

WORDS IN (EVERY)ONE'S MIND. TIPS AND TRICKS ON ROMANIAN LEXIS ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT. *Words in (Every)one's Mind. Tips and Tricks on Romanian Lexis Acquisition.* Words, be they viewed as separate entities, semantically related or connected in utterances, represent the basis of a language and, extensively, of communication. Due to the world knowledge we all share, to which several social features are added, humans basically 'speak' the same 'language', assumed as a series of common-sense (non-)verbal actions. It goes without saying that communicators understand each other mostly by means of a common language; once they intend to transfer their thoughts into a foreign language, overlapping, misunderstandings or breaches of communication may occur. Such linguistic facts represent the premise of the present study, which aims to survey certain differences between native and non-native speakers, the focus being the Romanian language (as a foreign language). A peculiar Balkan Romance language, with Slavic, Greek and Turkish influences, the Romanian language has intrigued different speakers from all over the world, both by its lexis and its grammar. Out of practical considerations, merely the Romanian vocabulary is examined here, and particularly the A1-A2 speakers (in accordance with the CEFR, *The Common European Framework for Languages*) are addressed, since it is the beginners who typically encounter many linguistic hardships. Certain pragmatic learning strategies (validated through research and teaching experience) are collected in the study, meant to represent a useful (yet not extensive) tool for anyone interested. Naturally, relevant examples are provided, in a gradual approach from simple to complex, such degrees encompassing phonetics, semantics and pragmatics.

Keywords: *CEFR; communication; language; lexicology; learning strategy; meaning; mental lexicon; Romanian vocabulary; semantics*

REZUMAT. *Cuvintele din mintea noastră. Strategii și tehnici de achiziție a vocabularului limbii române.* Cuvintele, indiferent dacă sunt privite ca unități

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distincte, relaționate paradigmatic sau sintagmatic, reprezintă structura de bază a unei limbi, dar și a comunicării, în general. Datorită cunoștințelor despre lume pe care fiecare le are, cărora li se adaugă diverse particularități sociale, oamenii 'vorbesc', de fapt, aceeași 'limbă', percepută ca o serie de acțiuni (non-)verbale, de bun simț. Este de la sine înțeles faptul că o limbă comună facilitează comunicarea; odată ce se dorește exprimarea într-o limbă străină, participanții la procesul comunicativ se pot confrunta cu diferite neajunsuri, cum ar fi suprapunerile semantice, interpretările eronate sau chiar lipsa oricărei comunicări. Astfel de fapte lingvistice constituie premisa lucrării de față, care își propune să abordeze diferențele dintre vorbitorii nativi și cei nonnativi, cu referire la limba română (ca limbă străină), singura limbă romanică din spațiul balcanic, având influențe slave, grecești și turcești, asemenea particularități lexicale și gramaticale intrigând diferiți vorbitori din întreaga lume. Din considerente practice, doar lexicul limbii române este supus examinării aici, îndeosebi primele niveluri de competență lingvistică, A1-A2 (așa cum se stipulează în CECR - *Cadrul european comun de referință pentru limbi*), din moment ce începătorii se confruntă cu cele mai multe dificultăți de ordin lingvistic. Studiul de față oferă strategii practice de învățare (validate prin studii de specialitate, dar și prin experiența concretă de predare), constituindu-se, credem noi, într-un instrument valoros (chiar dacă nu complet) pentru toți cei interesați. În plus, nu lipsesc exemple relevante ale observațiilor teoretice, care pornesc de la simplu la complex, acoperind nu doar fonetica, ci în special semantica și pragmatica.

