# ROMANIC EQUIVALENTS FOR LATIN IDIOMS

**Dr. Stefan DUMITRU,**
stephanosrom@yahoo.com
The Military Academy „Carol I" Bucarest

**Abstract:**
In this study we set forth to present several of the most important aspects regarding the contrastive analysis of a well-defined number of Latin idioms in parallel with their Romanic counterparts (in French, Italian, Spanish and Romanian). Our intent was not to discover, in the Romanic space, all the equivalents of the phrases that form the corpus we work with, for reasons pertaining to material restrictions, but to discuss, based on a certain number of units, the different types of issues they may point to. The most important is to establish the relation between the idiomatic expressions in Latin and their correspondents in the above mentioned languages, regarding their inner form, their meaning and their structure.
**Key-words**:
idiomatic expression, Latin language, Romance languages, Romance correspondent, semantic relation, idiomatic pattern, inheritance, innovation.

In the present study we set forth to present several of the most important aspects regarding the contrastive analysis of a well-defined number of Latin idioms in parallel with their Romanic counterparts. Our intent was not to discover, in the Romanic space, all the equivalents of the phrases that form the corpus we work with, for reasons pertaining to material restrictions, but to discuss, based on a certain number of units, the different types of issues they may point to.

To this effect, we considered it to be efficient if one performed a selection among the Neo-Latin languages, taking into consideration the relevance criterion from the point of view of both the number of speakers and, primarily, the culture. Thus, apart from the Romanian language, which falls under these categories for obvious reasons, we will take an interest in the Italian, French and Spanish languages.

The utility of such an analysis is revealed from two angles: a theoretical one and a practical one. The former is limited to discussing the aspects related to the meaning, the internal form (the image underlying the idiomatic construction) and the structure of Latin idioms set against their Romanic equivalents. Expanding the analysis in this



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

direction could help towards forming several premises or hypotheses regarding the connection between the Romanic phrases and the Latin ones (inheritance, borrowing, parallel creation, independent)[1]. The latter is concerned with the issue of translation, considered to be an operation of discovering the most similar equivalents, on one hand, of the Latin phrases in Romanic languages, on the other hand, of the Romanic phrases themselves, when passing from one language to another, within the already set limits.

The sources I have used in building the Romanic corpus are of multiple types: translations of authors into the four languages, bilingual dictionaries (both Latin and Romanic, phraseological dictionaries of the same type), monolingual dictionaries for every Romanic language, as well as the phrases corpora.

From the very beginning one must underline that we will take interest in examining various types of Latin idioms in parallel with their counterparts from a dual perspective: semantic and structural; moreover, we will consider the modality in which the internal form of the Latin constructions can be retraced in the Romanic ones. We hope that such an analysis will allow us to issue some possible common patterns (that can be inherited, borrowed or can constitute the reflex of a panromanic *Weltanschauung* of Roman origin), or at least of some Latin patterns that have played a certain part in the subsequent process of innovation and creativity of Neo-Latin languages. To this purpose we will highlight both the common elements and the differences that may arise from the perspective of the above mentioned aspects.

We are fully aware that the limits of the research cannot be pushed too far, for the simple reason that in the area of idioms it is sometimes risky to postulate, on one hand, the origin, the inheritance or the borrowing, and on the other, the history, the reasons and the full history of idiomatic structures. This aspect has already been pointed out a few times and synthesized by O. Lurati[2]. As a result, following several clear criteria regarding the meaning and form identity, we will limit to invoke a possible monogenesis or polygenesis of the phrases. Another

[1] I have taken into consideration Aristiţa Negreanu's suggestion, from *Idiomatismes,* …considering a possible expansion to Italian or Spanish as well: "*L'étude des idiomaties a séquences égales (ou presque) une fois achevée, établira si, a ce niveau-la, il pourrait être question de calques entre deux langues d'origine latine, telles le français et le roumain*".

[2] In: *Per modo di dire…*, p. 166: "*Origine, percorsi, motivi, modi e cause della difusione di locuzioni e stereotipi non sono sempre stati analizzati a fondo, fatto che induce talora a interpretazioni soggettive e ad hoc. Gran parte delle locuzioni paneuropee oggi in voga… risalgono al comune fondo culturale greco, latino, poi cristiano, medievale e rinascimentale*".



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

clarification: without trying to allocate to the Latin fund everything that exists in the area of idioms in the Romanic languages, we will try to avoid, keeping in line with the same researcher[3], for as much as possible, supporting the origin of some phrases within one linguistic system.

Our working hypoyhesis will be that of the parallelism among the four linguistic systems, the elements of which (in this case, the idioms), will be therefore discussed from three points of view: the meaning, the internal form and the structure. From this perspective, we consider useful a tripartite classification of the constructions in identical, similar and different phrases, under the three aspects.

