THE LEXEME *CAP* IN ROMANIAN AND SERBIAN PHRASEOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS[*]

Laura SPĂRIOSU
University of Novi Sad

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to make a comparison between phraseological expressions with the lexeme *cap* in the Romanian and Serbian languages. These expressions could be classified according to various criteria and the main sources in their identifying were bilingual dictionaries. Most of them are related to the definition of the lexeme *cap* as a body part, then as intellect, thinking, existence, judgment, memory, life or leading person. Similarities between expressions, in both languages, also clearly illustrate that the cultural developments of the Romanian and Serbian peoples do have a lot of things in common and illustrate clearly the fect thet they took the same direction.

Key words: *Romanian*, *Serbe*, *the* cap/head *lexeme*, *phraseological expressions*, *comparison*

Résumé

Le but du présent article est de dessigner une comparison entre les constructions phraséologiques contenant le léxème *cap/tête* en Roumain, respectivement en Serbe. Les sources essentielles employées pour les identifier ont été les dictionnaires bilingues. Lesdites constructions peuvent étre classifiées selon divers critères. La plupart parmi celles-ci portent sur l'usage du léxème *cap* pour évoquer, d'abord, une partie du corps; ensuite la capacité de l'intellect, la pensée, l'existence, le jugement comme logique, la mémoire, la vie ou la personne d'un dirigeant. Dans les deux langues, les ressemblances entre lesdites constructions illustrent afirment le fait que le développement culturel des peuples Roumain et Serbe a beaucoup de choses en commun et témoignent aussi du fait que la direction qu'ils ont prise était la même pour les deux peuples.

Mots-clés:

Preliminary remarks

Lexicography is a domain of applied linguistics "which naturally imposes the analysis and explanation of phrases" (Dumistrăcel, 1980: 131). A series of contemporary research papers on vocabulary have brought

[*] This paper was written as part of Grant no. 178002, *Jezici i kulture u vremenu i prostoru* "Languages and cultures in time and space".

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

valuable contributions to the understanding, the forming and the dynamics of development for this domain of language, by defining certain criteria derived from the modern approach of a structural determinism, having as a consequence the essor of the specificity of certain compartments, such as phraseology (Dumistrăcel, 1980).

Phraseology is that compartment of language which studies phraseological units in a language or in a group of languages: their appearance and their origin, their use in common language or in specialized languages, their role in modernizing literary language. Although we might approach it in various ways that involve diverse domains, such as – morphology, syntax, semantics, stylistics, psycholinguistics, ethno-linguistics, culturology – the study of phraseological units too raises a series of problems[1].

Although defined as an autonomous field (Bally, 1951; Vinogradov, 1946), phraseology has as its main feature a lack of a common sight regarding a series of important issues[2]. Bally's undeniable merit consists in the fact that he provided scientific arguments, for the first time in the history of linguistics, in favour of the need to study stable collocations of words, and the solutions offered with respect to these collocations had a decisive role in constituting a new subdomain. When it comes to Vinogradov's contribution to the study of phraseological units, we will highlight the fact that the Russian linguist re-designed, on the basis of the distinctiveness of Russian phraseology, Charles Bally's phraseological scheme, emphasizing, as functions of the degrees of cohesion and semantic motivation of their composing elements, three types of phraseologisms: phraseological mergers/ blends, phraseological units and phraseological collocations.

In Romanian specialized literature, phraseology has been considered to be an autonomous discipline since the 1980's, when Stelian Dumistrăcel (Dumistrăcel, 1980: 132), wrote that "phraseology tends to be considered even an autonomous linguistic domain" and Theodor Hristea (Hristea, 1984: 160) saw it as a domain "in the making"

---

[1] In spite of a relatively rich bibliography, phraseology becomes a question; if not a controversial one, at least one which is open open to linguistic research, with extents in studies about lexicology, lexicography, semantics, onomasiology, grammar, language development etc.

[2] Thus, the very term *phraseologism* has numerous significances and definitions; yet, one way or another, all of them are concentrated around the statement that they has to do with a stable unit of words with a figurative meaning; they are characterized by the still, stable character of the position of their composing elements, as well as by the expressive impact, for instance: *a tăia frunze la câini* "to waste time", *a vinde gogoşi* "to tell lies", *a-i sta ca un ghimpe în ochi* "to be a permanent threat", etc.

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

Although phraseology must be separated both from syntax and from lexicology, it stands closer to the latter, through its research scope and the research methods it employs (Hristea, 1984). We may deduce this also by investigating the main types of phraseological units, which, from this point of view, resemble the best to lexical ones. Alike words, phraseologisms have a unitary sense, and this is best noticed in the case of phrases, which, in some respects, are the main category of phraseological units (Hristea, 1984).

