

THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH SYNTAX ON SOME FASHIONABLE “ROMANIAN” NICKNAMES

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ABSTRACT. *The Influence of English Syntax on Some Fashionable “Romanian” Nicknames.* The present paper aims at offering insight into the problem of language change. The influence of English on the choice of some Romanian show-biz nicknames is scrutinized as it shows a “creolization”² of Romanian not only at the lexical level, but at the syntactical level as well. The “creolized” Romanian syntax (rom. *sintaxa “romgleză”*) is used in social contexts that impose an individuation of the average persona, thus displaying interesting pragmatic influences upon culture.

Keywords: default lexical insertion; phrase structure; linguistic change; nickname; cultural pragmatics; variation within grammar

0. Introduction

The Romanian language has long been under assault from foreign languages³, thus confirming the common-sense reality of societies and cultures in contact⁴. Approaching this issue with a descriptive goal in mind, Romanian researchers have painstakingly rendered interesting inventories of neologisms/borrowings/linguistic calc⁵ for the Romanian language. Two attitudes are to be found alongside such important lexicographic matters: on the one hand, vocabulary enrichment methods are vital and regular, as, from a historical point of view, society evolves, discovers and re-invents itself⁶; on the other hand, though, one is quite often taken aback by the large amount of borrowings which have no practical motivation⁷ other than prestige, fashion or mood.

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² Pinker (1995).

³ Boc (2003:19).

⁴ Vasilescu (2007a).

⁵ Avram (1997); Nevaci (2002); Stoichițoiu-Ichim (2003; 2006); Gruică (2006); Pașcalău (2009).

⁶ Coșeriu (1997).

⁷ see Rodica Zafiu’s articles in “România Literară”, gathered under the heading *Păcatele limbii (Language Sin)*.

Hence, from the point of view of cultural pragmatics, the adaptation of English words by using Romanian functional categories or, vice-versa, the filling in of the English structure with Romanian lexical terms represent the means through which slang and jargon are perpetuated. It has been noticed that the Romanian language used by the mass-media encourages the trendy sinking in of all items pertaining to the English tradition up to the point where linguists were forced to accept the existence of *romgleză*⁸.

Long are the days⁹ when the “hybrids” of Romanian and a fashionable foreign language were used only for humorous reasons, for, nowadays, these are becoming the norm for the younger generation.

Fewer are the linguistic studies that deal with the syntactic interaction of Romanian with other languages, for an obvious reason: the first changes in language happen at vocabulary level, as syntactic changes are more insidious and long-term. Some might say, by simply casting a glance at Romanian grammar, that there isn't any influence upon it from the part of English syntax. This is the point where we beg to differ, as we have found evidence that the English influence upon Romanian has not avoided syntax. Of course, the evidence we speak about does not amount to hundreds of different examples, but to merely a handful, examples which are most likely to be found in the media and which strike us with their widespread presence.

The impact of English syntax upon the Romanian language is still looming in the cradle, but our belief is that it will become more prominent in the years to come, as media is the major channel of information and attitude diffusion.

1. Aim and methods

The examples we deal with consist either in nicknames, or in the Romanian adaptation of English cartoon names. While the first category (i.e. the nicknames) is used in order to attach a social connotation to a person, the latter merely represents a case of strange translation.

While dealing with both categories, the paper will aim at displaying:

- a. the overlap of Romanian functional categories with English ones;
- b. the borrowing of English word order and noun phrase structure.

In order to do this, we will use traditional and generative accounts of Romanian and English grammar. Notions such as *functional category* and *phrase structure* will be very useful in our approach.

The linguistic material to be surveyed consists in the following list of examples: *Freakadadisk* (Diskspinner); *Sexy Brăileanca* (Sexy woman from Brăila); *Tom motanul și Jerry* (Tom the cat and Jerry), *Jurrasic potaia* (Jurrasic pooch), *Dino potaia* (Dino pooch), *Bugs Iepurele* (Bugs the rabbit), *Galactic fotbal* (Galatic football), *Samurai Jack* (Samurai Jack), *chimicale X* (chemical X).

⁸ Stoichițoiu Ichim (2003).

⁹ Graur (1970).

Before starting off, some aspects need to be clarified in relation to proper names, as all the examples that we scrutinize are such entities. Proper names are generally considered rigid designators¹⁰. However, in the case of nicknames, one might seem to find contradictory facts. Nicknames can be proper names, as it is the case with our examples, or not. Furthermore, nicknames exist in order to highlight a particular, original aspect of a certain individual. If the nickname is motivated by the social context, the obvious question is whether it can still be considered a rigid designator. Our claim within this paper will be that the nicknames and proper names under analysis are all rigid designators, as they indicate/ refer to one and only one particular individual.