**1.1. Identical phraseologies (equivalents)**

It is self-evident that all Latin idioms have total semantic equivalents inall four Romanic languages that we take into account. But only some of all these have an idiomatic character. In what follows, we present several examples of Latin constructions that have total semantic equivalents, and, of course, idiomatic character, in all four Romanic languages: *aquam quaerere, ad Kalendas Graecas, alicui adire manum, ancoram tollere, arcem facere e cloaca, canere surdis, cloacas Augias purgare, cum ventis litigare, digito caelum attingere, duabus sellis sedere, duos apros capere, eandem incudem tundere, elleborum potare, gallinae albae filius, flamma de stipula, imbrem in cribrum ingerire, in scirpo nodum quaerere, in silva ligna ferre, inter sacrum saxumque esse, oleum addere camino, rixari de lana caprina, ulcus tangere* etc.

There are Latin phrases that can be found as equivalents with idiomatic status in only three of the Romanic languages: *aquam a pumice postulare* (it, fr. sp), *ab acia et acu exponere* (ro, it, fr)*, cantilenam eandem canere* (ro, fr, sp), *in eadem navi esse* (ro, it, fr), *in tenebris micare* (it, fr, sp), *milvo volanti ungues resecare* (ro, it, sp), *potare fructum fullonium* (it, fr, sp). As one can notice, the distribution of idiomatic equivalents does not comply with a particular principle, in the sense that there aren't any Romanic languages that would not consistently present such correspondences.

A similar situation is valid for the Latin phrases which can be detected with an idiomatic status in only two Romanic languages: either in Romanian and Italian (*asciam in crus impingere*), or in Romanian and French (*aureo hamo piscari*), or in Italian and French (*scire uti foro*).

[3] Idem, p. 165: "*…vediamo talora anche studi seri avanzare interpretazioni ben poco sostenibili proprio perché tentano di spiegare la locuzione rimanendo all' interno di un medesimo sistema linguistico*".



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

French and Romanian languages constitute systems in which one can single out phrases that cannot be found in Spanish: as such, French has idiomatic equivalents of the phrases *de via in semitam degredere* (*savoir se garer des voitures*)*, in laqueos cadere* (*se bruler a la chandelle*)*,* while in Romanian we find an identical idiomatic correspondent for the phrase *centones alicui sarcire* (*a spune la moşi pe groşi/ a spune braşoave*).

In light of semantic identity, we also want to stress the phenomenon of maintaining the initial connotation: the phrase *in scirpo nodum quaerere* indicates both in Latin and in Neo-Latin languages the action of intently looking for a flaw (the construction having a negative connotation).

Of the above mentioned constrictions, the majority have equivalents in Romanic languages both semantically, and from the point of view of the internal form, that is, the concrete image that underlies the constructions. These are the following, presented according to the number of languages in which they are present:

a) in all four: *acum quaerere*, *candida de nigris (et de candentibus atra) facere, cloacas Augias purgare, contra aquam (remigare), contrahere vela, demittere auriculas, delapsus de caelo, excitare fructus in simpulo, hamum vorare, imbrem in cribrum ingerire, in occipitio habere oculos, in silva ligna ferre, lupos apud oves linquere custodes, oleum addere camino, ovem lupo commitere, pulverem ob oculos adspergere, ulcus tangere, vendere vanos fumos, viperam sub ala nutricare.*

b) in three of them: *albis dentibus deridere* (ro, it, fr)*, esse suae/ eiusdem farinae* (ro, it, fr), *flamma de stipula* (ro, it, fr), *frenum mordere* (ro, it, fr), *gallinae filius albae* (it, fr, sp), *in aquam scribere* (it, fr, sp), *inritare crabrones* (ro, it, fr), *in scirpo nodum quaerere* (ro, it, fr).

c) in two: *auribus tenere lupum* (it, fr), *duabus sellis sedere* (it, fr), *eandem incudem tundere* (it, fr), *elleborum potare* (it, fr), *in mare fundere aquas* (it, sp), *in pertusum dolium dicta ingerire* (ro, fr), *ludere de alieno corio* (it, fr), *navem in portu mergis* (it, fr), *palumbem ad ariam adducere* (it, fr), *vellere barbam* (fr, sp).

d) only in one: *ab acia et acu exponere* (fr), *alicui adire manum* (sp), *canere surdis* (it), *cucurbitae caput (non) habere* (it), *digito caelum attingere* (it), *duo parietes de eadem fidelia dealbare* (it)*, duos apros capere* (fr), *in aurem utramvis dormire* (fr), *lupus in fabula* (it), *maria montisque polliceri* (it), *plaustrum percellere* (ro), *utrosque parietes linere* (it), *venire sub dentem* (fr).

Between the semantic identity and the internal form identity one cannot postulate a relation of strict determination, as there are



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

situations in which, based on semantic equivalence, the Romanic languages captured different images to update the idiomatic meaning (e.g. *arcem facere e cloaca* in all four languages). Sometimes the variation of the internal form has a stylistic motivation (it. *cascato dalle nuvole* compared with *delapsus de caelo;* fr. *couper les ailes, Sp. despuntar/ cortar las alas a uno* compared with *pinnas incidere*).

Another detail that is worth mentioning is that where we have an identity of the internal form it is also maintained the symbolism certain aspects of reality are associated with; for example, the beard, as a symbol of respect (*vellere barbam*), can be found exactly as such in the French and Spanish languages.

