Borrowing in Romanian

A Lexical, Morphological, and Syntactic Approach

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This article offers a three-pronged, diachronic analysis of borrowing in Romanian, examining not only lexical loans but also morphological and syntactic borrowing. Donor languages considered in the present study are limited to German, Slavic, Hungarian, and Romani. A survey of the relevant literature demonstrates that Romanian has been extensively influenced by neighboring languages and that this influence has taken the form of morphological and syntactic borrowings, in addition to more traditional loanwords. After a general, conceptual overview of borrowing is presented, German, Slavic, Hungarian, and Romani links to Romanian are discussed, along with a specific borrowing framework: the Balkan sprachbund.

Romania—an Eastern European nation about the size of Oregon, with a population of approximately twenty million—has stood at the crossroads of empires for much of its history. As the journalist Robert Kaplan (2016) notes, "Romania was . . . the ultimate marchland, a vast territory . . . constituting the frontier extremities of the Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian empires, even as the language itself signaled a longing for the Latin West" (p. 25). Consequently, the Romanian people and their national language, Romanian (which belongs to the Romance family, thus signaling "a longing for the Latin West"), have had sustained contact with many different cultures and peoples over the centuries. The list of Romania's former occupiers and rulers is a long one and includes Germans, Slavs, and Hungarians. The more mobile Romani-speaking Roma, while never a part of the ruling class, have also been a significant presence on Romanian territory for centuries.

What sets these groups (i.e., the Germans, Slavs, Hungarians, and Roma) apart from others whose languages have influenced Romanian is the *duration* of their contact. Because the Germans, Slavs, Hungarians, and Roma have been in contact with Romanians for so long, the borrowing of words from their languages into Romanian has been a robustly "bottom-up" phenomenon. These borrowings are therefore more interesting to study—from the perspective of historical linguistics—than the borrowing of words from languages whose speakers have had a less robust history of contact with Romanian.

For instance, French loanwords account for at least twelve percent of the Romanian lexicon (Schulte, 2009). Why, then, am I not looking at French data? The reason is that the French have no history of sustained interaction (e.g., settlement) with Romanians. Most French loanwords were borrowed during the nineteenth century by elite Romanians who wanted their country to more closely align with Western Europe (Schulte, 2009). Since French was then the language of diplomacy, it made sense to enact their alignment with Western Europe by using French. Overall, this history does not suggest a bottom-up, organic French-Romanian borrowing process. In this article, then, I demonstrate that German, Slavic, Hungarian, and Romani influence on Romanian has been extensive and has involved not only the loaning of words but also morphological and syntactic borrowing. I proceed by first giving a brief, general overview of borrowing. I then detail

German, Slavic, Hungarian, and Romani influences on Romanian before closing with a discussion of the Balkan *sprachbund*.

An Overview of Borrowing as a General Linguistic Phenomenon

Borrowing is widespread cross-linguistically and generally involves some degree of bilingualism on the part of speakers from both the donor and recipient languages. Borrowing involves more than simple additions to one language's lexicon from another's (Campbell, 2013). Indeed, morphology and syntax can be borrowed too, along with entirely new phonemes, semantic associations, discourse strategies, and so forth (Both, 2015; Campbell, 2013). (A brief note on terminology: throughout the article, I use the terms *borrowing, loan*, and *loanword* interchangeably; each refers to the result of the borrowing process in the recipient language.)

Lexical borrowing is by far the most common kind of borrowing and is very much worth studying. However, lexical borrowing should not be studied to the exclusion of all other loaning processes. Borrowing is generally motivated by either prestige or need (Greavu, 2013). I will now examine each factor in turn. What exactly is cultural prestige? And why do some languages have this kind of cachet and others do not? The simple answer is that in almost all situations of language contact, there is a hierarchy. The language of the ruling entity appears more attractive (prestigious) because it offers potential access to that power and creates a pathway to the ruling class. Interestingly, many prestige loanwords create redundancies in the recipient language's lexicon. As Greavu (2013) points out, "In situations where borrowing takes place for reasons of prestige or fashion, the recipient language also borrows words for which it has almost perfect equivalents" (p. 146). For this reason, some speakers have considered prestige borrowing lazy or unnecessary. Nonetheless, it often meets real and pressing sociopolitical needs[1] (e.g., the conquered Anglo-Saxons trying to ingratiate themselves, in a sense, with their new Norman French rulers by borrowing from French).

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1. Additionally, "redundant" borrowing can meet unexpected linguistic needs; Schulte (2009) observes that "synonym pairs created by borrowing can come to contain complex and unpredictable semantic and sociopragmatic nuances that go beyond their lexical meaning" (p. 244).

