

Aspects Related to the *Definite Article* in the Process of *Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language*

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Abstract:

The didactics of teaching the Romanian language as a foreign language is one that has been carried out for some time in the virtual environment, through online courses. This aspect can lead without discussion to a series of difficulties related to the specific grammatical structure. From a methodological point of view, it is necessary to start from the basic elements to the complex ones in learning the Romanian language, based on the principle of concentric circles, in order to obtain a well-fixed minimum background on which to teach more complex elements of grammar and vocabulary. The issue of learning any language presupposes an interdisciplinary perspective on the phenomenon, in which the elements of linguistics, grammar, language and culture in general are applied in specific sociolinguistic and psycho-pedagogical contexts.

Keywords: *the definite article, Romanian as a foreign language, teaching, learning, foreign students*

Introduction

There are many aspects in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, real problems to be solved, one of them being the influence exerted by the mother tongue and the transition language - English - on the foreign students. Therefore, it is a double challenge, especially since the mother tongue is so well mastered that the whole attention of the foreign student is focused on its content, without thinking especially about the forms of expression. It is therefore possible to identify the reason why, in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, a sustained effort is needed, first to avoid the influence of the mother tongue, of the transition language - English - and then to focus the attention of foreign students on the perception of Romanian words, on its specific constructions and grammatical forms, so that, on this basis, the student can think directly in the newly learned language. Consequently, the teacher must take great care to strengthen

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the skills of perceiving, understanding and reproducing the language material, as well as to form new skills in this regard.

The specificity of the Romanian language, as a foreign language, presupposes certain particularities in the application of the general didactic principles in teaching.

Nicolae Iorga said about the Romanian language: „It is too much believed that a language develops only through writing; it also develops through its current use (...)”².

In the process of learning the Romanian language as a foreign language, there is also a reason for the „teaching opportunity”: the fact that what has an important aesthetic effect on us is better kept in memory. Therefore, information is more easily retained in connection with some texts that generate aesthetic pleasure, as long as „things learned in the abstract or in relation to uninteresting texts, which are given only as an example and which have no value in themselves, are easily forgotten”³.

If the Romanian language is learned only from practical needs, at a basic Romanian level, then, obviously, there is no need for literature. What matters is that the non-native speaker makes himself understood, to communicate his „message” in the conversation with the Romanian interlocutor. Such a speaker does not seem to be bothered by the fact that he speaks with language mistakes, since he „understands” what he is saying. And he doesn't care that he is immediately perceived as a stranger because of the bad way he speaks.

In order for the foreign student to reach a „satisfactory” level of comprehension and expression in Romanian, learning can be on their own or in an organized setting, and the level of preparation can follow the „beginner”, „intermediate” stages (or „medium „),“ advanced „. The so-called „active communication” is also effective. In fact, as a solution for a rapid learning of a foreign language, the recommendation to take a „language bath” within the target language community is widely used. In time, we can reach a „satisfactory” command of our language: a simple / simplified Romanian, but correct.

As for the conversation guides that involve the Romanian language, it should be noted that they are useful, but - as Rodica Zafiu proved in a pertinent analysis - there are plenty of „illustrative” statements that elude the naturalness of communication situations⁴.

² Iorga, N. *Istoria literaturii românești. Introducere sintetică*. Chișinău: Litera, 1997, p. 33.

³ Eugen Coșeriu, *Despre temeiul studiului limbii și al literaturii* [1987], în „Cercetări de limbă și literatură”, tomul XII, Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, Editura Imprimeriei de Vest, Oradea, 2005, p. 415.

⁴ Rodica Zafiu, *Diversitate stilistică în româna actuală*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2001, p. 139-142.



The grammar of the Romanian language, quite complex and with certain „obstacles” for foreign students, can become approachable by use in different contexts and by example, both in current speech and in writing. However, it is important to know that we can communicate in a foreign language not only by teaching its grammar but also by: „The information sent by our body, face and tone of voice can set up the perfect background for a successful communication. (...) Communication is about more than finding the right message, it is also about finding the right distance, about learning how to get close to people but not too close and not too far”⁵.

