Romanian Interjections as Discourse Markers

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Introduction

What we propose in the present study is a corpus driven analysis which explores several corpora of Romanian spoken interactions in an attempt to prove that certain Romanian interjections are no longer simply emotional or affective words, but significant tools pragmaticalised for an important range of functions. The purpose of the present paper is two-fold:

(i) to present an inventory of the most important functions of Romanian *conversational interjections*,

(ii) to develop two case-studies for this type of interjections.

Our examples (over 15) are excerpted from transcribed familiar conversations published in five corpora of spoken Romanian (CORV, CRVA, IVLRA1, IVLRA2, ROVA). The paper places a special focus on the Romanian interjections *a!* and*e!* comparing their usage in authentic oral interactions and in plays written at the beginning of the 20th century without exploring the phonetical, phonological and prosodical features of interjections since it only looks at written corpora using more than one type of transcription of spoken language.

In section (1) we give an overview of the results of traditional and pragmatic approaches concerning interjections which occurr in conversations in Romanian. In section (2) we provide two case-studies and in section (3) we present the conclusions of the paper.

1) Romanian studies concerning interjections

As in many other languages, in Romanian, the class of interjections is highly heterogeneous including onomatopoeia (*poc!*, *miau!*), discourse markers (*ei bine*) or expressions of emotion (*oh!*). There are significant differences between the lexicographic approach of interjections in general explanatory dictionaries and the functions these interjections are used with by the speakers. For instance, the interjection *de!* is presented in dictionaries (DEX and DA, see references) as an interjection that introduces assertions whereas our intuition as native speakers would

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incline towards negation and disagreement[1]. The description of interjections as linguistic elements for expressing speakers' emotions is often wrong or incomplete.

However, in recent years numerous studies have been published on the pragmatic roles of interjections assigning them the status of intercultural pragmatic elements (Pop 2006) or illustrating their discoursive functions: *uite* (Șerbănescu 1991), *vai* (Sauciuc 2003), *de* (Dragoș, Duncea 2006), *zău* și *vai*(Tuțescu 2006), *păi* (Ștefănescu 2007, Pop 2009), *ei bine/eh bien* (Pop 2003, 2006) etc. At the same time, Romanian diachronic studies on interjections are exiguous and aim either at making an inventory of interjections accompanied by their grammatical descriptions (Frâncu 2009), or at showing how some interjections have changed from the old age[2]of Romanian language to contemporary Romanian, highlighting their grammatical, semantic and pragmatic characteristics (Manu Magda 2017). Romanian studies have identified a range of functions performed by interjections in Romanian: a. hesitation markers: *îî, ăă, mm* (Dascălu Jinga 2006), b. back channel markers : *aha, îhî* (Enache 2003, Dascălu Jinga 2006), c. digression connectors: *e* (DascăluJinga 2006), shedding light on the roles performed by interjections in coordonated and complex message exchanges between interlocutors.

A change of perspective is registered in Romanian studies too, recent grammars taking interjections to be linguistic **signals** with an unstable significance, which get their meaning – their various communicative **functions** – from the situational or linguistic context and by means of intonation. These grammars consider that interjections are **conversational markers** and **pragmatic connectors** with a certain degree of conventionalization, that are characterized by semantic and pragmatic interaction with the utterrance, instructing the interlocutor to give the message an affective interpretation. Some Romanian interjections are argued to be polyfunctional, that is they can either have several communicative functions in different contexts or they can have several values in the same context (GALR 2005: 665–670).

In order to identify the interjections frequently occurring in direct, face-to-face verbal interactions, we have chosen private spontaneous conversations taking place between a limited number of interlocutors (2 or 3 interlocutors) and, very rarely, we have relied on examples of mediated verbal communication, such as excerpts from interviews, radio/TV programmes or telephone conversations. In the 5 volumes of samples with Romanian spoken language (**IVLRA 1, CORV, CRVA, IVLRA 2** and **ROVA**, see Sources) the interlocutors use colloquial, informal speech. In addition, they use a non-dialectal[3] and non-popular variant of Romanian, used by educated adults in urban environments. We have also used literary texts (plays from the early 20th century) since the volumes of samples are relatively small-sized.

