

The problem of precedentness in contemporary Slovak literature and its translation (as reflected in M. Hvorecký's novel *Tahiti*)

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Abstract

The paper deals with the issue of precedentness (precedent phenomena) in translation communication. The material base of the analysis is represented by the novel *Tahiti* (2019) by the contemporary Slovak author Michal Hvorecký and its German translation, which was published under the title *Tahiti* (2021). The theoretical part presents the definition and classification of precedent phenomena according to V. Krasnykh (2002), then we focus on a brief introduction of the author, his work, as well as thematic and expressive specifics of the analysed work. The paper seeks to decode precedent phenomena in the source text through comparative analysis, to explain their meaning and ethnocultural connotations in the Slovak sociocultural space and to evaluate potential problems of their transfer to the German sociocultural space, especially with regard to the specifics of national precedent units.

1. Precedent phenomena – definition and classification

The essence of intertextuality resides in the creation of secondary, derived (in our case literary-translation) communication. According to T. Žilka (2015, 11), intertextuality arises when a work of art, including its individual parts, becomes the subject for the creation of another work of art or becomes part of other texts. The precedent phenomena, which this paper focuses on, can also be understood as a manifestation of the phenomenon of intertextuality and the theory of precedentness (precedent phenomena) can be seen as a “successor” of the theory of intertextuality (Dulebová 2015, 14).

The identification of universal and national precedent phenomena in the original text and their transfer to a different socio-cultural space represents an extremely challenging task for the translator for several reasons – extensive knowledge of history, literary science, culture, political science or ethnography is needed to identify and “mediate” the particular entities (Dulebová, Cingerová 2017, 9). Moreover, the essence of the precedent phenomenon is often understood only in the original linguocultural space. In this paper, we focus on the analysis of selected precedent phenomena extracted from the work of contemporary Slovak literature, their transfer to the German language and reception peculiarities in two different socio-cultural spaces. As far as the translation and reception process is concerned, it seems problematic that precedent phenomena often have hidden semantics and are associated

with important connotations of a particular linguistic community. J. Sipko (2011, 38) draws attention to the fact that it is the decoding of the connotation component of linguistic expressions of different structure that is relevant for an adequate reception of the text.

Since the theory of precedentness is developed mainly in the Russian scientific milieu, the theoretical background relies primarily on key approaches to the understanding of precedent phenomena of foreign (Russian) authors (V. Krasnykh, D. Gudkov, I. Zacharenko, D. Bagayeva 1997; V. Krasnykh 2002; D. Gudkov 1998), although we also rely on the work of Slovak experts who study precedentness in linguistic, didactic and partially also translation aspects (I. Dulebová 2015; J. Sipko 2011; N. Cingerová 2017; P. Adamka 2008). In our opinion, the theory of precedentness provides us with an opportunity for optimal terminological understanding of the analysed units and at the same time offers a new perspective on the study of intercultural peculiarities of literary texts in translation and linguistic contexts (for more see Zahorák 2019).

Precedent phenomena can cover various manifestations of precedentness. Krasnykh, Gudkov, Zacharenko and Bagayeva (1997) define precedent phenomena as linguistic and extralinguistic phenomena, which are well known to the representatives of a certain linguistic culture and which enter the collective cognitive space of the communicants. In philological (linguocultural and translation) research, it is possible to apply the classification of precedent phenomena by V. Krasnykh (2002), which divides precedent units into: 1. precedent texts; 2. precedent statements; 3. precedent situations; 4. precedent names. We are going to briefly characterize the various types of precedent phenomena that we deal with in our analysis.

A precedent text is the result of a speech-cognitive process, it represents a certain set of components that have a deeper meaning than their original structure. Precedent texts include texts that are well known to the average representative of a particular national and cultural society. These can be works of fiction (world or national literature), political or journalistic texts (Krasnykh, Gudkov, Zacharenko and Bagayeva 1997, 83-84).

The term **precedent statement** is understood as a result of a speech-cognitive process, and may or may not be predictive. It is a complex feature, the overall meaning of which is not equal to the sum of the meanings of its individual components (Krasnykh, Gudkov, Zacharenko, Bagayeva 1997, 83). Precedent statements can include quotations from various types of texts, statements of famous personalities from the field of history, science, art, politics, etc.

A precedent situation represents a specific situation or data that has "the ability of language bearers to evoke broad associations with historical, political, social and other events and conditions with which it is inextricably linked" (Adamka 2008, 13).

