INFORMATION DENSITY IN CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

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Abstract

The language of classified advertising resorts to a minimal syntactic elaboration, even a "syntaxless" and paratactic grammar. Lacking the benefits of literary grammar redundancy, this grammar tends to be more obscure though sufficiently elaborated to attain to its basic communicative purposes under spatial restraints. The degree of syntactic elaboration at prepositional level is examined within the theoretical framework of the typology of economy registers, demonstrating whether constraints of space enforce similar strategies of reduction according to the purpose and content of classifieds (apartment rentals, cars, personals). The origin (central vs local newspaper) and language (English vs Romanian) variables are also taken into account.

1. INTRODUCTION

To a casual viewer, an exposure to classifieds columns will bring topical insight into the local social realities. In Romania, if commercial print and TV advertising have a relatively short history, classifieds, though less abundant and inciting in the past, used to be the single type of press advertising to survive before the revolution due to its less sophisticated and more factual content (except for personals which, more recondite in character, were almost completely missing from newspaper columns).

Being less fanciful, less commercially elaborated and usually imageless, classifieds lack the appeal of TV commercials or print advertisements, as they rely solely on the persuasive powers of the written word and therefore recourse to the informative language function. Adding to these the language truncation induced by costly items, persuasion task is made more difficult.

Unlike radio/TV commercials or text advertisements, which viciously "bug" other texts, are unwanted, and parasitic on other discourses, classifieds are purposefully read, the reader being already motivated to seek and pay attention, to find relevance and recover meaning, despite poor linguistic evidence. Obvious consequences of this character are:

-classifieds do not conform to standards of print advertising;

- are information-providing rather than persuasive.

Conceived by non-specialists, they are not professionally elaborated and do not attract attention through the linguistic form in a way in which other print advertisements do. They could, nonetheless, offer insights into how common people – consumers of other types of commercial advertising – conceive and receive linguistic creativity, persuasiveness, pragmatic aspects such as politeness, and not in the least define the essence of language economy.

1.1. Hypothesis. The purpose and content of classifieds enforce different reduction strategies under roughly similar space constraints. There is a greater degree of elaboration to the standards of literary grammar in the Romanian classified advertising, due to its being less tightly constrained by costly editorial space, although Romanian in general resorts less to function words to express syntactic relations than English. Whenever costly items come into play, roughly similar strategies of reduction and integration are employed in both the Romanian and English corpuses. For this purpose, the degree of syntactic elaboration at prepositional level is examined within the theoretical framework of the typology of economy registers

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1.2. Corpuses. A number of 500 personal and real estate classifieds were selected from Romanian (Flash, Adevarul, Romania libera) and English newspapers (Loss Angeles Recycler) and divided into the following corpuses according to language (Romanian/English), and central versus local newspaper:

Personals
MATRIM-R – Romanian corpus of 110 personals extracted from the local Flash (**Matrim**oniale)
PERS-E - English **pers**onals corpus of 100 classifieds extracted from the Los Angeles Recycler electronic version
Real Estate
ADEV - Real Estate corpus of 100 classified ads from central Romanian newspapers **Adev**arul and Romania Libera
IR - 100 Romanian real estate classifieds from the local newspaper Flash (**I**nchirieri – **R**omanian)
AE – 100 English real estate classifieds (**A**partments **E**nglish) extracted from the Los Angeles Recycler, electronic version.

II. DEFINING THE TERMS

2.1.Complexity versus Simplicity

Language complexity has been differently defined. For parsing and natural language processing, text simplification (Siddharthan, 2002) implies dis-embedded clauses, separated conjoined clauses, making new sentences out of appositives, i.e. rewriting sentences by reducing their syntactic or lexical complexity. Text simplification is used for people with language disabilities (aphasia - have trouble with long sentences, embedded clauses and passives), for teaching English to adults and for users of limited channel devices (mobile phones, small screens, etc.).

