

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF LETTERS
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY
STUDIES

PARAPHRASE AND PARAPHRASTIC
COMPETENCE IN ROMANIAN
A Case Study of Native and Non-Native Speakers
-Abstract-

Advisor:

Prof. Liana POP, Ph.D.

Candidate:

Alexandra Gabriela OLARU

Cluj-Napoca

2026

This doctoral dissertation, entitled “Paraphrase and the Paraphrastic Competence in the Romanian Language. A Case Study: Native and Non-Native Speakers”, aims to investigate a complex intersection between theoretical linguistics, psycho- and sociolinguistics, pragmatics, textual analysis, and the teaching of Romanian to non-native speakers (RNNL). The scientific approach takes the form of an in-depth analysis of the two pillar concepts presented in the title – the paraphrase and the paraphrastic competence (PC) –, concepts which, although ubiquitous in scientific discourse (and sometimes even in everyday speech), have received limited attention in national specialized studies; moreover, in the international context, despite a vast body of literature, perspectives tend to be rather reductionist, consisting of unidirectional approaches that overlook the complexity of these two constructs.

The study is based on a comparative analysis of corpus data, examining the specific manifestations of these concepts in the productions of both native and non-native speakers of Romanian, covering proficiency levels from A1 to B2, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*.

The work originated from a twofold motivation. On the one hand, there was a personal curiosity, primarily of a theoretical nature, fueled by the desire to observe the extent to which the linguistic reality of speakers confirms or refutes the theories and hypotheses postulated by researchers. On the other hand, as previously noted, the research addresses a pressing need in the field of Romanian as a Non-Native Language (RLNN). In Romanian specialized literature, the tendency has been to treat paraphrase (and, by extension, PC) marginally, most often reducing it to the status of a mere vocabulary or grammar exercise. Existing studies have failed – and, in many cases, likely did not even intend – to capture the complexity of paraphrase or the vital role that the paraphrastic competence plays in the architecture of communication and the language learning process, both for the teacher (as an instrument for evaluation, self-regulation, and contextual adaptation) and for the student (as a compensatory strategy and a hallmark of discursive autonomy).

In this regard, one of the general aims of this doctoral dissertation is to investigate the mechanisms of paraphrase production in the Romanian language based on the specialized literature; specifically, we examined whether there is a certain correspondence between the procedures mentioned by leading researchers in the field (such as C. Fuchs, J. Miličević, A. Tsedryk, and E. Platon) and the actual productions of speakers. Furthermore, based on the

contrastive analysis – which tracks the gradual evolution of the paraphrastic competence from A1 to B2 –, the work aims to demonstrate that paraphrase represents an essential indicator of communicative maturity, serving as a bridge between linguistic competence (the mastery of forms and rules) and communicative competence *in actu* (the capacity for adaptation), while also reconceptualizing the paraphrase and the PC by placing them at the center of the teaching-learning evaluation process.

The investigation starts from two main working hypotheses, designed to test the limits of current theories:

- the paraphrastic competence as an indicator of linguistic maturity: contrary to many specialized studies that place the ability to paraphrase only at the threshold level (B1), we argue that it manifests as early as the A1 level. Even if it appears in a “rudimentary” form, based on simple mechanisms of synonymy or antonymy, we consider PC to be active from the very first stages of learning;
- major differences between native and non-native speakers: taking field studies as a starting point, we anticipate the existence of significant qualitative and quantitative differences between the productions of the two categories of respondents (with the native speaker representing the “benchmark”).

In order for the work to meet scientific requirements, we opted for a complex methodology based on a comparative-contrastive study. The strength of this dissertation, in terms of methodology, lies in the combination of two analytical perspectives: the cross-sectional (simultaneously analyzing respondents at different proficiency levels, from A1 to B2) and the longitudinal (part of the non-native respondents were followed diachronically throughout their evolution from A1 to B2). This approach encouraged both a “radiography” of linguistic competence stages and the observation of a “refinement” of paraphrasing mechanisms, clearly influenced by the progress of learning.

