

Lexiculturemes, harbingers of spring: with one eye in the textbooks of Romanian as a Foreign Language and with another in the Romanian cultural space

Olivia-Carmen ȚÎRLEA¹

In an era of globalization, “knowing how to speak a foreign language” is constantly acquiring new and new meanings. Thus, grammatically accuracy, once so coveted, and mastery of a rich vocabulary in a foreign language (a non-native/a secondary/a desirable language to be acquired), seem to be insufficient today in the absence of minimal sociocultural knowledge. In this paper, we aimed, therefore, to investigate how the approach to culture is reflected in several Romanian as a Foreign Language textbooks published at the beginning of the current century, respectively to what extent the selected contents correspond to the everyday needs of the learner immersed in the Romanian cultural space. Browsing through them, a first obvious conclusion was that not only the teacher and the learner play the role of mediator, but also the vocabulary can mediate access to culture.

Keywords: *vocabulary, culture, lexiculture*

1. Introduction

As teachers of Romanian as a Foreign Language, we often face the following situation: an international student, who has been in Romania for a short time, asks us, out of the blue, in a practical Romanian language course, “But what is *Mărțișor*, actually?... I searched on Google before and it said a lot about spring, but I didn’t really understand what it is.” Such case is extremely significant, since, nowadays, we often have the impression that technology has taken ahead of us and that many of the contents that we propose to discuss with our students would already be known to them. However, this example proves quite the opposite; the student still seeks the teacher’s answer, which, in fact, he considers to be the most informed and the most complete. Whether there is a chance to integrate a cultural approach

¹ Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, t.olivia95@gmail.com

into any practical Romanian language course is, therefore, the question we need to ask ourselves. Consequently, in the following paragraphs, we intend to present the paradigm shifts that currently allow us to better correlate the cultural contents in the Romanian as a Foreign Language textbook with the real communication needs of the learner, according to the principles recommended in the *Companion Volume* (CV).

2. From communicative competence to a pluricultural competence

In an era of globalization, a still quite new competence seems to be gaining more and more attention: *pluricultural competence*². Far from acting in a direction of eliminating other competences, this (pluri)cultural competence is intended to be, rather, a harmonious complement to them; “knowing how to speak a language means not only linguistic, communicative competence, but also cultural competence that encompass the others” (Neșu 2022, 219) (trans.). Thus, in the context of a practical Romanian language course, in which students are assumed to have already mastered their mother tongue well, and, implicitly, the related competences, the urge “to learn how to communicate with cultural otherness” (Platon 2021, 143) (trans.) is justified in gaining more and more ground.

The efficiency of this advantage remains, however, still open to research, hence our interest in approaching culture in the space of Romanian as a Foreign Language didactics. According to CV, at least one principle is certain for the moment: the development of pluricultural competence requires the active participation of the person involved in learning a foreign language (CV 2018, 158). If we follow the scale “Facilitating pluricultural space” (CV 2018, 122), we can observe a series of descriptors, such as: “to create”, “to deal”, “to identify”, “to build”, “to enhance” etc.

A dynamic character is also relied on even in the intention to define plurilingual and pluricultural competence, understood, since the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), as “the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures” (CEFR 2001, 168). Subsequently, for this “complex competence” (CEFR 2001, 168), the following scales are provided in CV: “Building on pluricultural repertoire”, “Plurilingual comprehension”, respectively “Building on plurilingual repertoire”. Interesting to notice here the presence of descriptors even at elementary levels (except Pre-A1,

² Given that CV does not yet contain an exact definition of cultural competence, in this paper we will rather refer to the possibilities offered by pluricultural competence, as established in the CV.

for the moment), where there is frequent hesitation regarding the introduction of various cultural contents. If we were to analyze, for example, the scale of “Building on pluricultural repertoire”, we would spot, first of all, that the descriptors related to level A1 are formulated, predominantly, in terms of “recognizing”, while “explaining”, “discussing” or “interpreting” correspond rather to intermediate and advanced levels. We would then also spot the repetition of constructions such as “even though” or “although”, a clear mark of anticipation of possible difficulties that learners might initially encounter in a pluricultural space, such as the classroom.