Other (numerous and important) phraseological units are, undoubtedly, *expressions*, of which the status is much less clear than that of phrases (Hristea, 1984). To this extent, we might say the one certain Romanian and foreign researchers either do not differentiate between expressions and phrases, or they include them in the latter, or they consider the two terms (that is today: *phrase* and *expression*) as synonymous[3]. Because of that, they are used in parallel or instead of each other (Hristea, 1984).

Thus we can draw the conclusion that the basic principle in determining phraseologisms is their idiomatic character, where idiomaticity is, first of all, "a transfer of meaning, a semantic renovation of the general contents of certain word collocations, which takes place on the basis of various semantic processes within the given collocations" (Hristea, 1984: 150). At least two semantically altered elements do constitute the forming of an idiomatic expression.

The constituent elements within certain phraseological units preserve their semantic independence, which allows for calking or litteral translation into another language. Thus, *gorak kao žuč* was rendered into Romanian as *amar ca fierea*, *lukav kao lisica* was translated as *şiret ca vulpea*, *vredan kao pčela* as *harnic ca albina* a.s.o. In opposition to such phraseological collocations, which are dissociable and into which words retain their own meaning, idiomatic expressions (also labeled *idiotisms* or *idiomatisms*) have a figurative meaning, which belongs to the entire phraseological group, impossible to translate *ad litteram* into another language: *a cumpăra mâța-n sac/kupiti mačku u džaku*; *a pune în aceeaşi oală/strpati u isti lonac*; *a rămâne cu buzele umflate/ostati kratkih rukava*, etc. As expressions that are specific to a particular language, idiotisms must be very carefully translated

[3] We mention here Ion Coteanu's definition who speaks of "groups of words that, without being sentences, have an adjectival meaning, are labelled as adjectival phrases (i.e. expressions)", Coteanu, 1982, p. 99; among foreign linguists, Pierre Guiraud (Guiraud, 1963) applies the term *collocations* to expressions as well, and Charles Bally (Bally, 1951) only makes a more general difference between the *groups* of free words and those which are settled, also labeled as *phraseological*.

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

into another language, precisely because their meaning cannot be inferred from the sum of their components.

Taking into account the great number of phraseologisms, which are used in the most diverse domains of activity, we may say that the study of phraseology connects us to the history, culture and civilization of our people or of other peoples, with an incomparably greater extent than the study of phonetics or grammatical structure do. Among the various compartments of language, it is only the proper vocabulary and phraseology that are, in fact, the expressions of culture and civilization, because they are the only ones that straightforwardly reflect the changes which occur in society (Hristea, 1984).

When speaking of this phenomenon, we must add that it is known across languages. The differences from one language to another are exclusively quantitative and cannot be explained, as it is usually done, via ethnical psychology (Iordan, 1975). The only differentiating criterion is the sociological one; if the speaking subject should belong to a category which would be placed on a most lower step on the social strata, the richer the language he uses in expressive terms. The almost complete lack of any outside constraint makes him act completely spontaneously and naturally in all his attitudes, especially when he acts under the impulse of emotional states of the soul (Iordan, 1975).

The speaker demonstrates the same freedom when he comes to linguistic expressions. In other words, the colour of individual language is a function of the culture he inhabits, in a reverse ratio (Iordan, 1975: 267). If we should want to make a classification of the various idioms from this point of view, we would argue that the larger plastic value of some of them is due not to ethnicity, but rather to the most genuine asset, which would be nearest to the natural status of that particular people (Iordan, 1975).

The lexeme *cap/head* in Romanian and Serbian phraseological expressions: examples

The lexeme *cap* is found in the DEX having several explanations: 1. *cap, capete* (s.n) – the upper extremity of the human body or the anterior extremity for animals, where the brain, the main sensing organs and the oral cavity are situated; 2. *cap, capuri* (s.n). – plot of dry land protruding from the sea; promontory; 3. *cap, capi* (s.m.) – person who is in charge, leader, boss.

