FUNCTIONS AND CONTEXTUAL MEANING OF ANIMAL PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS SIGNIFYING ”NEVER”. ”LA PAŞTELE CAILOR” IN THE ROMANIAN JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to emphasize the large number of Romanian animal phraseological units that mean "never” and to exemplify the function and contextual meaning of the most frequent one in the contemporary Romanian journalistic: ”la paştele cailor”.*

Keywords: *phraseology, function, pragmatic, journalistic, newspapers.*

Considering that the function of phraseological units usually becomes more important than their standard meaning in the journalistic discourse, they usually express unfavourable attitude towards lack of effectiveness, distrust and disagreement in relation to people or situations. As speech acts, they may be complaints, warnings, refusals. In informal style, they are the pragmatic synonyms of ”I don’t believe it”, ”rubbish”, ”nonsense”, rejecting a statement. The social context in which these animal phraseological units are used may influence their function and meaning.

The corpus contains online articles published in the period 2005-2015, picked up from the newspapers ”Evenimentul Zilei”, ”Ziarul de Iași”, ”Monitorul de Vaslui”, zvj.ro.

After defining the basic concepts in the first part of the article, the second part will analyse the pragmatic and functional role of the most frequent animal phraseological units in the contemporary Romanian journalistic.

1. Concepts

The article will further introduce the main concepts: phraseology and phraseological unit.

1.1. Phraseology

Phraseology studies “the constant combination of words or by the stable syntactic groups” (Hristea 1984:139), “the word groups characterised by a preferential selection in the use of a linguistic community”. The narrow definition comprises only the groups of words that almost have the functional value of the lexicon, for example “the phrases and the phraseological expressions that highly belong to the organisation of vocabulary” (Groza 2005: 48).

1.2. Phraseological units

There are more synonymous terms for the concept of ”phraseological unit”, narrower or broader, such as “phraseological groups”, “syntagmatic units”, “stable phrases”, ”phraseologisms” (”frazeologisme”), ”multi-word groups” or ”fixed expressions”.

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Liviu Groza prefers the term “phraseological unit” and only in some cases those of “co-location”, “terminological co-location”, “phraseological phrase”, “phraseological expression” to designate a group of words with global meaning (Groza 2005: 49).

Phraseological units are stable combinations of two or more words with unitary meaning, already existing in language and famous in usage, felt as separate units that name only one object, process or phenomenon, one trait or action, etc., opposed to the ”free syntactic groups of words” (Hristea 1984:139). Liviu Groza broadly defines the phraseological unit as a “complex linguistic sign, superordinate to words, likely to get one or more functional values in an utterance. The narrow definition refers to ”a complex linguistic sign, being descriptive or logically accepted as such by the use of language, also accepted as part of a sentence, and thus as belonging to a lexical-grammatical category, semantically encoded or not, being the object of the organization of vocabulary as a whole or as a part of it” (Groza 2005: 47 - 48).

In order to point out their functional and pragmatic role in the journalistic discourse, the present article will also refer to phraseological units from a pragmatic or sociolinguistic perspective.

Strässler considers idioms to be a functional element of language, „a pragmatic phenomenon, for example something that is judged from the point of view of the language user” (Strässler 1982).

Pragmatic idioms (in some cases also called routines, social formulas or gambits) are the lexical items whose occurrence is required by a particular social situation (S. Gramley and K.M. Patzold 1992: 55).

2. Phraseological units meaning ”never”

More than 37 synonymous phraseological units that mean ‘‘never” in Romanian are registered in the phraseological dictionaries named DFLR (”The Romanian Phraseological Dictionary”) and DELS (”The Dictionary of Expressions and Phrases”). Besides these, their variants should also be considered.

It is interesting that almost half of these phraseological units contain an animal term: ”când o zbura porcul (cu aţa)”; ”când lupul şi mielul împreună vor paşte şi leul cu boul împreună vor mânca”; ”când o prinde mâţa peşte”; ”când o prinde mâţa peşte şi coada de urs o creşte”; ”când va creşte coada ursului”; ”când or zbura bivolii”; ”când se va împrieteni şoarecele cu pisica”; ”când va face broasca păr (nuci)”; ”când o face ursul coadă și prepelița noadă”; ”când se va vedea ursul cu cercei umblând după miei”; ”când oi vedea ursul în doi craci, văcar după vaci”, ”când mâșcolii vor face mânji”; ”când s-or roade furnicile pământului” (reg.); ”(la anul) când o făta motanul”.

