

**Time in the Romanian imaginary
(based on repeated discourse units)****Lilia TRINCA**

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Abstract

The article aims to describe the Romanian imaginary of time based on repeated discourse units (proverbs, sayings, phraseological expressions), understood as “forms of linguistic memory” in the Coșerian sense. The corpus consists of approximately 200 proverbs and expressions that explicitly or implicitly conceptualise temporality, selected from classical collections, dictionaries of expressions, and digital resources, by filtering units in which time is the semantic core rather than a peripheral element. Methodologically, the study combines lexicographic inventory with an inductive classification into semantic fields and a semantico-pragmatic analysis, at the intersection of cognitive linguistics, linguistic anthropology and cultural semiotics.

The results outline several major thematic areas: time and destiny (“Nu-s vremurile sub cărma omului...”, roughly “Times are not under man’s helm”), time as resource and irreversibility (“Timpul nu așteaptă pe nimeni” – “Time waits for nobody”, “Apa trece, pietrele rămân” – “The water flows, the stones remain”), cyclical time and the alternation of good/bad (“După furtună vine și vreme bună” – “After storm fair weather comes”, „Ziua bună multă vreme nu ține” – “A good day doesn’t last long”), processual time and patience („Cu vremea și cu încetul se face tare oțetul” – “With time and patience even the vinegar turns strong”), the axiology of wasting time (anti-procrastination and anti-haste proverbs) and the “never” register, expressed through impossible scenarios („La Paștele călăilor” – “At the horses’ Easter”, „Când a crește păr în palmă” – “When hair grows in one’s hand”, „Când va zbura porcul” – “When pigs fly”, functionally equivalent to English *when pigs fly*). The general conclusion is that these units do not operate merely as expressive ornaments, but as nodal points of a “cultural grammar” of time, articulating the relationship between ephemerality and permanence, situated freedom and fatalism, patience and timely action. From an applied perspective, the study anticipates a digital corpus of Romanian proverbs about time, integrated with artificial-intelligence-based tools for semantic search, typological analysis and diachronic visualisation.

Keywords: repeated discourse; cultural imaginary; fatalism and destiny; temporal metaphors; computational paremiology

Introduction

The article examines the structural place of time in the Romanian imaginary, not only as an abstract notion but as a constitutive dimension of the way the community conceives existence, world order and its relationship to destiny. In Ernest Bernea’s classic description, traditional time is experienced as a concrete and qualitative reality, articulated through the rhythms of nature, the cycle of feasts and the succession of life-moments “each with its proper order”, rather than as a homogeneous physical flux, quantifiable by abstract measurement (Bernea 2005, 24). Within this horizon, being “in time” means inhabiting

space, time and causality as “fundamental frames and categories” of popular thinking, through which both the perception of reality and the spiritual meaning of existence are organised (*idem*, 30).

Romanian philosophy of culture has refined the relationship between time, cultural style and destiny. Thus, Lucian Blaga interprets time and space as “concrete horizons of consciousness”, which are not neutral containers but stylistic forms specific to a cultural “matrix-space”, emblematised by the well-known “mioritic space” (Blaga 1969, 119–132). Along the same lines, Constantin Noica rereads the same tension in terms of the conflict between “what is eternal” and “what is historical” in Romanian culture, proposing the distinction between *vreme* (‘time’ as span), as a horizon of duration and participation in being, and *ceas* (‘clock-time’), as the succession of transient events (Noica 2008, 7-10). Proverbial formulae such as „Trece și asta” and „Toate veacurile se înțeleg ca ziua de ieri” thus become symptoms of a sensibility that relativises the historical event against a background of permanence.

Materials and methods

Within this framework, language – and repeated discourse in particular (proverbs, sayings, fixed phraseological expressions, stereotyped formulae) – functions as a privileged archive of temporal mentalities, in Coșeriu’s sense of repeated discourse as “forms of linguistic memory” in which collective experience is crystallised and transmitted. The article aims to investigate the Romanian imaginary of time starting from these forms of repeated discourse, with a focus on proverbs and phraseological expressions that explicitly or implicitly conceptualise temporality. The approach is framed interdisciplinarily at the intersection of cognitive linguistics (conceptual metaphor theory and image schemata), linguistic anthropology, and cultural semiotics.