Need factors, on the other hand, involve a lexical gap—some linguistic hole that needs filling. For instance, it is very common for languages around the world to borrow English high technology vocabulary since much of this technology was invented in the United States; the words *computer, telephone*, and *internet* have all been directly borrowed into Romanian from English. And yet, the line between need and prestige factors is not always very clear-cut (Greavu, 2013). This is obvious in the high technology example. Although Americans "created" a lexical gap in Romanian by inventing a new thing (like a computer) that needed a label, that need could have ostensibly been met language-internally. It was the prestige, then, of English as a modern, global language that caused the gap to be filled with an English word.

Importantly, Benő (2017) asserts that need factors can come in all shapes and sizes—and sometimes, non-economic ones (i.e., literary or metaphoric needs) have been ignored in studies of language contact. One example he gives concerns color categorization. Although languages do not usually borrow words for basic colors, they do borrow terms for more nuanced shades and fine-tuned categorizations. Benő (2017) provides examples of this borrowing phenomenon from Hungarian. While expanded color palettes might not be considered strictly necessary in the physical sense, they do fulfill certain artistic needs, "enriching the structure of meaning of a concept with a lexeme denoting stylistic and expressive value" (Benő, 2017, p. 58).

Foreign Influences on Romanian

I will begin this section by providing a brief historical overview of German-Romanian contact in both the Transylvania and Banat regions of the country. I will focus especially on the history of the Transylvanian Saxons, an ethnic group whose presence in the heart of Romanian for many centuries was the vehicle for a large number of German borrowings into Romanian (Zwanenburg, 2006). All subsequent language sections will follow a similar pattern, with a historical introduction preceding a technical description of the given language's contributions to Romanian.

German

Beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, German settlers were granted special permission from the Hungarian rulers of Transylvania to settle in the region, along the inner edge of the

Carpathian Mountains (Schulte, 2009; Zwanenburg, 2006). For the most part, these settlers kept to themselves, existing largely in separate cultural and linguistic spheres from their Romanian and Hungarian neighbors. Consequently, contact between these German and Romanian inhabitants of Transylvania generally occurred in only commercial settings (Schulte, 2009).

Much later, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more German settlers arrived in Romania's Banat region, located in the far southwestern corner of the country along its present-day border with Serbia (Zwanenburg, 2006). In this instance, Habsburg rulers were the ones encouraging German colonization; Germans who settled here were known as Banat Swabians (Zwanenburg, 2006). The Romanian-German contact situation in Banat was nearly identical to that which existed in Transylvania, with German settlers retaining much of their language and culture.

Linguistic and cultural isolation notwithstanding, borrowing from German into Romanian still took place. Zwanenburg notes that "Transylvanian Saxons introduced many German words into Romanian from the twelfth century on," although "the diffusion of these words is limited to the Transylvanian dialects or . . . professional language" (2006, p. 258). In Romanian overall, some 1.6 percent of words have German origins, according to Schulte (2009).

Borrowings from these two groups of settlers—Banat and Transylvanian—can be broadly placed into two groups: a smaller one, containing words introduced by Saxons or Swabians which are now used widely across the entire Romanian territory, and a larger group of loanwords which are only regionalisms, limited in use to mainly the former Austrian-Hungarian territories of Transylvania and Banat (Zwanenburg, 2006).

Later still, in what Schulte (2009) calls a "separate contact situation" (p. 237) that began during the second half of the nineteenth century, German contributed many so-called "learned vocabulary" words (but no affixes) to Romanian. While French was the primary contributor of these sorts of prestige loans, Romania's cultural pivot toward Western Europe also invited German words into the lexicon because many elites would travel and study in Germany. This stands in contrast to other languages like Hungarian and Slavic that have contributed both words and affixes (Zwanenburg, 2006).

Overall, these data points about German vocabulary contributions are key because they show how the borrowing process can penetrate various registers of a language differently. Aside from its lexical influence, some scholars have also described a German phonetic influence on Romanian that has impacted diphthongization in southern Transylvania and south of the Carpathians (Zwanenburg, 2006). However, according to Zwanenburg, these phenomena are not well-attested.

Finally, regional place-name data help to demonstrate the complexities of language contact patterns, and show how German was, in some sense, competing with other languages for influence on Romanian. For example, some cities in the Transylvanian Saxon heartland have four names, one for each language (German, Hungarian, Latin, and Romanian). One such city is Sibiu, known variously as *Hermannstadt*, *Nagyszeben*, *Cibinium*, and *Sibiu*.