A precedent name is understood as an individual name, associated with a well-known text (often also precedent), or with a

situation well known to the language bearers of a certain linguistic community (Gudkov 1998, 83).

When identifying precedent phenomena, it is necessary to take into account that, in some cases, the precedent phenomenon may refer to another precedent unit or point to their relationship. For example, referencing to a precedent text can be realized through other precedent phenomena – precedent statement or precedent name, which are related to the text; precedent situations can be updated in the form of precedent statements or precedent names, etc.

2. Precedent phenomena in the novel *Tahiti* by Michal Hvorecký (Slovak-German comparative aspect)

2.1 The author and his work

Michal Hvorecký is a contemporary Slovak writer and translator from German language. He writes short stories, novels and blogs. As his books have been translated into several languages (English, German, Italian, Czech), he is contributing to the reflection of contemporary Slovak literature in various linguistic spaces. His work is rather broad in its scope, as he writes fiction, alternative history, adventurous travelogues and autobiographical prose. The uniqueness of his work is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that he is considered one of the most popular contemporary Slovak authors in Germany. The publishing house Tropen Verlag published the following German translations of his work – *City: Der unwahrscheinlichste aller Orte*, 2006 (orig. *Plyš*), *Escort*, 2009 (orig. *Eskorta*), *Tod auf der Donau*, 2012 (orig. *Dunaj v Amerike*), the short story *Das allerschlimmste Verbrechen in Wilsonstadt*, 2016 (orig. *Najhorší zločin vo Wilsonove*), the novels *Troll*, 2018 (orig. *Trol*) and *Tahiti*, 2021 (orig. *Tahiti*), which represents the material basis of our research.

The analysed novel *Tahiti* was translated by Mirko Kraetsch. He is a graduate of Czech studies and cultural science at Humboldt University in Berlin and Charles University in Prague. His translation activities focus on poetry, prose and social science texts from Czech and Slovak into German.

2.2 The ideological-thematic line and specifics of the novel *Tahiti*

Given the basic ideological and thematic characteristics of the work, it should be noted at the beginning that the novel *Tahiti* presents an alternative version of history in which Slovakia does not exist in Europe. After the end of the First World War, Slovaks are not able to become part of Czechoslovakia, and Slovak territory remains part of Hungary. The country is under the influence of strong Hungarization and Slovaks are forcibly expelled from their homes. Therefore, they decide to go to French Polynesia – to Tahiti (under the leadership of a prominent figure of Slovak

history – Milan Rastislav Štefánik), where they plan to create their own colony.

The novel follows the style of reportage literature, it lacks direct speech and it alternates alternative history (years 1921-1922, 1923, 1926, 1976) with an alternative present (the year 2020). The main narrator is a historian dealing with Hungarian history and at the same time the great-granddaughter of M. R. Štefánik. Interestingly, General M. R. Štefánik is portrayed realistically, i.e. without myth-making, which is inextricably linked with his person in Slovak cultural space.

The text of the novel also ruminates on several current topics or links to them, e.g. the migration crisis (p. 81; 88): *Zem sa od toľkých nôh priam chvela, mosty vibrovali. Zorganizovala sa sieť pomocníkov. Rodiny odchádzali z domovov v obrovskom chvate najmä v noci [...]; Počas nocí pod oblohou si utečenci naplno uvedomili svoju situáciu. Napriek odhodlaniu začínali chápať, čo znamená žiť bez domova. Smútili za všetkým, o čo prišli. Budúcnosť si nevedeli predstaviť a báli sa jej. Cítili tupú, kyslú nenávisť ľudí, ktorí spolu utrpeli ponižujúcu porážku.*¹ However, it should be noted in this connection that in the analysed work it is the Slovaks who are cast into the role of “inferior” migrants seeking exile. The novel also mentions extremist views and actions (in this case, parallels can be found with current extremist political parties) or criticism of science and education, where quantity is more valuable than quality (p. 27): *Pribudli kritériá, podľa ktorých museli vedci povinne publikovať v angličtine. Inštitúcie však neinvestovali do lepšieho vzdelania, nevyčlenili peniaze na kvalitné preklady a jazykovú redakciu, iba počítali výsledky [...]. Nastavené kritériá oceňovali počet publikácií oveľa viac ako ich odbornú kvalitu.*²

2.3 Comparative analysis of precedent phenomena in *Tahiti* and its translation into German

Since the text of the novel presents alternative history, it contains a number of real important personalities from the field of political or social

¹ The ground trembled from so many feet, the bridges vibrated. A network of helpers was organized. Families left their homes in great speed, especially at night [...]; At nights, under the sky, the refugees became fully aware of their situation. Despite their determination, they began to understand what it means to live without a home. They mourned everything they had lost. They could not imagine the future and were afraid of it. They felt the dull, sour hatred of people who suffered a humiliating defeat together.

