

UNCONVENTIONAL USES OF ROMANIAN TOPONYMS IN IDIOMS AND ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract: This paper aims at analysing the unconventional uses of Romanian toponyms in certain idioms in Romanian and advertising slogans in English. The theoretical framework of the research consists of principles of semantics, semiotics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. The study explores the relationship that exists between the meanings of these expressions and the proper names employed in their construction. In this context, the properhood and appropriateness of the onymic units is also discussed.

Keywords: toponym, idiom, slogan, semantics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics.

Introduction

To embark on a journey that aims at exploring the (terminological, legal, philosophical, semantic, semiotic, discursive, psycho- and sociolinguistic) conventionality and unconventionality of names is comparable to any quixotic quest in any field one might consider. The dichotomisation (because that's what it is) is virtually *ad infinitum* and seems to be unable to provide a clear-cut, universally applicable solution. The onomastician's task is, therefore, even more of a "tilting at windmills" than Don Quixote's original adventure, because while we do turn to numerous studies in the field to build our chivalric defence, we also wonder about in the realms of other domains, looking for new tools and new concepts (new in onomastics) to develop and prove our cases.

It is precisely such an excursion that the present paper puts forward. The analysis is focused on the employment of Romanian toponyms (names of counties, towns and villages) in autochthonous idioms, on the one hand, and advertising texts in English, on the other. Starting from the identification and explanation of the stylistic-phonetic mechanism that underlies the use of the names in the Romanian idioms selected, the paper aims at adapting the method to bilingual advertising texts, which result from English puns based on Romanian toponyms. The use and functionality of toponyms in the discourse samples illustrated is analysed within the frameworks of semantics, stylistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Concepts and precepts specific to semiotics are also adopted, especially borrowed from the field of visual arts and post-structuralist philosophy. The idioms were collected from everyday Romanian language and the print adverts from Romanian virtual space. The latter pertain to *Brandom Humor*, a

collection of advertisements created by Andrei Stanciu, a Romanian copywriter. They are available on Andrei Stanciu's Facebook page and various websites, like *Orașul meu* (see Zipisi 2014) and *Suburban Magazine* (see Chirilă 2014).

Idioms: form and meaning

Widely understood as language constructions that are multimembral on the level of form and unitary on the level of meaning, idioms have generally been investigated with respect to their lexical-grammatical configuration and semantic peculiarity. As regards the former, the aim has been to determine just how restrictive the structure of idioms actually is. Thus, idiomatic expressions are considered *lexemes* or *lexical items* consisting of multiple words (see the distinction between these concepts in Crystal 1994: 104 and Crystal 2007: 193), with a “(quasi)fixed” architecture (Munteanu Siserman 2014: 69; see also Podaru 2011: 310 and Sanford 2014: 497). What prompts one to see them as units rather than as collocated series of words is precisely their semantic behaviour: idioms have a “non-compositional character” and the “idiomatic meaning of expressions does not result from the sum of meanings/significations of the component units/lexemes of the phrases, but it is provided/built by the unitary, global meaning of the phrase as a system” (Munteanu Siserman 2014: 68, orig. Romanian, my translation). This equals with the “canonical view that while expressions such as these may once have been formed compositionally, they are now essentially irreducible units” (Sanford 2014: 493). As such, idioms may be treated as examples of *formulaic language*, prototypically defined as “two or more words which may or may not be adjacent and which have a particular mutual affinity that gives them a joint grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, or textual effect greater [and different, in the case of idioms in particular] than the sum of the parts” (Wray 2009: 266).

The correct delimitation of a sequence of words as an idiom and its germane interpretation in context greatly depends on hearers' sharing a common ground of linguistic and encyclopaedic knowledge (see Wray 2002: 24). Naturally, awareness of the language code in which an idiomatic utterance is issued is a prerequisite to the accurate understanding of the formulaic text. However, more than that, it is speakers' shared extralinguistic knowledgeability that facilitates the apposite apprehension of an idiom. In fact, the wider and more thorough their shared knowledge is, the better chances there are for speakers to get along idiomatically.

