# ASPECT AND VOICE CONVEYORS CONTRASTIVELY VIEWED: GERMAN, ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN FUNCTION VERB PHRASES

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*Abstract*

After previously searching through the samples of Romanian function verb phrases (FVPs) extracted from various sources and assigning them to the aspect subcategories which they most fittingly illustrate: ingressive, punctual, iterative and egressive, the author devotes the former section of the present contribution to investigating stylistic synonymy as well as defending nominal style and such intriguing FVPs as fall in love and fall out of love.

The approach in the latter section is roughly the same, i.e. descriptive in the beginning, with copious illustration of various semantic shifts (active / reflexive → passive, active → reflexive) as well as of the contrasts and similarities observed when comparing the three languages at issue, and interpretive in the second stage, with the focus on two most challenging cases: the 'implicit' passive with a subject acting semantically as a 'minor performer'; the surprisingly divergent semantics of two at first blush similar FVPs (be thrown into ecstasies and go into ecstasies).

## I Function Verb Phrases[1] as Conveyors of *Aktionsarten*

Both the champions and the critics of nominal style agree that, despite their relative lengthiness, function verb phrases are genuine perennials which have lived through dramatic morphological and syntactic changes and, moreover, that it is such unnervingly deep-seated mainsprings as availability for expressing a wide range of Aktionsarten that must be credited with helping grammatical metaphor endure beyond dozens of passing linguistic fads.

This ability to highlight various stages or phases of the activity as process expressed by verbs Polenz views as a major criterion for assessing the stylistic force of a FVP. That, in all probability, should account for the indispensability of certain FVPs - even where a semantic one-word analogue is by no means hard to come by - , the aspectual auxiliary of which, nevertheless, falling short of the translator's expectations when in need of appropriate emphasis on the most relevant activity or process phase.Such is the case with the English ingressive *fall in love*, which long since demoted the sequence *begin to love* to the trivial position of a dictionary paraphrase (as did for that matter, German and Romanian too, where *von Liebe ergriffen werden* and *a fi cuprins de dragoste* came to supersede *zu lieben anfangen* and *a începe să iubească*, respectively - even if only resorted to in literary or elevated style, the colloquial one favouring the two-word reflexives *sich_verlieben* and *a se îndrăgosti*).

It is English again - one must give credit where it is due - that came up with yet another highly original FVP accommodating the egressive meaning opposed to the one discussed above: *fall out of love*. Admittedly, this fairly recent coinage has not come into its own as yet - as the failure of most English dictionaries to include it among their entries seem to indicate - , but it is definitely a choice to be reckoned with in less formal styles, where aspectual combinations such as *cease to love* and *stop loving* or trite paraphrases like *love no more* and *not love any more* sound dismayingly run-of-the-mill. Unfortunately, for German and Romanian there is only Hobson's



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choice to take, i.e. they have to make do with lacklustre sequences such as *nicht mehr lieben*, *zu lieben aufhören* and *a nu mai iubi*, *a înceta să mai iubească*, respectively.

To my mind, the vividness and immediacy of both *fall in love* and *fall out of love* are ultimately to be traced back to the aggressive dynamics of *fall*, which must thus be taken to induce general anaesthesia of the subject's will.

The German examples listed below also go to prove that function verbs can every so often transcend their strictly grammatical province with amazing effects for the overall semantics of the FVP:

- *in Bewegung geraten/kommen* (the stress is on the onset of the action - inchoative aspect);
- *etwas in Bewegung halten, in Bewegung sein* (duration is of the essence - durative aspect);
- *etwas in Bewegung bringen, geraten lassen, kommen lassen* (the initiator of the action comes into play - transformative-causative combination).

As far as marginal function verbs[2] are concerned, stylistic synomyms are the perfect device to put them on their mettle, as illustrated by *eine Frage stellen*, *eine Frage aufwerfen*, *eine Frage aufnehmen*, or *jdm. eine Frage stellen*, *jdm. eine Frage unterbreiten*, *jdm. eine Frage vorlegen*.

An even more exquisite array in terms of discriminating connotations flaunt FVPs the nominal constituents of which have been known to assume psychologically-based semantic role. German *sich fürchten* (E *be in fear of*, R *a-i fi frică*) with its stylistic synonyms is a relevant case in point : *in Furcht fallen / geraten / kommen / sein*, or *Furcht empfinden / fühlen / haben / hegen / (ver)spüren.*

To sum up, when it comes to making aspect conspicuous, what really speaks volumes for the preeminence of FVPs above their archrivals, one-word semantic analogues, is the fact that the former fittingly feature the noun, which is not subject to conjugation, hence notoriously defying such oppressive categories as tense, person, as well as mood. Thus the highlight switches from the process or action as expressed by the verb over to the concept or notion, as represented by the noun.