2. “FREAKADADISK”¹¹

2.1. Primary observations and problems

Freakadadisk is the stage name/nickname of one of the singers in the Romanian rap band *Paraziții*. Like any show name, it is used in order to attract the public’s attention by specifying the relation between the nickname and the activity the rapper performs: spinning the disk.

The literal translation of *Freakadadisk* is given in (1):

- (1) Freak - a - da - disk
 Spin - *Definite article* - *da?* - *disk*
 Diskspinner

The aspects which have caught our attention are the functional elements and their value. The first problem is that the Romanian definite article *-a* is added at a verbal stem¹². The second problem is establishing whether *da* can be assimilated to the phonetic equivalent of the English definite article *the*, or to the Romanian default preposition¹³ *de*.

2.2. Syntactic analysis

The aspects mentioned above justify a layered syntactic analysis of *Freakadadisk* and it is with this in mind that we propose the idea that nicknames, which display originality in choice, represent the place where Romanian and English syntax

¹⁰ Proper names do not comprise a set of features which are attached to an individual via his proper name. Instead, names merely indicate the object/the individual referred to – see Oltean (2006 – quoting Kripke); Plantinga (1998)

¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraziții>; <http://www.20cmrecords.com/20cmrecords.html>.

¹² Zafiu (2005) – “România literară”, nr. 2/2005.

¹³ Default prepositions are defined as those prepositions that have undergone grammaticalization and have become pure grammatical instruments, prepositions possessing only abstract meaning. It is the case of Romanian *de*, English *of*, French *de*.

interfere. In order to clarify this “portmanteau” status of syntactic elements, we will further identify the syntactic levels embedded within the analyzed nickname.

2.2.1. *The first layer*

At the first level of analysis one could have the representations in either (2) or (3):

- (2) X freacă discol. (regular transitive structure)
X spins disk-the.
X spins the disk.
- (3) Se freacă discol. (impersonal structure)
It-ACC spins disk-the.
The disk is spun.

The examples show an agentive pattern. If nominalization¹⁴ occurs, then either (4) or (5) can appear:

- (4) Frecat(ul) de disc
Spin- (the) of disk
Spinning of the disk
- (5) Frecare(a) de disc
Spinning-(the) of disk
Spinning of the disk

Examples (4) and (5) clearly show that *de* and *of* are counterparts and that the DP in (5) resembles (1) very much. From this point of view, *de* would be assimilated as part of *da*. Despite the resemblance between (1) and (5), the structures are different. If in (5) we have a derived/deverbal noun, in (1) we have what appears to be a simple definite noun, obtained either by a deletion operation of the final morphemes in *frecearea/spinning* or by making an extravagant derivation from the verb *el freacă*. Whatever path we take, we end up owing preposition *de* to the verbal tracking of *freaka*.

2.2.2. *The second layer*

If our analysis takes into consideration only 2.2.1., then it only accounts for one aspect that *da* displays, namely its prepositional feature. However, nothing we said so far predicts the shift from *de* to *da*. In order to account for it, we must identify the second layer embedded in *Freakadadisk*.

¹⁴ Romanian de-verbal nouns correspond to the nominal use of supine and infinitive – see Stan (2003).

If we take (2) and shift the Romanian parameters to English ones, then we would get (6):

(6) X spins the disk.

It is here that we notice something intriguing: the phonetic transcription of *the*, i.e. /ðə/ (Romanian *dă*). From a phonetic point of view, *dă* is closer to *da*, then *de*¹⁵. The transition from *dă* to *da* can be explained by the fact that many Romanian speakers of English pronounce *the* as *da*.

2.2.3. The Spell-Out

If we take the first layer of representation, then *da* has prepositional features, thus licensing the derivation. If we take the second layer, then we account for the article features of *da*, its pronunciation and confirm that *freaka* is an extravagant de-verbal noun.

2.3. Conclusion

On the one hand, the phonetic similarity between the Romanian default preposition *de* and the English definite article *the* enables the “creole” structure *da*.

On the other hand, *da* shares properties of both the Romanian preposition and the English article, as the governing category displays nominal as well as verbal features.

3. “SEXY BRĂILEANCA”

3.1. Adjective Sexy and its relation with Romanian NP/DP phrase structure

An overview of present mass-media shows a preference towards structures that are Romanian non-specific. Thus, instead of using *brăileanca sexy* (woman from Brăila sexy), Romanian tabloids and magazines opt for the “mirror” expression, *Sexy Brăileanca* (sexy woman from Brăila). In order to explain the odd structure of *Sexy Brăileanca*, we will first give its English interpretation:

(7) Sexy Brăil -ean -ca
 Sexy Brăil¹⁶ -Suffix indicating individuals -Suffix indicating the female gender+Definite article
 Sexy woman from Brăila

¹⁵ Vowels *a* and *ă* are both central, while *e* is not.

