STUDYING ENGLISH. FREQUENT ERRORS MADE BY ROMANIAN STUDENTS ONE: SYNTACTICAL, LEXICAL, STYLISTICAL AND PHRASEOLOGICAL LEVELS

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Abstract: *Students learning English as a foreign language often make errors under the influence of their mother tongue. Romanian students are no exception. In this study we analyse the most common mistakes occurring during the study of English and we try to identify their sources on various levels: syntactical, stylistically, lexical etc.*
Keywords: *assessment, sources of errors, types of errors, analysis, correcting errors.*

In the process of applying certain foreign language teaching strategies, it is very important to establish the common elements of the two languages involved: the native language (source language) and the target language (receptor language). Bearing this concept in mind, teachers often start from the idea that students will find it easier to study a foreign language if their first steps on an unknown territory are guided by notions that they are familiar with in their mother tongue.

A totally different approach is needed when the learner is not at a beginner level, but in a continuing language development, as is the case of the students at non-philological faculties where studying foreign language is part of the curriculum in the first two academic years.

Although they enter a faculty after having passed their baccalaureate exam and consequently an English exam for linguistic competence, students have various language abilities. In order to determine an accurate and homogenous level of English for each group and also for an adequate performance, at the beginning of each academic year we usually ask them to take a test for assessing their general knowledge of English, so that we could distribute them in different classes. This brief written examination is meant to check main aspects related to the verb tenses, the irregular and defective plural of nouns, the comparison of adjectives, the definite, indefinite and zero article, a basic vocabulary etc.

As this test is not meant to be and, at the same time, cannot be very comprehensive, some errors are noticed from the very beginning, others – later on.

In the last decades of the XX-th century, researchers made the difference between errors of performance and errors of competence (see Corder, S. P., 1971, *Idiosyncratic*

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dialects and error analysis, *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 9* (2), 147-160).

Errors of performance are attributed to lapse of memory, emotional state etc., and, consequently, are unsystematic and not very serious. On the other hand, errors of competence are persistent and systematic.

The main sources for errors of competence identified by many authors are caused by ① the interference with the students' native language, ② the target language. According to some scholars, there is also a third source of errors: ③ the second or third foreign language the students simultaneously learn.

In this study we refer only to errors originated in the interference of the Romanian language with the English language (the target language), errors made by students in non-philological faculties.

The sum up of these examples is made according to a taxonomy that refers to various linguistic levels: syntax, stylistics, vocabulary, phraseology. However, the following classification is not meant to be a value or occurrence rating of linguistic abnormalities.

Without establishing a hierarchy, we have just recorded the linguistic phenomena as we encountered them during our English practical course that we teach for I-st and II-nd year students in our University.

During the teaching-learning process, one of the first differences between English and Romanian that we emphasize to our students (aged 18 to 40 and more) is the analytic character (that is we underline that grammatical relationships are expressed by means of function words or word order and not by inflections – which are simple) of English as opposed to the synthetic character of Romanian – which is very rich in case inflections and verbal forms. Although at a first glance the distinction may seem rather unimportant, this difference has consequences on the syntactical level of the simple sentence, mainly on the word order.

Given its analytic character, word order is much stricter in English due to its fewer inflections and this aspect may seem alluring to those who study this language. The well-known arrangement is present one way or another in almost every English textbook:

⑦		①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
ADVERBIAL OF TIME (When ?)		SUBJECT (Who ?)	PREDICATE (Action)	INDIRECT OBJECT (To Who(m) ?)	DIRECT OBJECT (What ?)	ADVERBIAL OF MANNER (How ?)	ADVERBIAL OF PLACE (Where ?)	ADVERBIAL OF TIME (When ?)

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While in Romanian, Latin or German, the inflections for cases or verbs conjugation convey the content of a message, in English, Bulgarian or Swedish, word order is stricter in order to avoid confusions and ambiguities at syntactical, morphological or lexical levels.

At the syntactical level we have identified a number of errors that we classified into: errors referring to syntax of the simple sentence (**A**) and errors regarding the syntax of the complex/ compound sentence (**B**).

(A) Syntax of the simple sentence

Word Order: At this level, word order represents an "unstable ground" for those studying English. „*Doamna şi domnul X"* rendered in English as *Mrs and Mr…* instead of *Mr and Mrs…* is one of the most common errors, shortly followed by expressing the number of a building after the name of the street: *Downing Street 10* (following the Romanian pattern) instead of *10 Downing Street*.

An interesting case is represented by the misuse of *of*-Genitive (Analytical Genitive) instead of '*s*-Genitive (Saxon Genitive). The explanation lies in the fact that the Analytical Genitive has the same word order as in Romanian and, consequently, *numele băiatului* is often translated: *the name of the boy* instead of *the boy's name.*

Another example of different word order in the two compared languages is represented by the use of the personal pronoun *I* as part of a compound subject. In English, placing this pronoun at the beginning of a sentence is avoided: *Mother and I* is preferred to *I and mother...* This restriction is not present in Romanian[1] , and as a result Romanian learners quite often feel inclined to use their mother tongue word order: *Eu si mama...* becomes *I and mother.*

In the same category we may also include the mandatory repetition of the personal pronoun at the beginning of each sentence in English, while in Romanian this aspect is absent as the verbal conjugation includes, among other information, data about person and number. The optional presence of the subject in Romanian is clearly motivated by the synthetic character of the language.

