

Priming French in English and Romanian (con)texts

Maître de conférences, dr. Daniela Tüchel

Université “Dunărea de Jos” de Galați, Roumanie

Abstract: *French is given its due in English for mastery in domains such as cuisine, haute couture, lifestyle, social bonds. We propose ourselves to investigate samples of Romanian and English media discourse in which the mediation of French facilitates communication while loading cultural notions with French-specific features.*

Key words: *collocates and colligations, encounter of contexts, priming*

Introduction

There is a linguistic debate and there is a cultural debate. The former, which has been heating up over the latest decades, might no longer grasp the special attention of language users. Definitely, there are areas where French is at home in English contexts and vice versa. Of late, Romanian contexts have eagerly embraced English, and much less French, lexemes. In search of etymologies (in the examples to be found here and elsewhere) there is a handy etymology for English lexemes and a distant etymology, since both French and Romanian are descendents of Latin and misuse has to be signaled. As for the cultural debate, we might think of the suggestive allegory of some fish discovering its need for water only when it is no longer in it. Our own culture functions like water to a fish. It sustains us, we live and breathe through it. Yet, what one culture may regard as essential, a certain level of material wealth for example, may not be so vital to other cultures.

When language users encounter words, they turn to best account each such encounter in order to cumulate both linguistic and cultural effects. Users are said to have primed words for further use. Initial priming, before everything else, is the object of further primings. Thus lexical and grammatical patterns are seen in their functional importance. Primings are tied to contexts, contexts of encounter (Hoey, 2005). In other words, when communicators speak or write, listen or read, they subconsciously enter dialogue with the contexts of their previous experience.

One word – practically every word – is primed to occur with other words, that is, these are collocates. Every word is primed to occur with certain grammatical functions or to avoid certain grammatical positions, that is, colligations. Every word is primed to join certain semantic sets, that is, it has semantic associations. Every word is primed for use in one or more grammatical roles, that is, it displays grammatical categories.

Ossifications in language use are primarily expected from colligations. Collocations are more open to variation in time. Thus, if usage is to be kept under restrictions, the phenomenon of priming becomes essential and is worth studying. M. Hoey states his belief in literacy, as soon as a central problem for a nation is to attempt to harness the dangerous consequences of priming in the educational process.

The pop-ups

In the childhood of senior generations, a book reader's strongest sensation was perhaps the moment he used to open a pop-up book (cards were that way too) to get a picture standing up when the pages came apart. Nowadays, computer users may see a menu or a window appear suddenly on the screen, especially as they are looking at a website (this window contains an advertisement most of the times). Now we are dubbing pop-ups the odd occurrences in language use that indicate surprising, possibly ill-timed, developments.

In the review *România literară* (35/2009), Mihail Gălățanu rightfully notes that „reclamele/*advărtăsinga*’ măsoară gradul de cultură” and he goes on bitterly observing that it happens „cu prețul luxării întregului bun-gust. Merită târgul? *I don't buy it*” (p. 3). He

concludes that, peremptorily, advertising today gradually merges with capitalized Culture („cultura mare”, ibidem).

Wherever language users feel there is a gap in expression, they promptly fill the gap. Emptiness becomes a center of interest imaginatively solved with loans, their adaptation occurring or not, conditional upon the culture and education of either addressers or addressees.

Below, we are going to tackle different domains. *Menu* should be a perfectly familiar notion, yet staring at an improvised dish, one of our fresh tv ‘stars’ exclaimed something about a ‘menu’, triggering the immediate correction from the chef who underlined the idea of a ‘list of things’ generating a correct application, be it in cooking (kinds of food available for a meal) or computer science (things on the screen one can ask the computer to do). Again, the notion put forth by a *limousine*, in French, English or Romanian, is that of an expensive, comfortable, very large car, but Romanians overlook the supplementary detail that it should be driven by someone paid to drive. English makes use of *pompon* (just like Romanian) to refer to a small, soft, fluffy ball used for decoration on clothes, hats or cheerleaders’ wrists; also, in some news reports, ‘prime-minister’ is dumped in favour of *premier*; the noun *pomade* is about the sweet-smelling oily substance people rub on their hair to make it smooth, preferentially used in the past. Examples can be multiplied.

