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## **"IT IS A *THING* THAT GIVES YOU...": THE LEXEME *THING* AS THE SERBIAN EFL 'TEDDY BEAR'\*\***

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This paper aims to explore a case of most overused 'teddy bear' in the Serbian component of the *ICLE* corpus (version 3), the lexeme *thing*, which appears about four times more frequently in the Serbian subcorpus than in the reference native corpus used in the study (*LOCNESS*). The research follows the quantitative-qualitative design, thus combining the applicable software tools with the qualitative analysis. The results clearly indicate that Serbian learners of English are in favour of exploiting the lexeme *thing* in various roles.

Firstly, if the *thing* 'teddy bear' is used on its own, it can denote a number of concepts the meaning of which may be recovered from the context: life in general, ideas, physical objects, achievements. This role of the *thing* 'teddy bear' is the result of the cognitive strategy of generalisation.

Secondly, if the thing 'teddy bear' is pre- and/or postmodified, the structural head is less dominant than its modifiers. In actual fact, modifiers direct NP functions in the four distinct directions: the organisational function, the propositional function, the attitudinal function estimating relative importance, and the attitudinal function of evaluation. The organisational function is used in a modified (essentially syntactic) manner by Serbian EFL learners: it serves the student writer more than the putative reader. The propositional function, where modifiers are semantically dominant, also uses the syntactic potential of *thing*, to form complex phrases instead of simple ones. Both attitudinal functions, of relative importance and evaluation, exploit superlatives, expressing no real comparison at all, but emphasizing, or inflating student writers' arguments.

Further research should be carried out to explore reasons for such diversified and frequent use of the *thing* 'teddy bear' in Serbian EFL writing, L1 transfer certainly ranking high among them.

**Key words:** learner corpus, Serbian, EFL, 'teddy bear', *thing*, essay title, lexical, syntactic

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## **1. Learner corpora and Learner Corpus Research**

Learner corpora are typically defined as "electronic collections of authentic FL/SL textual data assembled according to explicit design criteria for a particular SLA/FLT purpose" (Granger 2002: 7). Nowadays it is almost taken for granted that they are accompanied by metadata that inform researchers about individual contributors. The emergence and availability of learner corpora (Gilquin, Granger, & Paquot 2007) has enabled researchers to focus on a number of various features of learner data, both syntagmatic and paradigmatic in essence, within a relatively young subfield of Learner Corpus Research.

### **1.1. Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis and the International Corpus of Learner English**

This paper aims to contribute to current Learner Corpus Research focusing on an important aspect of the learner corpus, i.e. the most prominent lexical choice in the Serbian component of *the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), version 3* (Granger, Meunier, Paquot, & Dupont, forthcoming).

The methodology used in the article is the revised model of Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (Granger, 2015). Granger points out that the revised version promotes the notion of 'varieties', in line with 'the strong variationist trend that characterizes current language studies' (2015: 17). According to this methodology in general, an interlanguage variety is contrasted with a reference language variety (Granger 1996). The reference variety may be, and frequently is, a native one. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily so – it may also belong to 'competent L2 user data,' or the so-called expert language variety. Thus, the essence of the methodology is to contrast an interlanguage variety with a carefully chosen reference variety in order to carry out research objectives successfully. It must be added that the revised model promotes the idea of defining interlanguage varieties themselves by a number of variables – L1 being just one of the most frequently used ones, but by no means the only one.

Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis has enabled researchers to focus on numerous instances of contrastive discourse research: frequent verbs, or verbs + particles (Deshors 2016; Altenberg & Granger 2001; Nesselhauf 2005), using the definite article (Díez-Bedmar & Papp 2008; Crosthwaite 2016), personal and impersonal metadiscourse (Ädel 2006), multi-word units, e.g. "I think", "according to" (Lee & Chen 2009), to mention but a few. In the same way *the International Corpus*

of *Learner English*, collected under the guidance of Sylviane Granger, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, now available in its three versions (Granger, Dagneaux, & Meunier 2002; Granger, Dagneaux, Meunier, & Paquot, 2009; Granger, et al. forthcoming), has turned out to be the empirical corner stone of Learner Corpus Research.

