On the syntax and usage of glossonyms in memes and reels

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The paper looks at three major contexts of occurrence for non-standard glossonyms, i.e. in internet reels and memes, which are identified as: Verb + glossonym proper (of the type 'waits in Spanish'), Manner-of-speaking Verb + covert glossonym (of the type 'screams in teenager'), and Verb + like X glossonym (of the type 'stares in wife'). Building on the syntactic analysis in Tănase-Dogaru (2024), the paper shows that all three types of constructions involve the presence of a covert classifier LANGUAGE or WAY. Moreover, all three types of constructions involve the presence of the preposition 'in', which, unlike standard glossonym constructions, where it disambiguates between an individual-level and a stage-level reading, introduces an ambiguity between a 'like X' and a 'language X' reading, which in turn triggers humorous effects.

Keywords: *glossonyms, classifiers, prepositions*

1. Introduction

The present paper investigates three specific uses of names of languages, i.e. glossonyms, in Internet language, more specifically memes and reels[2]. The three uses are preliminarily illustrated in (1-3) and follow three main patterns: Verb + glossonym proper (1), Manner-of -Speaking Verb + covert glossonym (2), and Verb + *like X* glossonym (3).

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[2] The examples discussed in this paper have been found on Tik-Tok, Facebook, Pinterest, and YouTube comments. The main sources are the Tik-Tok channels *shiadanni*, *nicholas_flannery*, and *TwinGirlPeeks*.

(1)   Verb + overt glossonym
       smells in Greek
(2)   Verb + covert glossonym
       screams in teenager
(3)   Verb + *like X* glossonym
       stares in wife

Glossonym constructions of the type in (1-3) represent a relatively new development of humorous internet language. They can be understood as a kind of caption or speech bubble, complementing the short film or image. They are generally used to disambiguate the attitude and/or frame of mind of the content creator, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Verb + *like X* glossonym (from *nicholas-flannery*)

Figure 2. Verb + overt glossonym (from *shiadanni*)

By investigating these three types of glossonym structures, the paper aims to bring (additional) evidence in favour of the presence of a silent classifier LANGUAGE / WAY in the make-up of (complex) proper names of languages (see Tănase-Dogaru 2024). Secondly, the paper shows that the reflex of the presence of the classifier is the preposition *in*, which basically turns every common noun into a name of a language.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 gives a brief account of the syntax and use of standard glossonyms in English and Romanian; section 3 proposes an analysis for the types of glossonym structures identified in Internet language; section 4 gives some conclusions.

2. On standard glossonyms

Glossonyms, which are also known as glottonyms or linguonyms in the literature, are a relatively understudied domain. Building on the syntactic approach in Tănase-Dogaru (2024), this paper represents an attempt at filling the gap in the study of names of languages and complex proper names generally, at the syntax-pragmatics interface.

English has two types of glossonym constructions: covert classifier + glossonym constructions (4) and overt classifier + glossonym constructions (5), while Romanian has three: covert glossonym + classifier constructions (6), overt glossonym + classifier constructions (7), and -*ește* glossonyms (8).

(4)   She speaks English.   English
(5)   She speaks (the) English language.
(6)   Vorbește   română.   Romanian
        Speak.3PRES Romanian.
        'She speaks Romanian'
(7)   Vorbește   limba   română.
        Speak.3PRES   language Romanian.
        'She speaks the Romanian language'
(8)   Vorbește   românește.
        Speak.3PRES Romanian.*ește*
        'She speaks   Romanian'

In what follows, these different types of glossonym constructions will be briefly discussed for English and Romanian, so as to pave the way for an analysis of internet language glossonyms.

2.1. Standard glossonyms with overt classifiers

The syntactic structure of these glossonyms consists of a classifier–noun sequence, in the sense that they behave like complex proper names[3] of the type in (9) (Cornilescu 2007; Tănase-Dogaru 2013, 2024).
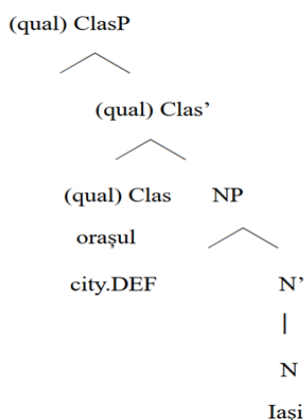
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[3] These constructions are known in the literature as restrictive appositives, qualificational nouns, descriptive proper names, complex proper names, qualitative classifiers (van Riemsdijk 1998, Löbel 2001, Cornilescu 2007, Tănase-Dogaru 2013).

