DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 109 906 95 FL 006 993

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TITLE	Some Semantic Properties of Romanian Interrogatives: "Care" and "Cine."
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SPONS AGENCY	Institute of International Studies (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.
BUREAU NO	BR-67-7901
PUB DATE	13 May 72
CONTRACT	OEC-0-72-0918
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Romanian Language and Literature (Seattle, Washington, May 12-13, 1972); For related document, see FL 006 989
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Descriptive Linguistics; Grammar; *Pronouns; Romance Languages; *Romanian; *Semantics; Sentence Structure; Structural Analysis; Syntax; Uncommonly Taught Languages; Vocabulary
IDENTIFIERS	*Interrogatives; NDEA Title VI

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to account for some semantic properties of Romanian interrogatives "ce" and "cine" by establishing some definite correlations between various contextual restrictions governing the use of these interrogative particles and the "meaning" which might be assigned to each of these particles in any context their occurrence is allowed by the rules of distribution. In spite of the fact that the approach is intended to be of a kind that will allow an easy embedding into a formal semantic description of Romanian, of the type outlined in the author's "Elemente de teorie semantica a limbilor naturale" (Bucuresti, 1970), the formal device itself is not developed here. Description is confined to the "pre-formal" level. (Author/AM)

University of Washington

Conference on

ROMANIAN LANGUAGE
AND
LITERATURE

May 12-13, 1972
Seattle, Washington

"Some Semantic Properties of Romanian Interrogatives: 'Care' and 'Cine'"

by

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Supported by

The Institute of International Studies
of the Office of Education

The Graduate School of the University of Washington

The Department of Slavic (and East European)
Languages and Literature

§ 1. Purpose. The aim of this paper is to account for some semantic properties of Romanian interrogatives ce and cine, by means of establishing some definite correlations between various contextual restrictions governing the use of these interrogative particles and the "meaning" which might be assigned to each of these particles in any context their occurrence is allowed by the rules of distribution. In spite of the fact that the following approach is intended to be of such kind as to allow an easy embedding into a formal semantic description of Romanian, of the type outlined in my Elemente de teorie semantică a limbilor naturale (Bucuresti, 1970), the formal device itself is not going to be developed here. I shall confine myself to the "pre-formal" level of the description.

§ 2. Problem of reference. Usually, ce, cine are roughly characterized by mentioning that cine refers to human beings whereas ce refers to non-human beings or to inanimate objects. At the same time in syntactic and semantic terms one might restate this characterization by saying that cine is a substitute for nouns which refer to human beings, whereas ce is a substitute for nouns which refer to non-human beings or to inanimate objects.

This statement seems to be supported by interrogative sentences like:

(1) La cine te uiţi? "Whom are you looking at?"

(2) La ce te uiţi? "What are you looking at?"

requiring answers like:

(1') Mă uit la student (or: Ion, coril, mama, etc.) "I am looking at the student (or: John, the child, my mother, etc.)"

(2') Mă uit la tren (or: pisica) "I am looking at the train (or: at the cat)".

However, one should notice that whereas a sentence like

(3) Mă uit la copil "I am looking at the child"

might be an appropriate answer to a question like (2), a sentence like

(4) Mă uit la o casa "I am looking at a house"

may never be an appropriate answer to a question like (1).

In the same way, sentences like:

(5) Caut un student "I am looking for a student"

(6) Caut cartea "I am looking for the book"

might be proper answers to a question like

(7) Ce cauţi? "What are you looking for?"

whereas a sentence like

(8) Caut o carte "I am looking for a book"

is never allowed to be an answer to a question like

(9) Pe cine cauţi? "Whom are you looking for?"

A sentence like (9) can be answered only by sentences of the form

(10) a. Caut (pe) un student "I am looking for a student"

b. Caut studentul "I am looking for the student".

In order to give a more proper characterization of cine and ce in terms of the reference the previous statement should be rephrased as

follows: cine refers only to human beings whereas ce refers either to human beings or to non-human beings or to inanimate objects.

A more refined analysis should specify the conditions under which ce can refer to human beings. It is the aim of the subsequent paragraphs.

