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Sixth International Scientific Conference

ФИЛКО FILKO

ФИЛОЛОГИЈА, КУЛТУРА И ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ

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ЗБОРНИК НА ТРУДОВИ
СБОРНИК СТАТЕЙ
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

18-19 октјабр 2021 / 18-19 октомври 2021 / 18-19 October 2021



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Филолошки факултет
ул. „Крсте Мисирков“ бр. 10-А
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Воронежский государственный университет
Филологический факультет
г. Воронеж, пл. Ленина, 10, корпус 2, к. 34, Россия

Университет им. Гоце Делчева – Штип

Филологический факультет
ул. „Крсте Мисирков“ д. 10-А
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Address of the Organizational Committee

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Faculty of Philology

10 pl. Lenina, Voronezh, 394006, Russia

Goce Delcev University - Stip

Faulty of Philology

Krste Misirkov St. 10-A

PO Box 201, Stip - 2000, Republic of Macedonia

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СОДРЖИНА / СОДЕРЖАНИЕ / CONTENT

1. Adili Bujar, Petrovska Sonja and Xhambazi Gzim - GENDER AND LEVEL OF TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE ON KEY FEATURES OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION.....	13
2. Ćeklić Nina S. - CONCEPTUAL POSITION AS A COMPOSITION PRINCIPLE IN REMNANTS OF THE WORLD BY IGOR MAROJEVIĆ.....	23
3. Gjorgjeva Ivana, Jankova Alagjovska Natka - ANGELA CARTER'S BLOODY CHAMBER IN RELATION TO THE SECOND WAVE FEMINISM	31
4. Пиев Крсте, Поп Зариева Наталија, Крстева Марија, Донеv Драган - THE NOTION OF BANISHMENT IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS	39
5. Ivanova Biljana, Kuzmanovska Dragana, Kirova Snezana - FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN SCHOOLS.....	45
6. Јованова-Митковска Снежана- КВАЛИТАТИВНАТА МЕТОДОЛОГИЈА И НЕЈЗИНАТА ПРИМЕНА ВО ОПШТЕСТВЕНИТЕ И ХУМАНИСТИЧКИТЕ НАУКИ	49
7. Крстев Марија, Донеv Драган, Поп Зариева Наталија, Илиев Крсте HEMINGWAY IN HEMINGWAY'S GIRL.....	59
8. Kujundžić Maja, Ćeklić Nina - SOCILINGUISTIC USE OF THE PASSIVE IN TWO 19TH CENTURY BRITISH NOVELS.....	65
9. Vangelov Nikola - INTERCULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL MARKETING	75
10. Антониевски Горан, Асани Агим - КАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ НА ГАСТРОНОМИЈАТА ВО ПОЛОШКИОТ РЕГИОН.....	83
11. Аржанова Ирина- СУЩНОСТЪ ЧЕЛОВЕКА И ИДЕАЛЫ ЖИЗНИ У СЛАВЯН.....	91
12. Арязмова Ольга Витальевна - ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЙ ТРАВЕЛОГ В ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРНОМ ИЗМЕРЕНИИ (на материале «Африканской книги» А. М. Стесина).....	99
13. Bangoji Salija -TEACHER COMPETENCIES FOR THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY	105
14. Василевская Анастасия - РАБОТА С ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОЙ ДЕТАЛЬЮ НА УРОКАХ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ В СРЕДНЕЙ ШКОЛЕ.....	113
15. Витанова-Рингачева Ана, Мицева Сузана ЈУРУЦИТЕ – МАКЕДОНСКИТЕ АМИШИ.....	117
16. Гальцова Дарья - СИНОНИМИЧЕСКИЕ СООТВЕТСТВИЯ В НАИМЕНОВАНИЯХ ОБРАГОВ (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ ВОРОНЕЖСКИХ ГОВОРОВ)	123
17. Гладышева Светлана - КНИГОИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО «СЛОВО» В СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ РУССКОГО ЗАРУБЕЖЬЯ.....	129
18. Голаков Костадин, Методијески Дејан - КАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ НА РУСКАТА ГАСТРОНОМИЈА.....	135
19. Грачева Жанна, Ганделидзе Диана - ЯЗЫКОВАЯ МОДА В РОССИИ НАЧАЛА XXI ВЕКА.....	143

