



## PREDICATE REFERENTIALITY AND NON-REFERENTIALITY IN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

**Žana Gavrilović<sup>i</sup>**

English Department,  
University of East Sarajevo,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the predicate referentiality and non-referentiality in English linguistics, and the research is focused entirely on the literary corpora. While previous studies often used constructed or conversational examples, this paper demonstrates how referential and non-referential temporal meanings of finite verb forms operate in canonical English literature. Eighteen examples are excerpted from the literary works of some of the most prominent writers of contemporary literature and analysed in terms of their temporal meaning within wider sentential context. The results of the research confirm that the non-referential use of the tenses is less common in the examined literature, and that it represents a stylistic means of colouring the context so as to make it more vivid, temporally extended and more expressive. The results primarily confirm that the interplay between grammatical tense and discourse context is central to temporal interpretation.

**Keywords:** predicate, referentiality, non-referentiality, meaning

### **1. Introduction**

Temporal reference is one of the key layers of meaning in the interpretation of English finite verb forms. It is immanent to the denotation of verbs and to the whole sentential structure via verbs. Most of the tenses, i.e. the functions of the verb phrases refer to the temporal sector they convey by their name itself (present simple or progressive to present, past simple or progressive to past). If that is the case, then the use of the tense is considered referential. However, it is sometimes the case that a tense does not coincide with the temporal sector it implies, but the real time of the verb situation is elsewhere in time. In other words, the verb form does not always map directly onto chronological time. Instead, tense forms may operate referentially (anchored to real-world chronology) or non-referentially (transposed, hypothetical, gnomic, or evaluative). The literary excerpts provided here illustrate rich empirical evidence for these distinctions.

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [zana.gav@gmail.com](mailto:zana.gav@gmail.com)

## 2. Literature Review

The framework of temporal referentiality follows Reichenbach (1947), who distinguished between *Speech time* (S), *Event time* (E), and *Reference time* (R), necessary for the temporal determination, or location, of any verb situation in the sentence. When the time conveyed by the verb form in the predicate (the tense) aligns with the real time of the verb situation (the reference time), the verb situation is considered referential. When misaligned, it means that the reference time is salient and can be found somewhere else in the context, while the temporal interpretation itself depends on certain discourse functions. Further elaborations are found in Comrie (1985), Klein (1994), and Smith (1997). The literary excerpts selected for the purpose of the research in this paper offer the authentic context where tense can also be used metaphorically, counterfactually, or pragmatically.

## 3. Material and Methods

The sentential context for the analysis is excerpted from canonical English literature across different genres and centuries. The examples were chosen from the most recent, authoritative scholarly editions (Penguin Classics, Oxford World's Classics, Scribner, Oxford University Press). A total of eighteen examples were analyzed, covering a balanced distribution across major authors, and with specific reference to the deciphering of the temporal meaning of the whole sentential construction. A qualitative analysis was employed as the methodology. The paper assumes that referential temporal interpretation is evident at the level of the verb phrase in the predicate; the whole sentential context is necessary for the non-referential temporal interpretation, as the verb form itself can be misleading, because it coincides with the temporal sector. More specifically, the English past tense often functions non-referentially in counterfactual and hypothetical contexts. The context determines whether the tense is interpreted referentially or as being transposed. Non-referential usage appears prominently in literary rhetoric, historical present, and gnomic expressions.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

As aforementioned, the empirical part of the paper refers to the analysis of the excerpted examples by means of the three points in time offered by Reichenbach (S, E, R), to determine whether the form itself deviates from the referential use. The focus is put on *Simple Present* and *Simple Past*, as the predicate referentiality is most evident in terms of the grammatical category of tense and the binary opposition within it (past or present). The relevant excerpts for *Simple Present* are as follows:

1) "*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.*" (Macbeth)

2) "*Put out the light, and then put out the light.*" (Othello)

- 3) *"To be, or not to be: that is the question."* (Hamlet)
- 4) *"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."* (Animal Farm)
- 5) *"There is a touch of death about a ship. She always knows it."* (The Heart of Darkness)
- 6) *"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."* (Pride and Prejudice)
- 7) *"I am born."* (David Copperfield)
- 8) *"So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."* (The Great Gatsby)

