

**On a Phraseological Contamination within Romanian Journalistic  
Contexts: *a se duce pe apa Dunării* ('to be wasted')**

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**Abstract:** Not only the water of the Danube itself is currently contaminated with toxic elements, but also the positive symbolic halo which was once associated with this river. Thus, unlike in the old times, when the Danube was divinised as a saint river, it is becoming more and more a desacralized space. This tendency can also be observed, for instance, in the way in which its name is used in all kinds of puns which are found in the journalistic style, mainly in allusive journalistic headlines. I refer to a well-known procedure, by means of which journalists try to attract a certain category of readers. In my paper I will examine the way in which a Romanian idiom (having negative connotations), *a se duce pe apa Sâmbetei* (literally: "to go down the water of Saturday") 'to be wasted', underwent a formal transformation, namely a substitution, and finally resulted in the phrase *a se duce pe apa Dunării* (literally: "to go down the water of the Danube"). In this case, as well, one can find in journalistic headlines a series of motivated modifications or adaptations of the respective phrase, according to the topic of the journalistic report.

**Keywords:** The Danube, idioms, phraseological contamination, journalistic headlines, motivated modifications

1. First of all, we must note that the Danube represented for the Romanians (mainly for their ancestors), for a long time, a sacred river, a divinity. This fact is convincingly supported, among other specialists, by Romulus Vulcănescu: "In the mythical conscience of the Romanians the Danube is represented both as *a sacred river*, as *an aquatic divinity* (similar to the ancient ones) and as *a mirific border*. As a sacred river and as an aquatic divinity, it can listen to, talk with those that ask for its help, but it can also defend and avenge the Dacians, Daco-Romans and Romanians against their permanent and accidental enemies. Its sacred character as a protective river is proved by the legends, ballads and stories about the Danube." (Vulcănescu, 1987, p. 476). From what we know, in such cases, taking the name of a sacred reality in vain or using it pejoratively was not recommended. But, in time, as we will later see, it seems that the attitude of most Romanians towards this river and its name has changed quite a lot.

2. We will now refer to another reality, which belongs to a negative dimension in the ensemble of the Romanian beliefs. It is about the term *sâmbătă* 'Saturday', which was associated only with bad omens at the Romanians. As a day in itself,

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Saturday represented the death of the week, unlike Sunday, seen as the birth of the week. It was not good luck if one started or made an important job, dug a well, started a journey or had a wedding on this day, etc. In fact, Saturday is still the day when the dead are commemorated. In the Romanian mythology, Saturday (just as the other days) is personified as *Sfânta Sâmbătă* ‘Saint Saturday’, as a (semi)divinity who lives in the woods and who tries to do harm to the travellers who got lost. What is more (as a Hebrew influence, it seems; cf. the river *Sambatyon*), in the same Romanian mythology there is *Apa Sâmbetei* ‘the River of Saturday’, a malefic, infernal river (similar to the Styx in the ancient Greeks’ beliefs), which flows towards Hell, as opposed to *Apa Duminicii* ‘the River of Sunday’, which is beneficial and flows towards Heaven. As an echo of this belief, the Romanian language coined the phrase *a se duce pe apa sâmbetei* ‘to be wasted/destroyed’<sup>1</sup>

3. At first sight, judging after the ancient Romanian beliefs, the Danube is more similar to *Apa Duminicii* and is opposed to *Apa Sâmbetei*. In other words, the Danube and *Apa Sâmbetei* seem to flow (according to the mythological “geography”) in totally different directions. Thus, their association seems to be a contradiction. And still, in DLRLC, an important dictionary of the Romanian language, we find the following entry: *a se duce pe apa sâmbetei* (or ~ *a Dunării*, ~ *a gârlei*), meaning ‘to die, to disappear’. In order to attest it, the authors of the respective dictionary provide (only one) quotation from the thick novel *Lanțuri* [*Chains*] (published in four volumes between 1950-1954), written by Ion Pas: „Dar dacă s-ar duce pe apa Dunării și a sâmbetei toți ciocoi, poate că n-ar fi rău!” (“If all the parvenus went down *the Danube* and *apa sâmbetei*, it wouldn’t be that bad!”). It must be mentioned that it is, to our best of knowledge, the only lexicographical entry in which the phrase *a se duce pe apa Dunării* appears as a variant of the idiom *a se duce pe apa sâmbetei*. However, a single quote does not justify the recording of the phrase *a se duce pe apa Dunării* as an idiom (even as a phraseological variant) in a dictionary. The lexicographical norms require that a certain phrase, in order for it to be considered a language unit, should benefit of more attestations. This may be the reason why we find the phrase *a se duce pe apa Dunării* only in the above mentioned dictionary.