## 1.2. The corpora in the research

In this research, I focus on the Serbian component of *ICLE v. 3*, hence *ICLE-SE*. *ICLE-SE* contains 325 argumentative essays, or slightly over 200,000 words, contributed mostly by third and fourth year students, all native speakers of Serbian, studying English as a foreign language at the four universities in the Serbian-speaking territories.

The status of English in Serbian-speaking territories is typically labelled *a foreign language*. Nevertheless, Prčić (2014) uses the term 'the nativized foreign language' to refer to it, thus denoting a more or less commonplace linguistic setting in the Expanding Circle (Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson 2009). In other words, although English is not used as an official language in the area, its status is much more prominent than the status of a regular 'non-nativized' foreign language.

As a reference corpus I used a native variety, *the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays, LOCNESS*, collected at the Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.<sup>1</sup> *LOCNESS* consists of both British and American texts, written on various topics, some of which include personal elements. The overall size of the *LOCNESS* corpus is 319,789 words. The native corpus is by no means seen as a model; it is being used as a reference language variety. Apart from this native reference corpus, I also used several non-native reference corpora, being other subsets of *ICLE v. 3*, at some point in the research.

## 2. 'Teddy bears' in the learner corpus

Research so far has identified that there are numerous cases of significant overuse of lexical items in non-native writing, when compared to reference native written corpora. These cases are referred to as lexical 'teddy bears.' The term was used for the first time by Hasselgren (1994), in a study on Norwegian students' learner writing in L2 English. Namely, she found that fairly advanced learners have a tendency to overuse words that are general in meaning at the expense of more precise

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uclouvain.be/fr/node/11973>

vocabulary. More recently, Lee and Chen also found out that Chinese learners of English rely heavily on a limited number of 'the smaller words' (Lee & Chen 2009).

The overall concept of 'playing' and 'toys' can easily and justifiably be generalised from the lexical point to functional roles. In the studies on the verb *make* in student writing (Altenberg & Granger 2001, Marković 2018), it has been shown that certain functional roles of 'make' may also be treated as functional 'teddy bears', since they are used much more frequently than other functional roles. Thus learner 'teddy bears,' apart from being lexical in essence, may also be primarily functional.

### **2.1. The concept of discourse-organising nouns**

Referring to nouns *argument, decision, fact, issue, problem, or thing*, Tåqvist (2018) uses the term discourse-organising nouns (DONs). These nouns contain relatively little semantic content, or, they are "semantically unspecific", relying "on their linguistic co-text for part of their meaning" (Tåqvist 2016: 107). In terms used by Halliday and Hasan (1976), these nouns are referred to as general nouns, and considered to be on "the borderline between grammatical and lexical cohesion" (1976: 274). More recent research also focusses on this group of nouns. Thus, Schmid says that general nouns are "even empty" (Schmid 2000, in Tåqvist 2018: 15).

Halliday and Hasan say that "the class of general noun is a small set of nouns having generalised reference within the major noun classes, those such as 'human noun', 'place noun', 'fact noun', and the like" (1976: 274), and provide the following examples: *people, person, man, woman, child, boy, girl* [human], *creature* [non-human animate], *thing, object* [inanimate concrete count], *stuff* [inanimate concrete mass], *business, affair, matter* [inanimate abstract], *move* [action], *place* [place], *question, idea* [fact].

It is worth noting that Halliday and Hasan point out that general nouns are "often interpretable only by reference to some other element other than themselves," which, contrary to expectations, does not make them unimportant – in actual fact general nouns "play a significant role in making a text hang together" (1976: 276). In other words, they serve as cohesive devices in the context of reference, because they exemplify a more general phenomenon – reiteration (1976: 278).

