# The Creative Manipulation of Fixed Word Combinations in Romanian Media Discourse

**Ramona-Olga POHOATA**
University of Suceava

**Résumé:** Actuellement, on observe un phénomène intéressant qui se manifeste fréquemment dans la presse satirique roumaine: la manipulation créative des constructions fixes. Les journalistes recourent à ce qui semble être une série de vieux techniques de la rhétorique dans le but de *captatio bene-volentiae*, pour séduire le lecteur dans le choix d'une publication au détriment d'une autre.

Notre étude va analyser les différents types de manipulation créative dans un corpus de constructions fixes de deux publications périodiques satiriques: une publication locale, *Jupânu'*, et une publication nationale, *Academia Cata-vencu.*

**Mots-clés:** manipulation créative, constructions fixes, phraséologie, mass-média.

## 1. Types of creative manipulation of fixed word combinations

In the Romanian mass-media a phenomenon with an increasing frequency can be observed as it manifests the tendency to extend from the field of satirical press to more prestigious publications: the manipulation of fixed structures with the purpose of *captatio benevolentiae*. On the one hand, the motivation of this phenomenon could be purely economic, as nowadays written press competes against powerful sources of information, even more powerful than the classic radio and television – the internet



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is not only cheaper, but also faster, richer and more attractive. On the other hand, it is possible that the Romanian satirical journalists had found a form of expression that satisfies both the hidden intentions of their message and aesthetical needs, though the same affinity for transforming traditional structures is found in other European languages as well.

The alterations these constructions are submitted to can be identified with the rhetorical *figures* that Marcus Fabius Quintilianus defined in Antiquity.

For the Roman rhetorician Quintilianus, *the figures* (of words), as well as the tropes, provide strength and charm to the ideas[1] and consist of deviations from the simple, direct way of expressing the message, with the purpose of embellishing one's style. *Figures* are attractive due to the surprise they involve, for they are never conventional. There are four types of such alterations that form a *quadripartita ratio*: *detractio* (reduction), *adiectio* (addition), *immutatio* (substitution) and *transmutatio* (permutation). They require a certain linguistic competence of both the creator and the receiver – in our case, the reader. The latter has to be able to recognize the original form and to identify the modifications so as to understand the intention of the communication, its new meaning.

The Spanish linguist Gloria Corpas Pastor[2], analyzing the same phenomenon, notices that, in numerous cases, a fixed word combination shows more than one type of internal manipulation, which is the kind of change that affects either the inventory of components or the syntactic relations between them and has consequences at semantic level. Therefore, she identifies six such alterations, as follows:

**1.1. Addition.** Just as Quintilianus' *adiectio*, the addition refers to adding elements to the construction, in whatever posi-

[1] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, I, *apud* Stelian Dumistracel, *Limbajul publicistic românesc din perspectiva stilurilor functionale*, Institutul European, Iasi, 2006, p.128.

[2] Gloria Corpas Pastor, *Manual de fraseología española*, Gredos, Madrid, 1996, p. 235 *et seq.*



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tion, therefore maintaining all its components. It is for this reason that the addition does not require great coding and decoding effort from the sender and the receiver, respectively. In most cases, the added element is a lexeme or a group of lexemes; however, there are situations when a phoneme is attached to a lexeme, and this leads to the construction of a new word. The operation can be considered a case of substitution of the old part with a new one, based on formal compatibility.

**1.2. Reduction.** Synonym of *detractio*, it consists of eliminating one or more components of the fixed word construction, so that it allows the initial construction to be easily restored. Consequently, one can only remove the elements whose absence does not represent an obstacle in the restoration. Moreover, in the case of a linguistically incompetent receiver, there is a risk of losing the control over the meaning. It is for this reason that, of all the types of fixed structures, the proverbs – that belong to the extended oral culture – are the ones most submitted to this creative manipulation technique, due to their binary structure that facilitates the reconstruction of the whole based on the part.

There are also cases of reduction at the level of a lexeme that can be interpreted as substitution, as, by removing part of a word, a new word is formed.

