ROMANIAN LANGUAGE IN 1918

Petre Gheorghe BÂRLEA
„Ovidius" University Constanța
gbarlea@yahoo.fr

Abstract:
The analysis of the Romanian literary language of 100 years ago can only provide a "blurred photo" type of image. The explanation lies in the fact that a natural, vivid language is never static, even if we refer rather to a one moment in time, as was the year 1918. Synchrony is only a methodologically established conventional perspective for the study of languages that are in eternal diachrony. Therefore, what one can remark in relation the Romanian language of that age is its processes and tendencies: the concurrence of noun endings (*conot**ație*** vs. *conotați**une***); the alternation of case forms (*păc**ii*** vs. *păc**ei***); the persistence of archaic phonetisms (*a ceti*) etc.

Keywords:
Romanian literary language, synchrony, diachrony, nominal inflection, phonetic aspects.

1. Necessary Specifications

1.1. An attempt to give a language an X-ray picture at a specific moment in time would definitely be superfluous, if not unprofessional. It is well known that the so called synchronic analysis of a language system is merely a methodological convention which pragmatically ignores the natural dynamism of any living language. The fact that a language – due to its human characteristic - should always be studied in its diachronic development had already been acknowledged even before Ferdinand de Saussure launched his axioms which have been later amended by Eugenio Coșeriu and others. The debates of the founders of the comparative-historical method – the most valid and fertile study method of language structure also by generating further methods and complementary fields for the science of language - are reasons enough to realize that linguistics is nothing but historical, just as the real philosophy is nothing but idealistic.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

In any case, although concentrating on a specific moment in time, our approach here is nevertheless diachronic since the topic – the Romanian language in 1918 – was examined in the perspective of the year 2018. Consequently, a correct analysis was ensured by the one century period which offered a rather perceptive and axiological visibility over the topic in question.

1.2. We only focused on language samples typical for a specific calendar year, but we reiterate the idea that this was just a convention motivated by extra-linguistic reasons: we now celebrate a century of our country's historic evolution, since 1918 is the birth year of the modern Romanian state in its widest historical-geographical borders and its broadest ethno-linguistic configuration. Our cultural and scientific approach is not only part of the tribute that should be paid to this specific social context, but it also employs the usual methods of any diachronic analysis by establishing periods of study marked by historical events that are of a greater importance than the object of study itself. Moreover, linguistics operates with terms like *ab quo* and *ad quem*, tightly connected to the language recorded in written documents that can be exactly dated and are characteristic for the beginning or the end of an era etc. But in literature (linguistics is also included here, since it operates with words and not with figures, logical or figurative symbols, or manufactured products), in fact in the history of literature the events are usually even less connected with the evolution of the field – revolutions and changes in the economic, social, or political structure.

1.3. Whatever the perspective, a diagnosis for this 'linguistic year" – 1918, as mentioned in the title of the present paper, if such a term could exist – could not be made even if wanted to. The explanations for this impossibility are easy to be presumed:

a) Not all texts published in 1918 have been written in that year; many of them are slightly older;
b) Even those texts claimed to have been written and published in 1918 bear the natural influence of previous linguistic acquisitions of their authors, sometimes even the influence of skills developed over a period of a lifetime;
c) No text is similar to another, and the average in a linguistic analysis has nothing in common with an arithmetic average, not to mention that the latter does not reflect the absolute truth as it is well known from the modern philosophy of sciences.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

Therefore, a second great challenge we faced – with all the risks assumed – was that of a recourse to method.

2. *The Working Method*

The methodological frame for our work aimed at finding a midline, if possible, or at least a unity in diversity. Of course, the unity can only be relative due to the above mentioned dynamics of a living language, manifesting itself both horizontally and vertically. More exactly, we tried to establish the language manifestations of the language in all three dimensions considered in such analyses: diachronic, diastratic, and diatopic.

2.1. Diachronically, the working material has been selected among the texts published between 1904 and 1947. The former term of this periodization (the year 1904) resulted from the fact that the first great official reform of Romanian orthography – which we owe in a great measure to Titu Maiorescu – was then introduced, under the auspices of the Romanian Academy. It is known as the reform of "phonetics tempered from etymological needs", with principles and rules which governs the Romanian written and spoken language ever since in an overwhelming proportion, even at the level of the meta-language.

For the term *ad quem* we considered the debates held both at the Academy and in the journals and newspapers edited by schools and universities between 1916 and 1932 (the latter is the publication year of the first normative work based on the proposals made by Sextil Pușcariu (1929) and Ovid Densusianu (1932), debates which continued in 1947 and which prepared the reform in 1951 (actually in 1953)[1].

