# SOME ASPECTS OF THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF THE ROMANIAN VERB *A (SE) PORNI* 'START'

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**Abstract.** The aim of this study is to present a synchronic and diachronic analysis of the verb *a (se) porni* 'to start', which is used both with a motion value, showing the change of location ('to depart from or to leave a place in order to arrive or to get to another place') and with an aspectual value, denoting the beginning of an action ('to start doing something or to make something happening'). We will also try to find out whether or not the inchoative (and factitive) usage of *a (se) porni* ('depart > start') belongs to a pattern of grammaticalization (very common in the Romance languages), according to which motion verbs acquire aspectual meanings (Heine & Kuteva 2002). In doing so, we will analyse data from old Romanian texts and present-day Romanian corpora to see in which contexts *a (se) porni* occurs with an aspectual value.

**Keywords**: grammaticalization, motion verbs, aspect, inchoative, Old Romanian.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Romanian, similarly to other Romance languages, does not have tense auxiliaries originating in motion verbs, but has a wide class of aspectual verbs with a parallel locative or motion meaning: *a se afla* 'to be situated > to be', *a ajunge* 'arrive > become', *a (se) apuca de* 'catch > start', *a ieşi* 'go out > become', *a se porni pe* 'depart > start to', *a (se) prinde* 'catch > become', *a prinde* 'catch > start', *a se pune* 'sit > start', *a rămâne* 'remain > be, remain in a state', *a se opri din* 'stop (somewhere) > stop to', *a sta*'stay, sit > be about to', *a trece* 'pass > be considered', *a (se) ţine* 'keep, hold > be', *a urma* 'follow > be about to', *a veni* 'come > be', *a-i veni să* 'come > feel like'. Generally, these aspectual markers are followed by prepositions with locative meanings that are the source of their aspectual value (see Manea 2008; Dragomirescu 2011)[3].

In the present study we will focus on the verb *a (se) porni* and on its path of grammaticalization from a motion verb meaning 'to depart' to an aspectual verb indicating the beginning of an action 'to start to'. The morphosemantic analysis of *a (se) porni* will be

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[3] Regarding other studies on the grammaticalization of motion verbs in Romanian, see Dragomirescu (2018) for *a (se) ţine*; Dragomirescu, Nicolae (2014), Boioc Apintei, Costea (2020) for *a veni*; Botez Stănescu, Dragomirescu (2020) for *a rămâne* and *a se afla*; Brăescu, Nicula Paraschiv (2020) for *a (se) trece*.

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illustrated with examples from old Romanian texts (the corpus made for *The Syntax of Old Romanian* (Oxford, 2016) and the corpus made for the academic dictionary of Romanian (DLR)), as well as examples from a present-day Romanian corpus (CoRoLa).

In **Section 2** we will briefly discuss the grammaticalization process and its relation with aspectual verbs in Romanian; in **Section 3** we will present the syntactic and semantic contexts in which *a (se) porni* occurs; in **Section 4** we will try to highlight the grammaticalization path of *a (se) porni*; and in **Section 5** we will draw a series of conclusions.

## 2. THE BACKGROUND

### 2.1. On grammaticalization

The phenomenon of grammaticalization seen as a diachronic mechanism that changes lexical items into grammatical operators is well studied cross-linguistically (Bybee, Perkins, Pagliuka 1994; Lehmann 1995; Lamiroy 1999; Lamiroy, De Mulder 2011; Heine, Kuteva 2002; Roberts, Roussou 2003; Stolova 2005; Brazeal 2009, among others). Grammaticalized items, such as tense auxiliaries, undergo a complex process of transformation that implies desemanticization, decategorialization and phonetic erosion (Heine, Narug 2010, *apud* Lamiroy, De Mulder 2011: 302). In some languages (English, German) aspect is also marked by auxiliaries comingfrom motion verbs, as there is a general phenomenon according to which motion and locative verbs tend to grammaticalize into tense and aspect auxiliaries (Heine, Kuteva 2002).

