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THE MARKER AND THE MORPHEME IN THE ROMANIAN GRAMMARS

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Abstract

The modern academic grammar – "Gramatica de bază a limbii române" (GBLR, 2010) – is meant to represent a 'sophisticated' theoretical description of the contemporary Romanian language. Its deliberate modernity – in both conception and themes – implies nevertheless the terminology. Within this perspective, we will focus upon the term and the concept of 'marker'.

The marker is defined as "any element on the level of expression (of the word's form) constantly associated with a certain grammatical meaning and which serves to the recognition of that meaning." (GBLR, 2010, p. 8). Still, the term 'marker' is adopted not only with its meaning of 'morpheme', but it also stands for 'class of words'. Our observations regard its status and its use, in strict relation to its accuracy and coherency throughout the academic work. Meanwhile, we will try to answer some essential questions regarding the types of grammatical mark(er)s, the conceptual and terminological relation between the 'marker' and the 'morpheme', in order to decide if the term is accurate, relevant and sufficient in order to describe the corresponding linguistic facts in the Romanian language.

As a preliminary conclusion, we argue that more coherent arguments and a more consistent use are both needed in order to consecrate the contextual, unambiguous meaning of the 'mark(er)', along with an rigorous definition and standardization.

Keywords: Mark(er), morpheme, class of words, article, morphology, syntax..

1. Introduction

1.1. The modern academic Romanian grammars ("Gramatica limbii române" – GALR, 2005) and "Gramatica de bază a limbii române" – GBLR, 2010) are meant to constitute „sophisticated" theoretical descriptions of the Romanian language. Their deliberate modernity is obvious at the level of themes and concepts and it is extended, implicitly, in the terminology. While focusing upon those terms and concepts that are relevant for the Romanian morphology and syntax, there can be found new terms for new concepts, along with new terms which are meant to (re)define traditional grammar concepts and aspects and, nevertheless, consecrated terms which are tinted or even modified in relation to the traditional grammar. Within this perspective, some observations are to be made regarding the "mark(er)", as it somehow oscillates between tradition, modernity and innovation.

1.2. On one hand, there is the traditional meaning of the "mark(er)": an element that indicates grammatical or semantic class or function; in grammar, it is referring to a free or bound morpheme that indicates the grammatical function of the marked word, phrase or sentence. The Romanian *Dicționar de științe ale limbii* (DȘL, 2001) (Dictionary of Language Sciences) gives the following definitions: "1. Linked to the distinction marked / unmarked, the term, used for phonology at first, was extended to other areas, *designating a feature whose presence or absence is capable of distinguishing language units, i.e. to achieve oppositions*"; "2. *Any plan customization of expression, including achievement ø (zero) associated consistently with a specific grammatical meaning and serving its recognition*. There are *mark(er)s of grammatical categories* (mark number, case, etc.) and *mark(er)s of syntactic functions* (of direct object, the subject, etc.). The use of the word mark(er) was broadened *beyond grammar, to designate any index of expression associated with a specific meaning/linguistic function*." (DȘL 200, pp. 302-3) (*Italics mine*).

1.3. GBLR (2010) itself says, from the very beginning, that the mark(er) represents "any element in the plan of expression (word form) which is consistently associated with a specific grammatical meaning and which serves its recognition" (GBLR, 2010, p. 8). Nevertheless, throughout the pages of the academic grammar, the term is used not only for proper morphemes, but it also seems to stand for "class of words" and it is being used in phrases such as "discourse mark(er)", "focalization mark(er)", "interrogation mark(er)" etc. However accurate and acknowledged all these phrases might be, in accordance with the broadening of the term, the absence of any other definition other than the one mentioned above rises some questions. The initial (and unique) definition of the mark(er) implies only the grammatical meaning and the term is being used in synonymy with the morpheme in most of the contexts in which it appears. The frequent use of a word with a specific meaning (morpheme, in this particular case) indirectly fixes its signified in the use of the language (in GBLR, 2010 for instance); therefore, it becomes necessary, in our opinion, either a clear delineation and consistency of the meaning with which the word is always used or the accurate and explicit meaning of each of its uses (grammatical vs. semantic vs. discursive mark(er), for instance).

