verbs were translated into English using the present progressive. In those cases, the progressive aspect was chosen to emphasize the ongoing nature of the actions. Here, however, the habitual or repeated nature of the actions is most accurately conveyed with the present simple, even though it does not explicitly mark aspect as in Serbian.

Translating proverbs from one language to another has always been challenging, as literal or word-for-word translations are usually inadequate. This difficulty is particularly pronounced with the proverbial gnomic present used in the indicative sense, which poses unique challenges in finding suitable translation equivalents. For illustration, consider examples of proverbs with the gnomic present from a website dedicated to translating proverbs and expressions from Serbian to English.⁸ Example 4 provides the original proverbs alongside their suggested translations.

Example 4. Proverbial gnomic present

Original sentences in Serbian and their English translations:

1. Ko rano *rani*, dvije sreće *grabi*. [The early bird *catches* the worm.]
2. Iver *ne pada* daleko od klade. [An apple *doesn't fall* far from the tree.]
3. *Miješa* babe i žabe. [He/She *is mixing* apples and oranges.]

Upon reviewing sentences containing the proverbial gnomic present in their semantic context, it is evident that the italicized Serbian verbs (*rani*, *grabi*, *ne pada*, and *miješa*) correspond to the present tense. Analysis of the translations reveals that they accurately convey the meaning of the original Serbian sentences.

⁸ The Serbian examples and their translations were sourced from: <https://app.memrise.com/course/887666/srpski-jezik-serbian-language/24/>.

However, in terms of equivalence, while the present tense is predominant in English translations, it is not exclusively the simple present tense. For example, in sentence (3), the present progressive is used. Translating proverbs can be particularly challenging due to their cultural and contextual references, which may not have direct equivalents in another language.

In sentence (3), the present progressive in English might be substituted with the present simple in other translations to convey a similar meaning. *The Cambridge Dictionary*, for instance, lists “mixes apples and oranges” as a possible translation and notes that both tenses can be appropriate depending on the intended emphasis.⁹ Additionally, many proverbs are fixed expressions in both languages, meaning that the choice of tense or wording is not flexible and must align with the established form of the proverb. As a result, the option to adjust the tense or structure sometimes does not exist, further complicating the translation process. This inflexibility further complicates the translation process. Consequently, the gnomic (proverbial) present in Serbian does not have an exact equivalent tense in English. The translation choice often depends on the specific meaning and context, leading to partial rather than complete equivalence between the two languages.

The comparison of aspectual dimensions in the given sentences reveals notable differences between Serbian and English. In sentences (1) and (3), all Serbian verbs are in the imperfective aspect (*rani*, *grabi*, and *miješa*). In English, however, only the verb in sentence 3, *is mixing*, is in the present progressive, which marks the action as ongoing. The verbs in sentences (1) and (3) are rendered in the present simple tense in English, which does not explicitly mark aspect but instead conveys habitual actions or general truths. Thus, the aspect in English remains unmarked in these cases. Conversely, in sentence (2), the Serbian verb *ne pada* is in the perfective aspect, indicating a completed action. In the English translation, *doesn't fall*, the verb is in the present simple tense, which does not explicitly denote aspect. This shows that the perfective aspect in Serbian does not have a direct equivalent in English.

Up to this point, the examination has primarily focused on the indicative meaning of the present tense, where actions occur simultaneously with the moment of speech. In contrast, the present tense with a temporal function denotes actions that coincide with a specific timeframe other than the time of utterance (Станојчић & Поповић, 2016, p. 388). Specifically, the relative present conveys actions that persist not only in the present but also extend into both the past and the future. Consequently, in literary discourse, we encounter instances of the narrative present and the future present, or present for the future. Additionally, within the relative present, qualifying features may emerge, leading to the formation of

⁹ For additional reference, see: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/to-compare-apples-and-with-oranges>.

the term “relative qualifying present.” In the following analysis, our objective is to identify the English equivalents of the Serbian narrative present.

Example 5. Narrative present

Original text in Serbian:

Prije nekoliko dana *idemo* nas dvojica ulicom, *gledamo* izloge i upravo pred knjižarom *sretnemo* Petra. Uđemo u knjižaru i *kupimo* knjigu koju nam je on odavno tražio (Stanojčić & Popović, 2016, p. 388).

English translation:

A few days ago, the two of us *are walking* down the street, *looking* at the shop windows, and right in front of the bookstore we *meet* Peter. We *go* into the bookstore and *buy* the book that he asked for a long time ago.

