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METAPHORICAL STATEMENTS IN HISTORICAL DISCOURSE:
THE PROBLEM OF THEIR CREATION AND RECEPTION

The author presents in the article traditional (G. Elton) and constructivist understandings of history (H. White and F. Ankersmit), which view correspondence between historical texts and the past differently. In contrast with the traditional understanding of history, the constructivist understanding of history emphasizes the significance of the perspective of the historian and the formative role of metaphorical statements by forming a picture of the past, and its reception. From the point of view of the author, the presence of perspective is an obstacle for the creation of a unified worldview of the past. The author illustrates this problem in relation to different views of Slovak and Hungarian historians to historical development related to the results of the Trianon Treaty.

Key words: Picture of the past, the past, traditional understanding of history, constructivist understanding of history, metaphorical statements, point of view, historical narrative.

During the last centuries, people were mostly informed about the past by written or told stories. This means that their “picture of the past” was necessarily mediated by language. From the beginning of the 19th century history as scientific discipline started to be formed, with the main task of achieving a mirrored picture of the past. It was meant to strengthen belief about correspondence between

historical text and the past. This belief is the result of a very understandable and basic supposition that only historical text truthfully mirrors the “real” past. This supposition has been problematized by the theoretical stream of the narrativist philosophy of history. In their theories of history metaphorical/figurative statements play a key role. This article deals with the role and significance of metaphorical sentences in the process of the formation and reception of historical text. It will point out some aspects (e.g. point of view) which could give an explanation of the problem of creating a united picture of the historical world. It will be illustrated by the issue of historical discourse about development related to Trianon’s treaty.

In the 20th century, we can distinguish two main streams in the understanding of history. The first one relates to the traditional understanding of history which presupposes a correspondence between historical texts and past events. The followers of this stream are persuaded that the community of historians makes gradual progress in creating more accurate (truthful) pictures (maps) of the past. They believe that this goal is possible to achieve by proper usage of certain transforming rules, which ends with different but complementary pictures of the past. The historians’ pictures of the past could be compared to filling gaps in creating a mosaic. The basic problem of this understanding of history is the reduction of subjective influences and fictional elements from their texts. The most secure way of constructing truthful language pictures of the past starts with detailed analysis of sources which result in simple statements. These statements can be connected to each other according to generally accepted rules and create a whole picture of the past. From this understanding of history, metaphorical statements would give a very vague and unprofessional picture of the past.

Representative of the *traditional understanding* of history in Anglosaxon historiography is the famous historian G. Elton who in his book, *Practice of history* [1], argued against the more relativist approach to history of Edward Carr. According to G. Elton, the professional historian “uses his real awareness of what is ‘right’ in a given context in order to fight his way through to an explanation grounded on evidence” [1, p. 19]. Thus, historians are able to able “to understand an age in its own terms, to judge it by criteria appropriate to itself, to avoid the error – ‘whig’ error – of looking only for what has significance in a later age, and to distinguish between the commonplace and the exceptional” [там же]. G. Elton warns about applying the theories of social scientists. He suggests using a historical method which is “no more than a recognized and tested way of extracting from what the past left the true facts and events of that past, and so far as possible their true meaning and interrelation, wholly governed by the first principle of historical understanding, namely that the past must be studied in its own right, for its own sake, and on its terms” [2, p. 65]. According to G. Elton, the truth about the past is possible to achieve by a proper understanding of what the evidence really says and understanding how it fits together [1, p. 84]. These definitions are very vague and we can doubt whether such a formulated method really “opens a window” to the past reality as Elton tried to argue.¹ Probably every historian

¹ According to G. Elton, a historian’s right posture is inside the event [1, p. 100].

asserts that his/her historical text presents a situation from inside the context of historical events by using proper methods, but there is still no general agreement about historical texts are “closer” to the past.

The theoretical problems and tensions appear in Elton’s second publication, *Return to Essentials* [2]. He stresses the importance of the independent work of historians and warns against interpretative and ideological theories. From Elton’s point of view, “theory directs the selection of evidence and infuses predestined meaning into it. <...> Historians captured by theory may tell you that they test their constructs by empirical research but they do nothing of the sort; they use empirical research to prove the truth of the framework” [Там же, p. 15]. Elton believes that a conservative temperament is the most suitable for historians who want to study history on their own terms [Там же, p. 24]. He recommends three principles:

1) Separate your question from your answer... the questions one puts to the evidence should not be biased towards an answer already in mind [Там же, p. 66].

2) Remember that you have the advantage and burden of hindsight ... studying the past on its own terms, with proper respect for it and its inhabitants [Там же, p. 67].

3) Keep an open mind. Allow further study and fuller knowledge, whether it comes from your own work or that of others, to modify what you have thought and said [Там же, p. 68].