3.1. Let us examine now more thoroughly the quotation from Ion Pas’ novel. In this literary context („Dar dacă s-ar duce pe apa Dunării și [pe ap]a sâmbetei...”), one can admit that the two phrases are in a relation of juxtaposed synonymy. Since the things that flow down water never come back, it does not matter too much which water it is. According to Heraclitus, *ta panta rhei* (“everything flows”)... Thus, in this case, the relationship between the two phrases is only based on the things they designate. Let us also notice that the order in which the two phrases

<sup>1</sup> See (Munteanu, 2011, pp. 42-50).

appear is not accidental. The former is *apa Dunării*, and the latter is *apa sâmbetei*, as if the Danube communicated with “*apa sâmbetei*”.

3.2. For an educated writer (as Ion Pas), the relation of the two phrases can only be semantic, leaving aside the connotative or symbolical association (even if we can notice the fact that the analysed quote refers to a character and not to the writer as such). In other words, Ion Pas knows that *apa sâmbetei* is something imaginary, while the Danube is as real as it can be. However, to an uneducated, naive person, influenced by magical thinking, „*apa sâmbetei*” is as real as the Danube. Consequently, the two realities, the two rivers can communicate quite easily. *Apa Dunării* can flow into *Apa Sâmbetei*. In this sense, we will present a relevant example which is not very old. In a volume devoted to deportations in Bărăgan (from the '50s) various statements of the people involved in the respective event are recorded. One of them is entitled *Vrajă în apa Borcei* [*Enchantment on the Borcea Branch*]. Someone narrates that, after his cart broke down on the way, he was forced to spend the night on the Danube bank (on the Borcea branch). During the night, he sees some women bathing in the Danube, and in the morning he finds some colourful pieces of cloth tied to his cart: „Eu le-am dezlegat și le-am dat drumul pe Dunăre, pe apa sâmbetei să se ducă. Și uite-așa nu s-o prins nimic de mine, nicio vrajă...” [“I untied them and I let them go on the Danube, to go on *apa sâmbetei*. And thus I could not be bewitched.”] (Marineasa et alii, 1996, p. 255-256) Accordingly, we can notice that the two rivers can communicate in the magical-mythological “geography” of the common people.

3.3. From what was said so far, it results that the two “realities” (as well as their corresponding phrases) can either be associated (1) *at a strictly semantic level*, by means of a common designation (see 3.1.), or (2) *at a mythical, magical level*, by means of a continuation of faith (see 3.2.). There can also be identified another type of relation or association: (3) *at the ludic level*, by evocation or motivated use of phrases. In what follows, we aim at only referring to the last type of relation, choosing examples only from the journalistic style. It is about a series of journalistic headlines in which the use of the phrases in question is motivated to a greater or lesser extent<sup>1</sup>. What is more, the respective phrases can frequently undergo formal changes in some contexts, according to the journalists' intentions.<sup>2</sup>

4. The phrases and idioms (also known as *phraseologisms*) belong to the sphere of the “repeated discourse”, a concept which was theorised by Eugenio Coseriu. The *repeated discourse* is for Coseriu “everything that is repeated in a community's speech in a more or less identical type of ready-made discourse of more or less fixed combination, as a long or short fragment of what has already been said” [my translation] (Coseriu, 1981, p. 298). This type of tradition is opposed to “the free

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<sup>1</sup> All the following examples have been taken from the on-line press, from sites accessed on 21.05.2016. They belong to journalistic articles published in the last decade.

