APPROACHING THE FEMININE GENDER IN THE STUDY OF ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract*: When teaching Romanian to foreign students one of the most important aspects is the linguistic and cultural diversity of those who study Romanian, somehow limiting their access to a clear grammatical structure and easy assimilation of the information regarding the language. The study of feminine nouns and grammatical structures that comprise them is closely related to the degree of similarity between Romanian, the transition language – English and the native language of the foreign students, for a most correct perception of the sense and of the due layout of linguistic structuring. There must be a certain dexterity of the speaker of Romanian as a foreign language for filtering the information extracted from a text, generally a specialty one, through a good bilingual-cultural correlation of two different linguistic systems.*

Keywords*: feminine gender, grammar, structure.*

Introduction

The gender is not a universal linguistic trait, as many languages do not use gender. It is found only in about 25% of the world's languages and can generally be animate/inanimate, masculine/feminine/neutral or common/neutral. In the first case, the distinction is based on the dichotomy animate/inanimate as it was regarded by many primitive peoples, or on the difference of sex, in the second case. In the third case, in the beginning there was a difference between masculine/feminine/neutral and later the difference masculine/feminine disappeared, merging into a single gender, the common gender. "The primitive Indo-European language differentiated between inanimate and animate nouns, names of objects. Then the latter split into masculine and feminine ones. But the notion of "inanimate", as it was perceived at the time, did not match our current perception (…). The vast majority of the animate nouns remained of masculine or feminine gender, but there also appeared inanimate nouns of these genders (…). This situation led to the disappearance of the neutral gender in the western Romanic languages" (Graur, 1973: 40). The gender also manifests, through agreement, in the relationship with other parts of the speech, such as: the pronoun, the adjective or, in some cases, the verb. For example in Russian the verbal forms of the past tense agree in gender (and number) with the subject and in Romanian one should mention the agreement in gender and number in the passive voice. The grammatical gender is encountered in most of the European languages such as Romanian, Italian, German, Russian, but it disappeared in Persian and mostly in modern

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English, which has only a few remnants of gender inherited from the old English. On the other side, the great majority of the world's languages do not have grammatical gender.

The Arabic, for example, differentiates between the masculine and feminine in the singular and the plural. In the plural it differentiates between men, women and the non-human plurals (including human collective nouns such as *nation, people*, etc.), the non-human plurals being feminine plurals, regardless of their singular gender. In Albanian, given that at the University of Craiova there is a large enough number of Albanian students every year, we are interested to keep in mind that the neutral gender has almost entirely disappeared. In Italian there is a trace of neutral in some nouns and personal pronouns, for example in the singular *l'uovo, il dito*; the plural *le uova, le dita – the eggs, the fingers*. The masculine and the feminine in Dutch have merged into a common gender in standard Dutch, but many speakers make a distinction when using the pronoun, and in some dialects. The difference between the masculine and the feminine still exists for persons and certain animals in Swedish. Some dialects in Sweden have all of the three genders for nouns in the spoken language, but in standard Swedish the masculine and the feminine have merged into a common gender. The definite article which can underline itself the gender of the nouns exists in Bulgarian and also in Albanian and may be used as a landmark for the identification of the gender, especially of the feminine one.

English – important for the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language, being a transition language – uses a trace of distinction between masculine/feminine/neutral coming from old English under the form of the personal pronoun *he, she, it* and other pronouns. In French we have two genders: masculine and feminine. The nouns that denominate persons of male gender will obviously be of the masculine gender and the nouns representing beings of the female gender will be of the feminine gender, just like in Romanian. However, in the case of the inanimate nouns, objects, phenomena and so on, in French, unlike Romanian, there is no neutral gender, so an object will be either of masculine or feminine gender, sometimes coinciding with its Romanian counterpart. German has all three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral and they differentiate with the help of the definite article which, in this case, precedes the noun and has different forms: *der* - masculine, *die* - feminine, *das* – neutral, for the singular and *die* for all genders in the plural.

In Romanian there are three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral and "the gender differences with nouns do not constitute a morphological category, manifested in flexion, given that the gender of the noun is fixed. (…) The mark of the gender with nouns in Romanian appears solidary with the number and case morphemes or together with determination morphemes (article), usually reunited in the ending of the word. Thus, the distinctive signs of the three genders in our language can be considered: the ending *–ă* for the feminine, *-u* or consonant for the masculine and neutral, *-e* for all of the three genders" (Iordan, Guțu Romalo, *et alii.*, 1967: 72-73).