According to Elton, using any expressions borrowed from the social sciences, critical theory, or literal theory can only distort historical knowledge and proper usage of technical language [3, p. 70]. Similar to Elton’s understanding of history, A. Marwick believes that it is important for historians to avoid using “ready-made metaphors” [Там же, p. XIII].

The everyday practice of historians produce many different and non-complementary texts (interpretations, narratives) about the past, which strengthens doubts about the possibility of achieving one united picture of the past reality. It appears that recommendations and advice for achieving a permanent, “unchangeable” picture of the past from representatives of the traditional understanding of history are difficult to apply in real practice. Probably permanent subjective impact in the work of historians is impossible to eliminate, so their production of pictures of the past necessarily differs. It is difficult to imagine historians working without using theoretical frameworks which make huge amounts of data understandable for consumers. So the presupposition of the traditional understanding of history about “direct” clear correspondence between historical texts and past reality which could ignore the problem of usage and the significance role of metaphorical statements appears to be incorrect.

The authors whose conceptions belong to the stream of *historical constructivism* believe that historians don’t have reliable rules by which they can achieve an objective and truthful picture of the past. They presupposed that usage of available rules often provides different and even contrary pictures of the past.

From the 60s discussions intensified about the nature of narrative as the main means to transforming historical knowledge. The relevant point was Arthur Danto's consideration related to narrative sentences which is illustrated by the statement that the "30 years war broke up in 1618". Consequences from his consideration about the meaning of events in narratives pointed to relevance of the process of endowing meaning to certain to historical events which depends on developments in the future [4, p. 143–181].

The most famous representative of the constructivist stream is H. White. In his first well-known essay, *The Burden History* [5] later published in *Tropics of Discourse*, he argued not only for plural views of the past but also for plural representation of it. He pointed to the role of governing metaphor in historical accounts, which "could be treated as a *heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data for consideration as evidence.*" The role of historians consists in finding the proper governing metaphors. He says "...when his metaphor begins to show itself unable to accommodate certain kinds of data, he abandons that metaphor and seeks another, richer, and more inclusive metaphor than that with which he began – in the same way that a scientist abandons a hypothesis when its use is exhausted" [Там же, p. 47].

White presented a more developed idea about the role of metaphor and tropes in the work of historians in the Introduction of his book, *Metahistory*. In this book, he introduced a model for understanding different stories of one historical event. In this model, he distinguishes surface modes of historical narratives: modes of emplotment (romantic, tragic, comic, satirical), modes of argument (formist, mechanistic, organicist, contextualist), and modes of ideological implication (anarchist, radical, conservative, liberal). He believes that every historical narrative has poetic and linguistic deep structural content which is related to four basic tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) [6, p. 7–38].

In his famous article, *Historical text as literary artifact* (1974) which was also published in [5] he declared the basic presupposition of his understanding of history, according to which historical reality (the past itself) is amorphous without intrinsic and stable meaning. In this context he says that "historical situations do not have built into them intrinsic meanings ... How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially literary, that is to say fiction making operation" [Там же, p. 85]. White emphasizing mediating the role of historical narrative results in his view of historical narrative as extended metaphor or symbolic structure. He says "the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences. The historical narrative does not *image* the things it indicates; it *calls to mind* images it indicates, in the same way a metaphor does. <...> histories ought never to be read as unambiguous

signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that “likens” the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture” [5, p. 91].

H. White illustrated the application of his constructivist approach to history in the text of A. P. Taylor, which was related to political life in Germany between 1919 and 1933. In this text, he showed how the historian’s description of the situation was dependent on a selection of rhetorical techniques. White presented Taylor’s creation as latent referent (related to historians’ assessment of real democratic life in Germany after the WWI), which was different from manifest referent, which was Germany [5, p. 107-109]. White’s statement that “historical discourse does not represent a perfect equivalent of the phenomenological field it purports to describe, in size, scope or the other seriality in which the events occurred” [Там же, p.111] is very persuasive. If we accept this view of historical text then we have to admit that the historian’s work is related to *distortion*, what in White’s understanding of history means the “departure from the chronological order of events’ original occurrence, so as to disclose their “true” or “latent” meanings” [Там же, p. 111]. Historians’ creation of a coherent story includes distortion, which in White’s view has “two sorts: negative, consisting of the exclusion of facts that might have been included in the representation of the field; and positive, consisting of the *arrangement* of events in an order different from the chronological order of their original occurrence, so as to endow them with different functions in an integrated pattern of meaning” [Там же, p. 111].

