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PRECEDENT PHENOMENA AS SYMBOLS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN YA FICTION

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Abstract

The term ‘precedent phenomena’ (PP) has been widely used to describe verbal representation of cultural and linguistic heritage as well as mindset formation. PP honeycomb all types of discourse – from biblical discourse to everyday one. Contemporary literary discourse is abundant in culture references. Writers of teen books exploit cultural references a lot. In their works names of music artists and musical groups, movies and TV shows, political leaders and military attacks are the code knowledge which is shared by the characters, readers and the author. Proper decoding of the information encoded in the precedent name is able to give insight into teenagers’ beliefs, feelings and values and eventually into the process of identity formation. The authors employed the semantic and conceptual analyses to reveal the role precedent names play in reflection of a teen’s identity. It has been found out that precedent names can be arranged as three-tiered structure which comprises three primary levels: a linguistic level (names, phrases and texts already embedded in other discourses), socio-cultural level (social, historical and cultural events) and pragmatic level (pre-existing knowledge, intents and attitudes). The research has showed that linguistic units regarded as precedent names encapsulate concepts that constitute social and moral imperatives. It has been concluded that ‘Friend or Stranger’ identification, which has a significant meaning in teen fiction, is predominantly represented with the help of precedent names.

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Keywords: Precedent phenomena, young adult (YA) fiction, identity.



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1. Introduction

Precedent phenomenon, the term adopted in Russian linguistics since the release of Professor Karaulov's work *Russkii iazyk i iazykovaya lichnost* (Karaulov, 2010) and roughly corresponding to the term cultural reference(s) adopted in Western linguistic tradition, has been widely used to describe verbal representation of cultural and linguistic heritage as well as mindset formation. Precedent phenomena (PP) are regarded as language phenomena that are well-known and easily understood by an average member of a lingua-cultural community. These phenomena are associated with the stock of concepts shared by this community (cf. Bolotina, 2016; Kirpicheva, 2017). Though the knowledge of eminent proper names and place names relating to some salient events in the history of a country or to widely known texts constitutes an essential part of PP awareness, it is the ideas and images evoked by them that enter the conceptual domain of the speakers' community. As it is asserted in *Sud'ba kak koncept v yazyke i kul'ture* (Chupryna et al., 2018), PP cropping up in speech reflect an individual's knowledge about the world and, as verbal symbols, are identified as a set of some qualities. PP made for the appearance of the notion *precedentness* which is 'in a syncretic relation to culture and cognitive aspect' (Zahorák, 2019, p. 105).

Precedent phenomena have rarely been investigated in respect to cultural identity, though the link between them does exist. Notwithstanding differences in definitions of identity, as an ethnic, social, cognitive, cultural and linguistic reality (cf. Baryshnikov et al., 2017), in general it can be understood as the answers to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What do other people think of me?' (Chupryna, 2017). Identity is inevitably woven into the web of beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions. As a result, identity is a fact of culture belonging. Language is an essential part of culture, it is a container of culture and a tool by which culture is created. That is why language models a person's identity and builds their awareness of the culture they belong to and other cultures.

Precedent phenomena is an umbrella which embraces *precedent name*, *precedent text*, *precedent statement* and *precedent situation*. *Precedent name* is considered as an individual name which is connected with a widely known person. For example, the text of Obama's speech at the Lincoln Memorial in January, 2009 comprises the name of Martin Luther King: *Directly in front of us is a pool that still reflects the dream of a King* (Obama's Speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Jan. 18, 2009). At first glance it might seem easy to decipher the word *King* as the name of a famous American scholar and social activist Martin Luther King. But in fact it is not difficult only for an alert mind and trained eye and ear, because adequate interpretation requires good knowledge of American history and the history of social ideas, as well as fairly good language experience. A name of a fictional character can turn into a precedent phenomenon too, for example *Humpty-Dumpty, Jack and Jill*.

In linguistics *precedent statement* is considered as a passage from a larger text familiar to an average native speaker. For example, the phrase *winter is coming* borrowed from the novel *A Game of Thrones* by George Martin can be recognized by a vast majority of fantasy fans. To identify the source of the phrase is not enough to understand what the precedent statement implies. What it really implicates can be inferred from the context of the novel or from the context of its screened version. The direct meaning of the phrase is obvious: winter (a season) is drawing near; House Stark of Winterfell in *A Game of Thrones* had these words as their motto which meant *be prepared* – be ready for any challenge. Moreover, one may hear the ring of warning in this phrase: life is not protected against dark periods and they are likely to happen.

