

From Romanian to “Rumañol”: linguistic confusions in native Romanian spoken by children born in Spain

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Abstract

After Romania joined the European Union in 2007, a massive wave of Romanian immigrants reached the Western countries in search for work, and the most significant migration took place in the Spanish kingdom. They were not the first Romanians to arrive in Spain, so they added their number to that of those who immigrated before, in the two decades after the fall of the Communist regime. Many Romanian children were born in Spain, so when they reached school age, they were at best bilingual; nevertheless, there are children who need to take Romanian classes in school, as they chose not to learn their native tongue at home.

Our article analyzes the ways Spanish influence their pronunciation and orthography of Romanian, based on test papers and homework that demonstrate the level of confusion produced in these children by their bilingualism, with Castilian being their first choice of language.

Keywords: *Romanian migration, Asturias, Castilian, “Rumañol”, Bilingualism, Pronunciation, Orthography.*

Premises

The year 2007 brought a series of changes in Romanian foreign affairs, after it joined the European Union, and the most significant consequence was the massive immigration to Western countries such as Italy and Spain.

The Romanian labor migration to Spain was a phenomenon of an unprecedented magnitude¹ that reached its peak a few years ago, when it was estimated that more than 800,000 Romanians already lived and worked (or studied) legally in Spain. According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics,²

¹ Comparable only to the corresponding immigration to Italy.

² The following information is extracted from the official page of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, www.ine.es.

there were just above 3,000 Romanians in the year 1999; this number doubled in the next year, but we find more than 30,000 Romanians in Spain in 2001. More than 60,000 Romanians will enter Spain in each of the next two years, and their number would increase up to about 100,000 each year during the following period (2004-2008). The migration rates have slowly decreased in the past few years, reaching the figure of about 26,000 immigrants in 2012.

Anyway, if we take into account the impressive numbers of Romanian immigrants between 2001 and 2008, we can easily imagine the consequences of such massive migration in terms of its projections to the present moment. The typical profile of a Romanian immigrant to Spain includes, among other, an average age between 20 and 45; certainly, there were plenty of cases of different age ranges, but they constitute the exception, formed by children accompanying their parents or by mature and elderly people that had a temporary residence in the Spanish kingdom.

Romanian integration in Spain

Such being the case, it is not surprising that a large number of Romanian children were born to these young people and families from 2001 to 2014. The majority live in Spain with their parents and go to Spanish schools, so they are perfectly integrated, linguistically speaking, in the Spanish society. Culturally speaking - not so much, as the Romanians in Spain are quite reluctant to renounce their traditions and language. Religious habits and gastronomy are two of the most persistent segments in the Romanian culture abroad, and it is not uncommon to see Romanian adds in shop windows promoting specific Romanian products that are hard to find in Spain, such as beef tripe, typical for a traditional sour soup that is spiced with garlic, cream and vinegar, or *borș*, a fermented extract of wheat bran and/or cornmeal, which is largely used in Romanian cuisine to give a specific acidic flavor to sour soups.³

Adults in traditional Romanian families would speak Romanian at home; their children, though, tend to reject any reference to a language and culture they only know from hearsay or from some short August vacations now and then, so learning Romanian at home might prove to be a challenge both for them and their parents. Some Spanish schools provide native Romanians with the proper conditions to attend Romanian classes if the Romanian community reaches an

³ See also Kim Schulte, "Daco- and Ibero-Romance in Contact: On the Origin of Structural Similarities Between Related Languages," *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 4 (2012, LVII, Bucharest), 335.

important statistic figure in the area, so these children are urged by their parents to participate in such courses (albeit unwillingly in some cases!).

Some of these children are, in fact, bilingual, but they consider Spanish as their main language, as it is the one that offer them linguistic autonomy and integration in an environment where being Romanian is not always a good thing.

