

PORTRAITS IN THE MAKING. GERMAN USERS OF ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT. *Portraits in the Making. German Users of Romanian as a Foreign Language.* The traditional approach to language learning has attempted to clearly differentiate between a first language or mother tongue and a second and/or a foreign language. In the last decades, these distinctions have become blurred – bilingual people admit having two first languages or L1-speakers living in a certain culture eventually view the foreign language as a second one. Consequently, the task of outlining sharp portraits of German users of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) seems hardly achievable, mostly since there are several parameters to consider, a significant one being exactly their proneness to alteration, due to the ever-changing linguistic process they are involved in. Nevertheless, the present study aims to fulfil such a task, rather from a broad perspective, by providing a series of concrete representations of the students enrolled in the Romanian-language courses (A1 – B2+ levels of proficiency) at the Leipzig University between 2019-2024, focusing on their non-permanent and variable-dependent nature.

Keywords: *error analysis, foreign language learning, heritage language, interference, interlanguage, RFL*

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REZUMAT. Portrete în devenire. Utilizatori germani ai limbii române ca limbă străină. Abordarea tradițională a studiului limbilor străine a încercat să traseze o delimitare clară între prima limbă achiziționată (L1) sau limba maternă și o a doua limbă (L2) și/sau o limbă străină. În decursul ultimelor decenii, aceste distincții s-au estompat din ce în ce mai mult, din moment ce persoane bilingve au recunoscut faptul că ar deține două limbi materne sau vorbitorii unei limbi anume, care trăiesc într-o cultură diferită, ajung să perceapă limba respectivă nu ca pe o limbă străină, ci ca pe limba a doua. Drept urmare, sarcina de a contura, în tușe clare, o serie de portrete ale unor utilizatori germani de limba română ca limbă străină (RLS) pare aproape imposibil de realizat, mai ales că sunt mai mulți parametri de luat în considerare, unul dintre aceștia fiind chiar transformarea permanentă, din punct de vedere lingvistic, a utilizatorilor mai sus amintiți. În ciuda celor afirmate, studiul de față își propune să ducă la bun sfârșit tocmai o astfel de sarcină, dintr-o perspectivă mai largă, oferind câteva reprezentări concrete ale studenților înscriși la cursurile de limba română de la Universitatea din Leipzig (nivelurile de competență lingvistică variind între A1 și B2+), pe parcursul anilor 2019-2024, punând accentul pe caracterul lor variabil, supus mereu schimbării.

Cuvinte-cheie: *analiza erorilor, achiziția limbii străine, limbă moștenită, interferență, interlimbă, RLS*

1. The basics. Ideas and first sketches

More than ever, in the actual geopolitical contexts, there are fewer and fewer people whose linguistic competence is restricted to merely one language. Out of touristic, political, economic or social reasons, individuals are compelled to appeal to (a) further language(s), other than their mother tongue, to communicate, to do business or even to save human lives. In a peaceful environment, people study languages willingly, for enjoyment or personal development.

This holds true also in the case of the Romanian language (classified among the 492 institutional languages, out of the 7,164 languages and dialects worldwide, according to *Ethnologue* - Eberhard et al., 2024) learned and taught outside the borders of the country, hence as a foreign language. The present article concentrates on the prismatic portraits of the Romanian-language students at one of the oldest universities in Europe, the Leipzig University, within the timespan 2019-2024. From time to time, there will be brief parallelisms to the students in Regensburg, since the author taught Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) at the Bavarian university for two years (2017-2019). In what regards the structure of the paper, the general theoretical framework will be followed by a series of portrayals based on empirical

evidence within the classroom, as well as on some examples excerpted mostly from the students' written exams, at the end of a language module and of the respective semester. Yet, before properly 'drawing' the student portrayals, we should *draw on* certain preliminary distinctions and remarks.