Cuvinte-cheie: CECR; comunicare; limbaj; lexicologie; strategii de învățare; sens; lexicon mental; limba română; vocabular; semantică

Motto:

*Words are stitched together in one's
mind like pieces on a patchwork quilt.
(Jean Aitchison)*

Words are stitched together in one's mind like pieces on a patchwork quilt... No matter how clear-cut or inspiring such words are, "the whole situation is more like badly spread bread and butter, with the butter heaped up double in some places while leaving bare patches in others. Some words overlap almost completely, as with *chase* and *pursue*, or *plump* and *fat*, while elsewhere there are inexplicable gaps: there is no generally accepted term for 'live-in lover' or 'dead plant' " (Aitchison 1996: 73). Such an argument even lengthens in the case of acquiring a foreign language, since lexical or semantic items, but also cultural concepts may not find their counterparts: "[I]anguages rarely divide up the world in exactly the same way, and so we should not be surprised if we find students using the word 'cup' to describe an object which is in fact a 'glass', a 'mug' or even a 'bowl' (Gairns, Redman 1991: 13).

The key explanation lies in the so-called *prototypes*, which "represent the mental models of the world we live in, models which are private and cultural

architectures, and only partially in touch with 'reality'. Such models are referred to under various names: mental models, frames, scripts, internalized cognitive models or ICMs, cognitive domains" (Aitchison 1996: 70). Hence, the fact that certain students whose national or social backgrounds lack(ed) the cultural element are unable to understand what *statuie* (*statue*), *monument*, *teatru* (*theatre*), *balet* (*ballet*), even *spectacol* (*show*), *orchestră* (*orchestra*) and *concert* mean, should not be viewed as shocking or incredible any more. They could simply not relate such concepts to anything they knew or were exposed to.

If we are to differentiate between a first/native language (L1) and a second or foreign language (L2), learning an L1 has been regarded as "*imitation and practice*" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 2) – the behaviourist view; as "*innate endowment/ Universal Grammar*" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 8) – the innatist position; as well as "*a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristics of the child and the environment in which the child develops*" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 14) – the interactionist view, the last of which seems the most comprehensive.

In what concerns the second/foreign language acquisition, its success highly depends on certain **learner characteristics**, such as:

- ✓ "knowledge of another language
- ✓ cognitive maturity
- ✓ metalinguistic awareness
- ✓ knowledge of the world
- ✓ nervousness about speaking" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 21),

and **learning conditions**, namely:

- ✓ "freedom to be silent
- ✓ ample time
- ✓ corrective feedback: grammar and pronunciation
- ✓ corrective feedback: word choice
- ✓ modified input" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 21).

The aforementioned 'modified input' refers to '*motherese*' or *caretaker talk* in L1, or *foreigner talk/ teacher talk* in L2, a rather artificial, yet comprehensible and helpful style adjusted to the needs of the learners, by **deceleration**, **simplification**, **repetition** and **paraphrase**. However, such a talk is absent in the case of 'language immersion' or 'street learning' (Gairns, Redman 1991: 1), as different from school learning; still, the main features of such a *bain de langage* are extremely valuable in the didactic-related context too.

Probably the 'affective filter', "an imaginary barrier which prevents learners from using input which is available in the environment" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 28), should also be taken into consideration as another criterion of learning a new language. Boredom can be eventually overpassed by the proper activities, but the lack of motivation (be it personal or professional) or of aptitude represent real hindrances in the acquisition process.

A. Word-Choice in L2

In what regards vocabulary in general, its importance can be definitely summed up by the following statement: “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed” (Wilkins, in Thornbury 2005: 13), the lexical items actually forming the foundation of any language. Words are basically approached from four interconnecting angles: *meaning, pronunciation, collocation* and *expressions* – Gough 2002: 3 (set phrases or formulae, phrasal verbs, idioms), the last two representing the language user’s ability to contextualise them.

In the process of learning a second/another language, a first crucial problem is the L1-L2 overlapping, a *trap* that an A1 learner can hardly escape from but, at the same time, a *prop* of the new language acquisition; the dual situation is illustrated below, adapted to Romanian as a foreign language (RFL):

Table 1. Intralexical factors that affect vocabulary learning (Laufer, quoted in Pavičić Takač 2008: 8)