**1.3. Substitution.** The correspondent of Quintilianus' *immutatio*, the substitution refers to replacing one or more elements of the fixed combination. It is the most frequent alteration type in the today's media discourse, mainly due to the transparency of the process itself, but another aspect must be taken into account: altering a unit by means of swapping one of its components with another element reflects the intention to manipulate more than any of the other figures of alteration. The interpretation of the result is often guided, rather aggressively, toward accepting the sender's point of view. This is why we can also identify cases of substitution within fixed structures in advertising.



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**1.4. Grammatical changes.** These are occasional morphological modifications of certain elements of a fixed construction, or changes in the syntactic relations between them. Most of these changes are cases of derivation with suffixes or conversion, which also trigger transformations at the syntactic level.

**1.5. Combinations.** A rather considerable part of the creative manipulations are a result of more than one procedure, therefore it is common to identify hybrid alterations by means of addition and reduction or addition and substitution, for example. These changes require greater effort from both participants in the communication process.

**1.6. Fusion.** The fusion is a special type of creative manipulation as it consists of reducing some fixed constructions and uniting them into one, based on a common element. To some extent it represents a situation of double addition made possible by previously operating a double reduction – if only two phrases are used; less frequently, even more than two are used.

Gloria Corpas Pastor leaves out a pattern to which Quintilian refers as *transmutation* and which we will name **permutation**, which is a switch of place between the members of a fixed word combination, often a bi-member one. The permutation is extremely rare because, besides requiring creativity and linguistic competence, it also requires a certain symmetry of the structure that allows an exchange between the components. If these components belong to different morphological classes, the process is almost impossible in Romanian, as it does not permit conversions the way English does, for example.

## 2. Fixed word combinations – theoretical aspects

The speakers build their discourse freely, by operating a selection, based on the norm, from a great number of variants which they combine. However, their message can also include – willingly or not – a number of pre-existent fixed structures. During all their existence, they assimilate such constructions that,



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due to their intensive use, acquire stability and have the same behaviour as a lexeme in the selection process from a vast paradigm.

Eugenio Coseriu considers that a creating a concrete discourse is similar to the process of creating a painting. Besides revealing original elements of the artist's own technique, the painting can include fragments of other works, belonging to other painters[3]. The Romanian linguist defines the "repeated discourse" as opposed to "the free technique of discourse" – which consists of the elements of language and the rules that govern their modification and combination. Therefore, the re-peated discourse is everything that is repeated in the speech of a community as a relatively fixed word combination[4]: literary quotes, proverbs, phrases, comparison formulas, periphrasis, *wel-lerisms*[5], proper nouns, slogans, etc.

However, as far as fixed constructions are concerned, a definitive definition and classification is still to be discovered. Gloria Corpas Pastor identifies a series of conditions that a group of words has to respect in order to be considered a fixed combination[6].

The first criterion is *frequency*. Not any fragment of a literary text can be considered a fixed structure. It must be frequently used within a community so as to become recognizable and to continue to be reproduced. This condition also refers to the frequency of the co-occurrence of its components. A combination is fixed when, due to its repeated use, it becomes part of the collective consciousness, in other words it institutionalizes. The institutionalization provides these units with relative stability.

[3] Eugeniu Coseriu, *Lectii de lingvistica generala*, Editura ARC, Bucuresti, 2000, pp. 258-259.

[4] *Idem*.

[5] *Wellerisms* are expressions introduced by formulas such as: "it. *come diceva quello che, come disse colui che,* es. *como deda (dijo) aquel que* etc." (*ibidem*, p. 261). They are named after Dickens' character of *Pickwick Papers*, Sam Weller, who uses them very often.