2. Theoretical frames

A reasonable first theoretical observation distinguishes between the acquisition of a first language (L1) and the learning of a second language (L2). We have all witnessed the amazing progress small children show in acquiring the idiom they are constantly exposed to, usually in the family, unaware of grammar rules but still able to reproduce the language naturally, authentically and in a more and more adequate manner. Up till roughly the age of five, there is also the possibility of acquiring two or more languages (Edmonson, 1999: 2), due to bilingual parents or even *au pairs*. On the other hand, we have certainly had various experiences with the languages we started to learn. We acquired our mother tongue almost unconsciously, in childhood and school, making it part of our identity. Later, we began learning mostly English and French in schools, sometimes for more than eight years. In my case, for example, I have also tried Italian, Japanese, Danish, Polish and Portuguese, the study of which lasted between two and eight months. In an ulterior explanation, besides the scarce exposure, I must have lost my motivation, due to the change of contexts (no longer an Erasmus student in Denmark, the difficulty of Japanese and Polish, or further personal prioritization). Edmonson (1999: 35) provides a basic list with such L1 and L2 differences, which play a significant role in shaping the general framework of L2-users:

1. External differences: *exposure* (L1 learners have unlimited access to L1), *input* (different input offered to children and adults), *social support* (children learning L1 most commonly receive strong social and emotional support from the learning environment), *pressure* (no pressure to acquire or understand, in comparison to L2 learning, both inside and outside the classroom), *feedback* (different types of correction and/or feedback).
2. Internal differences: *cognition* (cognitive development accompanies L1 learning, and precedes L2 learning), *language* (L2 learners may make use of their L1 in learning L2, which is not possible when learning L1), *social identity* (L1 is tied up with socialisation processes: SLA often involves losing or reducing one's social persona), *knowledge* (acculturation and gains in conceptual knowledge accompany first language learning, but antedate SLA).

At the same time, he also notices the individuals' ease in L1 acquisition and the relative difficulty (some languages are reported to be more difficult than others) in the case of L2, as well as the guaranteed success in L1 learning, yet not in L2. However, there are nowadays solid counterarguments to the claim that only L1 learning can be successful, once the L2 users are no longer perceived as "failed native speakers" (Cook 2002: *passim*), but as original and autonomous L2 speakers, who experience various stages in their linguistic development. Given Chomsky's Universal-Grammar competence or the "independent grammars assumption" (Cook 2002: 8), both children and L2 learners employ their own *approximative system* (Nemser, in Littlewood 1999: 33) or *interlanguage* (a term coined by Selinker, 2013: *passim*), rather than imperfect adult/L1 structures or "partial imitation(s) of what it might become one day" (Cook 2002: 8). Since the interlanguage is "the sum of all the rules a learner has acquired so far" (Pienemann, in Cook 2002: 20), the language system of such L2 users is never static, but alterable. In what concerns common traits in L1 and L2 (especially in the low-level courses), *motherese*² is a case in point, whose features include clear articulation, marked intonational contours, lexical adjustments/negotiations, grammatical well-formedness, limited range of grammatical relations, repetitions, checks and uptakes, tutorial and mostly non-genuine questions (the tutors already knowing the answer), the so-called "display questions" (Lightbown and Spada 2021: 140), high redundancy, as well as topics concerning the here-and-now (Ellis cited in Edmonson, 1999: 169).

From a behaviourist perspective, "a small part of the foreign language, such as a structural pattern, is presented as a *stimulus*, to which the learner *responds*, for example, by repetition or substitution" (Williams and Burden 1999: 10), a frequent case to be observed mostly in the low-level (A1-A2) language groups. On the other hand, a cognitive view would emphasize the active (not the mechanical) side of the learners, whose tasks are "to observe, think, categorise and hypothesise" (Williams and Burden 1999: 13), namely the way they process information. Within such a process, certain factors are of utmost importance: attention, memory and intelligence (see Williams and Burden 1999: 15-20). As teachers, we usually sense whenever our students pay attention to us or not, as well as whether some of them can memorise lexical items more easily than others. In Klatzky's definition, "attention should be seen as a process of filtering out an overwhelming range of incoming stimuli and selecting out only those stimuli which are important for further processing" (in Williams and Burden 1999: 15). Quite often, distracted attention occurred not necessarily out of boredom, but mainly because the respective students had

² In SLA, *motherese* is better known as *foreigner talk* or *teacher talk* (see Lightbown and Spada 2021: 41).