Even though the syntactic structure of the phrases does not play a major role in the economy of our study, we consider it to be useful, not so much from a statistical point of view, but in order to form ulterior hypotheses, to see which of the Romanic equivalents matching the Latin ones from a semnatic and internal form perspective behave also according to a formal pattern. Following the same criterion, the situation is as follows:

a) in all four languages: *ad Kalendas Graecas, ancoram tollere, caelum et terras miscere, cloacas Augias purgare, contra aquam (remigare), viperam sub ala nutricare.*

b) in three of them: *cum ventis litigare* (ro, it, sp), *demittere auriculas* (ro, it, sp), *in occipitio habere oculos* (ro, it, sp), *flamma de stipula* (ro, it, fr), *frenum mordere* (ro, it, fr), *gallinae filius albae* (it, fr, sp), *in scirpo nodum quaerere* (ro, it, fr).

c) in two: *hamum vorare* (fr, sp), *inritare crabrones* (ro, fr), *auribus tenere lupum* (it, fr), *duabus sellis sedere* (it,fr), *in mare fundere aquas* (it, sp).

d) in one: *esse suae/ eiusdem farinae* (it), *eandem incudem tundere* (fr), *palumbem ad ariam adducere* (fr), *vellere barbam* (sp), *alicui adire manum* (sp), *digito caelum attingere* (it), *duo parietes de eadem fidelia dealbare* (it), *lupus in fabula* (it), *maria montisque polliceri* (it).

One recurrent aspect is the fact that some of the phrases that refer to strictly ancient *realia* can be retraced in Romanic languages as total equivalents, both semantically, and from the point of view of the internal form and of the structure: the examples that give evidence to this fact are *ad kalendas Graecas* and *pedes lanatos habere.* It is possible that this tripartite equivalence would constitute an argument in favour of sustaining the hypothesis of scholastically borrowing of the said phrase in the four Romanic languages.

The statistics therefore prove that the majority of the Latin phrases have semantic idiomatic equivalents. A more reduced number of



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

constructions also present an identity of the internal form. Even less have a structural counterpart.

Another observation that we can make is that often the Romanic languages innovate, having, except from idiomatic counterparts, also synonyms, with or without idiomatic character. For example, the phrase *duabus sellis sedere* has, in the Italian and French languages, two equivalents, and for the construction *in scirpo nodum quaerere* one can find in Italian no less than six counterparts.

The semantic areas where one can highlight innovations from the point of view of phraseological synonymy are the following: individual behaviour, exaggeration (*arcem facere e cloaca*), duplicity (*duabus sellis sedere, duo parietes de eadem fidelia dealbare*), mockery (*vellere barbam*), harming oneself (*vinetum suum caedere*), irresponsabile behaviour (*ludere de alieno corio*), perseverance in an activity (*eandem incudem tundere*), self-control (*frenum mordere*), solidarity (*in eadem navi esse*), conflict intensification (*in flammam (fundere*), attitudes like disdain (*ciccum non dare*), luck (*gallinae filius albae*), happiness (*digito caelum attingere*), stupidity (*cucurbitae caput habere*), being tricked (*hamum vorare*), lack of abilities (*navem in portu mergere*), discouragement (*pinnas incidere*), facilitation of obtaining profits (*palumbem ad areas adducere*), getting oneself into trouble (*plaustrum percellere*), showing off (*pulverem ob oculos adspergebat*), sadness (*quadrigae suae decurrere*), precise guess work (*tangere acu*), how to approach a delicate topic (*ulcus tangere*).

Some Romanic equivalents (total ones, semantically speaking) show certain variations in structure and internal form compared with their Latin counterparts. These are:

a) the insertion of new lexical elements: *a căuta acul în carul cu fân*, it. *cercare un ago in un pagliaio*, fr. *chercher une aguille dans une botte de foin*, sp. *buscar una aguja en un pajar* with respect to lat. *acum quaerere.* The same change can be highlighted in all the correspondents of the phrase *fluctus in simpulo*. In this situation all four Neo-Latin languages innovate in parallel, compared with the Latin model. Changing the number of the formative elements sometimes do not impinge on the idiomatic character (as in the quoted phrases), other times it reduces it, by explicit semantic indications (for example, the comparison within the phrase *como piedra caida del cielo* facilitates to a certain extent the understanding of the idiomatic meaning, compared to *delapsus de caelo*).

b) the loss of some formative elements: rom. *a vinde fum*, it. *vendere fumo*, fr. *vendre de la fumée*, sp. *vender humos*, with respect to *vendere vanos fumos.*



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

c) different modalities of conceptualizing the surrounding environment: the phrase *in caelo esse* has Romanic counterparts with different internal forms, correlated to a way of structuring reality that is specific to that culture: rom. *a fi în al nouălea cer*, it. *essere al settimo cielo*, fr. *être au septième/ au troisième ciel*, sp. *estar en el septimo cielo*.

d) the semantic equivalence of a Latin phrase to a Romanic proverb. The counstruction *cum mortuis luctari* has as a counterpart in the Milanese dialect the proverb "*I mort l'è mej che resten in dove hinn*".

