

Exploiting the Phraseological Heritage in Teaching Romanian to Foreign Students

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the way in which different Romanian phraseological expressions are perceived by learners of Romanian as a foreign language.

Learning Romanian during preparatory seminars is quite a challenge to foreign students who intend to study at a university in Romania, as long as they need first to get acquainted with the Romanian alphabet and with the basic vocabulary, and then improve their language knowledge with structures specific to different types of speech. At the same time, they have to learn how to read a text written in Romanian, to get familiar with new lexemes and to be able to discuss on different topics chosen in accordance with the specific texts that they are studying. In following all these steps, students are liable to master the language in such a way as to give their own judgement on any text, starting from their own ideas.

Keywords: *Romanian phraseological units, specialised and common vocabulary, target language, source language, culture-specific terms*

I. General aspects concerning Romanian phraseological units

The originality and authenticity of a language is accounted for by the fascinating field of phraseology. Not only that they are pervasive in human communication but they also offer an insight into the culture of a nation. They are a first step in any new language acquisition and, given their beauty, any learner will fall in love with them. Such phrases are, in fact, relevant aspects of everyday life as they involve food, body parts, clothing, animals, colours and all the central elements of a language.

Trying to find the right meaning of such phrases could be a challenge even for a native speaker; consequently, it does not come as a surprise that foreign speakers, in their process of second or third language acquisition, find them difficult to comprehend. This problem arises especially when they are taken out of context. Learning Romanian with the help of phraseological expressions is a plus, due to their stylistic effect and their value. Words can easily be interchanged, getting new meanings, developing into metaphors, metonymies, similes, personification and even irony. The context in which they appear increases their effect.

Some phrases belong to popular language while others are based on neologisms. For a learner who is not familiar with Romanian culture it is quite difficult to understand and translate such expressions and this may lead to difficulties in communication. The origin of the persons engaged in the process of learning Romanian is also an important issue. For an Arab person, it is more difficult than it is for a European to understand such notions. Thus, we consider that, from a cognitive point of view, the cultural background of each individual is a necessary attribute, because it helps the learner to understand what people have in mind and relate to this information in such a way as to interpret what they learn. It is only when the learner acquires all the necessary information from a target language that we can speak about a correct understanding of that language.

If we ask any student what is the most enjoyable way of learning a new language, he will surely choose acquiring new expressions, because it is challenging to offer a correspondent in their own language. By offering new expressions or phrases to new language learners, we develop their ability to communicate and create meaning. The aim is not to learn all the expressions in a language but to know most of the common ones in order to understand the way a language is written or spoken.

By expressions or phraseological units we refer to a group of words with a fixed lexical composition and grammatical structure which have a familiar meaning for the native speakers of a given language. Their meaning is generally figurative but it can also be literal or the result of the language's historical development.

In the *Dictionary of linguistic terms* (Constantinescu-Dobridor 1998: 140), we find the following definition attributed to the word

expression: 1. "the sum of the elements of phonetic order which are part of the word, express it and give it a form". Another meaning involves 2. "the combination of words, which figuratively explains an idea and commonly forms a lexical unit (and/or even a grammatical one sometimes), getting very close to a phrase or even identifying with it): *negru pe alb* (black on white), *de bine* (of well), *de rău* (of bad), *apă de ploaie* (rain water), *cal de bătaie* (Aunt Sally/laughing stock/ mockery etc), *de joi până mai apoi* (for ever and the day/ from Thursday till late), *de amorul artei* (for art's sake), *după chip și asemănare* (according to his own resemblance), *atâta și nimic mai mult* (nothing more), *nu de alta* (enough to...) etc." (Constantinescu-Dobridor 1998: 140-141).

There are numerous classifications attributed to phraseological units, but we shall focus on Dobridor's hierarchy (1998), as it offers a systematic approach to the Romanian phraseological units proposed for analysis in the practical part of our paper.