skipped class – at the Leipzig University the attendance is not mandatory, so such students could not follow any more the subject matter, due to unknown words or unfamiliar grammar topics. In what concerns the intelligence factor, the educational psychologist Philip Vernon suggests two further types of intelligence, besides the inborn one, namely the everyday, context-bound intelligence and the intelligence measured by IQ tests (in Williams and Burden 1999: 19). Accordingly, there are students who may solve tasks faster than others; some who shoot answers, as opposed to those indulging in silence; some who make prudent or rash inferences, the latter standing a high chance of being trapped in linguistic interferences³. As a result, a humanistic approach to the learner as a whole person seems the appropriate one, since it focuses on personal identity, self-esteem, lack of criticism, feelings, creativity, freedom and responsibility (see Williams and Burden 1999: 36-38). Nevertheless, the different approaches to L2 learning should conjoin for a realistic picture in the 21st century, otherwise we will resemble the blind men and the elephant in the Asian parable, by grasping mere fragments or parts, but never the real entirety. A viable L2-learning framework should thus consider theoretical structures, mimicry and ‘the formation of habits’ (in Lightbown and Spada 2021: 108), but not ignore the ‘innate language acquisition capacity’ (in Lightbown and Spada 2021: 109), which draws on ‘perception, memory, categorization, and generalization’ (Lightbown and Spada 2021: 112).

A second terminological remark between *user* and *learner* should be made, the linguist Vivian Cook (2002: *passim*) separating them into real-life speakers and, respectively, potential speakers. Our study will make use rather of the first generic term, which encompasses the latter, but at times, it sets an interchangeable relation between them, based on the assumption that most learners will eventually turn into actual users.

The third distinction has a linguistic character, since we are going to focus on German native speakers learning an Eastern Romance language. It is common knowledge that the German language has a clocklike structure and clear-cut lexical items depending on position, form, starting and final points, completeness and so on. Such details are usually conveyed by particles or verbal prefixes, as in *an-*, *ab-*, *aus-*, *be-*, *zer-* or *zuschneiden* (all equating to *cut*), that differentiate between cutting slices, margins, certain forms or partial, complete and even first pieces from a whole. Probably the biggest shock is triggered by the verb *umfahren*, whose vowel-stress distinguishes between successfully going around something or somebody by a vehicle, as well as tragically knocking them over. In comparison to the conservative character of the German language, Romanian is

³ See de Groot’s (2002: 32-45) argumentation on ‘layered memory’, responsible for integrating or segregating languages within comprehension.

rather flexible and user-friendly, a possible difficulty lying in the existence of synonyms with various etymologies or even in the basic vocabulary, which is no longer purely Romance, but heavily influenced by Ottoman Turkish, (Old) Slavic, Greek, Hungarian or German. Nevertheless, we have recently discovered two examples to blow our conceptions apart, by which Romanian actually ‘snarls’ at any RFL learner, whereas German suddenly becomes ‘tamed’: *Anhänger* means trailer (*remorcă*), disciple, worshipper (*adept, susținător*), fan, supporter (*suporter, fan*), pendant (*medalion*), while *Schlüsselanhängers* is a key chain (*breloc*). The second polysemantic word is *Schläger* – bully (*bătăuș*), also a productive component in sports vocabulary: *Tennisschläger* – tennis racket (*rachetă de tenis*), *Tischtennisschläger* – paddle (*paletă de ping-pong*), *Baseballschläger* – baseball bat (*bătă de baseball*), *Golfschläger* – golf club (*crosă de golf*) and *Hockeyschläger* – hockey stick (*crosă de hochei*). To conclude with, such lexical differences between German and Romanian pose a challenge for the RFL learners, as the following depictions will demonstrate.

3. Shape and patterns. Light and shade

The city of Leipzig is closely connected not only to the commercial exchanges with the Wallachian and Moldavian regions more than 300 years ago, but also to the foundation of the first Romanian Language Institute in Germany, in April 1893 (see Burlacu 2024: 326-330). After one century, RFL is still taught in an academic context, within the Romanian Lectorate supported by the Romanian Language Institute (ILR) in Bucharest. The lectorate in Leipzig offers optional practical courses (A1, A2, B1, B2 and B2+ levels of competence), a culture-and-civilisation seminar, a linguistic seminar (taught in German and based on the Romanian-language phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicology and pragmatics), two translation courses (German – Romanian and Romanian – German), as well as further cultural events (film evenings, translation workshops or lectures given by visiting professors).

