

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 109 910

FL 006 997

AUTHOR Capusan, Cornel  
 TITLE Some Cultural Problems in Teaching Romanian.  
 INSTITUTION Washington Univ., Seattle.  
 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 10p.; 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 \*Cultural Differences; Cultural Education; Cultural  
 Factors; \*Expressive Language; Figurative Language;  
 Idioms; \*Language Instruction; \*Language Styles;  
 Metaphors; Romance Languages; \*Romanian; Second  
 Language Learning; Semantics; Teaching Methods;  
 Textbook Selection; Uncommonly Taught Languages  
 IDENTIFIERS NDEA Title VI

ABSTRACT

It is important for the Romanian language teacher to teach the language as a cultural entity, to convey the exact values of the language. If translation cannot be dropped entirely, it is very important for the student to accept what is typical and untranslatable in itself and to identify himself with the native speaker. Although every language has expressive functions, in Romanian in particular, expression assumes great significance. For example, redundancy is the most important problem facing the teacher of Romanian to Americans, and the teacher must convey to his students the values expressed by such redundancies. The expressive quality of Romanian is revealed in popular poetry, riddles, and metaphors, but the student needs a gradual introduction to the Romanian cultural universe in order to form the link between the literal and the figurative in Romanian. For this reason text selection is crucial, and an anthology is needed of instructional texts. This can only be the result of long bilateral cooperation between Romanians and those interested in Romanian language and culture. (AM)

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ED109910

University of Washington

Conference on

ROMANIAN LANGUAGE  
AND  
LITERATURE

May 12-13, 1972  
Seattle, Washington

"Some Cultural Problems in Teaching Romanian"

by

Cornel Căpușan

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

F7006997

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EDUCATION & WELFARE  
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
EDUCATION  
1601 MARKET STREET, N.W.  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20037



Knowledge of a foreign language implies somewhat more than simply the capacity to establish a correspondence between words and expressions in the foreign and native tongue. Such a simplistic view, emphasizing translation, and therefore a continual correlation between the familiar language and the one being studied, belongs irrevocably to the past. Today learning a language means, above everything else, accepting that language by itself, with as little external reference as possible.

Numerous expressions can be only inadequately translated. These expressions are often the most important in defining the idiom in question, conveying its typical approach to reality and manifesting cultural specificity. The specific difference between one language and another, although apparent in certain expressions, constantly involves the entire spiritual makeup, as it is reflected in our language. Comparison of different meanings of a single word can reveal a typical way of seeing the world. The two meanings of the word nebunie, translated either as "madness" or "prank," doubtlessly reveal a tonic approach to madness, which figuratively becomes a child's mischievous behavior. These two meanings clearly have a cultural facet that reminds us of, for instance, Shakespeare's madness--madness and buffoonery at the same time. The figurative meaning lends a certain humor to the literal meaning, and thus saves it.

Even a word with only one unique and definite meaning sometimes cannot be adequately translated. Obviously, bătătură loses its material

and ethical character when it is translated into English as "courtyard" or any other word. "Bătătură" is to the peasant a place trodden by people and cattle, a place of work, and at the same time, a distinctive token of his industriousness. The term does not simply describe a limited reality, but it suggests a whole world. To understand it, we must understand the Romanian village. Or, how can we translate an expression as basic to the understanding of the Romanian psyche as om de omenie? Its translation would only reduce its wealth to a redundant formulation.

Such an approach as implied by this expression has an absolute cultural value, in as far as no external point of reference can explain it in depth. For the native speaker it has a universal value as long as he is not acquainted with the different cultural setting associated with another language. The unveiling of this specificity, to which we are so accustomed that we are not aware of it, occurs sometimes only when we can look through someone else's eyes. During the past three years, as a teacher of Romanian here in the United States, I have been in a situation where I not only taught others, but myself learned from my students, whose active interest and intelligence made me see and understand the heretofore neglected specific character of the Romanian language.

