# Contamination as a Form of Interference in Learning Romanian as a Foreign Language

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The starting point of the present study is our ascertainment that, in the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language, one constantly come upon errors that do not depend on the mother tongue of the learner, but on the influence of *the stock of knowledge previously accumulated in the Romanian language*, to be precise on the *interference* between accumulated knowledge and newly-acquired knowledge in the Romanian language. In the current paper, of all the various kinds of errors made by foreigners who learn Romanian, *no matter what their mother tongue is*, we aim to draw attention to one specific type of language errors: those generated by *contamination*. In the process, we shall appeal to some ideas brought forward by the psycholinguistic approach to foreign language acquisition.

Revealing the downsides of the classic contrastive linguistics, which have tended to exaggerate the influence of the mother tongue, or first language (FL), upon the studied, or target language (TL)[1], psycholinguistic studies have demonstrated

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[1] Centered around the interaction between the mother tongue and the target language, which takes place during the process of learning a foreign language, the studies signed by Charles Fries (*Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, 1945) and Robert Lado (*Linguistics across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*, 1957) argue that the mother tongue can either *facilitate* the process of learning a foreign language (in this case, what happens between the mother tongue and the foreign language is a *positive transfer* determined by the existence of some similarities between the two contacting systems), or *hinder* this process (in this case, there is a *negative transfer* between the mother tongue and the foreign language, also called *interference* – a transfer determined by the difference between the two systems involved). Thus, in its initial approach, by comparing the two contacting linguistic systems, as well as highlighting their convergence and especially their divergence, contrastive analysis was aimed at predicting vulnerable areas where certain *difficulties* are bound to appear in the process of learning – difficulties that will generate *errors*. However, it has been shown that, not infrequently, "the mistakes predicted by the contrastive analysis are not identical to those appearing in concrete language learning situations; on the contrary, there appear some other errors that were not predicted by the analysis" (Chițoran 1972: 94; our translation) – something that determined polemics bringing to the limelight the limits of classical contrastive linguistics. It has to be mentioned in this connection that as early as 1967 Pit Corder observed that quite a few errors that can appear in the process of learning a language "were not predicted by the linguist anyway" (Corder 1967: 162), thus underlining that the predictions of contrastive analysis are not fully reflected in the reality of the language learning process. In fact, contrastive analysis compares two impersonal linguistic systems –



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that there are some other factors, apart from the first language, that interfere in the process of learning a foreign language. One of them is *the stock of knowledge previously accumulated in the target language* – a highly important factor impacting on the acquisition of new knowledge. Thus, in classic contrastive linguistics, the reality of the process of learning a new foreign language is oversimplified: it is argued that the main obstacle for learning a foreign language consists in some negative transfers, or *interference*, caused by structural difference between the first language and the target language; meanwhile, the psycholinguistic approach to foreign language learning has highlighted the fact that interference is produced not only between the first and the target language (*interlingual interference*), but also between the already accumulated knowledge and recently acquired knowledge in the target language (*intralingual interference*)[2]. The newly-acquired knowledge in the target language is assimilated through the reference to the stock of knowledge previously accumulated in the target language; according to Doca (1977: 14), they are

> perceived, compared and analysed depending on the previous knowledge, which, in its turn, finds itself in a process of a continuous reorganization and re-systematisation along with the assimilation of new knowledge (our translation).

The successive stages of knowledge accumulation in the target language are, therefore, characterised by *permanent dynamics*.

Learning a foreign language is a complex process marked by continuous structuring and restructuring of acquired knowledge, "a dynamic process in which previous stages cannot leave the later stages of the process unaffected" (Chițoran 1973: 32; our translation). During this process, the learner progressively builds up a new linguistic system situated *between* the first language and the target language – a system which, along with the advancement of the learning process, permanently changes and evolves, increasingly approaching the system of the target language. This intermediate linguistic system (or *interlanguage* – the concept introduced in 1972 by Selinker)[3], different from both the system of the first language (even though

that of the mother tongue or first language (FL) and that of the target language (TL) – without taking into account the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic features of the learner. At the same time, in a real language learning situation, "the contact between FL and TL is not produced at the abstract level of the language system, but rather takes place inside the 'student'" (Doca 1977: 3; our translation).

[2] For more details, see the study by Gheorghe Doca, *Analyse psycholinguistique des erreurs faites lors de l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère. Application au domaine franco-roumain*, based on the psycholinguistic approach to the interference appearing in the process of learning the Romanian language by French speakers, which states: "The psycholinguistic approach to the process of foreign language learning brought to the limelight that the interference is produced not only between FL and TL, but also between the stock of knowledge already accumulated in the target language and new knowledge. The latter, in its turn, determines certain modifications (reorganization and re-systematisation of the previously acquired knowledge" (Doca 1981: 15; our translation).