The students interested in the Romanian-as-a-foreign-language courses at the Leipzig University represent a heterogeneous category, in terms of age (18 to 45), studies (philological and non-philological) or connections to the Romanian-speaking context (from lack of any contacts whatsoever to Romanian friends, partners or families). Naturally the majority are Germans, but among the international students interested in the RFL courses so far, there have been three students with Arabic as their L1, an American, a Byelorussian, two Italians, a Korean, a Netherlander, three Russians, a Spanish, two Swiss, a Turkish and one Ukrainian.

In the timespan 2019-2024, there have been around 45 students/ year enrolled in the RFL courses, which makes a total number of 225 students. The groups are rather small, two to ten students in each level course, so they participate with great enthusiasm in the individual or pair work. Even if the courses (ranging from A1 to B2 levels) are part of language modules, they all have an optional character, being credited with 3, 5 or 10 ECTS points, depending on the weekly frequency of the course (2, 4 or 6 academic hours). What is special about the RFL students in Leipzig is the fact that some of them repeat the courses, not due to exam-failure, but on a voluntary basis. After an interruption of one, two or even four semesters – they had either to read for their bachelor's degree or study for postgraduate degrees, whereas others had applied for scholarships abroad – they returned to the RFL-classes, even more motivated and no longer under time pressure. Such students may be labelled as 'romantic', being part of the Romanian 'family' in Leipzig and outbalancing by far the group of the so-called 'pragmatic' students.

The descriptions to follow thus integrate concrete information with subjective observations on the RFL-learners, as well as certain 'errors' or deviations, which typically occur at low (A1-A2), respectively high (B1-B2) levels of competence. It is also worth mentioning the students are allowed to use a bilingual dictionary for the last part of the exam, the text-writing, hence the odd occurrences to be discussed below, under the generic category of error analysis (all errors were obtained mostly from the students' written exams and occasionally from oral elicitation and in-class work). In the case of Romanian-as-a-heritage-language users, the inaccuracies will be approached separately, in a distinct subsection.

3.1. Portrayals of 'pragmatic' students

Although stereotyping should be avoided at all costs, it is still the subject of self-ironical or satirical writings, such as *The Xenophobe's Guides* (1999-2017) or Adam Fletcher's bilingual books, *How to be German in 50 easy steps* (2013) and *How to be German in 50 new steps* (2016), all of them pinpointing national traits and eccentricities in a humorous manner, thus fostering cultural awareness and tolerance. The existence of national stereotypes was confirmed by James Coleman within a university context, as well, by analysing data from about 3,000 respondents: "Compared to the British, the Germans are serious, unemotional, logical, efficient, hard-working, competent, not lazy or shy in the slightest, arrogant, confident, impatient, intolerant, ill-tempered, loud and relatively unfriendly and ungenerous" (in Byram and Fleming 1998: 50).

Almost thirty years later, I would not describe the Germans by the above-mentioned negative adjectives, but the first four epithets serve me good. Indeed, my pragmatic students have been *serious*, apparently *unemotional*, *logical* and *efficient*, once they bluntly admit, already in the introductory class, that they have no connections to or direct interests in Romania or the Romanian language, but they do need the academic points provided by the RFL course: 10 ECTS for the A1-level language module: a practical course (4 hours/week) and a culture-and-civilization seminar (2 hours/week). Such rational students have usually decided not to continue the study of the language to the next level, since the difficulty increased, but the ECTS decreased to 5 (4 hours/week). A few of them have attended classes regularly and made visible progress, but, to my disappointment, I have never met them again in the A2-level course. On the other hand, there have been certain students in this down-to-earth category who did reach the B1 level. In their case, the initial realistic portraits received, towards the end of the first semester, some light touches of ‘romanticism’, once they decided to continue the RFL-study at the next level.

3.2. Portrayals of ‘romantic’ students

As already mentioned, the so-called ‘romantic’ students have emotional ties to the Romanian language or social context, be they the restricted or extended family, a circle of friends, a scholarship in Sibiu or Bucharest, a one-year stay within the Scout Movement in a village near Sibiu or within a volunteer association in Bucharest, a two-week trip to the poor villages in the region of Moldova within a charity organization in the last three years or summer schools in Timișoara, at a higher education institution within the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and in Chișinău, through Moldova Institute Leipzig; in special cases, there may also be the fondness of folk music or simply the polyglot curiosity of learning a new language. Either way, such individuals represent the stable audience in our RFL courses, keen on discovering more and more lexemes, subtleties, culturemes, grammar or translation challenges.