In addition, interpretation also depends on the degree of idiomaticity of an expression (Podaru 2011: 312). One can talk about semantic transparency and semantic opacity in an idiom based on the ability of the components to suggest at least part of the overall meaning of the phrase. For instance, one could claim that a Romanian phrase like *a trăi (a se înțelege, a se iubi) ca câinele și pisica* ('to live (to get along, to like one another) like cat and dog') (see Munteanu Siserman 2014: 71) conveys some (affective and associative) meaning through the lexical items decoded individually and then in smaller clusters, even if one is ignorant of the established meaning of the phrase (used to describe the fact that two or more people do not get along at all and

are constantly at odds). In this situation, one is faced with *complete semantic fusion*, as opposed to the *partial semantic fusion* occurring in the case of a *rupe mâta în două* ('to tear the cat in two') and a *tăia frunză la câini* ('to cut leaves for dogs') (Colțun 2000: 30 quoted in Podaru 2011: 311, orig. Romanian, my translation). The linguistic proficiency of the speakers of Romanian, not their native or non-native quality, determines the comprehension of both idiomatic semanticisms, as does the shared knowledge of the idiom issuers and receivers. In the latter respect, Wray (2002: 24) explains that "(...) any string that is formulaic for, say, the speaker, but not for the hearers, will simply not be understood unless it is transparent (...), while sequences which a whole community stores holistically can be much more irregular and opaque, since all the hearers possess a form-meaning mapping already". Therefore, idioms may be considered, in agreement with Sanford (2014: 494), "instances of metaphor that have become largely independent of a sanctioning schema due to high token frequency". As such, the correct use of idioms is indicative of group belonging: "(...) shared knowledge can be the badge of belonging to a speech community, and not possessing that knowledge can be a mark of social exclusion" (Wray 2002: 24).

Structural and semantic playfulness in onomastic idioms

The presence of proper names in idioms usually implies a greater fixedness of the phrases, due to the strong connection that exists between the original denotata of the onomastic units employed and the overall established meaning of the phrases. More often than not, the initial referents are entities that, at one point before the sedimentation of the idioms, enjoyed context-bound prominence and were involved in specific events, which ended up motivating the coinage of the phrases (Munteanu Siserman 2014: 71). As in the case of non-onomastic idioms, the motivation that underpins the existence of an onomastic idiom is generally obscured and even irrelevant in spontaneous language use, as the expression is not normally employed in current speech for the potential associative meanings of the proper name, but for the integral meaning of the idiom, its "holistic-level semantics" (Wray 2009: 271). Thus, the "transparency" of these linguistic isolations will only allow for the decoding of the expression after a connotative and stylistically marked reading, resulting from a process of metaphorical recovery of the literal, denotative, unmarked meaning of the structure in question" (Munteanu Siserman 2014: 76, orig. Romanian, my translation).

It is not only the passage of time that can lead to the obscurity of the onomastic foundation of an idiom. Sometimes, the apparent unmotivated character of a name-based idiom may be prompted by other factors, such as the accidental intervention of stylistic devices in the process of idiomatic establishment, in some cases with salient effects on the phonetic structure of the onomastic components. At least two such instances are relevant in Romanian, both resulting from language users' limited linguistic and/or encyclopaedic knowledge in relation to the source names.

