THE PREPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY
ROMANIAN LANGUAGE. A UNITARY STRATIFIED
APPROACH

ABSTRACT

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Key words: preposition, contemporary Romanian language, morphosyntax, semantics, pragmatics, phraseology, phraseological units, phrases, expressions, linguistic clichés, functional styles of Romanian language, literary style, scientific style, legal-administrative style, journalistic style, advertising language, familiar / colloquial language, argotic constructions, literary language rules, deviations, trends, linguistic variations.

The importance of prepositions in contemporary Romanian language is firstly reflected by the fact that, especially in the last years, diverse and complex studies have dealt with this category, including two PhD dissertations. One of them – Les prépositions fonctionnelles du roumain. Étude comparative, defended by Alexandru Mardale in 2007 and published in 2009 with the title Les prépositions fonctionnelles du roumain. Études comparatives sur le marquage casuel – presents the functional prepositions of Romanian language a, de, la, pe, in their relation to lexical prepositions, and includes significant comments on the prepositional system of both Romanian and other Romance, Balkan or Germanic languages; the other one – Prepoziția în limba română. Sincronie și diacronie, defended by Adina Matrozi Marin in 2008 and published in 2010 – analyses prepositions in general, from a diachronic and synchronic perspective.

Although some of the issues we shall study have already been dealt with by the linguists mentioned in the bibliography, we consider that a strength of this work lies in the accomplishment of a comprehensive synthesis, based on a rich, actual and diverse corpus, along with an up-to-date bibliography including old and new approaches on prepositions, with a view to determining the state-of-the-art of the relevant research.

Our approach is mainly a synchronic one, based on current normative works, and underlines the most significant aspects related to language dynamics and correct expression, as well as to the adequacy of the analysed linguistic items to the contexts in which they are used. Moreover, this kind of approach is highly important for language dynamics, as it outlines the trends noticed in the use of prepositions, which is an extremely actual topic, relevant both for specialists (academics and researchers) and for other users of Romanian language.

The originality of this work consists mostly of the analysis of the types of prepositional functioning on language levels that have not been studied on a frequent basis (phraseology, stylistics, language cultivation etc.), with a focus on: the semantic changes generated by the
presence or absence of the prepositional component, as well as prepositional substitution, language clichés based on certain prepositions, the prevalence of certain prepositions, the various uses of prepositions, the tendency to omission or synthetism, the infringement of grammatical rules and linguistic errors etc.

The paper includes five chapters and is underpinned by a three-layered approach: a mainly descriptive focus in the first part, an analytical focus in the central part and a normative stance in the final part.

Thus, the first chapter, titled *The Preposition in Romanian Language – the Current State of Research*, begins with an overview of the evolution of prepositions from Latin to Romance languages and, implicitly, to Romanian, analysing the status of prepositions and the development of the role of this lexical category in various phases of Latin language, showing that prepositions have gradually acquired importance as their role has gradually changed: from items playing a non-significant role to words with a semantic content, helping clarify the information conveyed by other terms, and finally also acquiring a grammatical role in expressing case relations. Furthermore, the use of prepositions has extended gradually – first in the spoken language, then in the written, literary language; moreover, given the concurrence between prepositional phrases and synthetic forms in the expression of cases, prepositions have gradually taken over the part that was initially fulfilled by case morphemes. Hence, while, in the beginning, prepositions were associated to accusative and ablative marks, some prepositions, i.e. *de* and *ad*, were subsequently established as marks of genitive and dative.

Additionally, the grammatical evolution was paralleled by a restructuring of the prepositional system, as some prepositions disappeared and other prepositional items gradually emerged. We must emphasize that the evolution of the prepositional system also continued in Romance languages, as a more complex process, since interlinguistic borrowings also appeared besides other development processes, as some prepositions migrated from one language to another.

Therefore, prepositions have undergone several syntactic and semantic changes. With the extended use of prepositions, the semantic values expressed by them also gained in diversity. Thus, the prepositions *de* and *ad* evolved, from their initial partitive and, respectively, directional values, to a wide range of meanings such as the origin or category of an element, the material of which an object is made, the destination etc. Moreover, based on the expression of partition through the preposition *de*, as a consequence of Latin inheritance, as well as the partitive article specific to French and Italian, a new category of prepositions has emerged in Romanian, i.e. *partitive prepositions*, presented in detail by Isabela Nedelcu in “Observații asupra utilizării prepozițiilor «partitive» din și dintre” (2007).
Furthermore, our analysis underlines that the main semantic value of dative, of assignment, was best preserved in all Romance languages, with various means of expression: through analytical prepositional phrases in Italian and French, but through synthetic forms in literary Romanian (which stands out as it has inherited the Latin language pattern). However, the diversity of expression of case forms in Romanian language is also supported by the possibility to convey dative by means of prepositional phrases with *la* or *caţre* (less frequently, in constructions with ‘dicendi’ verbs) in some linguistic registers (dialectal or colloquial), as the preposition *la* is also used in literary language, but under certain conditions (for instance, in numeral constructions).