[3] Interlanguage is a concept essential for the psycholinguistic approach to the foreign language acquisition process. It was introduced into the research field of foreign language learning by Larry Selinker, in his paper *Interlanguage* (published in 1972), in which he talks about "the existence of a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language norm. This linguistic system we will call 'interlanguage'" (Selinker 1972: 214). However, the concept of interlanguage was not a total novelty at the moment of Selinker's coinage of the term. Other terms, such as "*idiosyncratic dialect*", used by Pit Corder in his 1971 paper *Idiosyncratic Dialects and Error Analysis*, or "*approximative system*", used by William Nemser, also in



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it can contain some of its traces) and that of the target language, represents a temporary "*transitory linguistic structure*", a "*personalised and incomplete variant of the target language*" (Mureşanu-Ionescu 1984: 84; our translation), "an interiorised linguistic system which evolves, becoming more and more complex" (Frauenfelder, Noyau et alii 1980: 46; our translation). According to Klaus Vogel, interlanguage is a *transitory linguistic system* moulded by the foreign language learner while facing the elements of the target language, a linguistic system which, however, does not fully coincide with the target language. The construction of interlanguage includes the learner's first language, the target language, and, possibly, other previously-acquired foreign languages (Vogel 1995: 19). Jean-Marc Dewaele believes that the originality of the concept of interlanguage consists in the fact that the language of the learner is seen as a system independent from both the first and the target language, an intermediate system which is not a projection of either FL, or TL, but has its own unique characteristics (Dewaele 2003: 156).

In this transitory linguistic system, interlingual, as well as intralingual interference reveals itself in the form of *errors*[4]. The concept of interlanguage has determined a re-examination of the notion of error, the latter being considered a natural, "inevitable and indeed necessary part of the learning process" (Corder 1971: 160)[5], rather than a sign of learning failure, a deficiency that has to be corrected. According to this new interpretation, errors which appear in the process of foreign language learning provide us with the evidence "of how language is learned or

1971, in his study *Approximative Systems of Foreign Language Learners*, actually refer to the same concept. At the same time, the term "interlanguage", suggested by Selinker, is the one that was widely accepted and used by the majority of linguists. It has been shown (Rosen, Porquier 2003: 8) that "the notion of interlanguage was created in a period of crisis in applied linguistics in the field of foreign language teaching" (our translation) and that it appeared as an answer to a series of questions concerning institutionalised language teaching / learning, especially the significance of learner's errors.

[4] The distinction between *error* and *mistake* is inextricably linked to Chomsky's dichotomy of competence / performance and was formulated by Pit Corder in his study *The significance of learner's errors*, published in 1967, where he states: "It will be useful therefore hereafter to refer to errors of performance as *mistakes*, reserving the term *error* to refer to the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his *transitional competence*" (Corder 1967: 167). According to Corder, an error represents a "*systematic*" deformation, depending on knowledge and competence, whereas a mistake is an "*unsystematic*" deformation, depending on performance, with the speaker being able to correct his mistakes if his attention is drawn to them due to his awareness of the language rules (Corder 1967: 166-167). Errors reflect the "*transitional competence*" (Corder 1967: 167) of a language learner; they are recurring and occur because of the lack of knowledge of the rules or because this knowledge is incomplete or approximate. As compared to errors, mistakes are not repetitive and are caused by extralinguistic, temporary factors, such as the learner's tiredness, emotions, lack of attention, etc. Notwithstanding these efforts to formulate a clear distinction between an error and a mistake, in the real process of teaching / learning a language it is often difficult to distinguish between the two: "However the problem of determining what is a learner's mistake and what a learner's error is one of some difficulty" (Corder 1967: 167).

[5] The studies by Pit Corder, especially *The Significance of Learner's Errors*, published in 1967, significantly contributed to reconsidering the status of error and to highlighting its positive character as a sign of learning activity. The theory of error analysis (an alternative to contrastive analysis), starting from Pit Corder's works, is centred on the idea that errors are a proof of some *universal strategies* employed by those acquiring or learning a certain language: "The making of errors (...) is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother-tongue and by those learning a second language" (Corder: 1967: 167).



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acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language" (Corder 1967: 167)[6], while the learner's interlanguage evolves mainly due to errors. Thus, errors are a sign of *active learning* and reflect the learner's progressive acquisition of the language, at the same time allowing for the identification of the "*neuralgic points*" (Slama-Cazacu 1973: 68) – the difficulties that appear in the learning process. Awareness of these difficulties allows the teacher to assess the level reached by the learner's interlanguage and to take appropriate measures in order to avoid its fossilization.