Approaches to the article decided in Romanian as a foreign language

The vast majority of modern Indo-European languages in Europe have a definite and indefinite article, with the exception of Slavic and Baltic languages, although the Baltic languages linguistically express the idea of determination in certain situations. Of the Slavic languages, only Bulgarian and Macedonian have an article, both definite and indefinite, which appeared under the influence of the Romanian language. Apart from the Indo-European family, the definite article is well represented in Arabic. The Germanic languages have the definite article derived from the demonstrative pronoun as in the Romance languages, although the Latin language had none of them, neither the definite article nor the indefinite article⁶.

The definite and the indefinite article are found in a limited number of languages, which can make it difficult for foreign students to assimilate and understand the article in Romanian. Unfortunately, in the process of teaching Romanian to foreign students of different nationalities, it is difficult to make them understand the specific linguistic structures of the Romanian language, such as the article [Flexible speech part that individualizes the noun, adjective or (rarely) other parts and marking various grammatical functions of the words that accompany them⁷], without resorting to an intermediate language such as English or French. Often, however, these intermediate languages, not being mother tongues, are not sufficiently thoroughly assimilated into their deep structures, and the comparison with them would create even more confusion. In addition,

⁵ Laviniu Lăpădat, Maria-Magdalena Lăpădat, *Manifolds of Communication: Negotiating Social, Political and Economic Constructs*, în „Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques”, nr. 72, Craiova, 2021, p. 28.

⁶ <https://limbaromana.org/revista/observatii-asupra-originii-articolului-hotarat-in-limba-romana-si-in-limbile-romanice/>

⁷ <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/articol>



often the intermediate languages presuppose other linguistic mechanisms, which can confuse and disturb the process of assimilating the specific structures of the Romanian language. But at the same time, foreign students feel the need to look for syntactic, semantic and pragmatic equivalents in their native language for the structures they face in the process of acquiring the target language.

That is why this whole process of teaching-learning the article in Romanian by foreign students becomes a touchstone for many of them. An example of how English as a transition language can actually confuse foreign students, rather than giving them a way to understand the definite article more easily, is this: **Legumele** sunt mai pline de vitamine decât **fructele** / *Vegetables are fuller of vitamins than fruits*. In English, the article does not exist in this context, and the explanations we could give to foreign students can only be understood by reference to their own language, in which there is a possibility that this definite article will be expressed.

In Romanian, the definite article is used as **an anaphoric mark**⁸, either by repeating a previous word, which at the second mention becomes known to the speaker (*A venit **un student** din Venezuela. **Studentul** știe limba spaniolă.*), or by referring to an antecedent (*Găsești pe masă **fructe**, cele mai gustoase sunt **merele***). Another situation of using the definite article arises when its generic index function can be strengthened by the presence of the whole quantity: *Toate **stelele** sunt luminoase. / Toți **oamenii** sunt fericiți. / Tot **timpul** este cald vara. / Toată **lunea** este îngrijorată.*

It becomes obvious that: „Given that the student has already automated the incorrect use of the article, it is more difficult to correct this issue at a level that involves the assimilation of notions much more complex than the article”⁹. Thus, an interesting aspect regarding the article decided in Romanian and quite difficult for foreign students to understand is the substantivization, because: „any word associated with the article behaves as (becomes) a noun”¹⁰. An example is the one related to the substantivization of the adjective by attaching the definite article: ***Bogatul** nu vrea să dea bani cu împrumut. / **Săracul** este leneș.*

Another situation in which, in general, the noun is accompanied by the definite article is when it has the syntactic function of subject. In

⁸ ***GALR1: *Gramatica limbii române*, Vol. I. Cuvântul, Coordonator Valeria Guțu-Romalo, Tiraj nou, revizuit, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2008, p. 74.

⁹ Eliana-Alina Popeti, *Probleme în predarea limbii române ca limbă străină. Studiu de caz: articolul în limba română*, în *Quaestiones Romanicae VIII/1*, Editura Szeged Jatepress, Szeged, 2020, p. 379.

¹⁰ ***GALR1: *Gramatica limbii române*, Vol. I. Cuvântul, Coordonator Valeria Guțu-Romalo, Tiraj nou, revizuit, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2008, p. 55.