Slavic

Slavic-speaking peoples share a longer and more extensive history with the Romanians than the Germans do.[2] The first Slavic contacts began between the sixth and eighth centuries, when the Avar people occupied areas north of the Danube (Schulte, 2009). While the Avar ruling class was exclusively Turkic, those Avars who moved into Romanian territory were primarily ethnic Slavs, who did not belong to the ruling class. Neither the Slavs nor the Romanians were culturally dominant over the other, and so there was a great deal of cohabitation and day-to-day interaction between these peoples in their respective languages (Schulte, 2009).

Toward the end of the ninth century there was another influx of Slavs into the Balkan Peninsula. This group spoke South Slavic and became highly integrated with the local Romanian population. The large number of lexical items and morphosyntactic structures shared between modern Romanian and Bulgarian-Macedonian indicates "that there was a high degree of bilingualism in this mixed population in the entire [contact] area" (Schulte, 2009, p. 235).

Migration was not the only borrowing catalyst. Because Romanians are Eastern Orthodox Christians like the Slavic peoples,

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2. It is perhaps appropriate then that the traditional Romanian term for 'German,' *neamț*, comes from Slavic, although today the word coexists in a synonym pair with the more prosaic *german*.

religion provided another ready channel through which Slavic loanwords could enter Romanian. Old Church Slavonic was the exclusive language of the church in Romania from the ninth to the seventeenth century (Schulte, 2009). This fact helped make South Slavic a more prestigious language; its prestige is especially evident in the large number of words it contributed to the semantic domain of religious beliefs and practices in Romanian (Schulte, 2009).

Approximately 14.6 percent of Romanian vocabulary is of Slavic origin (Schulte, 2009). The breakdown of Slavic loanwords is as follows: 8.4 percent of all words are borrowed from South Slavic with no particular regional provenance; 5.4 percent from Bulgarian, Serbian, or both; 0.7 percent from Ukrainian; and a few items from Russian and Polish. The total percentage of loanwords from Slavic sources is thus 14.6 percent, which is approximately one-seventh of the words in the Romanian database that Schulte (2009) compiled.

Importantly—and in contrast with German—there has also been a good deal of Slavic influence on Romanian morphology (Maiden, 2021) in addition to its lexical influences that I have described. Maiden (2021) lists several examples of borrowed derivational affixes, including the iterative prefix *răs-* (e.g., *a răsciti* 'to read and re-read'), the adjectival or agentive suffix *-nic* (e.g., *obraznic* 'cheeky,' *zilnic* 'daily'), the feminine diminutive or agentive suffix *-iță* (e.g., *fetiță* 'little girl,' *actriță* 'actress'), and the feminine ethnic suffix *-că* (e.g., *româncă* 'Romanian woman'). Examples of borrowed inflectional affixes are harder to find (Maiden, 2021), but the feminine vocative case ending *-o* is one indisputable case of Slavic morphological influence (e.g. *soră* 'girl,' *soro* vocative).

It should be noted in closing that Romanians have always been keener on emphasizing their connections to Latinity, the West, and Roman civilization than highlighting their connections with Slavic peoples. This desire has at times influenced the way Romanian philologists and linguists tell the story of their language's history and development. While some have tried to downplay Slavic influences on Romanian, their significance is indisputable—even the Romanian word for 'yes' (*da*) is borrowed from Slavic.

Hungarian

Hungarian-Romanian contact has taken place almost entirely within the Transylvania region of western Romania; the relationship between these two peoples was historically contentious

(especially because Transylvania used to belong to the Austro-Hungarian empire) and remains somewhat so today. The nature of the semantic fields into which most Hungarian loanwords are categorized reflects both the legacy of these fraught interactions and Hungarian rule in Transylvania.

Ethnic Hungarians, known as Magyars, first began moving into the Carpathian Mountain region during the late ninth century (Schulte, 2009). Unlike the Slavs, Hungarians kept to themselves, much as the Transylvanian Saxon settlers would do in the future. They lived in separate villages, maintaining their own distinct culture and language. (There are still large numbers of relatively isolated ethnic Hungarians living in Transylvania today.) From a language contact perspective, this means that opportunities for borrowing occurred mostly in trading and other commercial contexts (Schulte, 2009).

The Hungarian scholars Benő (2017) and Both (2015) each provide a foundation for understanding which kinds of words were borrowed into Romanian, why they were borrowed, and how they were phonetically adapted to fit Romanian phonotactics. For example, Both (2015) notes that "we can speak of two layers of Hungarian influence: an older layer which contains general words which were spread in the whole of the language, and another layer represented by dialectal words, limited to the Transylvanian area" (p. 120). Interestingly, but perhaps not very surprisingly, this is similar to the borrowing pattern observed earlier with German loanwords, in which only a small subset of the total words loaned spreads beyond the "regionalism" level.

