FORMS OF THE ABSOLUTE SUPERLATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY SPOKEN ROMANIAN

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Abstract

In the contemporary Romanian language, there is a tendency for people to continually try to get integrated into a linguistic fashion, by appropriating all kinds of expressions uttered by people who are frequently present in the media, and who actually mask their linguistic impoverishment. One of the consequences of those tendencies can be detected very easily in the means of expressing the absolute superlative, means that go far beyond the limits of the forms recorded by the actual grammars. We cannot help noticing the special productiveness of different prefixes and prefixoids like *super*, *hiper*, *ultra*, etc., and of the lexemes *bestial*, *criminal*, *de belea*, *de comă*, etc., specific to the young people's language. Along with these few observations concerning the way of expressing the superlative, we cannot help noticing that the post-modern society is characterized by the incapacity to communicate using succulent words, that the mindful, natural and elegant language is no longer a feature of today's speakers.

Key words: *absolute superlative, contemporary Romanian language, lexical impoverishment, adjectiv, speech*

Résumé

Le parler actuel enregistre la tendance des gens de s'intégrer continuellement à la mode du langage, en s'appropriant toute sorte de répliques appartenant à des personnes généreusement médiatisées, qui en réalité ne font que masquer un vocabulaire pauvre. Une conséquence de cette tendance peut être facilement dépistée dans les moyens d'expression du superlatif absolu, qui dépassent de loin les limites des formes grammaticalisées. Nous ne pouvons passer sur la productivité hors de commun des préixes et des préfixoïdes: *super*, *hiper*, *ultra*, etc. de même que celle des lexèmes *bestial*, *criminal*, *de belea*, *de comă*, etc., spécifique au langage des jeunes gens. Les remarques que nous venons de faire prouvent que la société post-moderne se caractérise par l'incapacité de communiquer en utilisant des mots pleins de sève, que le langage soigné, naturel et élégant n'est plus l'apanage des locuteurs de nos jours.

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Mots-clés: *superlatif absolu, la langue actuelle, l'appauvrissement lexical adjectif, parole*

1. The actual Romanian language (and by this we mean especially the period after 1990) is characterized, first of all, by a series of striking lexical transformations, which have been triggered by several factors: socio-economic progress, freedom of expression, change of mentalities and implicitly of lifestyle, etc. The ideal of the contemporary society does not settle for simple features but imposes superlatives. The specific feature of this period is the speakers' preference (for the moment) for certain words or constructions, meant to render aspects of a life intended to be lived superlatively.

It has been acknowledged that the actual cultivated speech is getting closer to the colloquial speech, from which it actually borrows different lexemes, some of them being used to express the absolute superlative. Yet, before enumerating these forms we will make a short presentation of the superlative.

A grammatical category characteristic of the adjective and of certain adverbs and called for by the semantic content of certain speech parts that concentrate a high amount of affectivity, the superlative is in Romanian the expression of the maximum or minimum degree of intensity of the attributes of an object considered in relation to other objects (relative superlative) or by itself (absolute superlative). The superlative degree is of two types: relative and absolute, and each of these species can be of superiority (*cel mai bun*, *foarte bun*) or of inferiority (*cel mai puțin cunoscut*, *foarte puțin cunoscut*). Using the superlative, "the speaker indicates the fact that the attribute expressed by the adjective or the circumstance expressed by the verb is at the highest degree by comparison with the same attribute or circumstance taken as basis (the positive degree)"[1].

Comparison has undergone a very significant modification in the Romanian declension compared to Latin. If the Latin comparison was formed synthetically (using the suffixes *-ior/-iu*, *-issimus/-issima/-issimum*, etc.), in Romanian the category of comparison is generally analytical. In

[1] *DŞL*, s.v. *superlativ*.

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popular and classical Latin, the absolute superlative was expressed (except for the forms ending in *-issimus*, reintroduced in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese) by using numerous adverbs: *sane*, *valde*, *bene*, *multum*, *fortiter*, a model that was preserved in some contemporary Roman languages: It. *molto bello*, *ben pochi*, Fr. *bien peu*. Today, the adjectives formed using the grammatical suffix *-isim*, in order to mark the absolute superlative, derived from scholarly Latin, of the type *clarisim*, *rarisim*, *simplisim*, *importantisim*, are more rarely encountered, being specific to the language of educated people (*scurtissim*, *secretisim*, *senilissim*, *succintissim*).