3. From “a big culture” to “a little culture”

As we saw in the previous paragraph, communicative competence is responsible not only for the possibility of developing a pluricultural competence, but also for the expansion of what could be called “Little c culture” (Kramsch 2013, 64). In other words, we are witnessing, especially in the current century, an increasingly strong shift in emphasis: from “a big C culture”, heritage-type one, (education focused, therefore, on teaching history, institutions, literature and arts) (Kramsch 2013, 65), to a “little c culture” (education interested also in “lifestyle and everyday behaviors”) (Kramsch 2013, 64).

Focusing our attention beyond the areas already mentioned, intended, as we well know, for cultivating the spirit, is an even more significant boost, as it brings back into discussion man’s social dimension. After all, what better opportunity would be more suitable for the student to learn to be a good “social agent” (CV 2018, 157), if not the curiosity to discover how people’s lives unfold in the society he wants to integrate into? On this matter, returning to the same scale of “Building on pluricultural repertoire”, we noticed, once again, an anticipatory strategy, CV taking into account many such situations: “everyday activities”, “everyday social exchanges”, “values”, “behaviors” etc. As teachers of Romanian as a Foreign Language we strive, therefore, to find solutions that are as authentic as possible to illustrate everyday life, often forgetting one thing at hand, the vocabulary.

Related to this, a word like *Mărțișor* will bring to mind for a native Romanian speaker especially that Romanian habit, at the beginning of spring, more precisely on March 1, of offering a *Mărțișor* to ladies and misses. In an attempt to propose the most complete framework for discussing *Mărțișor*, the Romanian as a Foreign Language teacher will consequently have to pay attention to the “little c culture”; in this case, a behavior meant to mark the arrival of spring. The task is not an easy one, but identifying keywords, as will be seen later in the examples selected from

various textbooks for Romanian as a Foreign Language, can help to build a more coherent dialogue with the students. For example, a keyword such as *March 1* will anticipate a possible question from a student regarding the calendar context for *Mărțișor*. The idea that men are the ones who offer *Mărțișor* to ladies and misses clarifies the issue of the subjects involved in this common practice.

Thus, when focusing our attention also on the cultural significance that a word carries, we see how a simple communicative function like identifying something, i.e. “What is *Mărțișor*?”, branches out, providing answers to other questions as: “When?”, “How?”, “Who?” etc. Ultimately, in this way, the intercultural exchange, regularly mentioned in the scale “Facilitating pluricultural space” (CV 2018, 123), is eased too, giving students the chance not only to discover a new culture, but also to connect it to their own culture. Moreover, two or more cultures communicating with each other is absolutely a goal of the lexicultural approach.

4. Launching the concept of *language-culture*

Over time, lexiculture³ has been closely researched in various linguistic areas, such as French (Robert Galisson), German (Els Oksaar), Portuguese (Lúcia Maria de Assunção Barbosa), English (Claire Kramsch), Italian (Cristina Bosisio), Spanish (Antonio Pamies), respectively Romanian (Georgiana Lungu-Badea, Diana Moțoc, Elena Platon). For this paper, it is fundamentally to remember the concept of *language-culture*, as it was launched, from what we have been able to research so far, by the French linguist Robert Galisson, according to whom “words constitute the privileged place of intrusion for certain cultural contents”⁴ (Galisson 1988, 331) (trans.). In accordance with Galisson’s conception, it is also worth remembering the understanding given in the Romanian as a Foreign Language didactics, namely: “words loaded with a cultural implicit” (Platon 2020, 368) (trans.).

Still in the field of foreign language teaching, it is useful to consider as well the explanation of Lúcia Maria de Assunção Barbosa, professor of Portuguese as a Foreign Language at the University of Brasilia:

³ A more detailed interpretation of the concept can also be found in Olivia-Carmen Țîrlea. 2024. „Lexiculturemele în manualele de RLS. Nivelurile A1-A2. Câteva aspecte”. In *Discurs polifonic în limba română ca limbă străină (RLS). Actele Conferinței Internaționale organizate de Institutul Limbii Române ca Limbă Europeană de la Facultatea de Litere a Universității Babeș-Bolyai din Cluj-Napoca, 6-7 octombrie 2023*, ed. by Elena Platon, Lavinia Vasii, Diana Roman, Cristina Bocoș, 268-282. Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană.

