Images of Edible Plants in Some Biblical Phraseological Structures. A cultural perspective

Petronela SAVIN

This paper represents an investigation of some phraseological structures with biblical correspondence in the context of Romanian phraseological field of edible plants, from a cultural perspective, given that it is only more recently that the cultural foundation of phraseology has been duly noticed as playing an important role.
We agree with the statement made by Piirainen (2007) according to which there can be no adequate description of phrasemes and the way they function in a language without regard to culture, since in many cases culturally based concepts govern the inference from literal to figurative. In this article, we shall attempt to analyze the way in which the biblical representations related to the food act, on which Romanian phraseological structures rely, are part of real paradigms of meaning depending on the position that edible plants occupy in the popular mind.
This approach subsumes the ethnolinguistics, providing an answer to Eugeniu Coşeriu's (1996) challenge regarding the study of language from the perspective of culture's universality and having in mind the various demands of linguistic research which, as compared with other subjects, entails the most numerous connections with the man's way of being and with all the human activities in general.

Foods, a fundamental condition for existence, make up one of the most significant chapters of human development. Feeding is defined by what is general to the human nature, being characterized by a spontaneous automatism, thus, it belongs to nature, it is also subject to restrictive rules and it embodies both the relative and the particular, in this respect belonging to culture. Both these dimensions of the food act, the physiological one, as a revitalization source, and the cultural one, as a way of knowing and understanding life, are valorized through language. Phraseological structures constitute that part of the language where food, in its various states, embodies most faithfully the image of the relation between culture and nature at the level of the popular mind, in its most authentic forms.

The cultural foundation of a large number of phraseological structures can be ascribed to "intertextual phenomena", in a broad sense, the relation between phrasemes and certain text that can be identified as their sources. For a long time after the invention of letterpress printing, the Bible was the only book in many families, and whole passages were learnt by heart. Many biblical idioms are widespread in European languages, being so familiar that they are used without

BDD-A125 © 2011 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:43:15 UTC)

conscious reference to the original context. Besides the approximate quotations of biblical verses or some more or less vague knowledge about biblical stories, a reason for the durability of these structures is the their relation with a cultural foundation already there. The food, in the biblical imaginary, acquires a certain projection corresponding to the signification that man bestows on it, it is a sign generating messages of friendship, love, hatred, contempt. This culinary code is generically known by the readers. We say "generically" because there are numerous biblical phraseological contexts that are expressed by food codes whose "keys" have been forgotten, the explanations having been reduced to formulas such as "this is how it is said". Although the speaker of a certain language assumes the signification of the biblical phraseological sign, it rests to the specialist to trace back the semiotic construction of the semantic unit of the structures under discussion.

In the biblical context, the images of the act of feeding bring elements characteristic of the human culture at large, within the phraseological structures' process of signification. This process is based, in generally, on metaphor or metonymy, the key-elements in the phraseology of all languages (cf. Lakoff, Turner 1980, Kövecses 1986, Gibbs 1995, Dobrovol'skij, Piirainen 2005).

In this context, we attempt to analyze the way in which some biblical representations related to the food act, on which Romanian phraseological structures rely, are part of real paradigms of meaning depending on the position that edible plants occupy in the culture-nature relationship.

This approach subsumes the ethnolinguistics, the European version of what Anglo-Saxons called linguistic anthropology. In Eugen Coşeriu's terms, this linguistic discipline is aiming at "the study of language variety and variation in close contact with civilization and culture of a community" (Coşeriu 1994: 133).

Starting from the correlation language – culture and having language as research object, the "knowledge about things" is indispensable for situating our study within the area of this discipline. Therefore, phraseological structures based on biblical images of edible plants will be analyzed in terms of the position that the food act occupies in the popular mind. This will be possible by understanding the phraseological meaning as two-stage-process: the stage of the literal meaning, witch is conventional, lexicalized, accessed automatically (Ariel 2002) and the stage of phraseological meaning, "derived" and "figurative" (Burger 2007). We understand the term "figurative" in the sense that Dobrovol'skij/Piirainen (2005) give to this phrase. A relation is figurative only if it contains an image component. By image component the authors understand "a specific conceptual structure mediating between the lexical structure and the actual [=phraseological] meaning of figurative units" (p. 14). Just these "traces of literal meaning" which are inherited by the figurative meaning of phrasemes are very important in our ethnolinguistic approach because they incorporate the "knowledge about things", fundamental into investigation of phraseology from a cultural perspective. In order

BDD-A125 © 2011 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:43:15 UTC)

to investigate some biblical phrasemes related to the edible plants we have to reconstruct the phraseological context in which they belong.

Until the "Neolithic Revolution" that made the transition from the use of spontaneous plant resources to the domestic production of vegetal resources, plant cultivation, man had been living of hunting and gathering for at least half a million years. There are societies where, until recently, gathering has remained the only source of plant supply; in other cases, the gathering of spontaneous plant resources has continued in parallel with the production of cultivated plants (Barrau 2007). In this context, regardless of the degree of evolution, every nation keeps cultural traces of a gatherer's civilization.