2. To express the meaning of absolute superlative, along with the neological suffix *-isim/-issim*, the neological prefixes/prefixoids: *arhi-*, *extra- hiper-*, *super-*, *supra-*, *ultra-* are used, to which the word-formation element *mega-*[2] can be added.

Using these word-formation elements, adjectives, nouns or verbs with intensive meaning are created, which can be interpreted as representing the absolute superlative of the basic word, yet are not forms of this word, but new words[3], recorded as such by the dictionaries: *arhiaglomerat*, *arhicunoscut*, *arhiplin*; *extrafin*, *extraplat*; *hiperacid*, *hiperangajări*, *hiperemotiv*, *hiperlucid*, *hipersensibil*; *superdotat*, *superfin*, *supergreu*, *superobez*, *superrefractar*; *supraaglomerat*, *supraîncălzit*, *supraponderal*, *suprasaturat*; *ultracentral*, *ultraelegant*, *ultramodern*, *ultrasensibil*, etc. The superlative prefixes/prefixoids have become extremely productive in contemporary Romanian, being used especially along with adjectives and nouns, characterizing especially young people's language, but also the language of certain people who pretend to be "stars" (*super preț*, *super distracție*, *super efect*, *super acțiune*, *super impact*, *super hazos*, *super încântat*, *super tare*, *superfan*, *super top*, *super manele*, *super bancuri*,

[2] On the word formation element *mega*, Mioara Avram considers that it has acquired a superlative value recently in words such as: *megaelitist*, *megahidos*, much more numerous being the augmentative/superlative constructions with noun basis: *megaconcert*, *megaescroc*, *megasticlă*,, *megasponsor*, *megaparastas*, etc., extremely frequent in today's mass-media (Mioara Avram *Gramatica pentru toți*, ediția a II-a, revăzută și adăugită, București, Editura Humanitas, 1997, p. 126).

[3] *GALR, I*, 2005, p. 164.

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super referate, *super maşini*, *supertricouri*, *super fotografii*, *super OK*., *super cool*, etc.)[4].

Taking a closer look and studying their meanings, you cannot help thinking that maybe you have come across a different world that you cannot enter unless you are *super*, too. Without any difference, without any supplementary detail, music, clothes and people all hold the maximum feature, *super*[5], with the variants *beton*, *demențial*, *tare*, *trăsnet*, etc. We can no longer deny this reality, as to any suggestion you get the answer OK!, or instead of the characterization of a person or a thing you are told: *E cool!/tare!/marfă!/super!*, etc. In a society where the desire for perfection obsesses us continually, people (especially those who want to get married) must be "*absolut* sinceri", must have "calități sufleteşti *ideale*", "siluete *ireproşabile*" (Zafiu 2001: 97), and the young people need to wear "cercei cu *mega-perle*", listen to "*mega-hituri*" and get dressed "*cool*". At the same time, young people have significant chances to become "*supermodele*" and in order to become so they need to be "*super-populari*" (the examples are taken from magazines for young people: *Bravo Girl*, *Cool Girl*, *Bravo* and *Popcorn*).

Even prices can be evaluated superlatively: "prețuri *de excepție*"; "prețuri *foarte avantajoase*" and even "prețuri *incredibil de scăzute*"[6].

Certainly, an essential role in these formations' development and reinforcement goes to the mass-media, which by means of certain channels of proliferation does nothing else but deepen the crisis of language of the post-modern society[7]: "Se vor afla piste noi, care vor duce poate la găsirea

[4] We are not going to discuss the issue of the orthography of these derivatives or compound words.

[5] "Beyond their superlative connotation, these words say nothing. *Super*! can be just as well a woman, a bicycle, a stew, a film, a inner state… You no longer try to be descriptive, to make a difference between *fermecător*, *tulburător*, *surprinzător*, *provocator*, *incitant*, *copleşitor* or some other quality. You just say *Super*! and you get rid of it." (Pleşu, *Comèdii la porțile Orientului*, 2007, p. 23-24).