As for the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language, *referring to the stock of knowledge already acquired in the target language* (Romanian) can also frequently cause certain errors. Among the latter, we will pay special attention to the *errors determined by contamination*, errors that we have constantly and systematically noticed in the process of learning Romanian by foreigners, *no matter what their mother tongue is*. The fact that these errors do not depend on the mother tongue of the learner demonstrate that they, in fact, represent some difficulties typical of the acquisition of the Romanian language by foreigners.

Without any claims to an exhaustive analysis, in what follows we will try to explain the mechanisms producing contamination, which may constitute the first step towards the prevention of errors generated by this phenomenon in the case of foreigners learning the Romanian language.

According to the definition given in the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (*Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*), *contamination* is a linguistic phenomenon which determines modification of "a word or a grammatical structure through their intersection with other words or structures similar in meaning" (DEX 1998: 217)[7]. The phenomenon of contamination can be produced between words (lexical contamination), different structures (syntagmatic contamination) and different inflectional forms (grammatical contamination)[8].

Contamination is an insufficiently clarified linguistic phenomenon, not infrequently confused with other related phenomena such as analogy or popular etymology, "similar to it in their trigger mechanisms and ensuing effects" (Felecan 1999: 77; our translation)[9].

[6] According to Pit Corder, in the process of learning a language errors have a *threefold meaning*: firstly, errors show the teacher the level of the linguistic development reached by the learner, "how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn"; secondly, errors provide the researcher with signs concerning the way the respective language is learnt, as well as the strategies used by the learner in a progressive discovery of the language; thirdly, errors are indispensible to the learner since they can be regarded "as a device the learner uses in order to learn", ways in which he checks the hypotheses on the functioning of the language (Corder 1967: 167).

[7] For other definitions of contamination, see Constantinescu-Dobridor 1998: 73: "CONTAMINATION: reciprocal influence between two similar linguistic elements (with the modification of form)" (our translation); Dubois, Giacomo et alii 2002: 115: "Contamination is an analogous action performed by a word, a structure or a phonic element over another word, structure or phonic element" (our translation).

[8] On various existing types of contamination in the Romanian language (lexical, phraseological, lexical-phraseological, morphological, syntactic, phrastic, graphic), see Hristea 1991: 219; Felecan 1999: 81.

[9] In the paper *Contaminația și fenomenele lingvistice înrudite* (I), in reference to contamination, Th. Hristea (1991: 215) states that it "is incorrectly defined, incompletely presented or simply confused



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According to Doca (1981: 196), in the process of learning a foreign language, the phenomenon of contamination consists in

> linking words, syntagms and grammatical structures from the TL with words, syntagms and grammatical structures from the FL, from the stock previously accumulated in the TL or in other previously-acquired foreign languages (…) (our translation),

this resulting in "mixed" words, syntagms and grammatical structures.

The following comments are centred exclusively around contamination occurring in the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language, between new words, syntagms or grammatical structures, which appear in the learning process, and words, syntagms or grammatical structures, similar semantically and / or formally, belonging to the stock of knowledge already accumulated in the TL (Romanian) – contamination that depends neither on the mother tongue of the learner, nor on other previously learned languages. Contamination will therefore be seen as a reflection of the relation between the stock of knowledge accumulated in the Romanian language and new knowledge, in other words, as a form of *interference* which occurs in the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language.

### 1. Lexical contamination

In the case of Romanian as a foreign language, *lexical contamination* is less frequent. However, when such situations occur, they represent the result of a phonetic combination of *two different words acquired in the target language*, words which usually belong to the same lexical-grammatical class and, for various reasons, are overlapping in the mind of the Romanian language learner. This overlapping is, most often, the result of a *synonymic attraction* between words similar in meaning, as in the following utterance: *Aici am întâlnit prieteni din ****nenumăroase***[10] *țări*. (for ***nenumărate***) [Here I met friends from numerous countries], where contamination is produced between the adjectives *nenumărate* and *numeroase*. In other cases, it is the result of a *paronymic attraction* between words similar in form, insufficiently familiar to the learner from the semantic point of view, as in: *Sunt 25 de ani. Eu ****nu mă călătorit*** *încă*. (for *Am 25 de ani. Eu* ***nu m-am căsătorit*** *încă*.) [I am 25 years old. I am not married yet.], where in the hybrid form *nu mă călătorit* contamination is produced between the verbs *a călători* and *a se căsători*. Overlapping can also be

with other linguistic phenomena, the most important of which are analogy and popular etymology", whereas analogy, popular etymology and contamination represent "three related phenomena, both complex and controversial" (Hristea 1991: 221; our translation).

