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Teaching the Romanian conditional to students of other languages

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Abstract

In this presentation, I will deal with an issue in the language learning area. More precisely, I will discuss a method of describing and teaching the Romanian conditional. It is a part of a larger project, called “Theory and practice in teaching Romanian to students of other languages”, as approved by the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research. As any language teaching and learning presentation, this paper will be split into two: ‘what’ to teach and ‘how’ to teach. The first part will cover both diachronic and synchronic issues related to the formation and use of the Romanian conditional (present conditional and past conditional). I will show the advantages and disadvantages of teaching the Romanian conditional using a grammar approach or a communicative approach. The results of my research will show which method better suits the Romanian learners, coming up, of course, with valuable detailed description that will eventually help students, teachers, as well as any other people interested in knowing Romanian or Romanian data.

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1. Introduction

In this presentation, I will deal with an issue in the language learning area. More precisely, I will discuss a method of describing and teaching the Romanian conditional. It is a part of a larger project, called “Theory and Practice in Teaching Romanian to Students of Other Languages”, as approved by the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research (This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-PD-2011-3-0297).

Romania, now part of the European Union, has got an increasing number of foreign students in the latest years. As a teacher of Romanian as a second language at the Faculty of Letters, Romanian Language Department (University of Bucharest) and as a former exchange student in Sweden (when I had the opportunity of learning Swedish as a foreign language with highly-efficient modern approaches), the need for new approaches and methods in teaching Romanian as a foreign language has become urgent.

The literature (among others) focuses mainly on applied linguistics and has poor or no theoretical information. As such, this project aims at putting Romanian in line with the other languages spoken in the Union, by making a thorough study, with both matters of theory and practice regarding Romanian as a second language. Taking into consideration the language-specific issues, I will design certain learning strategies that will help students master the Romanian language on all aspects. For example, Romanian is known to have a rich morphology, which makes it sometimes difficult for students to learn. This is why it is highly recommended to find the best way to tackle specific grammar issues and make them easy to learn and this project is meant to do exactly this.

Given this rich morphology of Romanian, a lot of studies focus on grammar in the teaching process. However, in my experience, I have noticed that this may lead to students’ lack of interest. Apart from students who want to study Philology (according to my estimations, not more than 20%), too many labels and linguistic terminology confuse the students and make them find Romanian a very difficult language to learn. As such, teaching Romanian as a foreign language should consider communication, applied linguistics, but also cultural, sociological and psychological factors. At this point, it is very important to look at the student’s background. Previous studies have rather ignored where students come from. Without any intentions of making a pure sociological study, I believe it is of utmost importance to have a closer look at the students’ social and cultural backgrounds as well as their mother tongue. Even though all teachers do have certain intuitions and take into consideration the personality and background of each and every student, some general lines may be drawn in this direction (in some way, the applied linguistics at its most student-oriented approach).

The core objectives of this project are:

O1 – To elaborate a modern scientific thorough research of Romanian as a foreign language (the first comprehensive modern study);
O2 – To propose and describe modern teaching techniques for teaching Romanian as a second language (communicative and grammar approaches); in relation to this, to propose teaching solutions for students attending the Preparatory Year or for anyone interested in learning Romanian as a foreign language (academics, diplomats, etc.);
O3 – To elaborate a handbook with useful texts and (communication and structural) exercises for the use of foreign students.

Apart from these major objectives, side objectives include:

• the creation of an increased interest in the scientific field of Romanian as a second language;
• offering advice and consultancy to whomever wants to know more about Romanian;
• making Romanian more visible and easier to grasp by foreigners.
2. ‘What’ to Teach?
In language teaching, it is very important to know exactly what to teach. I wrote ‘what’ between inverted commas to stress its importance. I will oppose it later in this paper to ‘how’ to teach. As a teacher of Romanian as a foreign language at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, my first focus concerns the linguistic background of my students. I taught Romanian as a foreign language to two groups of foreigners. The first group had (alphabetically): four students from China, one student from Iran, two students from Macedonia, one student from Morocco and three students from Turkey. There are four other registered students from Turkey, but they have never shown up in school. In the second group, there were two students from Bulgaria, one student from China, two students from Greece, two students from Iran, two students from Israel, one student from North Korea, one student from South Korea and one student from Sweden (but of Iranian descent). They are all in Romania with the main purpose of obtaining a university degree, with minor exceptions. This is relevant because it shows their interest in learning Romanian and the extent to which they perceive Romanian as a true necessity, rather than something someone has forced them to learn.