Thanks to this new experience I now understand how important it is to know and to explain properly the language as a cultural entity, to convey to the student the exact values of the language. If it is true that translation cannot be entirely dropped, it is very important for the student to accept what is typical and untranslatable in itself and to identify himself with the native speaker.

It would be wrong to assume that such an understanding is needed only at an advanced stage in the study of the Romanian language. The American student, accustomed to a language that is extraordinarily rigorous and clear, is sometimes tempted to make comparisons.

(Comparisons are unavoidable as long as there is a need to find equivalencies.) And the first thing he will notice is the redundancy-- the doubling of noun and pronoun, or superfluous constructions such as de către, which could be replaced by de without altering the meaning or ignoring the rules of the language.

Besides the impossibility of correctly translating some typical words and expressions, redundancy remains the most important problem of Romanian facing the teacher. He must convey to his students that there is a certain value in what seems to them an unnecessary profusion of words. He has to make them understand that a language like the Romanian, which has a tendency towards redundancy, expresses by it certain values not to be underestimated.

Redundancy is also apparent in the extensive use of synonyms. The tendency to lengthen the discourse is basically the same as the one that accepts more words for the same notion. These different words, however, have a different syntactical value. In Romanian taină, mister, secret differ only if looked upon as having a specific stylistical value.

Here we are concerned with a different attitude toward the act of speaking, one whose object is not only to communicate, but also to express; where language is not only a means of transmitting information, but also of shaping attitudes. Though every language has such functions, in the Romanian language in particular, expression assumes great significance.

Does this make it more suitable for literature than other languages? The question in this form seems to suggest a simplistic answer; literature depends not only on the quality of language, but also on the individual effort of the writer. Thus, to give only two examples, the expressive potential of local idioms or words of Slavic origin was cultivated by the great classicists from Eminescu to Sadoveanu, who have thus been able to achieve unusual stylistic effects, and to lend local color to literary texts. The writer's sensitivity is called upon to achieve and bring out the potential virtues of the language.

The expressive quality of the Romanian language is entirely, but not incidentally, revealed in popular poetry. In folklore, the essence of language and poetry intermingle to bring out the creativity of a people. Through its form Romanian shows its freedom--the freedom to invent forms and words. For example, terms of onomatopoeic origin occur frequently and eloquently in standard Romanian. In the light of the Romanian folkloric tradition and literature, the verbal inventiveness of an Eugene Ionescu is not surprising (let us not forget that his first play English Without a Teacher, later The Bald Soprano, was written in Romanian).

But the whole inventive range, free from the consciousness of the existence of rules, is especially apparent in riddles. They may even reinvent the language, create new words by alluding to existing terms, or stimulate the imagination through onomatopoeia or combinations recalling sounds. Thus, a pig's tail is called cotofling, an invented word alluding to cotofană, a restless bird forever in motion, like the pig's tail. The ending of the word is as much onomatopoeic as

descriptive through veiled reference. Yet even though a riddle is a play of the imagination, the construction of new words cannot be considered simply a play, because not only new expressions, but also new words, felt to be necessary either for indicating objects, or new situations and actions, are constantly being incorporated into the Romanian peasant's language.

The riddle also reveals the purpose of this inventive freedom. To quote I. C. Chimia in his recently published book Romanian Folklore in a Universal Perspective: "In the process of guessing the metaphor unfolds, making the real object visible." One can extend the scope of this remark by saying that the inventive freedom of the riddle is not an end in itself, but ultimately serves the purpose of revealing reality. Even in a riddle the invented terms have a certain concreteness (by means of sound or referring), because they must basically, though indirectly, convey the reality of the object; they are not stylistically neutral, but partially transmit the concreteness of the object, being felt as one of its images. The expressive quality is therefore manifested in these two aspects, freedom and adherence to reality, which eventually are reduced to one and the same phenomenon. What is the connection between folk language and standard Romanian? It is clear that in spite of appearances, the distinction is not so marked. Standard language no longer possesses the gift of this prolific verbal inventiveness, but still it preserves the essential relation between freedom and adherence to reality; the freedom in using more words than seem to be needed, until we look at them from a logical rationalistic

point of view, and discover with their help a new and unexpected aspect of reality.