2. Problem Statement

The academic grammar GBLR (2010) makes intensive use of the term 'mark(er)', within various contexts. Most of them refer to the grammatical meaning of the term and various types are described:

synthetic, analytical and mixed marking; 'visible' vs 'absent' (zero) mark(er)s; lexical, grammatical and mixed mark(er)s etc. However, in the description of the *inflexional marks* (desinences, articles, grammatical suffixes), the term is to be understood as '*morpheme*'. Along with the 'syntactic mark(er)s', such a synonymy becomes ambiguous, since they comprise both morphemes and, for instance, prepositions, that is a proper class of words. Even if we leave aside the semantic and discursive meaning of the mark(er), we are still facing a very heterogeneous use of the term. In the absence of specific descriptions, the mere denomination / labelling of a linguistic fact as 'mark(er)' is not only incomplete, but it can also lead to inaccurate or invalid descriptions of the Romanian language.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Which are the types of grammatical 'mark(er)s', as described by the GBLR?

3.2. Are all the so-called grammatical 'mark(er)s' just morphemes and is their description non-contradictory?

3.3. If the answer to the previous question is negative, is the term 'mar(er)' accurate, relevant and sufficient in order to describe the corresponding linguistic facts in the Romanian language?

4. Purpose of the Study

On the one hand, our aim is to describe and investigate the multiple meaning in the usage of the term mark(er)' in GBLR (2010). Furthermore, we intend to prove that its unspecific use in describing the Romanian language (at the level of its morphology and syntax) proves to be rather controversial; moreover, that the labelling of a specific language fact by this mere term can be both confusing and specious. On the other hand, we want to demonstrate that more accuracy and less ambiguity are still needed in order to clarify certain particularities of the Romanian language and grammar. The bare changes in both concepts and terminology, as modern as they might seem, are not valid unless the context that motivates them is carefully considered.

5. Research Methods

Our linguistic research is based on a mixed method, both qualitative and quantitative, which includes a survey of current issues in the specific field, the grounded theory, as well as an analytic approach to GBLR (2010). The narrative analysis follows the text mark-up, the observation and interpretation, all with special reference to the specific of the Romanian language and Grammar.

6. Findings

6.1. Types of grammatical mark(er)s

There are several grammatical mark(er)s described in GBLR. A first category includes the *inflexional marks*: the *desinences*, the *articles* and the *grammatical suffixes* (GBLR, 2010, p. 8).

6.1.1. While the morphemic value of the desinences and of the grammatical suffixes is unequivocal, a special note regarding the article is compulsory here. Unlike the traditional grammars and even unlike the academic grammar GALR (2005), to which it is allegedly accountable, GBLR states that the article is no longer to be considered as a class of words, but as a morpheme; meanwhile, it is supposed to have a syntactic autonomy. It is not our interest in this paper to discuss these aspects, although we have to mention that from our point of view there is an obvious contradiction between the morphemic status of the article and its autonomy at the syntax level. However, for the purpose of our study, we will only consider the status of the article as a morpheme. GBLR states explicitly that "the articles do not constitute an autonomous lexical and grammatical class, but 'grammatical tools'"(GBLR, 2010, p. 86). They are "subordinated to a broader (syntactic) class, that of the determiners, which integrate the noun phrase (NP) in the sentence and which determine it." (GBLR 2010, p. 87). In addition, it is shown that "the article is the prototypical determiner, which has undergone a process of grammaticalization and through which this grammatical category is disclosed" (GBLR, 2010, p. 90). The morphematic value of the article is thus sufficiently obvious, through its lack of lexical autonomy and its grammatical meaning.

Moreover, the grammatical morphemes, those bearing a grammatical meaning, include the *definite article*, along with the desinences and the grammatical suffixes (GBLR, 2010, p. 11). Nonetheless, the *indefinite articles* and the Romanian '*lui*' (as in '*lui* Ion' = John'*s*) are 'free morphemes', unbound to the noun.

Up to this point, one preliminary conclusion is undeniable. The articles are grammatical morphemes, and so is '*lui*'. After all, definiteness, in itself, "is a grammatical category, not a semantic one" (Lyons, 1999, p. 16).