§ 3. Identity, inclusion and copula. In connection with cine and ce we are interested in two of the functions the copula verb a fi "to be" displays:

a. that of expressing the identity between the subject and the predicate noun, like in

(11) Ion este studentul meu "John is my student"

and

b. that of expressing the inclusion of the individual or of the class which the subject noun is referring to into the class the predicative is referring to, like in

(12) Ion este student "John is a student".

The distribution of the two above mentioned meanings of fi-copula is determined by the following co-occurrence features:

(13) 1° inclusion: a. Proper Name - este - Noun (with no article)

b. Noun + Definite Article + Det. - este - Noun (with no article)

c. Noun + Indefinite Article - este - Noun (with no article)

2° identity : a. Proper Name - este - Noun + Definite Article + Det.

b. Noun + Definite Article + Det. - este - Proper Name

c. Proper Name - este - Noun + Indefinite Article

d. Noun + Indefinite Article - este - Proper Name

e. Noun + Definite Article - este - Noun + Indefinite Article

f. Noun + Indefinite Article - este - Noun + Definite Article

g. Noun + Indefinite Article - este - Noun + Indefinite Article

Examples:

(14) Ion este student "John is a student" (for (13) 1° a.)

(15) Fratele meu este student "My brother is a student" (for (13) 1° b.)

(16) Un băiat este student "A boy is a student" (for (13) 1° c.)

(17) Ion este studentul meu "John is my student" (for (13) 2° a.)

(18) Studentul meu este Ion "My student is John" (for (13) 2° b.)

(19) Ion este un student "John is a student" (for (13 2° c.)

(20) Un student este Ion "A student is John" (for (13) 2° d.)

(21) Fratele meu este un student "My brother is a student" (for (13) 2° e.)

(22) Un băiat este studentul meu "A boy is my student" (for (13) 2° f.)

(23) Un student este o ființă umană "A student is a human being (for (13) 2° g.)

The simple inspection of (14) 1°, 2° enables us to say that the inclusion-meaning of the copula is correlated with the presence of a noun with no article on the right hand side of este; the identity-meaning of the copula is correlated with all of the other possible forms the noun (belonging to the predicative noun-phrase) may have.

§ 4. Interrogatives cine, ce and the meaning of the fi-copula. The most simple rule for the use of cine and ce would be the following:

(24) Cine stands for a predicative noun phrase the head of which is either a proper name or else a noun provided with definite article, when the noun refers to a human being; ce stands for a predicative noun phrase having one of the other forms mentioned under (13), with no respect to the fact that the noun for which ce is a substitute does or does not refer to a "human being".

According to (24), the proper structure of the answer of a question like

(25) Cine este acela? "Who is that?"

would be necessarily either (13) 2° a, or (13) 2° b; if the answer has the form (13) 2° a, the noun head of the predicate phrase must refer to a

human being.

The proper structure of the answer of a question like

(26) Ce este acela? "What is that?"

would be one of the other structures specified under (13).

In addition to the facts we already discussed, we have to say some words concerning the following data.

A proper answer of (26) may have, as well, the structure

(27) aceea - este - Noun + Definite Article

like in

(28) Aceea este cartea mea "That is my book".

(Of course, instead of the nominal head aceea, we may have a noun with definite or indefinite article, like in

(29) Obiectul acela este cartea mea "That thing is my book"

or

(30) Un apartament este locuinţa mea (alt apartment este locuinţa ta) "An apartment is my home (another is your home)".

Thus, one should add to (24):

(24') Ce may stand for a predicative noun-phrase containing as head a noun with definite article, when the noun refers to a non-human individual.

From a semantic point of view, we can say that an interrogative sentence where cine is used is unambiguous in that sense that the required information concerns an individual which is a human being (see also §§ 2,3); on the other hand, an interrogative sentence where ce is

used is ambiguous: the required information may concern individuals which may be either human or non-human beings.

Since ambiguity is defined in terms of reference, we are allowed to call it referential ambiguity; we should say then that cine is referentially un-ambiguous whereas ce is referentially ambiguous.

In order to get rid of the ambiguity of interrogative sentences with ce, that is of the ambiguity of sentences of the form

(31) Ce este aceea? "What is that?"

one might introduce two different symbols: one, ce_1, will be used just in cases in which the wanted information concerns the human beings, ce_2 will be used just in cases in which the wanted information concerns the non-human beings. Thus, instead of (31) we should have

(31 a) Ce_1 este aceea?

and

(31 b) Ce_2 este aceea?