In psycholinguistic research (Lowrey, 1998:187) **complexity is defined as left branching** ("Because it's high in fiber, X is a healthy choice for breakfast" versus right branching "Brand X is a healthy choice for breakfast because it's high in fiber"), negations, and passive constructions. All these are harder to read as they require more regressive fixations and are less easily recalled than sentences with simple syntax. This is essential in advertising, since a better comprehension and memory will lead to increased persuasion levels (Lowrey, 1998:187**).**

Linguistic studies (Schleppegrell, 1992:117) consider that **subordination is a measure of language complexity**, a more mature and difficult form of language expression than simple parallel statements.

Different labels were used to define simple registers, such as "little" (Halliday, 1994:372), "compressed" (Sinclair: 130)[1] or "**economy**" (Bruthiaux, 1994) and include: motherese, note-taking, pidgin, sports commentaries, which under spatial and/or temporal constraints excise redundant or less important information.

Previous linguistic research has revealed that complexities of language use tend to be limited in order to meet the ability of interlocutors who are foreigners, infants, ESL learners (didactic texts - which, though grammatical, are manipulated for greater accessibility). In students' note-taking economy of effort and time restraint are also responsible for reduction strategies. Classified advertising as a type of economy register was defined and comprehensively analyzed by Bruthiaux (1996).

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It is not limited linguistic competence but the spatial girdle that constrains classifieds writers, determining them to resort to a narrow range of core linguistic strategies, to discard dispensable items or replace them by more integrated, syntactically elaborated and economic alternatives.

2.2. Form and content words

The distinction "**full words" / "content words**" is threefold. Semantically, words like "apartment", "large", "renting" are autosemantic, i.e. they have some meaning even when appearing in isolation, whereas "the", "on" "if", are synsemantic (grammatical elements contributing to the phrase meaning), i.e. are meaningful only when occurring in the company of other words.

On phonologic grounds, initial cluster "th-"is voiced in form words: "the", "there", "this", "they" (exception: "through") and voiceless in content words: "thanks", "thief", etc

Grammatically, form words play roles similar to those of inflections, being in some cases interchangeable with them (e.g. the synthetic and analytical genitive). Standing for what declensions and verb endings stood for in Latin, form words were termed "inflection by prefix", with a higher ascertained independence than inflections (Ullman, 1972:43). This distinctive character of form words being more akin to inflections is relevant to our study, since in classifieds as well as in headlines and other forms of abbreviated language (note taking, sports commentaries, etc.) form words are systematically omitted.

Situations outside language or relevance of the preceding context are responsible for what Leech and Svartvik (1993:116) term "**information omission**". Omissions of form words with low information value or information that can be safely retrieved from context, occur in the abbreviated grammar of informal speech such as initially placed operators: auxiliaries, subject, pronouns. Likewise, although lacking the structure of a "complete sentence", the following are acceptable in communication:

- *sports commentaries*: "Lucescu către Iordănescu, pasă excelentă... Scorul neschimbat 2 la 1 în favoarea Stelei. Mingea la marginea careului de 6 metri,...."
- *Slogans*: „Always Coca Cola"
- *Formulaic utterances*: „Good!" „You and your stupid accidents!"
- *Casual speech*: „Sorry for troubling you..." (Will you have)"A cup of tea?"

Since in the case of classifieds the linguistic context is hardly responsible for information omission, it is opportune to believe that conventions about interpretation are too strong and the omitted items carry too low an informational load to preclude unequivocal interpretations. In MATRIM-R, however, and to a lesser extent in IR where there is a much looser spatial constraint (no costly items have to be omitted since advertisements are free of charge in *Flash*; however, they have to fit into a pre-established box), the degree of syntactic elaboration is far less minimal and identification of missing features is facile. These features set MATRIM-R in utter contrast with the ADEV, AE, including PERS-E, where the process of identification may occasionally be dangerous.

III. METHOD

The theoretical framework for this study is represented by Ferguson's (1982) typology of simple registers and considers the occurrence and distribution the syntactic variables of function words (prepositions).