It has been observed that in learner writing discourse-organising nouns are prominently frequent (Hasselgård 2012). They are often used as markers of stance (Jiang & Hyland 2015), or "personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments or assessments" (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan 1999: 966). Recent

research has confirmed that these 'empty' nouns are frequent in formal and academic registers as well (Tåqvist 2018: 15), and included in academic word lists. Concerning *thing* NPs,<sup>2</sup> they are more frequent in the spoken than in the written mode (Flowerdew & Forest 2015). Furthermore, if general nouns are seen as the continuum ranging from those dominantly general to those which are more specific, *thing* is definitely an extremely general lexeme – it can be used to replace a number of other general nouns, e.g. *issue*, *object*, *matter*, *question*. Thus, it is referred to as 'very unspecific' in the relevant literature (Tåqvist 2018: 23).

## 2.2. An overview of significantly overused forms in *ICLE-SE*

Based on the KeyWord function (Scott, 2018), I first analysed the cases of significant noun overuse in *ICLE-SE* with regard to the reference *LOCNESS* data. The following table contains the information about the initial 30 cases of significant overuse.

n	key word	freq./202,261	%	texts/325	RC. freq.	RC. %	BIC	Log_L	Log_R
1	movie	806	0.40	90	5	0.00	1,475.56	1,488.73	8.02
2	book	1,002	0.50	108	68	0.02	1,466.63	1,479.80	4.57
3	we	2,324	1.15	266	925	0.29	1,454.40	1,467.57	2.01
4	books	621	0.31	107	11	0.00	1,076.73	1,089.90	6.50
5	you	1,477	0.73	192	543	0.17	991.40	1,004.57	2.13
6	movies	391	0.19	87	6	0.00	679.79	692.97	6.71
7	reading	424	0.21	96	47	0.01	539.14	552.31	3.86
8	adaptation	239	0.12	65	1	0.00	432.90	446.07	8.59
9	us	612	0.30	194	212	0.07	425.21	438.38	2.21
10	your	483	0.24	141	122	0.04	422.32	435.49	2.67
11	relationship	338	0.17	51	44	0.01	404.29	417.46	3.63
12	read	325	0.16	111	42	0.01	389.26	402.44	3.64
13	imagination	190	0.09	74	10	0.00	281.24	294.42	4.93
14	watching	220	0.11	76	31	0.01	250.79	263.96	3.51
15	appearance	165	0.08	54	9	0.00	240.93	254.10	4.88
16	smoking	172	0.09	17	15	0.00	226.54	239.71	4.20
17	better	413	0.20	170	185	0.06	217.53	230.70	1.84
18	adaptations	112	0.06	55	0	0.00	201.48	214.66	138.19
19	things	367	0.18	173	165	0.05	191.00	204.18	1.84
20	conflicts	141	0.07	26	13	0.00	180.50	193.67	4.12

<sup>2</sup> The essential understanding of noun phrases as presented in a relevant descriptive grammar (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990) puts the emphasis on its noun head in both structural and semantic aspects. The *thing* NPs are specific in this respect, since in most cases the structural noun head is frequently not simultaneously the semantic 'head.'

21	someone	274	0.14	110	108	0.03	161.50	174.67	2.03
22	internet	118	0.06	48	9	0.00	156.70	169.87	4.40
23	sometimes	192	0.10	110	50	0.02	156.62	169.79	2.63
24	details	93	0.05	44	1	0.00	154.96	168.13	7.22
25	film	111	0.06	32	7	0.00	153.22	166.39	4.67
26	thing	245	0.12	137	91	0.03	151.93	165.10	2.11
27	computers	304	0.15	32	141	0.04	150.11	163.28	1.79
28	love	238	0.12	98	87	0.03	149.53	162.70	2.14
29	lot	240	0.12	141	90	0.03	147.15	160.33	2.10
30	restaurants	106	0.05	17	7	0.00	144.26	157.43	4.61

Table 1. The initial 30 significantly overused forms in *ICLE-SE*

Certainly noun frequencies in a learner corpus consisting of essays written on a chosen topic will depend on the topic itself. Therefore I will check the factor of topic using essay title *ICLE-SE* ratios in the following part.