(1) *A fi bun de dus la balamuc* ('to be ready to be taken to the madhouse') is obtained as a result of the "dissimulation of the first consonant" (Munteanu Siserman

2014: 74, orig. Romanian, my translation) of the village name *Malamuc*, in the vicinity of which a hospital for the mentally impaired used to exist (*DEX Online*, s.v. *balamuc*). As a result of appellativisation, the word *balamuc* is currently a generic term, designating a mental institution. Although *Malamuci*, a variant of the name of the monastery in the village of Malamuc, is almost homonymous with the toponym, it would appear that the original religious name was *Balamuci*, recorded in this form since 1631 (*CrestinOrtodox* 2012). According to the website *CrestinOrtodox* (2012), the most plausible explanation for the origin of the microtoponym would be related to the fact that the monks who founded the monastery were “mad unto Christ” (orig. Romanian, my translation). This could be considered to prove the existence of the appellative *balamuc* in everyday Romanian with the aforementioned meaning already in the early seventeenth century and might cast some doubt on the etymology of the idiom as recorded in Romanian dictionaries. Nevertheless, even if one accepts the account of the presence of the toponym in the phrase, its reference is no longer recoverable, nor would it matter if it were, as the integral meaning is stable in contemporary Romanian and the idiom is used at large, in quasifixed occurrences.

(2) *A nimerit (ca) orbul Brăila* (‘to have found something [as easily] as a blind person finds Brăila’) includes a toponym that designates a Romanian county in the south-eastern part of the country and the corresponding county seat. There are several explanations for the use of this place name in the idiom, none of which are recoverable at a first glance by current speakers of Romanian, nor are they of any importance in the economy of communication due to the semantic stability of the phrase. Most of the alleged motivations are related to the geographical position of the city (Brăila is an important port on the Danube, so it was easily located by travellers and merchants moving about by ship) and its urban planning (the circular design of the streets, which enables one to always get to the Danube in whichever direction one may head) (Bucurescu 2013). These interpretations could be considered valid, in the context in which the idiom is quasifixed and can be found with the following toponymic variations: *a nimeri(t) ca orbul Suceava* (Suceava = a county and municipality in north-eastern Romania) and *a nimeri(t) ca orbul Vașcăul* (Vașcău = a town in Bihor county) (Munteanu Siserman 2014: 73), with no change in the *asserted lexical meaning* of the idiom (see Van Langendonck 2007: 6): the phrase is invoked to encourage someone to perform a task that seems unaccomplishable (*DEX Online*, s.v. *orb*). Nevertheless, a shift can be traced in the *presuppositional meaning* of the idiom, as a result of the different associations conveyed by the name-indicated places. Thus, the presumed facile geographical localisation and urban design do not solely characterise the target of the idioms (the subject in relation to which the predicate is expressed), but also the inhabitants of the said settlements. In the former case, the speaker’s attitude is cardinal in understanding whether the subject of the idiomatic utterance is encouraged or ironised. In the latter case, regardless of the speaker’s attitude, the message is always disparaging, but may convey different degrees of this tone depending on the above-mentioned attitude, as the claimed simplicity of the settlements is, to a variable extent,

transferred to the inhabitants. Contextually, of course, the use of these toponymic idioms may entail the promotion of sociocultural stereotypes.

A similar cliché stance of language users as regards the inhabitants of the place indicated in the title idiom (*a nimerit (ca) orbul Brăila*) is found in another motivation put forward as the origin of the phrase. This interpretation links the toponym to an ergonym and, mediatedly, an anthroponym through an instance of folk etymology. According to Bucurescu (2013), after the appearance of the Braille system of writing for the blind, customers (mostly those who were suffering from this condition) would enter books stores in what was then Wallachia, a Romanian principality, and ask about books written in the Braille alphabet. As not everyone was fluent in French (or, anyway, was less knowledgeable in French pronunciation), the name of the writing system was gradually and naturally replaced with *Brăila*, the toponym via which the etymology of the French word *Braille* was interpreted. Bucurescu (2013) even quotes a Romanian text of 1847, written by Anton Pann, which says “Cine întrebă nu greșește. Orbul cu întrebarea a nimerit Brăila” (‘He who asks makes no mistake. The blind man found Brăila by asking about’). As in the case of the geographical explanations regarding the origin of the idiom, in this situation the association between the toponym and the chrematonym is obscure in current language use, without any damage inflicted upon the fruitful employment of the idiom in communication. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Hasdeu (1894: 263) read the coinage of the idiom in Pann’s text as resulting from the misinterpretation of the lexeme *Brăila* in relation to the toponym instead of the German noun *Brille* (‘spectacles’)¹, which it actually aimed to render.