Since we hypothesized that spatial constraint impacts upon the linguistic content, classifieds advertisements were selected according to length calculated as lines/ad. Generally, length of personals ranges among three to eleven lines in the Romanian corpus MATRIM-R. Excessive length of 8 to 11 lines counted for the exclusion of 25.6% of the ads in the subgroup

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MSE (males seeking females) with a remaining of 82 ads and 7 of the FSM subgroup (females seeking males) finally comprising 28 ads.

Mean ad length was measured as number of words per ad in the whole corpus of classifieds:

	Total no of words	Average
APARTMENTS		
Real Estate (**A-E**) (English)	2017/ 96 ads	21.01
Inchirieri locuinte (**I-R**) (Romanian)	2391/100 ads	23.91
PERSONALS		
PERS-E (English)		19
MATRIM-R (Romanian)		39.6

Table 5:1. Average ad-length measured as number of words/ad

Variation in mean length according to ad category is expected since fewer, more factual statements usually suffice in characterizing an apartment to be rented than in finding a potential partner. Additionally, there is little variation in ad length between the Romanian and English corpuses in the apartments section (21.01 versus 23.91 average words per ad) but significantly higher, more than double words/ad in MATRIM-R versus the English corpus PERS-E (39.6 – 19). One factor responsible for excessively short English personals is the frequent use of abbreviations. While SWF (single white female) or SBM (single black male) counted as one word (instead of three) in the Romanian MATRIM-R, where, except for the standard expression of age/height/weight: 32/187/75, no abbreviations were exhibited.

IV. INFORMATION DENSITY

4.1.Prepositions

Prepositions are defined as relational parts of speech, devoid of lexical meaning, whose syntactic function is to mark intrasentential subordination. In Romanian, prepositions are also case markers of accompanying nominal elements and morphemes of the infinitive or the "supin". Although lacking semantic load, prepositions are able to actualize specific significations of the (basically) nominal elements they form a syntagm with such as: place (destination, relative position, movement), time (duration), cause, purpose, concession, agent, etc.

In the sentence: "He *stays* **at**
behind
in front of } *the door,*
on the left of

there is a semantic transfer from the preposition towards the right element.

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Diagnostic context for a preposition is a right subordinated component and a regent left element – the latter representing a weaker and predictable relation in the case of a missing left term: "la cules", "de dragoste", "about productivity". Therefore, a preposition can be correctly read into an empty slot: "table (of) 45/50, (at) 100 $" "man (of) 30; (between) 25-40". The significantly large amount of such predictable relations will render certain prepositions easily disposable in a spatially constrained context, with the purpose of achieving maximum density of information.

Some prepositions can be more essential for the extraction of the ideational meaning (such as location or direction) whereas others are employed for attainment of interpersonal meanings. Comparative statistics show that in fully elaborated texts, prepositions have a high frequency of occurrence (in Romanian about 14% of text-words) especially in analytical languages.

Top frequencies advanced by AE prepositions (/1000 words) were:

- NEAR - expressing location, either in its abbreviated form: "*nr* (the) beach", or not: "*near* all", with 13 occurrences, is employed only as adjunct;
- TO – as "destination" relations: "minutes *to* all freeways", "walk *to* restaurants" (11 counts)
- IN (6 tokens) expressing area dimension 2/3 (Quirk, 1972:308) as in: "lndry *in* apt", "laundry *in* bldg"
- FOR – (5 tokens) beneficiary NG: "We have a house *for* you"
  - complementation of an adjective: "charming hillside, guest house, (in) quiet and serene neighbourhood, ideal *for* one person"
- OF (3 tokens) introduces prepositional phrases chiefly as postmodifiers of NG as in "beautiful view *of* mts", "lots *of* closet space"

Placement of apartments being an essential unique selling proposition, the first three types of prepositions above expressing spatial relations are less likely disposed with.

Appropriate top candidate for exclusion and responsible for increased informational density of apartment rentals is the relationship of "having" expressed by the preposition WITH in free variation with a relative clause or a present participle. There is at least one "with"-empty slot per advertisement in this corpus:

"Long Beach loft (with) 1Bd/2ba, beautiful, near beach…."