### 2.3. *ICLE-SE* popular essay titles

*ICLE-SE* uses 26 essay titles, chosen by learner writers themselves among the 31 titles offered, several being vastly the most popular ones:

Essay title	number of essays
Is reading a book better than watching its movie adaptation?	84
One should never judge a person by external appearances.	33
Most university degrees are theoretical and do not prepare students for the real world.	26
Are we too dependent on computers?	24
In the words of the old song "Money is the root of all evil." Agree or disagree.	23
Conflicts are necessary for healthy relationships.	20
Does age matter in relationships?	19
Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of banning smoking in restaurants.	14
In our modern world, dominated by science, technology and industrialization, there is no longer a place for dreaming and imagination. What is your opinion?	14
Discuss the necessity of make-up.	11
Is freedom of speech an illusion?	8
Early marriages are more likely to end up with early divorces.	7
In his novel <i>Animal Farm</i> , George Orwell wrote "All men are equal: but some are more equal than others." How true is this today?	6

Do you think adoption should be abolished?	5
Is artificial intelligence a threat to humankind?	5
Teachers should be paid according to how much their students learn.	5
Should books, plays and films be subjected to censorship?	4
In the 19th century, Victor Hugo said: "How sad it is that nature is calling out but humanity refuses to pay heed." Do you think it is still true nowadays?	3
Is capital punishment defensible?	3
Many parts of the world are losing important natural resources, such as forests, animals, or clean water. Choose one resource that is disappearing and explain why it needs to be saved.	2
Why does Holden ( <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> ) cling to the innocence of children so deeply?	2
The prison system is outdated. No civilized society should punish its criminals: it should rehabilitate them.	2
Feminists have done more harm to the cause of women than good.	2
Describe the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Morel and their children in D. H. Lawrence's <i>Sons and Lovers</i> . Use evidence to support your beliefs about why their relationships are this way.	1
Explain how <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> may be read as a "psychological novel." You may want to focus on the psychological nature of one or two characters, or you may want to trace a particular aspect of psychology across a number of characters.	1
All armies should consist entirely of professional soldiers: there is no value in a system of military service.	1

Table 2. The *ICLE-SE* essay title overview

The first seven essay titles make up 229 out of 325 essays, or over 70% of the total number. Moreover, the first ten essay titles, being the titles exceeding 10 essays each, make up 268 essays, or 82.5% of *ICLE-SE*. In other words, the remaining majority of essay titles, 16 in number, make up only 17.5% of the learner corpus, or slightly over 1/6.

Based on the most frequently used essay titles (and subsequently writing topics), it may be expected that lexemes used in the titles, e.g. *book, movie, person, appearance, university, students, world, computers, money, conflicts, relationship, age, smoking, dreaming, and make-up* are used frequently in *ICLE-SE*.

## 2.4. Matching the essay titles ratios and the KeyWord list

The significant overuse in the KeyWord list (Table 1) almost directly follows the essay title list (Table 2: *movie* (position 1), *book* (position 2), *books* (position 4), *movies* (position 6), *reading* (position 7), *adaptation* (position 8), *relationship* (position 11), *imagination* (position 13), *appearance* (position 15), *smoking* (position 16), *adaptations* (position 18), till position 19 – *things*. The list then follows the essay title list again, *conflicts* (position 20), *internet* (position 22), then *details* (not used in the titles), and *thing* (position 26), *computers* (position 27), *love* (position 28), and *restaurants* (position 30).

All in all, the only three nominal forms which appears in the initial thirty positions in the KeyWord List not being used in the essay titles in the Serbian component are *things* (position 19), *details* (position 24), and *thing* (position 26). When joined together, *thing* and *things* appear 612 times, making up 0.30% of the learner corpus, whereas they appear 256 times in the reference corpus, making up no more than 0.08% of it. In other words, *thing/things* appear about four times more frequently in the Serbian component of *ICLE*. What is even more important is the fact that the lexeme *thing* is not used in the essay titles at all, as has been shown earlier in the article (Table 1.). Thus, the overall frequency of *thing* in *ICLE-SE* cannot be ascribed to the explicit influence of essay topic/title at all.