We can also retrace in Romanic languages equivalents of some Latin phrases of popular origin (*asinus in tegulis, ciccum non interduere, in scirpo nodum quaerere*), but also of an erudite, literary one (*excitare fluctus in simpulo, pulverem ob oculos adspergere*). We also emphasize the maintaining, in the Romanic idiomatic space, of some mythological images (*cloacas Augias purgare, in pertusum dolium dicta ingerire*). What catches the attention from a different perspective is the fact that the technical origin of some Latin phrases can be recognized in Neo-Latin languages: fr. *marquer d'une pierre blanche*, faţă de *album calculum adicere*; rom. *a ridica ancora,* it. *salpare l'ancora*, fr. *lever l'ancre*, sp. *alçar ancoras*, faţă de *ancoram tollere*; fr. *battre la même enclûme*, faţă de *eandem incudem tundere.*

**1.2. Partially identical idioms**

There are situations in which the Latin idioms are retraced in the idiomatic Romanic space under the form of partially identical equivalents. In this context we use the concept of partial equivalence as we refer, on one hand, to the meaning of the constructions and, on the other hand, to their internal form.

A common feature of the partially equivalent Romanic counterparts for the Latin ones from a semantic point of view is given by the change of meaning. For example, the Latin phrase *album calculum adiicere,* with the meaning of *to encourage* can be found in the French language under the form *marquer d'une pierre blanche* and with the meaning of *to note a day who must be keep in mind.* Thus we can observe a slight expansion and generalization of the initial meaning. In other situations the meaning of a Latin construction becomes more radical: thus, if in Latin *clitellas bovi imponere* showed the mismatch between an undertaken task and a person's status (which did not exclude its completion), its equivalents in Romanian (*a pune carul înaintea boilor*), French (*mêttre la charrue devant les boeufs*) and Spanish (*poner el carro delante de las mulas*) show total mismatch, a strict reverse of the natural order. In parallel the French and Italian



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

languages (*bâter un boeuf,* respectively *ogni basto non si adatta a ogni dosso*) have constructions (in Italian the meaning of the phrase is updated under the form of a proverb) that recover the meaning of the Latin construction. We can detect the same process of slight change of meaning in the Romanic counterparts of the Latin phrase *herbam dare*: if the latter shows admittance of defeat, the constructions from Romanian (*a depune armele*), Italian (*deporre le armi*), French (*deposer les armes*) and Spanish (*deponer las armas*) rather show giving up the fight, which does not necessarily entail acknowledging inferiority in front of the adversary.

The loss of certain semantic components, as well as the restriction of meaning can be highlightled in the comparison between the construction *quadrigae suae decurrere* (which indicates both sorrow, sadness, disappointment, and the loss of hope) and the partial equivalent phrase *avoir le cafard* (which indicates a state of momentary or time-limited indisposition). In the same context we bring into discussion the phrase *cum mortuis luctari*; its religious connotations (doubled by the almost mystical fear of avoiding any conflict with the deceased) are, if not lost, at least softened in the counterpart from the Italian language (*lasciare a' morti la pace*). The semantic component of the piety can still be found in a Milanese proverb which has the form *I mort l'è mej che resten in dove hinn*.

The partial equivalence of the internal form is manifest both in the background of total semantic equivalence, and of the partial equivalence of the Romanic counterparts in comparison with the Latin idioms. As for total counterparts, the variations of the internal form (changing the image underlying the phrase) can be:

a) the activation of some connotations (for example, religious) via the presence of some formative elements that belong to that specific semantic domain: cf. *sp. echar la benedicion a alguien* with respect to lat. *confringere tesseram*; also, rom. *a prinde pe Dumnezeu de picior* with respect to lat. *digito caelum attingere.*

b) the loss of connotations (also religious): see all four Neo-Latin equivalents, with idiomatic status, of the phrase *inter sacrum saxumque esse,* which have their origin either in the technical language (*a fi între ciocan şi nicovală*, *trovarsi/ essere tra l'incudine e il martello, être entre l'enclume et le marteau*) or in the rustic one (*être entre chien et loup*), or in the domestic one (*ser entre la espada y la pared*). In this situation the Spanish language is the only one which has recovered the connotations of the initial model (*estar entre la cruz y el agua bendita*).

c) the presence, in the body of the phrase, of some formative elements with a different meaning than the ones from the Latin language, which leads to certain modulations: cf. all four Romanic



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

counterparts of the phrases *cucurbitae caput non habere, ad sepulcrum mortuo narrare logos, aquam a pumice postulare*;

d) the activation of some figures of speech, for example, the synecdoche: cf. it. *cascato dalle nuvole* compared with lat. *delapsus de caelo*; also, it. *suscitare un vespaio* compared with *inritare crabrones;* including all the counterparts of the phrase *pinnas incidere*.

e) decoding the metaphor: cf rom. *de la a la z*, fr. *du commencement à la fin*, sp. *desde el principio hasta el fin* with respect to *ab ovo usque ad mala.*

f) the transfiguration of the idea into images that are specific to that cultural system: see the counterparts of the Latin phrases *alicui os sublinere* and *alicui adire manum.* From this perspective, the most illustrative examples we consider to be the idiomatic Romanic updates of the phrase *arcem facere e cloaca*.

