

THE CATEGORY OF VOICE IN ENGLISH AND SLOVAK

Richard Repka – Peter Bojo

Faculty of Education, Comenius University – Faculty of Education, Comenius University

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Abstrakt: Predkladaný článok sa zaoberá komparatívnou analýzou trpného rodu a procesu pasivizácie v anglickom a v slovenskom jazyku. Cieľom článku je prostredníctvom medzijazykovej analýzy načrtnúť podobnosti a rozdiely používania trpného rodu s dôrazom na štruktúru a sémantiku pasíva. V článku rozlišujeme tradičnú pedagogickú interpretáciu a sémanticky motivovaný prístup k tomuto gramatickému javu.

Kľúčové slová: trpný rod, pasivizácia, štruktúra, sémantický prístup, komparatívna analýza

Abstract: This article presents a comparative analysis of the passive voice and passivisation process in English and Slovak. It is aimed at outlining similarities and differences in passive treatment between the two languages, with a major focus on the structure and semantics of the passive voice. The article distinguishes between the traditional pedagogical interpretation and the semantics-based approach to this widely discussed area of grammar.

Keywords: passive voice, passivisation, structure, semantics-based approach, comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that the system of *genus verbi* in English and Slovak consists of two elements – the active voice and the passive voice. The passive voice in English and Slovak occurs in both finite and non-finite verb constructions. Its basic communicative function is the change of perspectives of verbal action to be assumed in the process of communication in relation to various discourse

and situational contexts, using mainly transitive verbs which represent different kinds of processes. However, this is just a very general functional feature of the passive voice which needs to be made more precise. In our view, the passive voice is a grammatical construction or a grammatical predicate which focuses on the grammatical subject being affected or will be affected by, or involved in, verbal actions, activities and processes originating from outside sources. This is done for the purpose of assuming a new communicative intent on the part of the participants in the process of communication. The aim of the article is to provide a thorough description of the nature of the passive voice and to elaborate on its use, its semantics, and the process of passivisation with different kinds of verbs. Naturally, all this will be approached from a contrastive or cross-linguistic perspective.

1. THE NATURE OF PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

In both English and Slovak, the passive voice is a marked member of the active-passive system. In both languages the passive voice is not the transformation of the active clause into the passive one, that is, a formal operation without changes in meaning as it is frequently presented in many textbooks even today. This may be useful for pedagogical reasons, but such a view does not correspond to the nature of this phenomenon. According to many scholars (see e.g., Dixon 2005, 353) the passive is “an alternative realisation of the relation between a transitive verb and its object and involves an intransitive construction with a subject (corresponding to the transitive object)”. In the process of communication this practically means the change of the perspective (intentional stance) of the verbal action or its redirection.

There is always a meaning difference between active and passive clauses. In the system of English grammar there are verbs which for semantic or other reasons never occur in the passive (see section 4). According to various authors (e. g., Bolinger 1975, Dixon 2005, etc.), for a number of verbs, the ability to passivise depends on the nature of the object. For example, Bolinger (ibid.) says that it is possible to say, “*George turned the pages*” or “*The pages were turned by George*”, something happens to the pages in the process. But when we say *George turned the corner* it would be unacceptable to say * “*The corner was turned by George*” because the corner is not affected. The corner is only the place where George was at the time. On the other hand, in specific contexts, e.g., when we are speaking about some kind of race or game in which a particular corner is determined as an objective to be taken, we might say “*The corner has not been turned yet*”. Another meaning difference between active and passive constructions can be

demonstrated by the following interpretations. For example, we can say “*The stranger approached me*” or “*I was approached by the stranger*” because we are thinking that the stranger might do some bodily harm to me. In the same way we can say “*We saw them in the park*”, or “*They were seen in the park*”. In the second example the people in question might be on the run.

If there is an emphasis in the flow of discourse on the object, a passive in English can be used:

Our house was not loved by me, and not I think loved by Mum... (Lodge 2008, 304)

A slightly different view of meanings of active and passive clauses has been expressed by (Aarts 2011, 93) who claims that they mean the same and that they only differ in the way the information is presented to the hearer. This, however, might express at least some degree of connotative meanings.

