LEXICAL INNOVATION

Maria Laura RUS
University „Petru Maior", Târgu-Mureş

ABSTRACT

The vocabulary is the most susceptible compartment of language to be subjected to different changes. The lexical units that were subject to these changes of form and/or meaning, representing lexical innovations, can be underlined in so far as they are seen diachronically, because once generalized, they become historical categories. The changes in vocabulary determine the quantitative growth of it, based on words and variants that already exist in language or adaptation and endorsement of words, forms, meanings from other languages. The paper presents different linguistic phenomena that lexical innovations are based on: lexical analogy, hypercorrectness, popular etymology, contamination. Illustrative examples for each of these phenomena are brought into our discussion.

Key words: *lexical innovation, analogy, hypercorrectness, popular etymology, contamination*

The vocabulary of any language is the domain subject to the most rapid changes. One can discuss about changes that take place in language or linguistic changes only after spreading or embracing some innovations, new linguistic facts. Eugen Coşeriu talks about these facts in the following terms: 'Everything that, in one speaker's words, is getting far – in a linguistic manner – from the existent patterns in the language in which conversation takes place, is called innovation. And the acceptance on the part of the listener of an innovation, as a pattern for the next expressions, can be called endorsement. […] A linguistic change ('a change inside the language') represents the spreading or generalization of an innovation, namely it necessarily implies a series of successive endorsements. This means that, ultimately, every change is an endorsement at the outset'[1]. Therefore vocabulary changes to the extent to which some lexical innovations generalize.

A lexical innovation can imply the use of a new lexical unit, the modification of the root or of the semantic structure of a word in a language. Emphasizing such an innovation is a process that compares different stages in the development of a language, and because of its generalization the innovation that we discuss becomes a historical category.

The above fact can be illustrated through an example from the Romanian language. The word *vedetă* (*leading actor*), having its origin in the French *vedette* signifies 'the actor or actress that has the main role in a

[1] Eugen Coşeriu, *Sincronie, diacronie şi istorie*, Editura Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1997: 70.

BDD-A3775 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:32 UTC)

show, especially in a movie (and he/she has a great popularity)'[2]. The same meaning as the above is rendered by another Romanian term, recently appeared in the language, and this is *star*, a word of English origin. The two terms are in competition, but the recent borrowed word (*star*) began to be more powerful than its French rival. Thus, the use of *star* beside *vedetă* represents an innovation, as well as the use of *vedetă* as a unique word for the above meaning at the time it appeared in language represented a lexical innovation for that time.

Lexical changes take place in time and it comes out that at one time two terms can be in competition because they have the same meaning and thus the selection of innovation must take place. This kind of situation happened to *războel* (old name for *war*) and *războiu* (*war*). The first one, a form remade from a Slavonic term in accordance to the Latin *bellum* ('armed conflict between two or more groups, social categories or states, for some economic and political interests') was used in the 19th century, probably, in order to make the difference between it and its Slavonic homonym which signified 'household instrument used for weaving'. At that time *războel* represented the Latinists' lexical innovation, but nowadays it is already obsolete (it appears only in the dictionaries or it is used with a humoristic meaning). The reverse situation happened to the synonymous terms *rătund* and *rotund* (*rounded*). Only the second one became established and survived and that was another innovation belonging to the Latinists[3]. Nowadays *rătund*, from the Latin *retundus*, is a dialectal variant.

What one can notice from the above examples is the fact that the fate of every lexical innovation is decided by certain chances to compel recognition or not in one aspect or another of the language.

Some innovations have their starting point in different mistakes, infringements from the linguistic standards. These facts generalize and become correct forms, therefore representing innovations. For instance, if we consider the adjective *nou* (*new*), we must say that the feminine plural *nouă* has been replaced by *noi* in order to avoid confusion with its homonym, the numeral *nouă* (*nine*)[4]. Undoubtedly, these 'mistakes' have their role in the linguistic development, since they can eventually become correct forms, replacing the previous ones. It is the case of the variant *foarfecă* (*scissors*), which replaced *foarfece*; *frecție* (*massage*), which replaced *fricție*, but is still in competition with *fricțiune*, although the last one is not so often used.

[2] According to *DEX*, 1998, s.v.

[3] According to Theodor Hristea, *Probleme de etimologie. Studii. Articole. Note*, Editura Ştiinţifică, Bucureşti, 1968: 343-347.

[4] See also Iorgu Iordan, *Lingvistică romanică: evoluție*, *curente*, *metode*, Editura Academiei, Bucureşti, 1962: 170.