We have placed a focus on the phonetically reduced interjections with high frequency in conversations and plays, such as *e(ee)!* and *a(aa)!* since they succeed to cover numerous pragamatic roles despite of their semantic emptiness. Contrary to our expectations, interjections expressing emotions are rarer in conversations, only

[1]For a complete discussion on Romanian *de!*see Dragoș,Duncea 2006.
[2]Manu Magda 2017 considers that the old age of Romanian language covers the period 1600–1780.
[3] Some samples from CRVA display dialectal features.

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vai!, aoleu! occurring a couple of times per volume, while interjections indicating lexical hesitation, such as /î/, /ă/, are even more infrequent. The rate of frequency for the simple nonlexical vocalic interjections *e!* and *a!* in a single volume is considerable: *a*– 60 occurrences in ROVA and 23 occurrences in IVLR1 and *e* – 29 occurrences in ROVA and 11 occurrences in IVLR1.

In an attempt to classify the conversational interjections identified in the corpus we have combined semantic criterion with the functional one obtaining five categories[4]:

i. **conative**: *măi, mă, bă, hei, o*, with the generic semantic equivalent 'I want you to pay attention to me' and the functions of appellative, back channel and warning marker;

ii. **concessive**: *mhm, deh, eh*, with the generic semantic equivalent 'I agree to the utterance, although there are elements about which I disagree and the functions of hesitation, attenuation andpartial agreement marker;

iii. **oppositional:** *e(ee), mm, mde, de, aș*, with the generic semantic equivalent 'I do not agree to the content of the utterance' and the functions of disagreement, conter-argumentation and doubt marker;

iv. **epistemic:** *a, aha,* withthe generic semantic equivalent 'Now I know' and the functions of response to new information, identifying a referent and finalizing an inference or retrieving information from memory;

v. **evaluative**: *ei,* with the generic semantic equivalent 'I evaluate the utterance' and the functions of confirming, amending an approximation and warning about the truth value.

Some interjections acquire discourse values as secondary values, thus cancelling their prototypical expressive function. For example, from conveying a response (pain, wonder, surprise, pleasure etc.) to a stimulus: *a!* or an emotion: *e!* or *o!*, these interjections end up functioning as discourse particles. The explanation is a cognitive one in so far as interjections express the mental state of the speaker.

As far as conversational interjections are concerned, their function inventory is relatively fixed. They are characterized by a trend of becoming more stable and their polyfunctionality is solved *ad hoc*, most probably by means of paralinguistic and prosodical information. The situational context and the linguistic one, as well as the interlocutor's common background are key factors for correctly decoding these linguistic elements.

2) Case-studies: *a!* and *e!*

The interjection *a!* (with its versions *aa!* and *aaa!*) expresses a multitude of signals concerning the informational content of the utterance being in the same time linked with the way an utterance is received and with its evaluation in accordance with the elements of knowledge shared by the interlocutors. It seems to be emitted on the basis of a complex cognitive process in which certain data from the interlocutor are processed in order to be subsequently accepted (or not) as relevant or admitted. Certain contexts contradict the interjectional status of reflex sound

[4]For details concerning the classification, see Biriș 2018.

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issued in front of the unexpected (cf. DA) and it seems to have no connection with emotional or effective processes.

The most important functions identified in the spoken corpora are the following:

➢ It expresses a successful identification of a referent/object or the degree in which that is known:

1). A: eu vreau s-o văd pe profa de la teoria literaturii că n-am văzut-o.
B: a: eu am văzut-o prima oară.
A: mi-am cumpărat cartea.
B: a:
A: tot am făcut ceva pentru facultatea asta (IVLR1: 79).