¹⁶ *Brăil-* is not a word proper, but a stem which comes from the name of a Romanian city, *Brăila*. Therefore, *Sexy Brăileanca* means *The Sexy Woman from Brăila*.

In Romanian, the adjective determines the noun, by agreement in number, gender and case. In order to do this, the adjective's position is after the noun. It is true that the adjective can also be placed before the noun, but this is quite rare and it happens in order to stress the quality the adjective embodies. The DP in (8) is the direct object of the verb and occupies the focus position:

- (8) Frumos băiat am văzut ieri.
 Nice boy AUX see-Past participle yesterday.
 I saw such a nice boy yesterday.

The structure in (8) must not be confused with (9):

- (9) Frumos băiatul, n -am ce zice.
 Nice boy-Definite article NEG AUX what say-Present.
 (i.e. Quite nice this boy, no doubt about it.)

In (9) *frumos băiatul/nice boy-the* means *frumos e băiatul/nice is boy-the*. The structure has an elliptical predicate.

If we compare (9) with (7), we will notice that both *frumos băiatul* and *Sexy Brăileanca* have roughly the Spell-Out structure: Adjective+Noun+Definite Article. However, if (9) is a case of ellipsis (*frumos [e] băiatul*), (7) is not, for *Sexy Brăileanca* does not mean *Sexy e brăileanca*.

These notes are very important as they show that in Romanian:

- (10) we don't have structures of the type Adjective+Noun+Definite Article, unless there is an elliptical verb between the adjective and the noun;
 (11) the structure *Sexy Brăileanca* does not comprise an elliptical verb, therefore it is not Romanian specific.

Since the structure is not Romanian specific, it means that it was borrowed, which indeed is the case here. The NP/DP phrase structure in English is roughly Determiner/Adjective+Noun. This exact pattern can be seen in the case of our nickname [*Sexy*_{ADJECTIVE}+*Brăileanca*_{NOUN}].

In the case of *Sexy Brăileanca*, the syntactic pattern is English, while the lexical material is Romanian.

3.2. *Sexy*+NP/DP – a common pattern?

Nowadays, Romanian mass-media, show business and tabloids in particular, promote sensational news, extreme stories and gossip in order to create and satisfy, at the same time, the public demand for shows. In this context, public image, as superficial as it may be, it offers the viewers a momentary quench of the need to share the glamorous life of false stars. By repetition and, therefore, overuse of certain words with dramatic impact, the audience internalizes the underlying patterns. A vicious circle is thus formed. The successful pattern inflates and becomes a strange type of common-sense.

In the case of Romanian media, the adjective *sexy* is attached to every worthless heading in order to transform it into sensational news. It is because of this tendency to invent events that Romanian mass-media is filled with expressions like: *sexy coșărița*¹⁷ (~sexy chimney sweeper lady), *sexy mămică*¹⁸ (~sexy mother), *sexy politicienele*¹⁹ (~sexy politician women), *sexy purtătoarea de cuvânt de la pompieri*²⁰ (~sexy spokeswoman from the fire department), *sexy polițista*²¹ (~sexy police woman), *sexy-asistenta lui Mircea Radu*²² (~Mircea Radu’s sexy assistant), *sexy emisiuni sportive*²³ (~sexy sport shows), *toate sexy dinamovistele din țară*²⁴ (~all sexy Dinamo female fans in the country), *sexy președinta CS Buftea*²⁵ (~the sexy female president from CS Buftea), *sexy bruneta*²⁶ (~sexy brunet woman), *sexy prezentatoarea de la Meteo*²⁷ (~sexy Weather girl).

For the time being, the use of *sexy+NP/DP* (i.e. the English phrase structure) is confined to singularize an individual from the crowd, while the use of *NP/DP+sexy* (i.e. the Romanian phrase structure) is confined to describe or to qualify, without singularizing the individual.

3.3. Conclusion

The English pattern of NP/DPs is associated with the star-like character of an individual. The Romanian pattern of NP/DPs represents the usual way of qualifying individuals.

What rests to be seen is whether the fashion of placing the adjective in front of the noun, in accordance to the English pattern, will indeed catch on in other cases as well. The case of adjective *sexy* leads us to such horizons for now.

