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## **ENGLISH TEXTUAL GRAFFITI IN THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS**

*The present paper is an attempt to view English textual graffiti in the light of the theory of language functions suggested by R. Jakobson. Graffiti is a unique medium of communication between different members of a society. The message graffiti text conveys is expressed with the use of a number of linguistic units that collectively realize one of the functions of language. The aim of the paper is to reveal how each function is performed in graffiti texts and what kind of semantic and pragmatic properties their constituent parts may possess.*

**Key words:** *modes of communication, graffiti, street art, graffiti discourse, functions of language*

Graffiti is a rather old phenomenon and is considered to reflect a number of ideas, views and opinions prevalent in a society at a specific time. It is mainly created to raise various concerns, from strictly personal to socio-political. Graffiti stands out for the variety of topics covered and the unique way of encoding messages. These messages can be encoded using text as well as other modes of communication. Textual graffiti stands out for its linguistic features and for its *relationship* with other modes of communication. This paper attempts to highlight some of the linguistic characteristics of English textual graffiti according to the language functions performed and to reveal the linguistic means of their realization in this specific type of discourse. Examples of English textual graffiti are taken from various internet sources as well as have been obtained from personal observations.

Before proceeding to the analysis proper we think it reasonable to consider the definition of the term *graffiti*. It derives from the Italian noun *graffio* (literally “to scratch”) and means “incised inscriptions” /Encyclopaedia Britannica/. The dictionary definitions of the term focus on different characteristics of the phenomenon of graffiti. The Meriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “usually unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface /<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graffiti/>, while the Cambridge Dictionary stresses the content of the wall writings defining the term as “words or drawings, especially humorous, rude, or political, on walls, doors, etc.” /<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/graffiti/>. The Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary gives a more laconic

definition of the word: “drawings or writing on a wall, etc.” /<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/graffiti?q=graffiti/>.

The American Heritage Dictionary stresses the importance of visibility of the graffiti and defines it as “drawings or inscriptions made on a wall or other surface, usually without permission and so as to be seen by the public” /<https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=graffiti/>.

As far as the concept of graffiti is concerned, a distinction should be made between the following related terms: *graffiti*, *street art*, *urban art*. The term *street art* is sometimes defined as “All art on the street that’s not graffiti” /Lewisohn, 2008: 23, cited from Blanche, 2015/ and is usually believed not to be synonymous with *graffiti*, since *street art* “consists of self-authorized pictures, characters and forms created in or applied to surfaces in the urban space that intentionally seek communication with a large circle of people” /Blanche, 2015: 33/. The term *urban art* is considered to be much broader than *street art* and usually includes legal works as well. *Urban art* seems to be “more appropriate as an umbrella term for any art in the style of Street Art, Style writing or mural art” /Blanche, 2015: 38/.

The majority of researchers are of the opinion that the main functions of graffiti creation are to challenge the authorities, to let the weaker and more marginalised groups of the society express their ideas and concerns, as well as to voice their deeply personal or social-political problems that cannot otherwise be voiced /Mwangi and others, 2015: 3; Farnia, 2014: 49; Rodriguez and Clair, 2009: 3; Nwoye, 1993/.

The theoretical and analytical study of graffiti suggests that any type of graffiti performs certain functions manifested in the mode of communication it is created by. In textual graffiti the mode is the language that helps the author to reach his purpose – to perform a function the graffiti has been designed for. Below we'll focus on the functions textual graffiti perform and try to explore the linguistic means employed to realize them. For that purpose we take as a basis R. Jakobson's model of the functions of language.

Such an approach allows us to classify the graffiti texts under study according to their functional significance and helps us to reveal what kind of linguistic organization those texts have and what language functions different forms of linguistic organization are designed to serve.

