

PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF PRECEDENT UNITS WITH MYTHOLOGICAL ALLUSION IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Precedent units with mythological allusions as special textual elements with wide pragmatic potential are considered in the article from the point of view of their functioning in modern British media discourse, the most wide-scale version of modern text representation. Precedent units of different origin are actively used in modern language because the “eternal” concepts they embody, symbolize, and actualise the recipient’s background knowledge, which is essential for media discourse. The study describes and illustrates the main functions of precedent units in media language — nominative, expressive-decorative, persuasive, password (password-identifying), ludic (game, or the function of language game creation), euphemistic, affecting. The material for the study was a variety of sources, including UK periodicals. The illustrative material demonstrates the pragmatic features of the functioning of precedent units, their semantic derivation, and the increase of meanings in the process of linguistic perceptualisation. It is proved that the use of precedent units is extremely productive in the implementation of the author’s intentions in media discourse. It is concluded that the pragmatics of the precedent units is addressed to the paradigm of cognitive, discursive and communicative characteristics, which allows to perceive the text as a unified system. The prospect of further research can extend to a comparative analysis of precedent units with mythological allusions in different languages in the context of mass media in order to identify the cognitive and pragmatic universal components, as well as to describe the algorithm of linguistic influence on the potential audience through the subjectification of internal content and individual author’s interpretation of the main cultural and social references recorded in world literature.

Keywords: precedent unit, pragmatics, media discourse, mythological allusions, linguoculturology, cross-cultural communication.

С. Ю. Рубцова

ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ ПРЕЦЕДЕНТНЫХ ЕДИНИЦ С МИФОЛОГИЧЕСКИМИ АЛЛЮЗИЯМИ В МЕДИАДИСКУРСЕ

В статье рассмотрены прецедентные единицы с мифологическими аллюзиями как особые текстовые элементы, обладающие широким прагматическим потенциалом, с точки зрения их функционирования в современном британском медиадискурсе — наиболее масштабном варианте распространения современного текста. Прецедентные едини-

цы различного происхождения активно используются в современном языке поскольку «вечные» концепты, которые они воплощают и символизируют, актуализируют фоновые знания рецепиента, что имеет существенную значимость для медиадискурса. В рамках исследования описаны и проиллюстрированы основные функции прецедентных единиц в языке средств массовой информации — номинативная, экспрессивно-декоративная, персуазивная, парольная (парольно-идентифицирующая), людическая (игровая, или функция создания языковой игры), эвфемистическая, воздействующая. Материалом исследования послужили различные источники, включающие периодические издания Великобритании. На иллюстративном материале продемонстрированы прагматические особенности функционирования прецедентных единиц с мифологическими аллюзиями, их семантическая производность и приращение смыслов в процессе языковой концептуализации. Доказано, что использование таких структур в крайней степени продуктивно в рамках реализации авторских интенций в медиадискурсе. Сделан вывод о том, что прагматика прецедентных единиц обращена к парадигме когнитивных, дискурсивных и коммуникативных характеристик, что позволяет воспринимать текст как единую систему. Перспектива дальнейшего исследования видится в компаративном анализе прецедентных единиц с мифологическими аллюзиями в разных языках в медиадискурсе с целью выявления когнитивных и прагматических универсальных компонентов, а также описание алгоритма лингвистического воздействия на потенциальную аудиторию посредством субъективации внутреннего содержания и индивидуально-авторской интерпретации основных зафиксированных в мировой литературе культурных и социальных установок.

Ключевые слова: прецедентные единицы, прагматика, медиадискурс, мифологические аллюзии, лингвокультурология, кросс-культурная коммуникация.