Overall, Hungarian loanwords comprise 1.6 percent of the Romanian lexicon. Certain semantic fields have been more heavily influenced by Hungarian than others. For example, the semantic field with the highest proportion of Hungarian loanwords is social and political relations; 6.5 percent of the Romanian vocabulary in this domain comes from Hungarian (Schulte, 2009). This "can be attributed to the fact that Transylvania was under Hungarian influence or rule between the eleventh and the twentieth centuries" (Schulte, 2009, p. 245).

Romani

The history of the Roma people in Romania is not a happy one, nor is it particularly well-documented. What little is known about early Roma history in the Balkans (and the rest of Europe,

for that matter) is due to linguistic analysis (Achim, 1998).[3] The presence of Roma is attested for the first time in an official document in Wallachia (southern Romania) in 1385, in Transylvania around the year 1400, and in Moldavia (eastern Romania) in 1428 (Achim, 1998). The Roma were enslaved from almost the moment they arrived on Romanian lands during the fourteenth century and were not emancipated until the middle of the nineteenth century (Achim, 1998).

Because of the historically low status of the Roma people, their language lacked prestige. Consequently, most Romani loanwords today are slang or sometimes vulgar terms, and even if a given Romani loanword is not slang, it most likely still has a negative association (Leschber, 1995). Just as some have tried to downplay Romanian's Slavic connections, others, including the Romanian state itself, have sought to "erase" Romani's ties to Romanian. In fact, according to Leschber (1995), "in the post-1947 [Communist] era, the subject of Romani etymologies was taboo in Romania" (p. 152). Thus, it was not until after the 1989 revolution that work on Romani-Romanian contact began to be published again.

According to Leschber's (1995) sociolinguistic fieldwork with dozens of native Romanian speakers, some of the most widely used Romanian terms of Romani origin include terms such as the following: *mişto* 'cool,' *machit* adj. 'drunk,' *a se matoli* 'to get boozed up,' *nasol* 'terrible, awful,' and *ticalos* 'wicked, bad, false.' Thus, with the exception of the first word in the list, Leschber's observation about Romani borrowings' negative semantic bent seems to bear out.

Tying it (All) Together: The *Sprachbund*

The Balkan language area is the classic, textbook case of a *sprachbund*, or language area. Its features have been extensively documented and studied. Joseph (2020) comprehensively enumerates

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3. As Achim (1998) notes, "After centuries in which the most varied and lurid explanations were advanced for the origins and history of this people, with racial and cultural characteristics different to those of the peoples of Europe, in the second half of the eighteenth century comparative philology discovered the similarity between [Romani] and Sanskrit. On the basis of this discovery, German scholar H. M. G. Grellmann concluded in the first modern scientific work dedicated to the Gypsies, which appeared in 1783, that the Gypsy population was of Indian origin" (p. 7).

Balkanisms (convergent features of this language area) and his list contains much more than only lexical items, thus providing evidence for my thesis that Romanian has borrowed morphological and syntactic features from its linguistic features as well. While Slavic and Romani are the only languages of the four considered here that are traditionally considered Balkan languages, I nonetheless think that it is important to include this brief section on Balkan areal linguistics because this contact zone was an important driver of certain Romanian borrowings.

Some of the most important Balkanisms found in Romanian include a central vowel /ɨ/, syncretism of dative and genitive cases, postposed (enclitic) articles, a periphrastic future tense, a periphrastic perfect tense, and finally object doubling (where direct or indirect objects are doubly expressed, as in the Romanian phrase *i-am scris lui* 'I wrote him,' but literally it is 'to.him-I wrote him' (Joseph, 2020; Campbell, 2013). While it is not known exactly how these structural features became a part of Romanian, the explanation for many of them is most likely contact with (borrowing from) other Balkan languages. The enclitic article, for example, is not a feature of Latin nor any modern Romance language and thus could not have been inherited.

Conclusion

I have shown that Romanian was influenced extensively by German, Slavic, Hungarian, and Romani, and that these borrowing processes involved not only the loaning of words but morphological and syntactic loans as well. What, then, does this robust foreign element in Romanian mean for the language? Schulte (2009) observes that "having borrowed from a considerable number of languages over the centuries, Romanian can serve as an example of a language with a high degree of lexical permeability" (p. 249). So, to what degree can Romanian be called a Romance language? Genetically, it is descended from Latin, but what are the implications, if any, of its high lexical permeability and hybrid lexicon? For my part, I think that this evident linguistic flexibility has allowed the Romanian language to flourish as a "Latin island in a Slavic sea," keeping its core Latin elements while also taking on more unique Slavic, Hungarian, Germanic, and Romani flavors.

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