CONFUENCES

THE AUTONYMOUS CONNOTATION. SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC ASPECTS

Dr. Melania ROIBU
University of Bucharest
melaniaroibu@yahoo.com

Abstract:
This paper aims at presenting one of the main characteristics of the natural language, that is its possibility to refer to everything, language included. Given the latter possibility, one can speak about reflexivity, which is one of the universals of the language, since every language has a set of forms by means of which it can refer to (one of) its elements, usually a word or a phrase. Moreover, the semantics and the syntax of such structures are quite similar, in different languages. Semantically, they are the result of some mismatches the speaker encounters throughout the discourse and show different degrees of ”reality“ of the propositional content, as well as a certain attitude of the speaker towards the language used. At the syntactic level, the reflexive move is marked by the use of a metalinguistic term and a determiner that might be metalinguistic or neutral. This configuration has been referred to either as *autonymous connotation* or *autonymous modalisation*, according to whether both values of the sign (*use* and *mention*) co-occur on the linguistic chain, or the sign is just mentioned. Here, the label *autonymous connotation* is used in a broad sense, to cover both realities described above.

Key-words:
Autonymy, autonymous connotation/ modalisation, metalanguage, use, mention.

1. Terminological remarks

The autonymous connotation is a complex structure, which includes autonymy as one of its components. So, the definition is characterized by circularity, since it involves the use of the term *autonymy*, a compound of the Greek *auto* and *onoma* (‘which is its own name’). The autonymous connotation is a proof of the reflexivity of language, that is, it involves mentioning a word/ phrase, while also using it. At least, this was the first acceptation of the phrase, as used by

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

J. Rey-Debove[1]. Later on, J. Authier-Revuz[2] made a further distinction, between the autonymous connotation, on the one hand, and the autonymous modalisation, on the other hand. The starting point of this distinction was the observation that there were some cases where the sign was only mentioned, without being literally used. Consequently, the above-mentioned authoress grouped such examples under the label of *autonymous modalisation*, restricting the meaning of the phrase *autonymous connotation* to the cases where the two values of the sign (*use* and *mention*) co-occur.

At this point, we have to emphasize that we gave up the distinction proposed by J. Authier-Revuz, choosing to use the phrase *autonymous connotation* in a broad sense, that is to designate any situation where the discourse refers to one of its elements, irrespective of whether this move involves both values of the sign (*use* and *mention*) or not, and irrespective of the reason why the discourse operates this move, that is, objective reasons (in order to explain the language used) or subjective reasons (in order to suggest a certain attitude of the speaker in relation to the language used)[3].

Our preference for the label *autonymous connotation* has two explanations: firstly, the *autonymous modalisation*, as defined by J. Authier-Revuz, covers very few situations, being strictly dependent on trivalent verbs of designation, such as *to be called/ named*; secondly, the term *connotation* has the advantage of indicating quite clearly that these structures are instances of polysemy, that is multiple meanings of the "standard" word within the context, a combination of two semiotics, designating the object and the sign in the first level language, by means of which one refers to the object. Yet, it is worth mentioning that, in such cases, one deals with a multi-layered semiotics, the content "world" prevailing over the content "sign", the latter being added to the former, in a structure that refers primarily at the world.

The autonymous connotation represents solely a semantic system, but a very rich and varied one, which works for all sequences of the discourse, being subject to the general morphosyntactic system, but presenting the prosodic and the graphic marks of the autonymy (quotation marks/ italics and a certain intonational pattern). Moreover, like in the case of the autonymy, synonymy is suspended and the sign cumulates two references: to the world, on the one hand, and to the sign by means of which it is designated, on the other hand.

[1] J. Rey-Debove 1978 and 1997.
[2] Authier-Revuz 1995.and 2003.
[3] See also Roibu 2005, 2007 a) and b), 2008.

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

2. Interpreting the autonymous connotation

The forms one can use in order to refer to its words (or to the others') offer the image of a high semantic and syntactic variety.

