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Transformed Precedent Phrases in the Headlines of Online Media Texts. Paratextual Aspect

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Abstract

The paper studies transformed precedent phrases in the headlines of American and British online media texts with the aim to explore paratextual peculiarities of their functioning. Transformation of precedent phrases implies the intentional change of the utterances that are characterized by recognizability, reproducibility, as well as by the absolute cultural value for a certain linguocultural community with the purpose of achieving desired communicative effect. The paper covers the transformation of only two groups of precedent phrases – quotes and titles of works.

Transformed precedent phrases interpolated into a headline can form the following chain of links: "source precedent text / source precedent situation – source precedent phrase – transformed precedent phrase as a part of paratext – microtext (subhead, lead, etc.) / macrotext (full media text)". The connection between the first and the last links differs considerably, depending on whether it is conditioned by minor, incidental factors or by deeper, more valid ones. Based on these criteria, we distinguish the following types of paratextual connections: surface, indirect, direct, and deep. Another focus of the study is the mode of reference to the source text, which falls into either of these two categories: verbalized and non-verbalized. Various ways to verbalize paratextual connections are explored.

Keywords: Precedent Phrases (Pps), Transformed Precedent Phrases (Tpps), Source Precedent Text, Source Precedent Situation, Source Precedent Phrase, Paratext, Paratextual Connections, Online Media Texts, Microtext, Macrotext, Vertical Context, Horizontal Context.

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Precedent Phrases: Theoretical Overview

Among well-known, culturally-loaded expressions regularly used by each language community a special place is taken by precedent phrases. The latter are defined as reproducible products of speech and mind activity, complete and all-sufficient units, which may or may not be predicative; complex signs, the general meaning of which is not equal to the meanings of its components put together (Zakharenko, Krasnykh, Gudkov, Bagaeva, 1997: 83). They are characterized by recognizability, reproducibility, as well as by the absolute cultural value (Karaulov, 1987). This linguistic phenomenon has been the object of study by a range of Russian scholars (Gudkov, 2003); (Krasnykh, 2003); (Prokhorov, 2004); (Zakharenko, 1997), (Zakharenko, Krasnykh, Gudkov, Bagaeva, 1997), etc. Precedent phrases (PPs) include proverbs, sayings, "winged words", quotes, aphorisms, slogans, mottos, titles of literature works, songs, films, etc. However, the scope of study presented in the present paper covers only two groups of transformed precedent phrases – quotes and titles.

According to I. V. Zakharenko, PPs can be divided into two groups: (a) those used in their initial, intact form, and (b) the transformed ones (Zakharenko, 1997). The second group represents the object of our research. Transformation of PPs implies the intentional change with the purpose of achieving desired communicative effect.

As to the types of transformation, we use classification suggested by A. M. Melerovich and V. M. Mokienko, according to which transformation that entails the change in meaning of a source PP and the preservation of the overall initial structure is referred to as *semantic,* whereas transformation that consists in the change of both meaning and the initial structure of a PP is described as *structural-semantic* (Melerovich, Mokienko, 2001). Eg.:

- semantic transformation: *Georgia on Their Minds [Russia's war against Tbilisi didn't start with invasion]* (Wall Street Journal; Oct 1, 2009) ← PP: Georgia on My Mind (source precedent text: the official state song of the State of Georgia, USA);
- structural-semantic transformation: *Mr. Publisher, Don't Tear Down That Wall* (Huffington Post; Jul 10, 2010; M. Sigman) ← PP: Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall! (source precedent situation: the challenge issued by United States President R. Reagan to Soviet Union leader M. Gorbachev to destroy the Berlin Wall).

Our study is focused on transformed precedent phrases (TPPs), functioning in the headlines of online media texts. The observations, which are set forth further, are based on the analysis of more than 640 media texts from 12 American (the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the New York Post, etc.) and 11 British (the Independent, the Guardian, the London Evening Standard, the Daily Mail, etc.) online newspapers. The object of the analysis

was not confined to the headlines or specific linguistic units; it also involved the study of both the horizontal and the vertical context (the latter includes background information about source precedent phrases, source texts, etc.).

Transformed Precedent Phrases as Paratexts

Transformed precedent phrases are popular in mass media; journalists include them in headlines to catch readers' attention. The destruction of a pattern (either on structural or solely on semantic level) is meant to change recipients' perception of the linguistic unit, and impress them by "deceiving" their expectations. By alluding to familiar expressions, authors try to bond with the audience. The impact is intensified when the PPs are transformed, since they contain the encoded message, the meaning of which cannot be derived simply from the linear, or the horizontal context (a sentence or passage of a media text (narrow context) or a media text as a whole (broad context)). Interpolation of TPPs into a headline contributes to its intricacy, therefore the more inventive a journalist is, the brighter his material and its impact on the readers are.