Our analysis also outlines that grammaticalization has a major contribution to the completion of the grammatical role of prepositions; thereby, prepositions acquire the status of functional components with an exclusively grammatical role, thus losing their lexical autonomy. Moreover, compared to compound prepositions and prepositional phrases, simple prepositions are more prone to grammaticalization, given their vague meaning, dependent on the linguistic context. Thus, the prepositions become marks of grammatical cases or syntactic functions (for instance, *a*, *de*, *la* and *pe*).

Drawing a comparison between the evolution in the use of prepositions in Latin and Romanian, we find out that things develop differently. Thus, while Latin, renowned for its mostly synthetic (inflected) linguistic system, only focuses on prepositions in popular and late Latin, through the extended use of prepositional constructions and the analytical marking of cases by means of prepositions, Romanian language evolved differently in what regards the expression of case relations. In old Romanian, compared to the current phase of the language, prepositions show a more diverse use in case marking (the prepositions *a*, *de* and *la* for the analytical expression of genitive and *a* and *la* for the expression of dative or, more accurately, for making up prepositional constructions equivalent to genitive and dative), whereas contemporary guidelines recommend the synthetic forms and only accept analytical forms with prepositional constructions under certain conditions, as we mention in the fifth chapter.

After describing the evolution of the role of prepositions from Latin to Romanian, our diachronic focus continues with an analysis of the approaches to prepositions present in major Romanian language grammar works during 1757-2013. From a terminological point of view, the inventory of terms used until the establishment of the current form – *prepoziție* – includes thirteen different versions (three phrases and ten terms). At the same time, we can see an evolution not only regarding the names coined for the preposition, but also regarding the various methods to define this lexical category, which underline the position of prepositions related to
the nominal they precede and, especially, their syntactic role within the prepositional group of which they are a member.

Besides, an evolution is also seen in the status of prepositions, mostly as the initial confusions between prepositions and prefixes or between prepositions and other word categories (especially conjunctions and adverbs) are discarded. The importance of prepositions is also emphasized by the multitude and variety of studies focusing on this class, which analyse both the status of prepositions in general and certain categories of prepositions, resulting in the diversification of classification criteria. A controversial aspect of prepositions lies in that many linguists consider them to be a non-notional, meaningless category. This is why prepositions are mostly acknowledged for their syntactic role as a connector, also being able to impose grammatical restrictions to the term they precede.

Thus, the utility of our diachronic approach (also emphasizing some contrastive issues, such as the particularities of Romanian language in using prepositions compared to other Romance languages) lies in the fact that it outlines a lot of aspects related to the evolution of prepositions from several points of view: of terminology, of definition methods, of the status and fulfilled role, as well as the more and more diverse approaches. The result of this endeavour is the description of the state of the research regarding prepositions, an indispensable starting point for the complex and comprehensive analysis we have envisaged and which also implied the transliteration of old grammars using the Cyrillic alphabet.

The second chapter, *The Preposition in Contemporary Romanian Language: Definition and Lexical and Grammatical Status*, mainly aims at proving the assumption posited in the first chapter regarding the evolution in the status of prepositions, with the general idea that the importance of prepositions is given by their role as connectors and by the analysis of prepositional groups, as the prevalent issues in recent studies on the topic. Generally, prepositions fall under the category of invariable words, with adverbs, conjunctions and interjections, and they are mostly similar to conjunctions, since they occur on the sentence level, they have no syntactic autonomy and they express a subordination relation; additionally, conjunctions can express coordination and can occur on the complex sentence level.