Of late, Romanian speakers seem to have a new paraphrase for the international lexeme *șansă/chance*. This noun has developed a long polysemous history (1. possibility, 2. opportunity, 3. risk, 4. likelihood to succeed, 5. luck with no planning). It used to settle to clue number two in most Romanian contexts, yet, it has become quite useful for idea number three, as if the very word *risc* became useless and forgotten. This tendency to simplify the comprehension of certain words can be further illustrated, for instance someone *debonair* (R. *dezinvolt*) is, in English paraphrase, fashionable and confident; something described as *chic* is paraphrased as fashionable and expensive.

In most cases, the French-English competition is ruled out. Romanian borrowers, between ‘diaporama’ used by the French and ‘slideshow’ used by the English, have voted with the latter, to be sure. The vote for French has been cast by both English and Romanian in the following illustration with *vis-à-vis*. Gabriel Liiceanu, acting in consequence of this recent catchword or cliché for Romanians, uttered a televised protest not long ago. He referred to *vis-à-vis/vizavi* on the rise as “tic verbal” for our natives, with the approved-of example “vizavi de casa mea” and the rejected “vizavi de problemele mele” (concrete vs abstract arrangements in space).

Sometimes the authors of communication take unexpected shortcuts to answer the mini-max principle (minimum of text, maximum of information). We illustrate with a television title, “Estetica feței și a varicelor”, two television explanations, “casă cămășuită cu beton armat” and its antonymy in “motor demantelat”, and a television ban, “acest program este interzis minorilor sub 12 ani fără acordul părinților”.

As a rule, Romanian communicators rely on French and English with great confidence that the message can be decoded with no difficulty whatever. We compile an ad-hoc list from several issues of *România literară*: “demnitatea de a sfârși *en beauté*”, “avem un *scuba diving* în înțelesul turistic al termenului”, “un arici de mare pe care-l strivește *live*”, “se pierde în masa anonimă de *nonames*”, “spectaculosul improvizat al *wrestlingului*”, “structurează o carte-puzzle”, “crudă veselie *calamburgistă*”, “nu este aproape nimic erotic în această scenă *furtivă*”, “memoria afectivă reconstruiește *randomizant*”. Could it be that the encoder in these cases has fallen upon a referential blank (see the concept of “vid referențial” as worked out by Adam, 2008: 89 and specially exploited by the encoder for drawing the decoder’s attention)? Perhaps we should trust the lexical arrangements of the previous examples for not evincing any upsetting semantic overlap, in order to be accepted as fit in their context.

We need to point out that the above-mentioned situations belong to a high-culture type of communication. Alternatively, we can call it co-construction of culture. We have opened

above a counter perspective to what Kohn (1983: 127) proclaims in a patriotic vein as “plethora elementelor estetic-motivate ale fiecărei limbi, care opun o rezistență deosebită transferului interlingual”. The Romanian words ‘premieră’, ‘bubă’, ‘logodnic’, ‘elan’, etc. have manifestly displayed such a form of resistance and are kept in French, in English texts.

Let us round up this subsection of our article poking fun at media-circulated errors, those dubbed ‘malapropisms’, and paronymically subjected to hypothetical corrections by relation to French and English as linguistic sources: “claustrare *fortuită (forțată) într-un atelier”, “probleme *grevate (grefate) pe relații sexuale”, “optimismul pe care îl *abordează (arborează)”, “bani *implementați (investiți) în diverse”, “în locul unde te-ai născut funcționează *paternul (pattern-ul) tău energetic cel mai bine”.