[10] The examples illustrating contamination originate from the analysis of a corpus of approximately 60 written papers by foreign students (with different mother tongues: French, Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Persian) who studied the Romanian language at the Faculty of Letters of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași as part of *the Preparatory Course of the Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens* in the academic years 2018 – 2019 and 2019 – 2020. The written papers which we refer to covered grammar and vocabulary topics and creative writing, corresponding to the A2 and B1 levels of linguistic competence as defined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.



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the result of an *antonymic attraction*[11] between terms with opposite meanings, for example: *****Primitem*** *sfaturi de la părinți*. (for ***primim***) [We get advice from parents.], where the form *primitem* is the result of contamination between the present indicative forms of the verbs *a primi* (*primim*) and *a trimite* (*trimitem*); *V-am ****primis*** *tema mea*. (for *v-am* ***trimis***) [I sent you my home task.], where the past participle *primis* originates from the combination of the past participle forms *trimis* and *primit*; *Am făcut tema pe calculator ca să fie mai simplu să o ****trimesc***. (for *să o* ***trimit***) [I have done my home task on my computer so that it is easier to send.], where *trimesc* is the result of contamination between the present indicative forms, first person singular, *trimit* and *primesc*. The appearance of the hybrid verbal forms *primitem*, *primis*, *trimesc* is favoured by the fact that the verbs *a primi* and *a trimite* form an antonymic pair, and foreigners learning Romanian often retain words through antonymic opposition.

A superior stage of lexical contamination is *lexical creation* (Doca 1981: 89), which is caused by "the extension of some general rules of derivation, composition, etc." (Slama-Cazacu, *apud* Doca 1981: 89; our translation). Thus, in the utterances: *N-am avut apă caldă și am făcut duș cu apă ****frigă***. (for *apă* ***rece***) [I didn't have hot water and I took a shower with cold water.]; *Vremea e foarte ****frigă***. (for *foarte* ***rece***) [The weather is very cold.], the adjective *rece* (apă *rece*, vreme *rece*) is replaced by *frigă*, a word that does not exist in the Romanian language. It is the result of lexical creation; the word is formed from the noun *frig* by adding to it the feminine singular inflection *-ă*, due to the analogy with the adjective *caldă.*

**2. Contamination between syntagms**

In the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language, *contamination between syntagms* can be observed in utterances in which *two synonymous syntagms* occur next to each other: *Aș vrea să vin la Iași și ****la anul viitor***. (for ***la anul***) [I would like to come to Iași next year, too.], where contamination is produced between the synonymous syntagms *la anul* and *anul viitor*; *****Acum două zile în urmă*** *am fost în Bucovina*. (for ***acum două zile***) [Two days ago I went to Bucovina.], where contamination takes place between the syntagms *acum două zile* and *cu două zile în urmă*; *Am început cursurile ****acum o lună în urmă***. (for ***acum o lună***) [I started the course a month ago.], where the syntagms subjected to contamination are *acum o lună* and *cu o lună în urmă*; *Palas Mall se află ****lângă de*** *Palatul Culturii*. (for ***lângă*** *Palatul Culturii*.) [Palas Mall is situated near the Palace of Culture.], the form *lângă de* being the result of contamination between the preposition *lângă* and the synonymous complex preposition *aproape de*. The hybrid constructions *la anul viitor*, *acum două zile în urmă*, *acum o lună în urmă*, resulting from the redundant co-occurrence of some synonymous syntagms, are semantically incompatible and pleonastic.

[11] For more details on the types of formal and semantic attraction which can foster lexical contamination (synonymic, parasynonymic, antonymic and paronymic attraction), see Cristian Moroianu's paper *Contaminația lexicală: tratament lexicografic. De la DA la DELR* (Moroianu 2017: 353-357).



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Contamination between syntagms can also be exemplified by utterances such as: *Ne vedem ***pe o săptămână***. (for ***peste o săptămână***) [We will see each other in a week.], where contamination is produced between the syntagms *peste o săptămână* and *o dată / de două ori pe săptămână*; *Locuiesc ***întro-un** apartamentul frumos*. (for ***într-un** apartament*) [I live in a nice apartment.], where the form *întro-un* is the result of contamination of the syntagms *într-un* and *într-o*; *Când sunteți ***în acasă***? (for *Când sunteți **acasă***?) [When are you at home?] (from *în casă + acasă*); *După cursuri merg ***spre acasă***. (for *După cursuri merg **acasă***.) [After classes I go home.] (from *spre casă + acasă*); *Iau tramvaiul ***până în acasă***. (for *Iau tramvaiul până **acasă***.) [I take the tram home.] (from *până acasă + în casă*).