Furthermore, the analysis of studies on prepositions shows that the linguists do not have a unanimous approach regarding their syntactic and semantic status; prepositions are considered to be, on the one hand, a homogeneous class, with no syntactic autonomy and own meaning and, on the other hand, a heterogeneous class, with purely functional and meaningless elements (marks of cases and syntactic functions etc.), but also elements with a certain concrete or abstract meaning, mostly determined by the context.
Thus, on a syntactic level, things are quite clear regarding the behaviour of prepositions and their basic characteristics, such as the marking of grammatical cases (accusative, genitive and dative) and the lack of syntactic autonomy, whereby prepositions help establish dependence relations between a head and the subordinate term. Despite the many controversies related to the semantic aspects characteristic to prepositions, the descriptive and theoretical approach in this part of the work emphasizes that prepositions have a concrete or abstract semantic content, which is vague or well-determined, depending on the linguistic context of use. We conclude that, from a semantic point of view, one can establish a general feature of prepositions, a fundamental meaning, i.e. “marking the idea of relationship”. Therefore, prepositions represent a complex and diverse lexical and grammatical class, with many possibilities of use and interpretation, which also has, besides its indisputable functional (grammatical) role, a relational semantic role, also seen in the case of functional prepositions, with no semantic value.

As for the typology of prepositions, the diversification of classification criteria has resulted in the emergence of new types of prepositions or in renaming existing ones especially based on their semantic features: concrete, abstract, lexical, semi-lexical, partitive, complex, “of quality” etc.

Compared to other studies where prepositions are classified according to few criteria (most often based on the formal or case-based criterion), this work also contributes to the research on prepositions with an abundance and diversity of preposition classification criteria. The typology we present is comprehensive, as follows: based on the morpheme structure criterion (simple / mono-morphematic / non-analyzable prepositions, compound / analysable prepositions, prepositional phrases), based on the etymological criterion (primary and secondary prepositions, inherited from Latin, borrowed from French or proceeding from other word classes, through morphological category change), based on the age criterion (old / archaic, neological prepositions), based on the syntactic criterion / case system (prepositions with the accusative, genitive or dative) and in terms of combination possibilities, as well as the syntactic or semantic role fulfilled by the prepositions (functional, lexical and semi-lexical prepositions) or based on other criteria (“partitive” prepositions, complex prepositions, “quality” prepositions etc.).

While the first two chapters are the outcome of a mainly descriptive approach, the next two chapters – the third and the fourth – are based on an analytical focus, preceded by theoretical definitions and explanations regarding phrases which are specific to the corresponding language levels (phraseology and stylistics), supported by our own corpus, which was carefully selected according to the presented categories.

Thus, the third chapter, *The Preposition in Contemporary Romanian Phraseological Units and in Various Types of Linguistic Clichés*, aims at establishing the role of prepositions
as elements of phraseological units and phrases or linguistic clichés (greetings, thanks, wishes etc.). Our analysis is accompanied by conceptual framing and by the establishment of an inventory of phrases and linguistic clichés with prepositions, using phraseological dictionaries, relevant studies or online sources.

Analysing the behaviour of prepositions as elements of phraseological units, it can be seen that, of all the lexical combinations we have analysed, prepositional phrases present the largest number of usage specificities.

Prepositional phrases stand out not only through the compulsory presence of a prepositional component, but also by the fact that they fulfil the same grammatical role (as prepositions) in expressing syntactic subordination in a sentence.

Furthermore, the presence of prepositions is remarked especially when they represent an anomaly or a deviation from the usual syntactic behaviour of the verbs that are followed by the concerned preposition (for instance, the phrase *a băga de seamă* ‘to notice’ has become established as such, but the preposition *de* only appears after the verb *a băga* in this lexical set phrase). The semantic signification of prepositions is also proven by the fact that the presence of a certain preposition may change the global meaning of some phrases (see the verbal phrases *a băga de seamă* ‘to notice’ vs. *a băga în seamă* ‘to greet, to talk to someone; to pay attention to someone or something’, as well as their corresponding noun phrases *nebăgare de seamă* ‘lack of attention’ vs. *nebăgare în seamă* ‘lack of consideration’). At the same time, the simple presence or absence of prepositions from such set phrases may result in semantic changes in such groups (see *a da gol* ‘to score’ [sports] vs. *a da de gol* ‘to unmask’). Moreover, the examples above emphasize the idea that, in some cases, prepositions also help form new phrases starting from already existing ones, mostly noun phrases deriving from verbal phrases which do not have a prepositional component (see *a-și bate joc* ‘to mock’ > *bătaie de joc* ‘mockery’). Besides the preposition *de*, whose utility is proven especially in phraseological derivation, we must also mention the importance and specificity of the compound preposition *de-a* for the formation of adverbial phrases (*de-a bușilea, de-a dreptul* etc.).

We emphasize that, in terms of usage of prepositions, the most varied phrases are verbal ones, where most Romanian prepositions appear, with a wide range of combination possibilities. Moreover, verbal phrases stand out through a special category, that of prepositional verbal phrases, where a compulsory preposition is placed at the end, following the pattern of prepositional verbs (for example, *a avea de-a face cu*).