Examining the initial segment of the text, we observe the temporal expression *a few days ago*, situating the narrative’s events in the past. However, the subsequent verbs are conjugated in the present tense (*idemo*, *gledamo*, *sretnemo*, *uđemo*, and *kupimo*). This juxtaposition indicates the use of the present tense in a relative capacity. Upon scrutinizing the independently conducted English translation, a similar pattern emerges. Notably, the aforementioned verbs are translated into the present tense, while verbs denoting the narrative background (*idemo* and *gledamo*) are rendered in the present progressive, and those signifying action in the present simple. This dual usage of tenses is justified by English grammar conventions, where both the simple and progressive present tenses are used to convey past actions. Specifically, the present progressive sets the scene for the narrative and describes longer background events, whereas the simple present highlights the unfolding action itself (Hewings, 2023, pp. 4–5). Consequently, it can be inferred that the narrative present finds its equivalent in both the simple and progressive present tenses.

In the provided sentences, we observe distinct aspectual formulations in Serbian and English when referencing past events. The Serbian verbs *idemo* and *gledamo* are in the imperfective aspect. Their English counterparts, *are walking* and *looking*, are in the present progressive, which is used here to describe actions occurring in the past, in line with rules that permit its use for ongoing or background events in narrative contexts. In contrast, the Serbian perfective verbs *sretnemo* [meet], *uđemo* [go], and *kupimo* [buy] indicate completed actions. These are rendered in English using the present simple tense, which, in combination with the past time marker *a few days ago*, effectively conveys the completion of these actions. However, in English, aspect is not explicitly marked but rather relies on tense and contextual cues to communicate the nature of the actions.

In addition to its relative relationship to the past, the present tense can also indicate actions relative to the future. This means that forthcoming actions

may be expressed using the present tense. This particular usage of the present tense is illustrated in Example 6 (Ђорђевић et al., 2014, p. 367).

Example 6. Future present

Original sentences in Serbian and their English translations:

1. Sutra *odlazimo* na put. [We *are going* on a trip tomorrow.]
2. Čim *stignem*, javiću se. [As soon as I *come / have come*, I will call you.]
3. Avion *sleće* u četiri sata sutra. [The plane *lands* at four o'clock tomorrow.]

When expressing future events with the present tense, it becomes apparent that absolute equivalence does not exist in English. In sentence (1), the present progressive is used to convey a future action. This usage is supported by the grammatical convention that the present progressive denotes a prearranged future action, typically in the first person singular. On the other hand, sentence (2) introduces the concept of time clause, where the Serbian present tense can be translated using either the simple present or the present perfect. Opting for the present perfect emphasizes the completion of the future action, thus highlighting the role of aspect in precisely conveying the meaning.

This illustrates how the aspectual category contributes to expressing future actions. Furthermore, in sentence (3), a specific program is outlined, which necessitates using the present simple tense as the closest equivalent. This underscores the established nature of the program, aligning with the inherent characteristics of the present simple. In summary, while the present tense in Serbian can be used to express future actions, translating it into English requires careful consideration of factors such as aspect and context to convey the intended meaning accurately.

The comparison of aspectual usage in Serbian and English reveals significant differences, particularly when expressing future events. In the Serbian sentences provided, the verbs in examples (1) and (3) exhibit the imperfective aspect. However, when translated into English, the aspectual equivalence is not fully maintained. In sentence (1), the Serbian verb *odlazimo* is imperfective, yet its English counterpart, *are going*, is rendered in the present progressive tense, which inherently expresses an ongoing or future action rather than a perfective one. Similarly, in sentence (3), the verb *sleće* in Serbian is imperfective, but its English translation, *lands*, is unmarked in aspect, being expressed in the present simple. In sentence (2), the choice between different tenses in English leads to variations in aspectual interpretation. The Serbian verb *stignem* is perfective, denoting a completed action. When translated into English using the present simple (I come), the aspect remains unmarked, diverging from the original Serbian perfective aspect. However, if the present perfect (I have come) is chosen, the English translation captures the perfective nature of the action, aligning more

closely with the Serbian original. This comparison illustrates the complexity of conveying aspectual features across languages.

Stanojčić and Popović introduce the concept of the relative qualifying present to denote actions that are recurrent or performed when the necessary conditions arise (Stanojčić & Popović, 2016, p. 388). They assert that this usage conveys a relative meaning within a qualifying context. This is supported by the observation that both perfective and imperfective aspects can be employed interchangeably without altering the intended meaning (Stanojčić & Popović, 2016, p. 389).

