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LUDIC FUNCTION OF PRECEDENT-RELATED PHENOMENA IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Yu.M. Velykoroda

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to determine the ludic function of precedent-related phenomena as a type of intertextuality. The analysis is done on the basis of relevance theoretic approach, through which we aim to show the additional cognitive effect which is created by precedent-related phenomena in media discourse, and this comic effect serves as a foundation for the ludic function of these units.

Keywords: ludic function, precedent-related phenomena, media discourse, relevance theory, cognitive effect, processing effort.

1. INTRODUCTION

Precedent-related phenomena and their functions have frequently become objects of linguistic research in the last decades [5; 6; 7; 8]. Such functions as the manipulative, the nominative, the expressive, the function of characterization have been determined. In terms of the ludic function of precedent-related phenomena, it has not been investigated separately. As David Crystal argues, the ludic function of language is generally disregarded by linguists, "yet it is one of the most important dimensions of language" [1]. Wordplay and puns are frequently used in all genres and discourses, and with all types of language units. Precedent-related phenomena are not exempt from wordplay, and in fact are a powerful tool that involves numerous layers of punning. Precedent-related phenomena are generally understood as lingual-cognitive units, whose form and meaning are well-known within a specific lingual-cultural community; the understanding of precedent-related phenomena depends on the recipients' background and encyclopedic knowledge [9, p. 492]. In European and American linguistic traditions precedent-related phenomena are generally recognized as manifestations of allusion or intertextuality (though the term "precedent-related phenomenon" is not commonly used in linguistic papers). Unlike intertextuality, precedent-related phenomena are supposed to be easily and immediately recognized by the addressee, while intertextuality may remain unnoticed by readers with less background knowledge. This feature of "recognizability" leads to the flexible formal nature of precedent-related phenomena, when their form may become somewhat "fuzzy" in actual speech. Such modified precedent-related phenomena are called "transformed", yet these transformations commonly do not impede comprehension, instead, they add new layers to their meanings, when at least two senses coexist in one utterance: 1) the direct sense of the original phenomenon; and 2) the actually

expressed sense, i.e., when the meaning of the transformation is superposed on the original structure. For instance, Bill Clinton's catchphrase used in his 1992 election campaign *"It's the economy, stupid"*, is easily recognized by native speakers of English, and whenever used, this phrase will refer to the politics of Bill Clinton. As a result of this "recognizability", authors of American media texts have coined numerous adaptations and modifications of this expression: 1) *It's the **Voters**, Stupid* (Time, January 21, 2008); 2*) It's **psychology**, stupid.* (Newsweek, June 21, 2010); 3) ***It's** still the **economy**, and no one can afford to be **stupid**.* (Time, January 28, 2008); 4) ***It's the stupid** politics*. (Newsweek, May 19, 2008). As we see from these examples, modifications vary from replacements of one lexical unit (examples 1 and 2), to more complex grammatical changes (examples 3 and 4).

Common sense and scholarly research in pragmatics may seem to disagree with even the possibility of such processes, as such units are a violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle and its maxims of manner, quality, quantity and relevance. When precedent-related phenomena are used, we may see that the maxim of quantity is commonly violated. In fact, the information available in the text is nearly always insufficient for cooperation, and a lot more information is implied through precedent-related phenomena. Dmitri Gudkov calls this technique a "semantic ellipsis", and states that it is nearly always accompanied by a comic effect. According to the scholar, in such cases we talk not so much of informativeness of the utterance, but rather of the invariable informational insufficiency, as the addressee is expected to recover the missing links in order to understand the utterance [4, p. 25-26].

In this paper in order to explain how such units are interpreted by the addressee, we will use the relevance theoretic approach by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. Relevance theorists determine two principles: 1) the Cognitive Principle of Relevance (the human cognitive system tends towards processing the most relevant inputs available); 2) the Communicative Principle of Relevance (every utterance conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance) [11, p. 232-233]. Our communication should "be assessed in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort: 1) other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time; 2) other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time" [10, p. 609]. When precedent-related phenomena are used, the processing effort will inevitably seem to rise (thus leading to the decrease in relevance), yet the cognitive effects will increase drastically (thus leading to the increase in relevance). The conflict between the **cognitive effects** and the **processing effort** will be enhanced when transformed precedent-related phenomena are used, but we claim that these processes occur due to the potentially significantly greater cognitive effects which are achieved in communication, and which become dominant in such utterances. One of the key effects achieved thus, will be the comic or humorous effect, hence, we can claim that the ludic function of precedent-related phenomena becomes one of the key reasons for their use in such contexts.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the reasons for language play, according to David Crystal, is that language play is important for speakers creatively. Professional authors express themselves creatively through language, manipulate the rules of the language to suit their purposes. Anything in the language can be bent and broken for special effect, and it is usually several things that are broken at once. We must be prepared to encounter multiple effects, where sounds, grammar and vocabulary collaborate to produce a level of linguistic expressiveness which ranges from playful and intriguing to moving and profound [1]. Media discourse is always looking for new expressive ways, and precedent-related phenomena have become a useful tool for language play in media texts. As stated above, despite the increase in the processing effort, the cognitive effects become more dominant in relevance theoretic terms, and we claim that through this the ludic function of precedent-related phenomena in media texts is manifested.