In the two Romanian idioms examined, *a fi bun de dus la balamuc* and *a nimerit (ca) orbul Brăila*, the process of folk etymologisation concerns toponyms, but the direction of the phonetic approximation is distinct. With the former idiomatic phrase, the phonetic transformation stands for detoponymisation (Munteanu Siserman 2014: 74): the strongly connoted toponym is thereby assimilated as a generic appellative to such an extent that the underpinning relationship between the two coexisting words is no longer perceptible in current language use. As for the latter phrase, the phonetic change, apparently fuelled by certain Romanian speakers’ faulty knowledge of French or German (or simply their improper pronunciation in either of the two languages) determined that the establishment of the global meaning of the idiom be introduced by onomastic re-categorisation (French chrematonym/anthroponym, German appellative à Romanian toponym à a-proprrial lexeme). Analysed diachronically, it becomes clear that the idioms are grounded in sociocultural factors, in addition to the linguistic ones. The toponyms are generally non-identifying (even when they can be retrieved, the overall meaning of the idiom is primary), but they might be associatively identifying and descriptive (given stereotypes exist about the place named and the inhabitants in the area).

¹ I thank Dr. Ioana Vintilă-Rădulescu for pointing out this interpretation.

Phonetic kinetics: Romanian toponyms in English print advertisements

In advertising texts, phonetic mutation may be employed as a mechanism in the creation of word play. Uncustomary for classical advertisements, however, is the use of bi- or multilingual puns in view of obtaining specific stylistic effects. *Brandom Humor*, Andrei Stanciu's collection of print ads, includes such examples, aimed at exploiting the playful potential of a language even beyond its borders. Of the forty-five adverts designed as mock slogans, thirty-seven include national and international brand names as bases of puns coined either in English (*She is a VIRGIN, so UBISOFT* 'She is a *virgin*, so *you be soft*') or in Romanian (*Ajunsei acasă, o bruSKYPE nevastă, fu o zi frumoasă* 'I got home, bullied my wife, it was a beautiful day'). The remaining eight adverts explore the phonetic facetiousness of some Romanian toponyms in English sentences: *Be good, girl. Don't BIHOR* ('Be good, girl. Don't be [*a*] *whore*' < Bihor, county), *Don't CRAIOVA stupid people* ('Don't cry over stupid people' < Craiova, city), *Don't LIVADA people's lives* ('Don't live other people's lives' < any of the various settlements in Romania that bear this name), *If you want a girl to stab you, CALAFAT* ('If you want a girl to stab you, call [*h*] *er fat*' < Calafat, city), *Leave home. Go ABRUD* ('Leave home. Go *abroad*' < Abrud, town), *Never TELEORMAN to stop drinking* ('Never tell your man to stop drinking' < Teleorman, county), *Put your LIPOVA mine* ('Put your lip over mine' < Lipova, a town in Arad county or a commune in Bacău county), *There's no rush like CĂLĂRAȘI* ('There's no rush like *colour rush*', Călărași, county or municipality).