[6] Gloria Corpas Pastor, *op. cit.*, p. 20 *et seq.*



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Some constructions reach such a high degree of semantic specialization that their meaning can no longer be deduced from the isolated meanings of their elements – they become idiomatic, while others are idiomatic only to a limited extent. It is *idiomaticity* that makes these constructions difficult to translate, even though there are some cases when their form coincides in two or more idioms: ro. *a-si face sînge rau* / sp. *hacerse mala sangre* / fr. *se faire du mauvais sang.*

According to the level where the fixation takes place (system, norm or speech) and to the extent they respect the above mentioned conditions, Gloria Corpas Pastor proposes the following taxonomy of the fixed constructions[7]:

a. ***Collocations***[8] – relatively stable units that are fixed at the level of the *norm* based on semantic compatibilities. Some combinations are possible, for example the Romanian *vise placute, imagini de cosmar, aplauze furtunoase*, etc., while others are not: *aplauze vii/puternice/intense*. The collocations have a variable degree of idiomaticity; sometimes they allow commutations: *om de baza ~ om de nadejde*, and sometimes not: *Fat Frumos*, but not *Fat Atragator/Simpatic/Chipes*;

b. ***Idioms*** – combinations fixed at the level of the *system* that have semantic cohesion as a main feature – their meaning is not the sum of the meanings of its components – as well as being equivalent to a lexeme (eg. *dus cu pluta, a spune verzi si uscate, a o lua pe cocoasa,* etc.);

c. ***Phraseological statements*** – complete statements fixed at the level of *speech*, that are characterized by both internal and external fixation. There are two categories of such word combinations: *paremias* < Latin *paroemia*, from Ancient Greek

[7] *Idem*, p. 52 *et seq*.

[8] For the English translation of the terms used by Gloria Corpas Pastor, *op. cit.*, *colocaciones*, *locuciones* and *enunciados fraseológicos*, see Ana María Rojo López, *Step by step. A course in contrastive linguistics and translation,* Peter Lang, Bern, 2009, p.137.



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pa???µ?a (proverbs, aphorisms, maxims, quotes, slogans) and *routine formulas* (clichés, stereotypes that depend on the communication context, such as: *buna ziua, noapte buna, foarte bine, din punctul meu de vedere, încîntat de cunostinta*).

### 3. Fixed word combination creatively manipulated in *Academia Catavencu* and *Jupânu'*

The two publications that represent the corpus of our study, "*Academia Catavencu*" (AC) and "*Jupânu'*" (J), are weekly newspapers, therefore their resorting to *captatio benevolentiae* techniques is also due to the fact that they contain information that, at the moment of reading, is no longer fresh. The lack of novelty of the content is compensated by the satirical point of view, so that the articles do not aim at informing the public, but at expressing opinions and attitudes, creating opinions and attitudes of the receiver.

We will observe now how each of the three categories of fixed word combinations is creatively manipulated in the two Romanian publications, focusing on the original form, the modified one, the process and its results.

#### 3.1. Manipulated collocations

*Obscena politica* (J, permanent column) *? Scena politica* **(addition / substitution).**

The original construction refers to politics in its totality: people, decisions and actions seen as a dynamic play. Based on homophony and formal resemblance, one of the elements is replaced by another word. The process can also be described as the addition of phonemes which triggers lexical change. It is this new lexeme that satirically comes to suggest discontent towards the Romanian political life.

*Intestinul subtire cu cheltuiala se tine* (AC, January 3rd 2011) *? Intestinul subtire + Obrazul subtire cu cheltuiala se tine* **(fusion).**



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In this case, the second element means that financial sacrifice must be made in order to achieve our goals in terms of beauty. This phraseological statement has a common word with the collocation, therefore a fusion between the two was possible by eliminating an element of the former and replacing it with the latter. The result keeps the sememe + *financial effort*, but now refers to the health of the digestive system, endangered during Christmas, when Romanians eat unhealthy, fat food.

*Spitalul de trei stele verzi* (J, Nº 382) *?* *Hotel de trei stele* + *A vedea stele verzi* **(combination = substitution + fusion).**

The traditional constructions refer to a hierarchy in the hotel industry and, respectively, to a state of disorientation caused by a strong blow. By substituting an element of the first, eliminating one of the second and combining the two on account of a common lexeme, the meaning is diverted from the idea of "hotel" towards a negative opinion regarding the state of the Romanian health system. A chaotic and inefficient one, in spite of the great amounts of money invested in it.