As a rule, the partial semantic equivalencies entail the variation of the internal form as well, which can be generally explainable by modulations: as an example, we refer to the equivalent from the Spanish language of the phrase *ab acia et acu mi omnia exponere*, and also to the one from the Romanian language of the construction *centones alicui sarcire*. In this case as well one can invoke the process of semantic expansion and of connotation loss (e.g. technical); thus, if in the Latin language the phrase *omnium horarum homo* was used with reference to a person prepared for any type of discourse, it can be found in the Romanic languages with the meaning of *trustful man.*

The change of the internal form can appear in various degrees: in the it. *aver bisognio di elleboro* and fr. *avoir besoin de deux (six, quelques) grains d'ellébore* counterparts of the phrase *elleborum potare* the action is perceived as incomplete, compared with the Latin original, which leads to a major difference regarding the internal form. Contrary to this, the most sensitive change of image is in the counterpart from the French language (*ne pas donner un zeste*) of the construction *ciccum non interduere*.

As with total equivalents, also for partial equivalents we highlight innovations in the Romanic languages under the form of synonymical parallelism: see the phrases *a fura şi oul de sub cloşcă* and *a fura cloşca de pe ouă* compared with lat. *milvo volanti ungues resecare*. Another comment to be made is that often one can notice the total equivalence of the internal form in the case of some Romanic counterparts compared with the Latin phrase (see, for example, it. *cavar sangue da una pietra/ da una rapa/ dalla rape* and *cavar sangue da una pietra/ da una rapa, sacar agua de las piedras, querer tirar água da pedra* of the expression *aquam a pumice postulare*). Innovations and parallel creations can be



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

highlighted also in the case of the equivalents for the phrases *duabus sellis sedere, duos apros capere, in caelo esse, pedes lanatos habere*.

The Latin idioms that are retraced in the Romanic languages as partial equivalents, both from the meaning and internal form perspectives, cover a wide range of semantic spheres. We exemplify only some of them: relations with other members of the society and the attitude towards them (*confringere tesseram*, *alicui adire manum*), various qualities or flaws (*scire uti foro, cucurbitae caput non habere*), feelings, personal responses (*digito caelum attingere, in caelo esse*), useless actions (*ad sepulcrum mortuo narrare logos, aquam a pumice postulare*) various other attitudes and behavioural details (*arcem facere e cloaca, ciccum non interduere, duabus sellis sedere, duos apros capere, eandem incudem tundere*) etc.

**1.3. Latin phraseologies retraceable in the Romanic languages with a completely different internal form**

A particular category of Latin idioms is formed by idiomatic constructions that communicate cultural information (in this case, regarding the Roman culture). From this point of view, V. Teliya[4] distinguishes five categories, out of which our corpus deals only with two: cultural meanings, named by the researcher "*idioethnic realia*"[5], and cultural connotations. The former refer to specific Roman cultural details and include:

a) material realia, illustrated by the constructions *tesseram frangere* (in which the noun designates a board that served for the acknowledgement of hospitality connections), *quadrigae decurrere, album calculum adicere* etc.

b) social realia, illustrated by the phrase *inter sacrum saxumque stare, Saturnalia agere* (in which the noun designates a specific Roman celebration day) etc.

The latter category refers to the relation between linguistic signs and any type of non-verbal cultural code. The cultural connotations originated from the relation between the internal form and the contents of a cultural pattern, being visible especially in idioms. Indicative, from this point of view, for the Latin language, is the construction *gallinae albae filius,* litt. "*son of the white hen*", which refers to a lucky person, by associating the image of a white hen with providence, according to a legend mentioned by Suetonius.

It is obvious that this type of idioms, by reference to *realia* specific to the Roman world, can not keep, in the Romanic languages,

[4] In quoted work pp 58-64
[5] Ibid, pag. 58.



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

the internal form they have in the Latin language. For example, a construction like *ab ovo usque ad mala* can be detected in the Romanic languages under the forms *de la început până la sfârşit, du commencement à la fin* sau *desde el principio hasta el fin*, for the simple reason that the Roman custom (which the phrase hints at) of starting the meal with an egg and ending it with fruits has not been perpetuated with the Romanic peoples. The same principle (materialized this time in the loss of the custom of offering the sportive adversary a herbal crown as sign of defeat, or the disappearance of the ritual of sacrificing a victim on the altar) can also be invoked in explaining the total difference between the internal form of the constructions *herbam dare* respectively *inter sacrum saxumque stare* and their Neo-Latin counterparts, which have, invariably, as a proof, strictly technical connotations (rom. *a fi între ciocan şi nicovală*, it. *trovarsi/ essere tra l'incudine e il martello*, fr. *être entre l'enclume et le marteau*, sp. *entre el yunque y el martillo*). It is interesting to notice in this case, a counterpart, also an idiom, from the Spanish language, that keeps, as above said, the religious connotation, but transposed in a Christian context (*estar entre la cruz y el agua bendita*), which constitutes an additional argument to support the aforementioned hypothesis. Adapting to the cultural specificity, also conditioned by the strict reference of a formative element of ancient religious practices, is visible in the Romanic counterparts of the Latin phrase *Saturnalia agere;* indicative is how each of the four Neo-Latin languages has expressed the idea of easy living: the Romanian and Italian languages recover the Old Testament connotations (*a o duce ca-n sânul lui Avraam, non è sempre domenica*), French captures the convenient aspect of the idea (*avoir les fesses assises sur du velours*) and Spanish adapts it to its own religious festive system (*San Juan el verde no es cada día*).