Stylistically viewed, compliance with the principle of end-weight acts as an added incentive, keeping the listener/reader on tenterhooks up to the end, when the main information is finally processed (cf. G *vorgestern erschreckte er die ganze Stadt*, *vorgestern* ***versetzte*** *er die ganze Stadt* ***in Schrecken***, E *the day before yesterday he frightened the whole town…,the day before yesterday he* ***threw*** *the whole town* ***into a fright***, R *alaltăieri el* ***a speriat*** *tot oraşul…*, *alaltăieri el* ***a băgat*** *tot oraşul* ***în sperieţi***).

By way of conclusion, I deem it safe to infer that its vast number of inchoative FVPs reveals Romanian as being closer to German, since most English FVPs have been found to convey momentary actions .

Clearly setting Romanian apart from the two Germanic languages - which in such cases rely heavily on good old analytical means, is its recourse to synthetic devices (such as prefixation of the function verb) for turning certain momentary FVPs into interative ones ,as illustrated by: R *a REveni în memorie*, with its causative counterpart *a REaduce în memorie*, G *jdm. IMMER WIEDER in den Sinn kommen*, *jdm. etwas WIEDERHOLT in Erinnerung (zurück)bringen / rufen*, E *KEEP ON coming to one's mind*, *KEEP ON bringing / calling to someone's mind*, *come to one's mind OVER AND OVER (AGAIN)*, *bring / call to someone's mind TIME AND AGAIN*.



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## II. Function Verb Phrases as Conveyors of Voice

A minute survey of the body of examples utilized in *DIP* (sch II.7), as well as the additional ones extracted from various sources, laid the groundwork for my subsequent research into voice as conveyed by FVPs , which has in turn yielded the following facts:

a) Like German and English, Romanian has frequent - if not that ample - recourse to certain function verbs for expressing what I took the liberty to label the 'semantic' or 'implicit' passive – a combination which conveys a passive meaning couched in an active-like form, i.e. containing no passive auxiliary , eg

*a cădea victimă* [= a FI ucis] (G *zum Opfer fallen*, E *fall a victim*), *a cădea în uitare*, *a cădea pradă* (*ataculuı* etc.), *a cădea în dizgrație*, *a ajunge de ocară* [= *a FI dispreţuit*, *ridiculizat*], (G *in Schande geraten* [= *verhöhnt / verspottet WERDEN*], E *bring shame upon oneself* [= BE disgraced]), *a suferi o modificare*, *a căpăta expresie* [= a FI exprimat], *a fi în uz*, *a da un examen* [= *a FI examinat*], (G *eine Prüfung ablegen* [= *geprüft WERDEN*], E *take an exam* [= BE examined]).

b) Nevertheless, certain German and English FVPs - the ones employing dynamic verbs in particular (s. *kommen, geraten, gelangen, come, get, fall*, etc.) - will settle for nothing less than a Romanian explicit passive as their semantic equivalents. Cf. for instance : G *zur Abstimmung kommen*, E *come to a vote*, (R-*a FI supus la vot*), G *in Umlauf kommen*, E *get into circulation* (R *a FI pus în circulaţie*), G *zur Aufführung kommen*, E *come into production* (R *a FI pus în scenă*), G *in Betracht kommen*, E *come under consideration* (R *a FI luat în considerare*).

c) A further type of implicit passive convey superficially (i.e. in surface structure only) reflexive FVPs such as *a se bucura de* (*mare*) *căutare* [= a FI căutat], *a se bucura de o primire favorabilă* [= a FI primit favorabil] (E *enjoy a favourable reception*), *a se bucura de stimă* [= a FI stimat] (G *Achtung geniessen*), *a-şi pierde onoarea* [= a FI dezonorat]. The verb *a se bucura* is a marginal function verb ( cf *DIP*, sch II.7, FVPs employing *finden, erfahren and* ***leiden***), which seems to be equally at its ease when translated both by means of an active FVP (s. examples above) and of a passive one (eg. E *BE given an enthusiastic reception, BE held in respect*).

d) On the other hand, some superficially active FVPs must be construed as reflexives in disguise , eg. *a cădea în desuetudine* [= a SE învechi / perima] (G *ausser Gebrauch kommen*, E *come / fall / go / pass into disuse*), *a cădea în* ruină [= a SE ruina] (G *in Verfall geraten*, E *fall / sink into decay*), a avea încredere [= a SE încrede].The shift seems to go both ways, for we are also bound to encounter specimens like *a-şi pierde minţile* [= a înnebuni], *a-şi da cu părerea* [= a opina] (s. also sch. II. 7 of *DIP).*

Since implicit passives are "notorious" to provide one with ample food for thought, the concluding pages of this section will be devoted to discussing this particular topic.