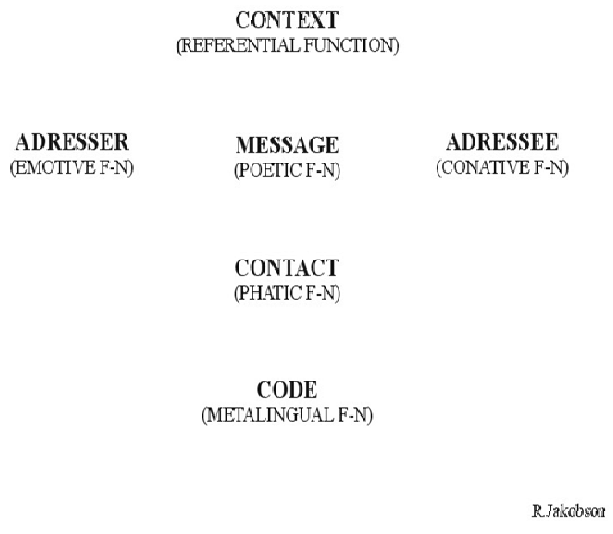
In his work “Linguistics and poetics” /1960/, R. Jakobson distinguishes between 6 functions the language performs according to the six respective components necessary for communication to take place (see the Figure below).

As can be seen from the figure each function focuses on the following components of communication: addresser, message, addressee, context, code, contact. Accordingly the model discriminates the following six

functions: emotive, poetic, conative, referential, metalingual, phatic. It is generally believed that there exists no utterance performing only one function, hence our classification of graffiti texts will be based on the prevalence of one function over the others.

Graffiti texts can be taken as means of verbalization of different emotions on the walls to make them more visible and “audible” for those whom they are addressed to. This does not mean, however, that all the graffiti texts perform the emotive function of the language.

The graffiti texts realize the **emotive** function of language, when the focus is on the addresser (the conversation starter), when they express the speaker’s direct attitude towards what s/he is speaking about /Jakobson, 1960: 354/. When realizing the emotive function, the language of graffiti often



sounds ironic. The ideas conveyed are mostly constructed upon oppositions. Consider the following example: “*Congratulations! You have surpassed the voice of youth now we speak through paint*”. Though the word *congratulations* normally expresses some kind of praise for an achievement, here it is used ironically to realize the emotive function of the language. Obviously, from the speaker’s point of view “surpassing the voice of youth” is not an achievement or even if it were the speaker is not happy with that at all. In this case the word “congratulations” is used as a kind of a contronym: *a word that conveys contradictory and reverse meanings depending on the context of its use*.

The following graffiti text is another example of an ironic and contronymic use of words and expressions: “*Merry crisis and happy new fear*”. Here the words “*crisis*” and “*fear*” are used as puns to “unite” the conative and emotive functions and express the writer’s emotions, on the one hand, and puzzle the reader’s mind, on the other.



Picture 1

The emotive function of language is realized in the following graffiti as well (Picture 1). Here we see two different modes of communication: an image and a text. Visually the image is bigger in size and covers most of the space, the textual component is comparably smaller and is in the secondary plane. The inverted commas make the graffiti more “dialogic” and “talkative”, as they prompt direct speech and ascribe it to the man. This graffiti is a vivid example of the interconnection and interdependence of the two

modes of communication applied in it. The picture backgrounds the role of the language in the message, at the same time it heavily relies on the language itself, otherwise the whole graffiti would have been incomplete. Irony and sorrow are one of the most common topics touched upon in graffiti. They mostly rely on the performance of the emotive function of language and dictate the choice of the means and techniques of expression.

Here is an example from the Armenian language to prove that graffiti texts are mostly based on the expression of the authors’ emotions. Right after the outbreak of COVID-19 in Armenia followed by many restrictions implemented after the first few cases a textual graffiti appeared in Yerevan (Picture 2).



Picture 2

The given graffiti alludes to the reality with the help of a demonstrative pronoun *uw* (*this*) referring to COVID-19. Note that the letters in the first part of the text are bigger in size. They highlight the importance of the message rather than the underlying reasons prompted by the smaller-size letters. Big-size letters also intensify the communicative effectiveness of the imperative mood used here. This example shows that not only one mode of communication foregrounds or backgrounds the role of the other, but also that one and the same mode (in this case

the text) may possess certain means that can show dominance of one of its components over the other. Though in such a tough and marginal situation this text is more like a request, it is written in the imperative mood and expresses order not to one but to all the members of the society. This can be deduced from the second person plural verb form (սիրեք/love), which is visually and conceptually the centre of the utterance.

