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# GIVING NAMES TO FLOWERS. A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Naming things has caused ardent debates since antiquity. Linguists, philosophers, anthropologists have discussed this matter from different perspectives, one of which being that of communication: "Man's highly developed constructive curiosity and his capacity for communication are two of the attributes distinguishing him from all other animals. Man alone has sought to understand the whole living world and things beyond his own environment and to pass his knowledge on to others. Consequently, when he discovers or invents something new he also creates a new word, or words, in order to be able to communicate his discovery or invention to others. There are no rules to govern the manner in which such new words are formed other than those of their acceptance and acceptability." (Gledhill 2008: 1**)**. With reference to linguistics there has always been fascination with etymological studies since retrieving the origin and evolution of words means going back to the dawn of humanity both through orality and literacy. Etymological thesauri are the direct result of human contact linguistically represented by the phenomenon of borrowing in all its manifestations (Dima 2008 a).

Delving into flower denomination can turn into a complex and challenging research due to its inherent comparative nature triggering an excursion into various languages and their diverse cultures. The enterprise proves to be even more interesting when approaching English and Romanian whose cultural discrepancy is quite obvious when taking into account the countries' origin and history, geographical position and, naturally enough, influences from other languages.

The present research originates in a taxonomic hierarchy study of the names of several spring bulb flowers as represented in monolingual English dictionaries ( Dima 2008 b). It was shown that the semantic information contained in the dictionary entries is both of a common knowledge nature, using such taxa as *flower , plant, season* (dictionary ranking: 1. Oxford 2. Longman and Webster 3. Chambers) and of an encyclopaedic one, retrieved by means of the taxa *family, genus, bulb, stem* (dictionary ranking: 1. Webster 2. Chambers and Oxford 3. Longman). We appreciated that the findings may satisfy the need of both common users eager to take advantage of scientific tips and specialists looking for a quick review of basic scientific knowledge when asked to ease non-specialists scientific guidance. Finally, we discovered interesting things about their etymology and decided to further enlarge upon the topic by including other types of flowers' denomination in English and Romanian.

Both English and Romanian literature in the domain have extensively dealt with flower names, focussing mainly on what criteria should be used in classifying vegetation. The first most often mentioned group displays a scientific character and is based on : a) taxonomic data ( genus and species inclusion ); b) word formation ( derivation and compounding). The second group has an empirical nature bearing on the direct, both sensible and sensitive perception of the extralinguistic factors according to which plants and flowers are named and



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recognized by people. The following list of 'naïve' ( Milica 2010, Flavell 2000) criteria includes: a) appearance (shape, colour, size); b) a particular characteristic they display; c) the place where the flowers grow; d) the uses to which they are put; d) medicinal uses and properties signaled by a feature or colour; e) behaviour; f) flourishing time ( day, season, holidays ( Bejan 1991).

The method we have applied combines the two categories of criteria and aims at achieving a tentative comparative and contrastive analysis of flower denomination in English and Romanian under the shape of cultural blurbs. The corpus has been selected from Flavell (2000) and Borza (1960) and includes names of flowers which we have considered reliable for an interesting etymological approach in the two languages.

The *bluebell* flower has as the Romanian counterpart *clopoței*, both sharing the common scientific denomination *Campanula* which, from a taxonomic point of view, denote one of several genera in the family *Campanulaceae*: genus *Hyacinthoides*: common bluebell, Spanish bluebell; genus *Mertansia*: Virginia bluebell, Scottish bluebell,Australian bluebell, Texas bluebell,dessert or California bluebell (Encyclopedia Britanica). Other species are found within the Romanian geographical area: *Campanula garganica*, *Campanula carpatica, Campanula colcearifolia, Campanula portenschlagiana.* It takes its name from their bell-shaped flowers-*campanula* is Latin for 'little bell'. While *bluebell* is a compound noun of an English origin, the Romanian *clopoței* is a noun in the plural, derived from *clopoțel,* a diminutive of *clopot* which was directly borrowed from the Old Slavic *klopotŭ*, the language spoken by the Slavs settled in the southern regions of the Danube in the seventh and ninth centuries, massively influencing the Romanian vocabulary.