For these Spanish-speaking Romanian children, learning Romanian might be a problem. First, because their parents probably speak a regional variety, so they are not exposed to literary Romanian until later in their life; second, because they do not see the utility in learning a language that is not currently used in their day-to-day life; third, because they are used to the linguistic mechanisms in Spanish, and they would generally apply the laws of analogy and reduce the Romanian mechanisms to the ones they already know, i.e. the Castilian ones.

Many of them acquire Romanian on a Spanish “substratum”, which would determine some peculiarities at all the levels of the language, starting with the phonological level (as well as the orthographic one), and ending with the syntactical level.

Linguistic corpus

Our analysis in the next pages is based on evaluation materials in Romanian classes that were provided by a good friend, Antoanela Pohoacă, who currently works as a Romanian teacher appointed by the ILR⁴ to six schools in Asturias,⁵ Spain.

According to statistics, back in the year 2009, Asturias was the Spanish community with the lowest rate of foreign immigration, as of its total population of 1,080,138, only 3.7% were foreigners, as compared with an average of 11.3% in the rest of Spain.⁶ The same year, the Romanians in Asturias reached a point where they became the most numerous foreigners in Asturias. There were 5,272 Romanians living legally in Asturias, and this number exceeds, for the first time, that of the Ecuadorians (3,834) and Colombians (2,948), the most important minorities in the year 2008.⁷

The statistics of the following year, 2010, show that, again, the Romanian population in the Principality of Asturias represented the largest foreign minority,

⁴ Institutul Limbii Române (The Romanian Language Institute) (on ilr.ro).

⁵ One in Grado, two in Gijón and three in Oviedo.

⁶ Mar L. Calvo, “Los rumanos ya son los inmigrantes más numerosos en Asturias,” in *20 Minutos* (January 11th 2009), accessed April 20, 2014, <http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/442182/0/rumanos/numerosos/foraneos/>.

⁷ Calvo, “Los rumanos ya son los inmigrantes más numerosos en Asturias.”

with an impressive number of almost 7,000 among the total of 47,000 immigrants (compared to a number of 40,171 one year before).⁸ Most of this population appears to be formed of qualified professionals,⁹ including college and university graduates in search of a better life, while performing activities far below their professional level. They constitute a well-defined group from a cultural viewpoint, and many of them are members in an ethnic cultural association, called the Asociación de Rumanos en Asturias (ARA).¹⁰

In these circumstances, promoting the Romanian culture and language throughout Asturias became a priority both for the local community and the Romanian ILR. The latter has managed to establish a schedule of courses of Romanian language for the children in the Romanian community.

We have analyzed a number of 40 test papers and class or homework exercises done by Antoanela Pohoaiță's students. The age of this particular group of students ranges from 6 to 14 years, and the majority of these children were born in Spain; they study Romanian (almost) as a foreign language, beginners level, in 2 hours a week.

Our analysis refers mainly to the phonological level, the simplest, yet the most noticeable of all linguistic levels. As we show below, the misperceptions at the phonological level reflect immediately on the orthographic aspect, causing students to misspell their Romanian words.

The phonological / orthographic level.

The characteristics of the Spanish language at this basic level, i.e. the phonetic inventory and the correspondence between sounds and letters, would influence the pronunciation and the spelling of Romanian words in the Romanian classes, as the children would filter the information according to what they have already learned during their Spanish classes.

Vocalism. The main difference between the Castilian and the Romanian vocalism is the phonetic inventory. Modern Spanish has 5 vowels, while Romanian has 7. Nevertheless, both systems are extremely similar, since none of these language have nasal or palatalized (rounded) vowels. The two specific closed vowels in Romanian, represented by *ă* and *î/â*, correspond roughly to the