Methodologically, the study combines a lexicographic inventory (consultation of proverb collections, dictionaries of expressions and sayings, databases, and digital resources) with an interpretive selection phase, in which only those units were retained that centrally activate a representation of time, rather than merely incidental mentions. On this basis, an inductive classification was applied: units were grouped into recurrent semantic fields, not starting from a pre-imposed theoretical typology, but from convergences of figurative patterning, role and temporal scenario identified in the corpus. Thus, relatively stable thematic series emerged, such as [time – destiny], [time – resource/wealth], [time – patience], [work – diligence – timeliness], [valorisation of the present/relation to past and future], [time – doctor/teacher/judge], [irreversible time], [cyclical time], [“never”-time], [mythical time], each defined by sets of dominant metaphors (time-as-resource, time-as-actor, time-as-moral-instance, etc.), by the type of temporality invoked (cyclical, linear, mythical, axiological) and by the pragmatic function of the units (normative, consolatory, ironic, and demarcative).

Results and discussion

This classification is not merely descriptive; it also allows for generalisations about the Romanian imaginary of time. First, it confirms the qualitative character of popular temporality: time is not perceived as a neutral, homogeneous flux, but as a “heterogeneous reality” segmented axiologically into “good”/“bad” intervals, “in due time”/“out of time”, “meaningful”/“in vain”, in line with Bernea’s observations on the lived structure of time for the Romanian peasant. Second, recurrent personifications (time-as-doctor, time-as-teacher,

time-as-judge) show that time is endowed with the status of an actor and a moral-epistemic instance: not just the framework in which actions unfold, but a force that heals, educates, sanctions, and ultimately “does justice”. Third, the distribution of semantic fields highlights the delicate balance between the pragmatic dimension (time as a resource to be managed, “time for everything”) and the symbolic dimension (mythical time, “times of old”, the hyperbolic impossible of “never”), which captures both a quotidian sensitivity to time-management and a need to anchor life within a broader horizon of meaning. From this perspective, the chosen methodology – inventory, semantico-pragmatic selection, inductive field-classification and integrative interpretation – makes it possible not only to describe a series of proverbs, but also to reconstruct a coherent, discretely articulated vision through which Romanian culture conceives time as resource, trial, doctor, teacher, judge and, ultimately, as a space of value-realisation.

One of the most salient thematic fields in the corpus is that in which time is related to destiny, constructing a vision of existence placed “under the rudder of times” and discursively structuring the proverbial area of Romanian fatalism. The category of fatalism and destiny in temporal proverbs constitutes one of the densest “semantic nodes” of the Romanian imaginary of time, where philosophical reflection (Bernea, Noica, Blaga) intersects with popular wisdom crystallised in repeated discourse. A first nucleus is formed by proverbs such as „Nu-s vremurile sub cârma omului, da-i bietul om sub cârma vremii” (“Times are not under man’s helm, but the poor man is under at the helm of times”), „Dacă nu ți se pleacă ție vremea, pleacă-te tu vremii” (“If time does not bow to you, then you must bow to time”), „N-aduce anul ce aduce ceasul” (“What a whole year won’t bring, a single moment will”), „Nu știe nimeni când îi bate ceasul” (“Nobody knows when his time comes”). In all these, *vremea* and *ceasul* appear as supra-personal instances that decide the course of life, placing the individual in a subordinate relationship to a higher temporal order.