BDD-A3775 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:32 UTC)

Lexical innovations have at the outset different linguistic causes that the speakers are not aware of, but they affect their speech. In this category there are the following phenomena that we are going to speak about: analogy, contamination, popular etymology and hypercorrectness.

Analogy consists in achieving new aspects, variants, meanings, new words, on the basis of pre-existent patterns that exert an assimilating action for several reasons. This linguistic phenomenon has an important role in word formation.

An illustrative example of analogy is the verb *a picta* (*to paint*). Until the end of the 19th century, there was one verb of Latin origin that was used together with the nouns *pictor* and *pictură*, namely the verb *a zugrăvi* (neo-Greek origin). Once the lexical family *sculptor*, *sculptură*, *sculpta* began to gain ground in the domain of fine arts, then spreading in current use too, the verb *a picta* imposed itself, beside the nouns in its lexical family, following the pattern *a sculpta*. *A picta* resulted from these nouns by back formation. The verb *a şofa* (to drive a car) appeared in the same manner, this time from the noun *şofer* (*driver*), of French origin, according to the pattern *şoma*, *şomer*.

Analogy is the process through which words of different origins have been assimilated in Romanian language. A series of nouns in the vocabulary of old Romanian language, ending in *-ar* (*zidar*, *tâmplar*, *cojocar*, *cizmar*, *dogar*, *cârciumar* – *bricklayer*, *carpenter*, *furrier*, *shoemaker*, *cooper*, *publican*) represented an analogical pattern for assimilating new borrowings from different languages, especially French, Italian, German. Thus, we have terms as: *vestiar* (*cloakroom*), from the French *vestiaire*, *veterinar* (*vet*), from the French *vétérinaire*, *marinar* (*sailor*), from the French *marinier* and the German *Mariner* etc.

There is another important fact to be emphasized regarding semantic analogy: this phenomenon affects both the content and the form of a word. Thus, as a consequence of an analogical influence (the series *perfect*, *perfecțiune*), the term *defecțiune* (*flaw*), from the French *défection*, the Latin *defectio*, *-onis* (abandoning one cause, deserting a party; the fact of not being there where one is waited for) became synonym with *defectare* (*out of order*), having the meaning ‘trouble, fault that stops good functioning of a machine, a device, a mechanism, the normal progress of an action etc.’

Through synonymic word formation, semantic analogy has an important stylistic role, developing figurative meanings of words. For instance, the metaphorical meaning of the noun *bostan* (= *cap*) – *pumpkin* (=*head*) determined, by analogy, the use of the nouns *dovleac* (synonym of *pumpkin*) and *tărtăcuță* (*gourd*) with the same meaning.

Contamination or lexical crossing represents the process through which two synonymous terms with the same frequency in communication overlap in speakers’ conscience, the result being some hybrid forms, accepted in language as variants or even proper lexical units. It is a

BDD-A3775 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:32 UTC)

spontaneous phenomenon, since the speaker does not have any stylistic intention. One of the most common examples in this way is probably the verb *a vroi*, appeared as a consequence of a contamination between the verb *a voi* with the verb *a vrea* (*to want*). Contamination also gave proper lexical units such as *cocostârc* (*cocor* + *stârc*), *a azvârli* (*a arunca* + *a zvârli*), *rotocol* (*roată* + *ocol*) – *stork* (*crane* + *heron*), *to fling* (*to throw* + *to hurl*), *wreath* (*round* + *detour*), etc.[5].

Hypercorrectness names the process through which the speakers change the initial form of some words for fear of not mistaking them. Even though in many cases there are non-literary variants that appear as a consequence of this phenomenon, there are also situations when those variants succeed in making their way to the literary language. We have, for instance, the variant *delapida* (*embezzle*), from the French *dilapider*, the Latin *DILAPIDARE*.

Another linguistic phenomenon that we discuss is known under the name of popular etymology and it represents the false analysis and the etymological interpretation of some words that are less used/known by speakers or of some obscure words in point of motivation. This phenomenon is mainly based on what Charles Bally calls 'etymological instinct', on the basis of which speakers create a motivation that lacks scientific basis for those terms that have an indistinct meaning or an unusual form. Popular etymology is equally based on resemblance between ideas or on some formal similarities such as homonymy and synonymy. Based on these facts, those speakers associate, for instance, the term *patrulă* (*patrol*) to the numeral *patru* (*four*) or the term *şezlong* (*lounge chair*) to the verb *a şedea* (*to sit down*). But *patrulă* is actually a term of German origin (*Patrulle*), meaning 'military sub-unit that fulfils a research mission, guard, control' and the word *şezlong* is from the French compound noun *chaise-longue* (*long chair*).