In reality, we did not concentrate much on the abiding by the orthographic rules as such (although it would have been necessary as in any scientific approach), but we chose to roughly select - somewhat arbitrarily – two decades before and after the year in question, starting from the assumption that a period of 40 years would represent a sufficiently consistent extent of time in order to determine at least some of the dominant tendencies

[1] A compromise between Emil Petrovici's and Alexandru Graur's proposals has been then made, thus resulting a third variant which benefited from the commentaries of further linguists, writers etc.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

in the evolution of language. We can definitely now say that our initial assumption was only partially confirmed.

On the other hand, we had to take into account the various ages of those who created a specific type of oral or written communication according to their preoccupations and intellectual calibre. As expected, the older opinion leaders have proven to be (rather) conservative in their use of language, whereas the younger ones manifested themselves as revolutionary and counter-revolutionary even in their means of expression and turn of phrases. All of them were nevertheless such strong personalities, that their arguments when ignoring the official norms and the mainstream opinions of the time were solid enough. In fact, the linguistic behaviour of a community is influenced not as much by the official canon established by the specialists, but rather by the personality models who take the lead[2].

2.2. The *diastratic perspective* includes a diachronic aspect as well. First, it is worth mentioning that we focused on the *Romanian written language*, i.e. the level of the standard literary language, in principle, where the high functional style – academic, oratorical, administrative – was prevalent. The witness-samples in journalistic style have demonstrated once again that this style was practically absent. On the other hand, and in order to ensure a broader spectrum for the verbal practices of communication, samples of colloquial language from diaries, written memories, or various notes have also been taken into consideration.

With regard to the authors of those texts, we studied primarily those directly implicated in cultivating the language. These authors have been selected and progressively classified into the following groups:

a) theoreticians of sciences of language and literature;
b) practitioners of writing – this group further classified according to their productions (academic treatises of language and literature; journalistic productions; memories or fictional writings);

[2] A personality model can have a positive, but also and mostly (?) a negative influence: this could be the only explanation for the massive and rapid spread (in a period of roughly 10 years) of the form *decât* wrongly used in affirmative contexts or of *ca și* similarly used in non-comparative (relative) contexts.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

c) notable personalities of the social-political or cultural-academic scene, considering their oral or written interventions.

In other words, we have been searching for texts of opinion leaders and designers of cultural style, such as Sextil Pușcariu, Dimitrie Caracostea, N. Iorga. The working material has been extended to written literary texts of authors such as Octavian Goga, Lucian Blaga, Tudor Arghezi, or oral interventions of political personalities such as P.P. Carp and Constantin Argetoianu. From the writers we chose texts in prose, but also some poetical productions. From politicians we examined their official oral interventions which have been confronted with their personal notes and diaries. The same approach was valid for academicians, where we confronted scientific treatises – as mentioned above – with academic lectures, or conferences held at the Academy, but also with their official discourses with political or social-administrative content and with personal notes, war diaries, or fragments from their private correspondence.

We reiterate once again that the diachronic perspective was always present in analyses such as the present one. For example, in the case of Nicolae Iorga we had to mediate between texts of *Istoria literaturii române* published in older volumes written around 1900, the text named *Introducerea sintetică* of 1929 (an introduction which is in fact a conclusive synthesis, and not an introductory one; he wrote it as such since it was requested by the course he brilliantly held at the University of Bucharest), and several of his late texts. The comparison with various texts written around 1918 coincides with the average between the two extremes dates (1901-1940). We could thus detect whether an evolution in the professor's style of language exists (the answer is negative) and we could also observe whether an indication of sequencing and classification was present (No!), except for the fact that he became increasingly more stable both in his expressivity or subjectivism and his resorting to personal attacks toward his enemies who have increased in number as he got older.

The productions of those great opinion leaders were selected as working material also for the following reasons: on one hand, around 1918 they were at their biological maturity and at the peak of their creative forces; on the other hand, they had a great impact upon their contemporaries, who were always if not totally convinced by them, at least very attentive to them.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

Unfortunately, all this strategy of sample selection – representative for the language status at a specific moment in time – has proven to be idealistic and lacking the expected practical results.

A first imperative finding was that nobody was then ready to observe any official conventions, even if those personalities – whose texts have been analysed – had been responsible for establishing them. As already mentioned, they were all very strong personalities who, as a matter of principle, did not want to obey the constraints imposed on others. At the theoretical level, each of them contributed *partially* to the general rules of pronunciation and spelling within the modern Romanian language, whereas at a practical and personal level they *fully* preserved their own system of expression. In addition, their intellectual and cultural acuity gave them – as expected – enough liberty of creation converted in the expressivity we found in their literary productions of various periods of time or belonging to various genres.