### 3. Grammatical contamination

In the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language, the majority of errors caused by contamination are observed at the grammatical level. Grammatical contaminations are usually produced between *two different inflectional forms* or between *two different grammatical structures acquired in the target language*.

#### 3.1. Contamination between two different inflectional forms acquired in the Romanian language

Some cases of contamination involve *two different inflectional forms of the paradigm of the same noun, adjective* or *verb*. If we turn to *nouns*, contamination can be produced between singular and plural forms, especially in the case of nouns with irregular plurals, as in the following utterances: *Am făcut un ***oamen** de zăpadă cu colegii mei şi a fost distractiv*. (for ***un om***) [I made a snowman with my classmates and it was fun.]; *Am întâlnire cu ***surora** mea*. (for ***sora***) [I have a meeting with my sister.], where the hybrid forms *oamen* / *surora* are the result of contamination between the singular forms of the nouns *om* / *soră* and their irregular plural forms, *oameni* / *surori*.

As for *adjectives*, contamination is produced either between the masculine and neutral singular form and the feminine singular form, or between the masculine plural and the feminine and neutral plural form, for example:

*– Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iași este cea mai ***vechie** universitate din România*. (for *cea mai **veche** universitate*) [Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași is the oldest university in Romania.], where the incorrect feminine form *vechie* of the adjective results from the contamination between the masculine and neutral singular form (*vechi*) and the feminine singular form (*veche*). The error is also favoured, in this case, by the atypical inflection of the adjective *vechi* with two inflectional forms, which takes the form *vechi* in masculine and neutral singular and masculine, neutral and feminine plural, as opposed to *veche* in feminine singular.

*– O să vizitez și ***ceilalte** orașuri*. (for ***celelalte** orașe*) [I will visit other cities, too.], where *ceilalte* is the result of contamination between the plural forms of the demonstrative of differentiation *celălalt*: *ceilalți* (masculine plural) and *celelalte* (feminine and neutral plural).



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– *Scriem texte* ****scurție***. (for *texte* ***scurte***) [We write short texts.], where the hybrid form *scurție* results from contamination between the masculine plural form (*scurți*) and the feminine and neutral plural form (*scurte*).

– *Am* ****mulție*** *cursurile.* (for ***multe*** *cursuri*) [I have many classes.]; *Avem cursuri de la 9:00 la 14:00 în* ****toați*** *zile*. (for *în* ***toate*** *zilele / în fiecare zi*) [We have classes from 9:00 until 14:00 every day.], where *mulție* / *toați* appeared through contamination between two forms of pronominal indefinite adjectives: *mulți* (the masculine plural form) + *multe* (the feminine and neutral plural form) / *toți* (the masculine plural form) + *toate* (the feminine and neutral plural form).

Contaminations can also occur between *two different verbal forms belonging to the paradigm of the same verbs*, as in the utterances: *Vreau* ****să plecat*** *din orașul*. (for *vreau* ***să plec***) [I want to leave the city.]; *Aș dori* ****să sosit*** *la București la marți*. (for *Aș dori* ***să sosesc*** *la București marți*.) [I would like to arrive in Bucharest on Tuesday.]; *Am mulți prieteni care m-au ajutat* ****să învățat*** *limba română*. (for *m-au ajutat* ***să învăț***) [I have many friends who helped me to learn Romanian.]; *Vă rog* ****să corectat*** *tema*. (for *vă rog* ***să corectați***) [I ask you to check the home task.]; *Trebuie* ****să spus*** *ce program aveți*. (for *trebuie* ***să spuneți***) [You have to say what plans you have.], etc., where the hybrid forms *să plecat*, *să sosit*, *să învățat*, *să corectat*, *să spus* result from contamination between the present subjunctive forms: *să plec*, *să sosesc*, *să învăț*, *să corectați*, *să spuneți* and the past participle: *plecat*, *sosit*, *învățat*, *corectat*, *spus*. In this respect, of special interest are utterances like: *Vreau* ****să scriet*** *despre ce am făcut în week-end*. (for *vreau* ***să scriu***) [I want to write about what I did at the wekend.], where contamination occurs between the present subjunctive *să scriu* and a regularized form[12] of the past participle of the verb *a scrie – *scriet*, a form regularized according to the model of the past participle ending in *-t*: *citit*, *venit*, *vorbit*, which replaces the correct form *scris*.