The first thing that is noticeable in all the aforementioned examples (1-8) is that the time span the verb situations encompass is related to the present tense. Formally, all the situations are related to the present. The speech time (S) in all the verb situations is in its deictic centre (*now*), and the grammatical time, the verb form in the predicate that conveys the situations, is also present (*Present Simple*). However, the time span that the verb situations encompass is different. Example 1 refers to the future, as the verb situation is expected to happen. Therefore, the referential time is in the future, not in the present, and it can be concluded that the present simple is used non-referentially here. Example 2 also refers to the future time, in the context of the imperative mood, and the use of the present tense here is also non-referential.

Examples 3-6 encompass a wide span of time, speech time (S) that coincides with now, parts of the past and future. The excerpts refer to universal statements that are omnitemporal, gnomic, and timeless. It means that they are created based on the experience, which implies repetition. It can be stated that these verb situations are referential, as they imply that they are happening in the present time as well, but a modified version of present meaning, i.e. present in a wider sense, and the use of the tense is referential.

Examples 7 and 8 refer to the past time, even though they are formally in present. The wider context suggests that the reference time of the situations is in the past time, and it can be stated that the use of the present tense here is non-referential.

The following set of excerpts is expressed in the past tense. A detailed discussion will reveal the temporal reference in each of them. The excerpts for *Simple Past* are as follows:

- 1) *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."* (A Tale of Two Cities)
- 2) *"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip..."* (Great Expectations)
- 3) *"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence..."* (Emma)

- 4) "*Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls.*" (Ulysses)
- 5) "*His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe...*" (Dubliners)
- 6) "*He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream...*" (The Old Man and the Sea)
- 7) "*In the late summer of that year, we lived in a house in a village...*" (A Farewell to Arms)
- 8) "*Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.*" (Mrs. Dalloway)
- 9) "*There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.*" (Jane Eyre)
- 10) "*If it were done when 'tis done, then it were well / It were done quickly.*" (Macbeth)

In examples 1-9, the verb situation happened in the past, as indicated by the *Past Simple* in the predicate. It actually means that the verb form in the predicate (E) coincides with the real time of the verb situation (R), both of which precede the speech time (S) on the timeline. The reference time of the verb situation is in the past, so the use of the verb form and its temporal meaning is referential. It varies from historical narrative over past tense autobiographical anchoring, situating narrative, and poetic narrative to the temporal frame.

However, the situation is different in example 10. Namely, the past tense form conveys counter-factuality. The whole construction refers to a possibility within present, which means that the actual time within this hypothetical construction refers to present, not the past. It is, therefore, evident that the mismatch between the form and the temporal function of the verb phrase in the predicate ascribes to the non-referential temporal meaning of the context.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper represents an attempt at revisiting referential and non-referential use of the two main oppositions within tense, i.e. *Simple Past* and *Simple Present*. The analysis of the literary examples confirms that the English tense use alternates between referential and non-referential functions. It was evident from the analysis that the form of the verb itself and its inflectional variation alone do not necessarily determine its referential temporal interpretation. Instead, the discourse context, rhetorical stance, and narrative conventions guide whether the verb forms are interpreted as chronologically anchored or transposed. A further conclusion is that the present tense is more widespread and temporally elastic, as it can express the non-referential time regularly, which implies its being seen as encompassing a wide span of time that includes parts of the past and the future.

### **Creative Commons License Statement**

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Author**

Žana Gavrilović, PhD in English Linguistics, is an associate professor in the Department of English at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of East Sarajevo. She lectures on various courses at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies. Her major research interests are the theory of syntax and the semantics of the English verb phrase, the ways it is reflected in her mother tongue, Serbian, and the modes of teaching and acquisition of the language structures in English as a foreign language. Another field that she has been engaged in with her research is intercultural and transcultural communication. Additionally, she is included in the process of internationalisation of the University of East Sarajevo.