Bernea notes that in popular thought “space, time and causality are categories which demonstrate a conception and a view of life specific to the Romanian people”, time being experienced as “concrete reality” and “condition of spiritual life”, not as a mere physical parameter (Bernea 2005, 149). What he calls “being in time” means “living in a continuous present enriched by contact with unchangeable things”, so that “time unfolds within eternity” (Bernea 2005, 155). The proverb „Nu-s vremurile sub cârma omului” translates this vision into the proverbial register: human life unfolds within a temporality that ontologically and axiologically exceeds the subject. From Noica’s perspective, this position is explained by his well-known distinction between *ceas* (‘clock-time’) and *vreme* (‘span, season’): “The clock moves, strikes, and time (*vremea*) stands, ‘times’.” (Noica 2021, 98). For him, *vreme* is not a flow but “standing in place, fixity, permanence”; “year” and “clock” belong to the historical, eventual order, whereas *vreme* pertains to the eternal, to the structure of cultural being. The proverb „N-aduce anul ce aduce ceasul” condenses precisely the idea that, at this historical level, change may be sudden and unpredictable, even if at the level of *vreme* the deep order of the world remains stable. Fatalism is thus not the absence of meaning but the placement of meaning in a different register from that of immediate action.

A coherent subgroup is formed by expressions related to death and the end: „Nu știe nimeni când îi bate ceasul”, „A-i veni ceasul”, „A-i veni ora din urmă” (The hour of the end has come”), „I-a venit vremea, dar nu i-a venit ceasul” (“Time has come, but the clock did not tick”, or “The time has come, but the right moment hasn’t”), „A i se apropia (cuiva) vremea” (Someone’s time is nearing”). Here, *ceasul* functions as metaphor for the limit-moment, and its uncertainty underlines both the precariousness of existence and the impossibility of

controlling the final calendar of life. The popular distinction „i-a venit vremea, dar nu i-a venit ceasul” is particularly revealing: *vremea* indicates the reaching of a general term or maturity (for instance, in birth: pregnancy brought to term), whereas *ceasul* designates the effective onset of the decisive event (labour, death, critical moment). Noica reads this duality as a tension between a permanence of being (“*vremea* stands, ‘times’”) and the succession of historical events, among which death is the culminating moment of the clock’s “striking” (Noica, 2021, 99). Proverbial discourse nuances this tension by suggesting that individual destiny plays out between a horizon of ripening (*vreme*) and a breaking point (*ceas*), both of which escape precise anticipation.

In Bernea’s terms, this double chronology reflects the fact that the Romanian “lives at the same time in the *veac* (age) and in eternity”, and death, as *ceas*, does not cancel participation in a broader, religiously conceived horizon of being. Hence the often sober but not despairing tone of these proverbs: they do not cultivate an obsession with the end, but a consciousness of limit, combined with faith in a higher order. Proverbs such as „Dacă nu ți se pleacă ție vremea, pleacă-te tu vremii” might be interpreted simplistically as expressions of a resigned, fatalistic mentality. Yet Bernea’s anthropological reading suggests an important nuance: for the Romanian peasant, “life takes place within certain frames of space and time” which “cannot be changed”, but within which one must nevertheless find one’s *rost* (proper place, purpose) (Bernea 2005, 155–160). To “bow to time”, therefore, does not mean to renounce action, but to calibrate it realistically in relation to context, turning fatalism into an ethic of adaptation. Repeated discourse fixes, through repetition, a behavioural model: the individual is advised not to fight uselessly against *vremea* (historical circumstances, conjunctures), but to direct effort where some margin of agency remains. From the perspective of discursive traditions, these proverbs function as “role formulae” prescribing a standardised attitude of “practical wisdom”: acceptance of limits combined with adaptability and prudence.