20. Гркова-Беадер Марија - ПРАВОПИСОТ ВО НАСТАВАТА ПО МАКЕДОНСКИ ЈАЗИК ВО ОСНОВНОТО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ	155
21. Денкова Јованка - БЕГСТВО ВО/ОД ВИРТУЕЛНАТА РЕАЛНОСТ НА СОНИШТАТА	165
22. Ђуричковиќ Милутин - РУСКА ДРАМА ЗА ДЕЦУ И МЛАДЕ НА СРПСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ	175
23. Донев Драган, Поп Зариева Наталија, Костова Кристина, Илиев Крсте ИГИТАЛНИТЕ НОМАДИ КАКО КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ФЕНОМЕН ВО СОВРЕМЕНОТО ОПШТЕСТВО.....	185
24. Иљина Татјана, Моу Шужань - ОСОБЕННОСТИ ДИСТАНЦИОННОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ В РОССИИ И КИТАЕ.....	191
25. Иванов Стефан, Мартиновска Банде Цвета, Ивановска Билјана ОБРАБОТКА НА ПРИРОДЕН ЈАЗИК СО ТЕХНИКИ НА МАШИНСКО УЧЕЊЕ	197
26. Ивановска Билјана, Џафери Гзим - ГОВОРНИТЕ ЧИНОВИ И НИВНАТА ПОВРЗАНОСТ СО УЧТИВОСТА ВО ВРЕМЕ НА КОРОНА КРИЗАТА	203
27. Карначук Ирина - КЛАССИЧЕСКАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА КАК СПОСОБ СОХРАНЕНИЯ НРАВСТВЕННОСТИ НА УРОКАХ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ В СРЕДНЕЙ ШКОЛЕ	209
28. Ковилоски Славчо - ЗА ПОСТОЕЊЕТО НА МАКЕДОНСКАТА КНИЖЕВНА КРИТИКА ВО XIX ВЕК.....	213
29. Косяков Сергей - ИСТОРИЯ ПОПЕЧИТЕЛЬСТВА О СЛЕПЫХ И БИБЛИОТЕЧНОГО ОБСЛУЖИВАНИЯ НЕЗРЯЧИХ В ВОРОНЕЖСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ	221
30. Котев Иван - ПРАВДАТА И НЕПРАВДАТА ВО ФОЛКЛОРОТ (Во македонските народни песни, приказни и кратките жанри)	227
31. Мелкадзе Нанули - ЗАСТОЛЪЕ КАК ФРАГМЕНТ ГРУЗИНСКОЙ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ КАРТИНЫ МИРА	237
32. Младеновска-Ристовска Катерина - КУЛТОТ НА ВОДАТА ВО РЕЛИГИЈАТА НА АНТИЧКИТЕ МАКЕДОНЦИ.....	245
33. Нагина Ксения - ОБ УЧЕБНЫХ ПОСОБИЯХ В ВЫСШЕЙ ШКОЛЕ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ТВОРЧЕСТВА Л. ТОЛСТОГО	253
34. Негриевска Надица - СИНТАКСИЧКИ ФУНКЦИИ НА ПРОСТИТЕ ПРЕДЛОЗИ ВО ИТАЛИЈАНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК И НИВНИТЕ МОЖНИ ЕКВИВАЛЕНТИ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК.....	261
35. Пигунова Ксения - СПОСОБЫ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕННО-ВРЕМЕННОЙ КАРТИНЫ МИРА В РОМАНЕ ЕВГЕНИЯ ВОДОЛАЗКИНА «ЛАВР».....	271
36. Попов Сергей - ДИАЛЕКТНАЯ ГЕОГРАФИЧЕСКАЯ ЛЕКСИКА В РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ТОПОНИМИИ РОССИИ	279
37. Рогич Петја -БУГАРСКИОТ, МАКЕДОНСКИОТ И СРПСКИОТ ЈАЗИК – СЛИЧНОСТИ И РАЗЛИКИ.....	283
38. Сарафова Наташа - РАДИКАЛНООСЛОБОДИТЕЛНИОТ ФЕМИНИЗАМ ВО ДЕЛАТА НА АНГЕЛА КАРТЕР	291
39. Саздова Викторија, Ивановска Билјана - ЈАЗИЧНИТЕ ЕДИНИЦИ СО ПОЗИТИВЕН ЕМОЦИОНАЛЕН ПРИЗНАК ВО ЈАЗИЧНИОТ ПАР ГЕРМАНСКИ-МАКЕДОНСКИ	299