In order to prove this claim, we will use examples from contemporary American media texts with precedent-related phenomena, when the interpretation of the utterance may become more complicated, yet the effect achieved or desired justifies the transformation.

The headline of an article about Donald Rumsfeld's (US Secretary of Defense 2001-2006) new autobiographical book contains a precedent-related phenomenon entwined in the title:

(1) "*Donald Ducks the Truth*" (Newsweek, July 6-13, 2009).

There is a clear violation of several stylistic principles of media discourse in this headline: 1) the use of the first name "*Donald*" instead of a more proper last name "*Rumsfeld*"; 2) the use of the term more commonly associated with sports, especially boxing "*ducks*", instead of a more formal "*avoids/evades*". In fact, it would have been enough for the author to use the formula:

(2)* "*Rumsfeld avoids/evades the truth*"

The same idea would have been expressed and all the formal requirements of the genre would have been adhered to. Yet the creative form chosen by the author is definitely intended to be a wordplay with the reference to the Disney character Donald Duck, famous for his not always intelligible speech and feisty temper. Expression (2)* demands less processing effort to understand the author's idea, while Expression (1) will require at least two additional steps of removing semantic indeterminacy: 1) refer "Donald" to Donald Rumsfeld, 2) separate "duck" from the sports discourse and infer the meaning of "avoid". It also requires one more non-obligatory reference to Walt Disney's cartoons. We claim that this reference is non-obligatory, as even without the knowledge of the precedent-related text, the meaning of the utterance could be clear. Yet this reference is 1) intended by the author, and 2) required if the reader is to appreciate the ludic effect of the utterance. In other words, in this case the comic effect is both desirable and intended and it is achieved through a reference to a well-known text. In his discussion of intertextuality, Umberto Eco speaks of two levels of readers: the semantic reader and the semiotic reader [2]. The semantic reader will equal expression (1) with the meaning of expression (2). Yet the semiotic reader will inevitably see the deeper sense and the recognition of the reference will lead to his pleasure from seeing the reference and to the comic effect intended by the author in this comparison.

A more complex example of a transformed precedent-related phenomenon is found in the title of an article about a woman accidentally filmed throwing a cat into the trash bin:

(3) "*Cat-Bin Lady*" (Time, December 27, 2010 – January 3, 2011).

The direct meaning of this utterance could be expressed as:

(4)* "*Woman who threw a cat into the bin*"

The actual headline contains the word "cat" and "bin", but the comprehension of this title is possible only after reading the text under the headline. The choice of this form is determined by the author's intention for wordplay in the headline, as "*Bin-Lady*" could be understood as a reference to the terrorist Osama bin Laden because of the graphic and phonetic similarity. We make this assumption on the basis of the fact that the use of the word "lady" in this situation is less appropriate than, for instance, a more general term "woman", but, *"Cat-Bin Woman" would not contain the reference to terrorist activity. The comic effect here is enhanced through the contrast between the actual situation of minor misdemeanor and a reference to the infamous terrorist leader responsible for one of the worst attacks on the US. The use of the less appropriate term "lady" instead of "woman" is evidence for the intended reference to the terrorist leader, and thus, the ludic function of the precedent-related phenomenon is once again the reason for the choice of a relatively difficult and practically incomprehensible form of the headline.

Such transformation may include not only names of people, but also famous sayings, mottos or slogans. In an article discussing problems with the vote count during the 2000 presidential election, the author uses the following expression in the text:

(5) "… the lack of trust fosters a suspicion that the U.S. now has a *government of the feckless, by the crooked, for the connected*." (Time, December 6, 2010)

This example is a transformation of a famous saying by Abraham Lincoln from his "Gettysburg Address": "*government of the people, by the people, for the people*", which might be considered an unofficial

definition of American democracy. The ludic function here is manifested through the use of an easily recognizable structure, though the actual components were replaced with units that express the author's critical attitude. The wordplay here lies intentionally in contrast with the anticipated original wording, and this contrast serves two functions – to mock the political situation of the election and to express the author's disapproval of such trends.

