Figurative and Modal Uses of the Romanian Verb "a zice"

Alina-Viorela VARVAROI
University of Suceava

Résumé: Les verbes du dire sont une catégorie de verbes des plus versatiles d'une langue naturelle. Plus que les sens dénotatifs, les *verba dicendi* acquissent des sens métaphoriques dans des contextes particuliers. Dans notre étude, on analyse le cas du verbe roumain *a zice*, "dire".

Mots clés: *verba dicendi*, Roumain, a zice, sens particuliers, métaphore.

The *verba dicendi* form a particular category of verbs within the verbal inventory of natural languages, as speech is an activity that defines and delimitates human communities. Speech verbs have a series of well-defined functions, the main one being that of designating communication in general, while supplying a variety of lexical, aspectual or modal nuances and semantic connotations. They can refer to the manner in which the discourse is produced (intelligibility, state of mind or attitude of the speaker, etc.), to the contents of the message (information, veracity, length, periodicity, etc.) or to the pragmatic purposes of the communication (modal nuances, such as those expressing permission, order, interdiction, etc.). As speech verbs proper, they can relate anaphorically or cataphorically to a direct speech, or they can reproduce a discourse by converting it into indirect speech.

BDD-A17771 © 2011 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 3.41.188.32 (2026-11-08 04:45:16 UTC)

Nevertheless, apart from these typical functions of the *verba dicendi*, some of them have developed a series of figurative or metaphorical meanings that are institutionalized mainly in the everyday spoken language, i.e. in the informal styles. Such is the case of the Romance verbs that proceed from the Latin verb *dico, dicere*. All these verbs were inherited directly from Latin, and they belong to the main word-stock of these languages, so they produced large lexical families and are polysemantic. No wonder, then, to find out that such verbs can acquire contextually a wide range of different meanings that are easily recognized by the native speakers, but are sometimes difficult to decypher by a non-native speaker.

The Romanian verb *(a) zice* is an apocopated form of *zicere* that follows the Latin infinitive *dicere*, that had the following attested meanings[1]: 1. to say, speak, tell, mention; 2. to assert, affirm, maintain, declare, state; 3. to deliver a discourse; 4. to mean, intend; 5. to describe, relate; 6. to sing; 7. to celebrate; 8. to predict; 9. to urge, offer; 10. to pronounce, utter, articulate.

In Romanian, most of these meanings exist and are still in use, including some peculiar ones, such as "to sing" or to "predict" that are not accepted by the literary norm and, like in Latin, are perceived as figurative. The Romanian dictionaries attest the following meanings for the same verb[2]: 1. to express with words, say, speak; 2. to utter sounds, syllables, words with the organs of speech, articulate, pronounce; 3. To communicate, formulate smth.; 4. to expose, relate; 5. to affirm, assert, confirm, to certify; 6. to declare, allege, claim; 7. to write, report; 8. (pop. and fam.) to address someone; 9. (pop.) to promise; 10. to ask, order, com-

[1] See Charlton T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, American Book Company, New York, Cincinnati and Chicago, 1890, and Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1879, both available online at http://perseus.uchicago.edu/Reference.

[2] See *** *Micul dictionar academic*, Academia Româna, Institutul de Lingvistica „Iorgu Iordan", Univers Enciclopedic, Bucuresti, 2002, *** *Dictionarul explicativ al limbii române*, editia a II-a, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucuresti, 1998, and Ioan Oprea *et alii*, *Noul dictionar universal al limbii române*, Editura Litera International, Bucuresti – Chisinau, 2009.

BDD-A17771 © 2011 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 3.41.188.32 (2026-11-08 04:45:16 UTC)

mand, impel; 11. to advise; 12. to put a name to someone, to nickname; 13. to express one's opinion, think, believe, assess, consider; 14. to reveal, to disclose something; 15. to recite, to read; 16. to celebrate; 17. to mean; 18. to confess; 19. to criticize, reproach, object; 20. (pop.) to sing (or play an instrument).