The passive as a marked construction “...should ideally be quoted together within its discourse and socio-cultural context; sometimes, a putative passive which sounds odd when spoken in isolation is immediately acceptable when placed in an appropriate context.” (Dixon 2005, 354)

Sometimes it is also difficult to tell the difference between a passive construction and a copula plus a past participle subject complement because past participle forms can often function as adjectives – *the broken vase, a stolen car, a tattered shirt, bleached hair*, etc. For example, when the construction “*They were married*” is uttered out of context, it is almost impossible to determine whether *married* is functioning as predicate adjective referring to a married state or as part of a passive construction describing an activity. Usually, it is the linguistic context that will make things clear (see e. g., Berk 1999, 119). For example: “*They were married but they acted like boyfriend and girlfriend*” versus “*They were married in a beautiful garden.*”

2. PASSIVE FORMS

At first, for practical reasons, we will repeat the basic formula generating passive constructions: *to be+ past participle, to get+ past participle*, for example:

The car is/was/will be sold.

They have been attacked by a madman.

Violence against women should be prioritised.

She got dressed in the bedroom.

Somehow everything got done in time. (Dušková 2005, 127)

I do get called in as an expert witness from time to time.

Passive constructions that exploit some form of *get* as their auxiliary are increasingly used by English speakers. (Berk 1999, 118) noted that written examples of the so-call **get passive** date back to the middle of the eighteenth century. This kind of passive is especially common in colloquial speech. It is frequently used when the subject of the sentence “suffers adversely as

a result of the action”. (Berk 1999, 118) quotes a study which has shown that in spoken English about 80 per cent of **get passives** reflect an adverse effect upon the subject, as opposed to only 40 per cent of **be passives**. For example:

*My dog **got bitten** by a snake.*

*They **got mugged** by some teenagers.*

*The unruly students **got punished**.*

*My colleague **got fired**.*

Two more things should be considered in connection with *get passive*. First, even when a subject does not suffer adversely, the *get passive* suggests that the subject has been affected by the action. For example, “*Bill got promoted last week*” and “*The hikers got rescued*” are acceptable sentences. Second, there are few cases when the *get passive* is preferable to *the be passive*. (Berk 1999, 119) claims that for most speakers, “*Crystal got married last week*” is more natural than “*Crystal was married last week*”.

The passive forms occur also in the present progressive and past progressive aspects:

Now, the problem is being discussed at a meeting

The picture was being sold when they entered the gallery.

It is noteworthy that a passive clause in English may include *by+NP*, which corresponds to the transitive subject (e.g., *by a madman*). (Dixon 2005, 353) says that it occurs relatively seldom (in formal English) and that more than 80) per cent of passives are agentless.

The *by*-phrase can be left out for a number of reasons that will be discussed in the following section. Omitting the *by*-phrase is not always possible. (Aarts 2011, 324) gives the following instances:

The gum infection is caused by two germs that live together.

**The gum infection is caused.*

If we remove the *by*-phrase from the first sentence, the second sentence is ungrammatical. The following text demonstrates the use of passive constructions in both finite and non-finite clauses:

*An agony that never ends: Rachael's IVF baby **was killed** – and she **was left** with crippling injuries - after an OAP driver crashed into her pushchair. Now as an **inquest is cruelly delayed**, she calls for drivers over 70 **to be retested**.*
(Daily Mail, Sept. 17, 2021)

In all the above examples the subject occupies a preverbal position. However, there are cases in English in which the passive subject is placed post-verbally (see e.g., Radford 2004, 199). Radford gives the following examples:

No evidence of any corruption was found. There was found no evidence of any corruption.

Several cases of syntactophobia have been reported. There have been reported several cases of syntactophobia.

A significant change of policy has been announced. There has been announced a significant change of policy.

Undoubtedly, such constructions which act as existential predicates do not exist in the Slovak language.

So far, we haven't mentioned the passive concerning the prepositional object in the active clause. In such cases the object expressed by a noun phrase in an active clause is shifted to the subject position of the passive one while the preposition remains with the verb. For example:

He sent for the doctor or The doctor was sent for.

They have reckoned with this possibility or This possibility has been reckoned with.

She cannot rely on their help or Their help cannot be relied on.

We should see to this problem or This problem should be seen to.

In Slovak, this kind of the passive does not exist, i.e., in it, the prepositional object is not changed, and the verb is subjectless:

The doctor should be sent for at once or Malo by sa hneď poslať po lekára.