<i>Facilitating factors</i>	<i>Difficulty-inducing factors</i>	<i>Factors with no clear effect</i>
Familiar phonemes	Presence of foreign phonemes (usu. <i>ă, î, â, ș, ț</i>)	
Phonotactic regularity	Phonotactic irregularity	
Fixed stress	Variable stress and vowel change	
Consistency of sound-script relationship	Incongruency in sound-script relationship (<i>elefant</i> - [e], <i>este</i> - [je]; <i>a iubi</i> - [ii], <i>urși</i> - [i]; adj. <i>deși</i> - [i], conj. <i>deși</i> - [ii])	
		Word length
Inflexional regularity	Inflexional complexity (RFL)	
Derivational regularity	Derivational complexity (RFL)	
Morphological transparency	Deceptive morphological transparency	
	Synformy (ex. <i>brown</i> has two lexical restrictions: <i>căprui</i> (as of eyes), <i>șaten</i> (as of hair), and a third general form, <i>maro</i> , for miscellaneous items.	
		Part of speech
		Concreteness/abstractness
Generality	Specificity	
Register neutrality	Register restrictions	
	Idiomacity	
One form for one meaning	One form with several meanings	

It should be stated from the very beginning that the size and the main semantic spheres of a second-language speaker’s vocabulary vary, in accordance with the learning settings (full or restricted exposure to/use of L2); age (children, young learners or adults); areas of interest (general language or specific

languages – medical, business, legal, etc.), to which several others may be added: the L2- course duration; the speaker's intelligence and talent for languages; subjective word-selection (the so-called "vital personal relevance of an item" - Gairns, Redman 1991: 65) and so on.

However, the essential criteria of word-choice and lexis acquisition in L2 are:

- a. USEFULNESS: "If the student does not perceive the vocabulary input to be useful it will be difficult to engage his interest" (Gairns, Redman 1991: 60);
- b. FREQUENCY: the more recurrent a word is, the sooner it will be learned and taught;
- c. LEARNABILITY and
- d. TEACHABILITY (in Thornbury 2005: 34-35).

While the last criterion refers to the easiness of lexical demonstration or illustration, learnability is commonly associated with the *contrastive analysis hypothesis* (CAH). According to it, "where there are similarities between the two languages, the learner will acquire target language structures with ease; where there are differences, the learner will have difficulty" (Lightbown and Spada 1993: 23). Consequently, the first L2 lexical items to be introduced should be those sounding similar, thus familiar to the learners, but they ought to be ratified by the criterion of frequency in all cases:

- ✓ *arogant* (Engl. *arrogant*, Fr. *arrogant*), before its synonyms, *îngâmfat/încrezut*
- ✓ *a combina* (Engl. *to combine*, Fr. *combiner*), before its synonym, *a potrivi*
- ✓ *a decide* (Engl. *to decide*, Fr. *décider*), before its synonym, *a hotărî*
- ✓ *inteligent* (Engl. *intelligent*, Fr. *intelligent*), before its synonym, *deștept*
- ✓ *similar* (Engl. *similar*, Fr. *similaire*), before its synonym, *asemănător*
- ✓ **tomată* (Engl. *tomato*, Fr. *tomate*), not applicable (not ratified by frequency – such a specialised term is replaced by *roșie*).

However, "human mental dictionaries cannot be organized solely on the basis of sounds or spelling. [...] humans fairly often confuse words with similar meanings" (Aitchison 1996: 11). Even if some A1-A2 speakers of RFL still confuse *mănușă* (Engl. *glove*) with *mătușă* (Engl. *aunt*), *a găti* (Engl. *to cook*) with *a găsi* (Engl. *to find*), *rochie* (Engl. *dress*) with *roșie* (Engl. *tomato*) or *a călări* (Engl. *to ride*) with *a călători* (Engl. *to travel*), some others have problems with the so-called 'false friends' - seemingly identical lexical items: *library* and *bookstore*, respectively *biblioteca* and *librărie*; *advertisement* (Rom. *reclamă*), similar to *avertisement* (Engl. *warning*). Moreover, due to the mental lexicon and the so-called *interlanguage* (Selinker, in Lightbown and Spada 1993: 55) – a more or less conscious blending of a speaker's first and second language characteristics, some would naturally say **a călări o bicicletă* (Engl. *to ride a bike*), instead of the correct variant *a merge cu bicicleta* or **Eu sunt 20 de ani*. (Engl. *I am 20 years old.*), instead of the correct variant *Eu am 20 de ani*.

