

# Phraseological units and their variants in a specific German-language egodocument of Slovak provenance from the mid-19th century

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## ABSTRACT

This study deals with the issue of the conventionalisation of selected figurative and non-figurative locutions and their variants within a specific German-language egodocument of Slovak origin from the 19th century, the author of which is Samuel Ferjenčík, a prominent figure in Slovak intellectual circles. A thorough textual analysis of the document, discovered on the premises of Ferjenčík's former rectory and comprising 908 entries on 155 manuscript pages, sheds light on Ferjenčík's stylistic preferences and rhetorical strategies. Using Conventional Figurative Language Theory (CFLT) as a theoretical framework, the study examines Ferjenčík's deliberate selection and modification of phraseological units to enhance stylistic competence. By analysing the content of the document, the research reveals different categories of figurative and non-figurative elements, each of which offers an insight into Ferjenčík's literary environment and communicative intentions. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of linguistic conventions and stylistic preferences prevalent in the 19th-century German-language discourse.

**Keywords:** Conventional Figurative Language Theory; phraseological units; German-language egodocument; 19th-century stylistic conventions; rhetorical strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Samuel Ferjenčík was a Slovak Evangelical (Lutheran) priest, writer, meteorologist and pomologist, known for his acquaintance with Johann Wolfgang Goethe. He wrote numerous homiletic works, treatises, newspaper articles and scientific texts on various topics including meteorology and pomology. He

was actively involved in organising church and school life, making him one of the most influential intellectual figures in the contemporary Slovak context. In 1842, he co-presented the Slovak Petition to the Throne protesting against the situation of nationalities in the Kingdom of Hungary. His personality is a striking example of the multi-currents in the Slovak national movement. In this context one can point to tensions in the author's biography: on the one hand, active advocacy for the linguistic and national rights of Slovaks in Hungary, and on the other hand, speaking out from the patriotic Hungarian positions against the Slovak movement in the revolutionary years of 1848/1849.

His manuscript of notes and excerpts was discovered in his former rectory and was dated to the 1840s. Its genre can be characterised as a special type of egodocument in which the personality of the author is constantly present through the application of a specific selection and modification key (cf. Baggerman and Dekker, 2018, 93; Dekker, 2002, 7; Presser, 1958; Presser, 1969, 277–282). The document provides an important key to understanding the attitudes of its author in the 1840s. It is a German-language document, intended for private use, containing 908 entries on 155 manuscript pages. The entries were notes from Ferjenčík's reading, which served to record formulations that he considered stylistically well-formed, expressive and worth recording; due to their persuasive power, he probably could have used them in his arguments before the state and church dignitaries, at church councils and congresses, in preparation of his own writings, articles, sermons etc. Formulations taken from other sources are usually (with only a few exceptions) cited or adapted without reference to a source. As part of the research, the reconstruction of the document source base was performed, with the recognition of textual matches in potential source documents playing a key role.

Rhetorical imitation was already a central element of ancient rhetorical practice, which promoted the direct imitation of the teacher or his models (the works of established artists) in the process of education (Fantham, 1978, 1). Imitation of Ciceronian style was widespread in humanistic contexts, including the written imitation of stylistic elements (words, idioms and other phrases) and entire passages on other topics, in order to enrich one's own stylistic set of instruments (cf. Lábaj, 2018). The principle of imitation also became part of later pedagogical concepts. For example, the method proposed for the study of foreign languages by John Amos Comenius in *Didactica magna* (1657) involves transcribing, adapting and paraphrasing discourses expressed in a varied and elegant style, observing and collecting noteworthy passages, and translating idioms (Comenius, 1967, 208–209). In order to achieve stylistic and rhetorical goals and competencies, expressive words and phrases were adopted. They inherently include figurative elements; innovative metaphors, but also idiomatic units (conventional figurative units; see below), as well as figurative units conventionalised in terms of contemporary literary communication. This also

applies to Ferjenčík's manuscript, which contains a number of phraseological units of which idioms are particularly relevant, having traditionally played a key role in the imitation and refinement of style.