Structurally, the work is organized into two parts to reflect the transition from the abstract (theory) to the concrete (corpus analysis), containing: the argument, eight main chapters (symmetrically organized into two parts), a final considerations section, an extensive bibliography, and an annexes section.

Regarding the first part, dedicated to theoretical aspects (Chapters 1-4), the approach starts from macro-perspectives on language and language acquisition, moves through the normative

framework of Romanian as a Non-Native Language (RNNL) and the analysis of various socioidentity dimensions, culminating in the core of the work: the definition and typology of paraphrase and paraphrastic competence. This first part goes beyond a mere review of the specialized literature, representing a necessary stage for the reconceptualization of the two constructs and preparing the analytical tools for the practical section.

The second part, dedicated to corpus analysis (Chapters 5-8), represents the applied section and is governed by the principle of mirror symmetry. Each chapter captures productions from a specific proficiency level (A1-B2), allowing for a detailed observation of how paraphrastic strategies change and evolve as the non-native speaker progresses through the learning process. This binary structure (native vs. non-native) within each chapter enables us to precisely identify the linguistic and pragmatic “distance” between the two categories of speakers.

The work concludes with a final considerations section, where the research results are synthesized and a new vision for the two main concepts is proposed. The annexes complete this picture, providing relevant samples from the analyzed corpus and serving as evidence of the complexity of the material studied.

To ensure a link between the hypotheses, the general aims, and the final results, we designed the research so that each of the eight chapters is built around a specific micro-objective. The synthesis of these correspondences is presented as follows:

- Chapter 1 – a concise presentation of the various understandings of language, structured along four directions: *language-culture* (viewed as a manifestation of the community, according to W. Humboldt, F. De Saussure, E. Benveniste, E. Sapir, B.L. Whorf, M. Agar, D. Tannen), *language-idiom* (as a system of norms: F. De Saussure, N. Chomsky, S. Pinker, R.W. Fasold, J. Connor-Linton), *language-cognition* (more specifically, language as evidence of the intersection between mind and environment: H.K. Bhabha, D. Hymes), and *language as an object of study* (within a pedagogical context: J.-P. Cuq). This is followed by a discussion on terminological issues regarding the process of language acquisition, where we critically analyze the term *natural language* (proposed by Porquier and Rosen), arguing that acquisition is not always spontaneous (as children attend daycare/kindergarten from an early age), as well as the dichotomy of *mother tongue* (a problematic term, since the mother is not always the sole or the first agent of learning) vs. *foreign language* (an obsolete concept in the technological era, where nothing is truly “distant” or exotic

anymore). At the same time, we highlight the difficulty of using L1 and L2 labels in the case of bilinguals, where the hierarchy of languages is hard to establish. As a solution to these terminological difficulties, we propose the binomial *native language* vs. *non-native language*, where the attribute “native” transcends chronological or biological criteria, defining the language perceived as natural, which the speaker relies on instinctively, especially in complex communication situations. The chapter concludes with a clarification of the distinction between *acquisition* and *learning*, where, although we analyze the four fundamental theories (B.F. Skinner – *behaviorism*, N. Chomsky – *nativism*, L. Vygotsky – *interactionism*, J. Piaget – *cognitivism*), we argue that they are complementary, representing different stages of the same process. All these elements are essential for subsequently positioning paraphrase at the forefront of the acquisition process;

