

Unbound Languages: Contact, Use and Pragmatic Innovation, with a Focus on Romanian

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This presentation argues that language is not a bounded and stable system, but a dynamic space continuously reshaped by contact, use, and emerging communicative practices. Focusing on contemporary Romance languages, particularly Romanian and its multiple contacts with other Romance languages, it examines how linguistic boundaries are crossed and renegotiated as speakers borrow, adapt, and reanalyse lexical and pragmatic resources. Digital communication further blurs the boundaries between languages, linguistic levels, registers, and communicative practices. Linguistic innovation thus emerges in these permeable spaces, not as a linear transition from one stable system to another, but as an ongoing negotiation between structure, use, and meaning.

Three dimensions structure the argument. The first is **language contact**, illustrated through French influence on Romanian. French-origin borrowings such as *bluză*, *vestă*, and *jupă* may develop semantic trajectories that differ from those of their French sources once integrated into Romanian. The comparison between Romanian *gen* and French *genre* further shows how formally related items can acquire partially different pragmatic functions in distinct linguistic systems. This perspective places lexical borrowing within a broader ecology of language contact and innovation, revealing how linguistic systems can remain structurally identifiable (recognizable) while being continuously transformed through contact.

The second dimension concerns the **relationship between grammatical structure and pragmatic function**. Linguistic forms may extend beyond their traditional functions and develop new meanings through discourse use. The Romanian Presumptive Mood, as in *O fi ajuns deja* ‘He/She may have arrived already’, illustrates how a grammatical form can encode epistemic stance and, depending on context, contribute to indirect evidentiality. Similarly, *cică* illustrates processes of semantic extension, developing various discursive functions related to reported information.

The third dimension addresses **digital communication** as a particularly revealing site of linguistic innovation. Online interaction favours the emergence and diffusion of discourse-pragmatic uses, while written digital discourse increasingly displays features traditionally associated with spoken interaction. Expressions such as *sincer* and *serios* illustrate emerging stance-taking functions.

The presentation concludes that *contact, use, and innovation form a continuous dynamic rather than separate phenomena*. Borrowed words, grammatical forms acquiring pragmatic or evidential functions, and lexical items developing into discourse markers are different manifestations of the same underlying process: linguistic resources are repeatedly reanalysed and adapted to new communicative needs. Romanian, situated within a complex network of Romance contact and contemporary pragmatic change, thus offers an empirical basis for a broader claim about the “unbound” nature of language.