⁴ « Les mots [...] sont des lieux de pénétration privilégiés pour certains contenus de culture qui s'y déposent, [...], et ajoutent ainsi une autre dimension à la dimension sémantique ordinaire des signes ».

“[lexiculture] evokes two connotations: one, relating to the *lexicon*, which brings us back to the word, to the set of words that a language contains, and another, relating to *culture*, which is linked to the set of manifestations through which the daily life of people is expressed.” (Barbosa 2009, 33) (trans.)

In this regard, *Mărțișor* clearly illustrates the concept of *lexiculturem*, belonging not only to the vocabulary of the Romanian language, but also to Romanian cultural practices, perhaps even to a greater extent than we might initially imagine. Just when we find ourselves in a situation to explain the reach meaning of *Mărțișor*, we realize how necessary is to achieve what already announced before, specifically communication between cultures. Around others we will no longer take certain words for granted, as we often do, unfortunately, in our native language, but instead, we will learn to be more perceptive when it comes to various linguistic and cultural representations. The way these two are depicted for *Mărțișor* requires, therefore, a thorough practical analysis, which we thought it would be better to carry out both in the classroom and outside it, as will be seen in the next two sections.

4.1. Lexiculturemes, harbingers of spring in the Romanian as a Foreign Language textbooks

Browsing through some of the materials intended for Romanian as a Foreign Language, published after 2000, both in Romania (see Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3), as well as abroad, more precisely, in Italy (see Figure 4), we found that, among the lexiculturemes harbingers of spring, “*Mărțișorul*” has the most occurrences.

„*Mărțișorul este o mică bijuterie care are un șnur împletit dintr-un fir alb și un fir roșu. În România, de 1 martie, bărbații le oferă fetelor și femeilor aceste mărțișoare.*”
(Platon et al. 2012, 215)

Figure 1. *Mărțișorul* like a jewelry

„Odată, la începutul primăverii, am fost plecată într-o altă țară. [...] Mă gândeam cu nostalgie la primăvara de acasă și, dintr-odată, am înțeles care era problema: era 1 martie, era marți și era ceva... **Mărțișorul!**”
(Platon et al. 2021, 109)

Figure 2. Day of *Mărțișor*

„Fiecare **mărțișor** are obligatoriu două părți: **un mic obiect simbolic**, despre care se crede că aduce noroc. Știți voi: un trifoi cu patru foi, o potcoavă etc. Însă aceste obiecte, singure, nu au nicio putere. Forța mărțișorului se află în **șnurul împletit** dintr-**un fir alb** și **un fir roșu**: albul reprezintă iarna friguroasă, iar roșul este simbolul anotimpului cald [...].”

(Platon et al. 2021, 107-109)

Figure 3. Mărțișorul as a lucky object

„Cu ocazia **Mărțișorului**, doamnele și domnișoarele primesc **mărțișoare**: **mici obiecte** legate de **un șnur împletit** dintr-**un fir alb** și **unul roșu**, considerate **simboluri** de bun augur, aducătoare de **noroc**.”

(Topoliceanu 2020, 260)

Figure 4. Receiver of Mărțișor

In an attempt to clarify as much as possible of the cultural implicitness that *Mărțișor* contains, the previously cut-out Romanian language inputs seem to have anticipated a series of common questions that could have arisen in any learner's mind, such as: “What is *Mărțișor*?”, “How does *Mărțișor* look like?”, “When is *Mărțișor* offered?” and “To whom?”. Focusing on the first question, where we could noticed that is oscillated between “jewelry”, “symbolic object” or, simply, “object”, “the need for a future dictionary of lexiculturemes” (Platon 2024, 16) (trans.) becomes even stronger. A concise style and a vocabulary appropriate to the language level of the nonnative speaker are, therefore, some of the fundamental criteria that must be taken into account when proposing a definition for a given lexiculturem.