The author encourages acute mode of readers' perception by referring to the *vertical context* (Akhmanova, Giubbenet, 1997) - subsurface linguistic and extralinguistic information, which is not expressed explicitly. Target audience is expected to be alert and knowledgeable enough to discover hidden signs that point to the presence of distorted patterns. In case a recipient fails to establish the connection between a phrase and the vertical, underlying context, such headlines will be perceived as unmotivated and the author's intention (e.g. sarcastic, ironic implications) will not be fully deciphered.

We found it essential for the purpose of our research to further explore the functions of the headlines of online media texts. Headlines can be defined as paratexts – the notion introduced by G. Genette. Paratextuality, according to G. Genette, is one of the categories of transtextuality ("textual transcendence of the text") alongside with intertextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality (Genette, 1997(a)). Paratexts encompass a range of heterogeneous, liminal elements (either verbal or non-verbal) that enframe the main text: titles, forewords, prefaces, abstracts, epigraphs, footnotes, illustrations, etc. These elements represent a threshold, or, in the words of Ph. Lejeune, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (Genette, 1997 (b): 2). According to G. Genette, "these productions … surround it *[a text]* and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: *to make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world…" (Genette, 1997 (b): 1).

In the online environment, the functions of TPPs, performing as a paratext (or its component), are expanded, and traditional correlation model "paratext – text" is morphed. Headlines, together with subheads, leads and other elements, can form paratextual groups that function as autonomous information molecules on the starting page of a site. These groups can be defined as

microtexts that can give a hint about the content of *macrotexts* (the main body of a media text). The target audience of a particular media resource can learn about the current news by quickly scanning the headlines without clicking on the hyperlink leading to the full article. In these cases the paratextual group doesn't usher readers into the macrotext, or they do so only potentially. Thus, in the autonomous mode, headlines function as paratexts that belong to their microtexts (subheads, leads, etc.), and in a broader sense – as paratexts related to the array of all neighboring microtexts presented on the online page. When readers click on the hyperlink and go to read the full text of the article, microtext together with the headline start to function as one paratextual group that belongs to the macrotext. As a result, such elements as subheads, leads, (as well as the headlines), etc. play a dual part because while functioning in "paratext – microtext" mode they potentially set the stage for a macrotext. Headlines can also appear on the site without being accompanied by any other paratextual elements, moreover, it can be positioned as a hyperlink adjacent to a different macrotext on a similar topic. To sum up, headlines in online media texts can function as the following:

1) a paratext to a microtext1 (when adjacent to subheads, leads and not the full media text);
2) a paratext to macrotext1 (when adjacent to the full media text);
3) a paratext to macrotext2 (as a hyperlink adjacent to a different text on a similar topic)
4) a paratext to microtetx2, 3, 4… (as one of many elements of the online page).

Further in this paper we will limit ourselves to exploring only the paratextual relations of the following modes: "paratext – microtext1" and "paratext – macrotext1".

Transformed Precedent Phrases in the Headlines: Types of Paratextual Connections

TPPs interpolated into headlines form the following chain of links: ***"source precedent text / source precedent situation – source precedent phrase – transformed precedent phrase as a part of paratext – microtext / macrotext"***. Our observations drew our attention to the fact that the connection between the first and the last links differs considerably, depending on whether it is conditioned by minor, incidental factors or by deeper, more valid ones. Authors can be guided by the relevance of the surface meaning of a PP in relation to the context of the media text or they can create reference to the leitmotif of the literary work. Based on such criteria we distinguish the following types of paratextual connections: surface, indirect, direct, and deep.

Surface connection presupposes the absence of reference to the essence of the source text. The use of a certain PP as a basis for transformation is

conditioned by the match of superficial, linear meaning of the phrase to the subject-matter of the article. The following headlines based on the title of the famous novel by Ch. Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities* illustrate this idea.

- *A Tale of Three Cities* (Wall Street Journal; May 3, 2010; B. M. Carney).
- *A Tale of China's Two Great Cities* (Los Angeles Times; Oct 4, 2010; B. Demick).
- *A Tale of Two Political Generations* (USA Today; Feb 24, 2011; C. Raasch).

None of these articles touch upon the novel, its plot, characters, leitmotif, etc. The only common point is the presence of two or more objects of narration (whether cities or not).