Romanian lacks aspectual markers that are fully grammaticalized (i.e., aspectual auxiliaries), but uses lexical verbs with a motion meaning instead to express aspectual values. In an early work about the verbal aspect in Romanian, Poghirc (1953) and Guțu (1961) claim that Romanian uses other types of markers to express verbal aspect, such as semi-auxiliary verbs, adverbs, and particles that accompany the verb. In the examples below, the so-called "semi-auxiliary" verbs followed by a subjunctive (*a începe să* 'start to', *a sta să* 'be about to', *a se apuca să* 'start to') or asupine (*a se porni pe* 'start to') mark the inchoative aspect:

(1) a. ***Începe*** *să* *plouă.*
starts SĂ.SUBJ rain.SUBJ.PRES.3SG
'It starts to rain.' (present-day Romanian)

b. ***Stă*** *să* *plouă.*
stays SĂ.SUBJ rain.SUBJ.PRES.3SG
'It is about to rain.' (present-day Romanian)

c. ***Se*** ***apucă*** *de scris.*
CL.REFL.3SG catch of write.SUP
'He/she starts to write.' (present-day Romanian)

d. ***Se*** ***porni*** *pe plâns.*
CL.REFL.3SG starts on cry.SUP
'He/she starts to cry.' (present-day Romanian)

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Guțu Romalo (1961) questions the "semi-auxiliary" properties of the verbs denoting the beginning or the ending of an action, arguing that most of these verbs have not undergone the process of grammaticalization. Some of them are weakly grammaticalized periphrases that generally contain subjunctive forms, and more rarely infinitives or supines, while others, especially those with reduced distribution, are just phrasal constructions (see also Manea 2008).

We believe that *a (se)porni* 'depart > start' is poorly grammaticalized, as it shows properties of a full lexical verb (2a) and of an aspectual verb (2b), denoting the beginning of an action in both examples:

(2) a. *Eu* ***mă*** ***pornesc*** *spre şcoală.*
I CL.ACC.1SG depart.PRS.1SG towards school
'I'm going to school.' (present-day Romanian)
b. *Ion* ***se*** ***porneşte*** *pe râs.*
John CL.REFL.3SG. starts laugh.SUP
'John starts to laugh.' (present-day Romanian)

In all the examples that we have analysed, the verb *a (se) porni* is synonymous with the Romanian verb *a începe* ('to start'), which is also grammaticalized to a certain extent. According to Manea (2008: 458), *a (se) porni (pe)* 'depart > start' is considered to be an inchoative verb because it has encoded the aspectual feature of showing 'the starting point in an ongoing process' in its lexico-semantic structure. Moreover, the aspectual inchoative value can be associated with agentive verbs. The inchoative *a (se) porni* enters in subordinate structures where it functions as a phrase head and carries morphosyntactic constraints.

### 2.2. Similar verbs in other Romance languages

In some Romance languages there is a correspondent verb for *a (se) porni*: *commencer* 'to start' in French, and *cominciare* 'to start' in Italian. Both verbs are located at an intermediate position on a continuum of structures ranging from full lexical verbs to purely grammatical affixes (Brazeal 2009: 418).

(3) a. *Elle commence à manger.* (Fr.)
b. *Lei comincia a mangiare.* (It.)
'She starts to eat.'

As an element becomes more grammaticalized, it often becomes more obligatory, meaning that there is less lexical choice to express the same concept (Lehmann 1995: 139). While both French and Italian have inchoative expressions other than *commencer /cominciare*, they are much more numerous in Italian (Lamiroy 1999). Romanian *a (se) porni* has a lot of lexical synonyms (*a începe, a se pune pe*, *a se apuca de*), like *cominciare* in Italian, being grammaticalized to the same degree as other verbs. French *commencer* is more grammaticalized than the other Romance languages (Lamiroy, De Mulder 2011: 302).