Then, the answers to the second question are those that can generate some confusion in the mind of the learner, since an explanation, as accurate as possible, requires the use of other words that can be felt as slightly above the language level of the learner targeted by the textbook (which would be A1-A2, the examples in Figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively A1-B1+, the example in Figure 4). If, however, we consider the Threshold level speaker, it is obvious that *Mărțișorul*, despite its linguistic difficulties, could not possibly be missing from a future minimal dictionary of Romanian lexiculturemes, being characteristic of everyday human manifestations. It is all about managing to anticipate these challenges well enough and, consequently, finding appropriate solutions. For instance, textbook authors

were sufficiently foresighted regarding the proposed definition, which is why they opt to insert, alongside the text, appropriate images for “șnur împletit”, “trifoi cu patru foi” or “potcoavă”. Hence, when the selected lexiculturem allows it, including a relevant image too can be a useful strategy in facilitating the understanding of meaning.

Finally, the third and fourth questions related to the practice of offering a *Mărțișor* to ladies and misses demands an increased attention to grammar. Accordingly, *Mărțișor* is a good example of how competences, in this case, the pluricultural and grammatical ones, complement each other. Since “to offer” is a verb that requires the presence of a noun or a pronoun in the Dative case, i.e., “bărbații *le* oferă *fetelor și femeilor* aceste mărțișoare”, the discussion on the subject of *Mărțișor* can be a genuine opportunity to introduce or practice this structure (which the textbook mentioned in the Figure 1 does), one that is not exactly easy for the learner of Romanian as a Foreign Language.

Last but not least, placing the selected lexiculturem in a proper lexical field should not be neglected either, because this can ensure greater or lesser contextual depth. About this, the previous examples contextualize well the lexiculturem *Mărțișor*, assigning it within the lexical field of “calendar holidays”, quickly identified as “1 martie”. A lightly difference can be felt in terms of style; rather, informative (examples from Figure 1 and 4) and more narrative (examples from Figure 2 and 3), which makes the cultural implicit even more authentic: “Mă gândeam cu nostalgie la primăvara de acasă [...]: era 1 martie, era *Mărțișorul*!”.

4.2. Lexiculturemes, harbingers of spring in the Romanian cultural space

Learning a foreign language continues beyond the classroom. Thus, for the targeted lexiculturem *Mărțișor*, the learner, walking down the street, may end up in the middle of a “Târg de Mărțișor” (for example, “Târg de Mărțișor” in Piața Unirii, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania) or see an announcement about the organization of a *Mărțișor* exhibition (for example, “Târg de Mărțișor” at the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca, Romania). These are common situations in which the cultural space, to which the learner wishes to gain access, faithfully reflects the contents already acquired during the course. Here, indeed, on the one hand, we recognize the ideal context of learning a foreign language while being already in that country. If, on the other hand, this physical advantage does not exist, as is, for example, the case of students learning the Romanian language abroad, the Romanian as a Foreign Language teacher is responsible for creating it (see Figure 5).

După vizita la Târgul de Mărțișor...

- Alege mărțișorul care ți-a plăcut cel mai mult.
- Descrie mărțișorul ales.
- Citește textul colegilor.

Ghiciți ce mărțișor am ales!



Figure 5. Activity „Mărțișor in form of...”

Other times, the learner may encounter the same lexiculturem in the virtual cultural space (see Figure 6 and Figure 7), where it takes the form of multimedia messages (in this case, of the image-text type). Although the word *Mărțișor* does not appear explicitly, the image of the red and white string is a clear sign of this Romanian cultural symbol. The fact that it is indeed a spring celebration is then suggested both through the image (the image of flowers, especially the snowdrops) and through the text (see the common greeting in Romanian language, “O primăvară plină de zâmbete!” or the reference to the same symbol illustrated by the construction “vestitorul primăverii”). To sum up, the selected examples prove that, in the absence of a prior discussion about *Mărțișor*, in a practical Romanian language course, an appropriate decoding of these multimedia messages by the learner may be perceived as a task too difficult to accomplish. For this reason, we consider the development of a minimal dictionary of Romanian lexiculturemes, a tool that a learner can quickly consult to familiarize himself with the cultural repertoire in the target language, to be a stringent necessity.