Taking these plausible implicatures into consideration, it is justifiable to say that precedent phenomena function as cultural symbols. It is well-known that symbols, including verbal and non-verbal, convey complicated and multifarious information in a brief form which is effortlessly perceived by large groups of people at different levels of social interaction. Precedent phenomenon is a verbal symbol which imparts information salient for a particular group of speakers.

Precedent situation is represented in language and speech either by the name of a person/people or organization involved in some noted event or by a place name where it took place. No doubt, the place name *Watergate* has become a precedent phenomenon. Though it is the name of the complex of six buildings in the neighborhood of Washington, D.C., it is widely accepted as the name of a political scandal which broke in 1972 at that place and as a symbol of political dirt.

Precedent text is the widest and most controversial and obscure concept of PP. According to Prof. Karaulov (2010), precedent text has three modes of existence: natural, secondary and semiotic. In natural mode the text is given to the recipient in its initial form and is understood directly. Secondary mode is evident in critical reviews or literature studies. Semiotic mode presupposes allusions to the initial text. It is evident that in semiotic mode precedent text overlaps with precedent name and precedent statement.

Precedent phenomena honeycomb all types of discourse – from biblical discourse to everyday one. They have become an integral component of contemporary fiction. Young adult (YA) fiction took shape as the result of various societal changes and new trends in genre variation. Childhood expansion up to the age of 18 and the blur of boundaries between the beginning of adult life and the end of children's one brought about the need of 'the creation of a cultural space for children and adults to share' (Jackson, 2016, p. 348). YA fiction is sometimes described as 'a notably restless art, a dynamic, risk-taking literature that grows and changes as its context – culture and society – changes' (Michael, 2016). As a contemporary genre, YA fiction formation is not restricted to the checklist of style elements, it is viewed as a complex process the essential elements of which are the potential audience of the book, its design, the book's marketing and paratexts (Wilkins, 2019). The term *young adult fiction* is transparent and clear to understand: these are the books written for teenagers and their 'narratives are focalised overwhelmingly through teenage protagonists' (Wilkins, 2019, p. 7). At the same time, kids are not the exclusive target audience, adults read these novels and stories as well. The plot of the book is designed by an adult writer, the book is written and edited by them, published and marketed by fully-grown people – YA is a 'mixed market' (Spencer, 2017, p. 433). Through their characters, writers of YA novels send social, cultural and ideological messages to their readers and project their ideas about teenage, their own adolescent aspirations, fears and cravings. Teen's identity in YA novels is constructed linguistically inside the situations of teens' interaction with adults and peaceful or aggressive relationships with peers.

2. Problem Statement

Precedent phenomena so far have for the most part been studied as cognitive units of intertextuality and interculturality. Knowledge of PP functioning as factors influencing the process of identity formation is scarce and haphazard. The knowledge gap should be filled with research of PP used by YA fiction writers to represent feelings, aspirations and cravings which contribute to adolescent identity formation.

3. Research Questions

There are three main questions to be discussed in the paper. The first one concerns the question whether PP should be treated as universally acknowledged and recognized in a broad lingua-cultural society or their recognition is restricted to some particular groups of a language speakers. The subject of the second issue is variability – invariability of PP understanding. The third question is about the role precedent phenomena play in teen communication and process of acquiring a sense of belonging.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims at revealing the essential characteristics of precedent phenomena occurring in YA novels as determinants of adolescent identity modelled by young adult fiction writers.

5. Research Methods

The study is based on the analysis of three pieces of YA fiction: *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* by S. Townsend, *About a Boy* by N. Horny and *Black Swan Green* by D. Mitchell. Though these novels were published in different periods of time, all of them depict early 1980-ies. The authors employ context sensitive analysis which, according to Kirsch and Sullivan (1992), ‘relies openly on plausible interpretation rather than on any kind of proof’ and ‘cannot possibly be highly formalized and testable scientific endeavour’ (p. 89). The starting point of the research is the selection of linguistic units tagged as PP; at the next stage the selected units are arranged according to the several cognitive domains – music, politics, everyday life, etc. At this step each unit is melded with the encyclopedic information. The next step involves analysis of linguistic and non-linguistic contexts in order to specify what the precedent phenomenon implicates.