The other productive precedent source of transformation – the quote from *Hamlet* by W. Shakespeare: *to be or not to be – that is the question*. The motivation of reference is reduced to the presence of dilemma in the narration of both the article and the source text (which is, however, has completely different nature, the idea of quest for the essence of life is in most cases materialized and downgraded when the phrase undergoes transformation). Apart from it, the author's choice is stimulated by the graphic and/or phonetic similarity of the constituent elements:

- *Travel Insurance: to Buy or not to Buy?* (USA Today; Jun 18, 2010; J. Berman).
- *TB or not TB, that is the Question…* (Telegraph; Nov 13, 2010; J. McCartney).
- *To Believe or not to Believe?* (Wall Street Journal; Jan 28, 2011; Mr. T. Teachout).

The authors use the recognizable structure as the means of contributing to the aesthetics of the headline, demonstrating their intertextual competence and the intention to dialogize the media text. By means of altering a fixed, widely-known pattern, authors strive for novelty and originality that contributes to the expressiveness of a new formation.

The choice to include a TPP into a headline can also be caused by such extraneous factors as the popularity of the source material at the moment of the creation of the media text. E.g.:

- *Eat, pray – and vote* (Washington Post; Sep 21, 2010; K. V. Heuvel).

The TPP is based on the name of a drama film *Eat Pray Love*, which is based on E. Gilbert's 2006 best-selling memoir of the same title that chronicles the author's trip around the world after her divorce. However, the topic of the

media text has nothing to do with the film, it is devoted to US Senate elections and the disappointment among voters. The author encourages readers to channel all frustration into making change and to start campaigning for their principles. The movie was released in theaters on August 13, 2010 - a little more than a month before the publication of the article. That signifies, on the one hand, high precedency of the phrase at the moment and, on the other hand, author's desire to benefit from it by attracting readers' attention to the politics-oriented content.

Indirect connection is the second type of paratextual connection we distinguish, which presupposes the presence of circumstantial connection between the headline and the source of the TPP. In case of indirect motivation a certain precedent phrase is chosen by the journalist because the object of narration is related to the source text. E.g.:

- *Take a Chance on Greece* (Sun; Jul 12, 2008; N. Parker).

The article tells about the Greek island of Skopelos, which became the filming spot for *Mamma Mia!* - 2008 musical/romantic comedy film. The movie is adapted from the 1999 West End/2001 Broadway musical of the same title, based on the songs of successful Swedish pop group ABBA. The headline is derived from the title of one of the group's hits – *Take a Chance on me* (1978), also featured in the film. The choice of the PP for the following headline is also based on the indirect intersection between the content of the article and the source:

- *City Woman* (New York Post; Oct 10, 2010; J. G. Keil).

The headline represents the transform of the title of 1990 romantic comedy film that features R. Gere and J. Roberts – *Pretty Woman.* The intent of the leading actress of the movie to buy new urban real estate is the topic of the article.

Direct connection relates to the situation when the source precedent text represents the object of narration of the media text. E.g.:

- *Sex and the Pity* (Guardian; May 24, 2008; L. Mangan).

The article is dedicated to the upcoming premiere of the *Sex and the City* movie based on the TV series of the same title. The author ponders upon the fact that, unfortunately, female friendship depicted in the series is rare to find in real life.

Another example when the use of the transform implemented by the author is explained by the title of the source being the topic of the article is the following:

- *Britain's got no Talent Spotters* (Daily Star; May 31, 2009; G. Bushell).

In the headline the author mocks the title of the popular British television talent show *Britain's Got Talent.* The sarcastic tone is preserved through the whole media text which criticizes the system of judging the contestants of the show.

The final type that we distinguish is ***deep connection***. In this case the author is guided by the fact that the source and the article, the headline of which contains the TPP, share something common in their background. The background of such nature usually involves facts concerning source's plot, leitmotif or theme. These additional shades of meaning and extra semantic dimension may, however, fail to be decoded by readers who do not possess similar knowledge, unless the motivation is explained by the journalist, which he may not chose to do relying on the readers' intertextual competence.

In the following example the author wittily hints at the common points that the topic of the article and the plot of the source text have:

- *The Spy Who Loves Media* (Guardian; Oct 12, 2009; I. Cobain).

The headline is the transformed title of the tenth film in the J. Bond series based on one of I. Fleming's novels about the British MI6 agent – *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). The storyline involves a reclusive megalomaniac named Stromberg who plans to destroy the world and create a new civilization under the sea. Bond who teams up with a rival Soviet KGB agent A. Amasova strives to stop Stromberg. The media text, that follows the life cycle of A. Lebedev, Russian billionaire businessman, was written in response to the news that he became the owner of the London Evening Standard newspaper. The story is spiced up by the fact that Mr Lebedev is a former KGB agent (like Ms Amasova) who used to work undercover in London. His latest business move gave rise to criticism and was interpreted by many as an attempt to control parts of the Western media, in order to project a better image of Russia. Thus, the headline sarcastically hints at factual similarities that the object of narration and the storyline of the source share. These are, namely, the issues of close contact and yet antagonistic, rival relations between the Soviet/Russian intelligence service and the Great Britain.