In the study of the above-mentioned document, the concept of intertextuality plays a central role (on various forms of intertextuality, cf. e.g., Miola, 2004, 13–25). Ferjenčík often chose expressive formulations with a particular stylistic effect (regardless of their thematic load) and inserted into them units for which he was looking to make a convincingly strong statement. In order to create rhetorically convincing formulations on the topic of his interest, the author not only took entire passages from the source texts, but he also often transferred parts of the original works into new contexts by replacing elements, omitting original ones, or adding new ones. He used sources from various newspapers and magazines, including *Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Allgemeine Kirchen-Zeitung*, *Gemeinnützige Blätter zur Belehrung und Unterhaltung* and *Historisch-politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland*. He quoted and paraphrased numerous contemporary German-language authors and German-language texts by ethnic Slovak and Czech authors. The manuscript also contains passages of foreign texts translated into German and updated ideas of earlier German authors.

## 2. Theoretical framework

We have chosen Conventional Figurative Language Theory (CFLT) to interpret the application of figurative elements, although other approaches (e.g. Ďurčo, 2022) could also be applied to some extent. CFLT deals with units of the figurative lexicon (conventional figurative units) and was introduced by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2022 [2005]; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2018). The theory proposes two heuristic criteria for distinguishing between figurative and non-figurative units: image requirement and additional naming (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2022, 13). The first criterion is based on the fact that the content plane of a figurative unit not only consists of a pure “meaning”, but also includes traces of the literal reading underlying the actual meaning (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2022, 13–14). Figurative units (idioms, figurative compounds and one-word metaphors) potentially possess two conceptual levels: they can be interpreted at the level of their literal reading, and at the level of their figurative meaning, both of which can be activated simultaneously (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2018, 6). The second criterion implies that a unit of figurative language is not the only way to say what is meant. Usually, there is already a more direct and cognitively simple expression denoting approximately the same entity, so the figurative units are additional means for naming it (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2022, 21).

It is important to note that indirectness of naming is not based on pragmatic conventions, but on the established lexical meaning of linguistic units (cf. Dobrovolskij and Piirainen, 2022, 26). The indirect naming denotes an approximately same, but not completely identical entity: the difference lies in the image component in the sense of the first criterion. Thus, its figurativeness does not have only a stylistic background (in the sense of a choice from an inventory of expressions with varying degrees of “normality” that convey the same information from different pragmatic points of view; cf. Lotman, 1970, 27; Rosengren, 1972, 13–16), but above all a lexical-semantic basis, as the figurative component is considered an important element of the lexicalised meaning of a figurative unit (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen, 2018, 7). Defining the imagery of an expression on the basis of the dual relationship between its literal and indirect interpretation opens the door to connections with correlated cognitive procedures; it has been experimentally confirmed that cognitive processing of ambiguous expressions is more complex, assuming that at the unconscious level each of the meanings of an ambiguous stimulus is processed, with the subsequent active rejection of irrelevant information and selection of a meaning suitable for further cognitive activity (Filippova, 2006; Filippova and Chernov, 2013; Kudel’kina, 2008, 275). According to CFLT, the specificity of figurative naming with transparent motivation lies in the varying degree of simultaneous activation (and thus involvement in further cognitive activity) of both lexicalised meanings as (albeit unequally) relevant.

Expressivity, which is often associated with figurativeness and built upon it, has a purely stylistic-pragmatic basis, although in our case it is born out of phenomena of a lexical-semantic nature. There is no doubt that imagery is stylistically and rhetorically relevant; words and phrases that can be interpreted both literally and figuratively are often associated with greater expressiveness compared to their more direct and simpler correlates (if such “neutral” correlates exist). Rhetorical devices that are subject to the imitation of (expressive and elegant) style in Ferjenčič’s book of notes and extracts usually fall into the category of figurative units too. Figurativeness, however, is not a necessary characteristic of expressive expressions as part of an expressive and elegant style, or even of rhetorical devices, as already indicated by the general remarks made by the authors of CFLT. According to them, tropes and various figures of speech can be figurative, but they do not have to be; they are somehow deviant from what may be called the “normal”, “neutral” or “standard” mode of speaking because they are indirect and/or expressive to a certain extent, but figurativeness is not their necessary characteristic (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen, 2022, 28). Although there is no equivalence relation between stylistic devices on the one hand and figurativeness on the other, the correlation between these classes of expressions is evident: a large part of tropes and figures of speech have (though not necessarily) a figurative nature that underlies their stylistic and rhetorical expressiveness.