Only for a certain number of animate nouns and especially names of persons the opposition between the masculine and the feminine corresponds to the sex difference: *student – studentă, vecin – vecină, leu – leoaică*. This correspondence is encountered not only with common names but also with proper names of persons: *Ion – Ioana, Mihai – Mihaela, Alexandru – Alexandra*. There are cases when the correspondence between the grammatical gender and sex is not valid. Some nouns such as *ministru, ambasador, avocat,*

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judecător also have a feminine form *ministră*, *ambasadoare, avocată, judecătoare* which is however rarely used, the masculine form being preferred: *Doamna judecător a hotărât să amâne procesul.*

Except the nouns that denominate animates, the grammatical gender is justified only by the ending. The ending criterion is decisive for the belonging of a noun to one gender or another, though there are no strict rules in this matter. Nothing in the form of the noun can give us clues regarding the gender. The only rule that can be mentioned is that no noun ending in a consonant can be feminine, but masculine or neutral. The vice versa however is not valid. A noun ending in a vowel can be masculine: *popă*, *tată*, *frate*, *munte*, *pui*, *unchi*, but also neutral: *nume*, *prenume*, *taxi*, *fotoliu*, *colegiu*.

The study of the gender in Romanian by foreign students – the feminine gender

The identification of the gender is done through the article or through the form of the noun which accompanies the noun, though for a foreigner who learns Romanian this is not revelatory. This is why nouns are usually taught in association with the numeral *un – doi* (for the masculine), *o – două* (for the feminine), *un – două* (for the neutral), just for an easier identification of the gender by the foreign Romanian speaker. One of the frequent mistakes when approaching the gender among the persons willing to learn Romanian as a foreign language is also the tendency to create feminine nouns and not only *agreed* of the type *bluza de pe ea este unicat**ă***, the correct form being of course *bluza de pe ea este unicat*, etc. The appreciation of the gender according to meaning is almost impossible to accomplish, because the names of objects, abstracts, places can equally belong to all the genders. Still one can make a few specifications in some cases. "As to the meaning, the most unitary gender is the neutral, which comprises almost exclusively names of inanimate objects: for example *loc, lucru, muzeu, obiect, vis* (the exceptions, names of animate nouns, are little: for example *animal*, *dobitoc*, *mamifer*, *macrou*)" (Avram, 1986: 33).

Therefore, the majority of the inanimate nouns are neutral: *pahar*, *dulap*, *frigider*, *afiş*, *obraz*, *impas*, *piept*, *drog*, *ajutor*, *deceniu*, *măr*, *lac*, *minut*, *cămin*, *dans*, *turneu*, *studiu*, *dig* etc., though they can be also masculine: *cartof*, *perete*, *pom*, *pantof*, *dinte*, *idol*, *castravete*, *munte* or feminine: *pijama*, *ţară*, *schemă*, *capcană*, *cafea*, *brăţară*, *crimă*, *artă* etc. Still neutral are the names of games or sports: *box*, *fotbal*, *şah* and names of winds: *austru*, *ciclon*, *crivăţ*, the letters of the alphabet being masculine: *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, also the names of the months of the year: *aprilie*, *mai*, *iunie*, the names of the musical notes: *do*, *re*, *mi*, *fa* etc., and feminine are always the names of continents: *Europa*, *Asia*, *Africa*, the names of the days of the week: *luni*, *marţi*, *joi*, the names of the seasons: *primăvară*, *vară*, *iarnă*, the names of fruits: *pară*, *cireaşă*, *caisă*, *prună*. As an exception *strugure*, *pepene*, *ananas* which are masculine and *măr* which is neutral (Idem). Also feminine are the names of languages *româna*, *latina*, *franceza*, *spaniola*, or the names of countries ending in the vowel *-a*: *România*, *Italia*, *Franţa*, *Canada*, *Brazilia*, *Portugalia*, the names of cars ending in a vowel: *Dacia*, *Lancia*, *Toyota*, etc. (Ivănuş, 1996: 48).

In Romanian, the feminine gender is the richest as inventory and the most diversified from the semantic point of view. The feminine covers, from a semantic point of view, many spheres – a large number of inanimate nouns: *vale*, *carte*, *masă*, *tastatură* etc.; a

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large number of abstracts, names of actions and the name of the result of the action and all the long infinitives: *credință*, *conjunctură*, *informatică*, *nutriție*, *nevralgie*, *adunare*, *tăietură*, etc., even nouns that denominate beings of the masculine gender such as *ordonanță* or *santinelă*. The postposition of the definite article however, specific to Romanian, has favored the correct interpretation of the gender in general and of the feminine gender in particular, for the foreign speakers of Romanian.

- Feminine formations in *–ă*, turned into *–a* when using the definite article

Therefore there are many feminine nouns formed from the masculine through the addition of the suffix *-ă*: *coleg – colegă - colega*, *vecin – vecină - vecina*, *student – studentă - studenta*, *pianist – pianistă – pianista, domn – doamnă - doamna*. "The feminine noun *domnișoară* has no masculine corresponding form in contemporary Romanian. The masculine noun *domnișor*, that represents its original base, is no longer used today. It is advisable to use the noun *domn* instead with the additional meaning 'unmarried man, bachelor'" (Biriș, Petre, *et alii.*, 2015: 19).