Introduction

At this stage in the development of linguistics, cross-cultural communication has received significant attention. The fact is that for a successful act of communication, it is necessary to operate with concepts within the same conceptual domain, as well as to know the “conceptual neighbours” of this domain. The nature of a concept is characterized by duality: on the one hand, a concept is fixed semiotically, i. e., by means of a language sign, and on the other hand, it has a cognitive basis, i. e., it is represented by the content part. This theory in linguistics is based on the hypothesis of structuring knowledge about the world by means of specific cells with a certain set of stereotypical scripts, which can be quickly mentally “processed”, since in addition to the main (explicit) information, they also record hidden (implicit) information. This explains the high accelera-

tion of human perception and cognition. Semantic representation occurs according to the following principle: information is perceived, processed, then a judgment is formed based on a set of standards, stereotypical concepts already existing in the mind, corresponding specifically to this area of cognition [Karasik, 2016].

The process of linguistic conceptualisation creates conditions for intensification of fixation of certain concepts in the consciousness of the collective linguistic personality, which is especially evident in cross-cultural communication, where reinterpretation and actualisation of semantic components are formed through the reference points of meaning [Ivanova, E. A. (2012) p. 169].

In this article, we consider the precedent units of different origin and their modifications with mythological allusions, consider the pragmatic potential of their semantic derivation and establish the peculiarities of their functioning in modern English media discourse.

World literature has been a rich source of precedent statements, influencing the formation of cultural and mental values for millions of people around the world for many centuries [Rubtsova, 2015 b]. The text as a precedent phenomenon undoubtedly has all the attributes of cross-cultural versatility. Despite significant distortions and additions in the structure of the cognitive matrix of the precedent text compared to fiction texts written at different times in different languages, both the preservation of the conceptual connection with the original text and the universal cross-lingual character of key concepts and cognitive lines can be observed [Orlova, 2010].

For the conventional collective individual, as well as for the whole linguistic and cultural community, precedent phenomena are of value because they appeal to the experience and perception of the linguistic picture of the world by previous generations, and many common language concepts were formed under the influence of the precedent. This explains the wide use of precedent units in modern media discourse.

The main feature of precedent units is considered to be referentiality, i.e., “an ability to give a reference to a past event” [Nazarova, 2017]. Being one of the dominant models of speech-making [Golubeva, 2007], precedent units contribute to the formation of additional meanings of statements and perform the following functions in media discourse: nominative, expressive-decorative, persuasive, password (password-identifying), ludic (game, or function of language game creation), euphemistic, affecting [Slyshkin, 2004, p. 86; Slyshkin, 2000, p. 123-124; Guseynova, 2013, p. 30]. Let us consider the implementation of these functions on the material of modern British media texts of different thematic orientation.

Methods and Materials

The major linguistic processes are currently recorded and fixed in the digital version of the language precisely because of the media. Therefore, we believe that the study of the use of precedent units in modern English-language media discourse and the analysis of their functioning is an urgent task for linguists engaged in the problems of text interpretation, conceptualisation of notions, and semantic categories. The diversity of perspectives in describing precedent units comprises syntagmatic and paradigmatic features. That is confirmed by the subjective styles of contemporary scientific reasoning, forcing one to see it as a communicative act and an aesthetic event simultaneously, at the same time allowing one to perform additional functions in media discourse.

The choice of the object of research predetermined the use of a number of methods to consider the functions of precedent units, in particular: descriptive-comparative method, the method of continuous sampling, the method of contextual analysis, the method of interpretation. The material of the study was the English originals of precedent units, translations into Russian, identified contexts of use of terms from the corpus of British modern media space of the Internet.

Discussion and Results

The key function that precedent units with mythological allusions perform in the discourse is a nominative function. N. A. Golubeva notes that the nominative function of precedent units lies in their reflection of the result of human intellectual activity, in the naming of “information objects” [Golubeva, 2007]. According to G. G. Slyshkin, the nominative function of precedent units is associated with the economy of speech means enabling a speaker to convey a significant amount of information concisely [Slyshkin, 2004, p. 86]. This is conditioned by the ability of the precedent unit to actualise particular slots of the frame, in the form of which they are presented in the minds of the native speakers. T. S. Guseynova [Guseynova, 1997; Guseynova, 2013; Guseynova, 2014; Guseynova, 2015] also draws attention to the ability of a phraseological unit to mark the phenomena of reality that are similar in situation and act as a frame, which determines the abstract nature and schematic nature of the phraseological unit [Nazarova, 2017, p. 70].