Besides figurativeness, another definitional property of conventional figurative units is that they are conventionalised, i.e. they are elements of the mental lexicon, unlike freely created figurative expressions (Dobrovól'skij and Piirainen, 2018, 6). This feature distinguishes them from innovative or occasional metaphorical compounds and one-word metaphors that are in general figurative, but not necessarily conventional (Dobrovól'skij and Piirainen, 2018, 6). In this context, the question of conventionality criteria arises. This is because, despite their diverse integral properties, the size, composition and structure of the mental lexicon of different language users vary (cf. e.g., Trautwein, 2019 for a more detailed discussion). Literary conventions often anchor certain figurative expressions as separate elements of the mental lexicon of competent participants in literary communication. The investigation of the degree of conventionalisation is commonly based on the use of corpora capturing linguistic practice. Also in the case of literary-conventional figurative units, linguistic, specifically literary communicative practice can be used to determine the degree of conventionalization. The assessment of this degree should be placed within an interdisciplinary dialogue.

### 3. Inventory of figurative lexical items in Ferjenčík's manuscript

The interoperability of biographical knowledge and textual research focused on Ferjenčík's manuscript confirms the thesis that figurative units possess two conceptual levels that can be activated simultaneously. The link to literal reading is obvious when the selection of units used to increase the level of stylistic competence reflects the author's interest in meteorology ('stürmischen Zeit', 'Die Zeit ist düster', 'Geschichte eines Orkans in einem Glase Wassers', etc.), agriculture and pomology ('Wurzeln freilich tiefer', 'Über uns Allen wird der Rasen grünen', 'hier ist die Wurzel aller ächten Klarheit').

#### 3.1 Figurative and conventionalised elements

These include phraseological units in the narrow sense of the word (Burger, 2015; Burger *et al.*, 2007; Fleischer, 1982). This means that they have all the properties of such kind of phraseological units and are lexicographically processed in relevant phraseological dictionaries, primarily e.g. Röhrich (1973) or Schemann (2011) Wander (1987): *trägt keinen Heller*<sup>1</sup>, ... *soll bei uns zu Hause sein*<sup>2</sup>,

1 István Széchenyi, *A Kelet népe* (Pozsony: Wigand, 1841), 325.

2 Röhrich (1973, 399); Schemann (2011, 246); Wander (1987b, 421).

*stürmischen Zeit<sup>3</sup>, nur einigermaßen am Herzen liegt<sup>4</sup>, sei treu der Muttermilch, die ihr gesogen<sup>5</sup>, in den Schoß der römischen Kirche zurückzuziehen<sup>6</sup>.*

### 3.2 Figurative and literary conventionalised elements

This category includes phrases or sentence constructions that exhibit reproducibility, relative stability and a certain level of figurativeness. This means that at least one of their components is used in a figurative sense, while it is not a phraseological unit in the narrow sense of the word, because the structure is not treated in dictionaries. These expressions often occur repeatedly in the press or in literary and philosophical works of the time (cf. Burger, Buhofer and Sialm, 1982), which means that, based on intertextuality, they could be conventionalised phrases from the point of view of their readers.

Very often they contain an allusion to a phrase, to ancient Greek and Latin mythology, to the Bible, or to a literary or philosophical work, etc. The decoding of these allusions presupposed a high level of literary competences among the readers of the time: *Wer die Gunst der Najaden<sup>7</sup> sucht, darf die der Hygea<sup>8</sup> nicht verscherzen<sup>9</sup>; Die Zeit ist düster<sup>10</sup>; Es ist ein eigenes Ding mit dem Menschengeschlecht<sup>11</sup>; wenn Leidenschaft es irre führt<sup>12</sup>; Dort ist gutes Blut, wo man lacht<sup>13</sup>; Das Vernünftige verhält leider wirkungslos in den Regionen, wo die Leidenschaft herrscht<sup>14</sup>; Über uns Allen wird der Rasen grüner<sup>15</sup>.*

3 Schemann (2011, 1006).

4 Röhrich (1973, 415), Schemann (2011, 348).

5 Variation of “*etw. mit der Muttermilch einsaugen*” cf. Röhrich (1973, 646); Schemann (2011, 560); Wander (1987b, 424).