Figure 6. The beginning of spring



Figure 7. Spring's flower

5. Conclusions

To conclude, practicing pluricultural competence, according to the descriptors provided in CV, and focusing attention also on the “little c culture”, attests to the fact that, within a practical foreign language course, not only the teacher and the learner act as mediators, but also the vocabulary can mediate access to the culture. Moreover, introducing lexiculturemes from elementary levels can function as a solid link between the inner pluricultural space, in this case, the classroom, and the outer, everyday, cultural space, in which integration is also aimed.

Valuing lexiculturemes, such as *Mărțișor* or *Babele de martie*, if we were to think about a possible future analysis, can, therefore, prove to be an effective strategy both to illustrate the Romanian cultural implicit and to help the learner enrich their own cultural repertoire. Because the cultural reference, although so often claimed in the CV, as seen in the previous scales, is a matter that still remains open to investigations, since the challenge here is also towards a paradigm shift; from passively delivered information to knowledge more and more correlated with real communications needs, giving the learner the chance to become an active speaker, able to interact, both linguistically and culturally, with others.

References

- Barbosa, Lúcia Maria de Assunção. 2009. “O conceito de lexicultura e suas implicações para o ensino-aprendizagem de português língua estrangeira.” *Filologia e Linguística Portuguesa* 10-11: 31-41.
- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors*. 2018. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989> (accessed on 27 May 2025).
- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. 2001. Strasbourg: Language Policy Unit. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97> (accessed on 27 May 2025).
- Galisson, Robert. 1988. “Cultures et lexicultures. Pour une approche dictionnaire de la culture partagée.” *Annexes des Cahiers de linguistique hispanique médiévale*, vol. 7, Hommage à Bernard Pottier, 325-341. Available at: www.persee.fr/doc/cehm_0180-9997_1988_sup_7_1_2133 (accessed on 27 May 2025).

- Kramsch, Claire. 2013. "Culture in foreign language teaching." *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research* 1(1): 57-78. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1127430.pdf> (accessed on 27 May 2025).
- Neșu, Nicoleta. 2022. "Metafore prin care (și) predăm (Metaphors We Teach By)." In *Predarea, receptarea și evaluarea limbii române ca limbă străină. Dinamică și varietate*, ed. by Lucia Ispas, 218-228. București: Editura Pro Universitaria.
- Platon, Elena, Cristina Gogâță, Lavinia Iunia VasIU, Anca Ursa. 2021. *România în 50 de povești. Limba română ca limbă străină (RLS). Texte gradate A1-A2*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Platon, Elena, Ioana Sonea, Dina Vîlcu. 2012. *Manual de limba română ca limbă străină (RLS): A1-A2*. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință.
- Platon, Elena. 2020. "Un proiect utopic de lexicografie didactică în RLS." In *Discurs polifonic în limba română ca limbă străină (RLS). Actele Conferinței Internaționale organizate de Institutul Limbii Române ca Limbă Europeană de la Facultatea de Litere a Universității Babeș-Bolyai din Cluj-Napoca, 18-19 octombrie 2019*, ed. by Elena Platon, Cristina Bocoș, Diana Roman, Lavinia VasIU, 357-379. Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Platon, Elena. 2021. *Elemente de metadidactică*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Platon, Elena. 2024. "La granița dintre cuvânt și tăcere. Fundamentele unui dicționar lexicultural." In *Discurs polifonic în limba română ca limbă străină (RLS). Actele Conferinței Internaționale organizate de Institutul Limbii Române ca Limbă Europeană de la Facultatea de Litere a Universității Babeș-Bolyai din Cluj-Napoca, 6-7 octombrie 2023*, ed. by Elena Platon, Lavinia VasIU, Diana Roman, Cristina Bocoș, 13-45. Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Topoliceanu, Harieta. 2020. *Bine ați venit! Corso di lingua romena. Livelli A1-B1+ del Quadro Comune Europeo di Riferimento per le Lingue*. Milano: Editore Ulrico Hoepli.

Image sources

<https://pixabay.com/ro/>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=975979641304573&set=a.580115487557659&type=3>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1027499462756589&set=pb.100064896331347.-2207520000&type=3>