In defining the riddle, Chitiția used the term "metaphor," which refers to all types of transposition. To a large extent, metaphors keep the language in direct contact with the world. In Romanian literary criticism, too little has been written about the particular creation of metaphors in Romanian literature; this invention of metaphors hold a privileged position in the definition of our culture, and even of the Romanian language, which is full of metaphors of popular origin. Often, in order to be understood, these metaphors demand familiarity with a specific style of life. It would be difficult to define them in the short space available in this paper. But the creation of metaphors, which is typical to the Romanian language and to our literature, in spite of the freedom it sometimes assumes, seems to exclude ostentation in favor of a deeper understanding of the reality of, either an objective or subjective world. Arghezi's prose for children is rich in precious images, but still remains the expression of newly found purity and a way of more directly grasping reality:

"A tale is a toy. I hung a thousand toys on the walls, and all the trees form the white mountain forests, at whose feet grazes the green light red horse, are full of hunchback monkeys, of angels with elastic, who are caught in the forests, our wish to give the voices of the wind a reason, and to the quiet emptiness among the leaves a life paired with people made of cardboard."

Such an overflow of images surprises the unsuspecting reader. But once he has understood the Arghezian imagination, which is nothing but a specific form of the Romanian imagination, the freedom of this text will



be revealed to him, the freedom used to rediscover the long past world of childhood innocence.

So redundancy appears to be also linked to the extensive use of metaphor and the free phantasy by means of which it fully expresses itself. Even when the image is concise, it presupposes a full intermediary scale of meanings. In Romanian language and literature the listener or reader is supposed to provide with his imagination the link between the literal and figurative meaning of metaphor.

To reach these conclusions, the student of Romanian needs a gradual introduction to the Romanian cultural universe; he must be exposed to an adequate selection of representative texts, which will not give a false impression of redundancy, of useless crowding of words, but which will reveal expressiveness. And no text seems to be more appropriate, from this point of view, than Miorita (The Lamb); in this poem my students found the key to the figurative means of expression with which they had been previously confronted, and which they had not been able to explain. A common metaphor, such as the one in the first verse, "pe-un picior de plai" (on the foot of a meadow), in which part of the human body is associated with a form of nature, recovers its original meaning from the moment when it conveys, in all its images, the idea of man's integration in nature. The creation of metaphors redeems the language by saving it from abuse. Individual metaphors and expressions contribute to the revelation of basic intuition: they are in the long run explained by it. The high artistic quality evident in this coherent image of the plain explains the quality of the language generally.

Today, when overly analytical tendencies are directed toward removing the wealth of context from words, the Romanian language, due to its innate tendency to create metaphors, remains in direct contact with life and the plurality of its forms. While a description of nature by Sadoveanu, a poem by Blaga, or another by Ion Barbu correspond to the vital need for reintegration in life and in the world, their victory is also the victory of the language, whose merits are found in their poetic or theoretical writing. The Romanian poet or writer has returned to a fundamental intuition intrinsic in the language; he perceives that there is not a precipice between us and the world. For this reason, poetry is a "roomy song" for Ion Barbu, a song that can accommodate a whole world.

We would need a roomy song such as  
The silky crackling of the sunny seas.

The basic problem of teaching Romanian abroad, where our culture is hardly known, is to explain the spirit of the language, and with it, that of our culture and literature, since they form a single entity. Text selection becomes crucial, and difficult at the same time, as it must take into consideration not only that which we consider truly important, but also those criteria instrumental in determining its success in other countries. I therefore believe that such an anthology may only be the result of long and bilateral collaboration between Romanians and those whose genuine interest in Romanian language and in Romanian culture has been steady during these last years.