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DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

***EXPRESSING HIGHEST/LOWEST
INTENSITY IN ROMANIAN AND
SPANISH.
A CONTRASTIVE-TYPOLOGICAL
APPROACH***

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KEY WORDS

Intensity, highest/lowest, degrees of comparison, absolute superlative, synchrony, diachrony, electronically-mediated communication, blog, prefixation, suffixation, lexicalized forms, grammaticalization, emphasis, denotative use, connotative use.

ABSTRACT

1. Premises and goals

This paper aims to comparatively present the means of expressing intensity in Romanian and Spanish from a predominantly synchronic perspective, without neglecting the importance of the diachronic study of language facts and the etymological clarifications, where needed. We have chosen to discuss *only one aspect of the complex act of evaluation*, more specifically, *the means of rendering highest and lowest intensity*, because of the complexity of this phenomenon which constantly expands its linguistic encoding forms.

The main research goal was to emphasise the way in which a certain logico-grammatical category involves the entire structure of a language by capitalizing on the phonetic, lexical, morphological and pragmatic-stylistic resources of the entire linguistic system.

In our opinion, the data resulted from the analysis of the situation in the two languages convincingly reflect the relationship between the general and the particular, between the universals of language and thought, on the one hand, and the “inner genius” of each language (cf. Wilhelm von Humboldt), on the other hand.

Our approach aimed to deconstruct and reconstruct phrases expressing the extreme intensity in Romanian and Spanish in order to point out the common essence of the studied linguistic phenomenon and the specific availabilities of each idiom, in terms of capitalizing on the compensatory resources and creativity of every community of speakers.

The paper equally deals with the general language dynamics because, nowadays, verbal interaction tends to leave more room for electronically-mediated communication. The world behind the screen, an artifact of the daily universe, reveals an emphatic *self*, which transfers one’s growing desire to confess, to promote one’s personality or display one’s everyday life to the virtual world. As regards blogs, which provided the analysed examples, credit is given only to the authenticity of experience, while the form of linguistic manifestation seeks to cut out fragments of reality in a vivid manner, devoid of any compositional artifice.

We have opted for the comparative perspective for subjective reasons, which may be summed up to our personal interest in the mechanisms of functioning of an extremely melodious, picturesque language viewed in relation to the native language.

2. Technical support

Numerous Romanian and foreign linguistic studies have focused on intensity. Naturally, many of them address the highest and lowest intensity under “degrees of comparison”, in the

“absolute superlative” section. In the last decades, however, stress is laid on the reception of “intensity” viewed as a distinct category, of great complexity, which linguistically reunites countless means of expression, as an effect of the many “synapses” created by the speaker on a psychological level.

In this respect, a pioneer is the linguist Georges Gougenheim, who is the first to propose a distinction between “degrees of comparison” and “degrees of intensity” in his work *Système grammatical de la langue française*¹. The researcher gives primacy to the semantics of structures, although he does not put forward clear criteria for conceptual definition. In Romanian linguistics, Iorgu Iordan and Vladimir Robu made a significant contribution to establishing the boundaries of the two categories. In *Limba română contemporană* (1978), they consider a reorganisation of the traditional system of “comparison” based on syntactic arguments. These discussions are resumed in greater detail in the descriptive grammatical treatises GALR (2005/2010) and GBLR (2010/2016).

The merit of a study which includes an overall vision of “intensity”, relying, first of all, on the semantics of structures, goes to Patrick Charaudeau, cf. *Grammaire du sens et de l’expression*, published in 1992. The French grammarian re-analyses the categories described by the traditional grammar and presents “intensity” as a distinct concept, with numerous means of expression on the linguistic level.

On a synchronic level, Spanish academic grammars play a significant role in describing “intensity”: *Gramática descriptiva de la Lengua Española*, coordinated by Ignacio Bosque and Violeta Demonte, in 3 volumes, published in 1999, *Nueva gramática de la lengua española*, 2009, coordinated by Ignacio Bosque.

The articles focusing strictly on intensity are also numerous and render, in most cases, a particular aspect of this category. We should mention some of them, which have proved very useful for our research: José Manuel González Calvo, 1984, “Sobre la expresión de lo «superlativo» en español (I)”; Raluca Ionescu 2004, “Valori superlative ale prefixoidelor în limba română actuală”; the articles of Silvia Krieb-Stoian of 2004 and 2009 – “Operatori ai intensității maxime în româna actuală”, “Aproximarea cantitativă non-numerică. Expresii ale cantității mari în limba română” and the list is far from being complete.

The notes included in the key works have also been of great importance, as they provide valuable explanations regarding the origins of words, similar constructions, the use of certain forms etc. For example, in Werner Beinhauer’s work, a note explains the origins of the

¹ Georges Gougenheim, 1963.

augmentative suffix *-ón*, which has facilitated the process of analysis of certain forms in our corpus (see Werner Beinhauer, 1968, p. 228).