Before getting to the teaching method, I will cover first the theoretical background related to the Romanian conditional. In today’s Romanian, the conditional has been traditionally interpreted as having present and perfect forms. The present conditional is formed with the help of an auxiliary (it is still a matter of debate whether this auxiliary is a avea ‘have’, a vrea ‘want’ or a fi ‘be’, see below 2.1) + the short infinitive of the lexical verb:

\[ \text{as face} \quad \text{‘I would do/make’} \]
\[ \text{ai face} \quad \text{‘you sing would do/make’} \]
\[ \text{ar face} \quad \text{‘s he would do/make’} \]
\[ \text{am face} \quad \text{‘we would do/make’} \]
\[ \text{at i face} \quad \text{‘you pl would do/make’} \]
\[ \text{ar face} \quad \text{‘they would do/make’} \]

The perfect conditional is used using the same auxiliary as for the present + fi + the participle of the lexical verb (Romanian has only one participle form, equivalent from many points of view with the past participle from other languages), as follows:

\[ \text{as fi făcut} \quad \text{‘I would have done/made’} \]
\[ \text{ai fi făcut} \quad \text{‘you sing would have done/made’} \]
\[ \text{ar fi făcut} \quad \text{‘s he would have done/made’} \]
\[ \text{am fi făcut} \quad \text{‘we would have done/made’} \]
\[ \text{at i fi făcut} \quad \text{‘you pl would have done/made’} \]
\[ \text{ar fi făcut} \quad \text{‘they would have done/made’} \]

The homonymy of the 3rd person singular and plural is not something particular for the conditional. It is very productive throughout the verbal flexion and foreign students are always expecting two persons of the same mood/tense to be identical. In what follows I will show the evolution of the Romanian conditional.

2.1 The Romanian Conditional in Diachrony
In this section, I will discuss the morphology and etymology of Romanian conditional, both present and past.

Discussing the origin of the Romanian conditional, Rosetti (1986: 144) claims that the first uses of the conditional as a mood in Romanian date back in the 16th century (1521 being the year of the first attested written document in Romanian). However, unlike the analytic form in use today, Romanian had a synthetic form, which is explained etymologically. As such, the author quoted above says that the present conditional to be found in 16th century texts is the follower of the Latin perfect subjunctive (having similar forms with the future in the past of the indicative).
There are documents attesting the use of present Conditional at all four conjugations: întrare (‘a intra ‘enter’), tacere (‘a tâcea ‘shut up’), ziser (‘a zice ‘say’), auzire (‘a auzi ‘hear’). The compound form, in use today, with the verb avea ‘have’ is to be explained through the use of similar forms in late Latin (Rosetti 1986: 144, 146-7); the only problematic etymology seems to be the first person singular as ‘I would’, explained through the evolution from Latin to Romanian of habuissem (a pluperfect subjunctive form of habeo, -ere ‘have’); all the other forms are inherited from Latin, with the appropriate evolution. Past conditional dates also from the 16th century Romanian texts, where there were three types of forming it, according to Rosetti (1986: 353-4), synthesising that it was built using the imperfect of a vrea ‘want’ + the infinitive of the lexical verb.

A different opinion as to the origin of the present conditional auxiliary origin is provided by Weigand (1896) in Coene&Tasmowski (2006: 325-6), claiming that the Romanian conditional should be related to the imperfect of vrea ‘want’ followed by the infinitive. This pattern is attested in certain idiolects from the West part of Romania and also in some Romanian dialects. However, it has been proven to be inconsistent and explained through other types of amalgamation and phonetic influences. Similar explanations can be found at Tiktin (1904), Skårup (1982), as quoted by Coene&Tasmowski (2006: 327).

A third and more radical explanation of the conditional auxiliary is by the use of the verb fi ‘be’. Coene&Tasmowski (2006: 328) a.o. find it a plausible explanation to consider a fi ‘be’ as a conditional auxiliary given the fact that it is in use as perfective auxiliary in Romanian rather than a avea ‘have’ (both in contemporary and old forms), as a derivation from the imperfect form era, conditioned by word order and phonetic interpretations.

2.2 The Romanian Conditional in Synchrony

In this section, I will discuss the syntax and semantics of Romanian conditional, as resulting mainly from GALR (2005). Apart from the morphology of the conditional, students shall also have to know when to use it. From this point of view, most grammar, most notably GALR (2005), stress on its modal values:

- modal values on the IMAGINE-BELIEVE-KNOW-EXIST scale;
- modal values on the WANT-MUST-CAN-DO/MAKE scale.

In GALR (2005), the following uses are assigned to the Romanian conditional:

A. The conditional as an instantiation of IMAGINE (X imagines that...) for sub-clauses headed by ca și cum and ca și când ‘as if’. In this situation, the sub-clause gets a counterfactive reading, namely the information provided in the sub-clause is false: Ana se poartă cu Andrei ca și cum nu l-ar cunoaște. (Ann treats Andrew as if she didn’t know him).