Rochette (1999) proposes that aspectualizers are raising verbs that select an activity or accomplishment, which may be realized as a nominal or verbal projection and may be

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"concealed". The interpretation of this concealed argument is determined by the context, see example (4). An accomplishment interpretation like *read a book* is possible, but not a state or achievement interpretation like *have a book* or *find a book*.

(4) a. *Jean commence {à lire/*à avoir/*à trouver} le livre.*
b. *Gianni comincia {a leggere/*ad avere/*a trovare} illibro.*
'John is beginning {to read/*to have/*to find} the book.' (in Brazeal 2009: 408)

## 3. THE DATA

### 3.1. The syntactic perspective

*A (se) porni* behaves like a **full lexical verb**, being the main predicate of a sentence with or without a DP direct object. For transitive and intransitive uses see (5) and (6), noting that it is often used with out a direct object:

(5) a. *George* ***a*** ***pornit*** *un process greu.*
George has.AUX start.PPLE a process difficult
'George started a difficult process.' (present-day Romanian)
b. *George* ***porneşte*** *motorul.*
George starts engine.DEF
'George is turning on the engine.' (present-day Romanian)

(6) *Trenul* ***porneşte*** *încet.*
train.DEF starts slowly
'The train is slowly departing.' (present-day Romanian)

As **an aspectual verb** (Pană Dindelegan 2014: 78) *a (se) porni* is used in constructions with infinitives (7) and subjunctives (8), with supines (9) and with nouns preceded by prepositions (10).

(7) *Deoadată* ***s-a*** ***pornit*** ***a urla*** *fără motiv.*
suddenly CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE to scream.INF without reason
'Suddenly s/he started screaming for no reason.' (present-day Romanian)

(8) ***S-a*** ***pornit*** ***să*** ***vorbească***
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE SĂ.SUBJ talk.SUBJ.3SG
*despre băiatul ei.*
about boy.DEF she.GEN.
'S/he started talking about her boy.' (present-day Romanian)

(9) ***S-a*** ***pornit*** ***pe plâns***.
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE on cry.SUP
'He/she started crying.' (present-day Romanian)

(10) ***S-au*** ***pornit*** ***la bătaie***.
CL.REFL.ACC.3PL=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE to fight.INDEF
'They started to fight.' (present-day Romanian)

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According to GALR II (2008: 261), verbs like *a se porni (pe)* 'depart > start to', *a se apuca (de)* 'catch > start', *a se da (la), a se pune (pe)* 'sit > start' used as aspectual markers should always be intransitive, reflexive, and followed by a preposition. Their aspectual usage is often circumscribed to certain stylistic registers (see also GALR I 2008: 457).

### 3.2. The semantic perspective

The basic lexical meaning of *a (se) porni* as a full verb consists of the following elements: [SOURCE] – [MOTION] – [DESTINATION] being synonym with *a pleca* 'go, leave, depart'. In (11), *a (se) porni* can be replaced with *a pleca* keeping the same meaning.

(11) a. ***Se*** ***porneşte*** *spre* *gară.*
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG departs towards railway.stop
'He/she is departing towards the railway stop.' (present-day Romanian)

b. ***Pleacă*** *spre* *gară.*
departs towards station
'He/she is departing /heading towards the station.' (present-day Romanian)

While in present-day Romanian the source is contextually implied, examples with a lexicalized source are less common; in old Romanian, both the source and the destination were lexicalized:

(12) a. ***Să*** ***porniră*** *gloate multe* *din oraş*
CL.REFL.ACC.3PL start.PS.3PL crowds many from city
*la casa* *lui* *Dioscrid.*
athouse.DEF GEN Dioscrid
'Lots of crowds of people started walking from the city towards Dioscrid's house.'(DVS.1682–86: 29[v])

b. ***Se*** ***porni*** *toată turma porcilor* *den ţărmurile*
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG start.PS.3SG whole drove pigs.GEN from shores
*măriei* *şi* *muriră* *într-apă.*
sea.GEN and die.PS.3PL in=water
'The entire drove of pigs left the seashore and died from drowning.'(CC[2].1581: 237)