The proper structure of the answers of questions like (31 a) is one of those specified in § 3 under (13) 1° a - c, 2° c - g. The proper structure of the answers of a question like (31 b) is one of those specified in § 3 under (13) 1° a - c, 2° a - g (because we do not have a special interest in cases in which the predicative noun phrase refers to non-human individuals, we left aside the examples).

In spite of the fact that using the subscript device, we got rid of the referential ambiguity of (31), questions like (31 a), (31 b) are still ambiguous. This ambiguity comes from the ambiguity of este, which may mean either "belongs to" or "is identical with".

This ambiguity should be explained as follows. The "inclusive meaning" of *este* is determined only by the occurrence on its right hand side of a noun with no article (see § 3, under (13) 1°); the "identity-meaning" of *este* is determined only by the occurrence on its right hand side of a noun provided with some kind of article, or of a proper name. Since *ce*$_1$ as well as *ce*$_2$ may stand either for predicative phrases like those specified in 3, (13) 1° a - c or for predicate phrases like those specified under (13) 2° a - g, it follows that (31 a) could mean either

(31' a) To which class of human beings does that individual belong?

or

(31" a) To which human being individual is that individual identical?

as well as (31 b) could mean either

(32' b) To which class of non-human beings does that individual belong?

or

(32" b) To which non-human being is that individual identical?

In order to avoid this kind of ambiguity, two devices are available:

(a) to split the copula *fi* into two lexical units: *fi*$_1$, *fi*$_2$ and to assign to one of them, let us say, to *fi*$_1$ the "inclusion" meaning and to the other one, let us say, to *fi*$_2$ the "identity" meaning;

(b) to split each of the items $\underline{ce_1}$, $\underline{ce_2}$ into two lexical units $\underline{ce_1^1}$, $\underline{ce_1^2}$, and $\underline{ce_2^1}$, $\underline{ce_2^2}$; for $\underline{ce_1^1}$, $\underline{ce_2^1}$ only predicate phrases of the form specified under (13) 1° are substitutable for $\underline{ce_1^2}$, $\underline{ce_2^2}$ only predicate phrases of the form specified under (13) 2° are substitutable. Since the predicate phrases of the form (13) 1° are co-occurrent only with the "inclusion" meaning of fi, whereas the predicate phrases of the form (13) 2° are co-occurrent with the "identity" meaning of fi, a rule may be stated in terms of which fi must be interpreted as "belongs to" when followed by $\underline{ce_1^1}$, $\underline{ce_2^1}$, and as "is identical with", when followed by $\underline{ce_1^2}$, $\underline{ce_2^2}$.

If one takes the way (a), then: (31' a) will be represented by

(31 aα) $\underline{Ce_1\ este_1\ aceea}$?

(31"a) will be represented by

(31 aβ) $\underline{Ce_1\ este_2\ aceea}$?

(31' b) will be represented by

(31 bα) $\underline{Ce_2\ este_1\ aceea}$?

(31" b) will be represented by

(31 bβ) $\underline{Ce_2\ este_2\ aceea}$?

If one takes the way (b), then: (31' a) will be expressed by

(31 aα') $\underline{Ce_1^1\ este\ aceea}$?

(31"a) will be represented by

(31 aβ') $\underline{Ce_1^2\ este\ aceea}$?

(31' b) will be represented by

(31 bα') $\underline{Ce_2^1 \text{ este aceea}}$?

(31" b) will be represented by

(31 bβ') $\underline{Ce_2^1 \text{ este aceea}}$?

For the time being, I can not see any effective support for one of the devices mentioned. I would like only to point out that procedure (a) is semantic (because $\underline{fi_1}$, $\underline{fi_2}$ are postulated only by virtue of the possibility of assigning them different meanings) whereas (b) is purely syntactic, because $\underline{ce_1^1}$, $\underline{ce_2^1}$, $\underline{ce_1^2}$, $\underline{ce_2^2}$ should be viewed plainly as a kind of variables - with limited range - their values are given only by rules of substitution.