VALUES SPECIFIC TO ROMANIAN CULTURE REFLECTED IN PROVERBS, SAYINGS AND IDIOMATIC PHRASES

Adina DUMITRU[*]

Abstract*: The present paper approaches the proverbs and sayings related to the set of values which are considered to be specific to Romanian culture. Starting from the set of values specific to Romanian culture, as they have been defined in remarkable works in different domains such as sociology, psychology, aesthetics and pragmatics, the attempt to connect the set of structures of language to the set of values shows that in creating and promotion of a language structure, more than one value is involved.*

Key-words: *value, proverb, idiomatic phrase, culture.*

1. The present paper proposes a particular approach of proverbs, sayings and idiomatic phrases in Romanian, which may be seen as a reflection of some spiritual values that can be considered fundamental for Romanian culture. It is generally accepted that the cultural pattern which shapes the spirit of a particular people reflects further in the language they speak, on the one hand, and in the way language is used, on the other hand. The different theories about the relation between reality, culture and language admit either that reality imposes certain forms and restrictions to language, or that language guides its users towards a certain perception of reality; what is indisputable is the fact that there is an interrelation, an influence between reality, language and culture and understanding this deep connection could allow us to clarify many of the characteristics of the contemporary society.

2. The starting point of the overview of the values specific to Romanian culture reflected in idiomatic phrases, proverbs and sayings is represented by the synthesis that was developed by Andra Șerbănescu in *Cum gândesc și cum vorbesc ceilalți. Prin labirintul culturilor*. This author's achievement is based on a series of fundamental works that have been published since the beginning of the 20th century by well-known personalities in various domains of culture (sociology, psychology, aesthetics, folklore), such as Mihail Ralea, Lucian Blaga, George Călinescu, Dumitru Drăghicescu, Dumitru Stăniloae.

Thus, there can be defined several values of Romanian culture which stand for fundamental structural elements of the Romanian spirit: **eclecticism, adaptability, nation/community, simple spirit** and last, but not least, **divinity**. Each of these coordinates which define the Romanian culture and spirit manifests multiple forms and it continuously interrelates with the other values. So, when studying the way they reflect in idiomatic phrases, proverbs and every day expressions, it is difficult to assert that only one value influences a language structure, because each phrase represents a consequence of the action of at least two forms of manifestations of values.

A.**The eclecticism**, which can be explained geographically and historically by the fact that the Romanian culture is situated in the area where two great antithetic cultures, one of the Orient and one of the Occident, encounter, designates, in fact, the capacity of the

[*] University of Pitești, adina.elena.dumitru@gmail.com

BDD-A29785 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:52 UTC)

Romanian spirit to integrate allogeneous elements. Mihail Ralea asserted that "all Modern peoples are the result of a combination of races. However, with us, the multiplicity of the races and influences that created the people of today was greater than anywhere else. It has been said that the passage way of the peoples circulating between Orient and Occident was here." (Ralea, 1997: 68). Consequently, the rapid rhythm of adopting the foreign elements within Romanian cultural area is remarkable, but also the process of giving up to them when they are not considered to be useful any more is very fast. With mentalities and behavior, eclecticism manifests in several forms.

A1. **Imitation.** Throughout centuries, the easiness with which Romanians adopt what would seem to be a practical solution, as well as their rapid borrowing everything they consider to be really useful have been noticed. The wish to synchronize has represented a form without substance or an exaggeration many times, as this aim was due to the complex of a small culture. Even the folk beliefs, superstitions and proverbs are often also a form of imitation, because Romanians would rather use the patterns, certain already existing structures with a proved efficiency than create some new expressions.

In our paremiological inheritance there are pretty few examples which illustrate imitation and this situation may have been determined by the same complex that leads to imitation: *Fă ce zice popa, nu ce face popa!; Cum e stăpânul așa-i și sluga; Învață din nevoia altuia.*

A.2. **Duality**, understood as tolerance to diversity. In different historical periods, Romanian culture has adopted diverse elements which have been integrated depending on the circumstances, non-critically or non-selectively. This way, the existence of some forms of manifestation characterized by diversity in the same material and mental space could be explained. This lack of homogeneity and even this sometimes extreme heterogeneity reflect in the idiomatic phrases of the spoken, non-standard language and in the proverbs: *Cum e turcul - și pistolul; De unde nu este nici Dumnezeu nu cere; Adevărul este întotdeauna la mijloc.*

