Bread. From Culture to Phraseological Imaginary

Petronela SAVIN*

Key-words: *bread, ethnolinguistic approach, phraseological imaginary*

1. Phraseology is a secondary semiotic system, in which phrasemes are regarded as second-order signs, composed of pre-existent signs (Makkai 1978: 303). Being strictly conventional, the phraseological sign requires an interpretant in order to reveal the significations that may lie behind the images. The phrasemes whose foundation can be ascribed to aspects of material culture of every day life, like food, seem to be more transparent. The food, in the phraseological imaginary, acquires a certain projection corresponding to the signification that man bestows on it, it is a sign generating messages of friendship, love, hatred, contempt. Man, as sender that encodes the message into an adequate context, makes use of a culinary code that is generically known to all the members of the community. We say "generically" because there are numerous phraseological contexts that are expressed by food codes whose "keys" have been forgotten, the explanations having been reduced to formulas such as "this is how it is said". Although the speaker of a certain language assumes the signification of the phraseological sign, it rests to the specialist to trace back the semiotic construction of the semantic unit of the structures under discussion.

In this article, we shall attempt to analyze the way in which representations related to the image of bread, on which the Romanian phraseological structures rely, generate real paradigms of signification depending on the position that food occupies in the culture-nature relationship[1]. The images of the act of feeding bring elements characteristic of the national culture and, respectively, of the human culture at large, within the phraseological structures' process of signification. This process is based, in general, on metaphor or metonymy, the key-elements in the phraseology of all languages (cf. Lakoff, Johnson 1980, Kövecses 1986, Gibbs 1995, Dobrovol'skij, Piirainen 2005).

* The "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, Romania.

Financing of this article was supported in part by the project CNCSIS PD-582/2010 and in part by project POSDRU/89/1.5/S/49944.

[1] The corpus of Romanian phraseological structures that our study is based on has been excerpted from Iuliu Zanne's (1895–1912) monumental collection *Proverbele românilor din România, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria şi Macedonia. Proverbe, zicători, povăţuiri, cuvinte adevărate, asemănări, idiotisme şi cimilituri cu un glosar româno-frances*, vols. I–X, together with both the old and new series of the most important achievement of Romanian lexicography, *Dicţionarul limbii române*. Concerning the phraseological structures taken from Iuliu Zanne's collection, we have generally used the author's explanations who, for his part, has frequently made use of those given by the sources he used (e.g., Iordache Golescu), respectively by the references that communicated them to him. For these reasons, the explanations reflect different styles.

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)

Studies in phraseology have so far mostly concentrated on questions about syntax and semantics. It is only more recently that the cultural foundation of phraseology has been considered as playing an important role, several studies demonstrating that the modern phraseology research is unthinkable without taking cultural knowledge into account (cf. Dobrovol'skij 1998: 55–61). This approach subsumes the ethnolinguistics, the European version of what Anglo-Saxons called linguistic anthropology. In Eugen Coşeriu's terms, this linguistic discipline is aiming at "the study of language variety and variation in close contact with civilization and culture of a community" (Coşeriu 1994: 133) while for A. Duranti "is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice" (Duranti 2001: 8899).

Starting from the correlation language – culture and having language as research object, the "knowledge about things" is indispensable for situating our study within the area of this discipline. Therefore, phraseological structures based on the image of bread will be analyzed in terms of the position that the food act occupies in the popular mind. This will be possible by understanding the phraseological meaning as a two-stage-process: the stage of the literal meaning, which is conventional, lexicalized, accessed automatically (Ariel 2002: 397) and the stage of phraseological meaning, "derived" and "figurative" (Burger 2007: 92). We understand the term "figurative" in the sense that Dobrovol'skij/Piirainen (2005) give to this phrase. A relation is figurative only if it contains an image component. By image component the authors understand "a specific conceptual structure mediating between the lexical structure and the actual [= phraseological] meaning of the figurative units" (p. 14). Just these "traces of literal meaning" which are inherited by the figurative meaning of phrasemes are very important in our ethnolinguistic approach because they incorporate the "knowledge about things", fundamental to investigating phraseology from a cultural perspective.