Another set of expressions explicitly introduces the religious and eschatological dimension of time: „Vremea de apoi” (“The after time”), „Vremea Judecății” (The time of Judgement), „La vremea din urmă se va vedea” (It shall be revealed at the time after”), „Vine vremea socotelilor” (“The time for settling accounts will come.”). These formulae extend the temporal horizon beyond individual biography, towards a time of judgement and ultimate restoration of justice, thereby reorienting fatalism from passivity towards eschatological hope. Bernea emphasises that Romanian popular thought is “profoundly marked by the consciousness of the transcendent”, and time is perceived as “included within the horizon of eternity” (Bernea 2005, 176). Proverbs that invoke „vremea de apoi” (The time after”) reactivate, at a discursive level, this articulation between historical time and the time of salvation, in which what is not settled “now” will be settled “then”. Everyday fatalism is thus compensated for by a final justice, which endows the passage of time with moral and teleological tension. In this framework, expressions such as „N-adeuce anul ce aduce ceasul” can be read on two levels: on the one hand they stress temporal unpredictability; on the other they may suggest that the decisive “hour” (of change, of justice, of salvation) is unknown but certain within a providential economy. Blaga famously characterises Romanian culture as a way of “dwelling in mystery and shedding light on it” (Blaga 1969, 54), and the fatalistic proverbs about „vremea de apoi” are precisely such attempts to illuminate, through accessible images, the mystery of a time that does not end in mere chronology.

Considered together, these proverbs construct what may be called a “cultural grammar” of temporal fatalism: time (*vremea*, *ceasul*) is conceptualised as a supra-personal instance; human freedom is recognised as limited and situated; the event is relativised with respect to

a higher horizon (“vremea stands, ‘times’”); final justice is projected into an eschatological time („vremea de apoi”, „vremea socotelilor”). Repeated discourse does not merely reflect this vision, but also reproduces it, offering models for interpreting concrete historical situations (wars, crises, political changes) through the grid „such was meant to be”, „such were the times”.

A second major area of the corpus is constituted by proverbs that foreground the idea of irreversible time and the “great passing”, that is, the unrecoverable flow of life between birth and death, with all its existential and axiological implications. Expressions such as „Timpul nu așteaptă pe nimeni” (Time waits for nobody) and „Veacul ca un râu, mereu curge la vale, da’ îndărăt niciodată” (Time as a river, always flowing downward and never upward”) form the semantic core of irreversibility, supported by the pervasive metaphor of flowing (river, water, thought, cloud). The proverb „Apa trece, pietrele rămân” (“Water flows, the stones remain”) organises the entire field of the relation between the ephemeral and the stable, contrasting continuous change (water) with what resists (land, homeland, tradition, good deeds, sometimes “good people”). Vegetal images („Ce-a fost verde s-a uscat” – “What once was green has turned dry”, „Frunza verde-n toamnă cade” – “The green leaf in autumn falls”) map the human life-cycle onto the seasons, making the consumable nature of life sensorially intelligible.

In this field, repeated discourse fulfils a key pedagogical function. By iterating such proverbs, the community transmits a series of fundamental lessons: time is irreversible, thus the resource of the present must be used responsibly; no state is absolute („Toate-s numai până la o vreme” – “Everything lasts only for a while”), which relativises both success and failure; true consistency lies not in transient forms but in values and deeds („Apa trece, pietrele rămân”; „Trece vremea, rămâne ce-ai făcut” – “Time passes, what you built remains”).

This pedagogy perfectly corresponds to Bernea’s observation that the Romanian peasant overcomes time through faith, transfiguring what is ephemeral and living under the sign of serenity: “In short, it may be said that, for any work, if man is to flourish, it is good that he should respect as much as possible the condition of time. Time reflects upon all acts its own meanings and powers” (Bernea 2005, 187). This art of placing actions at their proper time is exemplarily realized in the funerary order, where each gesture is fixed at a precise moment in order to confer, in spiritual terms, value upon the irreversibility of time. “Let us take, for instance,” notes E. Bernea, “the ritual of burial. Interment on the third day, the wake, and the guarding of the grave at a particular time are all acts connected with time, from which specific meanings are derived. Man performs particular acts at particular times in order to gain or to remove, as needed, the powers of a moment, of an hour, of a day” (Bernea 2005, 189). Proverbs render transition both intelligible and acceptable, providing a language in which one can speak about the end without absolutizing it, and acknowledge limits without relinquishing meaning.