As a proof of the fundamental role in the life of man at all times, fruits and vegetables represent, at the level of the imaginary, elements that betray the human habit of defining the world from the perspective of the gatherer. The biblical phraseological structures related to the images of vegetables and fruits submit to the same principle.

In this context, we propose to analyze the biblical proverb *Părinții mănîncă aguridă şi copiilor li se sterpezesc dinții* (the parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge), 'one wrong, while others suffer the consequences' (Zanne, P I, 217; *Ier.*, 31, 29-30, *Iez*. 18, 2-3). The meaning of this structure is based on the value of the food image "sour grapes". The metaphorical motivation of the phraseology based on images of everyday live like food is founded on observation and immediate experience. One perceives the similarity between the unpleasant taste and unpleasant fact. As universals of thinking, acrid, hot or bitter are marks of negative fact, unlike sweet which defines the positive fact. In this context, the sour grapes represent the image of unpleasant consequences of one's acts. In Romanian language, this biblical proverb integrates an entire phraseological system which demonstrates the validity of this metaphorical law.

Relation acrid - negative fact is illustrated in the signification of the phraseological structures: *S-a făcut agurida miere* (sour grapes have turned to honey) 'meaning that the enemies have come to terms', *Cu încetul, încetul agurida se face miere* (step by step and bit by bit the sour grapes are turning into honey) 'teaches us not to be hasty for we shall acquire much through patience', *Cu oțet şi cu fiere nu se face agurida miere* (vinegar and bile does not turn sour grapes into honey) 'people cannot be tamed with hatred and scolding' (Zanne, P I, 95), *a se sătura ca de mere pădurețe* (to be fed up as if with wild apples) 'meaning, to have had enough of a bad and unpleasant thing' (Zanne, P I, 217), *Treanca-fleanca mere acre* (tittle-tattler sour apples) 'to fiddle-faddle, to maunder' (Zanne, P I, 218).

To a similar style belong the idioms *poamă acră* (sour fruit) 'malicious, naggy, bad person', a famous Romanian folk old saw being 'Mother-in-law, mother-in-law, you sour fruit, / Even if you ripened for one year and a summer, / You would still be bitter and sour' (Ciubotaru 1984: 264), *poamă rea* (bad

BDD-A125 © 2011 Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:43:15 UTC)

fruit) ‘person with bad manners, habits’, *poamă bună* (good fruit) ‘is said ironically about a man good for nothing, a trifler, a rogue or a loose woman’ (cf. DLR, VIII/3). It is obvious that the value of the three expressions is given by the traits of the term *poamă* (fruit): sour, bad or, ironically, good. Although the trait is not clearly stated, by reducing the syntagm, its value remains, hence the figurative meaning of the term *poamă* (fruit) ‘person lacking in seriousness and character; person good for nothing, rascal, rogue, loafer, dissolute; prostitute, immoral, frivolous woman’ (cf. DLR, VIII/3).

Therefore, the food image of biblical proverb *Părinţii mănîncă aguridă şi copiilor li se sterpezesc dinţii* bring in the process of signification elements characteristic of the human culture at large, the acrid, mark of negative fact, representing an universal of thinking. Just this universal cultural foundation assures the success of the biblical phraseological structure.

An other biblical example which can be integrated into the same metaphorical system of signification is the expression *a se vinde pentru un blid de linte* (to sell oneself for a bowl of lentils) ‘meaning, to sell oneself short’ (Zanne, P III, 596), that can be found in the Biblical text containing the story from the Old Testament about Isav’s selling his first-born right to Iacov, for a bowl of lentil (*Genesis* 25, 29-34). The significance of this expression is based on general metaphorical relation: the lack of nutritional quality - image of non-value. This expression can be integrated in Romanian language into a series of phrasemes in which the negative bearing of the image of a certain food is also a result of its low nutritive value.

The dissatisfying nutritive quality of the lentil may serve as an image for an insignificant fact, in the following structures also: *Linte văzuşi, linte spui* (lentil is what you’ve seen, lentil is what you’re telling) ‘when somebody enthusiastically and boastfully tells something that is, in fact, unimportant’, *frige linte* (lentil fryer**)** ‘miserly man’, *spală linte* (lentil washer) ‘babbler’ (Zanne, P III, 596). The other structures which can be integrated in the same context are: *spanac* (spinach) ‘worthless thing’ (Zanne, P IV, 127), *a mînca la ciuperci* (to eat a whole lot of mushrooms) ‘to eat nothing’, *parcă mănîncă numai ciuperci fripte* (he looks as if he ate only fried mushrooms) ‘he is thin, with no blood in his cheeks’, *a mînca asmaţuchi* (to eat chervil) ‘to give oneself the bob’ (Zanne, P III, 450), *a nu face* (sau *a nu plăti*) (*nici*) (*cît*) *o ceapă* (*degerată*) (not to be worth a frostbitten onion) ‘to be worth very little’, *a da cuiva ceapa* (to give somebody an onion) ‘to give him nothing’, *a mînca o ceapă degerată* (to eat a frostbitten onion) ‘not to bring something to a successful conclusion’ (Zanne, P III, 518).