As a matter of fact, in the case of these false cognates, the “equivalence hypothesis may fail and lead to erroneous conclusions because of the following reasons (Swan, in Pavičić Takač 2008: 9):

- ✓ lexical units in two languages are not exact equivalents (i.e. there is more than one translation);
- ✓ equivalent lexical units in related languages have different permissible grammatical contexts;
- ✓ equivalents belong to different word classes;
- ✓ equivalents are false friends;
- ✓ there are no equivalents at all”.

B. RFL/RSL Learning/Teaching Strategies

As in the case of any L2 acquisition process, mainly viewed as cognitive progression, RFL or RSL (Romanian as a second language) proves no exception at all, making use of similar learning/teaching strategies, such as:

1. Word-translation (in the students’ mother tongue or in an intermediate/contact language) – still the commonest learning strategy, but the last choice in a modern language classroom – is the quickest, time-saving approach to grasp the meaning of a word, yet rather often the least efficient. Such a contrastive method usually impedes or slows the rapid access to acquiring both vocabulary and fluency.

1.1. Looking words up in a bilingual dictionary, a method frequently used for self-study, not necessarily in the classroom; a more productive alternative, especially for higher levels, would be the *monolingual dictionary* or the *thesaurus*. For example, the English Vocabulary Profile (EVP), structured on the 6 levels of language knowledge stipulated by *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* – CEFR, reveals some undoubtedly giant work behind the A1-C2 word lists for the English language, a vital starting point in vocabulary acquisition, language teaching and assessment, as well as text and manual elaboration, to be found under the following link: http://vocabulary.englishprofile.org/dictionary/word-list/uk/a1_c2/A. In addition, certain words are assigned various levels in accordance with their different meanings: “for instance, the word *degree* is assigned level A2 for the sense TEMPERATURE, B1 for QUALIFICATION, B2 for AMOUNT and C2 for the phrase *a/some degree of (sth)*” (<http://vocabulary.englishprofile.org/staticfiles/about.html>). Unfortunately still inexistent at the moment, a Romanian Vocabulary Profile would absolutely ease the students’, teachers’ and manual authors’ tasks.

In Seashore and Eckerson’s classification, an average speaker should have knowledge of: “common ‘basic words’ ” (in Aitchison 1996: 6) – a ‘core vocabulary’ of approximately 2,000 words or at least 3,000 word families, as argued in Thornbury 2005: 21; “rare ‘basic words’, and derivatives and compounds” (in Aitchison 1996: 6). If applied to RFL, the noun *pui* (Engl. *chicken*) belongs to the

first category, the second-person verb *pui* (Engl. *you put*) may be a rather rare 'basic word' for a non-native beginner (because of the frequent incorrect form *puni**), whereas *pui de animal/pasăre* (Engl. *the young of any animal or bird*) and *pui de somn* (Engl. *nap*) fit in the last category of compounds; in the CEFR terminology, the above-mentioned item should range from A1, A1/A2 to B2 and C1 (the idiomatic expression *a trage un pui de somn* – Engl. *to take a nap*).

2. The use of **visuals** for vocabulary acquisition, practice and revision: "flashcards, photographs, blackboard drawings, wallcharts and realia (i.e. objects themselves)" - Gairns, Redman 1991: 73, sometimes accompanied by mime and gesture.

3. The use of **non-visuals** or **verbal means** for vocabulary acquisition, practice and revision: "providing an example situation; giving several example sentences; giving synonyms, antonyms, or superordinate terms; giving a full definition" (Thornbury 2005: 81) or even providing a scenario on the target word(s), although such a strategy may prove scarce in case of A1-level.