- Chapter 2 – a description of the most important concepts and normative documents in the field of RNNL. The chapter begins with a review of the official framework, analyzing the *CEFR* (including the 2018 and 2020 updates – the *Companion Volume*) and the reference documents for the Romanian language (*The Minimal Description* and the *Threshold Level*). This is followed by a diachronic analysis of the concept of competence, tracing its evolution from the legal and administrative spheres of Antiquity (the Roman Empire, the Chinese Empire) to the modern understanding as an umbrella term that encompasses the dimensions of *savoir* (knowledge) and *savoir-faire* (practical skills). Within this context, we detail the concept of *linguistic competence* according to European standards and analyze the fundamental processes that define learning: *progression* (M. Sagaz, D. Lemov, M. Lupatini), viewed as a gradual and systematic evolution; *interlanguage* (L. Selinker, L. Vasiu), as an individual and transitory system through which the speaker moves toward the target language; and *transfer* (R. Lado, J. Schachter, T. Odlin), as a mechanism for adopting structures from previously known languages. The final part of the chapter is dedicated to characterizing the A1-B2 language levels according to the *CEFR* and *The Minimal Description*, in order to establish the framework for the corpus analysis relative to the specifics of each level and, simultaneously, to identify the absence of paraphrase and paraphrastic competence from the reference documents;
- Chapter 3 – a discussion of the main concepts related to textual analysis and socio-identity variables, aiming to configure the necessary toolkit for the corpus analysis. The section

dedicated to textual analysis addresses the *functions of language* (R. Jakobson), *the mechanisms of cohesion and coherence* (R.-A. Beaugrande and W.U. Dressler, M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hasan, T.A. van Dijk and W. Kintsch), as well as the *theme-rheme* informational dynamics (J.-M. Adam). The approach is complemented by the pragmatic perspective of *conversational maxims* (H.P. Grice) and *discursive strategies* (J.L. Austin, J.R. Searle, D. Sperber and D. Wilson, W. Labov, D. Tannen). In the second part, the chapter investigates the impact of socio-identity variables on the choice of paraphrasing strategies, analyzing the influence of *gender* (D. Tannen, R. Lakoff, J. Coates, J.S. Hyde), *age* (W. Labov, P. Trudgill, P. Eckert), and *cultural factors* (E.T. Hall, G. Hofstede). Particular attention is paid to the risk of falling into linguistic prejudices and stereotypes; we argued that, although the cultural and social imprint is inherent, the individual maintains their discursive individuality, with paraphrase also being a personalized act of negotiating meaning;

- Chapter 4 – a detailed theoretical analysis of paraphrase and paraphrastic competence, constituting the conceptual core of our research. The chapter opens with a brief history of the phenomenon, tracing the evolution of paraphrase from Antiquity, where it was used in oratory as an instrument for the refinement, clarification, and embellishment of discourse. On a theoretical level, we systemize existing definitions into two fundamental categories: *structural*, focusing on semantic equivalence and identity of meaning (C. Fuchs, L. Miličková, J. Miličević, A. Tsedryk, E. Platon), and *functional*, focusing on the purpose of the paraphrase (B. Daunay, J. Aufray Germain, A. Zucker). A central point is the reorganization of paraphrastic mechanisms, starting from the Miličević-Tsedryk-Platon model, supplemented by the perspectives offered by R. Bhagat and E. Hovy. Furthermore, we establish a rigorous demarcation between paraphrase and related concepts, such as *reformulation* (C. Martinot), *summary/synthesis* (S.B. Kletzien, B. Daunay), and *translation* (A. Zucker, D. Santos, and A. Barreiro). The end of the chapter is dedicated to paraphrastic competence (PC), analyzing its definitions and characteristics (C. Martinot, C. Fuchs, E. Platon), the dynamics of its development according to age (C. Martinot), and the triadic role (discursive, cognitive, and didactic) that paraphrase and PC play in the communication process and language acquisition. The micro-objective of this chapter is to

demonstrate that current perspectives are often partial, thus justifying the need for a reconceptualization and an integrated definition;