Yet another case in which we can talk about contamination between two different verbal forms belonging to the paradigm of the same verb is illustrated by the following utterances: *Azi* ****o să cumpărat*** *un dicționar*. (for ***o să cumpăr***) [Today I will buy a dictionary.], where contamination is produced between the "popular" future *o să cumpăr* and the past participle *cumpărat*; *Doresc* ****să dați-mi înapoi*** *banii*. (for ***să-mi dați înapoi***) [I want you to give me the money back.], where the form *să dați-mi înapoi* results from contamination between the subjunctive *să*(*-mi*) *dați* (*înapoi*) and the imperative *dați*(*-mi*) (*înapoi*); *În fiecare zi* ****începuteam*** *cursurile la ora 9:00*. (for ***începeam***) [Every day we started classes at 9:00.], where the form *începuteam* is the result of the overlapping of two different verbal forms belonging to the verb *a începe*: the past participle *început* and the imperfective *începeam*; *Vin la cursuri* ****pentru a învățat*** *limba română*. (for *Vin la cursuri* ***pentru a învăța*** *limba română*.) [I attend the classes in order to study the Romanian

[12] For more details, see the paper *Despre unele erori în însușirea limbii române de către străini – erorile de regularizare* (Sterpu 2015: 493–502), where we mention that, in the process of learning Romanian by foreigners, the trend of the formation of past participles following the regular and therefore more productive patterns constitute a cause of regularization errors. This type of errors is exemplified by utterances such as: Am **scrit* tema (for *am scris*) [I wrote down the hometask.], Ne-am **ducit* la film (for *ne-am dus*) [We went to the movie.], where the pattern of the past participle *a citi – citit* is also extended over some verbs ending in *-e*, such as *a scrie* and *a se duce*.



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language.]; *Te invit* ****pentru a venit*** *în România*. (for *Te invit pentru* ***a veni*** *în România. / Te invit să vii în România*.) [I invite you to come to Romania.]; the last two utterances include the hybrid forms *pentru a învățat*, *pentru a venit* that appeared as a result of contamination between the infinitive forms *a învăța*, *a vizita* and the past participles *învățat*, *vizitat*.

In other situations, contamination involves *two competing verbal forms in the Romanian language*, as shown by utterances like: *Sper că pot* ****să merge*** *la Iași la viitor*. (for *pot* ***să merg*** / ***merge***) [I hope I will be able to go to Iași in the future.]; *Ei nu pot* ****să merge*** *cu noi la munte*. (for *nu pot* ***să meargă*** / ***merge***) [They cannot go to the mountains with us.]; *Nu poate* ****să veni*** *azi la facultate*. (for *nu poate* ***să vină*** / ***veni***) [He cannot come to the university today.]. In the cited examples, contamination is produced between the subjunctive structure (favoured in oral speech): *pot să merg*, *pot să meargă*, *poate să vină* and the infinitive one (typical of written language)[13]: *pot merge*, *poate veni*, taking into account the competition[14] between the infinitive and the subjunctive in the structures that contain the modal verb *a putea*.

In the case of verbs, contamination can also occur between the verbal suffixes of the present tense *-ez* (*fumez*, *lucrez*) and *-esc* (*citesc*, *vorbesc*), whose co-occurrence leads to the appearance of hybrid verbal forms in which the two suffixes fuse, for example: *Nu* ****fumezsc*** *niciodată*. (for *nu* ***fumez***) [I never smoke.], ****Lucrezsc*** *pentru examenul*. (for ***lucrez***) [I work for the exam.].

### 3.2. Contamination between two different grammatical structures acquired in the Romanian language

Some cases of contamination of this kind deal with *the adjective* and are caused by the co-ocurrence of two different comparative structures of inequality: the one with the adverbial morpheme *foarte* (the sign of the absolute superlative) and that with the adverbial morpheme *mai* (the sign of the comparative degree of superiority) – the co-ocurrence which leads to semantically incompatible hybrid structures, such as: *Viața aici este* ****foarte mai naturală*** *decât cea de la Bruxelles*. (for *Viața aici este* ***mai naturală*** *decât cea de la Bruxelles*.) [Life here is much more natural than in Brussels.]; *Am văzut multe mașini care sunt* ****foarte mai noi*** *decât mașinile Franței*. (for *Am văzut multe mașini care sunt* ***mai noi*** *decât mașinile din Franța*.) [I saw many cars which are newer than the cars in France.]. In both cases there is contamination between the structures with the morpheme *foarte*: *foarte naturală*, *foarte noi* and those with the morpheme *mai*: *mai naturală*, *mai noi*.

In the case of *the verb*, contamination can take place between *two variants of the morphological realisation of the future*, the variant with the auxiliary *a vrea*

[13] In reference to this issue, *Gramatica limbii române* (Gramatica 2005: 393) underlines: "In written language, especially in a refined style (belletristic, scientific and legal), the infinitive – a more abstract verbal form – is more frequent. The trend to use the infinitive instead of the subjunctive fits the Romanian language into the pattern of the Romance languages. At the same time, in oral speech (in all its variants) the subjunctive is preferred (…); thus, Romanian distances itself from other Romance languages and approaches Balkan languages" (our translation).