*Atlas de hazoologie* (J, permanent column) *?* *Atlas de zoologie* **(addition).**

The canonical collocation used in a publication such as *Jupânu'* that often criticizes politicians using strong words implies, from the beginning, disapproval as political subjects are tackled under a title that alludes to animals. The addition of a new lexeme and its fusion with an element of the fixed structure result into an innovation, as "hazoologie" is not a Romanian word. The suggestion of laughter fits perfectly, as the content of the section consists of funny political situations.

*Fabrici si duzine* (J, Nº 380) *?* *Fabrici si uzine* **(addition / substitution)**.

This collocation is reminiscent of the communist period when Romania was mainly an industrial country. Adding a phoneme to one of its elements with the effect or replacing the element with another lexeme provides the result with a negative



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connotation. The article is an ironic comment about the unrealistic campaign promises of a local politician to rebuild the industrial area of Suceava.

*Furtuna dinaintea linistii* (J, Nº 388) *?* *Linistea dinaintea furtunii* **(permutation).**

This is a rare case of alteration, as fixed word combinations can rarely be submitted to permutation. This was possible due to the symmetrical structure of the collocation, both elements being nouns.

### 3.2. Manipulated idioms

*Condusi cu vorba* (AC, November 3rd 2010) *?* *A duce cu vorba* pe cineva **(combination = grammatical change + addition / substitution).**

Idiom that refers to unfounded and repeated promises and that is creatively manipulated by means of a combined technique. First, a grammatical change is operated, converting an infinitive into a participle, and then an addition is made, acting as a substitution. The new meaning is that of leading the community not with actions and solutions to its problems, but with empty words.

*Suspendarea din lac în put* (AC, September 29th 2010) *?* *A da din lac în put* **(combination = grammatical change + substitution).**

The meaning of this idiom, namely escaping a difficult situation only to enter one that is even worse, is preserved after altering it. A grammatical change – converting a verb into a noun – and a substitution were operated to suggest that the proposal a Romanian politician made to suspend the president was a mistake.

*Cu* ***auto****Buzele umflate* (J, Nº 382) *?* *A lasa pe cineva cu buza umflata* **(combination = reduction+addition/substitution).**

Idiom with the meaning of disappointing someone; it is manipulated by eliminating the verb and operating a substitution based on homophony and homography. The meaning that results



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is still of disappointment, but the form also hides the reason: the local authorities have stopped any type of subvention for public transport.

### 3.3. Manipulated phraseological statements

*La îmbracaminte, înainte* (J, N$^{o}$ 387) *? La placinte, înainte, la razboi, înapoi* **(combination = reduction + substitution).**

Proverb that condemns one who only acts in his own benefit and, at the same time, is coward. Starting from a binary structure, the second part is eliminated, leaving an asymmetrical structure. Then, a lexical element was replaced by another, based on formal affinities. The result is reminiscent of the initial aspect, as it also rhymes, and it ironically refers to a consumerist society that buys unnecessary goods.

*Aho, aho, copii si frati, stati putin, nu va drogati!* (AC, December 23$^{rd}$ 2010) *? Aho, aho, copii si frati, stati putin si nu mînati!* **(substitution).**

The new message of the manipulated phraseological statement is rather transparent, especially as it takes the form of an imperative. Moreover, this imperative that replaces an element of the original construction is placed after interjections, vocatives and another imperative so as to achieve its purpose of persuading the reader not to consume drugs. In cases like this, rhyme plays an important part. It is essential that the replacing element rhymes with the rest of the structure, as the old one did.

*Tîntara arde si Ciuhandu piaptana bugetul Timisoarei* (AC, September 7$^{th}$ 2010) *? Tara arde si baba se piaptana* **(combination = addition/substitution + substitution).**

The proverb refers to crisis situations when, instead of searching for solutions to solve the problem, people engage in meaningless activities. By adding phonemes to an element, a mutant word is obtained, the meaning of which becomes transparent only after reading the article. This is also the case of the proper nouns that substitute other components of the statement.



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The processes do not alter the meaning, but only complete it with particular data.

*O scrisoare gasita* (J, permanent column) *? O scrisoare pierduta* **(substitution).**

The title of the play *O scrisoare pierduta*, by I. L. Caragiale, is manipulated by replacing an element with its own antonym in order to give the journalist a pretext, a frame in which to write. He conceives his articles in the form of found letters. The cases of cult phraseological statements are very frequent and various: famous quotes, titles, names of authors, etc.

