

Rediscovering Past Narrations: the Oral History of the Romanian Language Preserved Within the National Phonogramic Archive¹

Oana Niculescu, Maria Marin, Daniela Răuțu

Institutul de Lingvistică al Academiei Române „Iorgu Iordan - Alexandru Rosetti”

Calea 13 Septembrie 13, București 050711

{oeniculescu, dialectologie, danarautu}@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this presentation we aim to deliver a key message related to the preservation of the Romanian National Phonogramic Archive (AFLR). The data gathered within the Archive (the richest, most inclusive and diversified collection of dialectal texts and ethno-linguistic recordings in Romania) are of immeasurable documentary value. Through the digitization and preservation of AFLR we can gain access to both individual and collective memories, aiding to a better understanding of our cultural heritage on the one hand, and, on the other hand, restoring missing or forgotten pieces of Europe’s oral history.

Keywords: Romanian oral history, Phonogramic Archive, digitalization

Résumé

În această prezentare ne propunem să atragem atenția asupra necesității conservării și digitalizării Arhivei fonogramice a limbii române (AFLR). În momentul de față, AFLR este cea mai bogată și cuprinzătoare colecție de texte dialectale din România. Cu toate acestea, doar o treime din material a fost digitalizat, existând riscul ca benzile rămase să se deterioreze, ducând la pierderea înregistrărilor. Protejarea arhivei contribuie, pe de o parte, la recuperarea narațiunilor individuale și colective, iar, pe de altă parte, la înțelegerea și valorificarea patrimoniului cultural, respectiv redobândirea unor elemente pierdute sau uitate din istoria orală a Europei.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to raise awareness concerning the protection and preservation of the Romanian Phonogramic Archive (AFLR), a repository of the oral history of the country. At the present moment, there is an urgent need to digitalize the Archive in order to prevent further degradation or even possible loss of the entire collection.

2. Romanian – a brief presentation

Romanian is the only surviving Eastern-European Romance language (Rosetti, 1986), being the national language of Romania. It descends from the vernacular variant of Latin, branching into Daco-Romanian, spoken north of the Danube, and three south Danubian dialects, Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian, and Istro-Romanian. The northern dialect is what is usually referred to as Romanian, while the southern tongues have the status of oral dialects, abiding by the literary language of the country they are found in, such as Greek, Bulgarian, Croatian or Albanian. It is generally considered that the Daco-Romanian variety is either divided in two areas, north-west and south-east or it has five subdialects, corresponding to the provinces of Muntenia, Moldova, Crișana, Maramureș and Banat. The north-Danubian subdialects show a remarkable unity, despite external influences, setting Romanian apart from other Romance languages.

Romania joined the European Union in January, 2007, and is registered in the UNESCO World Heritage List with eight properties, six cultural and two natural (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ro>).

3. The AFLR Archive

AFLR stands out as being the largest collection and most diversified collection of dialectal texts and ethno-linguistic recordings in Romania (over 2000 reel tapes, 30-90 minutes per tape), encompassing material from all Daco-Romanian subdialects, both in the country and across the borders. A monumental work, both in conception, structure and scope, The National Phonogramic Archive is kept at “Iorgu Iordan – Alexandru Rosetti” Institute of Linguistics, Bucharest, Romania (<https://www.lingv.ro/>).

3.1 Historic overview

The first recordings began in the 1930’s, by D. Șandru, in different areas of the country, with modern techniques for that time, representing an important step in Romanian dialectology. The texts transcribed were published between 1933 and 1948. Unfortunately, in 1944, the Bucharest Phonetic Laboratory at the Faculty of Letters was destroyed by air bombings, and along with it the invaluable collection of phonograph recordings of Romanian dialects north of the Danube was lost. After the Second World War, dialectal research in Romania started to flourish. One such key moment in the national development of dialectal research is the initiation (1955-1957) and founding (in 1958) of AFLR, designed as a “sonorous museum”, representing all regional varieties of Romanian (Șuteu, 1958).

At the beginning of the 1960’s, in parallel with the elaboration of seven regional atlases corresponding to Romania’s historical provinces, researchers gathered around the three main university centres, Bucharest, Iași

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and Cluj-Napoca, wanting to consolidate the phonogramic archives, and field work was resumed. The gathering of dialectal and ethno-texts in order to make up the archives was and continues to be in the centre of attention for dialectologists. The purpose of such collections is to preserve the oral history, traditions, customs and folklore of the population. Dialect investigations not only follow diatopic variation, but also language variation from a sociolinguistic perspective. The AFLR material reflects the speaker's linguistic and social distancing from the mother tongue, the causes and effects of losing national status due to post war treaties reshaping the borders, individual and collective bilingualism, code switching.