2.1. The semantics of the autonymous connotation. Such structures are the result of four types of mismatches:

2.1.1. The interlocutive mismatch springs from the difference — real or just assumed — between the participants' level of linguistic competence. The grammatical marks of these forms of co-enunciation are the use of the second person pronouns and determiners (structures like: *X, if you want*; *X, as you said*; *X, to use your terms*):

(1) We, Latins, didn't live within our traditional relationships. The Eastern Latins, unwillingly integrated, *as you said before*, in an Asian political regime (*I borrow your expression*!) and forced to adapt to other mentalities… (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 96).

2.1.2. The mismatch of the discourse with itself is triggered by every insertion of words coming from an external source (forms like: *X, to use Y's terms*; *what Y calls X'*):

(2) And we belong to the Latinity, we aren't *Slavs — as one calls us*. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 17).

2.1.3. The mismatch between words and things results in different degrees of appropriateness of the nomination, associated with different degrees of the speaker's commitment to this nomination (structures like: *X, this is the proper word*; *what one could call X'*; *X or, rather, Y*; *X, to put it this way*; *X, the term is inappropriate*):

(3) The author's ideology (or*, better said, the ideology imposed on the author*) is defeated by Art, in most cases. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 62).

2.1.4. The mismatch of the words with themselves arises from polysemy, homonymy and any other manifestations of the linguistic vagueness. One can quote here forms used to specify the "quantity" or the "quality" of the sense, such as: *X, in a broad/ narrow sense*; *X, in a figurative meaning*:

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

(4) I enjoy life in order to work, to love and be loved. *Speaking of love in the broadest sense*, which includes friendship, too. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 82).

2.2. The syntax of the autonymous connotation

Two patterns are to be taken into account here: integrated forms and adjoined forms, the latter being usually detached from the rest of the sentence.

2.2.1. T h e i n t e g r a t e d f o r m s are context bound, depending on trivalent verbs of denomination, such as *to be called/ named* or *to designate*. Syntactically, this pattern results in a determinative (restrictive) relative clause, which comes as a necessary element in the designation made via the nominal phrase it belongs to. Unlike other forms we are going to discuss later, this particular one involves just mentioning a certain word/ phrase, without really using it., as illustrated by the following example:

(5) This is what we do in relation to someone we don't know and *whom we call* ***God.*** (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 111).

2.2.2. T h e a d j o i n e d f o r m s are based on four possible linguistic configurations:
2.2.2.1. Succession allows both elements, *X* and *X'* (the autonymous counterpart of *X*) to appear on the linguistic chain, either by anaphoric reference, where *X'* is replaced by a grammatical substitute (*so*):

(6) Wait a moment… It (the crisis) might be permanent… However, it *exploded, so to speak*, in your books starting from… (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 113);

or by cataphoric reference, with the standard sign *(X)*, replaced by a lexical substitute *(the word)*, and anticipated by the autonymous sign *X'*, inserted in a metalinguistic structure. The following example illustrates a bilateral reference (anaphoric and cataphoric reference, at the same time):

(7) If I'm not wrong, a letter came out, too, where she denies you. *It was a fashionable word then, to deny or to condemn.* A splendour… (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 58).

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

Succession is achieved by means of various kinds of comments, most frequently assertive, but also imperative, interrogative or exclamative. The structure of these comments usually corresponds to a certain number of patterns:
— the (inter)locutor = subject and *X'/ the word/* a nominal substitute = direct object:

- with the locutor alone, in structures such as: *X, I use the word…/ X, I say that…*
- with a pair of interlocutors, either brought together by an *us* of the common wish (forms like *X, let's say the word*), or placed on an asymmetric position (in structures like: *X, allow me the term*; *X, excuse my expression*):

(8) …Joyce is the author of an enormous, pretentious mush, *let's say a genial mush*, but still a mush. I don't want a mush, I want a novel. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 148);
(9) I'm proud of having been a part of the ***Holy Trinity****, forgive my profane expression*, Barbu, Preda and me. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu,* p. 151);

— *X'/ the word* = subject appears in assertions with the verb *to be*: *X, the word is…* :
(10) *When I say* ***lozinci*** ('slogans')*, the word* has been so compromised that I feel ashamed. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 136).