Another major theme that emerges in the corpus is the cyclicity of time, associated with a natural rhythm of existence and with a tempered hope grounded in the regular alternation of good and evil, light and darkness: time does not advance only linearly, but “returns” periodically, offering the possibility of renewal and existential rebalancing. Studies in the anthropology of time in Romanian culture have consistently emphasized the predominantly cyclical character of traditional temporality. Ernest Bernea shows that, in the mentality of

the Romanian peasant, time is a qualitative and heterogeneous reality, linked to the rhythm of the seasons, to the succession of religious feasts, and to the threshold-moments of life (birth, marriage, death) (Bernea, 2005, p. 192). The year is experienced as the periodic return of the same phases: spring (beginning, promise), summer (fullness), autumn (fruit, decline), winter (withdrawal, recapitulation). In this context, the proverbs marked in the analysed corpus with the label [cyclicity] become “cognitive maps” of this temporal structure.

Utterances such as „O zi de primăvară hrănește un an” (“One spring day nourishes a whole year”) are not mere meteorological observations but reflect a conception of agrarian time as a model for all human processes: what is done “at the beginning” – at the opportune moment – shapes the entire subsequent course. Similarly, „La Crăciun se vede dacă-i bună nuca” (“At Christmas one sees whether the walnut is good”) shifts the emphasis to a ritual threshold (the feast of Christmas), at which the quality of an entire cycle (vegetative, economic, moral) is tested and judged.

The proverb „După furtună vine și vreme bună” (“After the storm fair weather comes”) occupies a central place in the cyclical repertoire. Ernest Bernea observes that the Romanian peasant does not experience the “terror of history” or the “absurdity of existence”, because he has integrated suffering and hardship into a “horizon of faith”, in which “the great passage” is perceived as part of a higher order: “At the level of the traditional village, the Romanian peasant recognizes time as a necessity of the human condition and of the unfolding of his life. It cannot be eliminated; like any given, like any phenomenon that surpasses us, it cannot be eliminated, because it is within it that we exist. In general, the peasant sees time as a condition of nature, of the existence of the world, and its transcendence leads him to regard it as having the character of a law, beyond our power and will” (Bernea 2005, 177). Proverbs such as “After the storm fair weather comes” function as discursive instruments of this integration: they directly connect negative experience with the promise of a change for the better, not as a guaranteed linear progress, but as the natural alternation of “times”.

The same pattern can be observed in expressions such as „Vremea rea trece, dar oamenii buni rămân” (“Bad times pass, but good people remain”), where the emphasis shifts from mere meteorological succession to a contrast in duration: “bad times” (temporary) versus “good people” (relatively permanent). Hope is not limited to the disappearance of evil but is articulated around the conviction that there are stable subjects (good people) who pass through the times without being annulled by them.

In counterpoint to proverbs that insist on the overcoming of evil, expressions such as „Ziua bună multă vreme nu ține” (“A good day does not last long”) or „Nu-i veselie fără sfârșit” (“No joy lasts forever”) introduce an element of lucidity with regard to good fortune. These formulas reveal that periods of prosperity, health, joy, or luck are themselves subject to change and cannot be absolutized as permanent states. This type of repeated discourse has a clear cultural function: it relativizes the illusion of definitively stabilizing a favourable state and prepares the individual for its inevitable transformation. From a psychological perspective, proverbs of this kind act as mechanisms for regulating expectations: they warn against triumphalism and self-sufficiency in moments of success, suggesting that a “good day” should be lived with gratitude, yet also with an awareness of its fragility.

Family-type formulas such as „Vremea pe vreme a născut” (“Time has given birth to time”) - or their contextual equivalents - circulate the idea that time is self-generative: one „vreme” (time) gives rise to another, in a process of succession without beginning or end perceptible

on the human scale. This reinforces the perception that there are no absolute “blockages” in time: any period – good or bad – is linked to another, being both cause and effect at the same time. Reflecting on forms of temporality in culture, Lucian Blaga speaks of „timp-fluviu” (“river-time”) and of the way in which a community’s “diffuse metaphysics” experiences temporal flow not as rupture, but as an advance within a given horizon (Blaga 1969, 28). Proverbs of the „Vremea pe vreme a născut” type can be read as popular expressions of this conception: there is no „vreme” (time) without its antecedent and its consequence, and the human being is called to adapt to this flux rather than halt it.