In English even transitive verbs with adverbial particles can be used in the passive voice: *The scheme has been given up, Political ties were broken off, The departure must be put off.*

In both English and Slovak there are verbs which can be associated with two objects – direct and indirect. They are generally referred to as ditransitive verbs. The main difference between English and Slovak concerning the process of passivisation is that ditransitive verbs in English can form two passives:

They have sent him a letter - He has been sent a letter; A letter has been sent to him.

The choice of the subject of the passive sentence depends on the amount of communicative dynamism of the direct and indirect objects. It is an object with a lower degree of communicative dynamism which becomes the subject of the passive sentence. In the first passive sentence it is *him*, in the second sentence it is a *letter*. The problem in this respect is whether these two passives are semantically synonymous. It seems that their use differs depending mostly on stylistic reasons.

In Slovak, two passives with ditransitive verbs are not possible since only the verbs with a direct object are regarded as transitive, and that only transitive verbs can be used in the passive voice.

In English there are also some active constructions which can behave very much like passives. There are several types of them. In one type, the agent is omitted altogether – *the book reads well, cotton washes well, the clothes wash easily, the book sells well, the shirts iron easily*. Some of the sentences above can be turned into passives “...by retaining NP in subject position – These shirts can be ironed easily.” (Berk 1999, 122) However, it must be said that the subjects of these sentences are affected by the action of the verb, and that they point to general characteristics (see e.g., Dušková 2006, 255–258). Such sentences are normally used in the present tense and the past tense.

Besides the first type, Dušková also draws attention to another type of such constructions. In it, the passive meaning is modal in character. It is usually expressed by negatives *doesn't / don't* and *won't*. For instance, *the material won't / doesn't wash* (tá látka sa nedá prať), *the lid won't shut* (to veko sa nedá zatvoriť), *foreign tissue doesn't transplant* (cudzíe tkanivo sa nedá transplantovať), etc.

It is clear that in Slovak the English active sentences with passive meaning are rendered by means of the reflexive passive.

It has already been said that Slovak distinguishes two passives: the compound passive that roughly corresponds to the system of English tenses and aspect and the reflexive passive, which does not exist in English. The reflexive passive is marked by the reflexive pronoun **sa** (self/selves), and it is used in the 3rd person singular and plural of mostly inanimate nouns. The functions of the passive voice in Slovak and the semantics of verbs were dealt with especially by (Sokolová 1992, 82–90). They will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

3. THE USE OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

The following circumstances in which a passive construction can be employed contribute at the same time to the clarification of the nature of the passive voice. According to a number of authors see (e.g., Dixon 2005, 354-359, Berk 1999, 119-121, etc.), passive constructions (or passive predicates) may be used in one of the following circumstances:

1. To avoid mentioning the subject

There are several reasons for the use of the passive in this respect. Thus, the passive may be employed:

- a) if the identity of the subject is unknown, e.g. *A friend of mine has been mugged in the park. My grandfather was wounded in WW 1.*
- b) If the speaker does not wish to reveal the identity of the subject, e.g. *I have been informed that he wants to quit as manager of the team. It has been reported to me that he cheats at cards.*
- c) If the identity of the subject is implied and does not need to be expressed, e.g. *He has been fined twenty euros for speeding. She has been promoted. They were rushed to the hospital in ten minutes.*
- d) If the identity of the agent is not considered important, e.g., *Visitors are requested to leave their coats in the cloakroom.*

Heavy use of the passive is a typical feature of certain styles. For example, in scientific English the passive is used to avoid bringing in the first-person pronoun, e.g.:

*An experiment **was conducted** to investigate...*
*Extensive tests **have been carried out** on the patient.*
*This category **has not been defined** yet.*

It is obvious that the agentless passive is used extensively in English and that as such it is a very useful syntactic tool. In addition to scientific English there are different kinds of written discourse (e.g., diplomatic language), such as the following:

*OUNG **will not be assisted, accompanied, or transported** in any manner by diplomatic or non-diplomatic members of Embassy staff in the course of her departure. No vehicle with British diplomatic number plates **will be used** for her exfiltration. No false British papers **will be issued** to her.*
 (John le Carré, *A Legacy of Spies*)

When an agent or causer does occur in a passive (by+NP), it almost always carries new information. According to (Berk 1999, 121), such constructions appear as answers to questions. For instance:

What happened to your avocado tree? Oh, it was damaged by the wind.