— *X'* = exclamative predicate:

(11) I rushed into the Socialist realism and was bitterly disappointed, because I used to think this way: 'the Channel (Dunăre-Marea Neagră) — what a wonderful thing!' Actually, idiot, because the Danube flows into the Black Sea by itself. Why should it need a channel? (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 28).

2.2.2.2. The partial superposition of the linguistic and metalinguistic levels results in a structure where *X'* cumulates two signs with different semiotic status and two syntactic structures it belongs to:

(12) So, you left for the Occident, which was full of promises. You chose, *as one used to say, Freedom.* (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 62),

where *Freedom* enters two syntactic structures, at the same time: as a standard sign, within *you chose Freedom*, and as an autonymous sign,

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

within *as one used to say, Freedom*. Unlike the structures based on succession, which involve two elements, co-present on the linguistic chain, this time, a unique element (*Freedom*) concentrates the two values of the sign: use and mention.

2.2.2.3. The replacement of an element *X* by its autonymous counterpart *X'* appears in isolated structures, like: *X, as it is called/ named* or even in concentrated forms, such as former relative clauses, reduced to a verb "dicendi" in the past participle:

(13) Brâncuşi. Or Henry Moore. Bronze masses with holes. This is quasi-sculpture, and the novel, the *so-called French new novel* is a waste of time, energy and talent… (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 145).

2.2.2.4. The association of two elements, *X* and *Y'* usually enters one of the following linguistic configurations:
— the apposition, which may be:

- complete, like in: *X, what … calls rather Y'*; *X, which one could also call/ name Y'*:

(14) Yet, serious *mistakes, what one can call a sin*, my life's sin is having collaborated with those bastards of communists. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 138).

- reduced, like in: *X, also called/ named Y'*:

(15) What is happening then with my *utterance, called prayer*? (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 123).

— the rephrasing structures:

(16) In '47 I realized (…) that the Americans wouldn't come, that we were *sold to* the Russians. Or *given, delivered, betrayed*. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 16).

The vast majority of the comments by means of which one can refer back to an element of the discourse enter the field of the subordinate circumstantial clauses, mainly conditional, manner (of comparison), purpose and cause.

The conditional pattern may result in two possible structures: *X', if…* (dominant structure) or *if…, X'*. The desiderative verb can be followed by a verb "dicendi", the fulfilment of the condition being

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

suspended either on the interlocutor's wish (eg. 17) or on a social norm (eg. 18).

(17) We go on, because I want to say, the continuity between the revelation — *if you want to say, divine revelation* — in relation to the Jewish people, the spiritual destiny of this people, and the qualitative leap, as we, the followers of Hegel, used to call… (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 127).
(18) What about Sadoveanu? (…) the author of the well-known mithical prose, but also, after 1944, of some writings (…) which became, at that time, negative models. *If we can say so*. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 50).

The pattern based on comparison involves the massive use of a metalinguistic verb (*to say* and its synonyms), or a verb of designation, in all the grammatical forms (see eg. 17: …the qualitative leap, *as we*, the followers of Hegel, *used to call*…).

As far as the purpose pattern is concerned, one can distinguish between several linguistic configurations:
— metalinguistic verb + neutral determiner (*to speak euphemistically*):

(19) So, there's nothing to defend. And the colleague-like feelings, *to speak euphemistically*, that he might have had in relation to me, I don't reproach him with having them. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 41).

— neutral verb + metalinguistic direct object (structures like: *to use an appropriate term*)
— a system of forms where the purpose is that of avoiding another expression: such forms are almost clichés (*X, not to say Y'*):

(20) So, Art can save something.
Yes, sure. And when *the idea, not to say the ideology*… When there is true belief, then one can have great art. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 62).

— stereotypes, such as *so to speak*, resulted from the mismatch between words and objects (metaphorical meanings, usually):

(21) One should give up and, *so to speak,* tear his arm off. The arm the communists used to hold, I cut it off. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 53).