The use of an expansive concept ‘*Pandora’s box*’ [Rubtsova, 2015] implies the individual-author’s addition of pragmatic meaning about a risky situation, which can bring a number of adverse consequences:

*The US ambassador to Baghdad conceded yesterday that the Iraq invasion had opened a **Pandora's box** of sectarian conflicts which could lead to a regional war and the rise of religious extremists who "would make Taliban Afghanistan look like child's play".*

The expressive pragmatic component as the main evocative means is fundamental to media discourse, as it allows to draw attention to the topic under discussion and trigger an emotional outburst in the recipient. Therefore, the use of precedent statements is more common in newspaper headlines and editorials: *'Pandora's box': experts say Queensland's windfall from coal royalties could set a precedent.*

In media discourse, intentional modifications (transformations, quasi-citations) of precedent units are the author's intention, aimed at realising nominative and expressive-decorative functions: "***The bland leading the blind. The president intervenes. Or does he?***" is an intentional modification of the scripture text: "*The Blind Leading the Blind Every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them, they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. (Matthew 15:13-14).*"

The expressive-decorative function is most often realised in specific contexts and is motivated by the nature of media discourse, namely the attraction of readers' attention to the published material:

*... the British government using them as a political pawn in their games with the EU. **The writing on the wall** is clear, even more so after the Storm elections [16 16. The Times. London. 17, May, 2022].*

*... and the additional boost to inflation and supply chain problems it has brought. These "**four horsemen of the apocalypse**" have damaged growth and continue to do so. [The Times. London. 27, July, 2022]*

*Institutional enhancement isn't achieved by **scapegoating** nor purging the top levels. Nadhim Zahawi and Edward Argar, the new ministers responsible. [The Times. London. 19, September, 2022]*

The persuasive function is implemented in media discourse in the context of political discourse, as this communicative process is aimed at the implementation of manipulative strategies and the real impact on the recipient's mentality inherent in political discourse [Makarov, 2012, p. 52]. Linguistic markers create the preconditions for the formation of special cognitive attitudes, which allow identifying vaguely structured conceptual categories in the recipient's thinking and subsequently filling these blanks based on the author's goals and objectives. Manipulation as a special form of programming the reaction to a certain event covered by the media is also carried out through the use of precedent units:

«Nato's *'achilles heel'*: alliance conducts war games in nervous Lithuania» [The Times. London. 19, September, 2022];

Horsemen of the Apocalypse are on their way, Dmitry Medvedev warns

... he had warned that Moscow would attack western cities, if missiles provided to Ukraine by the US were used to hit targets in Russia. "The horsemen of the *Apocalypse* are ... [The Sunday Times. UK, 19, December, 2021]

A professional and independent media representative is expected to cover a political event in an unbiased manner, without adding his or her own personal evaluation or commentary, but in practice, media texts receive an authorial pragmatic component, which acquires an individual authorial subjectivity, including through the use of mythical allusions by the author:

... *It's what they do. This may persuade both party leaders not to bother reading the **writing on the wall** — writing that seems, to me, pretty clear.* [The Guardian. London. 20, April, 2022];

*Sit vac: cleaner required for **Augean stables***

Changes at the exchange

*Two members of the key World Cup-awarding executive committee were banned in the wake of a Sunday Times investigation into corruption; another four officials were also booted out. If not quite an **Augean stables moment**, it was justice delivered swiftly, and openly.* [The Guardian. London. 12, March, 2014]

The password function of the precedent units is widely practiced in media discourse by means of reference points of semantic meaning identified by the author, who seems to include the reader into the community of the privileged and shares with him the conditional information, which is not available to everyone. Ultimately, the reader becomes an equal participant in cross-cultural media communication, which connects their consciousness with the position of the author, who objectifies the media text in accordance with his or her intentions:

*And in the house he has clad all of the traditional marble and mosaic sculpture plinths in magenta. The changes are most noticeable in the house's sculpture gallery where 20 stunning 19th century sculptures, including **Sleeping Endymion** by Canova, now have bright magenta bases. "You can see how it clarifies the sculptures," Craig-Martin said. "You can see them so much more easily than normal." [The Times. London. 20, June, 2022]*

In this context, the mythical allusion of Sleeping Endymion is a kind of cultural sense-mimicking code that makes the recipient feel ‘at home’ in the companionship of the author and his associates.