In the case of the cyclical imaginary of time, the main functions of these units of repeated discourse may be summarized as follows:

- Change as norm: the alternation of good/bad time, „vreme bună”/„vreme rea” is presented as a law of the world, not as an exception; this reduces anxiety in times of crisis and at “the end”.
- Cultivation of realistic hope: there is an acknowledgment that „După furtună vine și vreme bună” (“After the storm fair weather comes”), but also that „Ziua bună multă vreme nu ține”; both total despair and naive optimism are thus avoided.
- Respect for the proper times: proverbs such as „O zi de primăvară hrănește un an” (“One spring day nourishes a whole year”) or „La Crăciun se vede dacă-i bună nuca” (“At Christmas one sees whether the walnut is good”) teach that certain moments are decisive and that evaluation must take place at “the right time.”

The Romanian imaginary of time also reserves a central place for patience, waiting and processual time as preconditions of success and as legitimate ways of inhabiting time in accordance with the rhythms of nature and of one’s own existence [„Cu vremea și cu încetul se face tare oțetul” (It takes time and patience for vinegar to become strong); „Cu vreme și cu răbdare și frunza de dud se face mătase” (With time and patience, even a mulberry leaf becomes silk); „Rabdă un ceas și vei trăi un an” (Endure for an hour and you will live for a year); „Lungește, Doamne, boala, până când se coace poama” (Lord, prolong the illness until the grape ripens)]. Here, time is figured as ally of profound transformation: the emphasis falls not on speed but on durability and maturation. Complementarily, a negative axiology of wasted time denounces both procrastination and unproductive haste, and the proverbial code proposes a middle way of timely action (*kairos*) without precipitateness or unjustified delay.

The “never” register is treated through an exceptionally inventive set of images. Proverbs do not merely state that “it will not happen”, but build impossible, grotesquely playful scenarios that mark indefinite postponement, implausible promises or absurd expectations. Expressions such as „La Paștele cailor” (At horses’ Easter”), „La sfântu-așteaptă” (At Saint Wait), „Să vii pe la noi când a fi Paștele joi” (Come visit us when the Easters on Thursday pass), „Când s-o întoarce Oltu înapoi” (When the river Olt will flow upstream), „Când se va putea face borbă în apă” (When you can make a hole in water), „Când a crește păr în palmă” (When hair grows in your palm.), „Când a face plopul mere și răchita vișinele” (When the poplar bears apples and the willow bears sour cherries), „Când va zbura bivolul” (When pigs fly), „Când a ploua cu covrigi” (When it rains pretzels) function as imagistic translations of “never”, often comparable to English *when pigs fly*. In comparative perspective, Romanian aligns with a broader European repertoire of impossibility metaphors (German *am Sankt-Nimmerleinstag*, French *quand les poules auront des dents*, Italian *quando gli asini voleranno*, English *when pigs fly*), but particularises the common pattern through sacral-calendar (Paște, *Sfântu-Așteaptă*) and agrarian-alimentary accents (covrigi, cârnați,

„lapte din piatră”), anchoring “never” in highly sensitive areas of collective life: sacred time and access to food. Pragmatically, these formulae serve as flexible instruments for evaluating promises, regulating interpersonal distance and teaching limits, under the guise of humour and hyperbole.

Conclusions

In conclusion, all these units of repeated discourse that conceptualise time are not mere ornaments of language, but “forms of linguistic memory” in which the collective experience of time is preserved and transmitted. They articulate, in condensed form, the same problem that Romanian philosophy addresses conceptually: the relationship between the historical and the eternal, between flux and stability, between the ephemeral and meaning. The Romanian imaginary of time, in its proverbial variant, offers a model of “practical wisdom” in which time is neither a simple natural given nor a purely arbitrary cultural construct, but the result of an ongoing dialogue between experience, language and values.

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