6 Schemann (2011, 724) *in den Schoß der Kirche zurückkehren*.

7 It is an allusion to the ancient Greek mythology. “Allgemeine Medicinische Central-Zeitung.” February 20, 1878, 171. “Oesterreichische Badezeitung. Organ für die Interessen der europäischen Kurorte und des Kurpublikums.” April 5, 1876, 3.

8 Hygieia or Hygeia or rarely Hygiea is the ancient Greek goddess of purity and health.

9 “Allgemeine Zeitung München” June 18, 1841, 1350. Saphir, Moritz Gottlieb. Der Humorist. May 13, 1842, 387.

10 “Kemptner Zeitung.” 1841, 375. “Sächsische Dorfzeitung: Anzeiger für Stadt und Land ...,” 1844, 22.

11 It is an allusion to Goethe’s statement „*Es ist ein einförmiges Ding um das Menschengeschlecht*“ from *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*.

12 “Augsburger Postzeitung.” November 4, 1841, 2., “Allgemeine Zeitung.” November 4, 1841, 2461., “Allgemeine Kirchen Zeitung.” 1846/25, 339. Schemann (2011, 384) sees the word *irreführen* as idiomatic.

13 It may be an allusion to the idiomatic phrase „*Gutes Blut machen*“ in Röhrich (146). “Allgemeine Zeitung München.” January 24, 1841, 190., “Aschaffener Zeitung.” January 21, 1841, 3., “Der Bayerische Landbote.” January 24, 1841, 107.

14 “Allgemeine Zeitung München.” October 28, 1840, 2412., “Augsburger Postzeitung.” October, 28, 1840. The sentence contains two repeating structures in contemporary press and literary works: „*verhält (leider) wirkungslos*“ in Christian Friedrich Handel, Christian Gottlieb Scholz, and Karl Gottlieb Roehrich, Pädagogische Hand- und Taschen-Bibliothek für Ältern, Lehrer und Erzieher (Hennings: Neiß, 1833), 423. Laons Fuchs von Schwaß, Mein Glauben und Hoffen

### 3.3 Figurative elements with a questionable degree of conventionality

These are non-fixed and non-conventionalised word combinations, syntagms or complete sentences where at least one component is used in a metaphorical sense, for example, *Jahrhunderte alte Mißbräuche gut zu machen*<sup>16</sup>. Here we also find allusions to literary works, e.g. *sich für einen Titanensohn halten*<sup>17</sup>.

### 3.4 Figurative and innovative elements

We include here those phrases or sentence constructions that exhibit a certain level of figurativeness, that is, at least one component is used figuratively, but the overall structure is not conventionalised. These phrases come often from established phraseological expressions in the same figurative sense. This way we can consider them an allusion to a phraseological unit (Mlacek, Ďurčo *et al.*, 1995): *Die Schminke der Jahrhunderte darauf gepinselt*<sup>18</sup>, *auf den alten Geigen abgespielt wird*<sup>19</sup>, *Es betrifft nur die Geschichte eines Orkans in einem Glase Wassers*<sup>20</sup>.

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sammt Stimmenaus der kathol. Kirche zu meiner Vertheidigung. (St. Gallen, 1836.), 398. “Rheinbayern: eine vergleichende Zeitschrift für Verfassung, Gesetzgebung, Justizpflege...” 1831, 179. *Leidenschaft herrscht* in Karoline Auguste Ferdinandine Fischer, Die Honigmonathe. Brief. Reinhold an Olivier. (Posen und Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Kuhn, 1802), 61–69. Joseph von Márton, Lexicon trilingue Latino-Hungarico-Germanicum (Wien: Universität zu Wien, 1823), 909. J. Hörner, Homiletisches Repertorium über die sonn- und festtäglichen Evangelien des ganzen Jahres (Magdeburg: bei Wilhelm Heinrichshofen, 1830), 156.