The useless and fanciful

A habitual occurrence is the preference for international words, those words that are similar in several languages, starting from the presumption that they are understood and need not be specially taught or treated. Romanians have been quick in reshaping their communication, they are heard to say “Medicamentele sunt date cu prescripție” (why not ‘rețetă’?) and “Sunt germenii pe tastatură” (why not ‘microbi’?). This is the linguistic imperialism of English with *prescriptions* and *germs* getting the upper hand. Similar examples are extremely numerous, yet not particularly offensive because they display an inner association-strength.

It seems it is not time yet to neaten up and reconsider the good old-fashioned vocabulary. More days and nights than not, we wake up to apparently new words in Romanian. At the same time, priming is a phenomenon admitted not to stop. No wonder if, one fine morning, we are going to say *provocativ* instead of *provocator* (cf. E. *provocative events*), or *confrunțațional* instead of *provocator* once again, alternatively *frontal* (cf. E. *a confrontational question*), or *remedial* instead of *corector* (cf. E. *a remedial evaluation*), whereas *a se simți devastat* instead of *răvășit* (cf. E. *to feel devastated*) is already a fact. The Internet choices too, in matters of wording the message, are occasionally snobbish. For example, the news about the soon-to-be princess Kate Middleton – knocked by critics for wearing a certain blouse – bears the title “Kate Middleton’s fashion faux pas”. Yet, English phraseology has the verbal possibility of referring to someone who “takes a false step”. The voice-over promoting a French documentary reads out the title “Histoire du *look*” while the caption spelling out its Romanian version reads “Istoria *eleganței*” (not a bad translation, after all). We can always speculate on the favours received by international words. We wonder why we should coin a verb such as *a prioritiza* (the tv reporter using it was even heard to stammer it out funnily) when we have at least two constructions sounding perfectly natural: “a face o prioritate din”, or “a-ți fixa priorități”. Dictionaries will have to be updated very frequently as the case stands in our day. One handy example can be the collocation-colligation *blinkered attitude* (internet syntagm), for pointing to narrowmindedness with a semantic condensation impossible to achieve in Romanian to cover stoppage plus annoyance plus prevention plus spatial indication as in the case of blinkers, with the formal sense of cover on horses’ eyes and with the informal sense of small car-lights flashing on and off. Another example can be *territorial*, as used further down, which in the dictionary entry will have to nuance its applications, adding one more figurative meaning: “The clan likes to share everything with each other, but they’re pretty territorial when it comes to their clothes.” A translation into Romanian is difficult unless the effort is minimized by not modifying the form while adding up one more to the existing senses (obviously, the double consonant should be out of place). Therefore, the Romanian *teritorial* contains a potential for becoming primed for use instead of *egoist*. Priming is always open to semantic drifting.

The Fashion Channel pours and purrs into viewers’ ears the term *lingerie* – and there’s a brand-new trend, ‘lingerie style’ – just because French has a ‘je ne sais quoi’ flavour to its

non-native users aspiring to give a semblance of refinement. Romanians at this point have ‘lenjerie’ as the domesticated version and need no other, yet *merci, bonjour, bonsoir, ça va* offer exactly what they need to win a smile for trying to be polite in another idiom. French contributing to the English repertoire (just another loan!) will also impose adaptation of pronunciations, as believed necessary in the following utterance (a title on the internet): “K. K. *debuts chic* new haircut.” One notes here both minimization of communicational efforts (the French noun-into-verb conversion) and redundancy inside colligation. The verb from French semantically contains the message (to score a first public appearance) laid in the second adjectival modifier of the grammatical object (the adjective ‘new’).

There is one distinct tendency in contemporary speech: not to take away redundancies of very rich languages; not to eliminate the words that can be made by putting together simpler words. Consider the following internet news: “She was first spotted wearing the *form-fitting frock* in September” to be contrasted with the French (*moulé*) and Romanian (*mulat*) one-word solution. Also let us look at the trendy dress described as “a *bandage* dress”, the French attribute possibly corresponding to the Romanian “(rochie) din fâșii”. Let us examine the Romanian statement “Mă rod pantofii” versus an old-timer in our dictionaries, “My shoes pinch” (the same linguistic solution as in French) and the recent internet wording “my shoes rub my feet raw” which increases in length and accuracy of description. Then, we use the notion of ‘clientelă’ versus ‘clientele’ running in both French and English for collectively designating customers, patients, etc., whereas the same reference exists in *case-load* for the number of people who a professional has to deal with. Let us manage at this point the transition to our next subsection.