Idiomatic expressions (phraseological units) have a complex structure, specific to a certain idiom (language, dialect or speech), which, according to its length, remind us, most of the times, about the characteristics of a preposition or of a well-defined phrase and which, given the figurative meaning of the whole structure, cannot be translated word by word, but approximated through periphrases. Examples of these type are: *nu-i sunt boii acasă* (to feel out of sorts, not to be/ feel (quite) up to the mark; to be as cross as two sticks), *nu e nici o afacere* (it doesn't pay; there's no deal), *i-a ajuns cuțitul la os* (to come to the end of one's rope/ tether), *nu-i ajungi cu prăjina la nas* (to be too big for one's boots/breeches/shoes/trousers), *s-a ales praful și pulberea* (to fall about one's ears), *e la mare ananghie* (hard put to it/ in Dutch/ in Queer Street/ under the harrow), *scoate apă și din piatră seacă* (to get water from a flint), *a-și da arama pe față* (to display the cloven foot/ hoof, to get one's hammer out/for), to give oneself away, to show one's teeth, to show the cloven hoof), *a pus-o de mămăligă* (to make a hash of something), *s-a dus pe apa Sâmbetei* (to go down the drain/ to go to pot, to go to the winds), *e la mintea cocoșului* (it goes without saying, it stands to reason, it stands to sense), *s-amestecă unde nu-i fierbe oala* (to come between the bark and the tree), *a bate fierul cât e cald* (to strike the iron while it's hot, to make hay while the sun shines), *n-are nici după ce bea apă* (not to have two halfpennies to rub together, to sit on the

Penniless Bench, to be (as) poor as a church-mouse) etc. Given their complexity, this category of expressions creates a metaphorical image.

To all these examples of Romanian idiomatic expressions we have offered an English translation or equivalent. English idioms have a fixed meaning and, as we can see in the examples above, some are even culture-specific due to their origin or their diachronic evolution. For example, a word such as *mămăligă*, being a traditional food in Romania, does not have an equivalent in English thus, the translation of the expression *a pus-o de mămăligă* can have a figurative translation into English: *to make a hash of something* which means “to spoil things completely”, similar to the meaning of the Romanian expression. Although we admit that, in many cases, it is not an easy task to translate or find the best alternative to an expression in another language, we can still find solutions to such problems. It is much more difficult when we do not have enough information about an expression in a target language or we cannot find similitudes with any other expressions in the source language; hence, the process of translation is doomed to fail.

The expression *e la mare ananghie* can have many alternatives in English *hard put to it/ in Dutch/ in Queer Street/ under the harrow*. The explanation is that a language is continually evolving together with its users. *To be in Dutch* for example means “to be in trouble or disfavour” and it may allude to the stern reprimands of a Dutch uncle (being mostly used in slang). *To be in Queer Street* is associated with debtors and Queers Street and, although one might find it imaginary, it was certainly located in London, as the first record of the term was found in 1821.¹ The English equivalents to our Romanian idiomatic expression may be considered somewhat exaggerated since *under the harrow* refers to a person subjected to actual torture or to great affliction or oppression, although the expression on the whole makes allusion to a person who is in trouble with something or with someone. In accordance with the historical period of time we confront with, in case of debate on a particular topic based on a given text, we shall choose the alternative that fits our context best. If we lack context, dictionaries

¹ <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/queer-street.html>, accessed on 17 May 2017.

may be of great help, as they offer various correspondences out of which we can choose the most appropriate one.

There are also drawbacks in translating phrases, because some expressions are culture-specific and their correspondences might sound unnatural or out of place if used in other different linguistic cultural-specific backgrounds. Thus, it would be preposterous to try to divide such expressions into small units and to attribute ad litteram translations to each of them. In such a case, for the French expression *comme l'eau*, the Romanian ad litteram correspondent would be *ca pe apă* and the English one *as water* (instead of "to know something by heart"); *tambour de livre* translated into Romanian with *tobă de carte* would be literally rendered into English with *drum book* instead of *a walking dictionary* or *over-learned*.

From a semantic point of view, phraseological expressions are fixed phrases whose meaning cannot be made up by the sum of meanings of their component parts. Nevertheless, their translation presupposes finding the adequate equivalent translation and differentiating between figurative and non-figurative meanings by keeping in mind the linguistic norms of the target language. It follows that the translation does not have to differ from the one in the source language, but it has to preserve all the specific characteristics of the meaning.