The visual and the textual forms of graffiti are unfolding in linguistic as well as extra-linguistic contexts. Context in graffiti is a crucial element. Graffiti is not only simply unfolding in a context, but can also be “context-inducing”. Context in this type of discourse can serve as the main motivator for the graffiti creation.

Context-sensitive utterances realize the **referential function** of language.

To illustrate this point let us consider a recent example of graffiti (Picture 3) created right after the outbreak of the coronavirus.

The graffiti obviously reflects the context in which it appears. The first thing that might be noticed here is the intertextual reference to the famous novel by George Orwell (“1984”) based on the graphic similarity of the utterances.



After realizing these intertextual relations, we can state that this piece of graffiti reflects the context of the situation following the COVID-19 outbreak, where the surveillance over citizens boosted, and their whereabouts and contacts could be legally traced. This directs us to the famous lines of the novel “Big brother is watching you”. So we can conclude that the referential function of language in the graffiti discourse can be realized by means of intertextual relations especially with the use of the famous narratives that are more than ever trendy at that particular time. Modern tendencies and events are primary motivators of graffiti creation.

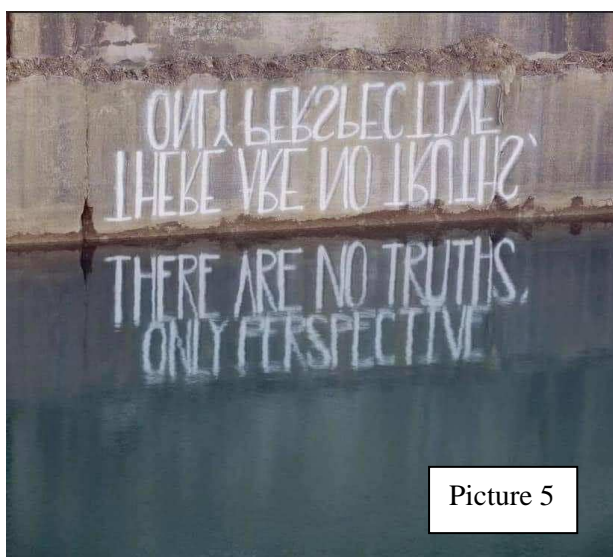
The following graffiti (Picture 4) displays the referential function of the language by means of an appropriate context. The textual



component of the graffiti closely cooperates with the context being unfolded in an environment which shows a 'cause and effect relationship'. The whole utterance expresses sarcasm based on a paradox. On the one hand, the speaker “doesn’t believe in global warming”, on the other hand, the consequences of the global warming (melting of ice) “drown” his speech, though he tries to “rescue” it by capitalizing and darkening the letters. In this case the context can be seen as another “mode” of communication, as far as it strongly cooperates with the text and takes part in the meaning-making process. The paradox of the utterance is created by the linguistic component (the negative conjugation).

We observe the same regularity in the following graffiti as well (Picture 5).

In order to express his conviction (emotive function) and make it more attractive for the addressee (conative function) the creator of the graffiti has selected the corresponding environment for the utterance (referential function). The speaker skilfully uses the mirroring effect of the water by writing his message upside down on the

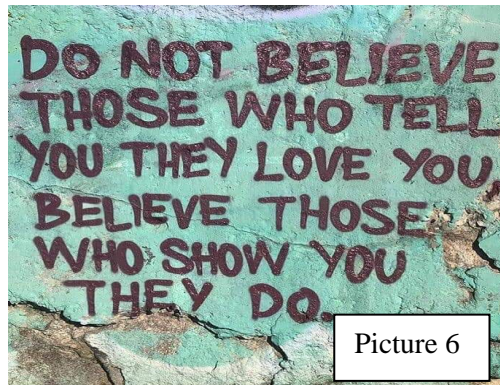


Picture 5

wall, thus making it more persuasive. Here two semantically different words – *truth* and *perspective* are represented as the two ends of the opposition. Besides, the word *truth* is written in plural and *perspective* – in singular. This slight though very skillful technique encompasses a rather big concept for the “truth” to be numerous and various but for the “perspective” to be one and only. Certainly, the message wouldn’t have been complete and the nuances – so visible if another context had been selected.