4. **Vocabulary organisers** – as an example, for the intermediate level and above (A2⁺-C1), Chris Gough has proposed 100 topics for self-study, structured into 17 sections, such as: people, describing people, feelings and emotions, the human body, health, around the house, food and drink, leisure time, sport, the media, technology, money matters, travel and transport, education and work, society, our world and abstract concepts (time, numbers, size and shape, quantities, etc.) – see Gough 2002: *passim*. A good hint at the end of each section is the empty box for any personal words/expressions one may want to add.

Besides such topic-related items, 'items grouped as an activity or process' (the steps involved in buying a house, for example), Gairns and Redman (1991: 69-71) suggest lists of semantically similar and frequently confused lexemes; pair-items (synonymy or antinomy); items within a scale (degree-differences); word-families; discourse-markers; polysemy; 'items causing particular difficulty within one nationality group': false cognates, phonological difficulties, etc.

Another valuable tool for the systematic increase of the lexicon is *The Words You Need* (Rudzka et al, 1990), a series of miscellaneous texts from books, magazines, newspapers or advertisements, also organised on common themes and followed by discussions, word studies (including fine semantic delineations, classified, explained and contextualised; synonymous pairs) and exercises.

5. The use of **interactive worksheets/didactic films** (focusing on speaking and listening skills) for vocabulary acquisition, practice and revision; valuable RFL/RSL materials ranging from A1 to B2 are available under: <http://video.elearning.ubbcluj.ro>.

6. **Reading** in the target-language or **listening** to music/TV shows, **watching** films. Even if such a learning strategy seems outlandish at A levels, it is totally approachable if the story-lines or films are adapted to a beginner's level (see the link above, on the series of didactic videos, listening materials

and exercises); higher-level speakers will naturally have no/fewer problems with authentic texts and films.

7. 'Playing' or Five-minute activities – besides the more or less classical activities, aiming to develop the linguistic and intercultural competences, Penny Ur and Andrew Wright suggest various *five-minute activities*, mostly appealing to our *homo ludens* side, thus applicable from the very first levels. A first plain example could be *Categories* - listening comprehension of isolated words (Ur, Wright 1993: 6): food and drink, animals/objects, big/small, round/square, land/sea/air (Ur, Wright 1993: 7).

Even if illustrated for EFL/ESL, further activities for vocabulary acquisition, review and enrichment, easily adaptable to RFL/RSL as well, are to be found below, in two (interchangeable if adjusted to a more complex or simple level) broad groups (*our categorization*):

7.1. Beginners or elementary (A1-A2; B1) students:

Making groups, Feel the object, Odd one out, Opposites, Likes and dislikes, Favourite words, Simon says – “simple commands to perform” (Ur, Wright 1993: 27); *Words beginning with..., Something interesting about myself* – “volunteering personal information” (Ur, Wright 1993: 77); *Find someone who ...* – “brief pair conversations” (Ur, Wright 1993: 76), *How many things can you think of that ...?, I would like to be ...*, *Compare yourselves/things* (use of comparatives or opposites), *Crosswords* (name learning, vocabulary review), *Cutting down texts* – “forming new grammatical sentences by eliminating words/phrases from the original” (Ur, Wright 1993: 13) and *Expanding texts; Piling up a sentence, Don't say yes or no, English words in our language, Hearing mistakes* – “listening comprehension with quick reactions” (Ur, Wright 1993: 34) or *Mistakes in reading; Martian* (explanations of everyday objects, developing the paraphrastic competence), *Questions about a statement, Miming, Songs, Spelling bee; Who, where and what?* – describing and guessing; *Say things about a picture, Slow reveal* (of a picture), *Sentence starters*, Chain stories (repeating the verbs/connectors), changing sentences/ *Rub out and replace* (“practice of sentence patterns” – Ur, Wright 1993: 8, translated here into Romanian):

Noi	deseori	a mânca	podea/parchet.
Oamenii	niciodată	a sta pe	carne.
Copiii	uneori	a se juca cu	scaune.
Câinii	întotdeauna		păpuși.
	de obicei		ciocolată.
			baloane.