Therefore, the signification of some biblical proverbs or expressions is strengthened by the whole phraseological system, the metaphorical low acting no matter the origin of phraseological structures.

As a proof of the fundamental role in man’s life of *fruits* and *vegetables*, the biblical proverbs and expressions include, on the level of the imaginary,

BDD-A125 © 2011 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:43:15 UTC)

elements that reveal man's habit of defining the world from the perspective of the gatherer. Just like the referential phrasemes, the biblical structures relying on edible plants organize their lines of signification according to the principle of the taste or nutritious value. Acrid brings about the image of discomfort, by extrapolation, the features angry, nervous, violent, inappropriate, whereas the dissatisfying nutritive value serves as an image for an insignificant fact, without value. According to a "law" of the transfer into the metaphoric expressive, the senses become metaphors for emotions, the physical pleasure or displeasure sets itself up as a gauge for the physical state. Therefore, even phraseological structures with obvious Biblical correspondences reveal an anti-Christian underlayer, reflecting the mind of a primitive, agricultural population.

Acknowledgements:
Financing of this work was supported in part by project POSDRU/89/1.5/S/49944 and in part by the project CNCSIS PD- 582/2010.

References

Ariel, M., *Literal, minimal and salient meanings*, in „Journal of Pragmatics", no. 34, 2002, p. 361-402

Barrau, J., *Plante cultivate*, in Bonte, P., Izard, M. (Eds.), *Dicţionar de etnologie şi antropologie*, Editura POLIROM, Iaşi, p. 527-529

Burger, H., *Semantic aspects of phrasemes*, in Burger, H. et al. (Eds.), *Phraseologie/Phraseology: Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung/An International Handbook of Contemporary Research*, vol. 1, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2007, p. 90-109

Ciubotaru, Silvia, *Strigături din Moldova. Cercetare monografică*, in „Caietele arhivei de folclor", no. 4, Iaşi, 1984

Coşeriu, E., *Lingvistica din perspectivă spaţială şi antropologică. Trei studii*, Editura Ştiinţa, Chişinău, 1994

Dobrovol'skij, D., Piirainen E., *Figurative Language: Cross-cultural and Cross-linguistic Perspective*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2005

Dumistrăcel, Stelian, *Pînă-n pînzele albe. Expresii româneşti*, Editura Institutul European, Iaşi, 2001

Gibbs, R. W., *Idiomaticity and human cognition*, in Everaert, M. et al. (Eds), *Idioms: structural and psychological perspectives*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Hillsdale (New Jersey), 1995, p. 97-116

Kövecses, Z., *Metaphors of anger, pride and love. A Lexical approach to the structure of concepts*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam – Philadelphia, 1986

Lakoff, G., Johnson M., *Metaphors we live by*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980

Piirainen, E., *Phrasemes from a cultural semiotic perspective*, in Burger, H. et al. (Eds.), *Phraseologie/Phraseology: Ein internationales Handbuch*

BDD-A125 © 2011 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:43:15 UTC)

zeitgenössischer Forschung/An International Handbook of Contemporary Research, vol. 1, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2007, p. 208-219

2. Dictionaries

DA = [Romanian Academy] *Dicționarul limbii române*; I/I, letters A-B, 1913; I/II, letter C, 1940; I/III, fascicle I, D -de, 1949; II/I, letters F-I, 1934; II/II, fasc. I, J - lacustru, 1937; II/III, ladă – lojniță (unpublished). Editura Academiei, Bucureşti

DLR = [Romanian Academy] Dicționarul limbii române (new series), tome VI, letter M (1965-1968); VII/1, letter N (1971); VII/2, letter O (1969); VIII/1-5, letter P (1972-1984); IX, letter R (1975); X/l-5, letter S (1986-1994); XI/1, letter S (1978); XI/2-3, letter T (1982-1983); XII/1, letter T (1994); XIII/1-2, letter V (V-veni; 1997; *venial–vizurină*; 2003); IV, letter L (*L – lherzolită*; 2008); V, letter L (*Li-luzulă*, 2008). Editura Academiei, Bucureşti

Zanne, Iuliu, *Proverbele românilor din România, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria şi Macedonia. Proverbe, zicători, povățuiri, cuvinte adevărate, asemănări, idiotisme şi cimilituri cu un glosar româno-frances*, vol. I-X, Editura Librăriei Socecu & Comp., Bucureşti, 1895-1912

BDD-A125 © 2011 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:43:15 UTC)