- 15 In Röhrich (1973, 1177) we find the phraseological unit related to the expression of death: *der grüne Rasen deckt ihn*. The sentence occurs in the following sources: “Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung.” April 4, 1841, 746. Anonymus, Aufzeichnungen eines nachgeborenen Prinzen aus der nachgelassenen französischen Handschrift (Stuttgart, Tübingen: J. O. Gottascher Verlag, 1841), 97. Alexander von Pusztay, Thronfolge und die pragmatische Sanction in Ungarn (Pressburg: Franz Eblen von Schmidt, 1849), 156.
- 16 Since the word “*gutmachen*” is perceived by Schemann (2011, 293) as idiomatic, we classified the word combination among figurative expressions with a questionable degree of conventionality, as we found it only in one journal, namely in “Allgemeine Zeitung München.” November 5, 1841, 2467.
- 17 “Allgemeine Zeitung München.” June 18, 1841, 1348. Possible allusion to Greek mythology, to Goethe’s work Prometheus from the 18th century.
- 18 The phrase may derive from phraseological units where the word “Schminke” in English “make-up” occurs as a component of the following idiom with the meaning to embellish (<https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/schminken>), to whitewash a problem “*hilft kein Pudern und kein Schminken*” (Röhrich, 1973, 204; Schemann, 2011, 631) or “*Einem Schminke vormachen*.” (Wander, 1987d, 278).
- 19 According to Röhrich (1973, 314), the German saying “the old violin” used to stand for “the old song, the old lyre”. At Wander (1987a, 1444) it means the preference of something old or traditional.
- 20 Heinrich Zschokke, Eine Selbstschau: Das Schicksal und der Mensch (Aarau: Verlag von Heinrich Remigins Sauerländer, 1842), 308. It is a lexical modification of the phraseological unit *Sturm im Wasserglas: viel Lärm um nichts*. cf. Röhrich (1973, 1047). At Wander (1987d, 949) and Schemann (2011, 823) we find the following variant *der/ein Sturm im Wasserglase/Wasserglas (sein)*.

### 3.5 Conventional and non-figurative elements

These are non figurative phraseological units in the broad sense corresponding to the main properties of phraseological units of stability, reproducibility and polylexia (Burger, 2015; Burger *et al.*, 2007; Drahotová-Szabó, 2021; Fleischer, 1982). This category includes primarily winged words from Latin which have already been conventionalised on an international level: *dolce far niente*, *primum desiderium*, *misera contribuens plebs* or proverbs like *Besser spät als niemals*<sup>21</sup>. The elements of this group do not occur as frequently as those belonging to the other groups.

## 4. Concluding Remarks

The objective of Ferjenčík's journal of notes and extracts was to acquire active stylistic competence by excerpting, imitating and adapting German sentences expressed in high and expressive style, including idioms and other figurative units. Considering the representation of figurative expressions, and also the share of imagery in the stylistic qualities of the excerpted or imitated passages, the figurativeness of speech can be identified as a key characteristic and prerequisite of good style as a goal towards which the author of the manuscript was aiming. The interdisciplinary treatment of figurativeness in Ferjenčík's book of notes and extracts confirms the thesis that figurative expressions retain a link to their literal reading in addition to their figurative lexical meaning. This is evident in phrases that the author has written out for his interest in meteorology: in their literal reading, they thematise meteorological phenomena, even though the motivated (figurative) meaning has a general validity. During the processing of the material, a number of interpretive problems related to determining the degree of conventionalisation has emerged: a wide range of figurative expressions are characterised by literary conventionality (and thus can be considered a separate part of the mental lexicon of competent participants in contemporary literary communication); for a number of elements, the degree of conventionalisation was questionable. The academic literature discusses numerous theoretical works on conventionalisation, lexicalisation, and the mental lexicon; however, further discussion of specific criteria seems to be necessary.

In today's society, in addition to traditional lexicographic and ethnological research, we also employ corpus analysis, discourse analysis, and questionnaires. When investigating the conventionalisation of word combinations and sentence structures of the previous centuries, we encounter a significant challenge despite the substantial progress in digitizing literary, philosophical, and other written works, including periodicals. The mere fact that a particular word combination or sentence structure is demonstrably conventionalised today (not only

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21 cf. Wander (1876a, 332).

through introspection by language users) does not automatically imply that it held the same status during the time of the examined author. Our basis for assuming conventionality relies on repeated occurrences in written documents from that era. Interestingly, there have been cases where we discovered more extensive sources containing certain word combinations only from several decades later periods.

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