A.3. **Coexistence of opposites** is an extreme manifestation of eclecticism, of the tolerance to diversity, because some opposite, antithetic elements come to be present in the same thinking and action space, which leads to a situation of bipolarity. This process of adjustment of opposites one to each other can be noticed in our history, in the structure of the contemporary society and, generally, in Romanian culture. Blaga noticed that in Romanian art "there is a synthesis of opposite tendencies, there is a polarity of ultimate refinement, which is solved through primary and natural means, on the basis of an amazing intuition about the sense of art" (Blaga, 1969: 217). The Christian religion of the majority of the population guides also by a binary principle: the good deed and the sin; the good man and the evil man; the heaven and the hell; the good luck and the bad luck; the devil and the angel; the evil hour and the holy cross. All these contraries reflect also in language: *Fă bine și așteaptă rău; La/în tot răul este și un bine*; *Pe cine nu lași să moară, nu te lasă să trăiești; Prost să fii, noroc să ai.*

A.4. **Picturesque** feature, the preference for detail, the recurrence of the ornament is a characteristic shared by the Balkans and Near East cultures, and, with Romanian culture, it was metaphorically expressed by Blaga, who referred to it as "the genius of picturesque". This particular feature could be seen in the aspect of the Romanian house, in

BDD-A29785 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:52 UTC)

metaphor, in folklore creations, as well as in superstitions and proverbs: *a despica firul în patru; meseria e brățară de aur; tăcerea e de aur, vorba de argint.*

B. **The capacity of adaptation** derives from assuming eclecticism, because, throughout times, Romanian culture had to find a way to survive between Orient and Occident, at a crossroad where different, even opposite lifestyles encountered or, as Ion Barbu expressed it, "la mijloc de Rău și Bun".

M. Ralea considered that "the function of adaptation is the effect of the millenary persecutions. Still, the one who can adapt means he can live. It is the sign of our vitality." (Ralea, 1997: 88).

Adaptability appears in a series of forms: the self-preservation instinct, fluctuation, change, the instant solution, ambivalence, compromise, conscious assuming the natural laws, the balance, and the customs.

B.1. The **self-preservation instinct**, which seem to have determined the historical miracle of Romanian people persistence throughout times, can be traced in idiomatic phrases and proverbs such as: *Capul plecat, sabia nu-l taie*; *Nu-ți băga nasul unde nu-ți fierbe oala*; *Nu mor caii când vor câinii.*

B.2. **Fluctuation**, defined by Blaga as "the feeling of the Mioritic space", represents one of the coordinates that shaped and continues to influence Romanian spirit, as well as its language expression. Blaga considers a certain geographical form, the alternation of hill and valley, to be fundamental and determinant for the Romanian spirit, which is definitely integrated in this pattern and the same slow alternation, dominates both the rhythm of the historical development of the nation, and the everyday life perception: *Azi aici, mâine-n Focșani.*

B.3. **The change** for the sake of change, as a goal, represents a feature that constantly shaped Romanian spirit, as Romanians' history may appear as a long string of changes, at least of the form and expression, in order to ensure the survival: *Aceași Mărie cu altă pălărie.*

Thus, the numerous quick changes created a special sense of time, which is perceived as an infinite line based on a continuous movement, on change, on transformation, so that a series of language expressions convey the dominant feature of time perception: *Timpul vindecă orice rană; Când mori nu iei nimic cu tine; Când ne-o fi mai rău să ne fie ca acum; Ce-am avut și ce-am pierdut?*

Romanian people distinguish between times *vreme*, meaning "eternity", and time, which is measurable. The latter stands for the present and for the moment that should be seized, so a series of idiomatic phrases illustrate this perception of time meaning "continuous change": *ce-i în mână nu-i minciună; văzând și făcând; nu aduce anul ce aduce ceasul.* The absence of the goal and of the motivation seems to be reflected at the discourse level, too: *acum spune una, mâine spune alta, vorbește ca să se audă vorbind, vorbește ca să nu tacă, vorbește să se afle în treabă*.

B.4. The **instant solution** that is quick, easy to do and simple, satisfies Romanian's needs, while expressing his superficial dimension: *Bate fierul cât e cald.* The result of his work or actions could have an impromptu aspect, he can get to a product which might look unfinished or perfunctory: *E bine oricum, numai să fie; Lasă că merge și așa.* Romanians proverbs and idiomatic phrases encode this disengaging attitude towards the results and

BDD-A29785 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:52 UTC)

consequences of their work: *face să fie făcut; de mântuială; în dorul lelii; acolo, să fie; să nu zică că nu a făcut;* Romanian's instant solution is often Machiavellian: *Se face frate și cu dracul ca să treacă puntea*.