⁸ *Ibidem.*

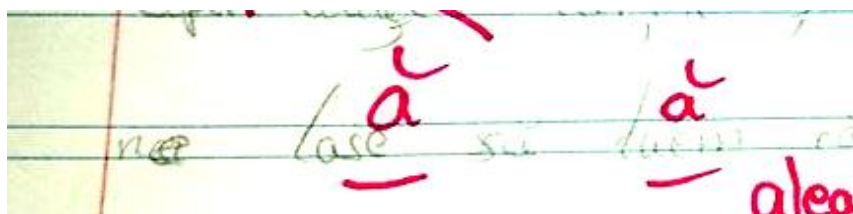
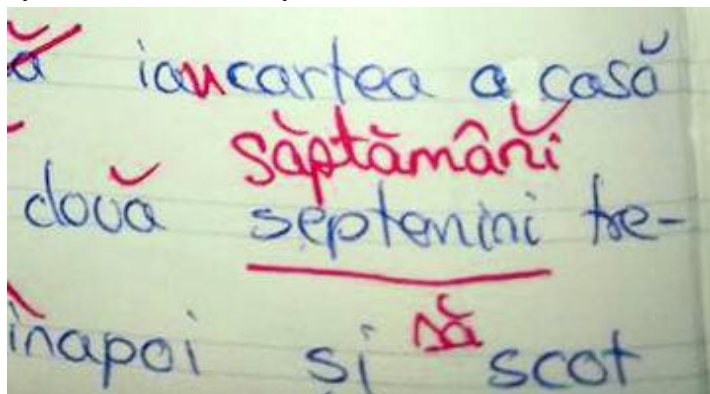
⁹ Luján Palacios, "Asturias, colonia de Rumanía," in *La Nueva España* (February 2nd 2010), accessed May 4, 2014, <http://www.lne.es/asturias/2010/02/22/asturias-colonia-rumania/876618.html>.

¹⁰ Palacios, "Asturias, colonia de Rumanía."

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unstressed *a* and *e* in Portuguese at the pronunciation level; these are central vowels with different degrees of aperture (close-mid and close).

The orthographic reform that took place in 1993 further complicates the rules of Romanian spelling: not only is it difficult for the Romanian students to distinguish between the two sounds, but writing them with three different letters seems almost impossible. They tend to approximate the former sound by *a* or *e*, and the latter by *u* or, sometimes, by *i*:

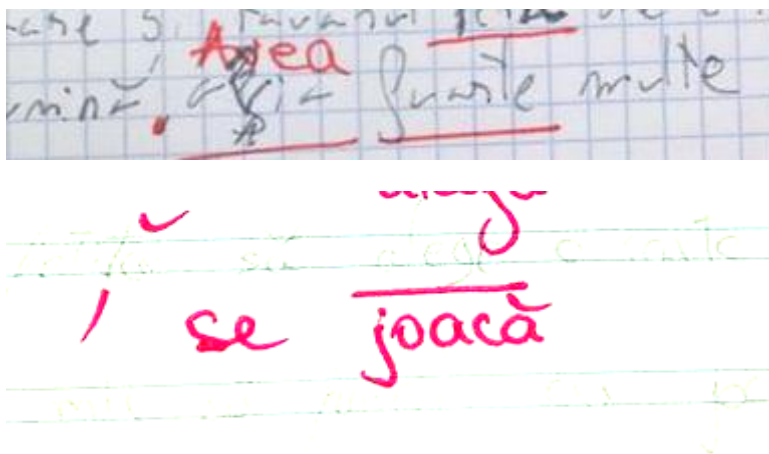


In writing, they use the graphemes *ă*, *î* and *â* indistinctively, as the two phonemes they represent sound exactly the same to them.