In those circumstances, we had to resort to the documents which we have, in fact, firstly considered and which – by their nature – are regarded as the mirror of the moment: *the texts from the written press*. Their mission being to inform and educate, newspapers and magazines should be unitary and *in consensus* with regard to educating the language of both their writers and their readers, irrespective of their ideological diversity. The result of our research was rather discouraging. The main newspapers with large circulation – in translation, with a great number of readers - display different writing systems and different use of the language. Eclectic were also the written productions published in the same issue, and even in the same article. Involved here was not only the personal style of each writer, but also the several linguistic phenomena, which should otherwise appear as unitary in a standard Romanian language programmatically promoted by the written press. Examples of free variations of this kind are: *ţărei* and *ţării*, *cari* and *care* (pl.), (*chestie/chestiune*), *proclamaţie* and *proclamaţiune*; *se cuvine a arăta*, *se cuvine să arătăm*, *se cuvine de arătat* etc.

In short, nobody at the time felt compelled to abide by the norms of verbal behaviour as it was expected from those texts. The conclusion drawn from this fact is that the *witness samples* we initially counted on have proven to be illusory.

2.3. Lastly, *the diatopic perspective* induced further difficulties in our analysis, but not as we expected them. 2018 is the year of the Great Union,

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

and it was only natural for us to compare the texts from Transylvania and Bessarabia on one hand, with those from the Romanian Kingdom (including Moldova from this side of the Prut river) on another hand. Latinist-illuminist and Hungarian-German influences are certainly visible in Transylvania, whereas in Bessarabia denationalisation, Russification, and, in the best case, the dialectic enclavation are obvious. All and each of those phenomena deserve a dedicated study which, in fact, do exist and continue to be performed by young researchers (Lilia Cuciuc, Yusuke Sumi, Ionel Cordovan and others).

It was not at all surprising the fact that the literary, scientific, and journalistic productions from these filo-Romanian geographical areas were not very regionally differentiated; on the contrary.

In exchange, great writers already residing in Bucharest for several decades at that time – in other words, a period long enough to facilitate loosing old verbal habits – were exactly the ones who made concessions to their dialectal dowry. A regional newspaper, with connections to the unionist movement, *Glasul Bucovinei* (1918-1919) cultivated the literary Romanian language both in its journalistic-oratorical aspects and in its academic or fictional ones. The problem was that the founder, who was also the main editor (an entire issue at the beginnings of the newspaper seems to have been written by him) came from Transylvania. We talk here about Sextil Pușcariu, a very thorough person, whose life achievements are worth mentioning: the reunification of Bessarabia and Transylvania with Romania, the founding of universities in the two provinces and consequently the writing of one of the most brilliant treatises on Romanian language.

His oral and written communication was however marked – as for many others in his generation – by the habits he acquired from his family, but especially during the twelve years of school, which is in fact a sign of the seriousness of the education system of the time. A single example will be given here: the unfortunate variation *cari/care*, widely used at the time, was solved by the great linguist by using the invariable relative pronoun *ce*, a Transylvanian idiom in contexts that remained regional only. Structures like *dragostea* ***ce*** *ți-o port*; *datoriile* ***ce*** *le aveam* etc. are everywhere to be found in his correspondence to his wife and friends (1918), in the *Jurnalul de război* of 1918, in his subsequent written memories (*Călare pe două veacuri* (1968),

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

in his journalistic writings and his linguistic studies, and in his reception speech at the Academy (dedicated to Ioan Bianu).

Lucian Blaga – in his memoirs and press articles – also wrote: ***mâneca*** *din Franța spre Țară*, *eu* ***adăst*** *puțin* etc.

Moldavian writers did not make an exception. N. Iorga resided in Bucharest since the age of 18. A further residence of his was the summer house in Vălenii de Munte, Prahova County. Nevertheless, until his death he continued to use Moldavian archaic phonetic idioms such as: *pănă*, *dintăi*, *răpede*, *a ceti*, *sama*, *trimes*, phono-morphological variants such as *vrâstă*, *cari*, *li*, *ni* (for *care*, *le*, *ne*, respectively), or the older forms he learned in school: *danț* (*a dănțui*) *ființi*, *mesagiu*, *complect*, *ridicul*, *falsificație* etc.

Being faithful to the ideology of specific literary movements – *Sămănătorim*, *Poporanism* –, Iorga programmatically refused to adopt the neologisms which had already permeated Romanian. Thus he used words like *amestecat* for „implicat", *întovărășire* for „asociere", *răpide* for „imediat", *numai cât* for „doar că", *a tăia neted* for „a decide ferm" etc.