### **Sources and References**

- Austen, J. (2008). *Emma*. Oxford World's Classics. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Emma.html?id=VhQ7F6Papb8C&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Emma.html?id=VhQ7F6Papb8C&redir_esc=y)
- Austen, J. (2008). *Pride and Prejudice*. Oxford World's Classics. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Pride\\_and\\_Prejudice.html?id=blpSDwAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Pride_and_Prejudice.html?id=blpSDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)
- Babić, S. (2002). *Sintaksa hrvatskoga književnog jezika*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga. Retrieved from <https://www.sumari.hr/biblio/pdf/10026.pdf>
- Brontë, C. (2006). *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/60371/jane-eyre-by-charlotte-bronte-ed-dr-stevie-davies/9780141441146>
- Comrie, B. (1985). *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139165815>
- Conrad, J. (2007). *Heart of Darkness*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Heart\\_of\\_Darkness.html?id=e9A3bsjaUQcC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Heart_of_Darkness.html?id=e9A3bsjaUQcC&redir_esc=y)

- Dickens, C. (2002). *Great Expectations*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.abebooks.com/9780141439563/Great-Expectations-Penguin-Classics-Charles-0141439564/plp>
- Dickens, C. (2003). *A Tale of Two Cities*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/98/old/2city12p.pdf>
- Dickens, C. (2004). *David Copperfield*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/David\\_Copperfield.html?id=iv0KAAAAYAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/David_Copperfield.html?id=iv0KAAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y)
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (2003). *Tender Is the Night*. Scribner. Retrieved from <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0301261h.html>
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (2004). *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/64317>
- Hemingway, E. (1995). *A Farewell to Arms*. Scribner. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/A\\_Farewell\\_to\\_Arms.html?id=vhodrUec7xsC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/A_Farewell_to_Arms.html?id=vhodrUec7xsC&redir_esc=y)
- Hemingway, E. (2003). *The Old Man and the Sea*. Scribner. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Old\\_Man\\_and\\_the\\_Sea.html?id=CqYIf-Fs5lkC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Old_Man_and_the_Sea.html?id=CqYIf-Fs5lkC&redir_esc=y)
- Joyce, J. (1993). *Ulysses*. Random House. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Ulysses.html?id=aHCY5W8-dU8C&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Ulysses.html?id=aHCY5W8-dU8C&redir_esc=y)
- Joyce, J. (2000). *Dubliners*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Dubliners.html?id=WkqR7nM198QC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Dubliners.html?id=WkqR7nM198QC&redir_esc=y)
- Klein, W. (1994). *Time in Language*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315003801>
- Orwell, G. (2021). 1984. Penguin Modern Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/57013/nineteen-eighty-four-by-george-orwell/9780241453513>
- Orwell, G. (2021). *Animal Farm*. Penguin Modern Classics. Retrieved from <https://wordsworth-editions.com/book/animal-farm/>
- Reichenbach, H. (1947). *Elements of Symbolic Logic*. New York: Macmillan. Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/rec/REIEOS>
- Shakespeare, W. (2016). *Hamlet*. The New Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/The\\_New\\_Oxford\\_Shakespeare.html?id=aMpjDQAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_New_Oxford_Shakespeare.html?id=aMpjDQAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)
- Shakespeare, W. (2016). *Macbeth*. The New Oxford Shakespeare: Critical Edition. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Macbeth.html?id=8Xf9EAAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Macbeth.html?id=8Xf9EAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)
- Shakespeare, W. (2016). *Othello*. The New Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/The\\_New\\_Oxford\\_Shakespeare.html?id=aMpjDQAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_New_Oxford_Shakespeare.html?id=aMpjDQAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)
-

- Smith, C. S. (1997). *The Parameter of Aspect*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/The\\_Parameter\\_of\\_Aspect.html?id=mJUya8G-1woC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Parameter_of_Aspect.html?id=mJUya8G-1woC&redir_esc=y)
- Woolf, V. (2000). *Mrs Dalloway*. Penguin Classics. Retrieved from <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/57014/mrs-dalloway-by-woolf-virginia/9780241468647>