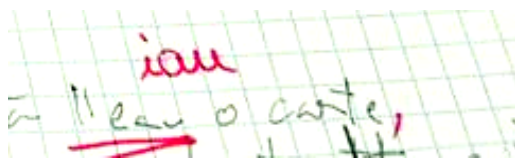
Another difficulty is posed by the difference between the status of semivowels and semiconsonants in the two languages. The rules in Castilian are clear: only *i* and *u* may act as semivowels and semiconsonants, while *a*, *e* and *o* always act as vowels. That means that a Spanish diphthong will always be a combination that contains at least one of the two “weak” vowels, *i* or *u*: *ai*, *ia*, *ei*,

ie, oi, io, au, ua, eu, ue, ou, uo, ui, iu. Nevertheless, Romanian accepts diphthongs such as *oa, eo* or *ea*, unknown to the Spanish norm, which are pronounced like [wa]/[va], [jo]/[io] and [ja]/[ia], according to the context,¹¹ in words such as *poate, deodată* or *teatru*; besides, the combinations of *i* and *u*, shown above, might act as hiatuses in Romanian sometimes (e.g. Rom. *hiat*, “hi-at”, Sp. *hiato*, “hia-to”), with no graphic differentiation.

There is no surprise, then, that spellings like *fuarte* instead of *foarte* or *avia* instead of *avea* would appear in the test papers of the students in question:



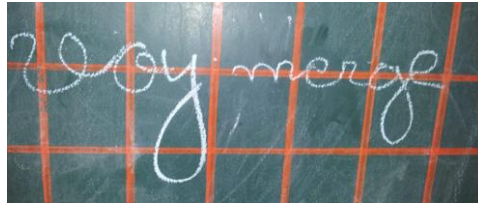
In initial position, a diphthong beginning in *i* is spelled in three ways in Spanish: either by *hi + vowel*, *y + vowel* or *ll + vowel*: *hiato, yegua, lluvia*, but such a rule does not exist in Romanian, where there are plenty of words beginning in *i + vowel*: *iederă, iarbă, iubire*; some students may get confused and use the Spanish spelling instead:



The same thing happens with words that end in a diphthong such as [aj], [ej] or [oj], spelled *ay, ey* and *oy* in Spanish, but *ai, ei* and *oi* in Romanian. The example below is more complex, as it is not a mere phonological / orthographic confusion, but it might be a sample of morphosyntactic association:

¹¹ Compare, for example, *teamă*, “tea-mă”, and *reală*, “re-a-lă”; there is no graphic clue about the pronunciation as a diphthong or as a hiatus of such combination of letters.

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Both Romanian and Spanish have two ways of expressing the future tense, but despite any -supposed- similarities, they have little in common. On the one hand, both languages have future tense forms that originated in periphrastic constructions in vulgar Latin. They share with the rest of romance languages the analytical syntagm formed with the auxiliary verb *habeo* (“to have”); but while Spanish follows the general pattern of *infinitive + habeo*, in Romanian the so-called “vulgar” future is *habeo + infinitive* (old Romanian) or *habeo + subjunctive* (in modern Romanian). This is not the case here, though. The second way of expressing the future tense is different diachronically, but somehow similar synchronically. The way of expressing near future in Spanish is the same as in most Romance languages, i. e. a movement verb + infinitive (*ir + infinitive*, “going to + infinitive”). In Romanian, on the other hand, there is a so-called “literary” future, formed, according to most linguists, with a volition verb, exactly as in Greek,¹² Southern Slavic¹³ or Albanian,¹⁴ so this is considered to be a “Balkanic” feature of Romanian. A mere coincidence (or not), some of the forms of these constructions are quite similar in Romanian and Spanish. Compare, for instance, the near future / literary future of the verb *to sleep*:

ROMANIAN	SPANISH
voi dormi	voy a dormir
vei dormi	vas a dormir
va dormi	va a dormir
vom dormi	vamos a dormir
veți dormi	vais a dormir
vor dormi	van a dormir

If we compare the forms in the two languages, it is not hard to see why native Romanians will always choose the near future over the future tense

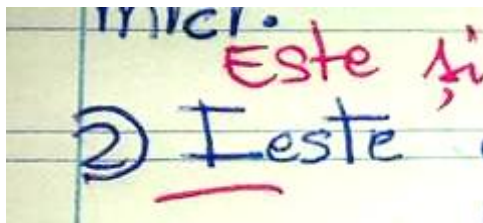
¹² $\theta\alpha$ + verb, with the particle $\theta\alpha$ being derived from $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega$ va, “I want”.