- Chapter 5 – the contrastive analysis at the A1 level, marking the debut of the applied section of the dissertation. The chapter begins with a detailed description of the respondent groups, structured according to relevant sociolinguistic criteria: age groups, gender, native languages, and other known languages, as well as the university centers of origin (in the case of non-native speakers). Next, the three work tasks specifically designed to test paraphrase and PC are presented, along with the methodological motivation for each: the paraphrasing of five individual utterances (to isolate the basic mechanisms), the paraphrasing of a full text (to observe cohesion and coherence in paraphrase at the textual level), and the drafting of two texts based on the same input but in different pragmatic contexts (to capture discursive adaptability). The core of the chapter consists of the actual contrastive analysis, conducted based on the three exercises, through which we identify the forms of “rudimentary paraphrase”. The results demonstrate that, although the mechanisms of non-native speakers are simplified, paraphrastic competence is active from the very first stages of learning;
- Chapter 6 – the contrastive analysis at the A2 level, focusing on observing the transition from simple lexical substitution (specific to the previous level) to the first complex mechanisms of syntactic restructuring. The analysis of the corpus data highlights how the non-native speaker begins to master tools for the expansion or condensation of the message. The central objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that the A2 level represents, in fact, a very important threshold in linguistic evolution, as its completion marks the moment when the speaker acquires real autonomy in the target language; it is the point where the “certainty” of learned rules transforms into the ability to manipulate language structures to maintain communication flow, thus paving the way for the levels of independence;
- Chapter 7 – the contrastive analysis at the B1 level, aimed at evaluating the linguistic and pragmatic progress of non-native speakers, as well as the complexity of their discourse at an intermediate level. The analysis focuses on the degree of convergence or the persisting distance from the native “benchmark”, tracking how respondents manage fine semantic nuances and complex syntactic structures. The chapter investigates whether, at this level,

the non-native speaker's paraphrastic competence reaches the natural fluency of the native speaker, or if certain patterns specific to interlanguage remain visible during moments of high cognitive demand;

- Chapter 8 – the contrastive analysis at the B2 level, aimed at evaluating linguistic and pragmatic progress at a level where communication barriers are presumed to truly begin to disappear. The analysis focuses on the speaker's ability to manage a variety of registers and nuances of meaning, emphasizing the convergence with or, conversely, the distance from the native “benchmark” in situations of high complexity. Additionally, the chapter investigates the extent to which paraphrase becomes an instrument of stylistic precision, capable of covering abstract concepts or cultural subtleties, thereby demonstrating the attainment of full discursive maturity.

Regarding the conclusions, the present research demonstrates that paraphrasing is not an exclusive attribute of advanced speakers, but a universal cognitive mechanism that accompanies language acquisition from the very beginning (from the first contact with the language). The contrastive analysis of the corpus validates the hypothesis that paraphrastic competence is active at all stages, manifesting initially through “rudimentary paraphrase” and linguistic safety strategies, while the A2 level represents a turning point toward discursive autonomy. The results refute the traditional view, which places the onset of these abilities only at the threshold level (B1), highlighting that, although marked by interlinguistic transfers or calques, the productions of nonnative speakers at elementary levels reflect the very architecture of meaning processing under the pressure of a limited lexical and grammatical inventory.

The central theoretical contribution of the work lies in the reconceptualization of paraphrase as a dynamic process of discursive reconfiguration, defined by three vectors: an act of conservation (of the semantic node), an act of transformation (structural), and an act of elaboration (contextual adaptation). We propose a taxonomic model hierarchized across four levels (lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discursive), where paraphrase transcends simple semantic equivalence and becomes an act regulated by pragmatic intention and psycho- and socio-identity variables. This perspective shifts the focus from rigid linguistic rigor to the speaker's reasoning, recognizing that meaning is a subjective construction and that a complete paraphrase represents, in fact, a total lexico-syntactic restructuring, constantly related to the communicational context and the speaker's particularities.

In pedagogical terms, the dissertation advocates for the status of paraphrastic competence as a transversal and integrative competence, essential for full language mastery. By developing performance descriptors and specific indicators for the A1-B2 levels, the work provides a calibration tool necessary for RNNL specialists to objectively quantify student progress. Beyond the results obtained, the study remains an open platform for future interdisciplinary investigations (particularly neuro- and psycholinguistic, but not limited to these), pleading for the systematic integration of paraphrase into textbooks and assessment methodologies as a fundamental discursive reflex in the negotiation of meaning and pragmatic adaptation to context.