As compared to the abovementioned, we have put forward a comparative analysis of the means of rendering the highest and lowest intensity in the two genealogically related languages, which, as far as we know, have not been the subject of an extensive work on this particular aspect.

3. Working methods

The choice of working methods has been prompted, naturally, by the nature and general goals of our study. Given that this is mostly a work of analysis, we have generally used the descriptive, systematic and, to the extent possible, rigorous method.

Where necessary, the etymological analysis completed the description of language facts, because, in order to explain current phenomena, such as the speakers' preference for certain structures, we needed to reconstitute the "roots" and the evolution of those forms. Furthermore, this is also a way to explain the differences between two related languages, which have evolved in different socio-cultural conditions, with distinct external influences (for example, the Arabic influence on Spanish or the Slavic influence on Romanian).

Last but not least, given that this is a comparative analysis of two modern languages, we shall use the contrastive-typological method so as to identify the structural features of each idiom, on the one hand, and the universals of language, on the other.

4. Text corpus

Our corpus consists of exclusively online materials, more precisely, examples taken from Romanian and Spanish blogs. We have used both articles posted on general blogs and excerpts from those addressing a particular type of readers (groups interested in food, travelling, blogs for mothers, discussions on social relationships etc.).

We have chosen the texts by excluding the extremes: we have left out obscene or extremely monotonous blogs and we have accessed, only sporadically, cultural blogs with normative content. We believe that the vivid, authentic, current language is used by groups of people with some kind of general knowledge, who represent a middle segment between the extremes mentioned.

Of course, considering the Romanian and Spanish blogosphere in general, we have been unable to carry out an exhaustive research that should cover all the issues dealt with in internet writings. We have selected over 800 examples that confirm the bloggers' originality, their

appetite for emphasis, the desire to stand out among their debate partners and the dynamics of language in the online environment.

5. Structure and contents of the thesis

Our paper is structured in four chapters which analyse the means of expressing intensity from a lexical, morphosyntactic and stylistic perspective, without neglecting the etymological, semantic and discursive analyses, where necessary.

As the title suggests, *General theoretical framework*, the first chapter deals with general, conceptual aspects that are the subject of this thesis. Thus, a particular attention is paid to the field of reference of “intensity” in order to determine if it is a notional category per se. The variations in intensity between a negative and a positive extreme capture the “deviation” from the socio-linguistic norm, with profound implications in qualitative and quantitative terms.

The diachronic perspective reveals the evolutive nature of the category and prompts us not to equal “intensity” with “comparison”.

In chapter two, *Lexical operators for expressing highest/lowest intensity in Romanian and Spanish*, we focus on the main lexical means of marking extreme intensity in Romanian and Spanish, relying on the descriptive and contrastive-typological analysis of the structures in question. Within the lexical level, we include both the derivational devices (prefixation/suffixation) and the lexicalised forms of gradation (e.g. *oribil* ‘horrible’), which are highly productive in both languages.

Chapter three, *Morphosyntactic devices of rendering highest/lowest intensity*, deals with the grammatical means of expressing intensity. We analyse the prototypical forms of encoding the highest/lowest values as well as the current stage of grammaticalization of intensifiers. Moreover, it dwells on the distinction between the main patterns of construction used to render intensive variations, according to the criterion of stability in language. Thus, we have distinguished between well-fixed structures within the language system and occasional constructions.

In the last chapter, *Stylistic devices of expressing highest/lowest intensity*, we focus on the stylistic features of the category of “intensity” and the repercussions, on a linguistic level, of a discourse that relies on subjectivity, emphasis and authenticity. We have examined the extent to which the oral/written dichotomy is abolished in the electronically-mediated communication. We have also analysed the contexts in which the structures of extreme intensity

are used with denotative values and the complex combinations, which give rise to numerous connotations.

6. General conclusions

- “Intensity” is a distinct logico-semantic category, whose status was determined according to both linguistic and extra-linguistic (psychological, logical etc.) criteria. The concept denotes a phenomenon completely adapted to a natural inclination of the human spirit: one permanently assessing everything that belongs to one’s sphere of perception – objects, beings, states, processes, one’s own self etc. Traditionally, the difference in intensity is rendered by means of “degrees of comparison”, which unjustifiably includes the absolute superlative as well. However, our analysis has shown, using linguistic arguments, that the latter is not the expression of a comparison proper, but of implicitly relating to a determined social or individual status. The phrase “degrees of intensity”, suggested by modern studies, captures the extralinguistic reality with much more preciseness and its extreme manifestations, “highest intensity” (Rom. *foarte interesant*; Sp. *muy interesante* ‘very interesting’) and “lowest intensity” (Rom. *foarte puțin interesant*; Sp. *muy poco interesante* ‘very uninteresting’), cover the area of the so-called “absolute superlative”.