¹³ In Bulgarian, for example, *уе* + present tense, with the particle *уе* being derived from the verb *уа*, “to want”.

¹⁴ *Do* + subjunctive / *Kam* + infinitive.

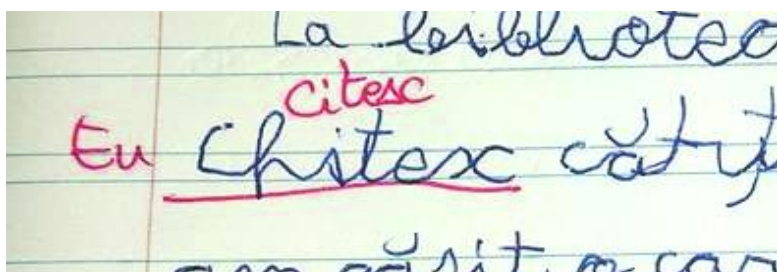
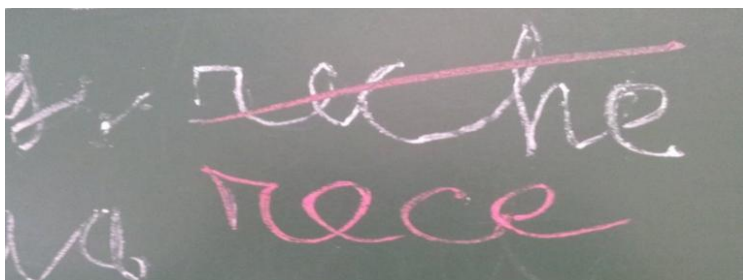
(*dormiré, dormirás, dormirá, etc.*) and why some of them tend to misspell the Romanian construction on account of the Spanish influence.

There is also a problem with the correct spelling of certain Romanian words beginning in *e*, but pronounced [je], according to the phonetic laws of transformation from Latin to Romanian: *eu, el, ea, ei, ele, este, eram, erai, era, erați, erau*. This is one of the few cases in Romanian when spelling and pronunciation are not correlated, so it may be somewhat confusing to the students:



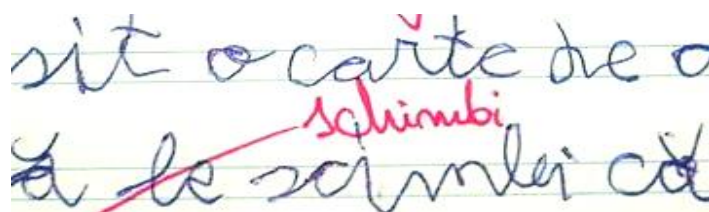
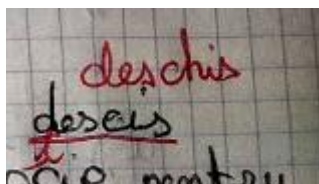
Consonantism. The Romanian inventory of consonants is far richer than the Spanish one, including a series of fricatives and affricates that the Castilian variety had lost during or after the medieval period.

The voiceless fricative [s] and the affricate [tʃ] pose no problems to the correct perception, as they also appear in Spanish (albeit with an apical pronunciation). But there are differences in the spelling of the latter, written as *ch* in Spanish, whereas in Romanian it is spelled as *c* followed by a palatal vowel (*e* or *i*):