The research is grounded on the idea which is very close to the one expressed by Luke Matthews et al. (2018). The thought is that any lingua-cultural community can be viewed as a single entity, members of which due to ‘similar life experience’ and language practice experience have identical or close to identical understanding of some spheres of human life. However, inside this linguistic and social fabric there are various groups whose outlooks may deviate in various degrees from predominantly accepted (Matthews et al., 2018). Though teenagers can be viewed as a homogeneous social layer, within it there are different patterns of cognition, behavior and language use, which are linked to identity acquisition that develops in the frame of differentiation between self and others (Rageliénė, 2016).

6. Findings

The sense of *self* evolves within fundamental semantic and semiotic opposition *Friend – Stranger* which in linguistic domain is represented with the help of precedent phenomena. Background considered as a combination of various factors, such as ethnicity, age, walk of life, etc. sets limits to precedent phenomena awareness and their appreciation. Though cultural heritage and its perception is important in mindset formation, it is perception of culture and its trends at present that plays dominant role in this process. PP may demarcate generation gap as they tend to enhance the lack of understanding or the

differences between older and younger people. At the beginning of the XXI century American Professors McBride and Nief (2011) came to the conclusion that films, songs, TV programs their colleagues referred to in their conversations were misinterpreted by their students or not comprehended at all. Thus, students who entered Beloit college in 2006 thought that the name *Beethoven* had always been ‘a good name for a dog’ and *Big Brother* was ‘merely a television show’ (McBride & Nief, 2011). Events which took place in the past rather rarely enter cognitive stock of young adults’ memory, for example, *Watergate* is ‘as relevant to their lives as the Teapot Dome scandal’ (McBride & Nief, 2011, p. 147).

Precedent names used in speech tend to create a clash between different outlooks on life that reflect the chasm between individuals and groups of people. References to songs, singers, bands and movies and clothing and things like that, have to not only make sense to someone who doesn’t have the intricate, specific knowledge, but they have to say something about the people or the situation or the time. The title of the book *About a Boy* by Nick Hornby might tell nothing to an uncultured mind except for being a novel about some boy. In fact, *About a Boy* is partially a reference to the Nirvana song *About a Girl*. The song is a story about a lonely man who looks for relationship and seeks a person who would listen to what he has to say. But his love is one-sided and the man remains lonely and unhappy. Presumption in case of the novel’s title is that potential readers are aware of the music group or their song and may extrapolate its core ideas – loneliness and search for friendship – to the content of the book. The title of the book signals that *Nirvana* and pop music in general will be a touchstone in the novel, testing the boy’s and his peers’ outlooks on life. The key character of the novel a boy called Marcus gains his understanding who he is in the web of several oppositions: Will, a thirty-six-year-old bachelor, – Marcus, Marcus – his mother Fiona, Marcus – his violent peers at school, Marcus – Ellie. Contexts in which these characters are embedded are abundant with precedent names connected to music. Though the names of singers and bands Will listens to obviously belong to popular culture, they have different implicatures. The name *Bruce Springsteen* suggests romantic and sentimental ideas, moreover treated as a ‘symbol’ (Gitz-Johansen, 2018), it may implicate Will’s latent desire to have a family and be a father. On the other hand, the name of *Paul Weller*, who claimed himself as a socialist, can be interpreted as a symbol of social anger and protest.

These names and names of other Will’s favourite groups – *MC Hammer*, *Nirvana* and *Snoop Doggy Dogg*, *R & B* – were terra incognita for the thirteen-year old boy. Fiona, his mother tried very hard to instill her taste in music in Marcus. Names of *Bob Marley* and *Joni Mitchell*, Fiona’s favourite singers, can readily be interpreted as symbols of desire for spiritual freedom and social justice. Being introduced to musical preferences of both – his mum and Will – the teen has to find his own identity. This is the search for ‘self-sameness’ and ‘uniqueness’ (Rageliénè, 2016), which is complicated by the rift with his peers at school. Linguistically the split between Marcus and other schoolboys is revealed in the choice of precedent names of singers whose fans the boys were: *Tupac* and *Warren G*. For Marcus they sounded as unknown words, he knew nothing about the people and their songs.