As we can see from the definitions listed above, the Romanian dictionaries attest almost twice as many meanings as the Latin ones; it does not mean necessarily that those meanings were absent in Latin, especially since spoken Latin was only recorded in scarce sources. Nevertheless, we will discuss all the special uses of the verb *a zice*, independently of how it is reflected in its Latin etymon.

The verb *a zice* is sometimes voided of its literal meaning; in certain situations, its function is purely phatic, as the speaker tries to establish the contact with the addressee in contexts like *Mai zi o data, n-am înteles*, translated as *Come again? I didn't understand.*

A different type of use of the analyzed verb is identified in fixed constructions such as *Cum s-ar zice...* and *Cum îi zice...* These units are formulas with a particular role in speech acts: the former introduces or follows a cliché, that is another recognizable structure (*Era cu capul în nori, cum s-ar zice*, i.e. *He was sort of lightheaded*), while the latter is used with an interrogative form to mark a slip of memory, allowing the speaker to make an effort to remember (*Mi-am cumparat o… cum îi zice?*, i.e. *I've bought a... what's it called?*).

The Romanian verb *a zice* may acquire the extended meaning of "to write, to be written in, to read / say or to report" when the grammatical subject of this verb is a [-human] one, i.e. if it is expressed by a noun that designates a written text of any kind. Thus, if we tried to translate a sentence like *Ce zice horoscopul de azi?* we should find that the meaning of the verb is anything but "uttering articulate sounds": *What does the horoscope say?* or *What does it read in the horoscope?*, literally meaning "What is it written in the horoscope?".

BDD-A17771 © 2011 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 3.41.188.32 (2026-11-08 04:45:16 UTC)

Another meaning, "to recite, to read" appears in examples such as: *A zis poezia pe de rost*, i.e. *He recited the poem by heart*; we may identify once again the high degree of expresivity Romanian offers while talking about this particular of speaking. Apart from all the preserved meanings inherited from Latin, some other significances have been added over time.

One of the meanings acquired by the Romanian verb *a zice* is the one involving the sense of "putting a name to someone". It seems that Latin didn't (probably) offer this signification which nowadays is so commonly used in everydays discourse: *I se zicea Morcovete*, i.e. *They called him Carrotface*. So it may be very easily substituted by the verb "to nickname" in this variant which settled quickly in our Romance language.

Taking into consideration the sense of "expressing an opinion", we still lack any traces of the Latin inheritance: *Ce-ai zice daca ar veni si ei?*, i.e. *How about if they came?*; still, a speech verb can be used to translate this context into English: *What would you say if they came?*

With the significance "to mean", also attested in Latin, *a zice* has a restricted use which consists in the fixed word construction *va / vrea sa zica*. This Romanian verbal idiom selects a metaphorical meaning of the analyzed verb. Therefore, *Astazi ploua, vrea sa zica avem nevoie de umbrela*, lit. *It's raining today, it wants to say we need the umbrella* no longer reflects its denotative acception, but can be rendered by replacing *a zice* with the lexeme *înseamna*: *Astazi ploua, vrea sa însemne ca avem nevoie de umbrela*, i.e. *It's raining today, which means we need the umbrella*. As the resulted phrase is not a stable word construction, additional grammatical instruments are needed to introduce the subordinate direct object clause, such as the conjunction *ca*. Related to the verbal idiom is the conjunctional idiom based on the same metaphorical meaning of the verb *a zice*: *carevasazica*, with a conclusive meaning. The conjunctional idiom can be substituted by simple conjunctions such as: *deci, asadar*, etc., or by other conjunctional idioms: *prin urmare, în concluzie*, etc. (*Careva-*

BDD-A17771 © 2011 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 3.41.188.32 (2026-11-08 04:45:16 UTC)

sazica / Asadar / Prin urmare, situatia în care se afla era dificila, i.e. *Therefore the situation he was in was quite difficult.*)

A distinctive meaning which Romanian offers in comparison to other languages is that of "disclosing, revealing something": *Te zic!*, i.e. *I'll tell on you!*; this use involves a previous action that requires the need of eluding the truth from the guilty part.