For openers, mention should be made of the fact that one of the main reasons for which speakers/writers seem to fall back quite frequently on implicit passives realized by FVPs is their time/space-saving function. Indeed, most German *kommen-, gelangen-* and *geraten-*, as well as English *come-, get-*, and *fall-* FVPs are monovalent, as contrasted to the usually bivalent explicit passives bound - at least in deep structure - to reveal the identity of the perject (= agent).

There are, however, further benefits which prevail upon speakers/writers to resort to such FVPs.Let us consider the following examples: *solche Geräte kamen ausser Gebrauch vor sechs Jahren* şi *solche Geräte werden seit sechs Jahren nicht mehr gebraucht.* Given the two different aspects conveyed - egressive, by *ausser Gebrauch kommen*, and durative, by *gebrauchen* -, recourse must accordingly be



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had to different tenses - past, in the former, and present, in the latter example - in order for the semantics to survive the transposition intact.Yet the key-element in the last two examples above is the noun phrase *solche Geräte*, which assumes the grammatical function of subject in both of them, whereas the semantic roles attached to it seem to differ considerably. Thus, in contradistinction to the latter, where *solche Geräte* is most obviously a 'patient', the active voice employed in the former example effects the conversion of the 'patient' (= the entity directly affected by the action or by the consequences thereof) into a special type of 'agent', a kind of 'minor performer' (i.e. the equivalent of a 'sleeping- ' or 'silent partner'), which is actually rather passively involved in the action denoted by the FVP, but definitely claims a certain responsibility in performing it. Again, the strategy helps render the style more dramatic.

The relationship obtaining between *be thrown into ecstasies* and *go into ecstasies* is a perfect illustration of the opposite effect to the one previously described. To begin with, the action as such can be traced back to a particular cause, more precisely an external stimulus. It follows that the active FVP clearly indicates that the subject deliberately experiences the state induced by the stimulus in question. By contrast, the explicit passive of *be thrown into ecstasies* - compounded by the aggressive semantics of *throw* - views the subject as disclaiming all responsibility, or better still, as a mere puppet of fate.

In an attempt to chop logic, we could take the reasoning a step further and claim that facing us in this example is a bona fide double-dealer: *ecstasy*. At first blush the passive semantics inherent in this noun seems to reinforce the explicit passive of the function verb. Deep down, however, it is the merger thus achieved of the two conflicting connotations – the negative, distressing one, conveyed by *throw*, and the positive, exhilarating one, carried by *ecstasy* - that effectively sets the stage for the puppet show.

Synoptically viewed, the 'implicit' passive tends to be more readily conveyed by German and English active FVPs, with the Romanian ones getting the upper hand when reflexive function verbs are involved. Moreover, the two Germanic languages under discussion differ in their treatment of the 'implicit' reflexive, with German acting more like the Romance one in resorting to active FVPs, and not like its English cognate, which is usually less partial to reflexives.

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## NOTES:

[1] 'Function verb phrase' (FVP) – the term denoting a verb combination the overall meaning of which is a variant of its verbalized nominal core (e.g. *sink into despair* ≈ despair (of)) – originates with the German linguist Bernhard Engelen (s. "Zum System der Funktionsverbgefüge", 1968, WW5, pp 289-303). FVPs usually consist of a verb (function verb), which is the grammatical kernel, a noun (function noun), representing the semantic core – these are the major, i.e. indispensable constituents –, a preposition and/or an article – which are the minor, optional components.

Their main contributions to the language reside in:

1) ability to express a wide range of 'Aktionsarten' ('modes of action'), such as causative, transformative, progressive – the main ones – e.g. *plunge into terror* [caus., transf.], *keep in fear* [caus., progr.], *bring to the boil* [caus., transf.], *keep under control* [caus., progr.], *come to the realization* [transf.], *get into debt* [transf.], *be in debt* [progr.], *be in use* [progr.], etc;

2) ability to lower or to raise the syntactic valency of the one-word verbal substitute, e.g. *take courage* (↔ encourage sb to …);

3) FVPs can be resorted to as ways of expressing what I took the liberty to label 'implicit' or 'semantic' passive (a more vivid variant of the explicit, grammatical one), e.g. *come to a vote* [= be voted.], *get into circulation*, *come under consideration*, *undergo a change*, *fall into oblivion*, *come into production*, *come to harm*, *be in use*, *find expression*.

4) ability to attract rhematic focus, e.g. I *suggested* sth. → I made a *suggestion*;

5) FVPs can be had recourse to as means of shifting syles, e.g. *set fire to* (colloquial) ↔ ignite (formal, elevated), *give notice* (colloquial) ↔ notify, inform, apprise;

6) FVPs are sometimes resorted to when there is no one-word verbal substitute in the language, e.g. *catch a cold*.

[2] I am perfectly willing to take both the blame and the credit – if any – for this term which I employed with reference to a subcategory including verbs that only occasionally take on the function verb role in such combinations and, consequently, tend to resent being deprived of their major semantic availabilities, as is usually the case with bona fide function verbs (s. *sink* into despair).



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