A large category of Romanian phrases consists of **verbal expressions**. In the structure of such expressions there is always a verb (generally the verb *to be*) which represents only a lexical unit, or both a lexical and grammatical unit (as in the case of impersonal verbal expressions): *mi-e foame* (I'm hungry), *mi-e sete* (I'm thirsty), *mi-e dor* (I miss), *mi-e frig* (I'm cold), *mi-e cald* (I'm hot), *mi-e teamă* (I'm afraid), etc. Verbal expressions are quite precise and expressive and do not give birth to other derivative expressions.

A special class includes **impersonal verbal expressions**, composed of the copulative verb *to be* and an adjective, an adverb, another verb or even a noun: *e nevoie* (it is necessary), *e timpul* (It's (high) time), *e momentul/vremea/ceasul* (it's time), *e adevărat* (it is true), *e bine* (it's good), *e rău* (it's bad), *e frumos* (it's beautiful), *e urât* (it's ugly), *e imposibil* (it's impossible), *e posibil* (it's possible), *e sigur* (it's sure), *e greu* (it's difficult), *e ușor* (it's easy), *e convenabil* (it's convenient), *e interesant* (it's interesting) etc.

Old/archaic verbal expressions are specific to an ancient period from the language development, such as *a-(i) fi aminte* (to keep in mind), *este* or *e necesar* (it is necessary), whereas **dialectal expressions** belong to a certain dialect: e.g. *de comun accord* (by mutual agreement), the Aromanian expression *pi ună parte* (de aceeași părere – to share the same opinion), the Megleno-Romanian expression *pită di ghieps* (cuib de viespi - vespiary), and the Istro-Romanian expression *ca și uzanța noastră* (după obiceiul nostru – as it is our habit) etc.

Present-day expressions make reference to the usual expressions circulating naturally in a language such as: *de florile mărilor* (on fool's errand), *din lac în puț* (from bad to worse/ from pillar to post), *ca la ușa cortului* (to be a potty mouth) etc.

Artistic expressions imply artistic skills which comply with certain aesthetic tastes (may often be the equivalents of certain figures of style used by writers). The following examples are excerpted from Eminescu's work: *lanțuri de aramă* (copper chains), *floarea Apusului* (the Occident flower), *regina nopții* (flowering/Jasmine tobacco), *vis de lumină* (light dream) etc.

In the category of **elliptical expressions**, one or more words are omitted by the speaker and may serve a stylistic purpose: e.g. *de când cu lupii albi* (*erau, s-a-ntâmplat*) (it happened) *ever* since *white wolves* (existed), *de când lumea* (since the beginning of world) etc.

Dignity expressions have a clear, distinct content. Such examples include *a face un act de dreptate* (to make justice), *a ajuns la liman* (to come to an end), *nu știe în ce ape se scaldă* (not to have got somebody's number) etc. The last category belongs to **vulgar expressions** which, as their name suggests, have an inappropriate content: *nu mă aburi* (Don't try to fool me!), *mă lași* (Why don't you give me a break!), *a mangli/șterpeli* (to half-inch), *a face din rahat bici* (to make a bricks without straw), *du-te dracului!* (Go to hell!)

As illustrated by the examples provided so far, phraseological units have semantic stability and carry connotations with certain emotional effects. Any language acquires expressive power due to phrases. Based on their metaphorical features, any learner shall develop his or her way of thinking and understanding of new concepts through things familiar to their experience.

II. Experimental research

For our experimental research, we shall further analyse some of the applications discussed with the foreign students in the preparatory year, during the Romanian language seminars at “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacau. This section of the present paper consists of a corpus of examples that have been selected from two bibliographical sources included in the seminar curricula: *Romanian Language. Concepts of Lexicology and Semantics* (Crețu et al. 2015: 29) and the *Dictionary of Romanian Phraseological Units*².

During the seminars of Romanian as a foreign language, we worked with students of different origins but we chose to analyse the evolution of two students’ learning processes: the former was a Frenchman (to whom we shall refer as S1) while the latter was a Syrian (referred to as S2). Both our subjects wanted to learn Romanian in order to continue their studies at our university, by passing an entrance exam at the bachelor’s programme in Physiotherapy, respectively a Master’s programme in Engineering. The two students participated to all of our seminars that took place in 2016, being the most diligent of a group of 10 students.