B. The conditional with modal values on WANT-CAN-MUST scale, expressing wish or intention. In these cases, the conditional has an optative value: Dan ar cânta. (‘Dan would sing.’).

C. The conditional is used to express probable, virtual processes (the BELIEVE contexts): X believes, but X is not sure that:
   a. Incertitude on a subsequent event: Ar veni sau n-ar veni. (‘He would come or not.’)
   b. In indirect speech – to cast some doubt, not to be one hundred percent sure about the event described in the conditional clause; Ministrul ne-a declarat că ar fi încheiat un nou contract. (‘The minister declared to us that a new agreement would have been concluded.’)
   c. To show the speaker’s presupposition about the existence/development of a process: S-ar sufoca probabil dacă ar vedea asta. (‘He would probably choke to death to see this.’)
   d. To express a hypothesis upon which another process realization depends (in this respect, it differs greatly from other Romance or English); these are the typical
conditional-optative constructions: 
*Dacă aș avea timp, aș veni.*
*Dacă aș fi putut, aș fi venit.*
(‘If I had the time, I would come.’, ‘If I had had the time, I would have come.’)

D. The conditional with the modal value of CAN – to express a possible, accomplishable process, under the existence of a necessary condition / favourable circumstance (called the conditional-potential, because the contexts may be rephrased using *could*): 
*Ce s-ar simplifica lucrurile!* (‘How things would be simplified!’),
*Cine ar crede asta?* (‘Who would believe this?’).

E. The conditional used as attenuation, instead of the present indicative, which is in some contexts perceived as too aggressive: 
*Ai timp? – Aș avea.* (‘Do you have time? / I would.’),
*Vreau un măr vs. Aș vrea un măr.* (‘I want an apple.’ vs. ‘I would like an apple.’).

Interesting about the use of the conditional in Romanian is the fact that the auxiliary does not have a tense reading/tense marking value, rather it only shows agreement to the subject. For this reason, Coene&Tasmowski (2006: 328) consider that it cannot occur in reported speech contexts (at least as far as literary Romanian is concerned).

3. ‘How’ to Teach?

The textbooks I book at the Preparatory Year have different views on how to teach the Romanian conditional. They use either long complicated grammatical information or (over)simplified contexts, usually following the three types of conditional clauses in Romance and English. As such, Brâncuș et al. (2003) is mostly grammar-oriented, where the conditional is presented as embedding four (modal) values:

- the optative;
- the conditional;
- the potential;
- the politeness.

Three other textbooks focus less on grammar and emphasise the role of communication in learning the conditional. Thus, Cojocaru (2003), Pop (2003) and Kohn (2009) mostly restrict the use of the Romanian conditional to such contexts as *If..., then...* and draw the attention on the use of the conditional in *if* clauses (something which does not happen in other Romance languages or English). Some of the advantages of using a grammar approach are: Romanian has a rich morphology; the conditional is (too) much related to mood and modality; contrastive grammar helps a lot... However, the disadvantages include: students do not like grammar; especially for the Preparatory Year foreign students, too much grammar information proves inefficient long-term; not all students want to become linguists or language specialists.

The communication approach has such advantages as: students improve their communication skills; various contexts make them active their implicit grammar knowledge; ‘Practice makes perfect’.

But, of course, there are disadvantages as well: some students are (too) shy; they come from (too) culturally different environments and communication is sometimes not an option; some students need formal information.

Since I was a teacher for two groups, I used an experiment: one group was taught the conditional using the grammar method, whereas the other was exposed to the communicative approach. Note that the two groups had different learning skills. The group where the grammar method was in use obtained better overall results during the year. The results of the experiment showed the following:

- for the grammar group: very well acquired the conditional from a morphological perspective (few flaws on forming it); students proved efficient in building relevant sentences; they proved efficient in writing compositions; they eventually proved efficient in communication.
- for the communication group: an increased number of mistakes as to the formation of the conditional; when asked to duplicate the examples written on the whiteboard, students gave confused answers; when asked to write a composition imagining they were someone else, they
did not explore enough the uses of the conditional; inappropriate/incorrect use of the conditional, in general.

4. Conclusions
In this presentation, I have emphasised the features of the Romanian conditional (etymologically and in contemporary language) and the information foreign students must know when learning Romanian as a foreign language. Since Romanian is too morphological, an exclusive communicative approach to its teaching is not at all productive, as shown by the carried out experiment.

Even if most students do not like grammar, no grammar puzzles them. Although not always explicit, they need formalisation (at least of some sort), they need frames to structure any new information they learn. Implicit grammar learning is (too) culturally conditioned, whereas explicit grammar seems to somehow illuminate the students. Of course, a mixed approach proves to be the best option I have identified, and the new textbook I am working on will prove of great help, I believe, to both students and teachers of Romanian as a foreign language.

References

Books and studies

Textbooks