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

The cause pattern represents a nomination which is considered appropriate, provided that it is motivated. The basic structure is: *X, I say X′ because…*, as illustrated by the following example:

(22) Another one who died of cancer: poor Gheorghiu-Dej. *I say* ***poor*** *because I'm a human being.* . (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 72).

Within the system of the metalinguistic comments, one can distinguish between those which point out the reality of the propositional content, those where it is questioned, by being suspended on the fulfilment of a certain condition, or even cancelled, in structures such as: *I was about to say X′* or *I won't say X′.* The latter forms can be connected with some psychological and rhetorical categories (hesitation, reticence), which turns them into the reverse of the forms showing high commitment or confirmation of the nomination, like: *X, I meant to say X′* or *X, this is the proper word.*

At this point, one can make another distinction, between comments which represent attempts towards a new nomination, on the one hand, and those where the propositional content of sentence is presented as non-accomplished, on the other hand. If the first set of forms is labelled as "inappropriate" nomination, as proved by the use of some words with negative connotations or by other words which point out a contrast with the previous context (*X, I say X′, although…*), in the case of the second set of forms, the same label is the result of the grammatical environment of the verb *to say* (its contextual synonyms included).

(23) What does the European novel look like today, in your opinion?
Like a big zero. No, even worse, zero is simple, zero is pure, it's nothing. Not zero, worse: mediocrity. Today's European novel looks like an old and tired whore, and so what? As though I had written better…. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 147).

(24) I found myself involved, *I don't say dragged*, no, but accepted among the communist intellectuals, Romanian and Jewish, of my generation. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 16).

Except for the subordinate conditional clauses and some structures which include adverbs such as *almost* «aproape (că)» and *hardly* «abia (dacă)», it is the verbal morphemes that point out the non-accomplishment of the propositional content of the sentence: modality (interrogative/ negative form), verbal mood (conditional), modal auxiliaries (*can, may*), tense and aspect (*X, I was about to say Y′*). Consequently, the following situations are to be taken into account:

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

a. A sentence whose accomplishment depends on:
- the interlocutor's wish (see eg. 17)
- a social norm (see eg. 18)
- the target's understanding of the message conveyed by the speaker:

(25) The more numerous regional centres we will have, *you understand what I mean*, with their theatres, the more intense our theatrical life will be. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 106).

- the indecision of the speaker:

(26) A culture doesn't choose randomly and, when it does, it uses a personal filter. The filter of the spirit, of the national style (*I don't know how to call it*!). (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 101).

b. The total interrogation of the propositional content. It is achieved by means of different modal and temporal combinations, such as: *I dare say X'* or *can/ should I say X''?/ what am I saying?*

(27) Then came the '50s and brought about the literature of the Party, the Socialist realism (…). *A drama. What am I saying? An enormous confuse tragedy*.[4] (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 27).

c. The cancellation of the propositional content by the representation of *not to say.* Here, too, like in the cases mentioned above, the element *X'* is only mentioned (as an autonym). This configuration can be achieved by reference to a previous attempt of nomination (*I was about to say X'*), by the representation of the speaker's rejection of the respective content (*I don't dare say X'*) or by the speaker's decision to avoid it (*I wouldn't say X'; I avoid saying X'*):

(28) I used to write them (the chapters) randomly, not in turns, and publish them in „Viaţa Românească" (*I was about to say* „Revista Fundaţiilor", but *Euridice* was published there). (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 59-60).
(29) Many followed this reasoning, I think, it's just that I was one of those who understood quickly. Others had to suffer a lot until they swallowed this dumpling[5]. *I won't say* ***poison***, I won't say any poetic

[4] In such cases, Laurenţia Dascălu-Jinga (2002: 54-55) speaks of an emphatic repair, also marked at the prosodic level, by the rejective intonation.
[5] The non-literal equivalent of the expression *to swallow the dumpling* is *to be forced to accept a certain situation.*

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

word, either. *Dumpling*! I swallowed it. (E. Simion, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, p. 16).

One can observe the paradoxical situation of these nominations, consisting in the affirmation of their non-accomplishment, by cancellation, interrogation or reference to a potential situation.