40. Стојановска-Стефанова Анета, Рунчева-Тасев Христина, Магдинчева Шопова Марија - КОМУНИКАЦИСКИ ПРЕДИЗВИЦИ ВО МУЛТИКУЛТУРНИТЕ ОПШТЕСТВА.....	307
41. Тасевска Марица - ОНЛАЈН НАСТАВАТА ПО ГЕРМАНСКИ ЈАЗИК ВО ВРЕМЕ НА ПАНДЕМИЈА. ИСКУСТВА И ПРЕДИЗВИЦИ.....	315
42. Тернова Татјана, Фролова Анна - РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИЈА ПАМЈАТИ В ПОЕЗИИ ОКСАНЫ ВАСЈАКИНОЙ	321
43. Ткаченко Дмитрий - ИНКЛУЗИВНОЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ В РОССИИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ЕВРОПЕЙСКОГО ОПЫТА	327
44. Ткаченко Татјана - ОПЫТ ОБРАЩЕНИЯ К СЛАВЯНСКИМ ЯЗЫКАМ НА ЗАНЯТИЯХ ПО РУССКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ В СПОРТИВНОМ ВУЗЕ	333
45. Тодорова Марија, Уланска Татјана - ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈАТА НА СТУДЕНТИТЕ ЗА ОНЛАЈН НАСТАВАТА ПО ШПАНСКИ И АНГЛИСКИ ЈАЗИК ВО УСЛОВИ НА ПАНДЕМИЈА	339
46. Урумова-Марковска Славица - ТЕХНОЛОГИЈАТА ВО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО КАКО ПРЕДИЗВИК ЗА ЗДРАВ ДЕТСКИ РАЗВОЈ	347
47. Цацков Оливер - МОРАВСКАТА МИСИЈА НА КИРИЛ И МЕТОДИЈА ЗНАЧАЕН ФАКТОР ЗА СЛОВЕНСКАТА ПИСМЕНОСТ.....	355
48. Шутаров Васко - СПЕЦИФИКИ НА МАКЕДОНСКАТА КУЛТУРНА ДИПЛОМАТИЈА	363

SOCILINGUISTIC USE OF THE PASSIVE IN TWO 19TH CENTURY BRITISH NOVELS

Maja Kujundžić¹, Nina Čeklić²

¹Associate Professor, University of East Sarajevo, Faculty of Philosophy Pale

²Associate Professor, University of East Sarajevo, Faculty of Education Bijeljina

Abstract

This article is inspired by our extensive research of the passive construction combined with consideration for the issues related to the social position of women. The resulting socio-linguistic research is based on the hypothesis that the passive construction, as a linguistic construction that expresses passivity, as its name implies, as opposed to activity and dynamism, will be more frequently used in the language of women since historically their position in a society have been passive and marginalized. Also, the feminine principle have been described and defined as the passive, as opposed to the male/masculine principle that has been defined as active and productive by many famous scholars and philosophers as well as in many cultural traditions (Kujundžić, 2021). In order to test this hypothesis, we decided to compare the frequency of the passive use in two British 19th-century novels written by a female and a male author respectively. As a female author we chose Jane Austen, as the first widely popular female British author, and her novel “Pride and Prejudice”, while as her male counterpart we chose William Thackeray’s “Vanity Fair” since they are both set within the same historical period – Napoleonic Wars, and they both deal with similar societal issues.