Next headline refers to the leitmotif of the source text:

- *Poland's Choice* (Financial Times; Jun 22, 2010; Editorial).

The source precedent phrase and at the same time the title of the source precedent text is *Sophie's Choice*, 1982 American romantic drama film directed by A. J. Pakula and 1979 a novel by W. Styron. The plot tells the tragic story of a Polish immigrant, S. Zawistowski. When she became a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp, Sophie was forced to choose which one of her two children would be gassed and which would proceed to the labor camp. To avoid having both children killed, she chose Jan, her son, to be sent to the children's camp, and her daughter Eva to be sent to her death in crematorium.

The author draws the parallel between the novel's / movie's circumstances and the ones that Poland found itself in. The media text is devoted to the elections in Poland, the people which after tragically losing their president L. Kaczyński in the plane crash near Smolensk (Russia), had to make a crucial choice between two major candidates – J. Kaczyński, the identical twin brother of the deceased president, and the acting president B. Komorowski. However, the country seems lost and reluctant since none of them received the majority of votes in the first round. Thus, by alluding to this story the journalist refers to the common leitmotif of unbearably painful decision that has to be made against the backdrop of tragic circumstances when a person is put under pressure to make life-changing choice to avoid even graver repercussions.

Transformed Precedent Phrases in the Headlines: Modes of Reference to the Source

The mode of reference to the source text usually falls into either of these two categories: *verbalized* and *not verbalized*. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the majority of the journalist material containing TPPs is characterized by the absence of verbalization of the source, which can be explained by the author's presumption that the intertextual competence of the readers will allow them to decode author's allusions, hints and intentions. Moreover, according to our observations, the reference is usually not verbalized when the connection to the precedent phrase has the surface character.

In case the author decides to make the paratextual connections transparent, he chooses the following ways to verbalize them:

a) Interpolation of the source text title into the paratext.

- E.g.: *May the Fourth be with You: Sci-Fi Film Fanatics Tie the Knot in Star Wars Themed Ceremony* (Daily Mail; May 5, 2009; E. Andrews).

The source PP *May the Force be with you* has achieved cult status and is symbolic of the *Star Wars* legacy. The line has been said by at least one character in each of the *Star Wars* movies. The media text tells about the sci-fi movie fans who celebrated their theme wedding on May the 4th, the day considered to be the official holiday by the fans of *Star Wars* culture, – which explains the author's pun upon the phrase. Other examples:

- *Jingle bells? It's Jingle Hell – and We Women have ourselves to Blame* (Daily Mail; Jun 5, 2010; D. Kelly).
- *Eat Pray Love? More like 'Me Me Me' amid Beautiful Scenery* (USA Today; Aug 14, 2010; C. Puig).

b) Interpolation of allusions related to the source into the paratext.

- E.g.: *Arnold Schwarzenegger: I'll be Back on the Big Screen* (Guardian; Jan 17, 2011; B. Guild).

I'll be back is a catchphrase associated with A. Schwarzenegger, who first used it in 1984 science fiction thriller film *The Terminator*. The media text tells about the plans of the ex-governor of California to continue his acting career.

- E.g.: *Frankly, She doesn't Give a Damn: Clark Gable's Bleary-Eyed Granddaughter Falls down in the Street* (Daily Mail; Oct 9, 2008; E. Sheridan).

The headline of the media text condemning inappropriate behavior of the granddaughter of the famous actor C. Gable includes the transform of the following expression: *Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.* It is a catchphrase from 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* starring V. Leigh and C. Gable, whose character, R. Butler, says these last words to S. O'Hara before he leaves her.

c) Interpolation of the title of the source text into the macrotext.

- E.g.: *No Longer a Phantom of Pop Opera* (Telegraph; Mar 11, 2010; C. Spencer).

The motivation of the choice of the precedent phrase, which the headline is based on, can be derived from the article that tells about the premiere of a new musical *Love Never Dies* by A. L. Webber. The author gives further details in the macrotext: *The reviews for his latest show, Love Never Dies, a sequel to his biggest and most enduring hit, The Phantom of the Opera, ranged from a five-star rave in The Independent to a miserly, nit-picking two stars in The Times.*

- E.g.: *UFOs: the (boring) truth is out there* (Guardian; Feb 18, 2010; N. Pope).