Contrary to most members of the historical community, for whom the main determinant for making a language picture of the past (in historical narrative) were facts, H. White’s literary understanding of history emphasized the role of linguistic tools (especially tropes) in creating historical narrative as a main medium of securing and understanding historical knowledge. His taking into account aspects of understanding historical narrative diminished significance of facts and data by the process of the historical creation of a language picture of the past.

A more philosophical approach to the theory of historical work (narrative) was presented by F. Ankersmit in [7]. He distinguished between the process of historical research (related to establishing historical facts) and a narrative writing of history (integrating facts in the narrative into a consistent historical narrative). He pointed out the absence of a generally accepted method among historians for making historical narratives, so the “historical landscape” is not given to historians; he has to *construct* it” [Там же, p. 86]. In Ankersmit’s understanding of history, the past can be seen “only through a masquerade of narrative structures” [Там же, p. 88]. F. Ankersmit ascribed the decisive role in creating the structure of historical narrative to *narrative substances*. According to him, they represent certain “pictures or images” which “are guiding principles in the construction of the narration (historical narrative) as well as content of cognitive core” [Там же, p. 98]. By consideration about historical writing, F. Ankersmit ascribes a significant role to metaphorical statements in describing and individuating narrative [7, p. 209]. They differ from literal statements because they not only able

to describe the world but also to define a point of view [Там же, p. 210]. Metaphorical statements are able to invite readers to the most significant statement in narratives (e.g. “Culture was reborn”). Blending theory can offer some explanation of using expressions which describe complicated social processes (the special connection of some aspects of reality which results in very special expression, e.g. “Cold war”) [8, p. 133–147].

H. White and F. Ankersmit emphasize the decisive role of metaphorical statements, which are important for the formation of a certain point of view which is relevant for understanding the content of a narrative. Their understanding of history legitimizes historical knowledge, which is contaminated by values, in the process of a historian’s selection of a certain point of view. Thus the status of historical narrative as a mirror of the past is seriously questioned. The constructivist’s understanding of the role of metaphorical statements and historians’ points of view is in opposition to the traditional understanding of history, which strives to achieve a “timeless” view of the described historical world. Their remarks about the role of language in the construction of the past world appear to be relevant for understanding contemporary discussions among historians whose approaches come from different perspectives.

One example offers us a different interpretation of events related to the Trianon Treaty in 1919, which set up the southern boundaries of Czechoslovakia. According to Hungarian historians, this time (1918–1920) was a big break in the history of the Hungarian nation. Under to the Treaty in Trianon, the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was divided into new states and the Hungarian population in those new states suddenly found themselves in the position of national minority in Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. Hungarian historians described it as a national tragedy and they blame the Allies for unfair treatment during their dealings with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, because they did not take into account “sufficiently” ethical criteria. In many works of Hungarian historians from the 20s until today, metaphorical statements like “Hungary was mutilated” and the “broken limbs of Hungary” can be found. From the point of view of somebody who takes care of the Hungarian nation which was dominant for many centuries, the new development could not be presented in any other way than as a tragedy. Hungarian historians use rhetorical devices and highlight data which argue for presenting it as a national tragedy that could be considered a national trauma.

Representatives of the Slovak nation joined with the Czech nation in the creation of Czechoslovakia and accepted the results of the Trianon Treaty. From the point of view of some Slovak politicians, this breaking of relations with Hungary was like “getting rid of shackles or 1000 years oppression.” They argued that the creation of the new state was the result of national oppression (magyarisation mainly after 1848). Slovak historians presented events related to the Trianon Treaty as the logical result of the events which preceded it, so the issue of the Trianon Treaty is not very attractive for their work.

L. Vörös, in his articles, noticed the different approach to the historical representation of Trianon between Hungarian and Slovak historians. Slovak historians were interested in a “pure description” of events directly connected to the days in October, 1919 in Trianon, but Hungary’s historians worked with the subject of the Trianon Treaty as “condensed metaphorical concept” [9, p. 25]. He says that the narratives produced by historians in Hungary and Slovakia “are irreconcilable because their regimes of truths are mutually exclusive despite their premises which are the same... Productive discussion can be only beyond paradigm of national history” [Там же, p. 64].

We can see that the language construction of worldview is a very complicated process which still depends on the presence of points of view. Overcoming the impact of point of view by creating a generally accepted united language world view of the past appears to be impossible.¹ An historical narrative offering a certain worldview of presented historical events can suit the needs and social vision of the members of a selected society. If the historical narrative does not meet the expectations of members of this society, then impulses for making a more suitable historical narrative with an appropriate point of view of historical development arise. We suppose that the problems surrounding making a common language worldview for the past cast doubt.

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¹ Even understanding of common space is viewed differently. Hungarian nationalist movements present different state divisions of geographical space (in their flags, Hungary is shown in areas which currently belong to neighboring states).