7.2. Advanced (B1-B2, C1+) students:

Brainstorm round a word, with variations such as limited “free associations” (Ur, Wright 1993: 5): adjectives or verbs that can apply to the noun; “a central adjective can be associated with nouns” (Ur, Wright 1993: 5); prefixes or suffixes, etc.; *First, second, third; Damaged property* (the central question: *What might have*

happened? – using the past tense and passives) or *What has just happened?*; discussion of *Controversial statements* (e.g. *Boys and girls should have the same education.*) - (Ur, Wright 1993: 10), *Five-minute writing storms* (Ur, Wright 1993: 28), *The other you*, diaries, *Expanding headlines*, *If I had a million dollars/ If I weren't here*, *Proverbs*, *Why have you got a monkey in your bag?* – using one's imagination.

Irrespective of the strategy preference, the teacher should be adaptable and also able to involve the learners actively, encouraging them to speak in real-life contexts, thus productively using their receptive vocabulary acquired in the classroom. Even if the students will naturally favour certain activities, the four competences (reading, listening, speaking and writing, to which two further competences may be added: grammar and vocabulary and the cultural competence) should always intertwine, similarly to everyday communication.

As a matter of fact, if native speakers are able to differentiate between words and non-words, non-native speakers cannot, at least, not on an inferior level of language knowledge. For such a reason, after gradually acquiring new items, the non-native speakers should start using them in concrete situations and become familiar to their meaning in the new language (the three English lexemes *old – young/new* become *vechi – nou (old – new)* and *bătrân – tânăr (old – young)*, whereas *a cânta* includes both singing and playing an instrument), contexts of use, dynamism (archaisms or words whose meaning has been updated) and connotations (a good example is *securitate/Securitate*, the common noun *security* still being surpassed by the Communism-associated body of control; actually, “the term *connotation* tends to slip awkwardly between something like ‘peripheral meaning’ and ‘emotive meaning’ and ‘personal associations’” (Yallop, in Halliday et al. 2004: 28).

Moreover, special focus should be given not only to individual or pair-work/group activity, but also to contextual guesswork, by which the learners' understanding is checked and also their cognition and attention are engaged. Ultimately, it is the student who has to learn the vocabulary which, paradoxically, “...cannot be taught. It can be presented, explained, included in all kinds of activities, and experienced in all manner of associations” (Rivers, in Thornbury 2005: 144). The main idea underlining this statement is that one cannot learn certain dictionaries or word-lists as such, but has to integrate the new lexical items into their idiosyncratic mental lexicon; consequently, the resulted vocabulary (in one's mind) does not coincide with the initial vocabulary taught in the classroom. In other words, “the relationship between a book dictionary and the human mental lexicon may be somewhat like the link between a tourist pamphlet advertising a seaside resort and the resort itself” (Aitchison 1996: 14).

C. Conclusions

In summary, words represent the basis of any language, any sequence of communication and, extensively, of our humanity. Due to the multi-faceted

character of vocabulary and its being taught/learned, some final observations should be emphasised at this point:

- ✓ Even if languages share the same reality, each language is unique and creates a specific linguistic realm; consequently, “words need to be presented in their typical contexts, so that learners can get a feel for their meaning, their register, their collocations, and their syntactic environments” (Thornbury 2005: 30).
- ✓ “Learners should aim to build a threshold vocabulary as quickly as possible” (Thornbury 2005: 30), by various tasks, such as: “identifying, selecting, matching, sorting, ranking and sequencing” (Thornbury 2005: 93-94).
- ✓ Words should be acquired gradually, from simple to complex, their introduction in a syllabus or mental lexicon being ratified by four criteria: usefulness, frequency, learnability and teachability.
- ✓ “Learners need multiple exposures to words and they need to retrieve words from memory repeatedly” (Thornbury 2005: 30).
- ✓ The higher the language knowledge is, the fewer RFL/RSL tips and tricks are needed.

To conclude with a financial comparison, words are like money – if we always keep them in the ‘safe’ (be it a notebook or a dictionary) and never ‘invest’ them in concrete contexts of communication, such words are prone to oblivion and thus prove entirely inefficient.

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