As for prepositional functioning types within idioms, considerably less preposition-determined transformations stand out. From a syntactic point of view, the prepositional element does not have a particular behaviour in terms of word order or on a structural, syntactic or
semantic level, as it happens in set phrases. However, the importance of prepositions is mostly
given by their presence in comparative expressions such as *ca la carte*, where the prepositional
element *ca* is indispensable.

These aspects also prove that prepositions are not involved just in the formation of set
phrases, but also in coining linguistic clichés, where they appear as central connecting elements,
especially in structures specific to journalistic and advertising language (mostly the preposition *de*),
as well as introductory elements in greeting, thanking or wishing formulae (mostly the
prepositions *cu, la, pe*). Hence, our purpose is to prove the diversity of usage of prepositions in
various contexts, as elements of set phrases or phrases that are frequently used and are about to
be established as such.

**The fourth chapter, The Preposition in the Functional Styles of Romanian Language**, mostly focuses on the semantic and functional behaviour of prepositions in contexts found in the
functional styles of Romanian language. Prepositions appear in such constructions to a lower or
higher extent.

Thus, the literary style is more permissive regarding the presence of prepositions, as it also
accepts the use of obsolete forms (*dimpreună cu*), as well as the substitution of prepositions in
idioms (*a stat puțintel la gânduri*, instead of *a stat puțintel pe gânduri* ‘s/he thought it through’).
At the same time, artistic language often shows a preference for prepositional constructions (e. g.
*picior de plai* – a phrase coined by the introduction of the famous Romanian ballad “Miorița”,
with the approximate meaning of ‘stripe of land’, but practically untranslatable to other
languages) instead of synthetic forms.

Compared to other functional styles of Romanian, the scientific style does not stand out in
terms of prepositional usage. However, scientific language records a high number of lexical
constructions with the preposition *de*, as well as other prepositional occurrences (*cu, în and la*).
The use of prepositions is also seen in the connectors specific to scientific works (such as *în
concluzie* ‘in conclusion’, *în primul rând* ‘in the first place’, *pe de altă parte* ‘on the other hand’
etc.).

The legal and administrative style, instead, stands out through the use of stereotyped
formulae including certain prepositions and prepositional phrases (such as *în conformitate cu* ‘in
accordance with’, *în termen de* ‘within’ etc.), as well as the frequency of dative-determining
prepositions such as *conform* and *potrivit*, and many phrases with *de*. The last two features are
also specific to the journalistic style, where elliptic constructions can be noticed, mainly based
on the ellipse of *de* or *cu*.

Among the particularities of colloquial language, we remind the frequency of prepositional
verbs and prepositional verbal phrases. Another feature is the preference for prepositional
constructions (especially when expressing genitive and dative) to the detriment of literary synthetic forms. Moreover, the use of *pe* has extended in the familiar style, instead of other prepositions (*pe centru* ‘in the centre [of the city]’, *pe tren* ‘on the train’ etc.).

As for argotic constructions with prepositions, mostly modal constructions with the preposition *la* (such as *la ușcheală* ‘on the run’ etc.) and the expressive superlative formed with *de* (such as *marfă de marfă* ‘extremely cool’) should be outlined, some of which have gradually entered colloquial language.

Analysing prepositions in the advertising language, especially in names of commercial products, the following aspects stand out: the omission of the prepositions *de*, *din* or *pentru* (examples such as *Condimente sarmale* ‘meatball spices’). Moreover, from a semantic point of view, the utility of prepositions is seen in the fact that they help indicate source or origin (*Brânză de Moeciu* ‘Moeciu cheese’), the usage purpose of the product (*Smântână pentru gătit* ‘whipping cream’), content (*Urdă cu smântână* ‘ricotta with cream’) or serving suggestions (*Cârnați de bere* ‘sausages for beer’) etc.

All the analysed examples prove, on the one hand, the productivity of prepositions, through the wide variety of usage on this language level and, on the other hand, show that prepositions surpass their strictly grammatical role of expressing subordination and significantly contribute to establishing the unitary meaning of the concerned lexical groups.

The fifth chapter, *Norms and Tendencies in the Use of Prepositions in Contemporary Romanian Language*, is mostly a normative one, focused on an analysis of the relationship between guidance and use regarding the class of prepositions in contemporary Romanian. This part of the work also presents the tendencies seen in the usage of prepositions, as well as the most frequent errors involving prepositions.