*Reteta sanatoasa în saptamînal sanatos* (J, permanent column) *? Minte sanatoasa în corp sanatos* **(substitution).**

The famous Latin quotation *Mens sana in corpore sano* is highly prolific. In this case, substitutions have been operated in both segments of the binary structure so as to inform the reader about the content of the column: health tips, healthy recipes, etc.

### 3.4. Canonical fixed word combinations

Some fixed constructions are used without any previous transformation, because they serve the purpose of the communication without the author's intervention. These cases are rare, although not as rare as permutations, and belong to the category of phraseological statements.

For instance, *Daca doriti sa revedeti* (J), title of a column that includes information on events throughout the week, can convey the message: „What you are about to read is information you already know. Here you can see it again".

Other such examples are: *New York, New York* (J, 381), *Misiune imposibila* (J, 387), *Drumurile noastre toate* (J, 387), and *Unora le place Jazz-ul* (J, 381).

## 4. Conclusions

The various types of fixed constructions lend themselves differently to creative manipulations, according to their charac-



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teristics. Also, alterations happen to different degrees, given that some of them require a higher level of effort and superior linguistic competence.

Hence, *collocations*, as they consist of a small number of elements, will never undergo the process of reduction. The fragment resulting from it is insufficient for reconstructing the original structure and updating its meaning, both of which being important aspects in decoding the senders' intention.

The addition process however allows recognizing the canonical form and retrieving the meaning, which is why it is also used in modifying collocations, but with a relatively low frequency. Just as infrequent are the substitution cases, in which case, in order for the mother-structure to be identified, either the substituted element must be similar to the one it is replacing, or the other components must ensure a minimal context that would hint at the original form.

Even though the formal structure of collocations allows grammatical changes, in the analyzed corpus we have not found examples of this type of creative manipulation.

Combinations appear in very few cases, because, out of the six possible transformations, collocations can only be submitted to two of them. Fusions however are frequent, both between two or more collocations and between a collocation and a phraseologic statement or an idiom.

The situations of collocations restructured through permutation are very few in the analyzed corpus, but we consider that this figure could be less productive, because in spite of the term permutation allowing the recognition of the collocation, it still requires a superior creative effort.

As far as idioms are concerned, reduction is an unproductive figure, considering both that the text resulting from the operation is insufficient for reconstructing them and that their meaning is not the sum of the components' meanings.

The addition and the substitution do not pose such problems. By adding or substituting an element, the phrases are still recognizable, and the meaning of the original construction contributes to



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outlining the meaning of the manipulated structure. These two figures are however rarely found in the case of this type of fixed constructions.

The grammatical change as well proves to be a prolific alteration, as idioms are easily transformable by derivation or conversion and, as they can be submitted to most of the patterns of creative manipulation – except for reduction –, there are many cases of combination.

We have also encountered situations of fusion, mostly with collocations, based on a common lexeme.

However, in the studied corpus we have not found phrases restructured through permutation, and the explanation could be that creating wordplay with a small inventory of components is difficult. Moreover, inside the structure of a phrase there are established syntactical rapports which cannot change easily.

Statistically, modified phraseologic statements are the most numerous, regardless of the figure of alteration. The superior number of elements permits the identification the construction, even after suppressing, adding, substituting or permuting some of them.

There are also, however isolated, fixed word combinations which are used in the canonical form in the media discourse. They cover, in those particular cases, the meaning intended by the journalist, without him or her having to intervene in the structure.

Creative manipulation of fixed structures in the press surprises and captivates the interest of the reader that is able to reconstruct them, and plays an important role in fulfilling the phatic function. In the Romanian media, the phenomenon is an intense one, and it reaches all kinds of publications, including the most elitist ones, as the effort of reconstitution is, at the same time, a challenge and an opportunity for fun and intellectual satisfaction.

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**Corpus**

J: *Jupânu'*, www.jupanu.ro.
AC: *Academia Catavencu*, www.catavencu.ro.



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