The contrast between the conventional use of a certain phrase and its actual context is another way in which the ludic function can be expressed. The previous example is a combination of transformation and contrast of contexts. In the following example, a non-transformed precedent-related phenomenon is used, yet the wordplay is obvious because of the reference to an unexpected source:

(6) "*Forgive Us Our Debts*" (Newsweek, June 29, 2009)

By itself this expression is a reference to the Lord's Prayer, yet the article is devoid of any religious context and discusses the contemporary economic crisis and the fastest increase in the national debt since World War Two. In fact, "*Forgive us our debts*" is an appeal to future generations, who will have to repay the debts Americans are taking now ("*… the money rolling off central-bank presses today could carry a very high price tomorrow.*"). Such examples of wordplay create an effect of a "failed expectation", when a certain precedent-related situation is expected to be actualized, but instead a different situation is described, and this situation may be in sharp contrast with the expected precedent-related situation [3, p. 264-265]. This is the same technique we could observe in examples with transformed precedent-related phenomena. The difference lies in the fact that in case of transformation this contrast is visible in the very utterance on the surface, while in example (6) this contrast is inferred through the opposition of the literal and figurative meanings. The interpretation process here is different to the process in examples (1), (3), or (5), when the interpretation had to be enriched through references to other texts. In example (6), the interpretation is first modified in the headline through the reference, but after reading the article and finding no other religious references, the reader will have to impoverish their interpretation to the mere literal sum of the meanings in the headline. Despite this impoverishment, we claim that the interpreter will not get rid of all the implications altogether, and they will remain in the background while reading the article, though the religious context will just remain an unjustified expectation.

The ludic function of precedent-related phenomena is also manifested in numerous cases of wordplay with the names of famous people. Obviously, such transformations aim to sound grotesque, artificial and ultimately entertaining: *Brangelina* (Brad Pitt + Angelina Jolie) (Newsweek, December 21, 2009), *Clooneypalooza* (Clooney + Lollapalooza) (Time, Dec 7, 2009), *The Billary Offensive* (Bill + Hillary Clinton) (Newsweek, February 4, 2008), *The Merkozy Index* (Merkel + Sarkozy) (Time, December 26, 2011-January 2, 2012). One such example is used in the headline of an article about a diplomatic scandal between the US and Russia involving arrests of Russian spies in Washington D.C. in June, 2010:

(7) *Le Carré'd Away* (Time, July 12, 2010).

The title of the article is a blend of two precedent-related phenomena. One is the pen name of a famous author of espionage novels John le Carré. The other is a more situational phrase used by the Russian president as his reaction to the arrests, translated into English as "your police got carried away, putting people in jail". The headline is criticism of both the incompetence of Russian spies, and the whole situation around the scandal, and this mocking attitude continues throughout the article: "*After a decade-long operation, the FBI rolls up a ring of singularly incompetent Russian secret agents. What on earth was Moscow thinking?*", "*Somewhere, the ghosts of Dzerzhinsky, Beria, Andropov and other Soviet spy-masters are snorting in disgust.*" As we see from this example the combination of two precedent-related phenomena used in one title evokes multiple references to both precedent-related situations, and it is through these references and how they are recognized by the reader that the ludic function of precedent-related phenomena is manifested. In fact, in such cases the reader is invited to participate in the process of co-creating sense and meaning of the text, as he/she has to enrich the explicit meaning with references intended by the author, and depending on how well he/she disentangles the intertextual web, he/she will be both informed and entertained by the media text. The entertaining effect in such cases is achieved as a result of the ludic function of precedent-related phenomena.

3. Conclusions

In the inner conflict of media between the desire to inform and to entertain, precedent-related phenomena tend to serve the latter purpose. The ludic function of precedent-related phenomena in media texts is achieved by means two main tools: 1) transformations of the original precedent-related phenomenon; 2) conflict between the actual and the expected contexts of a precedent-related phenomenon. The first tool is possible because of a high degree of "recognizability" of precedent-related phenomena, when despite any changes, readers, led by the general expectations of optimal relevance, manage to decode the original word, at the same time enriching its interpretation as a result of transformations. The second tool employs the inferences we tend to make when we hear a well-known phrase, and the references we make when hearing it. The actual context then fails our expectations, and we realize that we have been "tricked" into a false background context. It is obvious that these tools not always function separately, and during transformations there will invariably be a conflict between the actual and the expected contexts or forms. But the first tool deals with the change of the form of the expression, while the second tool only employs our inferences.

This paper provides a sketch for how precedent-related phenomena can function in media texts, but further research is needed into the language units which perform the ludic function in media discourse, as well as other effects created by precedent-related phenomena.

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Address: Yu.M. Velykoroda, Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University, 57, Shevchenko Str., Ivano-Frankivsk, 76018, Ukraine.

E-mail: gvelykoroda@yahoo.com.

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Метою статті є визначити особливості маніфестації лудичної функції прецедентних феноменів як типу інтертекстуальності в американському медійному дискурсі. Аналіз проводиться на основі підходу теорії релевантності, через який показується додатковий когнітивний ефект, створений

прецедентними феноменами в медіадискурсі, а цей комічний ефект слугує основою для визначення лудичної функції прецедентних феноменів.

Ключові слова: лудична функція, прецедентні феномени, медіадискурс, теорія релевантності, когнітивний ефект, інтерпретаційні зусилля.