"Studio City Apt, dog OK, (with) A/C, lrg clsts, lndry, (in) quiet (area), (with) prkng…"

More abstract uses of the same easily retrievable preposition are however present in a readiness to sacrifice brevity in favor of a more extended version:

"Mt. Washington cute 2 bdrm 1 ba in quaint duplex *with* personality, yard/garden, laundry, storage, parking, outdoor fireplace"

The Romanian corpuses ADEV and IR also exhibit the most **category-motivated prepositions** (location, purpose, etc.):

- ÎN (59/1000 words) – "dau *în* chirie";
- CU (36): „apartament *cu*... camere...în....";
- PE (25): „închiriez apartament, ( ) str. Tuşnad" versus „*pe* B-dul.....";
- DE (25): „în bloc *de* apartamente", „contoare *de* apă";
- PENTRU (~ "for") in "*pentru* birouri/firma" with substituting prepositionless idiomatic phrases "pretabil (pentru) firmă";

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In ADEV ÎN/LA expressing location and CU – „having" – are dispreferred in favor of more densely packed information based on omissions, as in the case below:

„(În) Calea Victoriei, (la) Universitate, etajul 2, nemobilat, (cu) 2 grupuri sanitare..."

„(Ofer spre închiriere) (în) Cişmigiu (pe) Brezoianu, (apartament) decomandat, semimobilat, amenajat, (cu) bucătărie utilată, (având/care are/cu o suprafaţă de) 60 mp şi (spaţiu de) parcare".

ADEV is **one of the most dense texts of classified advertisements** with a preponderence of only 2.3% of prepositions per 1000 text words as compared to the 14 percentage reported in Romanian literary texts.

IR, characterized by moderate spatial constraint (and the lack of printing charge), influences text elaboration to the standards of literary grammar as far as prepositions are concerned:

„Primesc în chirie familie fără copii, de naţionalitate maghiară, la casă particulară, (situată) ultracentral."

„Dau în chirie cu posibilitate de cumpărare pe parcurs, casă cu curte, grădină mare, **în** comuna....", which does not exclude more laconic messages to coexist under similar constraints: „Închiriez garsonieră () cart Tudor, () avans pe 6 luni".

Statistical analysis of this group has to consider as irrelevant the top frequency preposition ÎN as part of the verb phrase appearing ad-initially in „dau în chirie" (instead of the simple VP „închiriez", ambiguous in Romanian between „dau în chirie" and „caut chirie") and contributes to the high preposition counts in IR.

The most frequent function of prepositions in this subgroup is that of NG modifier:

„apartament *cu*..... camere (care este) situat în str..."

Prepositions are means of linguistic economy in themselves, being able to bypass relative and indefinite clauses, although at variance with explicitness. The use of prepositions in NG multiple modification represents successive layers of embedding, sometimes to the third or fourth degree, which, combined with adjectival pre-modification, is a caracteristic of consumer advertising in general:

„Apartament deosebit, cu posibilitate de cumpărare pe parcurs..."

Highest preposition counts represent the most striking characterisitc of Romanian real estate classifieds resulting from the safe elimination of a left element with which the preposition is in a weaker relation: „(situat) în Aleea..." - This device is used in headlines and titles („la cules"; „despre democraţie", „upon creativity" etc.) on similar economic grounds.

Second place frequency of occurrence of the preposition CU validates the results in ADEV, and demonstrates its non-obligatory character in a non-ambiguous interpretation of the rentals messages.

Other syntactic functions of frequently employed prepositions are:

- adverbial of place: „lângă....", „din....."
- adverbial of time: „Între orele.....", or as adjective modification „disponibil între orele....."

Knowledge of the world precludes ambigous readings in absence of prepositional markers: „Dau în chirie apartament cu 2 camere, mobilat, aragaz, frigider, în Tudor" (correct preposition automatically supplied is „*cu* aragaz si frigider"i.e. „*with* stove and fridge" and not stove and fridge to be rented separately). In such circumstances, how should the retained prepositions in highly predictable, unambiguous semantic relations be interpreted than as a desire to stand out against an internally established pattern, or what Bruthiaux (2000: 303) terms „a desire to glamorize":

„Long Beach single, *in* charming older building, separate kitchen, full bathroom, large closets *on* First St..." The fact that such **prepositions are preserved in compressed texts is**

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equated with linguistically glamorizing, or reaching almost full sentence status, especially in the personals sector, where writers choose to contrive their texts in a more complex syntax. No such tendency is reflected by ADEV. In IR where elaboration and increased preposition counts represent a norm responsible for a common, utilitarian and informal style, the opposite prepositionless expression stands out from the status quo as more laconic, elevated and inconspicuous.