According to the definition from DLR, *a (se) porni* is a polysemantic verb, which is one of the criteria for grammaticalization. In DLR, the meanings which contain the aspectual inchoative value are:
(i) *a se pune în mişcare pentru, a se duce (de) undeva* 'start to move, set in motion', *a pleca* 'to go', *a se duce* 'to go', *a merge* 'to walk'; *a se îndrepta (spre...)* 'to head towards':

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(13) *Eram* *cu câţiva tovarăşi ...* *şi* ***pornisem***
be.IMPERF.1SG with few friends and start.PLUPERF.1PL
***să*** ***culegem*** *mure.*
SĂ.SUBJ pick.up.SUBJ.1SG blackberries
'I was with some friends and we started picking up blackberries.' (Galaction,O.A. I.: 231, in DLR, s.v. *porni*)

(ii) *a da sarcină* 'to give a task, to order':

(14) *L-au* *făcut* *han şi numai decât*
CL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3PL make.PPLE khan and immediately
*l-au* ***pornit*** ***să*** ***meargă*** *la Crim.*
CL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3PL start.PPLE SĂ.SUBJ go.SUBJ.3SG to Crim
'They made him a khan and immediately they ordered him to go to Crim.' (R. Greceanu, CM. 123, în DLR, s.v. *porni*)

(iii) *a determina să facă un anumit lucru* 'to make someone do something':

(15) *Cea mai mare dobândă* *nu-l* *poate* ***porni*** ***să***
the more big gain NEG=CL.ACC.M.3SG can.3SG start.INF SĂ.SUBJ
***facă*** *cea mai mică slujbă*
make.SUBJ.3SG the more small job
'The highest gain cannot determine him to do the smallest job.' (I. BELDIMAN, *Ist. Amor.* 63$^{v}$/l0, in DLR, s.v. *porni*)

(iv) *a-şi propune să facă ceva* 'to set one's mindto do something', *a se hotărî* 'to decide' (refl.), (followed by prepositions):

(16) *Şi, vădindu-ş* *ceale* *de la inemă*
andsee.GER= CL.REFL.DAT.3SG those.F.PL from heart
***s-au*** ***pornit*** *spre ucidere.*
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE towards kill.INF
'And seeing what he has in his heart he decided to go kill him.' (DVS. 130$^{r}$, in DLR, s.v. *porni*)

(17) *Te* ***porniş*** *...* *pe prăzi*.
CL.REFL.ACC.2SG start.PS on loots
'You decided to capture loots.' (Biblia. 2061/50, in DLR, s.v. *porni*)

In old Romanian, the aspectual verb *a (se) porni* appears in the present, the past and the future. In modern Romanian, it is used more in the present and rarely in the imperfect or past simple.

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## 4. PATTERNS OF THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF *A (SE) PORNI*

The process of grammaticalization changes the lexical verb *a (se) porni* from a SOURCE verb into a TEMPORAL verb ('to go > to start'), becoming an intention/future verb.

Analysing the data, we noticed that *a se porni* is used in structures with infinitives, subjunctives, supine, and nouns with prepositions:

### 4.1. *a (se) porni* + infinitive

The aspectual verb *a (se) porni* may take infinitival complements as in (18)–(23). It is frequent in old Romanian, rare in modern Romanian.

The short infinitive co-occurs with the 'long' infinitive[4] (23), a form that was frequent in the 16th–18th centuries (GO: 215).