The *cowslip* flower has its common name derived from the Old English *cūslyppe* meaning 'cow dung', from *cū cow* + *slypa, slyppe, paste*, probably because the plant was abundantly found growing among the manure in cow pastures: "cowslip [*cuwlippe*, Sax. As some think, from their resemblance of scent to the breath of a cow; perhaps from growing much in pasture grounds, and often meeting the cow's lip" (Johnson : 502). The word is made up of the base noun *cow* and the attributive noun *lip* with the word first known use dating before the twelfth century. Other folk names include *cuy lippe, herb Peter, paigle, peggle, key flower, key of heaven, fairy cups, petty mulleins, crewel, buckles, palsywort, plumrocks*. The Romanian counterpart is *ciuboțica-cucului*, also a compound word, where the attributive noun *ciuboțica*, derived from *ciubota* plus the diminutive suffix – *ica*, with *ciubota* coming from the Ukrainian *čoboty*, and the possessor noun *cucului*. Other common denominations include both simple and compound nouns: *aglică, aglicel, țâța-vacii / oii* or *ciuboțica / urechea – ursului*, the same as in English. The scientific name *Primula veris* indicates that the flower first appears in spring, the Latin *vēris* meaning 'of spring', hence the Romanian denomination connection with the cuckoo as the herald of spring. Within folk and children's literature (Moraru, see http) the story goes that one day the cuckoo wanted to go to a birds' party having to wear something new as all party-comers had. He urged the birds' cobbler to make him a pair of yellow boots and because he was too insistent , the former spoiled the cuckoo's going to the party by making the left boot twice. Angry and very sad, the cuckoo took the boots, flew over the hills and threw them down. While falling on the ground they changed into the yellow flowers of *ciuboțica-cucului*.

The *daisy* flower denomination is quite different from its Romanian counterpart variants: *părăluță / bănuț / bănuțel*, both sharing the scientific denomination *Bellis*



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*perenis*. *Daisy* seems to be a corruption of 'day's eye', because the whole head closes at night and opens in the morning, as Chaucer called it "eye of the day":

> *"Now have I then such a condition,/ That, above all the flowers in the mead,/ Then love I most these flowers white and red,/ Such that men calle Day's-eyes in our town;/ To them have I so great affectioun,/ As I said erst, when comen is the May,/ That in my bed there dawneth me no day/ That I n'am* up, and walking in the mead, *am not/ To see this flow'r against the sunne spread, When it upriseth early by the morrow; "*
>
> ….
>
> *As soon as ever the sun begins to west,* *decline westward/ To see this flow'r, how it will go to rest,/ For fear of night, so hateth she darkness!/ Her cheer* is plainly spread in the brightness *countenance/ Of the sunne, for there it will unclose.* (Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women)*

The *day's eye* is an image of both the sun and the world. The shape of the daisy, a circle with a center dot, is the floral sign of gold and the astrological graph for the sun (Beekman Taylor, 1996:62)

The connection with metals is made with the tiny silver coin in Romanian in denominating the same flower. Hence, *părăluță* in Romanian comes from the Turkish *para*, meaning 'money', plus the diminutive *–uța*. While the English common denomination refers to the day's time flourishing, the Romanian one refers to the shape of a coin, and from here by enlargement of meaning, to any possessions, including money: "Stringe părăluțe albe pentru zile negre" (Creangă); "Am strins si citeva părăluțe"(C. Negruzzi) (DEXI).

The *foxglove* ( *Digitalis purpurea*) has an interesting and somewhat controversial etymology in English. Firstly, it has been translated as *folk's glove* with reference to the folk living in the woods where it likes to grow. Secondly, it is supposed to come from the Old English *foxes glōfa*, 'fox's glove' because the flowers look like finger-stalls, still, the connection with the fox being rather obscure. The metonymical rendering in English is absent in Romanian where the flower is called *degețel –roşu /degetar, degetariță* by derivation from *deget* plus *–el, -ar,-ița*, its etymology being directly connected to the Latin *digitalis*, meaning 'deget'. The scientific denomination was bestowed by the German herbalist Fuchs in 1542 after the German name *Fingerhut*, 'thimble'.

The English *pansy* and the Romanian *pansea* or *panseluța ( pansea +uță*), have the same etymology, originating from the French *pensée* meaning 'thought', possibly due to the flower markings resembling a thoughtful, upturned face. English borrowed the word at the end of the sixteenth century, with the modern spelling evolving in the eighteenth century.

The English *soapwort* and the Romanian *săpunariță/ săpunel* of the family *Saponaria officinalis* denote the same saponaceous flower, with very perfumed petals. The denominations distinguish in point of word formation. The English word is a compound noun from the Middle English *sope* (from Old English *sāpe;* akin to Old High German *seifa,'* soap') and the suffixed word *–wort* Middle English, from Old English *wyrt* root, herb, plant, both dating back to 12th century. The Romanian word is a derived one, from the noun *săpun* of a Latin origin, i.e. *saponem* ,plus the suffixes-*arița* and *–el.* The plant has been named after its use as soap washing in both civilizations.