Assembled in a rather short time interval (1961-2015), with data collected from a dense network of over 950 villages, the AFLR recordings are representative of Romanian dialects spoken also across the borders (Marin, 1996; Marin, 2003; Marin, 2012). In the 1980's the first recordings took place in America, and in the 1990s, after the fall of the Communist regime, the research intensified, leading to recordings in The Republic of Moldova, certain areas of Ukraine, Bucovina, south-east Hungary, Bulgaria and Serbia. From each investigated community, researchers have systematically interviewed between five and seven speakers from 4 generations, permitting the dialects to be studied in their social dynamics.

3.2 The hidden stories within the Archive

AFLR is an authentic collection of ethno-texts (Neagoe, 1993), vast and original in information regarding traditions, customs and folkloric production. Since Romanian dialect literature is practically non-existent (Vulpe, 1978), these recordings play an important role in linking dialectology with sociolinguistics and the study of folklore.

The Archive includes both descriptive and narrative productions, as well as numerous dialogues between the informants. These oral productions can be classified as: (1) thematic texts – describing customs related to important life events (birth, marriage, death), religious or laic ceremonies, practices of traditional beliefs, specific activities of the informants, (2) spontaneous texts – narrations, historic accounts, memories, anecdotes, jokes, sometimes even songs and carols. At the borderline between the two categories we find folktales, legends, fables and short stories (especially from children). Due to a systematic collection of the data, all of these past narrations are comparable in nature, leading to new lines of inquiry into the oral history of the Romanian language.

3.3 Research topics derived from the Archive

The AFLR recordings contain phonetic productions of paralinguistic information such as changes in intensity, pitch, rhythm, as well as gestural cues, representing an important and original material from a sociolinguistic perspective. AFLR also displays a vast onomasiological inventory that ranges from (nik)names of informants, to names of places accompanied by quite unique explanations delivered by the informants as to the age and origin of the region. It also includes elements of microtoponymy regarding the history of various Romanian rural

settlements. Due to its large terminological repertoire (agriculture, manufacturing, viticulture, lumbering, mining, occupations, human anatomy, among others), the material in the Archive is helpful in conducting a structural analysis of dialect terminology.

Important methodological contributions to Romanian dialectology are found in the prefaces of the atlases, regional glossaries, dictionaries and volumes of dialectal texts. Various research topics, theoretical works, and projects have derived from AFLR, such as: (1) collections of dialectal texts written in narrow phonetic transcription gathered from a wider region (TDM, TDO, TDD) or a smaller geographical area (TD–Porțile de Fier, TD–BN, among others); (2) dialectal glossaries focusing not only on the words attested in the transcribed texts, but also itemizing and explaining all regional terms found in the broader recorded area (TDD, TD–BN, TD–Bas., TD–Nistru), (3) dialectal monographs, describing the phonetic, phonological, lexical, morphosyntactic and pragmatic features of different microzones characterized by ethnographic and linguistic unity (TD–Ung., TD–Bulg., TD–Ucraina, TD–Banatul sârbesc); (4) dictionaries – either dedicated to the lexical peculiarities of one village or focused on wider regions such as the *Dictionary of Southern Dacoromanian Varieties* (DGS); (5) anthologies reflecting the richness and the vastness of the dialectal data stored in the Archive, sections of which have been published in works referred to as “sonorous maps”, “*Harta sonoră*” a graiurilor și dialectelor limbii române (Marin and Tiugan, 2014), and “*Harta sonoră*” a graiurilor dacoromâne vorbite în afara granițelor României (Marin et al., 2016), their novelty residing in the correlation between the dialectal phonetic transcription, the literalization and the digitise tape recordings; (6) studies, articles and PhD theses. Still, only a third of the Archive has been processed so far, with various manuscripts unpublished coupled with the urgent need to digitize the remaining files (either text or audio).

4. Digitising the Archive

Through the preservation of oral archives, we can gain access to both individual and collective memories, aiding to a better understanding of our cultural heritage on the one hand, and, on the other hand, restoring missing or forgotten pieces of Europe's oral history. This being said, we need to take into account both the digitization of the tapes, as well as that of the metadata content (information about gender, age, regional dialect, accompanied by photographs and phonetic transcription of various pronunciation variants belonging to the informant).