[14] "In modern Romanian the subjunctive competes with the infinitive, being a synonym of the latter" (Gramatica 2005: 392; our translation).



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followed by the infinitive and the variant with the invariable auxiliary *o* (a contracted form of the auxiliary *a vrea*) followed by the present subjunctive, as in the utterances: *Atunci* ***voi să pot rămâne** mai mult timp aici*. (for ***voi putea rămâne***) [Then I will be able to stay here longer.]; *Când ajung în Franța* ***voi să-ți telefonez***. (for ***îți voi telefona***) [When I arrive in France, I will call you.]; ****Vom să dăm** examen săptămâna viitoare*. (for ***vom da***) [We will take the exam next week.], where contamination is produced between the structures comprising the auxiliary *a vrea* + the infinitive (*voi putea*, *voi telefona*, *vom da*) and the ones comprising the invariable auxiliary *o* + the present subjunctive (*o să pot*, *o să telefonez*, *o să dăm*).

Yet another type of contamination including verbs can be produced between two passive structures, as in the following utterance: *Grădina* ***s-a fost deschisă** săptămâna trecută*. (for ***s-a deschis***) [The garden opened last week.], in which we observe a mixture between the structure with the reflexive pronoun (*s-a deschis*) and the one with the verb *a fi* (*a fost deschisă*).

*Contamination of two different reflexive structures* acquired in the Romanian language can lead to the appearance of new forms, for example: ****M-am adus aminte** că avem întâlnire*. (for ***mi-am adus aminte***) [I remembered that we had a meeting.]; ****Te aduci aminte** că trebuie să cauți un hotel în Cluj*. (for ***îți aduci aminte***) [You remember that you have to look for a hotel in Cluj.]; *Nu* ****se aduce aminte** unde a parcat mașina*. (for ***nu își aduce aminte***) [He doesn't remember where he parked the car.], where the hybrid forms *m-am adus aminte*, *te aduci aminte*, *nu se aduce aminte* resulted from contamination between a reflexive structure with a reflexive pronoun in the Accusative case: *a se duce* (*m-am dus*; *te-ai dus*; *se duce*) and the one with a reflexive pronoun in the Dative case: *a-și aduce aminte* (*mi-am adus aminte*; *ți-ai adus aminte*; *își aduce aminte*). It has to be mentioned in this connection that foreigners who learn Romanian face difficulty in distinguishing between the verbs used with the reflexive pronoun in the Dative case, such as *a-și aminti* (less frequent situations) and those used with the Accusative, such as *a se duce* (the majority of the cases). This difficulty in choosing the correct reflexive pronoun in the case of reflexive verbs is sure to contribute to the production of contamination in the examples cited above.

In other utterances, such as: ****Îmi spăl** pe față*. (for ***Mă spăl** pe față*.) [I wash my face.]; ****Îmi spăl** pe mâinile mele*. (for ***Mă spăl** pe mâini*.) [I wash my hands.]; ****Îți speli** pe dinți*. (for ***Te speli** pe dinți*.) [You clean your teeth.], contamination of two reflexive structures acquired in the Romanian language involves a structure which contains a reflexive pronoun in the Dative case with possessive meaning (possessive Dative): *îmi spăl fața*, *îmi spăl mâinile*, *îți speli dinții* and the one with a reflexive pronoun in the Accusative case: *mă spăl pe față* / *pe mâini*, *te speli pe dinți*, in which the presence of the preposition *pe* is obligatory.

One more frequent type of contamination is observed in the utterances in which it results from the co-occurrence of the partially synonymous prepositions *în* and *la*[15] in certain structures comprising a verb of movement (*a merge*, *a se duce*, *a*

[15] For more details on the synonymous relations between various prepositions, see *Gramatica limbii române*, which demonstrates that simple and complex prepositions "enter in synonymous