B.5 With Romanians, the **ambivalence** manifests various forms, and duality comes from their being undecided, when the individual is not able to choose: *Mielul blând suge la două oi; Ba e albă, ba e neagră; Și cu slănina în pod, și cu cratița unsă.* Either he is duplicitary: *se dă după cum bate vântul, o întoarce ca la Ploiești;* or he dissimulates his thoughts and his intentions: *Fugi de cel ce pupă în bot, / că îți ia din pungă tot; face de ochii lumii; în față zice una, în spate zice alta; zice ca tine și face ca el*; *Hopa Mitică - cade-n cap și se ridică.*

B.6. However, the **compromise** and the slight difference are reached, when a decision has to be made or when someone has to make a choice, and Romanian prefers the moderate solution: *Cu răbdarea treci și marea; Fuga e rușinoasă, dar e sănătoasă; Câinele care latră nu mușcă.* Numerous idiomatic phrases, such as *a împăca și capra, și varza; nici în căruță, nici în teleguță*, serve to expressing this intermediary attitude.

B.7. Romanians' **attitude of conscious assuming the natural laws** was identified by Blaga with "the feeling of destiny". The Romanians' representation of the universe relies on law, harmony, divinity: *voia Domnului*; people obey these laws and rules, then adapt to the circumstances: *Apa trece, pietrele rămân; Ce ți-e scris, în frunte ți-e pus; Corb la corb nu scoate ochii; Așa a fost să fie.*

B.8. Measure, as a form of avoiding the excesses, represents the aspiration to reach the situation of **balance**: *Ajunge un par la un car de oale*; *Cine aleargă după doi iepuri, nu prinde niciunul; Cine seamănă vânt culege furtună.*

The interior and exterior balance may be considered a virtue consisting of sobriety, perseverance, respect for traditions, respect for social duties, moderation: *pe măsură, cu dreaptă măsură, își măsoară cuvintele, nici prea-prea, nici foarte-foarte.* The one who lacks moderation, proving that he disrespects the measure, loses balance and symmetry, so that he becomes uncommon: *într-o doagă, într-o ureche, într-o parte.* The most appreciated form of balance is peace*: Schimbarea domniilor, bucuria nebunilor.*

B.9. The nature of things, the **customs** is the Romanian expression of perfect harmony and universal equilibrium. The role which God assigned to each human being or to each thing ought to be preserved and respected: *a fi om în rândul lumii, a rândui toate lucrurile, a pune în bună rânduială*. The idea of cosmic harmony contains the idea of work, hierarchy and law: *Unde-i lege nu-i tocmeală.*

To Romanian people, work represents a tradition, it means rather performing a cosmic ritual, than a source of welfare: *Meseria este brățară de aur, Lenea e cucoană mare care cere de mâncare, Cine mult vorbește lucrul nu-i sporește*. Justice derives from laws which are situated above mortals: *Cine sapă groapa altuia, cade singur în ea; Să-l judece Dumnezeu.*

C. The **simple spirit,** which designates a sum of features that characterizes Romanians, such as natural attitude, living close to nature and a relative distance from culture, has been adopted due to the historical circumstances that influenced the Romanian society development. Thus, the endless battles, invasions and forced wanderings prevented Romanians from cultivating behavior and spirit, forcing them rather to learn from what they

BDD-A29785 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:52 UTC)

experienced, to build again and again what had been destroyed, to accept and to adapt with a view of surviving.

To the western people, this characteristic of Romanians seem to be considered more like a weakness than a quality, as this is valued in a negative direction and it made possible a series of stereotypes regarding both Romanians' appearance and their behavior, which have been modified in time: from the barbarian aspect, lacking refinement and civilization, to the lack of experience, of professionalism, of seriousness, of engagement and profoundness. The forms of manifestation of Romanian's simple spirit are the **concrete thinking,** the **practical spirit**, the **caution**, the **sympathy**.