E. g.: *Boris Johnson is neither good chap nor great man ... description of him as the “Alexander the Great of our times . . . a great cutter of Gordian knots”*. This is how the prime minister’s acolytes see him, and perhaps how ... [The Guardian. London. 18, May, 2022]

The ironic use of the expression ‘*Gordian knot*’ [Oxford Dictionary of English] contributes to the mental unity of the author and the reader, indicating a definitive realisation of the semantic component of the mythical allusion.

The game (ludic) function of precedent units in media discourse is implemented in order to enliven the narration. It is often possible to observe a symbiosis of the ludic and affecting functions via the semantic superimposition of different precedent utterances. In English media discourse, language game serves as an effective expressive tool to attract the attention of the recipient. The modification of the precedent unit ‘*Procrustean bed*’ refers the reader to a situation where there are strict requirements or norms that the object seeks to comply with:

*Constructing WN puzzles is a prolonged process. The grid should ideally contain equal numbers of words of different lengths, and I try to select words which seem to offer a reasonable range of different one-word definitions. This may create unforeseen problems at the cluing stage, and as this proceeds to the last few, the **Procrustean demands** of the format become ever more challenging. So you may have to wait a while before the next WN turns up, whether or not it’s a competition puzzle!* [The Guardian. London. 06, February, 2014];

*You are having trouble getting through a newspaper book review. What is the problem? Is it because the argument is of labyrinthine complexity? Or is it because **the author’s Procrustean tendency** to shoehorn classical metaphors and similes into every sentence is becoming irksome? For three years I suffered a **Proustian and Procrustean fate** as I sought my Lolita in a boyish woman. I even wrote poems. Oh my Lolita / I long to meet yer. And then I got a letter from a Mrs Schiller. “Dear Dad, I am married and having a baby. Please send money.”* [The Guardian. London. 21, February, 2009]

The euphemistic function of a precedent unit is reduced to “softening” the statement, presenting information in a softer, more politically correct form, without offending the reader’s feelings as a result of the author’s individual reinterpretation. In media discourse, this function is

realised in a quantitatively reduced manner, covering and softening some sacred notions:

Trump calls Covid diagnosis ‘blessing from God’ amid false treatment claims

President returns to Oval Office despite concerns he should be self-isolating as virus spreads in White House [The Guardian. London. 07, October, 2020];

as well as the concept of ‘death’: *to sleep in the Arms of God / eternal rest*

The gentrification of death: in New York eternal rest will soon be a luxury [The Guardian. London. 12, July, 2018];

Earlier this morning, pallbearers had laid the cypress coffin onto the stone steps in front of the basilica. A choir sang “Grant him eternal rest, O Lord” to mark the start of the funeral Mass. [The Guardian. London. 08, April, 2005]

Conclusion

Productive pragmatic potential of the precedent units in the modern media discourse contributes to the implementation of the processes of semantic derivation, the accretion of meanings and the formation of occasional connotations. The versatile nature of intertextuality in the case of precedent insertions refers the recipient’s attention to the eternal themes and motifs, which organically integrates into the modern paradigm of reality perception, blurs the cognitive structure and the framework of human information and allows to fully implement the author’s intentions. The use of precedent units in a media text helps the author to eliminate information redundancy by sublimating a huge layer of background knowledge into a relatively truncated precedent structure, stimulating the emergence of additional background connotations and attracting attention to them. The desired perception of certain information in the media discourse is achieved as quickly as possible by matching the sent and received signals. The broad functionality of the precedent units is fully realised in the texts of the media. On the material of modern British media, it is shown that the pragmatics of precedent units is addressed to the paradigm of cognitive, discursive and communicative characteristics, which allows the text to be perceived as a single system, implementing nominative, expressive-decorative, perceptive, password (password-identifying), ludic (game, or language game-making function), euphemistic, affecting functions.