(18) *Şi atâta să îngrozârâ toţi cât din sângur chipul*
andso.much CL.REFL.ACC.3PL terrify.PS.3PL all as from itself face.DEF
*nuorilor să vedea că, de* ***s-or***
clouds.DEF.GEN CL.REFL.IMPERS see.IMPERF. that if CL.REFL.ACC.3PL=AUX.FUT.3PL.
***porni*** *a ploa, vor ploa tot foc.*
start.INF to rain.INF AUX.FUT.3PL rain.INF also fire.ACC
'And they all were so terrified and frightened that, by looking at the clouds alone, one could tell that if it were to start raining, it will rain fire.' (DVS.1682-86:110r)

(19) ***Porniră*** *unii dintr-înşi ia străbate hotarele*
start.PS.3PL ones of=them.ACC to cross.INF borders.DEF.ACC
*răsăritului.*
east.DEF.GEN
'Some of them started to cross the borders of the east.'(Varlaam-Iosaf.1786:16)

(20) *Că-acum* ***pornisă****-a să face seară.*
because=now start.PS.3SG=to CL.REFL.3SG make.INF night.ACC.
'Because now it has begun to get dark.'(BDŢ.1812: 89)

(21) *Craiul Alboin auzisă de această marghioală privelişte*
king.DEF.NOM Alboin hear.PLUPERF.3SG of this ridiculous view.ACC
*şi* ***să pornisă*** *a râde*
and CL.REFL.ACC.3SG begin.PLUPERF.3SG to laugh.INF
'King Alboin heard about that ridiculous situation, and he started to laugh.' (ŞA.I.1799: 353)

(22) *Şi încă* ***să pornea*** *laconii cu toţii a fugi.*
and also CL.REFL.ACC.3PL start.IMPERF.3PL Laconians.DEF.NOM with all to run.INF
'Also Laconians started suddenly to run away.'(HI.1664–68:211)

[4] The long infinitive is inherited from Latin, while the short form is the result of apocope of *-re*. In MR, the long infinitive is computed as a noun, but in OR, the long infinitive had both verbal and nominal uses (SOR: 232).

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(23) *Că doaosprăzeace coşure* *împlute* *fură* *ca* *şi*
because twelve baskets.ACC fill.PPLE.F.PL be.PS.3PL that and
*Iuda să* *poarte* *şi* *să* *nu* *se*
Iuda SĂ.SUBJ carry.SUBJ.3SG and SĂ.SUBJ NEG CL.REFL.ACC.3SG
***pornească*** *spre* *vindere.*
start.SUBJ.3PL towards sell.INF
'There were twelve full baskets for Juda to have and for him to start selling them'(CC[2].1581 :261)

### 4.2. *a (se) porni* + subjunctive

In many contexts, in old Romanian there used to be a phenomenon of competition between the infinitive and the subjunctive.

(24) *Şi* *toţi* *să* ***porniră*** *să* *între*
And all CL.REFL.ACC.3PL start.PS.3PL SĂ.SUBJ enter.SUBJ.3PL
*în mijlocul* *apostolilor.*
in middle.DEF apostles.DEF.GEN
'And everybody started to mingle with the apostles' (Varlaam C.1643:486)

(25) *Neamul* *femeiescu* *să* *fie* *atâta de nebune*
people.DEF womanly SĂ.SUBJ. be.SUBJ 3SG so crazy.F.PL
***a*** ***să*** ***porni*** *să* *facă* *atâta* *mare turburare.*
to CL.REFL.ACC.3.SG start.INF SĂ.SUBJ make.SUBJ.3SG so big noise.
'All women should be so crazy to start making so much noise' (Zosim.1676: 89)

(26) *Erau* *înţeleşi* *cu* *ciocănaşii,* *ca* *de-acolo*
be.IMPERF.3PL understand.PPLE with blacksmiths that from=there
***să*** ***pornească*** *să* *răscoale* *Ploieştii.*
SĂ.SUBJ start.SUBJ.3PL SĂ.SUBJ revolt.SUBJ.3PL Ploieşti
'They had an agreement with the blacksmiths to depart from there and put up a fight against the city of Ploiesti.' (Ghica, O.I. 1879–1886:462)

(27) *O* ***pornit*** *să* *se'nsoare.*
have.AUX.3SG. start.PPLE SĂ.SUBJ CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=marry.SUBJ.3SG
'Decided to get married.' (Şez.VII.1898: 65)

(28) *Timpul* ***s-a*** ***pornit*** *să* *cearnă.*
time.DEF CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE SĂ.SUBJ sift.SUBJ.3SG
'The too hasty time started to sift.' (CoRoLa 2015)

### 4.3. *a (se) porni* + supine

The aspectual *a (se) porni* embeds the supine forms and together they form a complex verbal construction. It imposes its own prepositional regime and controls the subject of the supine (headed by the preposition *pe*, rarely *la*).