In these adverts, the Romanian place names are written in turquoise font, to help readers distinguish them from the rest of the mock commercial discourse. It is a marker of the multimodality of the adverts (Sjöblom 2008: 351), emphasising the fact that the text sequences should not only be looked at as strings of words, but also as images. As such, they can be described as anamorphic creations. According to Kent (n.d.), "An anamorphosis is a deformed image that appears in its true shape when viewed in some 'unconventional way'". To notice an anamorphosis, one has to view an image from a different position than the one an individual would normally adopt to look at regular depictions (remember Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*, with the symbolic human skull at the bottom of the painting, in the centre, clearly visible only when viewed from a high position on the right side or a low position on the left side). By apprehending the text globally, as one would approach idioms, the sound image of the toponyms often suffers significant changes (in several instances, the phonetic exactness of the pair toponym – nonproprietary counterpart is sacrificed in view of preserving the meaning of the English utterance (e.g., *Leave home. Go ABRUD* 'Leave home. Go *abroad*' – *Abrud* [a'brud] vs *abroad* [ə'brɔ:d]). However, the visual image of the toponyms can still be delimited, owing to the different colour scheme. To speak in paralinguistic terms, the *treachery of the toponym* lies in the fact that it is not actually a toponym, but solely its representation, just as Magritte's pipe *was not* actually a pipe (cf. Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*).

The previous explanation holds especially when the toponyms, although

delimited as distinct lexical units (through the colour differentiation), are not understood as place names. When the shared knowledge is sufficient, the toponym is identified and its sound image is deconstructed, only to be reconstructed according to other parameters (number of lexemes, phonetic structure and stress) in order to fit the English utterance. Moreover, only some knowledge of English is necessary, as the curiosity to discover the intended associations prompt one to indulge in deconstruction after deconstruction, until the puzzle is solved.² According to Derrida (1997: 24),

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say, without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.

Thus, in spite of all the deconstruction, the toponyms in Stanciu's print ads may still be interpreted as conveying associative meanings, just as the toponyms in the two aforementioned Romanian idioms are believed to do. In both situations, the toponyms pertain to a geography that appears real, but might as well be invented, in which the places and inhabitants seem to be defined by the (English or Romanian) sentences in which the toponyms are incorporated. The idea that the print ads convey sociocultural stereotypes is rapidly formed; nevertheless, in most cases, it is merely an impression resulting from our inherent wish to make sense of names (as materialisations of one of the "main functions of language that individuals employ in the process of communication", according to Felecan, D. 2014: 16) and places. Stanciu's work, however, is a typical example of "art for art's sake" (Zipisi 2014), in the sense that while it does criticise the effects of globalisation on the Romanian language and society (even the phonetic twists might be an example in this respect), it is not meant to be programmatic, nor does his work aim at starting a revolution. The texts display a mild idiomatic behaviour: the global meaning of the sentences does not consist of the sum of the meanings of the components. Nevertheless, there are two main palimpsestic semantic readings instead of a unitary construal: one derived from the sentence in English and another in relation to the toponym, whose presence is signalled in the printed add by a different colour. A similar semantic construction occurs in the case of the Romanian idioms.

Conclusion

In contemporary Romanian public space, in which advertising is a globalised field par excellence, Andrei Stanciu created a number of print ads that aim to poke fun precisely at this overarching quality of the domain. The tongue-in-cheekness of the

² I express my gratitude to Professor Grant W. Smith and Professor Leo Loveday for their comments in this respect.

bilingual print ads that include toponyms lies in the creation of an illusion of negative stereotypes, a play on language users' expectations (great ones, to be sure!) that the message conveyed by the advertising utterance and the place and people associated with a toponym are semantically involved. It is a play on speakers' stereotypical assumption that names *will* make sense in the context and co-text in which they are used (Sanford 2014: 495) and function as "socio-, psycho- and ethnolinguistic indices of the society at a given point" (Felecan, O. 2013: 319, orig. Romanian, my translation), rather than considering names mere occasions for humorous word play. Nonetheless, it should be highlighted that in the idioms and print ads analysed toponyms do not behave prototypically, as their function of geographical designation and localisation is only activated as a result of specific readings (like the aforementioned stereotyping one). They are constructions that have been subjected to phonetic deconstruction and reconstruction as a consequence of environmental exposure. They are windmills that appear to be giants, pictures of pipes that appear to be real pipes, words that appear to be toponyms.

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