2. To focus on the transitive object, rather than on the subject

This tenet is based on the principle concerning the assignment of semantic roles (agent, experiencer, recipient, patient, etc.) to syntactic relations. According to (Dixon 2005, 355) the role which is likely to be most relevant to the success of a particular activity will be in a subject relation., e.g.:

I chose a blue cardigan, You should promote John, My teacher often canes boys, The fat girl is eating an ice-cream.

However, in some cases of the activity the object can assume a higher amount of communicative relevance which enables putting the semantic role which is in underlying object relation into the surface S position. Thus, in place of *A boy kicked Mary* at the picnic, the passive *Mary was kicked (by a boy) at the picnic* might be preferred. Similar examples: *Guess what, you have been chosen (by the team) as captain. I got promoted. My best friend often gets punished.*

In the same way, an object with specific reference is more likely to be amenable to the process of passivisation than one which is non-specific. Dixon gives the following example: *Our pet dog was shot by that new policeman. A dog was shot by that new policeman*

Here the active would surely be preferred – *That new policeman shot a dog.*

3. To maintain the topic of a discourse

This has to do with the clause as a message or information structure. This kind of the clause has some form of organization “whereby it fits in with and contributes to the flow of discourse.” (Halliday 2004, 64) The organization and the distribution of information within the clause from this standpoint was systematically explored and elaborated a long time ago in the Prague School of Linguistics (see e.g., Mathesius 1975, Vachek 1990, Firbas 1992, etc.). The basic concept in this respect is the concept of the **functional sentence perspective** according to which the sentence consists of two basic constituents: **the theme/topic** (what is being talked about, the point of departure) and the **rheme** (what is being said about it, or the core of the message). In English there is a tendency to keep the topic in subject position and this is made possible by means of the passive. To illustrate this point, we have chosen the following piece of discourse by Berk (Berk 1999, 120)

*My daughter Alice works in a bank. Last week **she was called** to the supervisor's office because a customer had complained about her behaviour. Alice **was not allowed** to defend herself. **She was suspended** for a week without pay. Of course, **she was shocked** by this callous treatment.*

Berk has mentioned another important thing which is related to the issue of topic. It is the egocentrism of human beings. This means that humans like to talk about themselves and other human beings. (Berk 1999, 120) claims that "We are likely to make a human the subject of a sentence when there is no topic to be maintained." Thus, the sentence *A man was hit by a bus* is more natural than *A bus hit a man*.

As far as the system active-passive is concerned, we can say that almost anything can be expressed by an active construction, but that only special meanings are suitable for description through passive constructions. It is also necessary to state that the choice between active and passive is not simply motivated by the fact that the Agent is unknown or unimportant but also by the question of which participant it would be most appropriate to thematize in the context and what information is to be treated as most noteworthy.

Now the question is which verbs are open to the process of passivisation. In other words, which verbs can and cannot be used in the passive voice. Typically, the majority of transitive verbs referring to action processes can be used in the passive. There are, however, some cases when the passive is not allowed. (Dixon 2005, 361-364, Huddleson 2004, 439-40) put forward four main reasons for this. Thus passivisation is not possible (a) where an object is obligatorily reflexive, (b) where a verb may be symmetrical, (c) where it may refer to a static relation, or (d) it may inherently focus on the subject. Nevertheless, it must be said that in all of these circumstances the process of passivisation is to a certain degree influenced by potentially ambiguous meanings of given active sentences containing specific verbs. In our opinion, this problem in general should be explored in a more detailed manner, but here we can refer only very briefly to the above reasons and subsequent semantic problems:

(a) Verbs with an obligatorily reflexive object

This can be demonstrated by the following examples:

*Ed perjured **himself**. The topic lends **itself** well to seminar discussion. Max drank **himself** under the table. The door opened **itself**.*

(b) Symmetric verbs

There are some logically symmetric verbs that express an activity which relates equally to two entities – either could be subject and the other will be object: *marry, resemble, equal, meet, date, meet, share, match, rhyme* etc,

for example: *George married Iris*. (X entails Y, and Y entails X), *Robert resembles his father*. (X entails Y, and Y entails X) *8 equals 4+4*. (X entails Y, and Y entails X)

However, there may occur some problems due to specific semantic constrains. This means that some verbs, such as *resemble* and *look like* must always be symmetrical. Others have two senses, one with a symmetrical meaning and one without it. For instance, the verb *equal* may be both a symmetric verb (see the above example) and have also a non-symmetrical meaning: *George equalled the world record*. Similarly, *fight* may be symmetrical when it is followed by a human object O, e.g., *John fought Tom in 1979/ Tom fought John in 1979*. or non-symmetrical with an activity noun as O, e.g., *Tom fought a fierce battle*. Only the second sense may allow passivisation.