With a figurative meaning, *cap* appears in phraseologisms. In what follows, we provide examples of expressions of this type in Romanian and their corresponding equivalent in Serbian. The main sources we used for this purpose are bilingual dictionaries. The classification is made by taking into account the meaning of the keyword:

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

1. Human and animal body part, where the brain, the main sense organs and the oral cavity are located:

a bate (pe cineva) *la cap/soliti* (nekome) *pamet* ("a-i săra (cuiva) mintea") = to tease, to pester; *din cap până în picioare/od glave do pete* ("din cap până-n călcâi") = from head to toe, completely; *cu noaptea-n cap/ u cik zore* ("în zorii zilei") = in the wee hours of morning; *cu capul plecat/pognute glave* ("cu capul plecat") = humiliated, shamed; *bătut în cap /udaren mokrom čarapom* ("lovit cu ciorapul ud") = stupid, moron; *a-şi lua lumea-n cap/otići* (*pobeći*) *u beli svet* ("a pleca/a fugi în lumea albă") = to leave far away; *a da* (ceva) *peste cap/preturiti preko glave* ("a da peste cap") = to completely change the order of things, ideas, a pre-established schedule; to work quickly, in a shallow manner; *a-şi face de cap/ izvoditi krive Drine* ("a face Drina[4] strâmbă") = to be cheeky, to sow one's wild oats; *a da din cap*/ *klimati glavom* ("a clătina capul") = to nod one's head, to shake one's head, etc.; *a se da cu capul de pereți*/*udariti glavom o zid* ("a lovi cu capul de perete") = to be overwhelmed by despair or trouble, to regret a mistake made; (până) *peste cap/preko glave* ("este cap") = extremely, too; *a scoate capul în lume/ izaći pred svet* ("a ieşi prin lume") = to go into the world, to emerge in society; *a-şi aprinde paie-n cap/ navući bedu na vrat* ("a-şi pune necazul pe gât") = to cause oneself trouble; *a-şi pierde capul/ izgubiti glavu* ("a-şi pierde capul") = to lose one's head; *a nu mai avea unde să-şi pună capul/ nemati krova nad glavom* ("a nu avea acoperiş deasupra capului") = to become homeless, poor; *a umbla cu capul în traistă/ hodati s glavom oblacima* ("a umbla cu capul în nori") = to be absent-minded; *a i se urca* (cuiva) *la cap*/ *udariti* (kome) *u glavu* ("a-l lovi pe cineva în cap") = to become conceited, daring, cheeky; to become inebriated.

2. Mind, reason, judgment, memory: *cu scaun la cap*/ *imati mozga u glavi* ("a avea creier în cap") = to have brains; *a-i deschide capul/ otvoriti* (kome) *oči* ("a deschide [cuiva] ochii") = to make somebody understand something, to clarify things to somebody; *a-i ieşi* (cuiva) *ceva din cap/izbiti* (kome) *nešto iz glave* ("a-i scoate [cuiva] ceva din cap") = not to have one's mind into…, to forget; *a nu-i mai ieşi* [cuiva, ceva] *din cap*/*ne izlaziti* (nekome) *iz glave* ("a nu-i mai ieşi [cuiva ceva] din cap") = a-l stăpâni mereu (acelaşi gând), a nu putea uita = "to be obsessed by an one and only thing"; *a-şi bate, a-şi sparge capul/lupati glavu* ("a-şi bate capul") = to wreck one's brains (in order to solve a problem); *a face* (ceva) *de capul său/biti na svoju ruku* ("a fi de mâna sa") = to do something on one's own without consulting anyone else; *a-şi băga mințile-n cap/dozvati se pameti*

[4] The name of a river in Serbia.

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

(“a-şi chema mintea”) = to perfectly realize the consequences of one’s actions; *a-l tăia* (pe cineva) *capul/kako zna i ume* (“cum ştie şi poate”) = to understand, to be capable of doing something; *a-i trece, a-i trăsni* (cuiva) *ceva prin cap/pasti* (kome) *na pamet/proći* (kome) *što kroz glavu* (“a-i trece ceva prin cap”) = to come to one’s mind, to cross one’s mind, a whim, a mood; *fără cap/bez glave* (“fără cap”) = reckless.

3. Existence, life: *a plăti cu capul/platiti glavom* (“a plăti cu capul”) = to lose one’s life; *odată cu capul, în ruptul capului/ni za živu glavu* (“nici pentru capul viu”) = at no cost, by no means, never; *a-şi pune capul la mijloc* (pentru cineva)/*jamčiti glavom* (za koga) (“a garanta cu capul”) = to jeopardize one’s life, to be certain, to stake one’s life for it; *a scăpa cu capul teafăr/ izvući živu glavu* (“ a-şi scoate capul viu”) = to come out safe and sound.

4. Persons in charge: *capul familiei/glava porodice* (“capul familei”) = person that provide for the living conditions of a family that they represent from a legal point of view; *cap încoronat/ krunisana glava* (“cap încoronat”) = king.