Keywords: *active, passive, male, female, social position*

1. Introduction

With the exception of matriarchy as a social system in which a woman was a dominant figure and around which the social and political life of a community was formed (Bachenhoff, 1861; McLennan, 1865; Morgan, 1877; Tylor, 1899; Briffault, 1927; Montagu, 1955; Campbell 1967; Gimbutse, 1974, 1989, 1991; Eisler 1987) the existence of which is nowadays perceived as rather controversial, it seems that for the biggest part of the history of the human kind women occupied and performed marginal social positions and roles, being perceived as passive and inadequate in comparison to men.

The prehistoric trend of female dominance/equality is to a certain degree present in the era of the first great civilisations. Women in Sumerian civilization enjoyed a certain level of equality with men, however, with the material and cultural development of Mesopotamian peoples the patriarchal structures are getting stronger and women’s rights start deteriorating in the later Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian cultures.

Position of women in Persia was similar to that of Sumerian women all the way to the fall of the Achaemenid Empire in the 4th century B.C. when it was invaded by Alexander the Great when under the influence of the Greek culture in which women were marginalized and subordinate to men, the position of Persian women

changes in the same direction. With the exception of Sparta, in which women had certain amount of equality with men, in majority of the ancient Greek polises women had very few rights, their main roles being limited to those of a wife and a mother, while their public life was limited to participation in a few religious rituals. Since the ancient Greek civilization inspired the social and cultural life of the Roman Empire to a great extent, it is not surprising that the position of Roman women was similar to that of the ancient Greek women, with slightly more freedom and rights at their disposal. It is obvious that from the early prehistoric times women are gradually losing their freedom and rights which, in certain religions and cultures, results in a complete disappearance of female deities and the ultimate development of the monotheistic religions, starting with Judaism and Christianity, all the way to Islam, which in their center have one male deity. We cannot say that monotheistic religions developed with a purpose to marginalize women, but it is obvious that in their various segments they truly reflect the social position of women whose primary role is that of a wife and a mother; the moral norms that relate to women are much more strict than those that relate to men when it comes to both their verbal and physical behaviour and expression.

The marginalised and subordinate position of women stays as such for centuries all the way to the modern times, when from the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th century significant improvements of their position take place due to the organized and systematic efforts of women to gain their rights, freedom and equality known as the feminist movements, thanks to which women managed to gain a great amount of equality – the right to vote, to be educated, and to hold positions in some of the most important walks of life. When it comes to the social position of women in the first half of the 19th century, the period from which are the female and male authors whose novels are analysed here, women are still very much marginalized and subordinated to men. According to Barbara Swords, the social position of women of this period is described as extremely bad “with few legal and economic rights or even receiving little respect” (1988: 76). Women are victims of the patriarchal system in which they are initially subordinated to their fathers and afterward while married to their husbands. Women are considered to be intellectually inferior and therefore inadequate to pursue education. In other words, women of this period are very much disprivileged and suppressed. Since women are seen as inadequate and deficient in various ways, they are supposed to passively and quietly follow men who are creative, dynamic and capable, and therefore the ones to decide, lead and rule. In the light of these findings, we hypothesized that the passive construction which is seen as indirect, neutral, subdued, or as its very name implies, passive, will be more frequently used in the language of the female author, that is, more frequent in Jane Austen’s than in William Thackeray’s novel.