He also favoured the completive structures using the infinitive, such as: *înseamnă* ***a cunoaște***, ni *vine* ***a juca*** (probably pronounced *ni vini*) etc. The image can be completed by the use of Gallicisms which were current at the time (*poezii* ***de caracter*** *popular*), and the appeal to colourful language abounding in pleonasms and popular expressions, for instance when he was too preoccupied dismissing B. Petriceicu Hasdeu: „***între*** *Hașdeu și* ***între*** *Maiorescu, de la început a fost război*" [Eng.: *there was a war* ***between*** *Hasdeu and* ***between*** *Maiorescu from the beginning*] said Iorga, illogically duplicating the structure and continuing with a severe characterization of the former (he acknowledged, in fact, Hasdeu's geniality, but also listed some strong criticisms about him: his ethnical origin – he implied that the name Boleslav became *Bogdan*; his education in Harkov – short and superficial; his impossibility to adjust to the society, especially to the aristocrat, intellectual class).

We have already mentioned in another study that the younger E. Lovinescu, who was very attentive at abiding by the norms in 1904 – his debut year – and who participated in the debates of 1916 (continued in 1932-1934), decided at the age of maturity that he was entitled to return to the Moldavian idiom he used as a child and teenager: *adeca*, *aiure*, *barbat*, *întăi*, *sară*, *urieși* etc.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

By using the invariable form *a* as a possessive-genitive article, he falls within the same constant tendency of all Moldavian personalities, regardless of the existent rivalries between them: T. Maiorescu, N. Iorga, Garabet Ibrăileanu etc.

The same applies to the phono-morphological adaptation of neologisms: *complect(ă)*; *contimporan*; *detail* (with the plural *detaile*), *inimic, orizon, peizaj* or *peisagiu*, *sombru*, *viţiu* etc.

The notorious phonetic morphological pairs are also present in his writings as they are in the productions of all the great writers and in the press of the time: *cari*/*care*; *sunt*/*sânt*; *mane* and *mâini*; *colori*/*culori*; *coprins*/*cuprins*; *românitate*/*români*.

Therefore, the three perspectives brought together have hardly resulted in a stable image of the Romanian language of the time, although only one aspect of the language was considered (since the study of popular phenomena or of dialects etc. have been omitted).

3. General Phenomena

The general analysis of the language has been performed by separating phonetic phenomena from the phonetic morphological ones (when possible) and also from the syntactical and stylistic ones.

Obviously, we do not mistakenly consider the older forms, or the variants etc. as false. The present time offered us a perspective which allowed for determining which linguistic forms used in 1918 proved as viable and which of them have been replaced with newer ones.

Our analysis required whole charts of lexemes and complex structures that have been designed in order to find the invariants according to which the dominants of the time could be established. A few examples are given here:

a. In the class of nouns, for instance, the Romanian literary language displays the forms ending in *-(ţ)iune* as dominants for abstract terms; there are also free variations (the shorter form) and, therefore, some words caused for considerable problems until a fixed form emerged (*În chestia Cadrilaterului* vs. *chestiunea ţărănească*, *condiţiune*, *populaţiune* etc.);
b. Still in the class of nouns, there are hesitations regarding the forms used in genitive/dative: *ţărei/ţării*, *păcei/păcii* etc.
c. The dominant form for the relative pronoun clearly is the plural *cari*; there was also an attempt of specialization for the

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)

masculine plural, as opposed to the feminine plural *care*, but they all have been reduced to the invariable *care* (for both singular/plural and masculine/feminine).

d. The high frequency of using the simple perfect for all the past tenses is notable in the class of verbs, especially since it is combined with archaic phonetics: *cetii* etc.
e. At the lexical level, very frequent are lexemes and structures that have been meanwhile replaced with other forms: *la aparență* (now: ***la*** *rigoare*, but ***în*** *aparență*), *clipă după clipă* etc.

An entire presentation of the linguistic phenomena classified according to classes of words, syntactic-stylistic, or lexical-semantic structures could not be here displayed, but this fastidious methodological apparatus led to the conclusion that its results are lacking spectacularity. The explanation lies within the fact that, despite the particularities mentioned above, many of the characteristics of the language from one hundred years ago are also present in the Romanian language of today. „The harvest" of linguistic phenomena specific to that moment in time is rather small. In other words, the Romanian language from around 1918 was already a modern language, able to meet the challenges of the historic events of the moment and to perfectly express the ideas and feelings which generated the birth of the Greater Romania.

.

BDD-A28479 © 2018 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:56:08 UTC)