Probably the most representative case of ‘lifelong’ devotion towards the Romanian language applies to three overenthusiastic students (B., R. and S.) repeating the advanced course a fifth time already. B. started attending the A1 course in 2020, out of personal reasons (a Romanian boyfriend), later also out of professional reasons – she has recently become the manager of her own company (professional cleaning services), where all the employees come from Moldova and Romania, most of whom cannot speak German. R. is a doctoral student whose focus lies on the role of the Black Sea as a geopolitical argument in Romania’s official

foreign policy narrative since the 1990s. She frequently travels to Bucharest to do research in the academic libraries or to conduct interviews. If B. mostly practises the language orally, being exposed to informal and dialectal uses as well, R. deals with the written formal language, whereas S., who is a professional interpreter (German, English and French), benefits from both written and oral inputs (by sporadically reading novels and listening to podcasts). They can all speak Romanian fluently and constantly ask for journalistic, literary and idiomatic language or C1-level grammar structures, some of which are to be found in various thought-provoking articles excerpted from the cultural weekly magazine *Dilema veche*. These three students have attained such a good competence level that they would not lose contact with the linguistic or sociopolitical context, being eager to participate in further activities organized in Leipzig or abroad (online), such as conferences, discussions or Romanian-film evenings. B. and R.'s positive attitudes towards the language community and their high motivation are thus doubled by the necessity to speak the language, due to their professional context – the so-called “*instrumental motivation* (language learning for immediate or practical goals)” (Gardner and Lambert, in Lightbown and Spada 2021: 90). However, quite often, it is practically impossible to delineate it from “*integrative motivation* (language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment through contact with speakers of the other language)” (Gardner and Lambert, in Lightbown and Spada 2021: 90). In a further analysis, Dörnyei discusses upon three phases of motivation (in Lightbown and Spada 2021: 90): ‘choice motivation’, ‘executive motivation’ and ‘motivation retrospection’, the last phase characterizing those students eager to continue the RFL study.

3.3. Error analysis. Typical errors for the A1-A2 levels

The students’ portrayals would not be complete without a minimum error analysis, based on the error correction complementing the regular activities in the language classroom. As a matter of fact, “[e]rrors have traditionally been regarded as signs of failure on the part of both the teacher and the learner and have frequently led to a sense of demoralisation on both sides. Now, however, we realise more clearly that they represent normal stages in the development of communicative skills” (Littlewood 1999: 95).

The most typical error the beginners produce is the false pronunciation of the graphemes that interfere with their mother tongue, hence [z], instead of [s]: *casă* [*kʌzə], instead of [kʌsə] (house), *frumoasă* [*frumqazə], instead of [frumqasə] (beautiful), or [tʃ] instead of [z]: *lucrează* [*lukrɛʌtʃə], instead of [lukrɛʌzə] (he/she/it works). Even if they presumably master the rule, they fail

at using it correctly when speaking, the “variable performance [being] a normal phenomenon in second language learners’ speech” (Littlewood 1999: 81). Similarly, in writing, they tend to use mostly *k* instead of *c*, as in **Bukurești* (instead of *București*/Bucharest), **kafea* (instead of *cafea*/coffee) or **bibliothekă* (instead of *biblioteca*/library) and rarely, even *z* or *ts* instead of *ț* [țs]: **veniz* (*veniți*/pl. you come), **facetsi* (*faceți*/pl. you do/make).

The noun ending in the plural poses a further challenge in the learning process, as in the highly frequent occurrence **omi* or **ome* (because of the singular *om*), instead of *oameni* (people), **sori*, **sore* or **sorele* (because of the singular *soră*), instead of *surori* (sisters), **pisice* (instead of *pisici*/cats), **sale* (instead of *săli*/rooms), **bicicleți* (instead of *biciclete*/bicycles) or **clube* (instead of *cluburi*/clubs). Since the German noun *hair* is in the plural, *die Haare*, a student has used the singular noun with a plural adjective: *Are păr *bruni* (instead of *brun*)/S(he) has brown hair. Naturally, the lexical restrictions that brown has in Romanian are quite difficult to master, even in the intermediate courses: *maro* (general objects), *șaten/castaniu* (exclusively for hair), *căprui* (exclusively for eye-colour), hence the frequent inadequate juxtaposition *păr *maro*.