Sometimes, verbs of saying can bear a modal meaning, reflecting order or advice. To this respect, the Romanian verb can appear in different contexts with either meaning: *Ti-am spus sa ma lasi în pace*, meaning *I told you to leave me alone* (i.e. "I've asked you to leave me alone"), or *Îti spun înca o data: nu te mai gîndi la el*, meaning *I'm telling you once again: stop thinking about him* (i.e. "I advise you to stop thinking about him").

Also, in certain occasions, this verb may express an obligation projected into the future, asumed by the speaker, i.e. a promise; in this case, some dictionaries mention a certain informal use to it: *Tu ai zis, de ce nu te tii de cuvînt?*, meaning *You said so yourself, why don't you keep your promise?* In situations such as: *Frumos, n-am ce zice*, i.e. *That's just great, what can I say*, and *Sa nu zici ca nu te-am avertizat!*, i.e. *Don't say I didn't warn you!*, the Romanian verb *a zice* expresses the modal meanings "to criticize, reproach, object", not attested in Latin. A not attested modal meaning, neither in Latin, nor in the Romanian dictionaries, is conveyed by the examples *Nici nu zici ca-i facut în China*, i.e. *You couldn't tell it's made in China*, or *Zici ca-i beat*, i.e. *He seems drunk*, "to appear, seem". Not attested in Latin, *a zice* can have the contextual meaning "to confess". In this case, it preserves the proper meaning "to say", while adding that of [+ acknowledgement] (reluctantly or not: *A zis ca el este faptasul*, *He said he did it*, vs. *În sfîrsit mi-a zis ca ma iubeste*, *Finally he told me he loved me*).

Romanian may be the only Romance language to have preserved certain significations of the Latin verb dicere, such as "to predict" or "to sing / play an instrument": *Moldovenii ziceau din fluier cele mai frumoase doine*, i.e. *The Moldavians played the most beautiful folk songs on the flute*, or *Marie, zi-le cum stii tu*

BDD-A17771 © 2011 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 3.41.188.32 (2026-11-08 04:45:16 UTC)

mai bine, i.e. *Mary, sing as you know best*. Interestingly enough, the Romanian a cînta, "to sing", can also be used as a metaphorical *verbum dicendi*, meaning "to describe": *Poetul cînta frumusetile naturii*, i.e. *The poet describes the beauties of nature*.

The great majority of phraseologisms include elements the meanings of which are metaphorical. It is this characteristic that makes their meaning, as a unit, differ from the sum of the meanings of their components. The verb *a zice* is part of such units: *Ce mai zici?*, i.e. *How are you?*, a discursive formula in which *a zice* means "to do, live"; *a zice de bine*, i.e. *to predict good things*, where it means "to foresee".

*

As we can see from the examples we have analyzed above, the Romanian verb *a zice*, most like its Latin predecessor, is an extremely versatile one, and its range of semantic values is quite impressive. Apart from the meanings listed in the dictionaries, both formal and informal, some other uses came to our attention, and they are fairly recognizable to the speakers; we have mentioned and evaluated these new meanings that deserve to be placed in the Romanian dictionaries.

Bibliography

*** *Dictionarul explicativ al limbii române*, editia a II-a, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucuresti, 1998.

*** *Micul dictionar academic*, Academia Româna, Institutul de Lingvistica „Iorgu Iordan", Univers Enciclopedic, Bucuresti, 2002.

Lewis, Charlton T., *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, American Book Company, New York, Cincinnati and Chicago, 1890, available online at http://perseus.uchicago.edu/Reference.

Lewis, Charlton T.; Short, Charles, *A Latin Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1879, available online at http://perseus.uchicago.edu/Reference.

Oprea, Ioan *et alii*, *Noul dictionar universal al limbii române*, Editura Litera International, Bucuresti – Chisinau, 2009.

BDD-A17771 © 2011 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 3.41.188.32 (2026-11-08 04:45:16 UTC)