The verbal inflections in Romanian give us important details about the subject, the person performing the action: the verbal form *munceşti* refers only to the II-nd person, singular, present tense. This is not the case with highly analytic languages – as English is. The verbal form *work* at simple present may very well indicate any person, except for the III-rd person singular, and if a modal verb is involved not even this information is disclosed. Therefore, the presence of the subject is almost in all situations mandatory in English. Interfering with Romanian, learners often omit the subject, especially if they are beginners: **Is raining*, instead of *It is raining*. Sometimes hypercorectness leads to a different error: subject repetition in the same simple sentence: *My father he left*.

It is well-known that Romanian admits redundancy at different levels of the language (Anticipated or Repeated Direct Object is one of the many examples). At the same time, the presence of two negative words in the same sentence is not considered incorrect in

[1] In the last decade of the XX-th century some futile rules tended to be imposed under the influence of the English language.

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Romanian, but this is not the case in English. Consequently, we have recorded the incorrect translation **I don't have no idea* for *Nu am nici o idee* on many occasions.

Short answers represent another aspect worth mentioning. Simple *Yes/No* answers are quite common and perfectly correct in Romanian, while in English they express either lack of education, or lack of respect. The rule is quite simple: the auxiliary verb or the modal verb used in the question must be repeated in the answer: *Can you...? Yes, I can/ No, I cannot.* or: *Does he...? Yes, he does/No, he doesn't* etc. Nevertheless, many Romanian students tend to ignore this rule and to give short *Yes/No* answers.

- El e tatăl tău ?	"Is he your father ?"
- Da.	"Yes." *instead of*
	"Yes, he is."

Transitiveness (or transitivity) – which is the verb property of taking a direct object – includes different verbs in English and in Romanian. Due to such differences, the Romanian transitivity pattern prevails when translating into English and leads to such errors as: **to enter in the classroom* (following the Romanian pattern *a intra **in** clasă*) correct: *to enter Ø the classroom*, while in Romanian: *a asculta Ø radioul → to listen **to** the radio*; and also: *Don't lie **to** me*; → Nu Ø mă minţi.

Subject – predicate agreement also provides differences between Romanian and English in some specific instances. Although Romanian learners may always find it funny, in English the word *money* (meaning *current medium of exchange*) has no plural form (*moneys* or *monies* being considered formal and seldom used). *Your money **is** on the table* for *Banii tăi **sunt** pe masă* sounds quite odd for beginners. Also unusual for Romanian students, but correct in English is the example ***Oile** acestea sunt din Australia = These **sheep** are from Australia*. Similarly, we always pay attention to the word *news* (= *ştiri, veşti*), a noun with a plural form and meaning, that makes agreement with a verb in a singular form: *"Here **is** the latest news."*

(B) Syntax of the complex sentence

There are two important aspects that generally confuse Romanian students when it comes down to the syntax of the complex sentence: *sequence of tenses* and *if clauses*.

As it is well-known, sequence of tenses is a set of rules present in English, French and Italian, but not in Romanian. For example, an *attracted sequence of tenses* (backshifting) is often used in indirect speech in English, while in Romanian this shift does not occur. A native English speaker could hardly understand the succession of the actions without applying the backshifting rules. As in Romanian this set of rules does not apply, students learning English often tend to copy the model offered by their mother tongue.

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A similar instance refers to errors occurring in building up conditional sentences. Although *If clauses* are strongly related to the French *Si conditionnel*, Romanian, though belonging to the same family of Romanic languages as French, does not have strict rules regarding this grammar issue. Romanian speakers may freely use the same tense and mode in both main sentence and clause:

Dacă vei veni,/îl vei întâlni. (future tense, indicative);
Dacă ai veni,/l-ai întâlni. (present conditional);
Dacă ai fi venit,/l-ai fi întâlnit. (perfect conditional)

while in English this rule does not apply:

If you come, (present)/*you will see him*. (future);
If you came, (present subjunctive)/*you would see him* (present conditional);
If you had come, (past subjunctive) */you would have seen him.* (perfect conditional).

Hence a long series of errors breaking the *If clauses* rules.

The lexical level

At the lexical level, the largest area with most errors is undoubtedly the False Friends Land – a ground which may be equally subject to doctorial research or jocular witticism. Since the topic is unquestionably generous, we will provide hereby only several examples, such as:

English word	**Wrong Romanian translation**	**Correct Romanian translation**
advertisement	*avertisment*	*reclamă*
sensible	*sensibil*	*rațional*
magazine	*magazin*	*revistă*
library	*librărie*	*bibliotecă*
eventually	*eventual*	*în cele din urmă*

The stylistical level

At a stylistical level, there is a profusion of loan translations (calques), in such cases as:

In answering the question: *"How old are you?"* such mistaken wording is very often phrased: **"I have 10 years."* – which follows the Romanian pattern.