As far as the form and contents are concerned, there are:

c. Phrases that are identical in the two languages: *cu capul plecat/ pognute glave*; *a da* (ceva) *peste cap/preturiti preko glave*; (până) *peste cap/ preko glave*; *a-şi pierde capul/ izgubiti glavu*; *a nu-i mai ieşi* (cuiva ceva) *din cap/ ne izlaziti* (nekome) *iz glave*; *a-şi bate capul/ lupati glavu*; *a-i trece, a-i trăsni* (cuiva) *ceva prin cap/ proći* (kome) *što kroz glavu*; *a plăti cu capul/ platiti glavom*; *capul familiei/ glava porodice*; *cap încoronat/ krunisana glava*.

d. Partial correpondencies: *din cap până în picioare/od glave do pete*; *a-şi lua lumea-n cap/otići* (*pobeći*) *u beli sve*; *a da din cap/klimati glavom*; *a se da cu capul de pereți/udariti glavom o zid*; *a scoate capul în lume/izaći pred svet*; *a umbla cu capul în traistă/hodati s glavom oblacima*; *a i se urca* (cuiva) *la cap*/*udariti* (kome) *u glavu*; *a-i deschide capul/otvoriti* (kome) *oči*; *a-i ieşi* (cuiva) *ceva din cap/izbiti* (kome) *nešto iz glave*; *a-şi băga mințile-n cap/dozvati se pameti*; *odată cu capul, în ruptul capului/ ni za živu glavu*; *a scăpa cu capul teafăr/ izvući živu glavu*.

e. different phrases: *a bate* (pe cineva) *la cap/soliti* (nekome) *pamet*; *cu noaptea-n cap u cik zore*; *bătut în cap/udaren mokrom čarapom*; *a-şi face de cap/izvoditi krive Drine*; *a-şi aprinde paie-n cap/navući bedu na vrat*; *a nu mai avea unde să-şi pună capul/nemati krova nad glavom*; *a face* (ceva) *de capul său/biti na svoju ruku*; *a-l tăia* (pe cineva) *capul/kako zna i ume*.

Identical phrases, the elements of which do preserve their retain semantical autonomy, have been literally translated, given the fact that these collocations of words might be easily transposed in another language. As far

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

as partial correspondences are concerned, the elements of which cannot be translated word-for-word, they have been replaced by equivalent phrases bearing the same meaning, differing however in respect to some of their components. In respect to the different phrases, of which the elements, being well merged, exhibit a difficulty in transposition, phraseologisms held been found which coincide of their meaning, but which differ through the image which lies at the basis of their meaning. The examples presented are, mostly, verbal phrases and a few adjectival and adverbial phrases.

Conclusions

Phraseological units may be studied and classified from various points of view, since they raise a series of problems regarding their origin, structure, stylistical value, etc. However, we were interested in the way how these collocations could be transposed into Serbian, with which the Romanian language spoken in Voivodina is in direct contact.

We can distinguish among the phraseologisms presented here similarities as well as dissimilarities. Coincidences regarding the internal form and the similarities in the use of their metaphoric values could be explained by means of identical living conditions, as well as by means of similarities in cultural development between the two peoples (Romanians and Serbs). Taking all this into account, we may add that phraseological units in a language are syntheses of the mind, able to express the essences in a clear and, straightforward manner. These collocations of words enter one language from another and, irrespective of their age, they are always current. Their functions in language are, on the one hand, to ease communication, and on the other hand, to evoke the rich human experience they came out of.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bally, Charles, *Traité de stylistique française, I*, Heidelberg-Paris, Winter & Paris, Klineksieck, 1951.

Coteanu, Ion, *Gramatica de bază a limbii române*, Bucureşti, Editura Albatros, 1982.

Dumistrăcel, Stelian, *Lexic românesc. Cuvinte, metafore, expresii*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1980.

Guiraud, Pierre, *La stylistique*, Paris, 1963.

Hristea, Theodor, „Introducere în studiul frazeologiei" in *Sinteze de limba română* (coord. Th. Hristea), Bucureşti, Editura Albatros, 1984, 134-160.

Iordan, Iorgu, *Stilistica limbii române*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică, 1975.

Kašić, Jovan, Petrović, Vladislava, Rajkić, Lukrecija, *Frazeološki rečnik srpskohrvatskog jezika, srpskohrvatko-rumunski*, Novi Sad, 1985.

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)

Raichici, Lucreția, *Dicționar frazeologic al limbii române* (*român-sârbocroat*), Novi Sad, Facultatea de Filosofie, Institutul de Limbi Slave, Institutul de Pedagogie, 1989.
Vinogradov, V.V., "Osnovnye ponjatija russkoj frazeologiji kak lingvističeskoj discipliny", in *Izbrannye trudy. Leksikologija i leksikografija*, Moscow, Nauka, 1946, 118-139.
http://www.dexonline.ro/

BDD-A3876 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:44 UTC)