6.1.2. From here on, however, things become less orderly. On one hand, the Romanian definites '-*a*', '-(u)l', '-*le*', '-*i*', '-*lor*' (= *the*) are articles (i), morphemes (ii) and inflectional mark(er)s (iii). The same is valid for the indefinites ('*un*', '*o*', '*nişte*' (= *a, an, some*)): articles (i), free morphemes (ii) and inflectional mark(er)s (iii). Still, '-*lui*' is 'just' a free morpheme (ii) and an inflectional mark(er) (iii); more than that, it is also called a 'pleonastic marker' (GBLR, 2010, p. 111); it is not a determiner, nor it has any syntactic autonomy. Let us examine the following statements: "*Unlike free morphemes*, the clitics have their own syntactic place and function" (GBLR, 2010, p. 12); and: "Note that *lui* din *lui Andrei*" (Andrew'*s*) "does not have a syntactic autonomy, *as it is an inflectional marker*" (GBLR, 2010, p. 20) (*Italics mine*). Thus, it becomes really confusing if a free morpheme does or does not have syntactic autonomy (both the indefinite articles and '*lui* are free morphemes) and if an inflectional mark(er) may or may not have a syntactic function (since both the articles and '*lui* are such markers).

Even without any further investigations, which are to be discussed in further researches, another preliminary conclusion is necessary: the term 'mark(er)' (with or without being specified as 'grammatical'!) stands for grammatical morphemes, rather close to the 'empty morphemes' (Spencer, 1991), that is it may be understood as an *inflectional mark*. Nevertheless, the linguistic reality it represents/signifies is described as uneven and contradictory.

6.1.3. Beside the *inflectional marks*, GBLR (2010) describes the *syntactic* mark(er)s, such as: the functional preposition *pe*, which marks the Romanian direct object (as in *Eu îl văd* pe *Ion*. = *I (+personal*

pronoun, Accusative) see (+preposition) John.); other functional prepositions such as *de*, which marks the modifier in the NP (GBLR, 2010, p. 8); the reflexive pronoun in the structure of the predicate, as a mark of the passive voice. Thus, we observe that the term 'mark(er)' can also stand for prepositions and pronouns. Their status, according to GBLR, is still grammatical, and it is further explained within the distinction between the synthetic and the analytic inflectional marking. They belong to the analytic inflectional marking, which includes, for the noun phrase, the indefinite articles, prepositions and "other free pre-posed marks", such as *lui* and *al*, and, for the verb phrase, auxiliary (grammaticalised) verbs, (grammaticalised) prepositions and conjunctions (GBLR, 2010, pp. 8-9).

Yet, all these are… mark(er)s! Whereas all of them are described as grammatical, some of them have syntactic autonomy and others do not; some of them are still named and described by (including) their initial morphological status (prepositions, pronouns, articles etc.), although it is claimed that they have lost it (GBLR, 2010, p.114); others (such as *lui* and *al*) are just… mark(er)s and there is no evidence of their former morphological value; some of them, such as the subjunctive *să*, can even cumulate at times the mark(er) value with its morphological one (that of a conjunction, for *să* (GBLR, 2010, p. 235)), whereas some of them are just mark(er)s, again. Additional arguments, based on distinctions as fixed vs free morphemes or on their inflexional value, do not seem to be coherent (see above).

6.1.4. A few short considerations need to be added regarding the status of *lui* and *al*. One cannot become aware of their initial, eventually altered (lost), morphological status, if there was any, since they are only called 'markers'. The articles, even though they are now denied as an independent class of words, are still… articles, certain pronouns, prepositions, verbs and conjunctions have undergone a process of grammaticalization, but we still acknowledge they were lexical items. This does not seem to be the case with *lui* and *al*. As we already mentioned a few things about *lui*, we just add here some observations regarding *al*.

Al, other than the semi-independent pronoun, is described as a "mark(er)", "a free morpheme" (GBLR 2010, pp. 8-9), therefore(?!) it has no syntactic function (GBLR, 2010, pp.11-12), although we have already observed that other free morphemes such as the indefinite article have syntactic autonomy. It also is a "proclitic syntactic marker" (GBLR, 2010, p. 59), though a "supplementary/additional" one (GBLR, 2010, pp. 62, 175). It is definitely not an article (GBLR, 2010, p. 87), though, in our opinion, the arguments presented can and should be carefully considered. Thus, it is a possessive / genitive mark(er), a "morphosyntactic connector" and a "case marker" (GBLR, 2010, p. 132). Considering all these, *al* is also a morpheme, but it does not seem to belong either to a grammaticalized class of words, or to the inflectional markers such as desinences, articles and verbal suffixes. A question arises naturally: is the 'mark(er)' status sufficient to describe it and account for its complex linguistic status? As far as we are concerened, it is definitely not.