(29) *Mircea* ***se*** ***porni*** *pe* *râs.*
Mircea CL.REFL.ACC.3SG start.PS.3SG on laugh.SUP
'Mircea started laughing.' (Bassarabescu.1890–1939:132)

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(30) ***Se*** ***porni*** *şi* *ea* *pe* *plâns*.
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG start.PS too she on cry.SUP
'She started crying too.' (Stănoiu.1928:205)

(31) ***S-a*** ***pornit*** *pe* *născut* *copii*.
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG=have.AUX.3SG start.PPLE on bear.SUP children
'She started making children.' (Stancu.1952:11)

(32) *Neculai* ***porneşte*** *la* *tăiat* *de* *stuh*.
Neculai starts to cut.SUP of reed
'Neculai starts cutting reed.' (*Contemp.*VII.1891: 1)

(33) *Tot felul* *de coruri şi* *coruleţe* ***pornesc*** *la colindat*.
allkind.DEF of choirs and little.choirs start.PRES.3PL to carol.SUP
'All kinds of choirs and little choirs go carolling.' (CoRoLa 2013)

The supine complement of aspectual verbs lacks temporal independence (Dragomirescu 2013), a fact which underlines the tendency of the structure to become monoclausal.

### 4.4. *a (se) porni*+ noun with preposition

*A se porni* selects only a certain type of prepositions, mostly locative prepositions (*la* 'at/to'*, pe* 'on', spre 'to/towards') thus preserving the locative value from the basic meaning.

(34) ***Se*** ***pornea*** ***pe*** *vorbă*.
CL.REFL.ACC.3SG start.IMPERF.3SG on word
'S/he started talking.'(Vlahuţă.Scr.A.II.1884-1911:65)

(35) *Şi* ***la*** *lucru* ***s-au*** ***pornit***.
And to work.ACC CL.REFL.ACC.3PL=have.AUX.3PL start.PPLE
'And they started working.'(Teodorescu. 1864-85:150)

(36) *Suntem* *aici…* *să* ***pornim*** ***spre*** *schimbare*.
be.PRES.1PL here SĂ.SUBJ. start.SUBJ.1PL towards change
'We are here to prepare it for change.'

(CoRoLa 2016)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The basic lexical meaning of *a (se) porni* as a full verb consists of the following elements: [SOURCE] – [MOTION] – [DESTINATION]. The process of grammaticalization changes the lexical verb *a (se) porni* from a SOURCE verb into a TEMPORAL verb ('to go > to start'), becoming an intention/future marker. The verb *a se porni* is not totally grammaticalized, it did not lose entirely its lexical meaning. The verb presents mixed semantic and syntactic properties that are due to its position on the continuum between lexical verbs and auxiliaries. As an aspectual verb, *a (se) porni* takes infinitival or subjunctive complements, it may embed supine forms and it selects only certain types of

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prepositions when followed by nouns. We can include this verb in the class of semi-auxiliary verbs as an aspectual operator with the inchoative meaning 'to start'. Usually, with aspectual value, an adverbial clause of purpose follows *a (se) porni*. In old Romanian, the complements of *a (se) porni* are infinitives, subjunctives, supines, but the oldest attestations are with noun + preposition.

In modern Romanian, aspectual *a (se) porni* is less common, only literary texts allow inchoative usage mostly with subjunctives, supines and some locative prepositions. *A se porni* is no longer used in infinitive structures. In spoken present-day Romanian, *a se porni* is mostly used in transitive factitive structures with nouns denoting electronic devices, engines, etc. as direct objects.

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