On the English Equivalents of Some Romanian Expressions of Modality. Theoretical and Practical Issues

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1. Preliminaries

Modality – a privileged space for the manifestation of the thought-speech relation – is commonly defined as the attitude of the speaker towards the propositional content of the utterance. The plural, modalities, is currently used to designate such semantic properties as: necessary, possible, likely, plausible, optional[1]. For decades, the interest in the study of modality / modalities has been shared by logicians, semioticians and linguists (see *Langages* 1976), with a marked tendency towards approaching the issue in a pragmatic perspective[2]. As Robert Blanché stated in his *Structures intellectuelles* (Paris, Vrin, 1966), the theories regarding modality have the reputation of being obscure. A medieval saying reactivated by Blanché warns: "De modalibus non gustabit asinus."

Whereas formalised logical structures are rigid and limiting, in natural languages modality is expressed by a variety of means. Linguistically, it can be expressed by phonological / suprasegmental means (stress, intonation), by lexical means (adverbs, as well as adjectives, verbs and nouns encapsulating semantic features of modality), by syntactic means (verb phrases including modal auxiliaries, adverbials, sentence types) or by a combination of means. To these, paralinguistic means – such as nodding and facial expression – may be added.

For those interested in the issue of the equivalence of modality expressions in two or several languages, the idea that modality is a universal semantic category[3] appears as reassuring. Any speech act includes a certain "dose" of modality, from (next to) zero in neutral statements to structures heavily marked for it. Human expressions of modality reveal human attitudes that are labelled as quasi-universal sets, the more so when they are placed in the context of comparable cultures, expressed by relatively comparable language systems, such as the Romanian and the

[1] Aristotle divided propositions into three categories, depending on the type of modality expressed: (1) assertive, related to what is real; (2) apodictical, related to what is necessary; and (3) possible or „problematic", related to what is possible. All three types have an ontological character in the sense that they are connected to real relations. These are called Aristotelian or alethic modalities. Robert Blanché systematized alethic modalities in his hexagonal model – necessary, possible, impossible, contingent, predetermined, casual. He classified other types of modality (epistemic, deontic, axiological, subjective) according to the same hexagonal model.

[2] In the sense that the importance of the context is postulated.

[3] Since modality is treated as a universal semantic category, certain grammars postulate a modality component. This is what Fillmore (1968) does in his case grammar: Sentence Z Modality + Proposition. Unlike modality, which is a semantic category, mood is a grammatical category.

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English. However, similarities may be misleading, just as lack of structural similarity does not necessarily prevent semantic equivalence[4].

In the present paper we will focus on some problematic aspects, both at the theoretical and at the practical level, with respect to certain Romanian moods and tenses with aspectual and modal values and the possibility of establishing definite equivalents in English.

Unlike modality and illocutionary force – which are universally incorporated in human speech – the grammatical category of mood is present in many languages but not in all of them (Lyons 1977: 848). Usually two or three moods in a language are enough to express a variety of modal shades. The very labels used in standard descriptions of moods are often confusing for reasons such as the following:

1) The labels may suggest narrower or more specific functions than in reality. Lyons illustrates that by the French "conditional mood", and the same is true of the Romanian *conditional*.

2) Generally speaking, the same term may apply to different functions in different languages, just as different terms may actually apply to the same function (Lyons 1977: 874).

Apart from that, nomenclatures may differ within the same language from grammar to grammar. Also, perfect coincidence is unlikely to occur between a morphological and a semantic classification. In defining moods, the morphological criterion often prevails in the sense that, within the same mood structure, one can distinguish central modal values from peripheral modal values. Introducing different labels for different modal values of the same form in unrealistic. In Romanian, for instance, splitting the "condițional-optativ" mood into two or even three (*condițional, optativ* and *potențial*) in order to reach a finer degree of granularity is an unnecessary complication since the formal structure is the same (in this respect see Dimitriu 1999: 557.) On the other hand, although both the Romanian *conjunctiv* and *condițional-optativ* express hypothetical or non-factual acts in opposition to the indicative mood, this semantic aspect is insufficient for treating them as a single mood since both their forms and their sets of values are generally distinct.