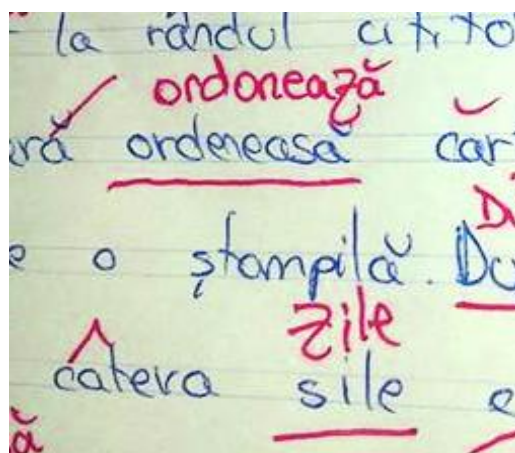


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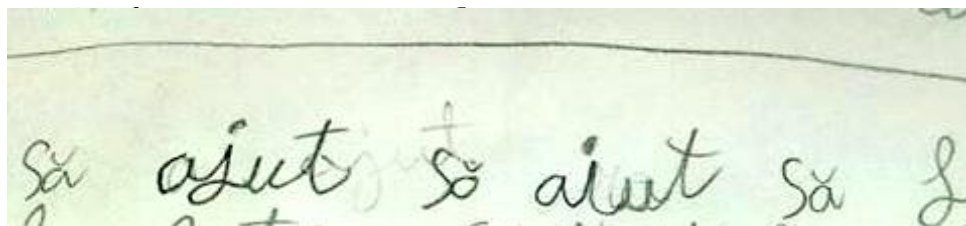
Such a difference in spelling may affect other words where the affricate phoneme does not appear; in Romanian, following the Italian model, the spelling *ch + palatal vowel* stands for the voiceless occlusive velar, as in *chemare* [ke'mare], but this proves to be confusing for some students, who find unexpected solutions for this situation:



The voiced pairs [z] (written z) and [dʒ] (g + e, i) of the consonants we have mentioned *supra* only exist in Romanian, so some of the students will be tempted to approximate them by [s] and [j], and this would affect the spelling of the words, even though it is not such a common mistake:



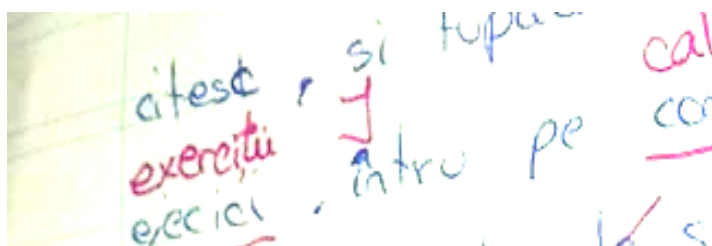
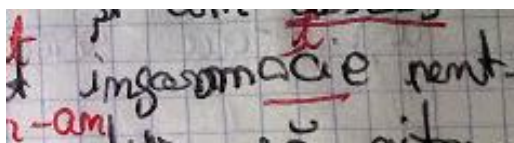
Another pair of fricatives only exist as phonemes in Romanian: [ʃ], written as *ș*, and [ʒ], written as *j*. The former would probably be approximated as [s] or [tʃ], and the latter as [j], written as *i* or as *y*:



Finally, the affricate [ts] can be completely confusing to some students who cannot perceive and spell it correctly with the letter *ț*:



Sometimes, students will be influenced by the pronunciation and spelling of the corresponding Spanish word, especially when it comes to words with a Latin origin that ended in *-tio(ne)*; in the first example below, the confusion is between Rom. *informație* and Sp. *información*, and in the second, between Rom. *exercițiu* and Sp. *ejercicio*:



Conclusions

As we have seen, bilingualism in Romanian immigrants to Spain poses some important difficulties in children of a young age. Social and cultural circumstances determine the speakers to draw a mental ranking of the two languages in contact, with Castilian being the most prestigious one, not for historical reasons, as we may think, but for practical and pragmatic reasons.¹⁵ Romanian acquires a secondary position, as it is used for communication within the family or a small group. The human factor is not to be ignored: integration in the Spanish society is a must for the Romanian immigrants due to the unfortunate image some of our compatriots have created abroad.

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¹⁵ See also Ofelia Mariana Uță Burcea, “El Rumano escrito de España. Un Análisis de Habla,” *Philologica Jassyensia* 1 (2010), 243 *et seq.*