2. Bread is the most important food made out of wheat flour dough (or rye or barley flour, rarely, under adverse circumstances). According to ALRM II, vol. III, map. 962, the name *pâine* 'bread' (from Lat. *panis*) has been spread all over the Romanian territory, except the area of Transylvania where the term *pită* (from Neo-Gk. *pita*) occurred. The value of this food is also supported by the semantic development of the term, in Moldavia and Muntenia, *pâine albă* (white bread) meaning 'cereals'. In the answers from dialectal investigations, a source from the parish of Şipotele, the county of Iaşi, mentions the fact that the expression "*pâine albă* (white bread) is generally used for wheat, barley, oat and rye" (Hasdeu 1972: 496).

In Romanian's past, wheat bread was rarely used as daily food. Ion Chelcea (2001: 212) argues that the staple food of the people saw a transition from millet flour and millet polenta to corn polenta during the 18th–19th centuries, and from corn flour and corn polenta to wheat flour and bread during the 19th–20th centuries. Gh. Crăiniceanu (1895) pointed out that in the late 19th century the phrase "our daily bread" was only a way of saying for the Romanian peasant whose staple food was polenta, and urged the authorities to try and change the food customs of Romanians by a "statute of the food of field workers" (p. 243).

Under these conditions, bread was particularly used ritualistically, during holidays, weddings, baptisms, funerals.

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)

2.1. One fact that illustrates the sacredness of food on the highest level is that for Christmas or Easter, for funerals or commemorations of the dead, the specially shaped bread and bread rings are given names of divinities (*Christmas*, *God*, *Virgin Mary*, *Archangel* etc.; Văduva 1996: 58). M. Eliade (1981: 40) considers that representing divinities by means of the bread dough (the only food invested with this quality) precedes Christianity and belongs to that common group of paleo-cultivators whose myths explain the occurrence of cereals as starting from a sacrificed primordial being. In Christianity, bread, under its various forms, host, prosphora, Christmas bread, bread rings etc., as well as wine, become, through sanctification, according to the Orthodox Church, the "holy gifts", that is the body and blood of Christ.

Bread personification is also developed by an ancient belief from the county of Bucovina according to which "Bread is a man", that is why, sticking the bread through or leaving the knife stuck into a bread is equivalent to an imaginary murder (Niculiță-Voronca 1998: 59). Arguments related to bread personification can also be found in folk fairy-tales in which the savior hero is bread or, in other cases, wedding bread rings.

In folk beliefs, bread is a sacred thing,

> that is why you are not allowed to throw bread away or to step on the «holy bread» for it is a sin. The gobbets should not be thrown randomly, but should be burned (Ciauşanu 2007: 228).

The sacredness of bread is also illustrated by the practices of choosing the "clean place" with the help of a loaf of bread. One of these is placing a loaf of bread or some dough at the foundation of a house so as "to have abundance in the house". Another practice is represented by the introduction, first of all, of a loaf of bread into a new house. Also, at the start of ploughing, a loaf of bread is placed on the plough, on the bull's horns or on the first furrow and, after wheat reaping, from the first dough a bread ring is made and dipped into a well, and then given to children in the hope that "the wheat will be resultful and clean" (Văduva 1996: 58–59). The housewife, to make sure the trees will bear fruits, says: "Just like the oven and the peel are heavy with bread, so let the trees be heavy with fruits" (Niculăiță-Voronca 1998: 59). The child, after being brought home from christening, was placed on the table with his head on a loaf of bread so that he may be lucky for as long as he lived; and bread or wheat ears never missed from the table of the fate fairies.