<sup>2</sup> See (Munteanu, 2013a, pp. 116-128; Munteanu, 2013b, p. 11-19).

technique of discourse” (which comprises “the constituent elements of language and the «present» rules of combination and modification, that is «words», lexical and grammatical instruments and methods” [my translation]). Famous quotations, sayings, wellerisms (are studied in text linguistics), fixed expressions, terms of comparison and other such expressions are included in the sphere of RD (Coseriu, 1981, pp. 298-302).

4.1. The phrases which belong to RD can be modified according to Quintilian’s *quadripartita ratio*, which Stelian Dumistrăcel fully dealt with (see Dumistrăcel, 2006). Dumistrăcel is justified in saying that this type of phrases are submitted to changes that can be grouped in (only) the four “figures of construction” referred to as “solecisms” by Quintilian in *Institutio Oratoria: detractio* (suppression), *adiectio* (addition), *immutatio* (substitution) and *transmutatio* (permutation).

4.2. We illustrate them, on our account, with some Latin phrases and sayings:

(a) suppression – is used when, in some contexts, it is enough to say just *verba volant* or *scripta manent*, there being a left or right suppression of the phrase *verba volant, scripta manent*;

(b) addition – *homo homini lupus (est)* became in the Middle Ages *homo homini lupus (est)*, *femina feminae lupior*, *clericus clerico lupissimus*;

(c) substitution – Plautus’ formula, *homo homini lupus (est)* is changed at various classics in *homo homini deus est* (Caecilius) or *homo res sacra homini* (Seneca);

(d) permutation – *ubi bene, ibi patria* was inverted by nationalists: *ubi patria, ibi bene*.

All types of modification go under these four categories: there are not more (they are universal), just as there are only four cardinal points. Mixed situations are also common in speech (the so-called “chameleonic figures”); they are cases of combination of the above mentioned figures, just as in geography, where we orient ourselves according to coordinates such as NW, SE, N-NW, etc.

5. As regards journalistic headlines, one can notice that some newspapers, in order to attract their readers, make use of puns, allusions, thus using modified idioms. The most frequent ones are substitutions.

5.1. Here are some examples in which *Apa Dunării* ‘the River Danube’ replaces *apa sâmbetei*, because the events or the people involved are somehow related to the Danube:

(i) „Sâmbăta, moșia lui Dinescu *s-a dus pe apa Dunării*” [“On Saturday, Dinescu’s estate went down the Danube”]. It refers to the fictive speculations made by a blogger regarding the poet Mircea Dinescu’s estate with a mansion, situated on the

waterside of the Danube, in a place named Cetate, an estate which he may have lost on a Saturday as a result of not paying state taxes<sup>1</sup>.

(ii) „Primul transfer al lui Dinamo *s-a dus pe apa Dunării!*” [“The first of Dynamo’s transfers went down the Danube!”] (<http://www.prosport.ro>). Its motivation: the player Alexandru Giurgiu refused the offer of the football club Dinamo București, choosing instead the club Astra Giurgiu. Since the town of Giurgiu is situated on the Danube bank, the substitution is thus not accidental.

(iii) „Proiectul grecului *s-a dus pe apa... Dunării!*” [“The project of the Greek went down the... Danube!”] (<http://www.prosport.ro>). Its motivation: a marketing manager, the Greek Nikolaos Koropoulis, promised he would revive, by means of an ample project, the Sports Club Turnu Severin, but he did not manage to do it, since he did not have any financial support. As known, Turnu Severin is bordered by the Danube.

(iv) „Un miliard de euro *aruncat pe apa Dunării: Turbinele modernizate de la Porțile de Fier crapă una după alta*” [“A billion euros thrown down the Danube: The modernized turbines from the Iron Gates crack one after another”] (<http://www.economica.net>). The motivation is found in the very explicit headline.

5.2. If in the above cited examples the phrase is used figuratively, here are some cases in which concrete objects (and even concrete money) are lost in the Danube:

(i) „Pirita de la Valea Călugărească *se va duce pe apa Dunării!*” [“The pyrite from Valea Călugărească will go down the Danube!”] (<http://www.ziarulprahova.ro>). Its motivation: from the area of the former combine group of enterprises Romfosfochim Valea Călugărească, the pyrite gets literally, borne by the wind, in the Danube.