There are, of course, some exceptions, which can be of three types: if the Latin phrases which are culturally marked are still present in the Romanic space with an identical internal form, they kept it, most likely, due to scholastical borrowing: in this category we include constructions such as *ad kalendas Graecas, cloacas Augias purgare, auri piscari hamo.* A second category is formed by those which refer to social practices that were most likely inherited throughout time: this may have happened with the game that requires guessing how many fingers the competitor will raise, which both the Latin phrase *in tenebris micare,* and its counterparts from the Italian (*giocarci alla morra*), French (*jouer a la mourre en pleine nuit*) and Spanish languages (*jugar a la morra*) refer to. In this situation, the survival of the ludic practice could constitute an argument in favour of inheriting the phrase. The third category includes the phrases calqued by translators or auhors of



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

dictionaries after the Latin models; they inevitably keep the internal form from the Latin language. If they are not understood, they can be accompanied by additional explanations or doubled by synonyms created after the Latin model within the said linguistic system (see the parallelism in it. *giocarci alla morra/ comprare a occhi chiusi/ comprare la gatta nel sacco*).

Another aspect which catches our attention is that of the Romanic phraseological synonymy compared with the Latin synonymy. Taking into consideration that in the Latin language this phenomenon is very well represented at a phraseological level, its attestation in the Romanic languages results as a natural one. The comparative examination of the Romanic equivalents and the corresponding phrases from the Latin language allows us to draw several conclusions:

a) generally, one notices the tendency to reproduce the internal form of the Latin model, in parallel with specific creations (cf. on one hand the phrases *a-şi bate cuie-n talpă*, respectively *darsi la zappa sui piedi*, on the other hand *a-şi da foc la valiză,* respectively It. *darsi alle gambe da sé* compared with *asciam in crus impingere*).

b) in some situations, the Romanic languages have innovated in parallel, having idiomatic synonyms both from the meaning and the internal form perspective (*a vorbi la pereţi, parlare a un muro/ a un sordo, parler à un sourd, hablar a la pared, hablar al aire*).

c) in other cases, apart from parallel innovations, some of them have synonyms which reflect a specific way of conceptualizating the world (with respect to *hablar a la pared,* in Spanish there is also the phrase *hablar de la mar*).

d) often isolated innovations carry the mark of the spread of Christianity (with respect to the Latin phrases *in caelo esse*, respectively *digito caelum attingere* in Romanian there is also *a fi în al şaptelea/ al nouălea cer* but also *a prinde pe Dumnezeu de picior*).

e) due to the dialect differentiation, in the Italian language one notices the synonymy at this level also; with respect to *duos apros capere,* respectively *duo parietes de eadem fidelia dealbare*, we have two series of synonyms: on one hand in the standard language (*pigliar due colombi ad una fava* and *pigliar due tordi à una pania*), on the other hand in dialects: Tuscan (*battere due chiodi a un caldo*) and Sicilian (*cu na figgia fa centu jennari*).

Following a close examination of a well-delimited corpus of phrases, we had the opportunity to ascertain, in the previous sections, the fact that all Latin phrases have, in the Romanic space (either isolated, or in two, three or in all four languages taken into consideration), total or partial equivalents, from a semantic perspective. At the same time we acknowledged that some of the Romanic



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

counterparts are not only equivalents for semantics, but also for the internal form, which in itself can be partial or total. Furthermore, we remarked that there isn't a determinating relation between the two types of equivalence. A considerable smaller number of idiomatic constructions are retraced, in the Romanic space, under the form of total equivalents, from the three points of view (semantic, internal form and structure). One can ask, in this point of our research, to what extent one can invoke, in the last case, the inheritance, the borrowing (possibly calque) or the parallel creation.

From the origin point of view, the situation of the phrases from the Romanic languages can be presented as follows:

a) they can be inherited from the Latin language

b) they can be scholastically borrowed from the Latin language, or from one Romanic language to another

c) they can be the result of similar parallel creations, due to the existence of a *forma mentis*, a common Romanic substance of thinking and interpreting reality. In this situation there are also included the phrases created following the Latin model (*acum quaerere*).