The formal structure *"How do you do?"* is very often mistakenly taken for *"How are you?"* if it is a translation from English into Romanian, and the Romanian *„Ce mai faci ?"* is mixed up with *"What do you do ?"* if it is a translation from Romanian into English.

Under the influence of the Romanian language, certain nouns in English are granted a plural form – as Romanian agrees to such grammatical terms – see for instance: *fruits, fishes, informations, sheeps, moneys* in an English context where such usage is not allowed.

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Calquing (loanwording) common Romanian syntagmata into English is a very widespread linguistic phenomenon; such wording, named *collocations*, either do not exist in English, or if they do – they have a different meaning: **black wine* instead of *red wine*, **black bread* instead of *brown bread*; *black eye* for *ochi negri* (correct: *dark eyes*; *black eye* means *ochi învineţit, de la o lovitură*).

Also, following the Romanian pattern „*Ştii să faci… ?"*, the phrase: *"Do you know to…?"* instead of *"Can you…?"*can be often traced. Related to this issue, the difference between *to make* and *to do* is somehow problematic in comprehension, because both verbs are translated into Romanian with the same meaning: *a face*, whereas in English are not switchable: **I have made my homework since morning.* instead of: *I have done my homework since morning.*

Along the same line we mention the use of verbs instead of nouns in such statements as: *„Abia aştept să vii."* incorrectly translated: *"*I am looking forward you to arrive."* instead of: *"I am looking forward to your arrival."*

The phraseological level

The combination of above mentioned cases may lead us to a more complex level represented by phraseological idioms that involve the three linguistic layers: syntactical + morphological + lexical. Such linguistic units provide most of errors when translated and thus, most hilarious situations.

It is already known that the main features of the phraseological idioms are the unit of content, the degree of fusion of idiom components and the global meaning, the structural models of phraseologisms, their syntactical and morphological value and power of expression. (See: Dan Mihai Barbulescu, Ioana Mariela Barbulescu: *Contrastive Approach on Idioms of Comparison Functioning as Adjectives in English and Romanian* as issued in International Conference Language and Literature – European Landmarks on Identity, Piteşti, Romania, University of Piteşti, Faculty of Letters, pp. 24-32, June12-14, 2015, and also Dan Mihai Barbulescu, Ioana Mariela Barbulescu: *Contrastive Approach on Comparing Idioms Functioning as Verbs in English and Romanian,* as issued in International Conference Language and Literature – European Landmarks on Identity, Piteşti, Romania, University of Piteşti, Faculty of Letters, pp. 43-50, June 24-26, 2016).

Consequently, such units will never be translated word by word from one language into another; they will always be rendered using appropriate idioms with the same meaning in the target language or rephrasing the text.

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The errors that occur at the morphological level are quite numerous and that is why we will dedicate a separate study to this issue, where we will also discuss the errors appearing in spelling and punctuation.

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Conclusions

Issues under debate in this study may be classified from different points of view. Still, it is very important that, beyond any classification, this study should have both a theoretical and practical finalization.

This is the reason why we consider that, for practical purposes, we should regard things from two perspectives: (**A**) – when translating a text from Romanian into English; (**B**) – when translating a text from English into Romanian.

If we take into account the above mentioned two perspectives, we can ascertain that for point (**A**), the main reason for errors to occur in English is calquing (loanwording), while for point (**B**), the main reason for errors to occur in Romanian is the incidence of Anglicisms – see Dan Mihai Barbulescu and Ioana Mariela Barbulescu: *Again about Anglicisms in the Romanian Language. Case Study*, as issued in International Conference Language and Literature – European Landmarks on Identity, Piteşti, Romania, University of Piteşti, Faculty of Letters, June 16-18, 2017.

Teachers and school books should underline, at a certain moment, the differences at all language levels (syntactical, morphological, lexical, etc.) and illustrate such differences with clear examples, to work out in suitable exercises. In such exercises, the practical applicability of the theoretical side must be present and teachers must highlight the differences between the two languages, as such differences actually motivate the students' errors.

Working with adults (aged 18–40 or more), teachers should make students aware of the differences; this will be in keeping with the main strategic teaching principle: *conscious language learning for unconscious language use*.

For beginners of young age, such highlight is of no real importance, but quite on the contrary – sometimes it is against the fluency of the teaching process. This happens due to the way the human being acquire knowledge at various ages. The lower the age is – the more natural the knowledge gain is, and it requires less explanations.

Foreseeing errors occurred under the influence of the native language helps the teacher in the teaching-learning process as he/she would know in advance the moment of pointing out different aspects and of detailing certain problems.

And, most important: eventually, teachers will have answers for anticipated questions.

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