² New criteria appeared according to which scientists had to publish in English. However, the institutions did not invest in better education, they did not allocate money for quality translations and editing, they only calculated the results [...]. The set criteria valued the number of publications much more than their professional quality.

life (E. Beneš, W. Wilson, D. L. George, J. Keynes, etc.), as well as historical information, events and contexts (the First World War II, the Paris Peace Conference, the process of Hungarization and many others). In this context, however, it should be emphasized that in some cases the author slightly alters the historical facts and context. The comparative analysis focuses only on phenomena that can be perceived as precedent in terms of semantics and ethnocultural connotations. In the presented texts, i.e. in the original and the translation of the novel *Tahiti* we identify individual precedent phenomena (precedent situations, precedent expressions, precedent texts), classify them into groups in accordance with V. Krasnykh (2002) and then focus on explaining their meaning, ethnocultural connotations and potentially problematic aspects of their transfer and reception in a different socio-cultural space.

a) Precedent situation

Original: *Zrazu stroj opäť stúpala. Pilot zrejme v poslednom okamihu považoval za výhodnejšie pláž ešte raz obletieť, aby si na zosadnutie na mori vyhlíadal vhodnejšie miesto a lepšie zvolil uhol. Lenže lietadlo vážilo priveľa, motory ho už po prudkej strate výšky nevládali utiahnuť. Stroj pri zbytočnom vzostupe strácal rýchlosť, na zlomok sekundy dokonca zamrzol vrezaný do oblohy a potom ostro zamieril k zemi [...]* (p. 18)³

Translation: *Plötzlich zog die Maschine wieder aufwärts. Der Pilot hatte es in letzter Sekunde offenbar für besser befunden, noch eine Schleife über den Strand zu ziehen, um sich für das Aufsetzen auf dem Meer einen geeigneteren Platz auszusuchen und den Anflugwinkel besser zu wählen. Allerdings war das Flugzeug viel zu schwer, die Motoren schafften es nicht mehr, es nach dem heftigen Höhenverlust wieder nach oben zu ziehen. In ihrem vergeblichen Steigflug verlor die Caproni an Geschwindigkeit, für den Bruchteil einer Sekunde fror sie sogar ein, in den Himmel verkeilt, um sich dann rapide Richtung Erdboden zu bewegen, regelrecht im Sturzflug [...]* (p. 23)

In the introductory chapter of the novel, General Milan Rastislav Štefánik tries to land in Tahiti, but his plane crashes and he dies tragically. The precedentness in the analysed example, associated with a real event in Slovak history, can be identified by a recipient who knows the real cause of Štefánik's death. M. R. Štefánik died in 1919 (in the novel he dies three years later), when he was returning to his homeland from Italy and his plane crashed near Bratislava under unclear

³ Suddenly the machine was rising again. Apparently, at the last moment the pilot considered it more convenient to fly around the beach once again, so that he could look for a more suitable place for landing at sea and choose a better angle. But the plane was too heavy, the engines could no longer support it after a dramatic loss of altitude. The machine lost speed as it climbed unnecessarily, for a split second it even froze in the sky, and then headed sharply to the ground [...]

circumstances. In the novel, French Polynesia and the island of Tahiti symbolize this new "dream" homeland of Slovaks.

Since M. R. Štefánik represents a well-known personality in the history of the Slovak nation, we believe that the mentioned national-precedent situation can be identified or received more clearly in the Slovak linguistic space than in the German space, where readers can view it only as the fiction of the author.