6.2. More aspects should be discussed in the future. They may concern, for instance, other mark(er)s, such as the grammaticalized adverbs (those of gradation, such as '*cel'*, or of negation, such as '*nu'*). However, these have not become affixal marks, as they only function at the syntactic level (GBLR, 2010, p. 301). Also, further distinctions for the mark(er)s may imply certain boundaries between the free/mobile morphemes and the clitics.

Nevertheless, we have only taken into consideration those mark(er)s that have a grammatical function. Other types mentioned and/or discussed in GBLR are phonetical, lexical, discursive and may imply the marking of interrogation, emphasis, thematization, subordination etc. Needless to say, they are all called, simply, 'mark(er)s', most often without any further details, specifications or delimitations. (Since we have already mentioned the adverbs, they are also functioning as 'marks' at the pragmatic and discursive level (GBLR, 2010, p. 301), they can be 'focalization' and 'restriction' mark(er)s and so on.)

7.   Conclusion

7.1. On a specific level, some revisions of the description of the grammatical morphemes - mark(er)s in GBLR (2010) would be necessary. This should include a more coherent and solid argumentation, since, on one hand, one and the same value generates different consequences in the analysis (for instance the status of 'inflectional mark(er)' or that of 'free morpheme' is given as an argument for the lack of syntactic autonomy of '*lui*', while the definite article, as an inflectional mark(er), and the indefinite article, as a free morpheme, are syntactically autonomous). On the other hand, however, we cannot comply with such statements as, for example: "Although it forms a morphological unit with the noun it determines…, the article, as a dependent / non-autonomous element on the inflexional and phonological level, has syntactic autonomy *because*, on the syntax level, it is the determiner of the noun phrase" (GBLR, 2010, p. 364) (*Italics mine*). We strongly consider that such a / any grammatical morpheme – morphological morpheme (Anderson, 1992, p. 26) - cannot hold autonomous syntactic positions.

While the grammatical mark(er)s and morphemes represent a very heterogeneous linguistic category, this is no reason to enhance their inherent difficulty by contradictory explanations and interpretations, when they are not required by the language itself, but, on the contrary, when they seem to be imposed from the mere use of the terms and/or from the compliance to a borrowed terminology.

7.2. On a more general level, the linguistic facts that in GBLR are reffered to as 'mark(er)s' form a very diverse and heterogeneous typology, since the term was broadened beyond the grammar itself. That is why just naming and describing them only by this mere term (also considering the fact that the context is not always clarifying) proves to be rather confusing at least at the theoretical level and it can even lead to an incorrect analysis.

We strongly believe that more rigorous descriptions and delimitations are needed for both the concepts and the terms that denominate them. While certain terms might inevitably stand for a diverse linguistic reality, and 'mark(er)' is definitely one of them, their use should be accurate enough to point out towards the exact/specific linguistic fact they are describing, while unequivocally linking them to the intentional meaning. Unless this happens, the fundamental principles of the scientific terminology are at risk, since they should imply the accuracy of the specialised meaning, the lack of ambiguity and a clarifying and unequivocal definition and standardization. The multiple meanings of a term require special attention and, still, they can be easily dealt with if basic requirements are met: first, an adequate definition, which plays a fundamental role, as it clarifies and fixes the concept, while it settles clear

delineations; secondly, when a single meaning of the term cannot be valid throughout the entire work (which is certainly the case with the 'mark(er)'), it becomes compulsory to specify, every time, the particular use or the term (in our case, grammatical vs. discursive vs. lexical a.s.o. marker). This is to be substantiated by coherent arguments and by a consistent use.

At least as important it is the necessary return, every now and then, even from within a deliberate modernity, towards the consecrated traditional Romanian grammar. However modern the current researches might be, the Romanian grammar has already demonstrated facts that do not need to be reinvented. Or else, one might just face the risk, as Coşeriu (2000, p.103) said, to be fascinated by things that are obvious and to misunderstand not only the borrowed models, but also the mere essence of the Romanian language.

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