- As regards the morphological classes which receive intensive operators, traditional works take only the adjective within the noun phrase and the adverb within the verb phrase into account, but, as we have seen, the category of “intensity” also covers other classes of words, such as the noun (Rom. *mega-concert*; Sp. *megaconcierto* ‘mega-concert’) or the verb (Rom. *a supraabunda*; Sp. *superabundar* ‘superabound’).

- Our study focuses mainly on three levels of analysis of the means of expressing the highest and lowest intensity in the two languages: lexical, morphosyntactic and stylistic. Each of them highlights important aspects in terms of the forms of manifestation of the highest/lowest intensity in the analysed idioms, which we shall present separately.

- The lexical level best shows the changes which have occurred in the language system, entailed, on the one hand, by the speaker’s need to denote new linguistic realities and, on the other hand, by one’s individual, psychological and social needs. The intensive encoding devices are similar in the two languages, except suffixation, which is more productive in Spanish. As regards the status of prefixes, their concise nature and expressive force justify the blogger’s option to use them in ever-new contexts in both idioms. The synoptic tables that include the distribution of prefixes in the two languages provide an overall view of the phenomenon.

Suffixation, a means regularly selected by the Spanish speaker to render the difference in intensity, is poorly represented in Romanian. Although suffix derivation holds a special place amongst the methods of enriching our language vocabulary, the use of diminutival or augmentative suffixes cannot be directly associated to the means of rendering the highest/lowest intensity. An exception is the suffix *-isim*, which, in its turn, is rarely encountered in online communication.

As for the intensive lexicalised structures, their increasing number shows the permanent availability of the two linguistic systems to revitalise the inventory of forms.

- The chapter on the grammatical means of expressing the highest/lowest intensity analyses the prototypical forms of encoding maximal values and the current stage of grammaticalization of intensifiers. The diachronic description of the phenomenon does not exclude the synchronic analysis; on the contrary, it completes it. The main patterns of construction used to render intensive variations have been established according to the criterion of stability in language. This makes it possible for us to make an important distinction between structures that are well-fixed in the language system and occasional constructions. In each of the two Romance languages there is at least one prototypical means of marking the highest/lowest intensity. In Romanian, the highest intensity is rendered by the standard operator *foarte* ‘very’, which has gradually lost its semantic and grammatical independence, just like the intensifier *muy* in Spanish. In colloquial speech, the intensifiers used are Rom. *tare*, Sp. *bien* ‘really, very’, which have only partially gone through the stages of the grammaticalization process. To render excess, Romanian uses *prea* ‘too’ whereas Spanish employs *demasiado*.

In terms of the patterns created in the two analysed languages, their identification has proved difficult due to a very diverse number of structures. The stable constructions are generally common to both languages, whereas the occasional structures, which, very often, disappear from language along with the relative loss of their expressiveness, are the “distinctive feature”.

- As regards the stylistics of intensive forms, the detailed analysis reveals general phenomena that are valid for both idioms, such as the blurring of boundaries between written and spoken language. Oral communication is transferred to the virtual environment in the context of a weakened interhuman direct connection. The bloggers’ discourse selects facts specific to spoken language and uses them in writing, thus turning them, voluntarily or involuntarily, into markers of orality. The texts stand out through the frequent use of forms with high expressive potential and through the occurrence of slang, familiar forms,

incompatible with the written, neat form of language. Bloggers frequently resort to morphological and syntactic devices that are typical of colloquial speech, the most common being the adverbial constructions, the exclamatory, consecutive clauses, in order to emphasise their discourse and thus to convince readers of the authenticity of the facts, experiences described etc.

In the case of stylistic devices of rendering the highest/lowest intensity, metaphorical, hyperbolic or oxymoronic uses are common, as markers of the speaker's affectivity, of one's need to personalise one's discourse.

- The premises underlying our endeavour have been confirmed throughout the entire analysis. First of all, it has been shown that expressing intensity very well reflects the rapid and consistent evolution of linguistic forms in line with the evolution of thought and of the organisation of social life. Secondly, the two languages *grosso modo* have similar ways of expressing intensity, which confirms the existence of *linguistic universals* within different systems. Furthermore, each device analysed in detail has also pointed out features of each idiom (for example, the greater availability of Spanish to create new forms by suffixation).

Thirdly, it has been confirmed to us that electronically-mediated communication is a good indicator of the stage of evolution of a vivid, natural language. By frequently, constantly using the resources of one's mother tongue in a synthetic form, in which the elements of standard literary language are fully exploited alongside the popular, archaic, vernacular, neological, scholarly ones, along the denotative elements combined with the pragmatic-stylistic ones etc., the massive middle-class groups of speakers in each modern language (Romanian and Spanish in our case) function as a sensitive 'barometer' of the living history of languages.

On a linguistic level, the highest and lowest intensity encodes the extremes of an experience, of a situation, of a material or spiritual need etc. as they are perceived by the speaker at that particular moment. That is precisely why the study of the forms it takes gives proof of the ability of languages to express the finest nuances of human thought and feeling.

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