Original: *Uniformovaní mladí muži nahádzali na veľkú kopu výtlačky mojej knihy, nedávno vyradenej z kníhkupectiev aj knižníc. Haldu poliali benzínom a zapálili. Plamene šľahali prekvapivo vysoko, plazili sa po obáľkach a s vetrom bleskovo obracali stránky, ktoré sa razom menili na popol. Bála som sa, aby sa nechtyl i dom. (p. 21)⁴*

Translation: *Uniformierte junge Männer warfen Exemplare meines Buches, das vor Kurzem aus allen Buchhandlungen und Bibliotheken aussortiert worden war, auf einen Großen Haufen. Den übergossen sie mit Benzin und zündeten ihn an. Die Flammen schlugen überraschend hoch, sie krochen über die Umschläge und blättern mit dem Wind rasend schnell die Seiten um, die im Handumdrehen zu Asche wurden. Ich hatte Angst, dass auch das Haus Feuer fangen könnte. (p. 28)*

The historian, who is also the narrator of the story, talks about how the youth militia marked the facade of the house in which she lived with a board bearing the words "foreign agent" and uniformed men burned her works. Although it is not explicitly stated in the text of the novel, the reason for their destruction is most likely their ideological "danger".

The burning of "inconvenient" books has been present in human history since ancient times. In the analysed sample, it can be seen as a universal precedent situation and a parallel with the Nazi era and the burning of the books by the Nazis in the 1930s, which was supported by the NSDAP. All books that were considered hostile to Nazi ideology were burned, and burning, including the destruction of cultural monuments, could be considered the initial "symbol" of extremism at the time. From our point of view, this is a universal precedent situation generally known in the German and Slovak socio-cultural space.

b) Precedent statement

Original: *Skandovali: My sme tu doma! Za Boha a národ! Tahiti je Slovensko! (p. 21)⁵*

Translation: *Sie skandierten: »Wir sind hier zu Hause! Für Gott und Nation! Tahiti ist Slowakien! (p. 27)*

The "slogan" is chanted in front of the narrator's house by members of the youth militia. In the context of contemporary associations,

⁴ Uniformed young men threw copies of my book, recently discarded from bookstores and libraries, into a large pile. They poured gasoline on the heap and set it on fire. The flames burst surprisingly high, crawling on the envelopes, turning the pages, which suddenly turned to ash, in a flash with the wind. I was afraid that the house would catch fire.

⁵ They chanted: This is our home! For God and Nation! Tahiti is Slovakia!

meanings and connotations, the given statement can be perceived as precedent, while in the case of the Slovak recipient it can be associated with the Slovak extremist political party leaning towards nationalism (the motto *For God and Nation* can now be seen on its banners). We believe that the semantics is clearer to the Slovak reader in this respect.

Original: *Francúzsko protestovalo, upozorňovalo na sekulárnosť štátu, ale neuspelo, a tak nechalo na všetky úradné budovy i školy pripevniť heslá: bratstvo, rovnosť, sloboda.* (p. 116)⁶

Translation: *Frankreich protestierte, verwies darauf, dass es ein säkularer Staat sei, aber ohne Erfolg, und so ließ es auf allen Amtsgebäuden und Schulen seine eigene Losung anbringen: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.* (p. 187)

The identification and reception of the above-mentioned universal precedent, which is connected with the motto of the French Revolution (1789-1799) *Liberty – Equality – Fraternity*, seems to be unproblematic in terms of context in the consciousness of the Slovak (and basically the German) reader. In the German translation, the translator does not use the “slogans” in their common German version – *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit* (unlike the Slovak original, where the author uses their Slovak counterpart, but lists them in a different order) and chooses the exoticization procedure, or their original version in French – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.

c) Precedent text

Original:

*Na Tahiti blízko
vlny divo bijú,
Doveslujme, bratia,
veď sa oni stratia,
Slováci ožijú.
To Tahiti naše
dosiaľ tvrdo spalo,
ale vlny mora
búšia zdola zhora,
aby sa prebralo.* (p. 7)⁷

⁶ France protested, drew attention to the secularity of the state, but failed, and so it had the slogans affixed to all official buildings and schools: liberty, equality, fraternity.

⁷ Tahiti is close
the waves pound wildly,
Let us row, brothers,
they will surely disappear,
the Slovaks will revive.
This Tahiti of ours
has been fast asleep until now,
but the sea waves
are pounding and encouraging it

Translation:

*An Tahitis Küsten
tobt die Wellengischt.
Doch rudert weiter, Brüder,
die Wellen werden müder,
Land ist schon in Sicht.
Lange hat Tahiti
wie im Schlaf verbracht,
doch die Naturgewalten
helfen durch ihr Walten,
dass es nun erwacht. (p. 7)*

The above example utilizes the precedent text in the form of the Slovak national anthem (it is modified by the author with regard to the genre and storyline of his work). The national anthem consists of the first two stanzas of Janko Matúška's song *Nad Tatrou sa blýska* from 1884. The notes under the text of the analysed original and the German translation explicitly state that it is a traditional national anthem, however, as it is a national-precedent text with high ethnocultural value, we believe that it will have stronger and clearer connotations for the Slovak reader.