[6] Zafiu, 2001, p. 113.

[7] Among them, the press is the one that "by means of the written word, allows the masses to know about what is new in different domains, provides a vivid image of the changes in the language; the press handles an extremely receptive language, meant to reflect the actual linguistic reality; moreover, it has the quality of influencing today's vivid language to the highest degree" (See *Introducere* in *DCR*$_2$, 1997, p. 10).

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mijloacelor de a elimina aceşti microbi *superrezistenți*" (*F. As*, nr. 549, ian. 2003, p. 23); "În istoria mai recentă a muzicii pop nu există *superstar* care s-o întreacă pe Madonna în ceea ce priveşte ego-ul…."; "*supervedeta* anului 2003 – Ruse Whiterspoon" (*F. As*, nr. 549, ian. 2003, p. 21); "Unele apartamente şi terenuri au ajuns la preț de chilipir, după ce ani de zile au fost *supraevaluate*" (*F. As*, nr. 860, mar. 2009, p. 2); "ne temem de *supraturism*" (*F. As*, nr. 860, mar. 2009, p. 3); "*Suprasolicitarea* produce stres. Lipsa de solicitare – *megastres*!" (*F. As*, nr. 860, mar. 2009, p. 20); "o *supradoză* de politică"; "o gară *supermodernă*"; "un *superconcert*"; "un *megaconcert*" (*M. B.*, nr. 372, 14 iunie 2002, p. 8); "Poliția Rutieră a fost dotată cu motociclete şi maşini *ultraperformante*"; "*Megaturneul* național «Muzica Antidrog» continuă" (*M. B.*, nr. 404, 5 sept. 2002, p. 1); "sistemul sanitar românesc este *supradimensionat*" (*M. B.*, nr. 336, 18 iunie 2002, p. 2).

3. In order to increase the intensity of a quality, you can either repeat a prefix (*extraextrafin*, *ultraultramodern*, *ultraultracentral*), or associate two prefixes (*arhisupraaglomerat*, *ultra-supra-computerizat*) or, with obvious tendencies of exaggeration, a string of two prefixes and a word formation element can develop: "Şi, dacă sunteți ascultători aveți şanse să câştigați şi un *super mega extra nemaipomenit* premiu" (*M. B.*, nr. 336, 18 iunie, 2002, p. 6), or even three prefixes and a word formation element *ultra-hiper-super-mega-star* (concerning Michael Jackson). Many of these formations are not accepted by the literary language, being specific for the colloquial, informal language, but the fact that they are taken over by an increasingly significant number of speakers makes it possible to find them in the actual educated style.

Along with the above-mentioned elements, there appears in the spoken language, and especially in the young people's language, a series of fashionable adjectives such as *criminal*, *demențial*, *fenomenal*, *mortal*, *trăsnet* or adjectival phrases like *de belea*, *de comă*, *de crimă*, *de milioane* meant to be used with a strongly appreciative meaning: "Un site *demențial* care îți aduce ştiri cuminți" (www.efiieficient.com); "Lada Niva tunat *demențial*" (www.masini.ro); "Fotografie *mortală*" (www.dannegru.com); "O pradă *mortală*" (www.port.ro); "o femeie *trăsnet*" (www.myvideo.*ro*);

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"o ştire *trăsnet*" (www.adriannastase.ro); "În ceea ce priveşte finalul, e *de* toată comă." (www.libertatea.ro); "un frate *de belea*", "tovarăş de belea", (www.voxpublica.realitatea.net); "o fermă *de belea*" (www.cinemarx.ro); "pariuri *de milioane*" (www.pariuridemilioane.ro); "o dimineață *de milioane*" (www.europafm.ro), etc.

4. The variety of the forms of the absolute superlative presented above demonstrates, on the one hand, the dynamism of today's spoken language and, on the other hand, contributes to its lexical impoverishment, while bringing a plus of expressiveness. Though many of them are specific for the colloquial or/and argotic register, occupying a special position in the young people's language, their use is becoming a barometer of nowadays' sociocultural level.

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