Example 7. Relative qualifying present

Original sentences in Serbian (Stanojčić & Popović, 2016, p. 389) and their English translations:

1. Poslije zime *dolazi* proljeće. [After winter, spring comes.]
2. Poslije zime *dođe* proljeće. [After winter, spring *has come*.]

Sentence (1) in the original contains the verb *dolazi* employed in the imperfect aspect. Upon examination, it becomes evident that the imperfective form bears an absolute meaning, denoting timelessness. Consequently, in the English translation, we opt for the present simple tense, as it aptly captures these characteristics. Due to this choice, the aspect in English remains unmarked, relying on the context rather than explicit aspectual markers. Conversely, in sentence (2), the verb is rendered in the perfective aspect with *dođe*. In this case, the English translation aligns with the Serbian perfective aspect. Thus, the translation employs the complex present perfect tense to signify the completion of the action indicated in sentence (2). Furthermore, the use of the complex present serves to underscore the thoroughness or completion of the action, as implied by the context of sentence (2).

Within the realm of indicative meanings, the gnomic usage of the present tense is delineated, necessitating familiarity with folk sayings and proverbs. Stanojčić and Popović extend the classification of the gnomic present beyond its indicative connotation, categorizing it within the realm of relative meaning as well. This classification is justified by the conditional implications inherent in the gnomic present, as well as the observation that both perfect and imperfect verb aspects may coexist within its usage (Stanojčić & Popović, 2016, p. 389).

Example 8. Relative gnomic present

Original sentences in Serbian and their English translations (Pješčić, 2020, pp. 36–177):

1. *Dobro se dobrim vraća*. [A good deed *is* never lost.]
2. *Dala baba groš da uđe u kolo, dala bi dukat da izađe*. [Give the piper a penny to play and two pence to *leave off*.]
3. *Zavadi, pa vladaj*. [Divide and rule.]

The analysis indicates that the intended meaning is appropriately conveyed. However, in sentences (2) and (3), the present tense is not used in the English translation; instead, the imperative mood is employed. As a result, we acknowledge that this particular type of present tense lacks a direct equivalence, prompting further exploration and consideration.

When examining the aspectual equivalence in the sentences in Example 8, notable differences emerge. In the original Serbian sentences, *vraća*, *izađe*, and *vlada* are in the imperfective aspect, while other verbs are in the perfective aspect. However, the English translations reveal a different treatment of aspect. Despite the aspectual distinctions in Serbian, the choice of the imperative mood in the English translation means that aspect is unmarked for all verbs. This suggests that while Serbian explicitly marks aspect through verb forms, English often relies on context and mood, particularly in imperative constructions, where aspectual features are not explicitly indicated.

In concluding the contrastive analysis, our focus shifts to identifying the modal meaning of the present tense in both languages. This involves examining modal meanings, which reflect the speaker's attitudes towards actions that are yet to be accomplished, encompassing desires, intentions, convictions, conditions, and commands. To illustrate these meanings, we refer to the sentences in Example 9 (Ђорђевић et al., 2014, p. 367).

Example 9. Modal meanings of the present tense

Original sentences in Serbian and their English translations:

1. Ako *uspijem*, slavićemo. [If I *succeed*, we will celebrate.]
2. Na utakmici mi *pobjeđujemo*. [We *win* the game.]
3. Ti da *ćutiš*. [You *keep* quiet.]
4. Šta da *radimo*? [What *can* we do?]

The translations of sentences with modal meanings reveal that the English equivalents for expressing conditions (1), convictions (2), and commands (3) typically use the present simple tense. Notably, in sentence (4), the modal verb *can* is employed, which aligns well with the context of modal meanings. Additionally, other modal verbs with similar meanings, such as *should*, could potentially serve as alternatives. Therefore, when discussing the modal meanings of the present tense in Serbian, we encounter partial rather than absolute equivalence. In our examples, equivalence is achieved through the use of the present simple tense and modal verbs.

Upon examining the sentences with modal meanings, we observe a shift in aspectual representation. In the original Serbian sentences, all verbs are in the imperfective aspect, except for *uspijem*, which is in the perfective aspect. In English, however, the equivalents for expressing conditions, convictions, and commands predominantly employ the present simple tense and modal verbs. This choice results in all verbs being unmarked for aspect in the English translations.