- Feminine formations in *–iță*

Still from the masculine form one may obtain feminine forms with the help of the suffix *–iță*: *frizer – frizeriță - frizerița*, *doctor – doctoriță - doctorița*, *sudor – sudoriță - sudorița*. One should notice that the feminine *doctoriță* is used nor to indicate the title nor for the direct addressing, but is replaced by the masculine *doctor* accompanied by the feminine *doamna* in order to underline the gender: Doamna *doctor* vă consultă imediat.

In order to facilitate the expression of the feminine gender for the foreign Romanian speakers, in the case of a title or of a profession practiced by women but having a commonly used masculine form "we use feminine nouns such as *doamnă, femeie* in fee or compound lexical structures (*doamnă ministru, femeie-pilot*), or with surnames/family names or baptismal names: *ministrul Elena Popescu, mecanicul Maria*).

Consequently, we use feminine substitutes (different types of pronouns) instead of these nouns: e. g. ***ea, aceasta, aceea***, etc. We can frequently find masculine nouns that have feminine corresponding forms used in the same way: **e.g.** – *Doamnă/Domnule* **decan!**" (Biriș, Petre, *et alii.*, 2015: 25).

- feminine formations in *–toare*

The masculine nouns formed with the suffix *–tor* are a starting point for the formation of the feminine with the help of the feminine variant of this suffix, *-toare*: *învățător – învățătoare*, *muncitor – muncitoare*, *dansator – dansatoare*, *vânzător – vânzătoare, desenator – desenatoare, judecător - judecătoare*.

- feminine formations in *–că*

The *–că* suffix – reserved for names of persons – is added to masculine nouns in order to obtain feminine nouns denominating a person: *țăran – țărancă*, *craiovean – craioveancă*, *țigan –țigancă*, *orășean – orășeancă*, *român – româncă*, *elvețian – elvețiancă, italian- italiancă, american - americancă*.

- feminine formations in *–oaică*

The feminine nouns obtained from the masculine using the suffix *–oaică* are especially names of animals *lup – lupoaică*, *leu – leoaică* or they denominate the beings of feminine gender belonging to a certain people: *turc – turcoaică*, *francez – franțuzoaică*, *grec – grecoaică*, *rus – rusoaică, arab - arăboaică*.

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- feminine formations in *-easă*

The feminine nouns obtained with the suffix *–easă* are fewer: *lăptar – lăptăreasă*, *croitor – croitoreasă*, *mire – mireasă*, *bucătar – bucătăreasă*, *preot - preoteasă*. The few feminine nouns ending in *-esă* are borrowed from French: *poetesă*, *negresă*, *prinţesă, stewardesă, contesă, ducesă*.

"Unlike English, Romanian makes a distinction between the feminine and the masculine genders for the various names of professions and trades, etc. (...) There are also some names of professions which have only the masculine form: miner, marinar, ofițer, mecanic. Such forms are used both for the masculine and for the feminine: ***El** este **ofițer**. **Ea** este **ofițer**.*" (Doca, 2005: 39)

Certain nouns have a feminine form completely different from the masculine one: *berbec – oaie*, *pisică – motan*, *cocoş – găină*, *frate – soră*, *ginere – noră*, *unchi – mătuşă*, *ţap – capră*, which implies a good knowledge of Romanian in order to avoid confusions or invented forms. There are very few masculine nouns formed from the feminine and those are the ones ending in *–oi* or *–an*, like: *broască – broscoi*, *raţă – răţoi*, *vulpe – vulpoi*, or *curcă – curcan*, *gâscă – gâscan*, etc. (Iliescu, 2014: 16)

Certain nouns having a feminine form denominate men: *ordonanţă*, *sentinelă*, *strajă*, *ştafetă*, *papă*. A reduced number of nouns have two singular forms, a feminine one and a neutral one, with identical meaning: *cătun – cătună*, *colind – colindă*, but the literary language prefers the first term of the pair, respectively *cătun* and *colind*. In the case of the next pairs, the literary language uses the second term of the pair, that is the feminine form: *axiom – axiomă*, *bonet – bonetă*, *beret – beretă*, *basc – bască*. A frequent mistake is the interpretation of the feminine plural *crevete* (with the singular *o crevetă*) as being masculine singular (like *perete – pereţi*, *burete – bureţi*, *castravete – castraveţi*). Thus was formed the plural *creveţi* corresponding to the masculine singular *un crevete*. Their use is a mistake, the correct form being *o crevetă – două crevete*.

Conclusions

One should remember that in Romanian, with the noun, the gender represents first a formal characteristic. The gender is important for the declining of the noun, for its agreement with its adjective determinants and for its substitution with pronouns. Thus the knowledge of the gender is crucial in the learning and the thorough study of Romanian as a foreign language especially in the view of avoiding speaking and writing mistakes, at least in the usual communication. In the case of the specialty texts that must be interpreted by the foreign Romanian speakers, the correct meaning of the word, its agreement with the determinants and finding the articulate form or plural form proper to the context and the expression is all the more made difficult.

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