The ritualistic value of bread is also illustrated by the belief in the power of bread to masons "To swear the great oath/ By the bread, by the salt/ By the holy icons". Also, blood brotherhoods are sworn by bread and salt (Caraman 1995: 212). Reflexes of these customs can also be found in the ritualistic gesture of welcoming guests with bread and salt, hence the idiom *a ieşi înainte cu pâine şi cu sare* (to welcome with bread and salt; Zanne IV: 58), that, by the symbolic connotations of bread (completed by those of salt), express not only good intentions but also the sealing of the spiritual bonds between the guests and the hosts.

2.2. The phraseologies have kept the positive value of the food

a) Bread – image of good and goodness

Bread is, generally, the symbol of good no matter the circumstances: *Eu umblu cu pâinea după el, şi dânsul dă cu ciomagul în mine* (I follow him with the

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)

bread and he hits me with his club; (Zanne IV: 44), *Îi dai pâne şi el te blestemă* (you give him bread and he curses you; Zanne IV: 45), *Cine îți zvârle o piatră, zvârle-i o pâine* (give some bread to the one who throws a stone at you; Zanne IV: 45); *Baba bătrână nu se teme de pâine moale* (the old hag doesn't fear fresh bread; Zanne IV: 48), *Mai multă pâine mănânci cu miere decât cu oțet* (there's more bread eaten with honey than with vinegar; Zanne IV: 53); *Pâine coaptă/Buni oaspeți aşteaptă* (Baked bread/Waiting for good guests; Zanne IV: 56).

b) Bread – metonymic image for living conditions

Bread appears as an image for the means of living in many phrasemes that relate to:

1) effort: *Pâinea nu vine singură la tine* (bread doesn't come to you by itself), *Nu mănâncă pâinea degeaba* (one doesn't eat bread for nothing), *Fiecare pentru sine/ Croitor de pâine* (Each one for himself/ Kneader of bread; Zanne IV: 49), *Pe cât poate/ Pâinea-şi scoate (As much as he can/ He earns his bread*; Zanne IV: 55);

2) wisdom: *De vrei să mănânci pâine nu-ți bate joc de tărâțe* (if you want to eat bread don't mock at the bran; Zanne IV: 43);

3) ignorance: *a nu şti cum se face pâinea* (one doesn't know how to make his bread; Zanne IV: 61);

4) suffering: *a mânca pâine amară* (to eat bad, bitter bread; Zanne X: 233);

5) selfishness: *a lua* (*cuiva*) *pâinea de la gură* (to take the bread from somebody's mouth) meaning 'to leave somebody without the possibility of making a living' (Zanne IV: 49), *a mânca pâinea şi sarea cuiva* (to eat someone else's bread and salt) 'to be received into somebody's house, to enjoy somebody's benevolence' (Zanne IV: 58),

6) altruism: *a mânca pâine şi sare* (*cu cineva*) (to eat bread and salt with someone) 'to live together' (Zanne IV: 59).

c) Bread – an image for the job, for the social position

Bread is an image for the means that generate the living conditions, the job, the position in the phrasemes *a-şi pierde pâinea* (to lose one's bread) 'to be dismissed, to be fired from a job' (cf. DLR VIII), *a pune* (sau *a băga*) (*pe cineva*) *în pâine* (to put or place somebody in the bread) 'to hire (somebody) for a job' (Zanne IV: 60); *a scoate* (*pe cineva*) *din pâine* (to take somebody out of the bread)'to dismiss, to fire (somebody) from a job' (cf. DLR VIII).

d) Bread – metaphor for action tools

Bread functions as a metaphor for action tools, no matter if they are successfully used or not: *a avea* (sau *a ține, a fi cu) pâinea şi cuțitul* (*în mână*) (to have/to own/to hold the bread and knife) or *a pune mâna pe pâine şi pe cuțit* (to lay one's hand on the bread and the knife) 'to own all the means, all the power', *cu pâine şi cuțitul moare flămând* (bread and knife in hand and still dying of hunger) 'for those who do not know how to make use of what they've got' (Zanne IV: 46–47).

e) Bread – image contributing to the shaping of human characteristics

As an image, bread takes part to the revealing of some general human characteristics, such as:

1) greed and foolhardiness: *Şi un nebun mănâncă nouă pâini, dar e mai nebun cine i le dă* (a fool would eat even nine loaves of bread, but the greater fool is the one who gives them to him; Zanne IV: 43);

2) conceit: *Gândeşte că numai el mănâncă pâine, şi alții paie* (he imagines

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)

that he's the only one eating bread while the others are eating straw; Zanne IV: 51);

3) incapability: *Vai de cel ce are pâine, şi n-are dinţi să o mănânce* (Woe to the one who has bread but no teeth to eat it; Zanne IV: 45);

4) poverty: *Tată, noi n-avem pâine nici o coajă/ Şi câinii umblă cu covrigi în coadă* (Father, we haven't got a crust of bread/ And dogs walk by with bread rings on their tails; Zanne IV: 45);

5) honesty: *Mai bună o bucată de pâine goală în pace decât o mie de dulceţuri cu ceartă* (better just a loaf of bread in peace than a thousand pots of comfitures in quarrel; Zanne IV: 53), *Pâine şi cu sare şi te uiţi la soare* (bread and salt and looking at the sun; Zanne IV: 54);

6) craving for more (wealth): *Caută pâine mai bună decât de grâu* (looking for bread better than the one made of wheat; Zanne IV: 56).

f) Bread – term of comparison

Bread, as a term of comparison, signifies, on the one hand, absolute appreciation: *e bun ca pâinea* (*cea bună, caldă*) (or *pâinea cea de grâu, pâinea lui Dumnezeu*) (as good as bread good, hot bread or wheat bread, God's bread) (Zanne IV: 61–62), *a fi pâine şi caş* (to be bread and cheese; Zanne IV: 63).

3. The reason for which the term *pâine* enjoys such a significant representation in the Romanian phraseology and in the phraseologies of other languages, derives from its signification of "food vital for living". Stelian Dumistrăcel (2001) resumes the discussion upon the value of this image under the sign of the human society's greatest fear ever, that of not starving to death, reminding the fact that Martin Luther regards the text "Give us this day our daily bread" from "Our Father" as a reflex of the biblical memories of the years of famine, a reality experienced by the Europeans of the 16th–17th centuries as a consequence of long wars, calamities and plagues.

Therefore, the phraseological structures related to the image of bread reveal an anti-Christian underlayer, reflecting the mind of a primitive, agricultural population.

Bibliography

a. Literature

Ariel 2002: M. Ariel, *Literal, minimal and salient meanings*, in „Journal of Pragmatics", 34, p. 361–402.

Braudel 1984: F. Braudel, *Structurile cotidianului: posibilul şi imposibilul*, vol. I–II, Bucureşti, Editura Meridiane.

Burger 2007: H. Burger, *Semantic aspects of phrasemes*, in H. Burger, et al. (eds.) *Phraseologie/Phraseology: Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung/An International Handbook of Contemporary Research*, vol. 1, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, p. 90–109.

Butură 1978: V. Butură, *Etnografia poporului român. Cultura materială*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia.

Caraman 1995: P. Caraman, *Studii de folclor*, vol. III., Bucureşti, Editura Minerva.

Chelcea 2001: I. Chelcea, *Etnografie şi sociologie*, Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)