## 2.5. Other learner corpora

In order to compare the ratio of *thing/things* in *ICLE-SE* to other learner corpora belonging to *ICLE v. 3*, I provide the data about the eleven corpora entering *ICLE v. 3*, chosen on the grounds of either genetic proximity or closer socio-cultural relations, in the descending order:

Bulgarian	Swedish	Czech	Greek	Turkish	Macedonian	Russian	Chinese	Polish	French	Italian
0.27	0.25	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.21	0.18	0.11	0.11	0.10	0.10

Table 3.: The *thing/things* ratios in the eleven other *ICLE v. 3* learner corpora

It is concluded that the lexeme *thing* is more frequently used in *ICLE-SE* (0.30) than in all the other learner corpora in Table 3. Furthermore, there are learner corpora (e.g. French, Italian) using it three times less frequently, which obviously shows that



the *thing* 'teddy bear' is by no means a universal EFL device. In other words, different EFL learner corpora use different 'teddy bears.'

### 3. The *thing* NPs in *ICLE-SE*: a structural-pragmatic analysis

In order to explore the functional aims fulfilled by Serbian learners of English, a structural-pragmatic analysis of the *thing* NPs will be provided here. The structural analysis follows Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), in terms of differentiating determination (using determiners only) and modification (pre- or post- modifiers).

#### 3.1. The *thing* NPs without any modification

The first type of *thing* NPs is without any modification. Most such examples, presumably, contain the plural *things*:

1) [W]e have it and use it to influence people and governments to change things for the better. (SEBJ3006)<sup>3</sup>

2) [W]e wait for someone else to express exactly what we have to say, things will never change for the better. (SEBJ3002)

3) However, people often have to accept things as they are. (SENS1027)

4) However, I still believe that things can change. (SENS1027)

5) However, things are not all that black and white, and there surely are examples of equality. (SEBG1032)

6) It is sad to say but that is how things work. (SEES2012)

7) Thing[s] were different now and then. (SEBJ1021)

8) The way they perc[ei]ve things does not have to overlap with the director's. (SENS1029)

In examples 1) to 8), the noun denotes life in general, or life conditions. The meaning is recovered from the context which exceeds sentence boundaries.

In the following examples the interpretation is closer to 'general opinions', 'thoughts', or 'ideas':

9) [I]t gives us more material to use our own imagination and to see things in our own way. (SEES2023)

10) They are not going to last because sooner or later things will rise to the surface and create a problem. (SENS2023)

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<sup>3</sup> Specific *ICLE-SE* essay codes are provided in brackets.

11) Nothing is what it seems, and we should not take things for granted [...].  
(SEES2020)

12) [...] who have the chance to make a change, to present different views on things, to help an individual to do their best, to come from ordinary to extraordinary [...]. (SEBG2051)

13) Some things are just to be enjoyed not explained or understood. (SEBG2054)

In the following examples the noun refers to 'achievements,' and, in actual fact, the meaning is unambiguously recovered from the accompanying verb semantics:

14) I hate that for I believe that people should accomplish things in life with their own hands, maybe with a little help from computerized equipment. (SEBJ1026)

15) [P]eople lost sense of imagination, sense of dreaming and achieving things seems like it's pushed a side. (SEES2027)

16) [T]hey are used to achi[e]ving things with little effort thanks to their good looks and affection they receive. (SEES3002)

17) Yes, he achieved many things, became very popular. (SEBJ1043)

In the following examples, the meaning is 'activities', also clearly recovered from the context:

18) If all things are done by robots, people are definitely going to have more free time [...]. ((SEBG2041)

19) It does things to you! (SENS1021)

In the following example, the noun means 'search-word/phrase':

20) [...] without checking our e-mail, without being able to "google" things?  
(SEBG2026)

In the context of 'buying things', it denotes various objects that can be bought:

21) [I]t helps the possession and power to buy things. (SEBJ1052)

22) [I]t seemed virtually impossible that a machine will enable us to buy things, send messages or help us do our job [...]. (SEBG2044)

23) Since ancient times money has been an object of desire for many people. Although initially it had existed in the form of trade and it didn't have a "physical form", things have always had their values. (SEBG1027)

A few examples contain the basic determination (*a/the*) and the singular *thing*:

24) [...] you will surely not miss a thing. (SEBJ2008) – [miss anything]

25) The thing is that a lot of the parts of the books are omitted from the movie. (SEBG1017) – [the point is...].