In one of the practical exercises, the students were asked to explain a series of Romanian phrases and, then, to make up sentences of their own with the expressions offered: *a nu avea habar* (to have no clue, to know nothing), *a tăcea mîlc* (to be as silent as a mouse), *a da buzna* (to break in/ into), *a îngheța bocnă* (to freeze or to get chilled to the marrow), *a-și da arama pe față* (to display the cloven foot/ hoof, to get one’s hammer out, to give oneself away), *a tăia frunze la câini* (to be on the bum, to fool about, to tootle along), *a da în pîrgă/pîrg* (to august), *a da ghes* (to labour under a delusion), *a munci pe brînci* (to be a demon for work, to try one’s hardest).

The purpose for such an exercise was to discover the way in which the foreign students succeeded in comprehending, explaining and finding the right contexts for the Romanian phrases.

² *Dicționar de expresii și locuțiuni românești* [*Dictionary of Romanian Phraseological Units*], <http://dictionareonline.duv.ro/dictionarlocutiunisiexpresii/dictionar-de-expresii-si-locutiuni-romanesti/>, accessed in June 2017.

PHRASES	Students' comprehension	The meanings and alternatives offered by the students	The sentences made by the students into Romanian
<i>a nu avea habar</i> (de cineva sau de ceva) (to have no clue, to know nothing about sb. or sth.)	S ₁ : <i>a nu avea habar, habar n-am</i>	not to be familiar with something, with a situation	<i>De ce mă întrebați asta? V-am spus deja, n-am habar!</i> [Why are you asking me this? I have already told you, I have no clue!]
	S ₂ : <i>a nu avea habar</i>	a nu ști nimic (despre cineva sau despre ceva) (not to know anything about sb. or sth.)	<i>Fiecare dată când te învăț matematica înțelegi nimic, nu ai habar.</i> [Each time I teach you Maths, you understand nothing, you simply have no clue.]
<i>a tăcea mîlc</i> ³ (to be silent/quiet/still as a mouse, to grin and beat it, to hold one's peace, to keep mum, to lie coy, to lie doggo)	S ₁ : <i>a tăcea mîlc</i>	1. a sta liniștit (to stay calm) 2. a sta fără voce (to remain voiceless); 3. a rămâne interzis (to remain without words); 4. a nu spune nimic (not to say anything); 5. a nu scoată vorbă (not mentioning words); 6. a tăcea chitic (to keep mum); 7. a mîlci = a amuți – datorită unui sentiment puternic (to have lost one's tongue)	<i>Mi-e frică de el. Fiecare timp ce vorbește cu mine, tac mîlc.</i> [I am afraid of him. Each time he talks to me I grin and beat it/I keep mum.]

³ <http://www.toatecuvintele.ro>, accessed on June 2017.

PHRASES	Students' comprehension	The meanings and alternatives offered by the students	The sentences made by the students into Romanian
	S ₂ : a tăcea mîlc	Să fii liniștit! (to remain still)	Copilul acesta nu spune nimic de dimineața, a tăcea mîlc. [This baby doesn't say anything this morning, to be silent as a mouse.]
a da buzna (undeva) (to break/ burst into)	S ₁ : a da/a intra buzna	1. a fi brusc (to be sudden); 2. a intra undeva brusc (to go somewhere suddenly); 3. a năvăli (undeva) pe neașteptate (to burst into, to sweep)	Nu mai intra așa buzna! [Don't break in like this anymore!]
	S ₂ : a da buzna	a intra brusc (to blow in, to burst in)	Nu intri camera mea așa, a da buzna. [You don't enter my room like this, to burst in.]
a îngheța bocnă (to be cold, to get chilled to the marrow, to be dead with cold, to be frozen stiff)	S ₁ : a îngheța bocnă	1. a se pietrifica datorită unei emoții (to remain puzzled due to a powerful feeling); 2. a-i fi foarte frig (to be very cold); 3. a îngheța foarte tare (to be frozen stiff); 4. a fi/a se face/a îngheța bocnă (chilled to the marrow)	Azi ninge...îngheț bocnă! Nu mai pot. [It is snowing today... I'm freezing! I cannot bear this anymore.]
	S ₂ : a îngheța bocnă	a îngheța tare (to freeze)	Ai spus aici e rece! Trebuie să vizitezi Bacău. A îngheța bocnă.