In some cases, when the students can speak other Romance languages, they make use of transfer, the positive transfer facilitating comprehension (Fr., Rom. *avion*/plane), in contrast to the negative transfer, which hinders it: *pom* (fruit tree), falsely understood as apple (Fr. *pomme*, Rom. *măr*) or, even at higher levels, *a pensa* (pluck one’s eyebrows) used as to think (Fr. *penser*, Rom. *a gândi/a crede*). Sometimes, English interferes with the Romanian in certain lexical innovations: **casă de pahar*, the word-for-word translation of the British *glasshouse* (Rom. *seră*), **din timp în timp*, from time to time, instead of *din când în când* or *găd* (the exact pronunciation of *guard*, falsely understood as such, instead of the correct meaning hedge/fence). Further written innovations include spelling mistakes influenced by English: **cheapă* (instead of *ceapă*/onion), **încherici* (instead of *încerci*/sg. you try), **chai* (instead of *ceai*/tea), and lexical errors, such as: *mâncare *germănească* (instead of *germană*/German food), *un cartier pentru *pensionați* (instead of *pensionari*/ an area for the retired).

The compound perfect tense is often problematic, the auxiliary verb forms of ‘to have’ being often confused with the ones of the primary verb: **are* (instead of *a*) *lucrat*/(s)he worked, **avem* (instead of *am*) *făcut* / we did/made, **aveți* (instead of *ați*) *ascultat* /you listened. The verb groups and the specific endings in the present tense do not always come in handy, as reflected by the oddest occurrence in an A1 written text, produced by L., a student who had hardly attended the course, but used a dictionary for the two verbs and the noun:

*Noi *venem un cozonac să *coacim.*

Correct: *Noi vrem/venim să coacem un cozonac.* /We want/come to bake a traditional cake (cozonac).

There are lexical, grammatical and word order-related errors in this example, such as verb confusion: *a vrea* (want) vs. *a veni* (come) or, since the context was rather ambiguous, it may also be a false ending (correct: *venim*); secondly, a false ending for the verbal third group (correct: *coacem*), as well as the placement of the main verb at the end of the sentence, which totally echoes the German word-position, yet not in the least the Romanian word order. According to Piaget's cognitive theory, the human mind seeks *equilibration* or *cognitive adaptation*, by assimilating new information, fitting it into the old information and accommodating the latter to the former (in Williams and Burden 1999: 22). Such processes must be gone through while learning new vocabulary and a different phonetic and grammar system, the students having to constantly reshape the newly acquired linguistic world, by making use of the *personal-construct theory*, initiated by the psychotherapist and clinical psychologist George Kelly: "Learners are actively involved in constructing their own personal understanding of things, and this understanding will be different for different people" (Williams and Burden 1999: 27). Beyond the strangeness of L.'s statement above, there surely lie the scarce command of L2 and the recurrent L1-structures, which L. has tried to apply completely, but with less 'inspiration'.

3.4. Error analysis. Typical errors for the B1-B2 levels

Sometimes, "errors are often described as *fossilized*, meaning that they have become permanent features of the learner's speech" (Littlewood 1999: 34), typical ones being overgeneralisation errors – mostly stress placed on the wrong syllable, hence the 'foreign accent', or the verb group confusion, hence inaccurate endings produced by students at all levels: **dormesc* (A1) (instead of *dorm*)/I sleep, *să *scriești* (A2) (instead of *scrii*)/you write, **terminez* (instead of *termin*)/I finish, **relaxește* (B1) (instead of *relaxează*)/it relaxes, **întârziez* (B2+) (instead of *întârzii*)/I am late. Starting with higher levels, students are likely to produce such utterances: **Pe mine îmi place* (the verb 'to like' requires a clitic in the dative which, for emphasis reasons, can be doubled by a stressed pronoun in dative; here, the first one (*pe mine*) is in the accusative instead of dative)/ I like; or they use the definite article incorrectly: *înot în *lacul* (instead of *lac*)/ I swim in the lake or *un teren în *pădurea* (instead of *pădure*)/ a ground in the forest. Not only nouns in the plural, but also simple present forms and special conjunctive endings in the 3rd person pose a difficult problem, reflected in the sentence produced by a student with competent knowledge in French:

*Oamenii mei *de* (instead of *din*) *jur* (a better variant: *Oamenii din jurul meu*) **dorește* (instead of *doresc*) *să *locuiește* (instead of *locuiască*) *în *cartierurile* (instead of *cartierele*) *populare*. /The people around me would like to live in popular districts.