Structurally, the phraseological units mentioned above usually follow the pattern of subordinate temporal clauses. Yet, besides them, there are phrases that mean ”never” and do not formally fall into the same category, for example: ”la Paștele (Paştile) cailor (calului)” and ”la vara calului”.

”La vara calului” is an example of a phrase that means ”never” only when it contains the animal term in the singular form. When that is in the plural (”La vara cailor” meaning ”în perioada de mijloc a verii, când caii sunt loviţi de streche”), it becomes semantically different, referring to midsummer.

There are cases when the animal keyword in the standard form (”tomcat”, ”pig”, ”wolf”, ”lamb”, ”cat”, ”mouse”, ”bull”, ”bear”, ”horse”, ”frog”, ”pike”) may be substituted in context by other animal terms that are more suggestive in the given situation.

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There are also synonymous phraseological units that do not contain a keyword denoting animals. These and the animal phraseological units sometimes coocur in newspaper articles in order to strengthen the journalist's attitude or to reach the discoursive goal: ”Când mi-o (va) creşte iarbă-n barbă (palmă)”; ”când mi-o (îmi va) creşte păr în palmă”; ”când mi-oi (ţi-i, ţi-oi) vedea ceafa”; ”când o da din piatră lapte”; ”când o face plopul pere (mere) şi răchita micşunele (mere dulci)”; ”când o face plopul nuci și răchita mere dulci”, ”când va (o) face spânul barbă”; ”când or înflori căpşunile iarna”; ”când se va lipi cerul de pământ”; ”când s-o întoarce gârla”; ”când va da din piatră lapte”; ”când o cânta știuca-n baltă”; ”când gaură în apă se va putea face” (pop.); ”(La anul) când o-nflori bostanul / la anul cu bostanul”; ”la anul cu brânză”; ”cât e hăul și dudăul”; ”cât e cucul”; ”până-i cucul”, ”la sfântul aşteaptă”, ”la moșii ăi verzi”, ”la anul și la mulți ani”.

As it can be noticed in the above phraseological units, they literally denote a situation that is impossible, unreal, even absurd and they perfectly match contexts when the journalist expresses disagreement.

Not all the phraseological units registered in the dictionary are used in the journalistic discourse. The most frequent ones are ”la paștele cailor” and ”când o zbura porcul”, exemplified below.

3. Functions and Contextual Meaning of Animal Phraseological Units Signifying ”Never”. ”La paştele cailor” in the Romanian Journalistic Discourse

Phraseological units often occur in headlines or in the pre-textual component named incipit to **draw readers' attention**, building up a bridge between the transmitter and the receiver. The headline should be ”clear, informative, concise, free from the figurative opulence and not ambiguous”, but, ”in practice, the nowadays Romanian journalism supports the rhetoric of the spectacular and the shocking headline, based on multiple lexico-semantic grammatical and figurative artifacts […], and ”**the reader's choice to read or not to read an article depends on the persuasive force of this element”** (Cvasnîi-Cătănescu 2006:11).

Researchers such as Ch. Fillmore, P. Kay and J. O'Conner (1988: 521-538) have been concerned about the sociolinguistic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic perspectives on idiomaticity.

As Ioana Murar noticed and summarized the studies in the field, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language use need to be considered when analyzing the role of phraseological units in discourse: the occurrence of idioms is determined by a particular social situation, the social context is important for their correct interpretation and their function sometimes overrides their meaning (Murar 2009: 146).

Liviu Groza considers that the phraseological units meaning ”never” can be included into the category of answers. They usually disapprove with something that has been told previously, having the same pragmatical function as ”What do you mean? I don't believe a word!”(in the Romanian variant: „Ce tot spui acolo?”, „Fugi de-aici!”) (Groza Liviu, 20011).

In the following part of the article, we will exemplify the most frequent phraseological units in the Romanian journalistic discourse.