By limiting our interest to the moods traditionally called *personal* or *predicative* in Romanian (and *finite* in English), on the basis of the criteria formulated above, we opt for the identification in Romanian of five such moods, namely, *indicativ, conjunctiv, condițional-optativ, imperativ* and *prezumtiv*.

As for English, we will distinguish two tendencies. (1) Grammars addressing native speakers of English may simply elude the notion of *mood* and add the modal / periphrastic forms to the types of verb phrases. The treatment of the subjunctive occasionally fills less than one page, as in Quirk et al 1971, and the imperative is treated as the occurrence of the base form in imperative sentences. (2) Pedagogical foreign grammars of English often extrapolate the richer modal systems of other languages to the English verb system. The former tendency will match the theoretically oriented studies, whereas the latter will practically orient the learners of English as a foreign language towards making useful connections between their mother tongues and English.

[4] As a methodological procedure, we support the following approach: once the communication situation and the modal expressions in L1have been identified, the way in which the same situation is expressed in L2 is determined, and, finally, the two structures are coupled even if they look superficially different. For example, Romanian uses a verbal mood where English uses a modal verb.

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A balanced combination of the two has proved to yield good results in the formation of Romanian Anglicists.

2. The Romanian *Condiţional-optativ*

This is the reason why we theoretically accept the fact that the functions of the Romanian *condiţional-optativ* are expressed in English by the two subjunctive sets,

1) the "synthetic" set (the *be*-subjunctive and the *were*-subjunctive), hardly distinguishable from the *indicative* in form;

2) the "analytical subjunctive" equivalents, incorporating modal auxiliaries in their structure.

At the same time, we acknowledge the practical value for Romanians of the label *conditional mood* for such structures as *would / could / might* $+V_{Inf.}$.

There is yet another argument, of a structural order: the semantic relatedness between the Romanian auxiliary verb *a vrea* in the paradigm of the Romanian conditional (cf. Dimitriu 1999: 440-441) and the typical English auxiliary *would.* As for the English equivalents of the Romanian *conditional* in subordinate clauses, they are formally distinct from the verb structures in superordinate clauses. Against all predictions regarding the death of the English subjunctive, we find it desirable to identify such formulae as the *be, were* and even *had been* subjunctive as expressions of a verbal mood par excellence, with values that are distinct from those of the corresponding indicative forms. Such a distinction will also facilitate the understanding of such structures as *I wish I were young* or *I wish I had been with him last night.*

Another aspect which accounts for the blunders of Romanian users of English with respect to the structures of conditional sentences is the absence in Romanian of formally rigid ways of expressing conditional values. These are central values of the mood called *condţional-optativ*, but are also present among the modal values of *conjunctiv*, as well as of the indicative form called *imperfect.* That is why in the following examples several Romanian structures correspond to a single English equivalent (provided we ignore the structures involving the omission of the conditional connector accompanied by Subject-Verb inversion):

1. Să-l văd venind,	aş fi fericit.
Dacă l-aş vedea venind,	

(English translation: „If I saw him coming, I would be happy.")

2. Dacă plecam la timp,	ajungeam la timp.
Dacă aş fi plecat la timp,	aş fi ajuns la timp.
Să fi plecat la timp	

(English translation: If I had left in/on time I would have arrived in / on time.)

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Notice the synonymy of the present *conjunctiv* and present *condiţional* in the first example*)* and the synonymy of *imperfect*, the perfect form of the *condiţional* and the perfect form of the *conjunctiv* in the second. These correspond to the English *past tense* (= *were* subjunctive) and *past perfect* (= *had been* subjunctive), respectively. The Romanian *imperfect* can equally replace the perfect conditional in the main clause, as in the second example above.