A case of semantic interference with the German language can be observed in: *un parc *amabil* (in German, *nett* means both nice and friendly, but the Romanian *amabil* is restricted to humans, in comparison to *drăguț*, that applies both to humans and non-humans). A further example confuses *if* (*dacă*) with *when* (*când*), semantically expressed by *wenn*, or *happy* (*fericit*) with *lucky* (*norocos*), equalled by *glücklich*, resulting into a sort of hallucination-like statement:

**Când sunteți *fericiți* (instead of *Dacă sunteți norocoși*), *puteți vedea niște *animali *africani* (instead of neuter pl. *animale africane*), *ca *girafi* (instead of *girafe*) *sau *antilopi* (instead of *antilope*) *la *parcul zoologic* (instead of *la ZOO/în grădina zoologică*). /When you are happy (actually: If you are lucky), you can see some African animals, such as giraffes and antelopes, in the Zoo.

Additionally, the higher-level students seem more confident in writing, so quite often, they do not look up words in the dictionary, but coin surprising lexemes, mostly shaped by German and English, sometimes by cognates in Romanian. The following examples, excerpted from the written texts within the B1 exams, are indeed a feast for the eyes and the brain alike:

*Am încercat să *prepar* (instead of *pregătesc*) *o *prezentățiune* (instead of *prezentare*) *pentru acest caz*. /I have tried to prepare a presentation for this case.

*Ar fi *posibil* (instead of *posibil*) *să *postpunem* (instead of *amânăm*) *ședința noastră*. /It would be possible to postpone our meeting.

*Vă *cer pe dumneavoastră* (instead of *Vă cer dumneavoastră/Vă rog pe dumneavoastră*) *de* (instead of *din*) *toată inima să munciți cu o echipă*. /I ask you from the bottom of my heart to work with a team.

*Este o hartă *incompletată* (instead of *incompletă*), *care nu *depictează* (instead of *descrie*) *decât jumătatea cartierului*. /There is an incomplete map, that depicts only half of the district.

*O hartă *de* (instead of *din*) *1915 care este *total de* (instead of *complet*) **inutil* (instead of *inutilă*) *pentru că e *învârstit* (instead of *veche*)! /A map from 1915, which is totally useless, because it is old! The last adjective, *învârstit*, represents the most creative invention I have encountered, since the student must have been familiar with the expression *a fi în vârstă* (to be old), but he may have also been influenced by the German-specific verbal prefixes.

From a teacher's perspective, learners may be viewed as resisters, receptacles ('the jugs and mugs' theory), raw material, clients, partners, individual explorers or democratic explorers (Meighan, in Williams and Burden 1999: 57-58). One student may belong to the last category, since R., who authored the last three examples, did not attend the courses regularly, yet kept on learning the language (A1-B1 levels) on his own, working by the Assimil-Method (the Assimil 500-page textbook for Romanian, authored by Vincent Iluțiu, 2022). Honestly declaring his addiction to the language, R. thus preferred the individual RFL exploration to the social interaction in the classroom context, yet remaining one of the best in his group.

3.5. Error analysis. Typical errors for users of Romanian as a heritage language

Among the proficient RFL students there are obviously those whose families originate from Romania. There are indeed very few who benefit from *additive bilingualism* (from my teaching experience, there are fewer in Leipzig than in Regensburg) – “the maintenance of the home language while the L2 is being learned” (Lightbown and Spada 2021: 34), the others falling under the category of *subtractive bilingualism* – they have simply unlearned Romanian while learning German in a German context. They have been exposed less and less to their family language; some had also moved out to study at the university, so they lost any contact even with the Romanian-speaking grandmothers or grandfathers. This is one of the recurrent reasons why such students enrol in the RFL courses and naturally, once exposed again to the language, they will start remembering some words from their childhood, most of which are regional and familiar: *tuși* instead of *mătușă* (aunt); *a pricepe*, instead of *a înțelege* (to understand); *ăsta/aia*, instead of *acesta/aceea* (this one/that one), *aicea*, instead of *aici* (here), *trebe*, instead of *trebuie* (must), *naționalitatea nemțească*, instead of *germană* (the German nationality) or lexiculturemes, such as *mămăligă* (polenta), *sarmale* (stuffed cabbage), *mititei/mici* (grilled minced meat rolls), *papanashi* (cheese dumplings), *langoși* (fried flatbread), *țuică/pălincă* (plum brandy), *vișinată* (cherry brandy) or even *socată* (elder flower juice).