In the previous examples the *thing* 'teddy bear' obviously replaces a number of more specific concepts, *life conditions, ideas, achievements, activities*, etc., in instances of generalisation. Generalisation as a cognitive strategy is widely used by even advanced language learners (Hasselgren 1994; Altenberg & Granger 2001; Laufer & Waldman 2011; Lee & Chen 2009). Serbian EFL learners obviously exploit this universal language learner cognitive strategy in written discourse as well.

### **3.2. *Thing* NPs with modification**

Most of *ICLE-SE thing* NPs contain premodification and/or postmodification. The most frequent premodifiers are adjectives (e.g. *bad, best, different, good, important, the right, the same*):

26) To [conclude] this topic, the most important things to say would be, that everyone should choose their own path, and that everything can be done with a little bit of a compromise. (SEBJ1028)

The most frequent postmodifiers are defining (contact) clauses (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990):

27) At the end we can conclude that no matter how many things we say against putting on make-up or how many things we say in favour of wearing make-up, people will continue to do what they think its best. (SEBJ1018)

The structural NP head, *thing*, now being modified, keeps its structural status, but obviously loses its semantic and pragmatic dimensions; modifiers simply take over the semantic and pragmatic primacy. Therefore, based on Tåqvist (Tåqvist 2018),<sup>4</sup> the four basic functions of modified thing NPs are recognized in the article: the organisational function (helping readers navigate through the text), the propositional

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<sup>4</sup> The author discusses premodifier roles in NPs (based on Francis (1986, 1994), and Hunston & Thompson (2000), in Tåqvist 2018). Nevertheless, the classification has turned out to be very effective in the preliminary research on *ICLE-SE thing* NPs, since the semantic and pragmatic roles are performed by modifiers (extender from premodifiers only) when they are used.

function (modifiers containing essential information about the topic addressed), the attitudinal function estimating relative importance, and the evaluative attitudinal function.

At least some typical instances of the organisational function were found in *ICLE-SE*:

28) One more thing, perhaps all three descriptions that are mentioned above are not explained in a right way. (SENS3006<sup>5</sup>)

29) One thing is for sure, many women use make-up because they don't feel confident looking natural. (SEBJ1018)

30) One thing is for sure, many women use make-up because [...]. (SEBJ1018)

31) One thing is sure that it is better to read rather than watching a movie. (SEBG1017)

32) But one thing is certain – whether you are married younger or older [...]. (SEBG2032)

33) Having the right to express yourself is one thing, having good manners and common sense is another. (SENS2001)

What is exemplified in these sentences is the 'typical' organisational function helping readers navigate through the text and 'make sense of the structuring of information' (Tåqvist 2018: 16). Thus I use the term *reader-friendly organisational function* in this article to refer to it.

It is much more frequent to come across examples where the impression is that student writers use a *thing* NP in order to navigate through the writing process more easily *themselves*. Such examples are referred to as *writer-friendly organisational function* in the article:<sup>6</sup>

34) Book is a thing that gives you another perspective on something, another point of view. (SEBJ1012)

35) [...] every individual has their own opinion about a certain thing which is not in agreement with other people's thoughts, needs, opinions and wants [...]. (SEBJ1044)

36) [T]hat being different is normal, your appearance, attitude, intelligence are the things which make you special, not strange, but unique. (SEES1008)

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<sup>5</sup> In examples 28) to 33) the modification is, in more precise terms, determination (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990). Nevertheless, I classify the examples as NPs with modification.

<sup>6</sup> The term is coined for the aims of this article. The term and the concept are not found in relevant literature.