(c) Verbs referring to a static relation

The most frequent verbs of this type are *contain*, *cost*, *weigh*, *last*, *lack*. For example:

The barrel contains beer. This book costs 5 euros. Her husband weighs a hundred and fifty pounds. The meeting lasted three hours. He lacks confidence. All these verbs never refer to the result of an activity, and so the passive could not be used.

(d) Verbs that inherently focus on the subject

This group of verbs is concerned especially with verbs referring mostly to mental process., such as perception, affection, cognition, volition. Thus, we cannot passivise clauses like: *I saw that they had left. She liked the new teacher. He hated their company. His brother wanted Liz to accompany him.* *Know and believe* are only occasionally found in the passive, especially when the subject has non-individual or indefinite reference, e. g. *His testimony was believed by the jury*. For *know*, the passive is used with an NP introduced by *to*, e. g., *John is known to everyone in the room*.

It has been already mentioned that the form, nature, and use of the passive in Slovak has been explored by Sokolová (e. g., 1992). She has also based her analysis on the semantics of Slovak verbs. Drawing especially on Kačala's classification of verbs from the point of view of their intention and valency (see e. g. Kačala 1980, 1989), she has selected a group of specific semantic features on the basis of which she presents her own classification. The semantic features in question can be translated into English as dynamic (D), action (+/- A), happening (+/-H), mutation (+/-M), scope (+/- S). By means of their application and considering the presence or absence of both pre-verb or post-verb human and non-human participants (x1, x2, x3), she has classified Slovak verbs into 3 basic groups. It would be pointless to discuss it in greater detail because it is beyond the

scope of this chapter. For this reason, we had to simplify it considerably. More importantly this classification serves as a basis for outlining the uses of both the participle and reflexive passives in Slovak.

The first group consists of stative verbs (-D, -A, -H, -M, -S). Like in English these verbs never occur in both the participle and reflexive passives. For example: *byť* (to be, to exist), *hraničiť* (to border), *stáť* (to stand), *mať* (to have), *prebiehať* (to take place), *obsahovať* (to contain), *skladať sa* (to consist of), *trvať* (to last), *podobat sa* (to resemble), *patriť* (to belong), *žiť* (to live), etc.

The basic feature of all non-stative verbs is the feature +D. Verbs with this semantic feature are referred to as dynamic verbs. The authoress distinguishes two groups of dynamic verbs with their corresponding subgroups especially on whether they contain the feature +/- A. Thus, the first group of dynamic verbs, which roughly corresponds to English happenings, is characterized by the semantic feature -A. It consists of two sub-groups.

The first sub-group includes verbs without a left intentional personal participant, e. g., *hrmieť* (to thunder), *pršať* (to rain), *snežiť* (to snow), etc.

These verbs do allow to form neither the reflexive passive nor the participle passive.

The second sub-group, on the other hand, may contain the participant x1 + human but they do not enable to form the participle passive. But with these verbs the reflexive passive is possible, e.g., *umieralo sa od hladu* (people were dying from hunger).

The second group of dynamic verbs consists of action dynamic verbs that contain the semantic feature +A. Generally speaking, such verbs answer the question “What does the intentional left participant do?” or “What does it cause?” (in case of causative verbs). They are also divided into two sub-groups.

In the first sub-group, there are **intransitive** verbs. These verbs practically exclude the formation of the participle passive both in English and in standard Slovak if we do not take into account such examples as *s tým bolo rátané* (it was reckoned with), *bolo o tom diskutované* (it was discussed), etc. However, in Slovak, the reflexive passive in this sub-group occurs very frequently. This sub-group involves several kinds of verbs, such as: *ísť* (to go), *pochodovať* (to march), *utekať* (to run), *cestovať* (to travel), *sediť* (to sit), *stáť* (to stand), *ležať* (to lie), *kľačať* (to kneel), *pracovať* (to work), *bojovať* (to fight), *tlieskať* (to clap hands), *žobrať* (to beg), *kričať* (to yell), *plakať* (to cry), etc.