3. The Romanian *Imperfect*

This brings us to the issue of the multiple values of one and the same Romanian verb form compared to the higher specialisation of the English verb forms. The best illustration for the translation intricacies related to a single Romanian form is the *imperfect*, commonly included among the tenses of the Romanian *indicative mood*, and its several aspectual and modal values, which lead to different verb forms in English. This issue is the opposite of the conditional structures discussed above in the sense that, whereas several Romanian (synonymous) structures correspond to a unique English structure, the Romanian *imperfect* covers several values rendered by a wide range of semantically and formally unrelated English structures. Here are a few examples in which the *imperfect* forms and their English equivalents are underlined:

1. *Ningea* când am ieşit din casă (descriptive value within the realm of the factual)
   ⇨ Past Continuous: *It was snowing* when I went out.
2. Când eram studentă, *fumam* mult. (durative / iterative value)
   ⇨ *I used to smoke* when I was young.
3. Mai degrabă *studiam* chineza. (= Preferam să studiez chineza / Aş fi preferat să studiez chineza) (Optative value, counterfactual)
   ⇨ *I'd rather have studied* Chinese.
4. Mai degrabă *studiai* medicina decât engleza (Optative value, *counterfactual*)
   ⇨ *I'd rather you had studied medicine* than English.
5. Mai bine nu-mi *urmai* sfatul.
   ⇨ It would have been better if you *hadn't taken* my advice.
6. Dacă *veneai* cu noi, n-ai fi regretat. (Conditional value, conditional clause)
   ⇨ If you *had come* with us you wouldn't have regretted.
7. Să fi fost aici, *rezolva* problema.(Conditional value, main clause)
   ⇨ If he had been here, he *would have solved* the matter.
8. Dacă nu *era* el, ne rătăceam. (See supra 6, 7.)
   ⇨ If it *hadn't been for him... / But for him* we would have got lost.
9. Poate că *nu voia* să-l vadă. (Subjective value, refusal)
   ⇨ Perhaps she *wouldn' / t* see him.
10. *Trebuia* să înapoiaţi cărţile până la 1 aprilie (=ar fi trebuit) (Deontic value. Unfulfilled action, also resulting from the semantic content of the verb.)
    ⇨ You *ought to / should have* returned the books by 1 April.

Summing up, the Romanian *imperfect* may correspond to the English *past progressive*, to the expression of discontinued habit *used to* + V, to the expressions of preference or regret, and to non-factual conditional structures rendered by *past perfect* or "past conditional" (= *would* + $V_{\text{Perfect Infinitive}}$).

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4. English Expressions of the Romanian *Prezumtiv*

The verb form designed by the term *prezumtiv* was identified by Al. Rosetti in his 1943 grammar, was called *modul potențial* (v. Iordan and Robu 1978: 473) by A. Philippide and has occasioned debates regarding its status as a mood (starting with Elena Slave, 1957)[5]. Leaving these aside, we would like to articulate here the possibility of associating the form of the Romanian *prezumtiv* built with the help of the auxiliary for the future tense *voi / vei* etc. with the English structures built with the help of the auxiliary for the future tense *will.* The two can be associated not only semantically but also formally,

1. Nu-l deranja. Va / *O fi dormind.*
   ⇨ Don't disturb him. *He will be sleeping*.
2. E ora 9. *Vor / Or fi sosit deja.*
   ⇨ It is nine o/clock. They *will have arrived* by now.

(Note: The "*o*" form is a colloquial variant. "*Or*" is the corresponding colloquial form for the third person plural. Colloquial "*o*" is homonymous with the future auxiliary. Compare. the *prezumtiv* form *va* / *o fi dormind* with the future forms *va dormi /*o dormi / *o să doarmă.*)

It is obvious that (1) the verbal structure *will be sleeping* is formally identical with the future continuous, but it expresses an action that is supposed to be taking place right now, whereas the corresponding Romanian form is identified as the present tense of the mood called *prezumtiv* and is different from the future forms; (2) the structure *will have arrived* is formally identical with the future perfect just as the equivalent Romanian expression is identical with the prior future (*viitor anterior* or *viitor II*) and, in the particular context, both express an action that is supposed to have taken place. We should note, however, that perfect formal equivalence in the former case, which involves the use of the Romanian *gerund* (*-înd /-ind* form) and of the English *present participle* (*-ing* form), respectively, does not hold true in the case of verbs that are not commonly used in the continuous aspect, e.g., *O fi* / *Va fi ştiind* el ce face / He *will know* what he is doing.

Along an epistemic scale, the central *will* form will be flanked by the *may* form and by the *must* form, respectively. Thus, the examples above, (1) Nu-l deranja*. Va* / *O fi dormind* and (2) E ora 9. *Vor / Or fi sosit* deja.can be equated to the following corresponding English structure, respectively:

(1) Don't disturb him. He *may* be sleeping.
Don't disturb him. He *will* be sleeping
Don't disturb him. He *must* be sleeping.