37) It takes an incredible actor to convey the things readers see written in a paragraph, explained to details [...]. (SENS1017)

38) They create their own virtual world and lose interest in the things that happen in real life. (SEES1004)

In other words, examples in this group perform the essential 'discourse-organising function.' The *thing* NPs are used as syntactic devices enabling student writers to organise sentences in a clear and unambiguous way, although being partially awkward, or unnatural. Apart from the pure syntactic value, student writers may feel that sentences containing contact clauses produce the effect of syntactic complexity, information density, and subsequently, student writer's competence.

Apart from this function, the propositional function, where the adjective contributes essentially important information, is also found:

39) If he is a complicated and conservative person he will find every banal thing crazy. (SEBJ1031)

40) [...] and a hopeful thing is that the world is starting to wake up and acknowledge this fact once again. (SENS1009)

41) It is a natural thing that conflicts exist and they will always exist in every sphere of our lives. (SEES3009)

42) Feelings are a strange thing, and sometimes, no matter how much we want to control them, we just [...]. (SEBJ1022)

43) One of those reasons are improving vocabulary, learning new interesting things and paying attention to details. (SENS2003)

44) What is a crazy thing that could be done for someone depends on individual [...]. (SEBJ1031)

The propositional function is best interpreted as one more syntactic 'device,' enabling student writers to use complex structures instead of simple ones (Sinclair 1991: 79; Deshors, Götz, & Laporte 2016: 193). Examples 45) and 46) represent linguistic creativity, and strategic competence:

45) Also, plastic surgery is a "must do" thing in Hollywood since imperfections are rarely accept[a]ble. (SENS2012)

46) People often make a big deal out of this age difference thing, but why should we care about a relationship that is not ours?! (SEBJ1022)

The two attitudinal functions, of relative importance and the evaluative one, are based on the 'importance/relevance' and the 'good-bad' parameters, respectively. Both the functions are very frequently realized in *ICLE-SE*. The attitudinal function of relative importance is exemplified below:

47) Happiness is the most essential thing in our life, and if we are not happy everything else is not that important [...]. (SEES2012)

48) Money has always been one of the most important things for people throughout the history. (SEBG2048)

49) And although they say that you can't buy the most important things in life such as love, happiness or health, the sad truth is [...]. (SEBG2050)

50) Age is not a crucial thing when you have to discuss some issues. (SEBJ1031)

51) Happiness is the most essential thing in our life, and if we are not happy everything else is not that important [...]. (SEES2012)

Apart from relative importance, the evaluative attitudinal function is also very frequently found in the learner corpus:

52) [...] make-up is as we said a good and a bad thing, but it is not really one of the main necessities in life. (SEBJ1018)

53) So, therefore conflicts are not a bad thing at all [...]. (SEBJ1044)

54) [...] a dilemma remains to be solved whether this is a good or a bad thing. (SEBJ3001)

55) So, theoretical knowledge need not be seen as such a bad thing. (SEBG1024)

56) [...] make-up can be treated as a positive and negative thing that actually is necessary but only in certain occasions [...]. (SEBJ1018)

In both evaluative and importance function there is a huge percentage of superlative examples:

57)his is the one of the most essential things. (SEES3009)

58) One of the most important things everyone can learn through conflicts is to be more tolerant [...]. (SEES3019)

59) Knowing what will happen is the worst thing ever. (SEBJ1029)

60) Finally, the most important thing about the stepping over the line is that we are developing ever more artificial things [...]. (SEES3004)

61) Students get powerful education and think that it is the most important thing for their future career. (SEES3016)

62) The most important thing here is to get to know the person and only then form an overall opinion. (SENS3014)

As has already been noticed in relevant literature, superlatives in learner corpora are frequently used as intensifiers, or boosters. In actual fact, while using them, student writers make no real comparisons. This is typical in student writing, unlike in expert writing (Tåqvist 2018: 23). It may be concluded that "the function of the superlative forms here is to primarily boost or inflate the [student] writer's own arguments" (2018: 23).