They may be used to complain, to warn or disagree, to refuse to believe, so they may perform communicative functions, having the role of speech acts or they may express lack of hope, disappointment or distrust. As they often occur in headlines or incipit, they refer to the situation detailed by the article.

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In the following text, the two phraseological units are strengthened by the adverb ”never”, which is meant to emphasize the ironic value that reveals distrust.

In the newspaper ”Ziarul de Iași”, the phraseological unit ”când o zbura porcul” keeps its pragmatic role in the ironic context, meaning **”I don’t believe you!”): „La pastele cailor ..sau... Cand o zbura porcu‘** . Avand in vedere ca variantele anterioare pot fi posibile .... **este mai sigur ca .. NICIODATĂ**” (zvj.ro, 10.01.2012).

In the next example, the allusion to the phraseological unit stands for distrust, although the verb is in its past simple form, as if the action had already taken place. The deictic value of the noun ”ziua” cannot change the meaning of impossibility, but it contributed to the ironic and humorous value:

„**Ziua când a zburat porcul**

Romanica noastra, sa fie condusa de niste tineri specialisti, educati, cinstiti si inteligenti, care lupta pentru binele national. Dar asa ceva nu se va putea intimpla acum, fiindca ar insemna **sa zboare porcul,** ceea ce n-ar fi prea indicat cind mai e putin pina la Ignat.” (ziaruldeiasi.ro, 24.11.2008).

A humorous allusion to the phraseological unit expresses disagreement and reproach regarding the ”swine fever” which brought income to some politicians: „Şi porcul a strănutat. În zbor” (ziaruldemures.ro, 2.05.2009). The headline is ludic and persuading. The reader feels the distrust implicature, suggested by the initial meaning of the phraseological unit meaning ”never”.

The next example illustrates the use of the idiom ”la paştele cailor”. In the context in which the employees who worked to accomplish the census haven’t got their money yet, still waiting for it, the phrase „la paştele cailor” expresses lack of hope, disappointment, distrust regarding the way the problem is going to be solved. The presence of the quotation mark delimits the intertextual element.

„Banii recenzorilor, **la «pastele cailor»!**

La mai mult de două săptămâni de la finalizarea Recensământului, recenzorii bârlădeni încă își așteaptă banii. Se pare că vor mai avea de așteptat, întrucât nici cei care au coordonat numărarea locuințelor și a persoanelor nu știu când va aloca Guvernul fondurile necesare.” (monitoruldevaslui.ro, 16.11.2011).

A well-defined pattern in the press is the following: the headline contains the phraseological unit that summarizes a crime and also clarifies the position of the journalist. It is followed by the details that disambiguate, such as the identity of the guilty people and how the crime took place.

Depending on how serious a problem is, the animal phraseological unit ”la paştele cailor” may draw attention to a crime or an unfair situation, being the synthesis of a denouncement, and express disappointment caused by the lack of punishment:

Jurnalisti arestati in scandalul ziarului "The Sun"

„Probabil, va fi ”judecat”, la fel ca Nicolae Popa, **la Pastele Cailor.** Sau **”cand o zbura porcul”** – data care, din fericire, pare sa se apropie cu pasi mari!, www.evz.ro, 31.01.2012).

The animal phraseological unit may sometimes get a function similar to that of ”Can you hear that?”, ”Look!”, aimed both to inform and to draw the reader’s attention. In order to strengthen the meaning, synonymous animal phraseological units may co-occur, like in the case of the phrases ”la paştele cailor” and „când o zbura porcul”.

Although journalists should be objective, idioms may sometimes express the speaker’s attitude towards the person or situation, such as ”his irritation or anger; they may convey an unfavourable or a contemptuous attitude towards the person or thing

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denoted or even a frivolous attitude, a lightly humorous or quietly mocking view of the person or thing referred to (Cowie et al. 1984: xl).

To conclude, the function of phraseological units may be more important than their standard meaning. The same animal phraseological unit may have diverse meanings and functions, depending on context. Thus, ”la paştele cailor” can mean more than ”never”. As speech acts, the phraseological units meaning ”never” may be complaints, warnings, refusals, expressing disagreement and disappoitment. The complaint may be serious or humorous, mocking at reality, depending on how it is perceived by the journalist and on his intention.

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