(2) It is 9 o'clock. They *may* have arrived by now.
It is 9 o'clock. They *will* have arrived by now.
It is 9 o'clock. They *must* have arrived by now.

[5] Slave (1957) treats the presumptive as a separate, periphrastic conjugation with three moods. Dimitriu (1979:269) dismisses this view by pointing out that there is no difference in meaning among the three types of formants when used in the presumptive . The *prezumtiv* isstructurally defined as **Formant + *a fi* + Main Verb$_{\text{Gerunziu}}$** for *prezumtiv prezent* and **Formant + *a fi* + Main Verb$_{\text{Participiu trecut}}$** for *prezumtiv perfect.* The formant may be (1) *viitor* aux. *voi* etc/ *oi* etc., (2) *conjunctiv* particle *să*, or (3) *optativ* aux. *aş* etc. The three formants become contextual quasi synonyms when used to express the mood called *prezumtiv.*

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Parenthetically speaking, Dumitru Irimia remarked long ago (1976) upon the synonymy (or, rather, quasi synonymy) of the forms *trebuie să* + $V_{Gerunziu/Participiu\ trecut}$ and *va fi* + $V_{Gerunziu/Participiu\ trecut}$, where *trebuie* is the Romanian equivalent of *must* in a *prezumtiv* equivalent construction:

Trebuie să fi cântând. ≈ Va fi cântând (He must be sleeping. ≈ He will be sleeping).

Trebuie să fi venit. ≈ Va fi venit (He must have arrived by now. ≈ He will have arrived by now).

The parallel drawn between the Romanian mood called *prezumtiv* and the corresponding English expressions is not meant to suggest in the least the presence of a distinct "presumptive mood" in English. Moreover, among the modal values of the Romanian future (*viitor I*) the "prezumtiv" value is present anyway, e.g., "Măi băieți... da' oleacă de fân nu s-o găsi pe la voi?" (C. Hogaș, quoted in Irimia 1976: 94), this verb form being interpretable as having either "extended present" reference or future reference. This is not surprising: since future actions are not facts yet, they are closer to an interpretation in terms of modality than, say, actions that are going on at present or that have already taken place.

Apart from the equivalences discussed above, which display an obvious systematic character, there are many others, which can only be discussed contextually. For a pertinent discussion of such cases, illustrated by parallel exemplifications, and of the morphological homonymy between the past presumptive and modal perfect forms, as well as for the overall presentation of the issues related to the Romanian *prezumtiv* vis-a-vis comparable expressions in the Balkan area we warmly recommend Victor A. Friedman's complex article "The Grammatical Expression of Presumption and Related Concepts in Balkan Slavic and Balkan Romance", 1998, also available on the Internet (May 28, 2002), in which he extensively deals with the "Romanian presumptive mood".

5. Final remarks

To sum up, we do not favour a complicated classificatory scheme that would be hard to handle, but, rather, we plead for training students in translation / interpreting / foreign language teaching (the English-Romanian / Romanian-English domain) towards an increased awareness of the possible structural and semantic parallels between English and Romanian that would speed up the process of establishing correct equivalents between the meaning and the grammatical structure of one language on the one hand and the corresponding meanings and grammatical structures of the other language on the other hand.

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Les équivalents anglais de quelques expressions roumaines de la modalité. Aspects théoriques et pratiques

Ce travail est centré sur certains aspects problématiques d'orde théorique et pratique concernant quelques modes et temps à valeurs aspectuelles et modales et la possibilité d'en établir fermement les correspondants anglais. L'auteur est favorable á un cadre théorique qui permette l'alignement et la pratique en contexte des structures prototypiques couplées en tant qu'expressions modales equivalentes dans plusieurs langues – le roumaine et l'anglais dans notre cas. Son point de vue est illustré par des exemples et remarques sur: (1) les constructions conditionelles; (2) certaines valeurs aspectuelles et modales de l'imperfait roumain par rapport á l'anglais; (3) un traitement parallële de certaines formes centrales du mode roumain appelé *prezumtiv* et leurs équivalents anglais, placés au long de la même échelle épistémique.

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