The professional and pragmatic

The previous, as well as the following examples will speak for themselves. As often as not, in the past two or three centuries, we have to go very far down on the social scale to find the people who do not employ gadgets and unnameable items which mean considerable improvement in their lifestyle, signs and symbols of other wealthy, luxurious, refined people.

As already hinted at, lexical priming is sensitive to the peculiar domains in which lexical items are placed.

Restaurant-related French-to-English transmissions are rich and absolutely necessary as long as there are no substitutes in the vernacular. *Meringue* is *bezea* in Romanian and *meringue* in English. An interesting verb, ‘to french’, means to say that beans, potatoes, carrots are cut lengthwise in preparation for cooking. In Romanian cookbooks, the idea is present in ‘a tăia julien’, such as in ‘ceapă tăiată julien’. On the other hand, an English chef can explain to anyone interested that a type of cut that makes long thin strips out of vegetables, in order to heighten their presentation, technically means ‘to julien/julienne vegetables’. We immediately see the French backing in many *cuisine* problems, such as in this example: “She had the chicken with the chanterelle-mushroom-and-sherry sauce” (the *Life & Style* weekly).

Invoking other professional jargons, one meets the artistic *mise-en-scène* (R. mizanscenă) and pictorial *mise-en-abyme* (domesticated by Romanian literary criticism into ‘povestire în cadru’). We can add professional advertising in which stability seems to be a key word, disconnected however from the importance played by orality vs writing (see Maingueneau, 2007: 89). Defying routine thinking in favour of the latter, of the preeminence of writing effects, Maingueneau is of opinion that one of the best tricks in favour of remembrance and persistence is a poetical constraint. He builds his case on the rhymed “Coca-Cola, c’est ça”, and there is an equally successful translation (the translator of the volume is Mariana Șovea): “Coca-Cola e așa”. Both formulas have to be read out with some cadence and a shifting stress on the name of the brand.

We need to be emphatic about the feminine side in the use of French as a spice added to all matters English. We will apprehend the phenomenon like a sort of ‘feminism without women’, as admitted to be (Caufman-Blumenfeld, 1998) a contemporary description of the post-feminist movement contemporaneous with us. Gender studies constitute a fashionable pursuit and a practice that everyone can go through, whether male or female. Thus, with an all-round adoption of certain French elements inside Anglo-American ways, one moves from recovering invisible women who cook, bake, embroider and cut clothes, water paint, teach children society manners, and so on, to people of both genders who avoid the artificial divide between male and female pursuits. Politeness and taste do not actually drive away English, but strongly favour French.

Women’s thinking has constantly been oriented towards creation, on a par with men’s thinking. “This is the ultimate signification of women’s struggles which have enabled them [...] to be at the *avant-garde* of Western culture” (Caufman-Blumenfeld, 1988: 33). In line with feminist drives, the insertion of French supports a consensus about women’s right to control. As to what to control, feminism has taught us to expect that a female wishes primarily to have control over her own body and over her sexuality. In the shift from feminism to mere femininity, we can also interpret facts as a passage from the stage of self-assertion to that of self-identification (cf. Séjourné, 1999: 198).

By contrast to politicized feminism, femininity (feminity or womanliness) is in part responsible for the condensed human insight and experience called ‘culture’. The French contribution is feminine precisely because it comes into action when people meet and greet, when they work and celebrate, when they relate about what they eat and how to eat it, when they socially relate to each other, and so on. Women always take the lead, even though common understanding of what constitutes good upbringing and happy lifestyle has considerably changed.