4. Cartoon names and their Romanian equivalents²⁸

The world known channel, Cartoon Network, is an enjoyable presence for Romanian children and adults alike. A couple of years ago, the English cartoons

¹⁷ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-06-11/Sexy-cosarita-din-Mures.html>

¹² <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-06-01/Corina-si-a-crestinat-baietelul.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-05-30/Sexy-politicienele-isi-petrec-vacanta-in-tara.html>

²⁰ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-05-16/Sexy-purtatoarea-de-cuvant-de-la-pompieri.html>

²¹ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-05-14/Sexy-politista-a-scris-o-carte-despre-viata-ei.html>

²² <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-05-13/Mi-e-mila-de-fosta-sotie-a-iubitului-meu.html>

²³ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-05-05/Admiratoarea-lui-Piti-junior-prezinta-stirile-sportive-topless.html>

²⁴ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-05-02/Mi-se-mai-spune-quotTurcuquot-pentru-ca-sunt-tare-ca-iataganul.html>

²⁵ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-04-27/Cancan-41425.html>

²⁶ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-03-24/Scandal-erotic-politic-in-Parlamentul-britanic.html>

²⁷ <http://www.cancan.ro/2009-03-27/Lovita-de-o-nevasta-geloasa.html>

²⁸ Since dubbing allows for material to be noticed on the spot, we provide the reader with examples from the following sites in order to match our audio observations with written fact:

<http://www.cartoonnetwork.ro/>; <http://www.desene.us/categories/25/laboratorul-lui-dexter.html>;

http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/List%C4%83_de_episoade_ale_serialului_%E2%80%9ELaboratorul_lui_Dexter

<http://www.desene.us/categories/16/bugs-bunny.html>;

http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Familia_Flinstone.

began to be dubbed on this channel, in order to make it easier for children to understand their favorite characters.

During the process of making English cartoons sound good in Romanian, many strange expressions have spread.

4.1. Bugs Iepurele – Iepurele Bunny. On adpositions

The first set we will analyze is *Bugs Iepurele* (i.e. Bugs Bunny) and *Iepurele Bunny* (i.e. Bunny Bunny). To make it clear, from the start, both of these names refer to Bugs Bunny.

It is obvious why *Iepurele Bunny* is an incorrect translation, for it assumes that *Bugs* means *rabbit/iepure*. *Bugs Iepurele*, on the other hand, contains a hidden mistake. It is a common fact in Romanian to say *domnul doctor Popescu* (i.e. mister doctor Popescu) or *președintele Marinescu* (i.e. President Marinescu). There are no examples that display a reversed phrase structure **Popescu domnule doctor* (i.e. Popescu mister doctor) or **Marinescu Președintele* (i.e. Marinescu the President). To make these latter cases valid, Romanian uses the comma between the name and the function of the individual. If we apply this to *Bugs Iepurele*, we notice that there is no comma between the two terms.

One could argue that still *Bugs Iepurele* is acceptable in Romanian as it can be considered a juxtaposition of two terms that form a proper name together. Indeed this is correct judgment. However, if we consider this to be the rule, we would expect all the English structures of the form Name+Function/Entity to be translated in Romanian accordingly, Name+Function/Entity. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case, as the one and the same Cartoon Network gives the following translations: *Tom motanul* vs. *Cățelul Scooby Doo*; *Jurrasic potaia* vs. *Curaj, cățelul fricos*; *Galactic Fotbal*; *Samurai Jack sau chimicale X*. We will discuss them one at a time under 4.2.

4.2. Free translations

In the case of *Tom motanul* (i.e. Tom the Cat) and *Cățelul Scooby Doo* (i.e. Scooby Doo the Dog), Romanian adds the words *motanul* and *cățelul* which are not mentioned in the initial name. The unstable way of naming cartoon characters is well seen in the fact that *motanul* (cat) and *cățelul* (dog) are either before or after the name. We will not insist on the fact that it is more natural in Romanian to say *Motanul Tom* and that if one chooses the reversed phrase structure *Tom Motanul*, a comma is needed between the two elements of the structure. A good example from this point of view is *Curaj, cățelul fricos*.

Another set of sloppy translations are the rest of the examples, where the English structure is preserved and filled with Romanian words: *Jurrasic potaia* (for Jurrasic pooch); *Galactic fotbal* (for Galactic football); *Samurai Jack* (for Samurai Jack) and *chimicale X* (for chemical X).

4.3. Conclusion

The Romanian translation of cartoon names is unstable as long as it tries to reach two different grammars simultaneously, Romanian and English. The most troublesome phenomenon is the spread of terms that use English syntax and Romanian words. As cartoons are addressed to children especially and they are at ages when they learn the genuine way to express themselves in their mother tongue, the non-Romanian-like translation and the sloppy pattern underlying the translation will be internalized, thus leading to an interesting variation of Romanian and a new generation of linguistic calc.

5. Conclusions

The paper tried to bring together, in a nutshell, some intriguing aspects of the present Romanian language. Not only the lexicon, but the syntax also seems to be under the strict influence of English. The overlap of functional categories and the shift in phrase structure are phenomena well exploited by media and show business. They confirm the fashionable spread of English-like elements in Romanian, nowadays understood as a sign of prestige. The thin line between prestige and ridicule is often crossed. Whether this fashion will catch on, or not remains undecided still.

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