Though one can not bring evidence to support the inheritance theory, we still wonder to what extent it can be invoked to explain the presence, in the French language (*raconter de fil en aiguille*), of the phrase *ab acia et acu exponere*. Is it enough, in this case, to invoke keeping the meaning, the internal form, as well as the structure of the phrase, built exclusively from lexemes of Latin origin? Moreover, could it also be an argument the fact that the phrase was widely spread in the vocabulary of ordinary people, which is confirmed also by the attestation context? Could we invoke the same arguments as well in the case of the equivalents from the Italian (*tenere il lupo per le orecchie*) and French languages (*tenir le loup par les oreilles*) for the phrase *auribus tenere lupum*? We believe that we should show caution in this approach, in spite of the concurrence of more types of elements to support this hypothesis.

Despite the fact that the source of the phrase *pedes lanatos habere* is identical with that of the construction *ab acia et acu exponere*, we show caution in invoking that the same insertion method is present in the Romanic languages, because of the ambigous idiomatic meaning, which could remain unknown to the majority of people until the researchers turned to Porfirius' glosse.

The majority of the phrases from the Romanic languages seem to be borrowed, as above said, either from the Latin language (by translating Latin authors, writing bilingual dictionaries etc, in short, due



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

to the existence of a "Latin cultural matrix"[6]), or from one Romanic language to another. Their essential characteristics are semantic identity, identity of the internal form and sometimes structural equivalence (*ad Kalendas Graecas*).

The Romanic parallel creations have, most of the times, a Latin model, either semantic (cf. cf. it. *non è sempre domenica* and sp. *San Juan el verde no es cada día* with respect to lat. *Saturnalia agere* or it. *contrastare per l'ombra dell'asino* and fr. *discuter sur la point d'une aiguille* with respect to *rixari de lana caprina*), structural (cf. fr. *pêcher dans le ciel/ pêcher en l'air* with respect to *in aere piscari*) or of the internal form (see parallelism *suscitare un vespaio/ punzecchiare i calabroni* with respect to lat. *inritare crabrones*). There are situations in which the Latin semantic pattern has been enriched with new elements (*acum quaerere*).

An interesting situation arises with the phrase *in tenebris micare.* The attestation, in the Romanic world, of the game the Latin construction refers to, which is confirmed by corresponding equivalents in the Italian, French and Spanish languages could have supported the inheritance hypothesis, but the change of the structure and the lack of connexion between the Romanic heirs of the verb *micare* and the internal form supports the idea of parallel creations.

This being the case, our observations confirm O. Lurati's opinion, according to which the majority of Romanic phrases we have taken into consideration have their origin in "common ecotypes"[7]. Thus, the Latin language appears as a productive source of constructions from a double perspective: on one hand, it borrows to the Romanic languages phrases from its own idiomatic fund, on the other hand it constitutes a model (from the point of view of semantics and of the internal form) that the Neo-Latin languages exploit in the process of creating their own combinations. Their action targets more aspects: either they keep the identical internal form, structure and meaning of the Latin phrases, or targets one of them. One possible explanation of the *ad litteram* reproduction of the three elements can be the lack of understanding of the initial meaning or perpetuating its ambiguity (see the counterparts of the phrase *gallinae albae filius*). The intervention on the internal form and adapting it prove, on the contrary, the full understanding of the pattern (cf. It. *avere i piedi di piombo* with reference to *pedes lanatos habere*). But regardless of how they took over or changed the Latin

[6] The phrase belongs to O. Lurati, *op. cit.*, p. 169; the researcher uses it to explain the existence during the Middle Ages of some "*internaţionalisme locuţionale*" that originate from the same cultural and religious body.

[7] "*Numerose locuzioni metaforiche costituiscono corrispondenze nazionali che scaturiscono da ecotipi comuni*" (*op. cit.*, p. 167).



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

models, the Romanic languages demonstrate to have, in the idiomatic sphere, both creative force and innovating capacity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### a) Dictionaries of expressions:

ALTAMURA, D., 1974, « Proverbia locutionesque populares apud Petronium », in: *Latinitas*, XXII : pp. 181-196.

BARBU, M., 1973, *Dictionar de citate si locuţiuni străine*, Bucuresti: Editura Ştiinţifică.

BEEDE, Grace L., 1948, "Proverbial expressions" in Plautus, in: *Classical journal,* 9, pp. 357-62.

BERG, I., 1969, *Dictionar de cuvinte, expresii, citate celebre*, Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică.

BONINO, G. B., 1934, *Dizionario metodico e fraseologico della lingua Latina*, Livorno: Raffaello Giusti.

BREBAN Vasile, BULGĂR, Gh., GRECU, Doina, NEIESCU, Ileana, RUSU, G., STAN, A., 1969, *Dicţionar de expresii şi locuţiuni româneşti*, Bucureşti: Ed. Ştiinţifică.

DOBRESCU, A., 1997, *Dicţionar de expresii şi locuţiuni româneşti*, Iaşi: Ed. Mydo Center.

DUDA, G., GUGUI, A., WOJCICKI, JEANNE, M. , 1985, *Dicţionar de expresii şi locuţiuni ale limbii române*, Bucureşti.

EICHHOLZ, K., 1897, *Lateinische Sprüche, Wörter und Sprüchwörter*, Hamburg.