### 3.3. The reference corpus

In the reference *LOCNESS* corpus some examples of the abovementioned functions were found. Thus, no modification is found in e.g.:

63) Things were fine and dandy until women started [...]

Only the typical (*reader-friendly*) organisational function can be found in examples like the following:<sup>7</sup>

64) The first thing I would like to address is the fact that [...].

The propositional function is exemplified in:

65) [...] not played in the house doing "girly" things.

66) It is a cross-cultural thing. We can be speaking of the American doll [...].

The attitudinal function of relative importance and the evaluative function are exemplified in 67) and 68), respectively:

67) [...] one of the most important things in your life, [...].

68) [...] take more time to research the good things teachers do.

Nevertheless what makes *LOCNESS* examples different from *ICLE-SE* ones, apart from infrequency, is the impression that they are 'monotonous', when compared to the picturesque and lively *ICLE-SE* 'teddy bear'. The 'monotony' can be supported by the comparison of repeated cluster lists, and the collocates displays (*WordSmith Tools*). The *LOCNESS WordSmith Collocate Display* gives 14 hits altogether (range 5L – 5R, minimum frequency 10), whereas the *ICLE-SE WordSmith Collocate Display*, using the

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<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, no examples of writer-friendly organizational function were found.

same parameters, shows that there are as many as 48 hits (Appendix, Tables 4 and 5, respectively). Moreover, on one hand, *LOCNESS* gives seven repeated word clusters altogether (range 5L – 5R, minimum frequency 5, e.g. *a good thing*, being the most frequent cluster (11)). On the other hand, *ICLE-SE* gives as many as 39 repeated word clusters (e.g. *most important thing, the first thing, the same thing, the only thing, things that we, thing that are, the things that*), the maximum frequency being 20 (Appendix, Tables 6 and 7, respectively).

#### 4. Concluding comments

The research has shown that the most favourite 'teddy bear' for Serbian EFL learners is the lexeme *thing*. The *thing* 'teddy bear' is used as both a lexical and a structural device, in a number of specific functions.

Firstly, when used on its own, the *thing* 'teddy bear' replaces a number of specific concepts the meaning of which is rather easily recovered from the context. Thus, it serves the cognitive function of generalisation, being a commonplace in language learning. In this role the *thing* 'teddy bear' may be considered a strategic *lexical* device primarily.

Secondly, when modified, *thing* becomes rather empty of meaning; modifiers take over semantic and pragmatic interpretations. Among such cases of modified NPs the four major functions have been recognized.

The organisational function is typically reader-friendly in essence, since its aim is to help readers navigate through the text. Nevertheless Serbian EFL learners seem to be using the organisational function in a dominantly *writer-friendly* manner, unlike native and expert writing. More precisely, student writers use the *thing* 'teddy bear' as a syntactic device, forming complex sentences (e.g. *book is a thing that gives you another perspective...*) whose role is at least two-fold: they student writers navigate through the complex process of writing, and produce the impression of 'advanced' written discourse.

The propositional function is another structural device. Here student writers use multi-word *thing* NPs with empty heads mostly instead of simple adjectives. The tendency has been recognized as a universal tendency among EFL learners, interestingly being opposite to generalisation. Quite expectedly, Serbian EFL learners use their favourite *thing* 'teddy bear' in the same manner.

The two attitudinal functions, estimating relative importance and providing evaluation, are specific for their frequent use of adjective superlatives. Most



superlatives are not produced in real comparisons, but they serve as emphatic messages student writers want to convey. This is also a universal student writer feature.

All in all, the *thing* 'teddy bear' in Serbian EFL writing serves different functions – lexical and functional ones. The research has so far clearly established the case of *thing* 'teddy bear' in Serbian EFL writing. A logical step forward is carrying out research on a number of possible causes, L1 transfer ranking among the most probable ones – based on lexical-functional roles of the Serbian *stvari*. The case is even more interesting for the simple reason that none of the essay titles in question contain the *thing* 'teddy bear' itself.

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