The second sub-group consists of **transitive** verbs which in Slovak are characterized by an accusative object. These verbs enable both reflexive and participle passivisation: *postaviť* (to build), *renovovať* (to renovate), *vyrábať* (to make), *upiecť* (to bake), *uvariť* (to cook), *realizovať* (to realize), etc. For example:

Táto firma renovuje nemocnice. - This firm renovates hospitals; *Nemocnice sú renovované.* - Hospitals are renovated; *Nemocnice sa renovujú.* - Hospitals are being renovated.

Vyrábame autá. - We make cars; *Autá sú vyrábané.* - Cars are made by us; *Autá sa vyrábajú tu.* - Cars are made here.

Ona pečie chlieb doma. - She bakes bread at home; *Chlieb je pečený doma.* - Bread is baked at home. *Chlieb sa pečie doma.* - Bread is baked at home.

In Slovak, there are a lot of verbs which can be used only with the reflexive passive. (Sokolová 1992, 109–110) in this connection analyses seven main groups of verbs corroborated by a number of examples. Here, for obvious reasons, we will confine ourselves only to some prominent cases and their English equivalents. For example:

Starne sa pomaly. (People are getting old slowly.); *Ležalo sa na dekách, ba i na holej zemi.* (We were lying on blankets, and on the bare ground, too.) *Štafeta žien sa beží pred štafetou mužov.* (The relay race of women starts/runs before the relay race of men.); *Na projekte sa pracovalo celé mesiace.* (The work on the project was going on for months.); *To sa tak často nevidí.* (This is rarely seen.); *Kedysi sa myslelo, že Zem je stredobodom vesmíru.* (In the past, the Earth was thought to be the centre of the Universe.); *Medzi jedlom sa fajčilo.* (People used to smoke between meals.); *Kone sa značkujú, nie ľudia.* (It is the horses that are branded, not the people.)

In Slovak, reflexive and participle passives can be synonymous. It is concerned with verbs which have common semantic features: +D, +A, +S, +TR, +/-M and human participants. X1. For example:

Čosi také sa vraj očakávalo. (Something like this was expected.); *Originálne myslenie však nikdy nie je očakávané.* (However, original thinking is never expected.); *Zver sa chráni v zimných mesiacoch.* (The game is protected during winter months.); *Zver je chránená v zimných mesiacoch.* (The game is protected during winter months.); *Prípád sa bude rekonštruovať.* (The case will be reconstructed.); *Prípád bude rekonštruovaný.* (The case will be reconstructed.); *Tomuto problému sa venuje/ je venovaná veľká pozornosť.* (Great attention is devoted/attached to this problem. / The case will be reconstructed.); *Výsledok sa často zaokrúhľoval/ bol často zaokrúhľovaný.* (The result was very often rounded.)

The above examples of Slovak passive sentences and their English equivalents indicate convincingly that in the great majority of cases, the Slovak reflexive and participle passives are rendered in English by means of the compound passive. At the same time, it must be stated that Slovak reflexive passives have a high frequency of occurrence and can be used in all kinds of styles, depending on the

semantics of verbs. Understandably, in this section we could only point out the most conspicuous problems.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, we have to stress once again that within this space we could only outline the most important similarities and structural, semantic and functional differences between English and Slovak. In both languages the use of these constructions depends on the semantics of relevant verbs. We have seen that Slovak has two types of the passive - reflexive and participle passives. It is the reflexive passive that has a higher frequency of occurrence than the participle one. In both languages passive constructions have an important role to play in various kinds of discourse or in the process of communication.

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prof. PhDr. Richard Repka, CSc.
Katedra anglického jazyka a literatúry
Ústav filologických štúdií
Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave
Pedagogická fakulta
Račianska 59
813 34 Bratislava
richard.repka@uniba.sk

PaedDr. Peter Bojo, PhD.
Katedra anglického jazyka a literatúry
Ústav filologických štúdií
Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave
Pedagogická fakulta
Račianska 59
813 34 Bratislava
bojo@fedu.uniba.sk