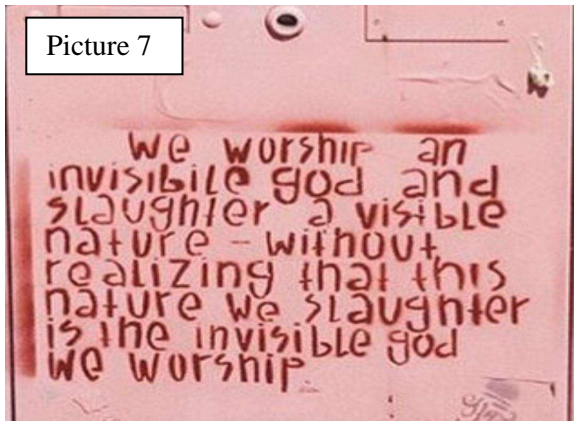
The graffiti discourse is rather diverse both in terms of the themes touched upon, as well as in terms of the language employed. In graffiti discourse the aim of most of the writings is to influence the varied readership, and as most researchers believe, to puzzle their minds making them think over the content conveyed and take into account different facts and ideologies. In graffiti texts the role of the potential audience is brought to the fore fostering the realization of the conative function of the language.

As is known, the **conative** function of language focuses on the addressee. In graffiti texts this function is mainly carried by interrogative and imperative sentences with certain characteristic features. Graffiti texts, in which this function prevails, are marked by the emotive function of language, as in the following example (Picture 6).



Picture 6

Here the utterance begins with a negative imperative sentence which sharpens the sense of the utterance and directs the vector of the speech to the potential addressee (the imperative mood, as we know, implies the use of the second person). The use of the imperative mood in the sentence projects the events into future. The whole utterance is based upon the opposition of ideas and actions. The word pair *tell* and *show*, on the one hand, and *love* and *do*, on the other, create the path of actions the addressee should walk in by pointing out his main task ('believing'), that appears in the middle of the utterance. In order to obtain the desired effect, that is to create a strong impact on the reader the "name" of the addressee (*you*) is used several times, though it has already been prompted by the use of the imperative mood.



Picture 7

The graffiti discourse here (Picture 7) contains contrasting ideas created with words sharing some semantic commonalities. In this example, the contrast is created with the help of an antonymic pair (*visible-invisible*) as well as with conceptual antonymic pair (*god-nature*). The subject of the sentence is the pronoun *we*, which indicates some integrity with the readership, creates a

sense of togetherness and thus intensifies the impact of the text on the readers. The semantic centre of the utterance (*without realizing*) is in an intermediary position and contains a negative message expressed with the help of the connective *without*. This message mainly realizes the conative function of language and contains some elements typical of the poetic function, such as the careful choice of words and the overall structure of the message.

We can also observe the conative function of language in graffiti carried by interrogative sentences, that are believed to attract the readers' attention and make him/her think of different issues. The following example (Picture 8) contains an interrogative sentence in the present perfect tense form. We think that the tense form is not chosen randomly. It is generally believed



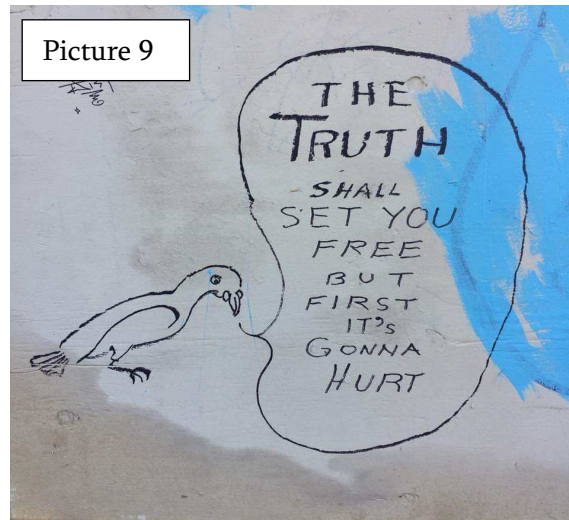
that dialogues usually start with present perfect tense forms. We can therefore conclude that the graffiti creator not only meant to make the reader think, but also to initiate a conversation with him/her. In such graffiti narrations we can observe M. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism /Bakhtin, 1981/. According to this theory the speaker's imagination starts talking to himself and triggers the potential answers of the interlocutor. In the example under analysis the anticipated answer to this question is "yes", which can be inferred from the sentence to follow (*you are not alone*). The conative function is displayed here in the last sentence as well, since the speaker refers to the first predicate of the utterance (*have you noticed*), pointing out the addressee, not to the second one (*this system is pathological*).