*Sunflower* in English and *floarea-soarelui* in Romanian with the scientific denomination *Helianthus annuus* describe the beautiful yellow flower which opens up in the morning to follow the sun from east to west. Both nouns are compound nouns indicating a relation of possession. The origin of the common sunflower



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denomination falls on Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 4, where one of the legend has it that once upon a time, Clytie, a dryad, deeply fell in love with Apollo, the Sun's God. But Apollo felt no love for her, adoring Leucothea. Jealous of the latter, Clytie made a scandal and after having published wide their secret love, Leucothea's father also heard the tale. Relentlessly and fierce, he buried his living daughter in the ground. Meanwhile, Clytie, broken-hearted since Apollo was still not interested in her, did nothing but just sitting and fixing her eyes on her beloved sun from sunrise until sunset. The dews and her tears magically turned her into a sunflower:

> "*Nine days the Nymph was nourished by the dews, or haply by her own tears' bitter brine; – all other nourishment was naught to her. – She never raised herself from the bare ground though on the god her gaze was ever fixed; – she turned her features towards him as he moved: they say that after while her limbs took root and fastened to the ground. A pearly white overspread her countenance, that turned as pale and bloodless as the dead; but here and there a blushing tinge resolved in violet tint; and something like the blossom of that name a flower concealed her face. Although a root now holds her fast to earth, the Heliotrope turns ever to the Sun, as if to prove that all may change and love through all remain*." (Ovid).

This is why the sunflower forever follows the path of the sun in the sky never wanting to lose sight of her lover.

Readings of flower legendry in the Romanian culture have the same recurrent motif, that of a maid's falling in love with the Sun and her redemption to nature by being turned into a flower by opposing forces, e.g. the Moon presented as the Sun's Wife; the Sun's Mother; the Ill-Omen Man. The legend of *floarea-soarelui* circulated in Moldavia and Muntenia in three variants under the form of manuscripts ( Brill 1994: 122-138). One of these variants has as the maid protagonist Stefan's Voivode's beautiful but dumb girl, who, in order to be healed, has to be kissed by the Sun. The climax is reached when, upon the Sun's kissing the maid, the jealous Moon turns her into a flower. Impressed, the Sun plants her into the garden, for the voivode's comfort and her looking at him all day long begging for the healing kiss.

*Tulip* in English and *lalea* in Romanian, with the scientific denomination *Tulipa*, have partially similar etymological developments. The English word entered the vocabulary in the sixteenth century as the New Latin borrowing *tulipa*, " from *tülibend*, a vulgar Turkish borrowing of unattested Persian *dulband* "( Flavell : 114), named for its resemblance to a turban. The Romanian *lalea* has been borrowed directly from the Turkish *lâle,* having the same Persian ancestry.

The analysis of the origin of some common flower names presented in the paper reveals the existence of three etymological strata: a. names representing the basic language stratum; b. names born out of internal means of word formation such as derivation, compounding, folk etymology; c. names of flowers coming from other languages by way of : direct lexical borrowing , from French, Turkish, Slavic, etc.; foreign words represented by the Latin scientific denominations; word-for-word translations including four structural types seen from the perspective of common flower name morphology : 1. simple names; 2. derived names; 3. compound names; 4. phrases.

From a semantic point of view we can distinguish between descriptive and metaphorical names. In the case of the descriptive ones, the most distinctive features of the flowers do not constitute the denomination base, but as a whole, they have an informative value, formally marked by an attribute or attributive prefix , referring to colour, shape, flourishing period, usage. The metaphorical



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names have an esthetic value through associations, imagination, popular humour and mythology. Still, not all of them acquire an esthetic function. Some common flower names refer to conceptual units or popular taxa which are not uniformly treated in science. In other cases, the empirical observation leads to different denominations of the flower. The majority of the flowers have two, three, or more common names, but there are many more common flower names that define two or more flowers. Both the common flower denomination and the scientific one are good territories for the manifestation of synonymy, homonymy and polysemy under the influence of both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. By way of conclusion, we consider that the paper has succeeded in underlining the aspects enumerated above and at the same time to pave the way for further investigation.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### DONNER DES NOMS'' AUX FLEURS. UNE APPROCHE INTERCULTURELLE

La recherche antérieure dans le domaine d'une représentation taxonomique du sens des noms des fleurs de printemps dans des dictionnaires monolingues anglais (Dima 2008) a anticipé des aspects étymologiques très intéressants. Une perspective diachronique sur le sujet va souligner l'influence du contact linguistique et de la créativité du langage sur leurs dénominations. Cet article a comme but d'étendre l'analyse sur les noms d'autres fleurs afin de réaliser une approche comparative anglais – roumain.
**Mots clefs** : *étymologie, contact linguistique, créativité du langage, changement, sens.*



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