The headline is the transform of the precedent phrase *The truth is out there*, the popular tagline of the television science fiction series *The X-files* (1993-2002), the main characters of which investigate cases that involve supernatural activity and search the evidence of the intelligent extraterrestrial life existence. The journalist writes about the released Ministry of Defense UFO files that failed to impress him since they didn't contain any valid proof of UFOs existence. The author wonders: *The newly released files cover the period 1994 to 2000. It's interesting to note that the cult TV series The X-Files was at the height of its popularity at this time. Might this have influenced people making UFO reports? …*

d) Interpolation of several precedent phrases from one source into both the paratext and the macrotext.

- E.g.: *To Raise or not to Raise Capital* (Financial Times; Dec 1, 2008; L. Saigol).

The headline is based on the opening phrase of Hamlet's soliloquy *To be or not to be* (Act 3, Scene 1) in W. Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The author, however, goes beyond using a TPP only in the headline. The media text, which narrates about the way Deutsche Bank deals with the losses caused by credit crisis, starts with the following sentence:

- *Something is rotten in the state of Hesse*.

This is the reference to the German state where the headquarters of the bank are located. The transform is based on the famous phrase *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* (Hamlet; Act 1, Scene 4), spoken by Marcellus in relation to the fact that the country was festering with moral and political corruption. The text also ends with the transformed quote from *Hamlet*, thus creating the framing disposition of the intertextual elements. The author finishes the articles with the following words:

- *Alas, poor Josef, they knew his ratio.*

The author refers to the bank's chief executive J. Ackermann and wistfully points out the faultiness of the decisions he took. The source precedent phrase is – *Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio* (Hamlet; Act 5, Scene 1) – was said by grieving Prince as he looked at the skull of Yorick, a court jester he had known as a child. So as can be seen from the examples above, the parallel between the bank's financial turmoil and the classic tragedy, is evident though the whole text. Let us provide another example of this type of verbalization:

- *Gimme Gimme Gimme … a Meal after 10 am* (Independent; Aug 1, 2009; S. Calder).

This headline consists of the TPP based on the title of a hit song by ABBA *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man after Midnight).* However, not only the headline but the whole article is interspersed with transformed quotes from the songs by this Swedish pop group. The author covers the news about the loss-making carrier British Airways that scrapped meals on short-haul flights, as a result, the passengers on flights lasting less than two-and-a-half hours will not receive a meal after 10am. This move urged a lot of passengers to avoid flying this airline – the effect labelled as ABBA = "Anybody But British Airways".

Because of the phonetic and graphic equivalence of the abbreviation to the name of the pop group, the author playfully includes references to the source throughout the whole macrotext. Here are the examples:

- *Can you hear the drums*? *… the airline's misfortunes are chiming with the songbook of Sweden's only supergroup; Anybody But British Airways – the slogan for people who are worried that, should a strike begin, they couldn't escape if they wanted to* (quote from 1974 single "Waterloo");
- *Don't be afraid to ask for another; in the past, I have. If I had to do the same again I would, my friend* (both are quotes from 1975 song "Fernando");
- *Money, money, money…lies at the heart of no-meals-on-wheels move* (the title and the quote from 1976 song);
- *The name of the game in the longer term?* (the title of 1977 song)*;*

The authors that choose this mode of the connection between the transformed precedent phrase in the headline and the source text demonstrate high level of creativity.

In some cases journalists make reference to the source by incorporating ***visual elements*.** For example, in the following headline the author transforms the quote and the title of E. John's song *Sorry seems to be the hardest word*:

- *Sorry Seems to be the Easiest Word for Over-Apologetic Brits* (Mirror; Sep 13, 2011; L. Hanna).

No mentioning of the source is included in the text, which is devoted to the British national habit of constantly apologizing. However, the media text is accompanied by the image of Sir E. John, which drops a hint to the readers and helps them decode the reference. The same approach is used in the following article:

- *All the Single, Higher Earning Ladies* (Wall Street Journal; Sep 1, 2010; R.E. Silverman).

All the single ladies is a quote from the popular song *Single Ladies* by Beyonce. The absence of verbalized reference to the source is offset by the presence of the image from the *Single Ladies* music video in the article. The author uses the PP from the song that is perceived by many as the anthem of all independent, confident women in relation to the article, which tells about the increasing number of young females who earn more than their male counterparts, which makes this reference especially pertinent.

The findings of the current research are of direct practical relevance. The suggested classifications of both the paratextual connections between the source precedent text / situation and the micro- and / or macrotext, and the modes of reference to the source can be useful in translation practices to enhance the process of translating English transformed precedent phrases.

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