PHRASES	Students' comprehension	The meanings and alternatives offered by the students	The sentences made by the students into Romanian
			[You said it as cold in here. You should visit Bacau. To be dead cold.]
<i>a-și da arama pe față</i> ⁴ / <i>a-și arăta arama</i> (to display the cloven foot/ hoof, to get one's hammer out, to give oneself away, to show your real feelings)	S ₁ : <i>a-și da arama pe față</i>	<i>a-și arăta</i> adevăratul caracter (to show the real you); <i>a ascunde cine ești</i> (not to show who you are)	<i>Acum că am nevoie de tine, îți dai arama pe față.</i> [Now that I need you, you show the real you]
	S ₂ : <i>a-și da arama pe față</i>	<i>a explica</i> adevăratele gânduri, sentimente (to show your real thoughts and feelings)	<i>Uită-te în ochii mei vei ști adevărul, a-și da arama pe față.</i> [Look into my eyes and you shall know the truth, to display the cloven foot.]
<i>a tăia frunze la câini</i> (to be on the bum, to fool about, to tootle along)	S ₁ : <i>a tăia frunză la câini</i>	1. <i>a face ceva pentru nimic</i> (to do something for nothing); 2. <i>a nu face nimic</i> (not to do a thing); 3. <i>a irosi/pierde timpul inutil</i> (to waste time doing nothing)	<i>Fă ceva! Nu sta așa tăiând frunză la câini!</i> [Do something! Don't you just tootle along!]
	S ₂ : <i>a tăia funză la câini</i>	1. <i>a pierde vremea</i> (to waste time); 2. <i>a face lucruri fără rost</i> (to do useless things)	<i>Dacă nu stai tot timpul pe internet și facebook, ești ca frunză la câini.</i> [If you don't spend all your time on facebook you are like a leaf to the dogs.]

⁴ <http://www.toatecuvintele.ro>, accessed on June 2017.

PHRASES	Students' comprehension	The meanings and alternatives offered by the students	The sentences made by the students into Romanian
<i>a da în pârgă/pârg</i> (to august, to ripen, to start ripening)	S₁: <i>a da în pârgă</i>	a alege primele fructe (to crop the first fruits); a se coace (to ripen)	<i>Merele dau în pârgă!</i> [The apples are ripening.]
	S₂: <i>a da în pârgă</i>	a începe să se coacă (to start to ripen)	<i>Plante gradinelor dau în pârgă.</i> [The plants of the garden are ripening.]
<i>a da ghes</i> – (to labour under a delusion) <i>a-(i) da (inima) ghes (sau brânci) (cuiva)</i> (to be able to see one's way clear)	S₁: <i>a da cuiva ghes</i>	1. a da cuiva susținere ; a încuraja pe cineva (to sustain somebody); 2. a motiva pe cineva să facă ceva (to motivate somebody to do something); 3. a îndemna, a stimula pe cineva (to impel somebody to do something); 4. a da cuiva o lovitură ușoară cu cotul (to dig somebody in the ribs)	<i>Hai! Îți dau ghes pentru exercițiu.</i> [Come on! I'll prompt you to solve the exercise.]
	S₂: <i>a da cuiva ghes</i>	a da lovitură ușoară pe cineva [to press somebody to do something]	<i>Când zicea nu poate face bine, i-am dat cuiva ghes.</i> [When he said not do well I gave impetus to him.]
<i>a munci pe brânci</i>	S₁: <i>a munci pe brânci</i>	1. a face ceva care este riscat (to do something risked to overpass the limits);	<i>Știu că muncește pe brânci. Niciodată l-am văzut să se oprească.</i>

