

Romanian lexical blending: from zero to hero.

Monica Vasileanu^{1,2}, Anabella-Gloria Niculescu-Gorpin^{1,3}, Cristina-Andreea Radu-Bejenaru^{1,3}

¹The ‘Iorgu Iordan – Alexandru Rosetti’ Institute of Linguistics, Romania

² Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, Romania

³ Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest, Romania

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Abstract

In an elicitation experiment, 109 Romanian native subjects were presented with 50 pictures of hybrid objects, e.g. a half-orange, half-pear fruit, and were asked to name each object using a single word either in Romanian or in English. 64.66% of the elicited English words were blends, thus confirming the expected tendency towards using blends in English; unexpectedly, the same tendency was observed for Romanian with 68.50% blends. In Romanian linguistics, lexical blending has been seldom mentioned, interest resting only in speech errors, and not in the deliberate phenomenon as a fully-fledged word formation process of Romanian morphology. We believe that our data analysis suggests a shift in Romanian word formation tendencies, possibly under the pervasive influence of English.

Keywords: lexical blending, elicitation experiment, Romanian language, word formation, language change

Introduction

Lexical blending, i.e. the process of coining a new lexeme out of (at least) two other source lexemes with some material loss from one or both source-words (Bauer, Lieber, Plag 2013, Renner 2022, a.o.) is a minor word formation process (Bauer 2021) with a sharp increase in productivity not only in present-day English (Kemmer 2003, Mattiello 2019), but also in other European languages, such as Polish (Konieczna 2012) or Bulgarian (Stamenov 2015). For present-day Romanian, we have observed a similar tendency that we wanted to study more closely, especially since the phenomenon did not receive attention in Romanian linguistics before, not being included among Romanian word formation reference works.

Since lexical blending is specific to English and the English influence seems to be the driving force for the increased productivity of lexical blending in other languages, and since little, if anything has been said about Romanian lexical blending as a word formation process, thus implying that compounding would be used in naming hybrid objects, our hypothesis was that Romanian native speakers with an above-average knowledge of English would produce more blends in English, but more compounds and fewer blends (if any) in

Romanian. To test our hypothesis, we used a hybrid-object naming task (Borgwaldt, Kulish, Bose 2012).

Methods

Participants

109 (92 BA and 17 MA) students from the English department, the University of Bucharest, aged 18-45 (mean = 21.2), with a self-assessed level of English as advanced (86) or intermediate (23), with formal English education of 2 to 29 years (mean = 12.31) participated in the experiment. 78% used English on a daily basis, 14% every two to three days, 6.5% weekly and only 1.5% occasionally. Students received course credits for their participation.

Stimuli and task

The stimuli, 50 images of hybrid non-existent objects (e.g. a half-orange, half-pear fruit), balanced to represent animals, fruits, objects and mixtures (e.g. a half-frog, half-broccoli entity), retrieved online (e.g. from Pinterest) or manipulated by the authors, were chosen to display different degrees of phonetic similarity between the expected source-words in Romanian, ranging from no common features (e.g. *banană* 'banana' + *kiwi* 'kiwi') to a large segment of common phonemes (e.g. *banană* 'banana'+ *ananas* 'pineapple').

Subjects were asked to name each object using a single word in Romanian for 25 images and the same for English. The order of the language blocks was counterbalanced across participants and subjects were able to self-pace the images. 57 subjects recorded themselves, and 52 subjects wrote down the answers. Due to the pandemic conditions, the experiment was carried out online.



Figure 1. An image displaying a half-orange, half-pear hybrid fruit. The task summary was repeated on each slide.

The 109 subjects produced 5488 words, sometimes creating two names for the same image. 59 words presented a language mixing effect (e.g. *mandarlic* < Ro. *mandarină* ‘tangerine’ + En. *garlic*) so we could not assign them to any language and were discarded from the final analysis that comprised 2727 Romanian and 2702 English words.

Subjects used lexical blending, compounding, broadening (participants used one of the source-words to name the hybrid), affixation or a random proper name not connected with the objects as naming strategies. Some words were coded *ambiguous* either because the word formation process used was opaque or because they can have multiple interpretations.

Table 1. The naming strategies used by subjects in Romanian and English.

	Romanian	English
Blends	68.50%	64.66%
Compounds	12.21%	15.62%
One source word	13.71%	13.92%
Ambiguous	3.15%	3.03%
Other means	2.42%	2.78%

Discussion

In both languages, lexical blending was the preferred strategy used for naming hybrid objects. While this is in line with the literature for English as the morpho-semantic iconicity of blending plays a major part (Renner 2020), it contradicts the expectations for Romanian: the traditional naming strategy for hybrid objects is compounding as shown in the literature or (academic) dictionaries that record already-established words for hybrid objects (see, for instance, *struțocămilă* ‘ostrich-camel’, a literary creation that has come to be used ironically for any mixture of two different things whose outcome is considered pointless).

Our results mirror the ones obtained for Ukrainian by Borgwaldt, Kulish & Bose (2012). The authors argue that their subjects invested more effort in the naming task because they were friends of the researchers. But this explanation does not hold in our case, since our subjects were students who fulfilled the task for course credits, were only told that they need to follow the instructions and that there were no correct or expected answers, and did the task in their own pace.

Another unexpected result is the fact that the subjects produced slightly more blends in Romanian than in English, perhaps because students are more used to creating new words in Romanian, their mother tongue, than in English. Nevertheless, the English and Romanian blends obtained are comparable, suggesting that, contrary to the non-existent Romanian literature on the subject, the process seems to be just as alive in Romanian as in English, at least for our subjects.

Conclusion and further research

Our results suggest that, most probably under the English influence, lexical blending has become the preferred strategy for naming hybrid objects at least for the Romanian native speakers in our study both in English and Romanian, possibly indicating a shift in the Romanian word formation patterns. Further testing is necessary to establish whether lexical blending is restricted to Romanian native speakers of a particular age or/and with a good command of English or not.

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