Taste in music and musical preferences evinced in precedent names serve as litmus test on sense of belonging among teenagers. In the book *Black Swan Green* by D. Mitchell opposition of precedent names *Johann Sebastian Bach* – *Sex Pistols* implicates hostility between kids groups, as each of the names is part of the code shared by peers. Craving for being part of some group or sharing some characteristics of teens’ idol is typical of teenagers. One of the ways to represent this desire for ‘self-sameness’ is by use of

precedent names from music domain. Thirteen-year old Jason in *Black Swan Green* adores Tom Yew. Tom Yew is a hero in the village and the names *Led Zep* and *Stairway to Heaven* fascinate Jason as symbols of Tom Yew's uniqueness. Julia, Jason's sister, who is eighteen-year old, represents a world so different from the world of her brother, the symbol of which is the name of a famous album by the Beatles – *Abbey Road*.

Interaction with peers 'within and outside their own group' is important for teen identity formation. Teens tend to compare themselves to peers (Pugh & Hart, 1999, p. 55). In their talks and discussions teenagers may agree on the meaning of some norms and values or reject them. Pugh and Hart (1999) insist that 'affiliation with a certain peer group implies identification with the values and norms of the group' (p. 56). In *Black Swan Green* a film name *The Great Escape* functions as a test on being friend or stranger: all the boys agreed that the film was superb because Tom Yew said it was classic. Jason had not seen the film but shared the agreement to obtain the sense of belonging.

Marcus in *About a Boy* was rejected by his peers because of several reasons, lack of knowledge of contemporary rap being one of them. Ellie, a fifteen-year-old girl famous at school, made kids to accept him because Marcus turned out to know what the name Kurt Cobain meant. When Ellie and Marcus saw each other for the first time, the boy knew nothing about Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. A bit later he got some glimpses of what rock music was, and the name *Kurt Cobain*, which he pronounced, served as a pass to school kids community. For Ellie Kurt Cobain was a rock star and a symbol of alienation she was acutely aware of. Included into the context of teen relations, this symbol communicates the idea that 'being rejected by the peer group, and thereby being excluded from meaningful contacts with peers' can be harmful to a young person (van der Wilt et al., 2019). Thus, the key culture reference in the book is doubtlessly the name of Kurt Cobain. It functions both as a name of a real popular person and as a symbolic name which is associated with loneliness, striving for relationship and love and danger of suicide.

Precedent situation became apparent in the context of a teen interaction with teachers. *Jack the Ripper*, name which came to Jason Taylor's mind when he was going past the teachers' staffroom in his school, can be interpreted as a) the name of a cruel murderer, b) precedent name of the situation developed in London in late XIX century and c) symbol of savageness.

Names of books attest to differentiation among teenagers. As a rule, teens are not well-read: the only book mentioned in *About a Boy* is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but Marcus knew the story just because he had seen the film with his mum. The lack of names is not an evidence of a teen's poor mental abilities or their intellectual laziness, but it may communicate the idea that 'the more likely a teen was to be a reader, the more chance they would be facing <...> extended delay of full adulthood' (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016, p. 195). Marcus, unlike his peers from *Growing pains of Adrian Mole* and *Black Swan Green*, undergoes serious transformation from a defenceless and unguarded little boy to an earnest grown-up boy with great inner strength. Names of books, which writers weave into the narrative, are the reflection of a teen's feeling of self-worth and their aspirations. Adrian Mole from *Growing pains of Adrian Mole* and Jason Taylor from *Black Swan Green*, no matter how different they are, express themselves in writing: Adrian writes letters to BBC, Jason writes poems and contributes them to a parish magazine.

Names of precedent texts are essential components of representation of kids desire to be different from other peers. Their aspiration to do something remarkable, for example, to write poems and essays, hinges on their knowledge of contemporary and classic literature. Adrian Mole thinks he is intellectual, to

sustain this idea and convince other people he talks about serious books, such as *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh, *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene and so on. Moreover, precedent statements exhibit mental qualities which form the core of his personality: Adrian quotes fragments from *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Ambition and striving for superiority become apparent not only in kids fights and physical competitions but in texts names duel. Hugo, Jason's cousin, an arrogant boy, who is two years older than Jason, demonstrates his intellectual superiority shuffling names of precedent texts: *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Inside the Whale*, *Animal Farm*. Jason Taylor, who contributes his poems to a parish magazine, is just getting acquainted with literature, so he cannot win this duel. School does not help him on this way as the only books Jason associates with school are *Plain Prayers for a Complicated World*, *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee, a novel about a boy's childhood in the period soon after the First World War, and *I Must Go Down to the Seas Again*, a poem by John Mansfield.