PHRASES	Students' comprehension	The meanings and alternatives offered by the students	The sentences made by the students into Romanian
(to be a demon for work, to try one's hardest)		2. a lucra numai dacă cuiva îți dă ghes (to work only if to someone is impetus to you); 3. a munci/a lucra foarte mult până la istovire (to work till exhaustion - extenuare <French éxtenuation)	[I know he works to the hardest. I saw him never stop.]
	S2: <i>a munci pe brânci</i>	a munci din răspuțeri (to be a demon for work)	<i>M-ai întrebat de ce este bogat, pentru că el lucrează de dimineața până seara, a munci pe brânci.</i> [You asked me why he is rich because he works from night till dawn, to be a demon for work.]

Analysing the examples listed in the table above, we wish to emphasise the weak and strong points as well as the opportunities and threats observed in the solutions proposed by the foreign students during their process of learning Romanian. Not only have the students understood the requirements, which is a plus, but they have also succeeded in making up sentences of their own. What is encouraging is that the students gave their best in order to offer detailed explanations and even synonyms and/or alternatives for the phrases they needed to use in specific contexts.

From a grammatical point of view, 80% of the sentences formulated were correct, which proves that the students largely understood the meanings of the expressions used. They explained them and made up sentences using them, developed their ability of recognising specific terms. Moreover, they proved to have understood the role played by

context in creating new meanings. During the seminars, the students showed interest in the lexical meanings and appreciated the cultural specificity of each popular expression although, at the beginning, they were tempted to translate them word by word as in the case of the expression *a tăia frunze la câini* (= to be on the bum, to fool about, to tootle along) which means "to waste precious time by doing nothing" and whose figurative meaning was not obvious to them, hence posing a potential threat to the process of understanding the correct meaning of Romanian expressions.

Among the difficulties they had to cope with, there was the use of diacritics. This is mostly obvious in the case of the Syrian student for whom, the process of learning the Romanian alphabet was quite problematic, given the differences between Arabic and Romanian alphabets. An example such as „Plantele gr[a]dinelor dau în pârg[a]” (The garden’s plants are ripening) emphasises one of the weak points of his writing. The French student does not confront with the same problem, but this may be due to the fact that his mother tongue is close to Romanian, both of them being Romance languages. The use of the metathesis is another minus for the Syrian student (S₂) who rearranges the syllables in words: *a îngheța bocnă* (meaning “chilled to the marrow”) becomes *a îngheța boncă*. The explanation for the metathesis in the word *bocnă* may be that the result resembles a common word pattern familiar to Arabic speakers.

At the same time, we notice the Syrian student’s use of another linguistic phenomenon, commutation, when he changes the ending of an imperative verb from the second person, namely [-ă] into [-i] (*uită-te* becomes *uiți-te*/ (look). In some sentences, the French student tends to use incorrectly the form of the Nominative pronoun *cineva* (someone), using instead of it, the Dative form *cuiva* (to someone). In another context, the French student does not correctly perceive the word *risky* and uses the word *risked*. The same student does not understand the role of double negation in Romanian.

After making thoughtful correlations, both students understood that some cultural concepts may coincide in all languages, but their meaning may differ due to cultural changes. There are expressions which are common to English, Romanian and French and others, which are specific to Arabic language. Some cultures prefer to make reference to a certain animal in order to speak about heavy rain for

example, while other cultures use terms selected from different lexical areas. Dialectal expressions speak about a different mentality which is representative of a certain period of time. Language is continually changing and adapting to all the changes in a society, in politics, in everyday life, things which, by no means, reflect in humans' speech.

Conclusions

Phraseological units are cultural labels which reflect in the language of any community and shape its cultural identity. Romanian lexicology is a fertile cultural heritage, highly appreciated not only by the specialists in the field but also by the foreigners who are fascinated by Romanian.

On the basis of the examples presented in our paper and our SWOT analysis, we could prove that the richness of Romanian language in terms of phraseological units and may raise difficulties for both native speakers and foreigners who are interested in learning Romanian. The fact that foreign students gave their best to understand and use Romanian expressions makes us appreciate their effort and encourage them to improve the knowledge they already acquired for a better understanding of their future domains of study.

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