3. Concluding remarks

The autonymous connotation, as defined in this paper, is the result of four types of mismatches, which account for the emergence of the weak points within the discourse: vagueness, difficulties in establishing the referent, denominating problems etc. At the surface level, these forms appear as marks of discontinuity, which affect the uni(ci)ty of the discourse, and paradoxically, as marks of continuity, too, since the error is signalled and repaired at the same time, by means of a reflexive move.

It is worth mentioning that the reflexive moves meant to re-establish identity are not typical to a certain language: they are universals of the natural language. Nor are they restricted to literature: they may appear in every-day discourses, both oral or written. Moreover, one shouldn't neglect the syntactic and modal variety of those forms, which can be integrated or isolated, the latter, with four different patterns: succession (the two values of the sign, *use* and *mention*, co-occur)[6], partial superposition of language and metalanguage (the sign is only mentioned)[7], replacing the standard sign (*X*) by its autonymous counterpart *(X')* and, finally, associating two elements, *X* and *Y'*.

The modal interplay within the structures with autonymous connotation offer a complex image with reference to the degree of "reality" provided by the autonymous counterpart of a word/ phrase, as well as to a certain attitude of the speaker towards the language used (by means of some specific combinations, such as: negation, conditional subordinate clauses, adverbs, modal verbs, tense or, sometimes, aspect). Along with forms that represent emphatic confirmation of a certain nomination, one can discover others where the reality of the propositional content is conditioned by the interlocutor's wish or by a social norm, questioned or even cancelled.

[6] Corresponds to the autonymous connotation, as defined by Josette Rey-Debove.
[7] What J. Authier-Revuz calls *autonymous modalisation.*

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)

REFERENCES

AUTHIER-REVUZ, Jacqueline, 1995, *Ces mots qui ne vont pas de soi. Boucles réfléxives et non coïncidences du dire,* tomes I - II*,* Collection « Sciences du langage », Paris: Larousse.

AUTHIER-REVUZ, Jacqueline, 2003, «Le fait autonymique : Langage, Langue, Discours — Quelques repères», in J. Authier-Revuz, M. Doury et S. Reboul-Touré, *Parler des mots — Le fait autonymique dans le discours*, Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, pp. 67-96.

DASCĂLU JINGA, Laurenţia, 1998, *Some notes on appropriateness repair in spontaneous speech*, in RRL, XLIII, 5 - 6, pp. 343-350.

DASCĂLU JINGA, Laurenţia, 2002, *Corectarea şi autocorectarea în conversaţia spontană*, Bucureşt: Editura Academiei Române.

REY-DEBOVE, Josette, 1978, *Le métalangage. Etude linguistique du discours sur le langage*, Paris: Le Robert.

REY-DEBOVE, Josette, 1997a, *Le métalangage*, 2ème édition, Paris: Mason & Armand Colin (eds.).

ROIBU, Melania, 2005, «Metacomunicare, metalimbaj, metadiscurs», in Gabriela PANA DINDELEGAN (coord.), *Limba română — Structură şi funcţionare*, Actele celui de al 4-lea Colocviu al Catedrei de Limba Română, Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii, pp. 185-197.

ROIBU, Melania, 2007a, «Autonimia — „slăbiciune" sau „putere majoră" a limbilor naturale?», in Gabriela PANA DINDELEGAN (coord.), *Limba română — Stadiul actual al cercetării*, Actele celui de al 6-lea Colocviu al Catedrei de Limba Română, Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii, pp. 191-198.

ROIBU, Melania, 2007b, «Despre utilizarea autonimică a semnelor», în *Studii lingvistice. Omagiu profesoarei Gabriela Pană Dindelegan, la aniversare*, Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii, pp. 343-352;

ROIBU, Melania , 2008, *Mijloace lingvistice de realizare a funcţiei metacomunicative în limba română*, PhD thesis, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest.

CORPUS:

Eugen Simion, 1994, *Convorbiri cu Petru Dumitriu*, Ed. Moldova, Iaşi.

BDD-A4074 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.239 (2026-11-06 21:38:24 UTC)