Conclusion

The present tense in both Serbian and English conveys various syntactic meanings, including indicative, relative, and modal. Through contrastive analysis and translation, we aimed to identify English equivalents for each of these meanings. While the present simple in English serves as an absolute equivalent for expressing timelessness within the indicative qualifying meaning, the present progressive often aligns with the indicative meaning of simultaneous action and speech. However, it is important to note that the present progressive is not always an absolute equivalent due to constraints imposed by verb dynamics. In such cases, the aspect category plays a crucial role in determining equivalence, highlighting a partial overlap between Serbian and English present tenses.

In analyzing the relative meanings of the present tense, we confirmed its capacity to denote both past and future actions. However, we found that there is no absolute equivalent in English for using the present tense to denote the past or future. Instead, the choice of verb tense in relative clauses is influenced by aspect. While both the present simple and present progressive can express the past, they are also employed for certain future actions. Regarding the present tense used to convey the future, the present perfect emerges as a potential equivalent, particularly when emphasizing the completion of a future action. This observation underscores the complexity of aligning aspectual features between languages.

Regarding aspect, it is noteworthy that the relative qualifying present accommodates both forms. As a result, absolute equivalence is not straightforward; in English, the perfective aspect is often represented using the present perfect tense. This observation underscores the complexities involved in aligning aspectual nuances between languages.

According to the results of the contrastive analysis, the gnomic present, used in proverbs and sayings, is of particular interest. We observed that this form of the present tense can express both relative and indicative meanings, for which no absolute equivalence exists. In translation, the focus shifts towards pragmatic considerations rather than strictly morphological-syntactic aspects. Consequently, various verb tenses can serve as counterparts of the Serbian gnomic present, highlighting the multifaceted nature of translation across linguistic and cultural contexts.

In the concluding section of the paper, we examined the modal meanings associated with the modal present tense. The contrastive analysis showed that no single verb tense covers all modal meanings. Instead, the use of modal verbs, in addition to verb tense, emerges as a key component in conveying these subtle modalities. This approach aligns with the inherent complexities of modal meanings and the category of mood, emphasizing the natural process of linguistic expression and translation across languages.

The analysis of aspect in Serbian and English reveals that a one-to-one equivalence between the two languages does not exist due to fundamental differences in how aspect is expressed. In Serbian, aspect is primarily conveyed through verb morphology, with distinct imperfective and perfective aspects marking ongoing versus completed actions. In contrast, English frequently relies on tense and context to imply aspectual meaning. Consequently, translations between these languages often reflect partial equivalence, as English does not always exhibit the same aspectual features inherent in Serbian verb forms.

Reflecting on the comprehensive contrastive analysis and descriptive method employed in our study, it becomes evident that various grammatical categories significantly impact the translation equivalents of the present tense. Our final assessment is that while certain meanings of the present tense in Serbian can be identified and expressed in English, absolute equivalence is often elusive due to the influence of different linguistic categories and the inherent complexity of the English present tense. This complexity arises from the interaction of various grammatical features, such as aspect and mood, which do not always have direct counterparts in other languages. Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of how these features influence meaning and to achieve closer translations. Such research will clarify these issues and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the present tense across languages.

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Контрастивна анализа садашњег времена у српском и енглеском језику

Резиме

Циљ овог рада је да представи садашње време (презент) са свим његовим синтаксичко-семантичким значењима у српском језику, као и да испита постојање тих значења у енглеском језику. У оквиру поменутих значења интегришемо индикативно, релативно и модално значење. Поред основних значења презента, посебна пажња придаје се темпоралном домену, односно могућности презента да изрази прошле, али и будуће ситуације. Како би се расвијетлила улога временског домена или могућност презента да изрази друге темпоралне домene, у раду имплементирамо теоријски осврт на граматичку категорију времена и физички аспект времена. Када се говори о комплексности садашњег времена у енглеском

језику, у рад уврштавамо категорију вида (аспекта) са циљем да се појасне различити глаголски облици презента у енглеском и пронађу пандани у српском језику. Ослањајући се на контрастивну и дескриптивну анализу, испитујемо степен еквиваленције садашњег времена и за сва поменута значења тражимо еквиваленте у енглеском језику.

Кључне речи: презент; глаголско вријеме; глаголски вид; контрастивна и дескриптивна анализа; еквиваленти; српски језик; енглески језик.



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