There are many ideas floating in the air and genuinely being misconception. Why must we be cocksure of French bringing or not bringing an ugly reference to many things such as: warfare (remember *debris*, the remains of buildings after an air raid), poverty in the cities with those begging and thieving (*mendicancy* or *mendicity*), plundering in the forest (*brigandage*), the state reform (they uniquely say *les nouveaux riches*, villains who too quickly acquire a considerable fortune and administrative or political power), lunacy (*derangement*), and so on.

Let us turn to another facet of the French stuff. What did France represent in the early days of feminism? The likely answer is ‘refinement’ as an object of imitation for the upper classes. Yet this refinement was linked with moral decadence for which French women were held responsible. Traces of the popular tradition of contempt for French women may survive to this day. The introduction of the French element entails the introduction of vice and wickedness according to the parodic lines of the anonymously published “Ode to the Chunnel” in London’s Sunday Telegraph. The first stereotype of otherness in the first stanza is dedicated to the French: “There’ll be carloads of Louises/ From Parisian stripteases/ Importing foul diseases/ Into Kent./ There’ll be modern French Wells Fargoes/ Sending juggernauts with cargoes/ Of frogslegs and escargots/ And men’s scent.” Thus collective information about the Continental neighbours is epitomized in a cumulative presentation of loose morals, vanity, shallowness, refinement (reference to scent), exquisite taste (reference to gastronomy). The reliability of this oversimplified, concomitantly exaggerated, picture can be questioned. Yet the stamp of dissolution cannot be erased, fringing upon national insult, most of it in the use of a plural form for a proper name: in the first line, Louises can be analyzed as a male (royal!) name Louis (plus the plural ending) or as a female name Louise for a commoner (plus the marker of the plural). The opposite attitude, of flawless admiration, can be as erroneous and preconceived as the one already mentioned. It is always a matter of progress to try and look at your world once again with the eyes of foreigners. In support of fostering tolerant attitudes is the following quote from Hoey (2005): “There is no right or

wrong in language. It makes little sense to talk of something being ungrammatical. All one can say is that a lexical item is used in a way not predicted by your priming.”

Conclusions

Maybe it has been a futile endeavour to show that cultures are stable and flourishing if plurilingual, but we have tried to explode no myth, only to illustrate with recent cases. Moreover, a growing lexical bulk is particularly a problem with older generations of speakers, whereas younger generations keep communication simplified and, as a rule, updated with international lexemes.

To us Romanians, the presence of French is a matter of cultural resilience, our linguistic regaining of Latin shape, our protective strategy linked to a Romance sense of belonging. The presence of English marks the linguistic byproduct of Romanians having (too much) freedom; it is a new generation's emancipation, the emphatic signal of go-getters who need a new vocabulary. It seems to be like singer and actor Tudor Gheorghe's experience described by a younger reporter than himself: “cu sufletul la trecut, cu viața pe repede înainte”. This tells of adjustment to the dynamics of our century. Ultimately, we do not mean to tangle over good or bad effects of all priming developments.

In conclusion, the linguistic part that has been of interest to us redesigns human condition within daily-lived experience. Everything stated so far touches upon the public sphere of expression and creative practice at the same time. The intersections of discourses (French, English, Romanian) have hopefully been shown to dismantle any attempt at a vain masculine assumption of this world. We can also conclude that in this particular intrusion of French into the other two, the personal is the aesthetical, as part of an important and conventional signifying system.

References

- Adam, Jean-Michel, *Lingvistică textuală*, Iași, Institutul European, 2008
Caufman-Blumenfeld, Odette, *Studies in Feminist Drama*, Iași, Polirom, 1998
Hoey, Michael, *Lexical Priming*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005
Kohn, Ioan, *Virtuțile compensatorii ale limbii române în traducere*, Timișoara, Facla, 1983
Maingueneau, Dominique, *Analiza textelor de comunicare*, Iași, Institutul European, 2007
Séjourné, Philippe, *The Feminine Tradition in English Fiction*, Iași, Institutul European, 1999