2). A: e un singur tren la zece fără un sfert de-aici de la vest.
B: a: eu mi-am scos unu de la București. (IVLR1: 39)

➢ It confirms a shared referential content:

3) E: nuștii de hariclea darcle?
A: Cine-a fost?
E: o cântăreață de operă.
A: a:d-aia n-am auzit de ea c-a fost de operă dacă era de altceva (IVLR1: 81)

➢ It signals a cognitive process (that can be decoded as 'Iunderstood') or the reaction to a propositional content expressed by the interlocutor. A speaker can use it with more functions in the same utterance. For instance, it may preface a contre-argumentation sequence:

4). A: și vreau să vă spun bine↑ tiroxina este ieftină e vreo zece mii de lei!
B: a:atunci e sla:bă.
A: e zece mii
B: a: (apăi) tiroxina e douăsute de mii e flaconu.
A: eu ce vă spun.
B: a:nici vorbă! Păi e apă de ploaie.
A: eu ce vă spun. (IVLR1: 84)

➢ It may represent a memory retrieval marker signaling a sudden re-access of events:

5). A: a↓ mi-amintesc. Atunci când ați fost cu: cum îl chema pe sportivul ăla. (IVLR1: 173–174)

➢ It may signal an inference of the interlocutor:

6). B: Ajungea-n gară la cireșu pe la doișpe fără ceva noaptea↓ și de acolo până la soacră-mea sunt vreo zece chilometri până la ea acasă↓ deci până-n sat sunt opt↓ și încă doi chilometri.
A: a:↑că gara nu e chiar în sat↓(IVLR1: 45)

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➢ It may be part of a broaden sequence of mitigation or justification together with other interjections or with a deictic:

7). A: tata face masaj la talpă↑ fac și eu masaj.
B: unde la ce la
A: la tot↓ începând cu degetele: peste tot↓ peste tot.
B: nu ne-ați spus chestia asta.
A: a: păi asta acuma↓ de curând↓ (IVLR1: 53)

➢ Or to be a part of a self-correction sequence:

8). C: Și-a văzut acolo volumele alea multe și unde toți delegații au iscălit
V: în sala Unirii
C: și unde proba
V: a↓ nu↓ asta era la Muzeu. (ROVA: 43)

The interjection *e!* is as polyfunctional as *a!* but it belongs to another category that of oppositional interjections, always oriented towards the addresse.

➢ It introduces a piece of new information that is either unexpected or unanticipated by the interlocutor:

9). A: aveam două intrări pă săptămână și am ales noi marțea și joia pentru că era mai puțină lume.
D: e↓ păi aicea-I pă lună. Îți iei pă lună câte vrei. (ROVA: 152)

10). A: e înghesuială mare.
C: e: e duminica↓ dacă te duci în timpul săptămânii↑ acum am văzut că trec și pă lângă el↓ când mă duc la (XX). (ROVA: 153)

11). B: unde se face raru [=R.A.R.-ul] de mașini.
A: e↓ se face↓ cred că-n mai multe locuri↓ (ROVA: 127)

➢ It may be a marker for agreement or concession:

12). R: N-aveți nici pisică. Nu vă plac nici animalele atunci.
I: Nu, îmi plac, da' n-am timp ca să fiu sincer de ele.
R: Stați la bloc probabil, nu?
I: Da, stau la bloc.
R: E↓ păi la bloc e mai greu să crești ditamai câinele (CORV: 229–230)

13). A: acolo nu-i lăsam singurică-i lăsam c-o bunică↓ da. venea mama↓ pleca soacră-mea.
B: e↓ Aia e. (ROVA: 79)

➢ It marks a contrary opinion simultaneously prefacing an answer that is out of the expectations of a person who asks something:

14). B: am iaz↑unde ne bălăci:m.
A: ai iaz?
B: da:

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A: natural ↑ sau ați săpat voi?
B: e:↓ a săpat nea Ion.
A: păi zi-i domnule piscină. auzi!
B: e: până la urmă așa s-a tranformat. Că Ion l-a făcut așa decorativ cu fântână arteziană în mijloc. (ROVA: 67)

15). C: era apartament enorm↓ era un dormitor aici↑ un dormitor aici↑ p-aici venea livingu↓ care era imens↓ și cu terasă.
B: dar care era defectu?
C: deci nu↓ erai de ea că era foarte departe de centru↓ da: era cam la același preț cu ăsta↓
B: e↓ acum oricum nu ne lăfăim și nici n-o să stăm foarte mult în cameră. (ROVA: 25)

- It may have an adeversative value "but":

16). A: și domnu C*** a zis că nu e treaba lor că este autonomie universitară și toate cele
B: da
B: e↓ să știi că n-a zis că la brașov↓ prin inspectorat au plătit ăia tot. Conferința pentru că inspectoratu are mai multe conexiuni și primăria știi (IVLR1: 37).

In the plays written at the beginning of the 20th century (see Sources) these interjections are used with the same pragmatic functions as in direct interactions: *a!*is related to the mental state of the speaker whereas *e!* is closer to the content of the utterance emitted by interlocutor:

17). Wanda: Care Mircea?
Aneta: Bărbatul procopsitei de Margareta.
Wanda: *A,* pe bărbatul Margaretei îl cheamă Mircea? (Kirițescu 1936: 264)

18). Varlam: *A,* bine că-mi adusei aminte. (Scoate din buzunar o gazetă). Asta e din cale-afară! Ascultă. (Ciprian 1927: 251)

19). Gena: îmi pare rău că-l văd pe tata parcă nemulțumit că mă aflu aici.
Dacia: *E!* Ce vrei tu, dragă! În privința ta, el a fost cel mai înverșunat dintre toți. (Mușatescu 1932: 175)

20). Sorcova: Eu să mă gătesc și să benchetuiesc. Iar Luca doarme cu țărâna în gură și...
Vecina (scurt): *Eee,* ba vezi c-o să ne punem cenușă-n cap! (Petrescu 1918: 256)

3) Conclusions

The emotional value of certain interjections is doubled by discoursive functions developed in those types of verbal interactions that are inherently contextual, structured and with predictable functions such as conversations. Appearing in framing positions at the beginning of a turn these interjections are triggered by a previous context summing up the speaker's mental status towards a

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certain element (a piece of information, fact retrieved from memory etc.). It is very important to have a thorough description of their functions for a better understanding of the relation between the affective-attitudinal perspective of a speaker and the meaning of an utterance.

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Abstract

Ignored by the traditional grammar because of their non-words status the interjections have been placed under a new focus from a pragmatic perspective and recognized as discourse markers (Schiffrin 1987, Fraser 1990). Due to their complex functionality the interjections allow multiple perspectives in recent studies: syntactic (Krieb 2001), pragmatic (Vasilescu 2001, Ștefănescu 2007, Pop 2009), contrastive (Pop 2001, 2003). From the point of view of intercultural pragmatics Romanian language is considered to be an *interjectional language* that uses interjections as signals to the addressees by comparison with French that uses more message structuring markers (Pop 2006). Certain Romanian interjections with numerous occurrences in spontaneous conversations have been pragmatised during the evolution of language for expressing numerous roles: repair markers, answer particles, topic signals etc.

The corpus-driven analysis explores several corpora of Romanian spoken interactions and will demonstrate that certain Romanian interjections (such as *a!* and *e!*) are no longer simply emotional or affective words, but significant tools pragmaticalised for expressing an important range of functions: feedback signals, repair markers, answer particles, topic signals, etc. Most examples are excerpted from transcribed familiar conversations published in corpora of spoken Romanian (CORV, CRVA, IVLRA1, IVLRA2, ROVA) and from literature.

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