It has been observed that **functional needs** – expressing more sophisticated interpersonal relationships and the need for accuracy **conducted to a higher degree of syntactic elaboration** in **MATRIM-R** and **PERS-E** compared to a significantly simpler category represented by the real estate (**AE** and **ADEV**) classified advertisements. Expression of the purpose of the intended advertised relationships propel the preposition FOR (PENTRU) to first position with 20 occurences and the main function of purpose adjunct:

- FOR/PENTRU: „Caut domnişoară/doamnă *pentru* o relaţie discretă/prietenie/o relaţie de lungă durată"
  „Seeking slender female, 18-30, *for* friendship/ serious relationship/ romance/ companionship / honest LTR"

Several instances of FOR with little independent meaning and collocational force are encountered at the phrasal verb level: „to look for". Another preposition depending on the VG collocational demands (prepositional object is requested by the subjective complement) is OF – „tired of being alone", although most commonly „of" is a mark of the analytical genitive thus disallowing compactness, and contributing greater extension to the NG, an idiosincracy of advertising register in general:

„warm, healthy, intimately communicative relationship *of* maximum quality".

- DE (18 counts/1000 words in MATRIM-R): „loc de muncă" counting for 16 of the 18 occurrences.
- CU (WITH) ranks equally high along the frequency continuum of the corpora and functions either as „having" prepositional relationship or, in more extended versions of the text appear in free variation with:

- relative clauses: „cu calităţi/*care are calităţi*, dar poate şi defecte";
- present participle: „I'm good looking, very warm, kind, *with/having* a big heart and lots of integrity".

Instances of preposition omission coalesce with elaborated parts „Sunt un tânăr romantic, ( ) studii superioare, timid..." and complex prepositional omission: „domn manierat, (de) 31 (de) ani, (cu) situaţie financiară bună". Since unambiguous replacement will not hamper propositional content, the reason for prepositional filling in such situations is to be found in the desire for building affect and stance, as in the following example:

„Great looking HF 42, very affectionate, passionate, spiritual, is seeking a true gentleman *with* a great warm heart that can become my life partner"

Paucity of relational prepositions combined with the desire to glamorize the „product" through a larger more abundant lexical range may not lead to higher explicitness. In the following example, run-on cumulative description with adjectives in pre and post- noun head position would make for greater accuracy if either punctuation of greater separative force or a coordinating conjunction were inserted before the last syntagm:

„An easy going, attractive SWM, 5' 10", 185, blonde, (who) enjoys music, (the) beach, seeks attractive F, slim, (of) average bulid, 21-40, (and / I , he) will reply to all".

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V. CONCLUSION

- At prepositional level there are three distinct degrees of syntactic elaboration: 1. less elaborated apartment rentals (ADEV and AE); 2. more carefully elaborated expression in personals (PERS-E and MATRIM-R), though still below the level of full grammar; 3. IR – surpasses even standard grammar (IR 170 preps/1000 words, *Cartea Oltului* 136 prep/1000 words);
- Prepositions are economy devices bypassing relative and nonfinite clauses, which can be further omitted wherever unambiguous propositional messages can be extracted. Deletion of prepositions not affecting comprehensiveness is a common denominator responsible for the low level of form words and demonstrates the possibility of economic expression of ideational meanings;
- Whenever highly predictable, unambiguous semantic relations still retain prepositions as in the personals subgroup, the result is expression of stance and affect-building besides the pure ideational content, or the marker of a common, utilitarian and informal style in IR;
- That functional effectiveness can be achieved under spatial restrictions, represents the essence of linguistic simplification.

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