In writing, they tend to drop the final -l, due to the oral Romanian language they have been exposed to: *În *primu rând* (instead of *primul*, firstly), **râu Timiș* (instead of *râul*, the river) or **micu* (instead of *micul*) *dejun* for breakfast. In rare cases, the German language interfered in the written texts, due to the fact that *s* is pronounced as *z* [z] in German, and *e* as *ă* [ə]), since D., whose oral competence level was actually B1, wrote **văsut* (instead of

văzut/seen), **să* **chiamă* (instead of *se cheamă/is called*), *vremea a fost *calde* (instead of sg. *caldă*)/ the weather was warm, or *mâncare *bune, dar *scumpe* (the singular noun should be followed by singular adjectives, in this case with the ending -ă, not the plural -e)/good, but expensive food. In a listening exercise, D. got confused by a sort of French – German – Romanian phonetical interference, writing **jouceri* (instead of *jucării/toys*). Such students are indeed a fascinating category, yet not truly a consistent and proficient group, as at the University of Regensburg, where they bear the name of *Secondos*, namely second-generation immigrants, and are even taught separate RFL courses, focused on orthography and vocabulary enhancement.

4. Final touches

Relying on a micro approach, namely on direct observations within the classroom context, the present article has drawn, in sketchy lines, a series of portraits of the RFL learners at the Leipzig University in the last five years. The subsections, whose titles echo certain artistic or drawing-related concepts, have stemmed from a twofold perspective: firstly, a subjective perception, according to which the L2-users classify as realistic or ‘pragmatic’, and, on the other hand, as nostalgic or ‘romantic’; secondly, an objective recording of natural, tapered-off and fossilized ‘errors’ or better say, typical or personal divergences from the norm, artistically viewed as shades and tones which may be later scumbled, erased or thickened, yet each of them representing countless points in the learning process. It is worth highlighting anew the fact that: “Language development is not just a case of adding one rule after another. Rather, it involves processes of integrating new language forms and patterns into an existing interlanguage, readjusting and restructuring until all the pieces fit” (Lightbown and Spada 2021: 225). Actually, Færch and Kasper examine the two types of interlanguage knowledge, polarized between implicit and explicit, the L2-users experiencing a linear, yet not necessarily complete, sequence: from the L2 use without reflecting on the rule, then pondering on the rule by relying on intuition, to rule-description in own words and culminating with the explicit rule-description in metalinguistic terms (Færch and Kasper 1986: 212), the last stage being, without doubt, coveted by both students and teachers.

At the same time, we should not neglect the existence of plateaus in language learning, namely the apparent lack of any progress whatsoever, no matter the input, exposure, efforts, or time invested in understanding the L2 vocabulary, grammar or pragmatics. Krashen also speaks about the ‘affective filter’, “a metaphorical barrier that prevents learners from acquiring language

even when appropriate input is available” (in Lightbown and Spada 2021: 111). Additionally, stress can hinder not only learning (the case of C., who suffered from panic and claustrophobic attacks), but also recalling plain words, systematically reviewed from tens of note cards (the case of S. undergoing severe test anxiety, fearing failure and negative evaluation). In a further classification, learners may be called *monitor over-users* – one hardly says anything and is very heavy on the pauses and self-correction, in contrast to *monitor under-users* – one does not care whether what they are saying (or writing) is grammatical or not (Krashen, in Edmonson 1999: 182).

To conclude, yet preserving the artistic realm, the selected RFL portrayals can certainly not be shaped up, being prone to change, if their real references – the L2 users, continue to learn the language, be it within a formal or informal context, or even unlearn it. This is why the sketched depictions will remain ‘portraits in the making’, an intriguing mixture of photographic and self-portraiture, in which the sitters – the same L2 users, should be no longer voiceless; the teacher’s voice “is only a partial one. It is a voice which needs to be complemented by the other, oftentimes, hidden voices of the classroom” (Nunan, in Bailey and Nunan 1997: 53). Consequently, the students’ views should also be considered for further analysis, since they may change not only the lighting, the shades or the focus, but also the settings, the sitters and the viewers.

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