Ciauşanu 2007: Gh. F. Ciauşanu, *Superstiţiile poporului român în asemănare cu ale altor popoare vechi şi noi*, Bucureşti, Editura SAECULUM I. O.
Coşeriu 1994: E. Coşeriu, *Lingvistica din perspectivă spaţială şi antropologică. Trei studii*, Chişinău, Editura Ştiinţa.
Crăiniceanu 1895: Gh. Crăiniceanu, *Igiena ţăranului român. Locuinţa, încălţămintea şi îmbrăcămintea. Alimentaţiunea în diferitele regiuni ale ţării şi în diferite timpuri ale anului*, Bucureşti, Lito-tipografia Carol Göbl.
Dobrovol'skij 1998: D. Dobrovol'skij, *On cultural component in the semantic structure of idioms*, in P. Ďurčo (ed.), *Europhras 97: International Symposium.* September 2–5, 1997, Liptovský Jan. Phraseology and Paremiology, Bratislava, p. 55–61.
Dobrovol'skij, Piirainen: 2005 D. Dobrovol'skij, E. Piirainen, *Figurative Language: Cross-cultural and Cross-linguistic Perspective*, Amsterdam, Elsevier.
Dumistrăcel 2001: Stelian Dumistrăcel, *Până-n pânzele albe. Expresii româneşti*, Iaşi, Editura Institutul European.
Duranti 2001: A. Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, in N.J. Smelser, P.B. Baltes (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Oxford, Elsevier, p. 8899–8906.
Eliade 1981: M. Eliade, *Istoria credinţelor şi ideilor religioase*, vol. I, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică.
Gibbs 1995: R. W., *Gibbs, Idiomaticity and human cognition*, in M. Everaert, et al. (eds.), Idioms: structural and psychological perspectives, Hillsdale (New Jersey), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, p. 97–116.
Hasdeu 1972: B. P. Hasdeu, *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae. Dicţionarul limbei istorice şi poporane a românilor*, I, ediţie îngrijită şi studiu introductiv de Grigore Brâncuş, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva.
Kövecses 1986: Z. Kövecses, *Metaphors of anger, pride and love. A Lexical approach to the structure of concepts*, Amsterdam – Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company.
Lakoff, Johnson 1980: G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
Makkai 1978: A. Makkai, *Idiomaticity as language universal*, in J. H Greenberg (ed.), *Universals of human language*, vol. 3, *Word structure*, Standford, Standford University Press, p. 401–448.
Niculiţă-Voronca 1998: E Niculiţă-Voronca, *Datinile şi credinţele poporului român adunate şi aşezate în ordine mitologică*, vol. I, Iaşi, Editura Polirom.
Văduva 1996: Ofelia Văduva, *Paşi spre sacru. Din etnologia alimentaţiei româneşti*, Bucureşti, Editura Enciclopedică.

b. Dictionaries

DA = [Academia Română], *Dicţionarul limbii române*, I/II, Litera C, Bucureşti, 1940; I/III, fascicula I, D–de, Bucureşti, 1949.
DLR = [Academia Română], *Dicţionarul limbii române* (serie nouă), Bucureşti, Editura Academiei Române, t. VI, Litera M, 1965–1968 ; VIII/1–5, Litera P, 1972–1984 ; IX, Litera R, 1975 ; X/1–5, Litera S, 1986–1994.
DU = Lazăr Şăineanu, *Dicţionarul universal al limbii române*, Craiova, Editura Scrisul Românesc, 1943.
Zanne 1895–1912: Iuliu Zanne, *Proverbele românilor din România, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria şi Macedonia. Proverbe, zicători, povăţuiri, cuvinte adevărate, asemănări, idiotisme şi cimilituri cu un glosar româno-frances*, vol. I–X, Bucureşti, Editura Librăriei Socecu & Comp.

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)

Abstract

This paper represents an investigation from a cultural perspective of the Romanian phrasemes related to the image of bread. Many recent studies on phraseology argue that it can be an adequate description of the phraseological structures and the way they function in a language without regard to culture, since, in many cases, culturally based concepts govern the inference from literal to figurative. In this article, we intended to show the specific methods of the Romanian bread phrasemes to sensitise a representation or an attitude, as well as to identify the effects of the communication of primary mental forms, as related to regional and general patterns. This approach subsumes ethnolinguistics, providing an answer to Eugeniu Coșeriu's (1996) challenge regarding the study of language from the perspective of culture's universality and having in mind the various demands of linguistic research which, as compared to other subjects, entails the most numerous connections with man's way of being and with all the human activities in general.

BDD-A1084 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:06 UTC)