4.1 Current progress

The first recordings for AFLR were made on wax cylinders and continued with reel-to-reel tapes, from the 1960's until the 1990's, ensuring a better audio quality. These oral narratives from the past are kept in the Archive either on an audio (reel to reel tapes) or text format (manuscripts, glossaries, dialectal transcripts). At the moment, our internal projects focus mainly on audio digital retrieval

(Proiectul *Consevrarea și gestionarea Arhivei fonogramice a limbii române, Programul IX: BANCA DE INFORMARE ȘI DOCUMENTARE LINGVISTICĂ* [Project Preservation and Management of the Romanian Phonogramic Archive, Program IX: Database for Information and Linguistic Documentation]). Since only 300 recordings have been digitised so far, there is a pending need to develop digital preservation projects so as to prevent further degradation of the entire collection.

4.2 The MIDVAL project

From all recorded villages, dialectologist collected and organised each speaker's metadata file according to social background ("informant's file") and individual pronunciation variants ("phonogramic file"). The resulting hand written documents were then assembled in "village notebooks". Over 950 such "notebooks" exist in the Archive alongside the corresponding reel to reel tapes.

By means of the MIDVAL project ("Metode moderne de instruire și valorificare digitală a documentelor cultural-istorice" [Modern methods for training and digitally restoring cultural-historical documents]), a recent winner of the Romanian Academy funding competition (GAR-UM-2019 I-1.5-3, 2019 – 2021), the metadata files will be organised, properly stored and digitally preserved (https://www.lingv.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=354&Itemid=250). This project (coordinated by the main author) aims to implement modern techniques regarding human resource training and digital preservation of the national oral cultural heritage.

5. Hopes for the future

The material found within the National Phonemic Archive, the richness of the ethnographic, linguistic and historic information it discloses, represents cultural assets which need to be valued and protected. In conclusion, our recommendations are the following: (1) the need of a national program in order to create a heritage value-based management and a sustainable framework for future projects, (2) encouraging intercultural dialogue and raising awareness of the importance of past narrations belonging to less represented European languages such as Romanian, (3) digitalizing and to preserving this intangible cultural heritage describing not only the history of an overlooked Romance language, but also gaining a better understanding of Europe's oral history.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DGS – Dicționarul graiurilor dacoromâne sudice, coordinator: Maria Marin, de Ion Ionică, Maria Marin, Anca Marinescu, Iulia Mărgărit, Teofil Teaha, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, vol. I, 2009, vol. II, 2010, vol. III, 2011.

TD–Bas. – Maria Marin, Iulia Mărgărit, Victorela Neagoe, Vasile Pavel, Graiuri românești din Basarabia, Transnistria, nordul Bucovinei și nordul Maramureșului. Texte dialectale și glosar, Bucharest, 2000.

TD–BN – Maria Marin, Marilena Tiugan, Texte dialectale și glosar. Bistrița-Năsăud, Bucharest, 1987.

TD–Bulg. – Victorela Neagoe, Iulia Mărgărit, Graiuri dacoromâne din nordul Bulgariei. Studiu lingvistic. Texte dialectale. Glosar, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 2006.

TDD – Paul Lăzărescu, Victorela Neagoe, Ruxandra Pană, Nicolae Saramandu Texte dialectale și glosar. Dobrogea, Bucharest, 1987.

TDM – Texte dialectale. Muntenia, sub conducerea lui Boris Cazacu, vol. I, de Galina Ghiculete, Paul Lăzărescu, Maria Marin, Bogdan Marinescu, Ruxandra Pană, Magdalena Vulpe, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 1973.

TD–Nistru – Maria Marin, Iulia Mărgărit, Victorela Neagoe, Vasile Pavel, Graiuri românești de la est de Nistru. Texte dialectale și glosar, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 2011.

TDO – Boris Cazacu (coord.), Cornelia Coțuț, Galina Ghiculete, Maria Mărdărescu, Valeriu Șuteu, Magdalena Vulpe, Texte dialectale. Oltenia, Bucharest, Academy Press, 1967.

TD–Porțile de Fier – Cornelia Coțuț, Magdalena Vulpe, Graiul din zona „Porțile de Fier”, I. Texte. Sintaxă, Bucharest, Academy Press, 1973.

TD–Ucraina – Maria Marin, Victorela Neagoe, Iulia Mărgărit, Vasile Pavel, Graiuri românești din sud-estul Ucrainei. Studiu lingvistic. Texte dialectale. Glosar, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 2016.

TD–Ung. – Maria Marin, Iulia Mărgărit, Graiuri românești din Ungaria. Studiu lingvistic. Texte dialectale. Glosar, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 2005.