In the graffiti discourse the messages can be created by the author himself or cited some from other sources. The text can also have intertextual relations with other texts. In all the three cases the stress of the utterance can be either on the message itself, or on its linguistic/textual organization proper. When the message becomes the primary focus of the utterance, it realizes the poetic function of the language. Below we will try to observe the peculiarities of its realization.

The **poetic** function of language is realized by keeping the message on focus.



The following graffiti (Picture 9) contains allusion to the Bible (“*the truth shall set you free*”): the whole content of the graffiti is based on this allusion. The text aims at puzzling the reader’s mind and disharmonizing with his intentions and expectations. The message is constructed upon an opposition, the two poles of which constitute the words *free* and *hurt*. The timeframe of the actions is expressed with an ordinal numeral (*first*) indicating



Picture 9

an initial action and an auxiliary verb (*shall*) indicating a future action. This example clearly shows that graffiti texts may often perform the poetic function using figurative language. In this case the figurative language is embodied with the use of conceptual metaphors (*The truth shall set free ... [and] hurt*).

Here is a piece of graffiti text which is constructed upon contrast by means of words, expressions and ideas that usually do not share any semantic boundaries: “*When the power of love is greater than the love of power, the world will know peace*”. The opposition in this graffiti realizes the poetic function of the language. The marker of the poetic function here are the two nouns (*power and love*) that are in a mutual comparison expressed by an adjective in the comparative degree (*greater*). The temporal vector of the utterance is directed to the future (the future simple tense), which brings about more concreteness, logic and motivation in the utterance, that could not be achieved if the present simple tense form was used in the secondary clause of time. The word *world* is the centre of the utterance placed in an intermediate position and the word *peace* is the purpose of the utterance in the final position. The words *power* and *love*, do not share any semantic similarities, rather they are used together in different quotes.

In the graffiti discourse, as in daily life, the “speakers” have to keep certain minimal contact with other “speakers” or “listeners”. As in daily conversations, in graffiti discourse as well this minimal or formal contact is maintained with the realization of the phatic function of the language.

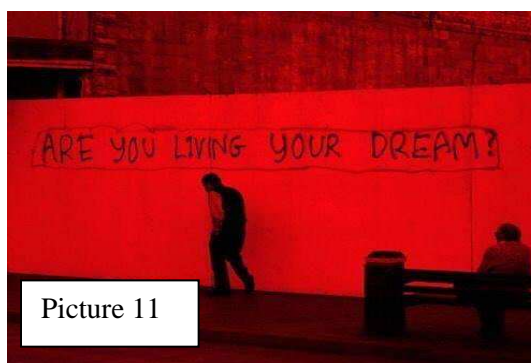
Some graffiti texts, when performing the **phatic** function of the language, aim at establishing and saving psychological contact between the members of the society. Unlike the daily communication, in these texts more existential issues are being questioned. The creator of this graffiti asks thought-stimulating and vital

questions, though the purpose is the same – to keep physical or psychological contact. Consider textual graffiti (Picture 10). The question here (*Are you happy?*) is short and straightforward, unlike the abstract nature of other questions used in daily conversations that usually perform the phatic function of language.



This regularity is observed in other pieces of graffiti as well. The following graffiti text (Picture 11 “*Are you living your dream?*”) is using a general question and though its function is to keep the minimal possible contact with the reader, the question put is much deeper and a more philosophical one, rather than simple “What’s up?” or “How are you doing?”, that are known as usual “performers” of the phatic function in daily conversations. The basic difference between the phatic

function as performed in daily conversations and in graffiti texts is that in daily communication the phatic function is simply limited to the formal maintenance of a contact, while in graffiti the message poses more fundamental and existential questions. The use of the present continuous tense in this very example creates the context of “here and now”. The pronouns *you* and *your* intensify the role of the addressee thus performing the conative function as well.