2. Passive in this research

The passive construction is the central linguistic unit of this research since, apart from the fact that its very name contains the epithet “passive” which truthfully reflects the passive and subordinate social position of a woman, very often it is also described as “weak, languid, indecisive, cowardly, cunning, latent, clumsy, etc.” which “are other epithets that have been frequently used to describe women throughout history all the way to the present times”. On other hand active is perceived as “stronger, more concise, dynamic and direct in its expression” which are the features generally

assigned to men (Kujundžić, 2021: 135). The reasoning and proofs behind such descriptions of the passive and active Kujundžić finds in the works of many important authors that have dealt with these construction (Wooley 1907; Strunk 1914; Foerster/Stedman 1931; Jensen et. al; 1935; Kierzek 1939; Orwel 1946; Baker, 1962; Zinsner 1976; Bremner 1980; Williams 1981 1990; Klauser 1986; Roberts 1992; Wilson 1993; Baxter 1997; Zwicky 2006; Pinker 2014; Pullum, 2014).

The definiton and clasiffication of the passive construction used in this research is based on the notion of the passive gradient by Quirk at al. in which different types of passive are singled out on the basis of their ability to be transformed into their active counterparts. On top of the scalewe find central or true passives which have their direct active counterparts (1,2, 3,4), they are followed by semi-passives whose participles can have both, verbal and adjectival characteristic (5,6) and pseudo-passives which nominally resemble the passive but do not have their corresponding active counterparts (8,9) (1985: 167)

- (1) This violin was made by my father.
- (2) This conclusion is hardly justified by the results.
- (3) Coal has been replaced by oil.
- (4) This difficulty can be avoided in several ways.

-
- (5) We are encouraged to go on with the project.
 - (6) Leonard was interested in linguistics.
 - (7) The building is already demolished.
 - (8) The modern world is getting [‘becoming’] more highly industrialized and mechanized.

We also took into consideration non-finite passives which, as their name imply, do not contain a finite verb phrase such as in:

9. You will not find him more favourably spoken of by anyone. (P&P¹, p. 55)

3. Corpus and analysis of data

The choice of Jane Austen as a female author representative of the first half of the 19th century came naturally since she was the first widely recognized female British author, famous even today, not only among scholars and literary critics, but also in popular culture thanks to the everlasting quality of the topics she dealt with, as well as her, for those times, rather feminist approach to the themes of marriage and love. Since she is a rather original literary figure of her time, it was not easy to pair her with a corresponding male author for the sake of the valid comparison. Her first novels both deviate from and contain the critique of the trend of the sentimental novel still prevalent at that time, as well as the parody of the gothic novel as its sub-genre. In her novels we come across elements of realism, engaged descriptions of the social climate of those times, represented through biting irony and humour. For those reasons, as her male counterpart we chose William Thackeray and his novel “Vanity Fair”, which, even though published thirty-five years later after Austen’s novel, and even though it belongs to the Victorian period and as opposed to Austin’s which belongs to the Georgian, they share many similarities.

¹ The abbreviations following the examples – P&P and VT stand for the names of the novels from which they were extracted, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Vanity Fair* respectively.

Main characters in both novels are women with similar aspirations, from the same social milieu and the same historical period – the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Since women at those times could not work and support themselves financially, their material well-being depended on the possibility of a financially pleasing marriage. This aspiration is more than obviously stated at the very beginning of the Austen's novel: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife" (P&P, p. 2). In both novels we follow the main female characters on their quest to merry well, with all of their ups and downs.

Both Elizabeth Bennet and Becky Sharp do not quietly accept destinies that are predefined for them in accordance to their social status – they both step out of the limits and borders imposed on them by the society. Elizabeth Bennets reject to marry her cousin who is to inherit her father's estate as the closest male relative, even though this would provide financial security to her and her family, since not only that she does not have romantic feelings for him, but she feels contempt and disgust for him. Becky Sharp rejects to be content with the job of a governess in a rich family and to accept a marriage proposal from an old and unattractive, but rich aristocrat, even though that would end all of her present and future financial problems and worries. Instead, she is determined to fight for what she finds attractive and for what she thinks truly belongs to her in accordance to her beauty and talents.