(ii) „De pe *apa sâmbetei, pe apa Dunării*” [“From *apa sâmbetei* to *apa Dunării*”] (<http://danielbotea.blogspot.ro>). Its motivation: It refers to a campaign of collecting and recycling plastic pet bottles, during which half of them (about 5000) were used for the construction of some boats, later launched on the Danube.

(iii) The headline of a piece of TV news (from 7.12.2015) is the following: „În Austria, banii nu *se duc pe apa Sâmbetei, ci pe a Dunării*” [“In Austria, money does not go down *apa sâmbetei*, but down the Danube.”]

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, such examples are also found in journalistic articles, not only in headlines; however, that does not happen so frequently. For instance, talking about the village of Rast, affected by flood, a TV reporter says the following: „Într-o noapte, 800 de familii s-au trezit în mijlocul puhoaielor, au privit neputincioși (sic!) cum *agoniseala de o viață se duce pe apa Dunării.*” [“One night, 800 families found themselves caught in the waters, seeing helplessly how *their life savings go down the Danube.*”] (<http://www.kanald.ro>). Or, on another TV channel, we find that hundreds of thousands of euros were spent on feasibility studies for the construction of six bridges over the Danube, but nothing concrete was made, since our politicians are irresponsible. Thus, the reporter concludes: „Banii s-au dus pe apa Dunării” [“The money went down the Danube!”] (<http://www.digi24.ro>).

(<https://www.youtube.com>). Its motivation: More than 100,000 euros were found floating on the Danube, in Austria, near Vienna.

5.3. There are also headlines in which we find apparently paradoxical formulations, such as those in which the phrase *a se duce pe apa sâmbetei* is used as such, while in the headline the reference or allusion is made to the Danube:

(i) „Mărfurile de pe Dunăre *s-au dus pe apa sâmbetei*” [“The goods on the Danube went down *apa sâmbetei*”] (<http://www.business24.ro>). Its motivation: It refers to a decrease in the traffic of goods in the ports of Brăila, Galați and Tulcea.

(ii) „Un sfert din transporturile pe Dunăre *s-au dus pe apa Sâmbetei*” [“A quarter of the transports on the Danube went down *apa Sâmbetei*”] (<http://www.viata-libera.ro>). It refers to a reduction in the naval traffic in the ports on the Danube.

(iii) „S-a dus pe *Apa Grea a Sâmbetei* – moștenirea nucleară pierdută a lui Nicolae Ceaușescu” [“It went down *the Heavy Water of Saturday* – Nicolae Ceaușescu’s lost nuclear inheritance”] (<http://adevarulfinanciar.ro>). Its motivation: It refers to the fact that Romania will no longer produce heavy water at the combine group of enterprises Romag – Drobeta-Turnu Severin. This example is even more interesting, since it is an example of addition, as well as substitution.

(iv) „FCM Dunărea *se duce pe apa sâmbetei*” [“FCM Dunărea goes down *apa sâmbetei*”] (<http://www.liga-1.ro>). Its motivation: The football team FCM Dunărea was then on the point of demoting.

(v) „Management defectuos la malul Dunării: 50 de jucători *s-au dus pe Apa Sâmbetei*” [“Faulty management on the Danube bank: 50 players went down *Apa Sâmbetei*”] (<http://liga2.prosport.ro>). Its motivation: The problems CS Turnu Severin encountered at one point because of some football players who had left the club.

5.4. But the most interesting headline, which contains a case of phraseological contamination, seems to be the following: „Gălățenii aruncă banii *pe Dunărea sâmbetei*” [“The inhabitants of Galați throw their money in *the Danube of Saturday*.”] (<http://www.catavencii.ro>). It refers to an article published in the magazine “Cațavencii” (from 25.06.2014), in which the former mayor of the city of Galați was harshly criticized for the waste of money which he was to make between 27th and 29th of June 2014 in the event of the organization of the festival “Dunărea noastră” [“Our Danube”].

6. Once, such puns would have been considered an impiety, a sacrilege addressed to a divinised or, at least, respected river. Given the fact that, lately, the Romanians (and people in general) have changed the way of looking at nature and its elements, the cult for the Danube has been irremediably affected. At the same time, notice must be made that the journalistic discourse has, in its turn, its features; that is why journalists sometimes take the liberty of making fun of sacred things, as well.

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