C.1. The **concrete thinking** consists in a preference for the concrete side of the world, for the sensorial aspect, which manifest at the language level by preferring the concrete term to the abstract one, together with a transfer of meaning from the abstract to the concrete forms, which are still very close to the reality: *a-și lua nasul la purtare, a-și pune obrazul pentru cineva, a-și pune capul la contribuție, a pune paie pe foc, a pune pe jar, a rupe inima cuiva, a da cu piciorul cuiva, a pune piciorul în prag*. Even when the subjected language structures originates in metaphors or comparisons that became catachresis or forms of the absolute superlative, the tendency towards the reality dimension, to the concrete elements could be noticed: *piciorul mesei, brațul fotoliului, gura uliței, gâtul sticlei, ochi de geam, buza prăpastiei, muncește ca un bou, turuie ca o moară stricată, lung cât o zi de post, rece ca gheața, roșu ca focul, greu ca pământul*.

Similarly, also the proverbs suggest the same tendency to turn into sensitive what is abstract, as Romanians aim to bring what belongs to the thinking level in the reality of the nearness: *Să nu muști mâna care îți dă de mâncare.; Cu o floare nu se face primăvară.; Vorba dulce e ca sarea în bucate.;*

C.2. A. Șerbănescu noticed about the **practical spirit** that: "A man with a practical spirit is skillful, cunning, capable, competent, qualified, smart, skilled, experienced, inventive, apt, clever, hardened, slick, gifted, expert, practitioner, learned, industrious, valuable, versed, hard-working, focused. He finds a good solution just by adapting to a certain concrete situation" (Șerbănescu, 2007: 347).

These qualities appreciated by Romanians are reflected in proverbs, such as: *Nu da vrabia din mână pe cioara de pe gard; Vorba multă, sărăcia omului; Hoțul neprins e negustor cinstit; Buturuga mică răstoarnă carul mare; Dumnezeu îți dă, dar în traistă nu-ți bagă.*

C.3. Within the Romanian space, the **caution** seems to be the result of a tumultuous history: *Cine s-a fript cu ciorbă, suflă și-n iaurt*; *Dă-i, Doamne, românului mintea de pe urmă; Ferește-mă, Doamne, de prieteni, că de dușmani mă feresc singur; Ferește-te de câinele mut și de omul tăcut.*

C.4. Many idiomatic phrases and proverbs illustrates **sympathy** which, in Romanian culture, is understood as an expression of the self-consciousness in the situation of social being; however, there are also many expressions of the opposite of this value, lack of sympathy. Some proverbs illustrate the attitude Romanians should adopt in order to be good-natured and to be like the others: *în rândul oamenilor*; *Lăcomia strică omenia; Să fii "domn" e o-ntâmplare, să fii "om" e lucru mare; Ce ție nu-ți place, altuia nu-i face; Banul face din om neom.*

BDD-A29785 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:52 UTC)

3. Conclusions. Among all these values specific to Romanian culture, which represent a consequence of its emerging and developing in an area that is not only geographically, but also culturally and religiously defined, placed between East and West, considering these terms with all their meanings, adaptability determined by eclecticism, which become an inseparable pair, may represent the most important feature. Its privileged position comes from the numerous forms of manifestation, as well as from the fact that it accompanies many of the occurrences of the other values.

Considered either qualities or deficiencies, seen either as virtues or as vices, these features characterizes Romanian culture and spirit and, consequently, they continuously act upon language structure and language use, shaping the language system as a whole, at every level. This approach highlighted only a few idiomatic phrases, proverbs or language clichés, which result from a certain manner of referring to world, to reality. Nevertheless, the vocabulary is not the only language level where these features could be pointed out, but also the other levels of language could reflect them, moreover the language use domain, that is the pragmatic level, represent a further research area.

Bibliography

Blaga, 1969 – *Trilogia culturii. Orizont și stil*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1969
Comșulea, Șerban, Teiuș, 1998 – *Dicționar de expresii și locuțiuni*, Știința, Chișinău, 1998
Dumistrăcel, 1980 – *Lexic românesc: cuvinte, metafore, expresii*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1980
Eliade, 1992 – *Meșterul Manole,* Editura Junimea, Iași, 1992
Groza, 2011 – *Probleme de frazeologie: studii, articole, note*, EUB, București, 2011
Niculescu, 2003 – *Individualitatea limbii române între limbile romanice, vol. 4: Elemente de istorie culturală*, Editura Științifică, București, 2003
Ralea, 1997 – *Fenomenul românesc,* Editura Albatros, București, 1997
Șerbănescu, 2007 – *Cum gândesc și cum vorbesc ceilalți: prin labirintul culturilor*, Polirom, Iași, 2007

BDD-A29785 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:52 UTC)