Original: *Pritom v Pekingu pred americkým veľvyslanectvom sa pred pár dňami masovo stretli čínski študenti a prevolávali Wilsonovi na slávu! Prezidentova kniha Štrnásť bodov, výber z jeho najznámejších prejavov, patrila v Ázii už niekoľko rokov medzi napredávanejšie knihy. (p. 56)⁸*

Translation: *Dabei hatten sich noch vor ein paar Tagen in Peking chinesische Studenten in Massen vor der amerikanischen Botschaft versammelt und Hurra-Rufe auf Präsident Wilson skandiert, denn seine vierzehn Punkte stießen auch in Asien auf ein enormes Echo. (p. 87)*

The precedent text *Fourteen Points* of President W. Wilson, used in the example, can be included among universal precedent phenomena. It is a program of US President W. Wilson, which concerned the international organization of the world after the First World War. In connection with the storyline of the novel, the tenth point of the program is particularly interesting as it concerns the possibility of autonomous development of the peoples of Austro-Hungary and the emergence of new states after the

to come alive.

⁸ At the same time, Chinese students met en masse in Beijing in front of the US Embassy a few days ago and called Wilson to fame! The President's book *Fourteen Points*, a selection of his most famous speeches, has been one of the best-selling books in Asia for several years.

collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including the former Czechoslovakia – however, this event did not occur.

In the analysed excerpt, the original (Slovak) version speaks of a book – the President's book Fourteen Points, a selection of his most famous speeches. As we have already mentioned, these are alternative histories in which the author changes some historical facts and contexts, and the same may be true in the given example. The German translation of the passage *denn seine vierzehn Punkte stießen auch in Asien auf ein enormes Echo* can be considered looser and at the same time less accurate in this respect, as it omits the "fictional" information about the book – only the president's fourteen points are mentioned (*seine vierzehn Punkte*), which have been a great success in Asia, while we can also see a relativisation of the proper noun in translation.

3. Conclusion

The paper focuses on the introduction of the basic conceptual apparatus of the theory of precedentness (precedent phenomena) and its application in a comparative research of precedent phenomena in two different socio-cultural spaces – Slovak and German. The material basis of the research was presented by the novel *Tahiti* (2019) written by the Slovak author Michal Hvorecký and its German translation *Tahiti* (2021, translated by Mirko Kraetsch).

The aim of the paper was to decode universal and national precedent phenomena against the background of the text of contemporary Slovak literature, to explain their meaning, ethnocultural connotations and to evaluate their transfer, especially with regard to potential problematic aspects of reception in different linguistic and sociocultural spaces. We are aware that some precedent units in the analysed literary text can be used to increase the degree of its expressiveness due to the genre of the work and the author's intention. However, on the other hand, it is necessary to realize that the text, in which various precedent phenomena are represented, is often much more demanding in terms of the reception of specific linguistic and cultural codes. In the German translation, the translator does not provide additional intratextual explanations when transferring precedent phenomena, which, however, is considered justified due to the genre of the work, author's intention and the analysed precedent units. Impoverishment in terms of semantics and expressiveness was identified only in the transfer of one precedent phenomenon, namely the precedent text of *Fourteen Points* by W. Wilson. We believe that the German translation, in comparison with the Slovak original (and author's intention), does not reflect the precedent phenomenon in its entirety.

In our opinion, the extracted precedent units, which can be classified as national-precedent phenomena (the cause and the circumstances of M. R. Štefánik's death, the Slovak anthem, mottos and slogans connected with the extremist political party), can be adequately perceived or identified in the text of the original (and its translation) only by a recipient with the necessary linguocultural knowledge from various areas of life of a specific (in this case Slovak) linguistic and cultural area. The semantics of precedent units can, in some cases, remain hidden from the German reader. Conversely, with universal precedent phenomena (book burning, slogans of the French Revolution), precedent units in the German-language translation communication can be received much more easily (again, this depends on many factors ranging from the recipient's knowledge to his/her ability to optimally interpret the references of different linguistic communities). There is definitely room for further interdisciplinary linguocultural-translation research that can be beneficial to the study of the translation and reception specifics of precedent phenomena in specific linguocultural communities.

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