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*pleca*, *a ajunge* etc.) and a noun (common or proper) functioning as an adverbial of place. The simultaneous presence of these two prepositions in the mind of the Romanian language learner can determine the following forms: *Mergem ***în la munte** pentru week-end*. (for *Mergem **la munte*** în *week-end.*) [We go to the mountains at the weekend.], where contamination is produced between **în munte* and *la munte*; *În vacanță merg ***în la Franța***. (for *În vacanță merg **în Franța***.) [On vacation I go to France.], where contamination occurs between *în Franța* and **la Franța*; *Mă duc ***în la București***. (for *Mă duc **la București***.) [I go to Bucharest.] (from *în București* + *la București*; *Plec ***în la Cluj***. (for *Plec **la Cluj***.) [I go to Cluj.] (from *în Cluj* + *la Cluj*); *Vin ***în la facultate***. (for *Vin **la facultate***.) [I come to the university.] (from *în facultate* + *la facultate*), etc. In the cited utterances, the combinations like *în la munte*, *în la Franța*, *în la București* etc. are incorrect hybrid structures resulting from a simultaneous use of the partially synonymous prepositions *în* and *la* – prepositions that are almost identical as far as their importance and frequency in the Romanian language are concerned. Even though they are partial synonyms, they both have

> a relative specialisation for a certain meaning. For example, the preposition *în* which, in some structures, indicates precise localisation or a final point of a movement in space, like the preposition *la*, tends to be used with the names of countries and continents (*S-a stabilit în Germania.*, *Pleacă în Grecia / În America*. [He settled in Germany. He leaves for Greece / for America.]). At the same time, the preposition *la* is used with the names of settlements (*Pleacă la Paris*., *S-a stabilit la Madrid*. [He leaves for Paris. He settled in Madrid.]) (*Gramatica* 2005: 625; our translation).

As can be seen from what has been stated above, contamination appears in various forms in the utterances produced by foreigners learning the Romanian language, who not infrequently use hybrid words, syntagms and grammatical structures resulting from *mental associations* (based on their semantic and / or formal similarity) between unfamiliar words, syntagms or grammatical structures, which appear in the learning process, and words, syntagms or grammatical structures previously acquired in Romanian. All these hybrid linguistic elements caused by contamination are a sign that foreigners learning Romanian form *logical associations* and try to integrate new linguistic knowledge into the system of previous knowledge, applying various learning mechanisms. It has to be mentioned in this connection that, in psycholinguistics, contamination is considered to be one of *the universal strategies of learning a language* (Doca 1981: 122). Seen from another angle, contamination "is the result of an active attitude of the learner as far as new knowledge in the TL is concerned" (Doca 1977: 15; our translation), whereas errors determined by contamination are, like the majority of errors appearing in the language learning process, "logical products of the perfect functioning of a human technique or strategy of learning", not "anomalies or absurd fallacies" (Slama-Cazacu 1999: 345; our translation).

relations as absolute or, more often, partial synonyms: *către* / *spre* / *la*, *în* / *la*, *înspre* / *spre*, *pe* / *peste* / *deasupra*, *pentru* / *spre*, *sub* / *dedesubtul* (…)" (Gramatica 2005: 625; our translation).



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There is no doubt that, akin to any other error, errors determined by contamination can also be considered "*key facts significant for the prognosis of learning*" (Slama-Cazacu 1999: 729; our translation), since they draw attention to some difficulties encountered by foreigners while learning the Romanian language. Moreover, far from having a negative character, these mistakes are a sign that foreigners learning the Romanian language progressively build up a new linguistic system – an individual, temporary linguistic system, an interlanguage with its own system used for producing messages in the Romanian language, which implicitly means that the learning process is in progress. However, in order to avoid the fossilization of these errors, they should be tackled through various strategies, so that the interlanguage does not stagnate and become permanent, turning into a stable form of communication – it should be able to evolve, gradually approaching the target language.

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## Abstract

The present study is based on the premise that in the process of learning Romanian as a foreign language one can often come upon errors that do not depend on the mother tongue of the learner, but on the influence of *the stock of knowledge previously accumulated in the Romanian language*, to be precise on the *interference* between accumulated knowledge and newly-acquired knowledge in the Romanian language. In the current paper, of all the various kinds of errors made by foreigners who learn Romanian, *no matter what their mother tongue is*, we aim to draw attention to one specific type of language errors: those generated by *contamination*, a linguistic phenomenon determining, according to the definition given in the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (*Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*), the modification of "a word or a grammatical structure through their intersection with other words or structures similar in meaning" (DEX 1998: 217; our translation). The phenomenon of contamination can occur between words (lexical contamination), different



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structures (syntagmatic contamination) and different inflectional forms (grammatical contamination). Following the lines traced by the psycholinguistic approach to the foreign language acquisition process, we see contamination as one of the universal learning strategies and we strongly believe that all the hybrid linguistic elements resulting from contamination attest to the fact that foreigners who learn Romanian make a series of logical associations and try to integrate new linguistic knowledge (acquired during the learning process) inside the system of previously accumulated knowledge. We have tried to explain the mechanisms that constitute the basis for the production of errors determined by contamination, because the teacher's understanding and the learner's comprehension of these errors result in the improvement of the process of teaching / learning Romanian as a foreign language.



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