Precedent phenomena are signs of reality and are derived from it. Though their understanding is variable, they may guide people through labyrinthine life and help them to find their feet. Being symbols of the world outside a teen and a group they belong to, precedent phenomena influence their inner world. Names which come from easily accessible domain – music, films, TV – permeate teens' world. Aside from the names of pop music singers and bands, names of films and TV programs delineate the young adult cultural milieu. Precedent names may reflect how fragile and insecure a teen's world can be. Marcus from *About a Boy*, a socially awkward twelve-year old burdened with a chronically depressed mother, sees the films that are easy to watch: *Home Alone 1*, *Home Alone 2*, *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid*, *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. His perception of music oscillates between the names of *Mozart*, *Bob Marley* and *Kurt Cobain*. It is notable that names of TV programs do not have hand in teen outlooks formation. They are signs of adult world and predilections of kids parents or elder friends. Will in *About a Boy* watches *EastEnders* (a popular TV serial drama) and *Countdown* (a TV game show); Jason's parents in *Black Swan Green* watch *The Two Ronnies Christmas Special* (a TV selection of sketches and songs), *The Paul Daniels Show*.

Construction of teens' identity can be viewed as a mosaic made up by reflections of various segments of outside life and inner world. It is reasonable to suggest that politics rather rarely is in the focus of teens' interests. Nevertheless, precedent phenomena relating to politics construct kids sense of self-esteem and craving for respect. Adrian Mole, who thinks of himself as intellectual, in his diary includes references to famous people, political and social events, newspapers and radio stations and so on. Adrian' comments on British and global events hinges on precedent names and situations: *Charles* and *Diana* (their marriage), the *IRA* (their terrorist actions), the *Falklands* (the war), etc. For Jason Taylor names of *Margaret Thatcher* and *Ronald Reagan* are symbols of the highest approbation and he dreams of being awarded medals by them. Precedent name *Winston Churchill* and precedent situation *Pearl Harbor* evince different understanding of the results of WWII and contrasting attitudes to them among teens: *Winston Churchill* is a symbol of British victory in WWII, *Pearl Harbor* – a symbol of American vengeance and victory in WWII.

Use of precedent phenomena relating to politics reveals their role in displaying fears of adolescents. Events happening in the world, political views of adults do not pass unnoticed by kids. TV, radio and talks of their parents and other adults supply teens with precedent phenomena relating to political and social life.

Precedent names and situations tend to shape stereotypes in the adult perception of the world. It is asserted that if held by parents, they contribute significantly to the development of children identity (Brozo, 2019). These stereotypes govern the formation of kids' outlooks on the world, their place in it and relations with people who surround them. Fears play a big part in building children's understanding of themselves and prospects the future may hold for them. PP from political domain disclose kids' fear of negative evaluation and fear of war. Thus, the name *Margaret Thatcher* in the novel *Black Swan Green* appears to be the name of a supreme judge of Jason's inability to talk without stammering. Fear of war is implicitly expressed by precedent phenomena *Russian MiGs, Russians, Soviet, Warsaw Pact* which pop up in Jason's speculations.

7. Conclusion

Precedent names included into YA fiction narratives can be arranged as three-tiered structure which comprises three primary levels. The first is a descriptive level where precedent phenomena are object-oriented and function as double-plane linguistic units, e.g. *Johann Sebastian Bach* is a proper name consisting of a first and second names, which describes a man. The second one is meta level where cognitive information about PP of the first level is inferred: Johann Sebastian Bach is a German composer. The third is a pragmatic level where pre-existing knowledge, intents and attitudes exist. At this level PP function as units of cultural domain typical of a certain group or community.

The research has showed that linguistic units regarded as precedent phenomena and incorporated into the YA novels encapsulate concepts that constitute social and moral imperatives among teenagers. The choice of PP displays judgements and propositions which play a cardinal role in teen identity formation. Precedent names connected with music reflect the sense of belonging and function in the novels as signs of social orientation and as 'Friend or Stranger' signal. Precedent phenomena anchored in politics represent another aspect of teens' identity – adolescent fears while PP connected with literary texts depict kids' strive for intellectual superiority.

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