Through the characters of their heroines both authors very skilfully question the ruling social structures, providing us, in this way, not only with valuable information about the social position of women at those times, but also about the historical and social factors and circumstances that shaped them as such. Both authors approach their topics and characters in the similar manner – they use realistic approach, rejecting the tradition of sentimentalism, and permeating their writing with elements of exquisite satire, irony and humour.

However, despite the similarities mentioned above it seems that the way Thackeray's deals with his topics, the way he tells his story, presents and builds his characters seems to be much more direct and unconventional from the way Austen does. As already mentioned, her main character Elizabeth Bennet has got strong individuality – she is free-minded and stubborn when it comes to her opinions and wishes. She says things that are quite courageous for a woman of those times such as – "I am resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any other person wholly unconnected with me" (P&P, p. 84). She is resolute to act in her own way and express her opinions even though from a woman from that era it is expected to be silent and docile. Her other statements such as – "There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me"; "Do not consider me now as an elegant female, intending to play you, but as a rational creature, speaking the truth from her heart" (P&P, p. 68), or "I am happier even than Jane; she only smiles, I laugh" (P&P, p. 471) further point out to the traits of her characters mentioned above. However, even though she is free-minded, outspoken and stubborn, and at the beginning of the novel also described as having a "playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous" (P&P, p.4), she never crosses the border of politeness – she is actually the epitome of righteousness and morality. She is the one noticing and commenting on the inappropriate traits and behaviour of other characters, enjoying uncovering and even ridiculing them, hoping at the same

time to “never ridicule what is wise or good” (P&P, p. 70). Even though she rejects to passively accept her life to be shaped by her family and community, and to accept all the societal norms prescribed for women at that time, ultimately, in her essence, she does represent the example of the female morality and chastity as demanded by her society. For example, while describing the character of her younger sister Lydia, she says that “our respectability in the world must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia’s character” fearing that because of that Lydia is on the way to become “a flirt in the worst and meanest degree of flirtation.” (P&P, p.288). Through this we see that she is preoccupied with norms of female morality, which is also confirmed by her reaction of shock after she gets to know that Lydia had sex before marriage and disgraced her family in such a way. Her opinion on this she keeps for herself in order to calm the tempest and protect her family’s reputation. Elizabeth shows a certain amount of rebelliousness and courage when her personal choices are at stake, but it is lacking when the general societal norms regarding behaviour and morality of women are in question. Neither Elizabeth nor the author of the novel question them essentially. By pointing out to this we do not belittle the importance of Elizabeth’s “small” protests since joined with those of others they initiate big changes, but we are trying to point out to the existence of a certain amount of indirectness and passivity in relation to both, the author of the novel, Jane Austen, and her main character, Elizabeth Bennet, in comparison to Thackeray and his heroine, Becky Sharp.

As opposed to Elizabeth, Becky Sharp, as her family name implies, is much more sharp and direct when it comes to her actions. She uses any means at her disposal in order to reach her aims, even if they are completely unscrupulous and contrary to the prevailing societal and moral norms. Unlike Elizabeth, she does not waste any time to ponder upon the righteousness and morality of her actions. She does not refrain from showing, verbalising and admitting her calculated and cunning intentions – she shows and verbalises them rather openly. She lacks empathy and does not have honest and deep emotions for anyone. The novel is crowded with examples of her unscrupulous obsession with the social and material status and her readiness to use all kinds of means in order to reach them – mostly by means of using her sexuality in order to seduce and use men of power for her own benefit. According to Kettle she “uses consciously and systematically all the men’s weapons plus her one natural asset, her sex, to storm the men’s world” (1954: 164). Harold Bloom describes her as “famously a bad woman, selfish and endlessly designing, rarely bothered by a concern for truth, morals, or the good of the community.” (2008: 2). In the world of chaste and moral Elizabeth Bennet, Becky’s behaviour belongs to the realm of scandalous and unimaginable taboos.