Firstly, the main guidelines imposed by academic works in terms of preposition use in contemporary Romanian are summarized. We propose an approach focused on language dynamics and we also outline the main types of linguistic variations found in the usage of prepositions (syntactic, semantic, sociolinguistic and register variations), along with representative examples of current language use. Thus, syntactic variations consist of differences between the synthetic expression of grammatical cases and the analytic expression by means of prepositional phrases, along with variations in the required prepositions of verbs, while semantic variations are represented by the differences of meaning generated by prepositional substitution, and sociolinguistic and register variations reflect the diastatic variation and language peculiarities determined by sociocultural factors.

Analysing the selected examples, we find that the use of prepositions implies many deviations from the guidelines: cases of mutual substitution of prepositions, omission of
prepositions in certain linguistic contexts, the redundant presence of prepositions in explicit morphosyntactic patterns, as well as other types of mistakes in the use of certain prepositions and prepositional phrases (mostly for expressing genitive and dative).

Moreover, this chapter proves the existence of certain trends in the usage of prepositions in Romanian language: the omission trend due to various factors – suppression of prepositions / the subordination is not marked by means of a preposition and the synthetic trend in marking genitive and dative in standard Romanian, along with the analytical trend in non-standard language variants, all accompanied by examples from online sources or from the transcription of television broadcasts, which reflects the contemporaneity of such linguistic items.

**Results of the research**

Concretely, our analysis has resulted in linguistic remarks along several perspectives:

(i) on a **descriptive-analytical** level: the analysis of representative examples for the use of prepositions and the observation of specific trends of current linguistic use; the establishment of the users’ preferences in the case of concurrent prepositions in the same linguistic context; the establishment of extended syntactic patterns with prepositions, sometimes resulting in clichés, and the use of certain prepositions or semantic extensions (for instance, in the case of *pe*);

(ii) on a **normative** level: the relationship between guidance and use regarding Romanian prepositions, based on representative examples for the current status of the language; presenting the most frequent errors found in the use of prepositions, also favoured by their wide use in audiovisual media or online press; the efficiency of examples and observations both from a descriptive (outlining the most frequent and representative instances of the presented situation) and from an applied point of view (contributing to the development of current Romanian language);

(iii) on a **theoretical** and **methodological** level: proving the efficiency of adequate and modern research methods, based on a functional and interdisciplinary approach to prepositions, by analysing their behaviour on various language levels as well as in a unitary manner, within the linguistic system; matching the grammatical to the pragmatic perspective, highly significant and useful with a view to outlining language changes and discursive and stylistic manifestations, as well as in order to establish the diachronic perspectives on prepositions, of which the most significant also have a synchronic impact;

(iv) on an **applied** level: proving the actuality and utility of the chosen topic, especially in the context of the latest usage trends, with a view to raising awareness on the correct use of prepositions in Romanian language and even new on new approaches to prepositions in research.
Additionally, our research was also materialized in communications presented in scientific events, symposia and conferences („Alb de Purcari” ori „Negru de Drăgășani”? Câteva observații cu privire la ocurențele prepoziționale în cadrul sintagmelor care denumesc produse comerciale (2018); Norm and linguistic variation in expressing the genitive and the dative in contemporary Romanian language (2018); On several types of mistakes in the use of prepositions in contemporary Romanian language: omission and redundancy (2019)), as well as articles in collective volumes or journals (Considerații privind utilizările prepoziției la în limba română (2014); Prepoziția în argoul românesc (2015); Statutul sintactico-semantic al prepoziției în limba română (2015); Prepoziția în frazeologie (2017); Reprezentări ale prepoziției în literatura lingvistică românească. Privire diacronică (2018); Tendințe în utilizarea prepozițiilor în limba română (2018); Aspecte normative și tendințe în utilizarea prepoziției pe în limba română actuală. Privire sintetică (2019, co-authored by Cecilia-Mihaela Popescu)), along with studies dealing with prepositions on other language levels than those approached in this dissertation (The specificity of Romanian compound anthroponyms containing prepositions (2015); Prepoziția în toponimia românească. Frecvență, topică și comportament morfosintactic și semantic (2018)), which proves the high interest in the category of prepositions and especially the analysis of this topic from diverse viewpoints, sometimes in a novel manner, and consistently based on a different structuring than the one generally found in similar works.

Finally, we can outline the utility of this work with several arguments, such as: the chronological presentation of the most important works of Romanian grammar during 1757-2013 (including grammars written in the Cyrillic alphabet), the original approach to prepositions by restructuring aspects found in other works on the same topic, as well as the novel analysis of prepositions in context by describing language levels which are not generally considered in works on prepositions (phraseology and stylistics) and, last but not least, the study on contemporary Romanian language on various levels, based on actual (not artificial) linguistic examples (mostly seen in the fourth and fifth chapters).