Graffiti is a discourse, where linguistic, semiotic, visual and textual components are closely interconnected. To make the message more concrete, logical and influential the “speaker” makes a choice among these components. This expansion of the use of various modes of communication sometimes generates the problem of clarification for the sake of the adequate interpretation of the message. That is where the metalingual function of the language is realized.

The **metalingual** function of language is performed when more clarification or ambiguity resolution is needed. In graffiti texts this function is performed a bit differently and with certain semantic and semiotic peculiarities. In Picture 12, for example, there is a hybrid text constructed with pure textual and semiotic components. The hybridity of the text is realized through the visual similarity of

the sign of the British pound with the letter E (in this case symbolizing a sum of money). The text cites a famous quote about love, at the same time it puzzles the readers' mind and doesn't meet his/her expectations due to the internal contradiction of its linguo-semiotic components. The semiotic component of the graffiti ('£' as the British pound sign) points to the meaning of the polysemantic word *free* appropriate in this context – '*costing nothing*'. Here the metalingual function is realized in the "reader's mind", when s/he tries to resolve the ambiguity caused by the hybridity of the text.



We can "observe" the metalingual function when the graffiti uses both modes of communication, visual and textual. In Picture 13, we again observe the "puzzling of the reader's mind" by modifying a well-known saying (*There is no plan B*). The author of the graffiti proceeds from the observation of the common



stem "plan" in both of the words (PLAN, PLANet). As for the visual component of the graffiti one can say that it is also based on the similarity with the textual component (letter O). On the whole, the graffiti raises an environmental issue by capitalizing the secondary component of the message (PLAN) and foregrounding the primary message (planet) on the visual component.

Summing up our observations we can conclude that the language of graffiti is a unique platform for combining various semantic phenomena, where linguistic and non-linguistic realities realize the functions of language through close cooperation with each other. The implementation of these functions in graffiti discourse manifests itself both in the use of pure linguistic units as well as in the interconnection and interdependence of different modes of communication. The performance of the functions of language doesn't violate the traditional linguistic rules or regularities, rather it makes a skillful and well-thought use of them in order to convey the desired meaning as well as to achieve the desired impact over the target audience both in the textual and visual domains.

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**Ե. ԵՐԶԻՆԿՅԱՆ, Գ. ԳԱՍՊԱՐՅԱՆ – Անգլալեզու տեքստային որմնագրությունը լեզվի գործառույթների տեսության համատեքստում.** – Սույն հոդվածում փորձ է արվում դիտարկել անգլալեզու տեքստային որմնագրությունը լեզվի գործառույթների տեսության լույսի ներքո: Որմնագրությունը համարվում է հաղորդակցության մի յուրահատուկ միջոց հասարակության ամենատարբեր անդամների միջև: Տեղեկությունը հաղորդվում է որմնագրային տեքստի միջոցով՝ կազմված մի շարք իմաստակիր լեզվական միավորներից, որոնք էլ իրականացնում են լեզվի գործառույթները: Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է պարզել, թե ինչպես է յուրաքանչյուր գործառույթը իրականացվում որմնագրային խոսույթում և թե ինչպիսի իմաստային և գործաբանական առանձնահատկություններ ունեն որմնագրային տեքստի բաղկացուցիչ մասերը:

**Բանալի բառեր.** հաղորդակցության եղանակներ, որմնագրություն, փոդոցային արվեստ, որմնագրային խոսույթ, լեզվի գործառույթներ

**Ե. ЕРЗИНКЯН, Г. ГАСПАРЯН – Английское текстовое граффити в контексте функций языка.** – В данной статье предпринята попытка рассмотреть английские текстовые граффити в свете функциональной теории языка Р. Якобсона. Граффити является уникальным средством самовыражения и общения между членами общества. Передаваемая граффити информация образуется «совокупным» значением ряда лингвистических единиц, которые и реализуют одну из функций языка. Цель статьи – определить, как та или иная языковая функция реализуется в граффити-дискурсе и какими семантическими и прагматическими свойствами могут обладать его составные части.

**Ключевые слова:** способы коммуникации, граффити, уличное искусство/стрит-арт, граффити-дискурс, функции языка

Ներկայացվել է՝ 08.10.2020  
 Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլերենի թիվ 2 ամբիոնի կողմից  
 Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 20.11.2020