Apart from his heroine being more direct, the way Thackeray tells the story of his novels and uncovers his characters is also much more direct from the way Austen does. He does so by employing his narrator to tell us the story of the novel and its characters so directly and without any constraint, that rather often his remarks and comments can be intrusive, presumptuous and even offensive. In the same manner, his narrator declares himself as a man, that is, as “man and brother” which according to Lisa Jadwin serves to “affirm male supremacy” (1992: 670) in the patriarchal surroundings in which we find Becky Sharp and other female characters. On the other hand, Austen does it indirectly – we get to know about the story of her novel and

her characters not directly form her narrator but indirectly through dialogues among other characters and via their inner thoughts. For example, at the very beginning we get to know about Elizabeth from her father who describes her in the following manner: “They have none of them much to recommend them; they are all silly and ignorant like other girls’ replied he; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (P&P, p. 2). Very often Austen uses narrative strategy known as “free indirect discourse” which introduces a character’s thoughts and feelings by use of phrases such as “she thought”, or “she allowed” but without quoting them. In this way the voice of a character gets mixed up with the voice of the narrator and we are not always able to make clear distinction between them. According to Morrison, indirect ways of telling about the story of the novel and its characters is typical for women, since we get to know about them mostly through the prism of characters’ relationships which for women are a priority i.e. for women “personal relationships define one’s being” (1994: 341).

As already mentioned, both authors use elements of satire in their novels, but Thackeray’s satire is much more direct and sharp than the mild satire we find in Austen’s novel, which is more indirect and cautious. Her mild approach is reflected in the way Charlotte Brontë comments on her novel “Pride and Prejudice” as “fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck” (Brontë in Gilbert & Gubar, 1976: 109), while professor Julia Prewitt Brown sees her novel as containing many “cowardly accommodations” (Prewitt Brown in Morrison, 1994: 341). On the other hand, Brontë appreciates Thackeray’s sharp and direct critique of the society devoting to him the second edition of her novel “Jane Eyre” with the following words: “the first social regenerator of the day - the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things” (Brontë, 1847: 6).

The fact that Austen tends to stay within the borders of convention, which is seen as more appropriate for women, is reflected also in the fact that her bad characters, even though susceptible to human mistakes and follies, they rarely enter the realms of scandalous which is rather often the case with quite a few of Thackeray’s characters which are prone to all kinds of vice and perversion.

On the basis of what is said above, it is more than clear that Austen’s approach to her novel’s plot and its characters is less direct, “sharp” and “free” from Thackeray’ does it. This has been reflected in the frequency of the passive use in their novels, which has confirmed our hypothesis and shown that passives were considerably more frequent in Austen’s than in Thackeray’s novel. For the sake of the validity of comparison, the passive constructions were extracted from the same numbers of the words in both novels (64 500).

Table (1) – Passives in “Pride and Prejudice” & “Vanity Fair”

	centralni pasivi	nefinitini pasivi	polupasivi	pseudopasivi	ukupno
Pride & Prejudice	465/54,2%	176/20,5%	159/18,5%	58/6,8%	858
Vanity Fair	233	192	90	71	586
Ukupno	698	368	240	129	1444

As it is obvious, the use of the passive is more frequent in Austen’s novel. In the total number of these constructions found in both novels which is 1,444 examples, in Austen’s novel their number is 858 examples, while in Thackeray’s novel they appear in the number of 586 examples, which is 272 examples of passives less, or in other words, almost one third less in his novel. The number of central passives is also higher in Austen’s novel, 466 vs. 233 examples, which is almost exactly half as much than in Austen’s novel. Below are examples of central passives from both novels:

10. They were not welcomed home very cordially by their mother. (P&P, p.42).

11. This invitation was accepted joyfully. (VF p. 3).

According to our hypothesis we would expect that all types of the passive are more frequent in Austen’s novel, but that is not the case with non-finite passives which are more frequent in Thackeray’s novel, 192 vs. 176 examples. This difference of only 16 non-passives might seem to be irrelevant, but it actually is important since it represents the change in the prevailing pattern and, in that sense, it might point out to important linguistic information. We explain such frequency of non-finite passives by Thackeray’s tendency to frequently use long and complex sentences (see example 13) Namely, one of the characteristics of such sentences is the use of postmodifications, “which often appear in the form of non-finite clauses” (Kujundžić, 2016: 94). According to Jucker *-ed* participle clauses appear often in the form of non-finite passive clauses (Jucker, 1992). The number of such long sentences in Thackeray’s novel is 56 examples, while in Austen’s novel their number is smaller by a half, 27 examples, which explains why non-finite passives are more frequent in Thackeray’s novel. However, the explanation that is more relevant for us in this context is related to the fact that women in those times were expected to be simple, modest and pious, which should have been also reflected in their language use, which accordingly should not be not too long, complex or extravagant, all of which Thackeray could more easily afford as a male writer. Below are examples of non-finite passives in both novels:

12. “Oh! my dear,” cried his wife, “I cannot bear to hear that mentioned.” (P&P, p. 43)

13. The flowers, and the presents, and the trunks, and bonnet-boxes of Miss Sedley having been arranged by Mr. Sambo in the carriage, together with a very small and weather-beaten old cow’s-skin trunk with Miss Sharp’s card neatly nailed upon it, which was delivered by Sambo with a grin, and packed by the coachman with a corresponding sneer — the hour for parting came; and the grief of that moment was considerably lessened by the admirable discourse which Miss Pinkerton addressed to her pupil. (VF, p.204)

Semi-passives are more frequent in Austen’s novel, 159 vs. 90 examples. These passives often contain participles that express certain emotional states (see examples

14 and 15), but since they are a types of the passiv that implies a certain amout of in-directness and formality in their expression which explains their more frequent use in the language of Austen's novel. Relevant xmaples of semi-passives are given bellow:

14. Sir William had been delighted with him. (P&P, p. 5)

15. She will be shaken when she first hears the news. (VF, p. 196).

Pseudo-passives are more frequent in Thackeray's novel, 71 vs. 58 examples. In the passive gradient they are at the very bottom which means that they least resemble "true" passives and that, therefore, the degree of their formality and indirectness is smaller. Quite a few of them appear with participles that are "morphologically isolated through the process of compounding" such as in – But Cavalli was unimpressed by this sally" (Kujundžić, 2016: 45) or as in example from Thackeray's novel given below (17). As they point out to a certain dose of linguistic freedom and extravagance that explains their higher frequency in Thackeray's novel. Below are examples of pseudo-passives from both novels:

16. You are mistaken. (P&P p.32)

17. She passed as weary a fortnight as ever mortal spent in Miss Crawley's sick-room; but her little nerves seemed to be of iron, as she was quite unshaken by the duty and the tedium of the sick-chamber. (VF, p. 173)

And to conclude, the quantitative results of our research presented above confirmed our hypothesis. The total number of all the passives is higher in the language of the female author, pointing out to the fact that the marginalized and passive social position of women in times of the 19th century got reflected in her language. The frequency of particular types of the passive, such as non-finite and pseudo-passives which are more frequent in the novel of the male author, and pseudo-passives which are more frequent in the novel of the female author is also explained in relation to gender. All of this has not only proven our hypothesis and together with it the linguistic stanza according to which language use is related to gender, bu also the main tenet of sociolinguistics which relates linguistic use to various social factor.

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