Because of the paronymy, words like *acoladă* (*brace*) or *filigran* (*filigree*) came to be used incorrectly as *arcoladă* and *filigram*, according to *arc* (*bow*, *arc*) and *gram* (*gram*). In fact, the term *filigran* has nothing to do with *gram*, because it is a word of French origin (*filigrane*) and this one too is from the Latin *filum* (*thread*) and *granum* (*wheat*); meanwhile *arcoladă* has a clear semantic motivation, *acolada* representing a graphic sign in the shape of an arc reuniting words, numbers, paragraphs etc. However, *acoladă* comes from the French *accolade* which belongs to the lexical family of the word *col* (*neck*), because, initially, it referred to the action of embracing someone's neck, as greeting and only later it came to designate

[5] For the stylistic intention of the speaker, see the variant of 'lexical derailment' suggested by Al. Graur in his work *Scrieri de ieri şi de azi*, Editura Ştiințifică, Bucureşti, 1970: 160-167.

BDD-A3775 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:32 UTC)

the graphic sign. The above incorrect forms are motivated for those relatively cultivated speakers.

The phenomenon of popular etymology operates in modifying the meanings of some terms, but not necessarily their form. The content is thus affected, a term that is more often used and known having an influence over a less known and less used term. An illustrative example in this case is the term *babalâc* (*old fogy*) that initially showed politeness, curtsey towards an important person. In the long run, the first part of the word was connected to the term *babă*, especially to the pejorative connotations of it; therefore the term began to mean 'old and helpless person'. Popular etymology is noticed at some compound nouns as *omnivor* (*omnivore*). Wrongly connecting this term to the noun *om* (*man*) from the Latin *homo* + *vorare* (*to eat*, *to swallow*) gave the term the meaning 'that eat people', a synonym for *cannibal* (*cannibal*). In fact, *omnivor* comes from French (*omnivore*) and in its composition one can identify the Latin *omnis* (*everything*) and *-vor* from the Latin verb *vorare* (*to eat*), justifying the correct meaning: 'that eat vegetal and animal food'.

Meaning and form transformation too is noticed in the word *cârdăşie* (*collusion*). At the beginning the form of the word was *cărdăşie*, but under the influence of *cârd*, it changed into the variant we know and accept today. The meaning of *cărdăşie*, derived from *cardaş* (*brother*, *mate*) was *tovărăşie* (*comradeliness*, *partnership*), but changing the form brought the undervaluing of initial meaning, upheld by the existence of some idioms where the term *cârd* has the meaning of 'coterie, gang' (*a intra în cârd/cârdăşie cu cineva*). Nowadays the term *cărdăşie* has a negative meaning: 'joining for objectionable purposes'.

The difference between the above linguistic phenomena resides in the reasons that make them appear. Analogy appears because of a simple formal resemblance between words, hypercorrectness is the consequence of the awareness of the right/wrong opposition in language, contamination has its starting point in a semantic resemblance and popular etymology implies a false analysis and etymological interpretation. However, we have to underline the fact that such linguistic phenomena give rise to variants of some words that represent, in fact, innovations in relation to form and meaning. If a variant is eventually generalized and established, that is something required by the language use.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*** *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, ediția a II-a, Bucureşti, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 1998.

*** *Dicționarul ortografic*, *ortoepic şi morfologic al limbii române*, ediția a II-a revăzută şi adăugită, Bucureşti, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2005.

Coşeriu, Eugen, *Sincronie*, *diacronie şi istorie*, Bucureşti, Editura Enciclopedică, 1997.

BDD-A3775 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:32 UTC)

Graur, Alexandru, *Scrieri de ieri şi de azi*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiințifică, 1970.
Guțu Romalo, Valeria, *Aspecte ale evoluției limbii române*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas Educațional, 2005.
Hristea, Theodor, *Probleme de etimologie. Studii. Articole. Note*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiințifică, 1968.
Iordan, Iorgu, *Lingvistică romanică: evoluție*, *curente*, *metode*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 1962.
Stoichițoiu-Ichim, Adriana, *Vocabularul limbii române actuale. Dinamică*, *influențe*, *creativitate*, Bucureşti, Editura ALL Educational, 2001.
Şerban, Vasile şi Evseev, Ivan, *Vocabularul românesc contemporan. Schiță de sistem*, Timişoara, Editura Facla, 1978.

BDD-A3775 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:32 UTC)