Romanian, the subject „requires the specification of the extension”, which implies „the association with the positive morphemes of the determination category”¹¹, such as the definite article (***Studentul** învață lecția.*) sau prezența altor determinanți (***Acest student** învață lecția.*)

The presence of the definite article is also necessary in the case of the collective numeral **both** (**amândoi / amândouă**) accompanying a obligatory noun articulated with a definite article. In the case of this Romanian construction, the collective numeral **both** are „always co-occurrent with the definite article, regardless of its position on the noun-center”¹², always in its plural form: ***Amândouă surorile** sunt profesoare. / **Surorile amândouă** sunt profesoare.* A peculiarity of the structure **both** (**amândoi / amândouă**) in Romanian is the fact that it can be replaced with the synonymous structure **both** (**ambii / ambele**), which can create confusion among foreign students, because the collective numeral **both** (**ambii/ambele**) „is always articulated enclitic” and „precedes the noun determined”¹³, obligatory unarticulated: ***Ambele surori** sunt profesoare.*

In the grammatical structures of the Romanian language we find another situation in which the noun appears definite articulate when it is accompanied by a possessive pronominal adjective or another noun in the genitive case, because in Romanian the definite article and the possessive pronominal adjective are „co-currents”¹⁴: ***Casa mea** este frumoasă. / **Copilul vecinului** este gălăgios.*

Various exercises are needed to accustom foreign students to attach the definite article to the noun that names the object possessed in such structures, whether it is followed by another noun in the genitive case or by a possessive pronominal adjective. For example, Arabic-speaking students will encounter problems in assimilating these structures in Romanian, which require the mandatory presence of the definite article, as evidenced by their way of expressing themselves, after an accumulation of grammar information level A1-A2: *Merg **cu mașină** fratele.; Am sunat **prieten** meu.; Ei sunt **surori** meu.*

A special case is the preposition with, which „from the point of view of the form of articulation imposed on the noun, [...] is atypical, accepting both the inarticulate form and the definite article form, depending on the semantics of the noun and its syntactic function”¹⁵. Thus, it can accompany in certain situations inarticulate nouns, as in the case of the other

¹¹ ***GALR1: *Gramatica limbii române*, Vol. I. Cuvântul, Coordonator Valeria Guțu-Romalo, Tiraj nou, revizuit, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2008, p. 54.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 312.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 615.



prepositions that require the accusative case – *Mănânc pâine cu unt.* -, and other times, when it has instrumental value, the same preposition precedes nouns articulated with a definite article – *Mănânc ciorba cu lingura.* / *Merg cu mașina.*

In terms of speech, the article decided by its presence next to a noun transforms the noun from a generic-virtual concept (*fată*) into a real representation (*fata*), from the system, from meaning, to concrete reality, to designation. However, we cannot say that the definite article realizes the realization alone, but only together with the intention of the sender. Therefore, the decided article updates the identification of a known object and maybe this explanation can become a starting point in the understanding of the decided article in Romanian by foreign students.

Conclusions

Some grammar papers mention the article as one of the most problematic elements of the Romanian language: „Appreciated as the most difficult chapter of Romanian grammar for foreigners learning our language (especially when they speak a language lacking the article, but also when they are accustomed to another number and other forms of articles; the existence of several kinds of definite articles is a peculiarity of the Romanian language compared to most European languages), the article poses enough problems for cultivating the language for Romanian speakers as a mother tongue”¹⁶. This characterization of the article warns about the complexity of the Romanian article and about the difficulty that foreigners face in the process of learning the Romanian language. The difficulties of assimilating the Romanian article by foreigners would force those who deal with the teaching of the Romanian language to approach this determinant in a way that would facilitate this process.

The most frequent inappropriate uses of the article in Romanian appear in the case of significant differences between certain language systems, those belonging to foreign students and represented by the native language or the transition language used which does nothing but complicate things in many situations. The definite article in Romanian represents a challenge in teaching this language as a foreign language. The definite article is a grammatical category that raises specific difficulties for foreign users and it requires reconsideration of teaching strategies in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. Also, more attention should be paid to the particular situations generated by the specificity of the Romanian language in relation to the students' mother tongues, which can be found in the textbooks that offer communicate effectively.

¹⁶ Mioara Avram, *Gramatica pentru toți*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1986, p. 66.



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