Sources

- Oxford Dictionary of English*. Available at: <http://www.en.oxforddictionaries.com> (accessed: 25.04.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. April 8, 2005. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/apr/08/catholicism.religion3> (accessed: 25.04.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. February 21, 2009. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/21/nabokov-digested-classics> (accessed: 13.05.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. February 6, 2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/06/wisdom-myths-lucy-ferry-review> (accessed: 25.04.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. March 12, 2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/12/michael-craig-martin-chatsworth-house> (accessed: 25.05.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. July 12, 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/12/the-gentrification-of-death-in-new-york-eternal-rest-will-soon-be-a-luxury> (accessed: 16.04.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. October 7, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/07/trump-covid-diagnosis-regeneron-treatment> (accessed: 16.04.2022).
- The Sunday Times*. UK. December 19, 2021.
- The Guardian*. London. April 11, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/11/natoachilles-heel-alliance-conducts-war-games-nervouslithuania> (accessed: 05.06.2022).
- The Guardian*. London. 20, April, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2000/apr/20/2> (accessed: 22.09.2022).
- The Times*. London. May 17, 2022.
- The Guardian*. London. May 18, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/crosswords/2022/may/18/azed-slip-no-2603> (accessed: 10.09.2022).
- The Times*. London. June 20, 2022.
- The Times*. London. July 27, 2022.
- The Times*. London. September 19, 2022.

References

- Golubeva, N. A. (2007). Word. Text. Discourse. Precedent units. *Language, communication and social environment*, 7: 152–168. (In Russian)
- Guseynova, T. S. (1997). *Transformation of phraseological units as a way to implement newspaper expression*. PhD thesis. Makhachkala: Dagestan State Pedagogical University. (In Russian)
- Guseynova, T. S. (2013). Nominative component of phraseological transformations in publicistic discourse: passionarity aspect. *News of Dagestan State Pedagogical University. Social and Human Sciences*, 3: 57–62. (In Russian)
- Guseynova, T. S. (2014). Vehement formatting of a header in the print journalistic discourse. *Historical and socio-educational thought*, 5 (27): 249–252. (In Russian)

- Guseynova, T.S. (2015). The transformation of phraseological units in the publicistic discourse: an objective law. *News of Dagestan State Pedagogical University. Social and Human Sciences*, 4: 67–71. (In Russian)
- Ivanova, E. A. (2012). Modification of idioms nominating a person according to his (her) social features in a publicistic text. *Herald of Irkutsk State Linguistic University*, 17 (1): 167–174. (In Russian)
- Karasik, V.I. (2016). Discourse Manifestation of Personality. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 20 (4): 56–77. (In Russian)
- Orlova, N. M. (2010). *Biblical text as a precedent phenomenon*. PhD thesis. Kemerovo.
- Makarov, V.I. (2012). Phraseological units, precedent phenomena and stereotyping of social and political information. *Herald of Novgorod State University*, 67: 51–54. (In Russian)
- Nazarova, R. Z. (2017). To the question of the ludic function of the precedent phenomena in a literary discourse. *News of Saratov University. New series. Series Philology. Journalism*, 1, 17: 29–32. (In Russian)
- Rubtsova, S. Yu. (2015a). Modified precedent units with historical allusions in modern English. Translation difficulties. *Proceedings of the 44th International Philological Scientific Conference “Fedorov Readings”. Actual problems of translation studies* (pp. 104–120). St. Petersburg: Philological Faculty of St. Petersburg State University.
- Rubtsova, S. Yu. (2015b). Quasi-citation of biblical precedent units in political discourse in the English language. *Symbol of science*, 12: 227–231. (In Russian)
- Slyshkin, G. G. (2000). *From text to symbol: linguocultural concepts of precedent texts in consciousness and discourse*. Moscow: Akademiia Publ., 128 p. (In Russian)
- Slyshkin, G. G. (2004). *Linguocultural concepts and metaconcepts*. Volgograd: Pere-mena Publ., 340 p. (In Russian)