FRITSCH, Andreas, 1996, *Index sententiarum ac locutionum: Handbuch lateinischer Sätze und Redewendungen,* Saraviponti: Verlag der Societas Latina.

GENEST, E., 1962, *Dictionnaire de citations : dictionnaire de phrases, vers et mots célèbres employées dans le langage courant avec précision de l'origine*, Fernand Nathan.

MARIAN, B., 1973, *Dicţionar de citate şi locuţiuni străine*, Bucuresti.

MEISSNER, C., 1931[5], *Phraséologie latine*, traduite de l'allemand par Ch. Pascal, Paris: Klincksieck.

MUNTEANU, E. & MUNTEANU, Lucia-Gabriela, 1996, *Aeterna Latinitas*, Iaşi: Polirom.

OTTO, A., 1890, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer*, Berlin: Teubner.

PARAPIRU, T., 1994, *Dicţionar de expresii celebre*, Galaţi: Alma.



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

POPESCU, C., CRETU, E., 2003, *Dicţionar de cuvinte si expresii latineşti si eline în contexte literare româneşti*. *Abrevieri latineşti*, Bucureşti: Humanitas.

PROBST, H., 1868, *Locutionum Latinarum Thesaurus, oder Lateinische Phraseologie: zum Gebrauch bei den lateinischen Stilübungen in den oderen Gymnasialklassen, zusammengestellt von Dr. Hermann Probst,* Imprint Köln: Verlag der DuMont-Schauberg'schen: Buchhandlung.

REY, A., Chantreau, S.,1989, *Dictionnaire des expressions et locutions: le tresor des manieres de dire anciennes et nouvelles*, Paris: Dictionnaire Le Robert.

*** , 1992, *Latine Dicta*, ed. îngrijită de Gh. Alexandrescu, Bucureşti: Albatros.

**b) Studies:**

AVADANEI, Constanţa, 2000, *Construcţiile idiomatice în limbile română şi engleză*, Iaşi: Univ. A. I. Cuza.

BIDU-VRĂNCEANU, A., CALARAŞU, C., IONESCU-RUXANDOIU, L., MANCAŞ, M., PANĂ DINDELEGAN, G., 2001, *Dicţionar de Ştiinţe ale Limbii*, ed. a II-a, Bucureşti: Nemira.

CACCIARI, C. & GLÜCKSBERG, S., 1991, „Understanding idiomatic expressions: the contribution of word meanings", in: G. Simpson (a cura di), *Understanding word and sentence*, Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers, pp. 217-240.

CACCIARI, C. & TABOSSI, P., 1988, „The comprehension of idioms", in: *Journal of memory and language*, 27, pp. 668-683.

CASADEI, F., 1996, "Metafore ed espressioni idiomatiche" in*: Uno studio semantico sull'italiano*, Roma: Bulzoni Editore.

CHAFE, W. L., 1968, „Idiomaticity as an anomaly in the Chomskyan paradigm", in: *Foundations of Language*, 4, pp. 109-127.

COULMAS, F., 1979, „On the Sociolinguistic elevance of Routine Formulæ", in *Journal of Pragmatics*, 3, pp. 239-266.

COWIE, A. P., 1998, *Phraseology: theory, analysis, and applications,* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

GIBBS, R. W. & NAYAK N. P., 1989, „Psycholinguistic studies on the syntactic behavior of idioms", in: *Cognitive psychology*, 21, pp. 100-138.

GREIMAS, A. J., 1960, „Idiomatismes, proverbes, dictons", in: *Cahiers de lexicologie*, 2, pp. 41-61.



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)

KUNIN, A. V., 1967, „Phraseology as a Linguistic Science”, in: *Actes du X-e Congrès International des Linguistes*, Bucharest, 28 aout-2 septembre, vol. II, pp. 753-6.
LAKOFF, G., 1991, "Una figura del pensiero", in: *Cacciari*, *Teorie della metafora,* Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore.
LAMACCHIA R., 1978, "Aspetti di civiltà diverse in alcune espressioni idiomatiche tradizionali", in: RCCM, XX, pp. 957-986.
LURATI, O., 2002, *Per modo di dire*, *storia della lingua e antropologia nelle locuzioni italiane ed europee,* Bologna: Clueb.
MAKKAI, A., 1972, *Idiom structure in English*. The Hague: Mouton.
MAKKAI, A., 1978, „Idiomacity as a language universal", in: *Universals of Human Language*, Standford.
NEWMEYER, F. J. , 1972, „The insertion of idioms", in: *Papers from the 8th regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, pp. 294-302.
SLAVE, E., 1971, „Locutions figurées et expressions", *ACLFR*, XII, vol. II, Bucureşti.
STRÄSSLER, J., 1982, *Idioms in English: a pragmatic analysis* , Tübingen.
WEINREICH, U., 1969, "Problems in the analysis of idioms", in J. Puhvel (a cura di), *Substance and structure of language*, Berkeley: University of California press, pp. 23-81.



BDD-A4066 © 2010 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:56:40 UTC)