(9)   Profesorul   Ionescu   regina   Elisabeta   oraşul   Iaşi
        professor.DEF   Ionescu   queen.DEF   Elisabeth   city.DEF   Iaşi
        'Professor Ionescu'   'Queen Elizabeth'   'the city of Iaşi'
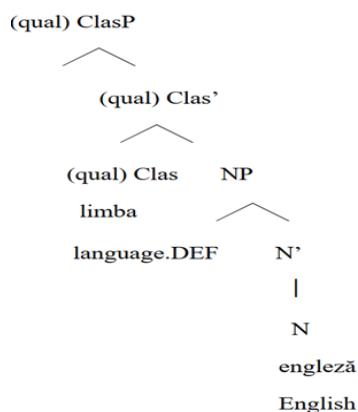
(Cornilescu 2007: 63)

Both types of nominal constructions contain an overt qualitative classifier in the syntactic make-up (Tănase-Dogaru 2024), as shown in the simplified syntactic structures in (10a-b).
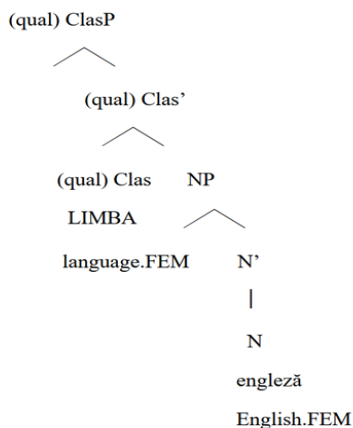
(10)   a. complex proper name   b. glossonym with an overt classifier

2.2. Standard glossonyms with covert classifiers

The main idea behind the syntax of glossonym constructions with covert classifiers is that in an example like (10) there is a silent classifier, so that the underlying structure for (11) is (12), where the glossonym agrees in gender with the silent classifier (see Tănase-Dogaru 2024).

(11)   Vorbeşte   engleză.
        Speak.PRES.3SG.   English.FEM
        '(S)he speaks   English'.
(12)   Vorbeşte   LIMBA   engleză.
        Speak.PRES.3SG.   LANGUAGE.FEM   English.FEM
        '(S)he speaks   English'.
(13)   (simplified) syntax of standard glossonym with covert classifiers

```
                    (qual) ClasP
                         ⌒
                    (qual) Clas'
                         ⌒
               (qual) Clas      NP
                LIMBA            ⌒
              language.FEM      N'
                                 |
                                 N
                              engleză
                            English.FEM
```

2.3. Romanian *-ește* glossonyms

-ește is the oldest and most productive adverbial suffix in Romanian, derivations using the suffix being attested since the 16th century (Haneș 1961; Popescu-Marin 2007; Croitor to appear). Adverbs derived by adding *-ește* to an adjectival or nominal base may have several interpretations, such as relation, conformity or likeness. The likeness, or *like X* interpretation (14) gave rise to names of languages (15):

(14) bătrânește   câinește   americănește
      old man-ește   dog-ește   American-ește
       'like an old man' 'like a dog'   'like an American'

(15) americănește   leșește   râmlenește   svăbește
      American-ește   Polish-ește   Rome-ește   Schwaben-ește

   'language spoken by Americans / the Polish / Rome people / the Schwaben'

(Croitor forth, 206)

Some amount of ambiguity between the interpretation *like X* and *language X* still exists in contemporary Romanian. In (16), the *-ește* derivative is ambiguous between the reading *like English people* or *using the English language*, while the lexicalized expression in (17) exploit the *like X* pattern (see Tănase-Dogaru 2024).

(16) Salută   englezește.
      Greet.PRES.3SG   English-*ește*
       '(S)he greets people like English people do / using English'

(17)   A șters-o   englezește.
       Has wiped-it   English-*ește*
        '(S)he took French leave.'

In (18a), with the adverbial *like X* interpretation, the *-ește* suffix is syntactically inert, being adjoined to the VP in an ordinary adjunct-like configuration, while in (18b), in a sentence that employs an *-ește* glossonym with a verb of saying, the suffix is syntactically active, in the sense that it allows the glossonym to be embedded under a Classifier Phrase whose head hosts the silent classifier LANGUAGE, thus signaling a true 'name of language' interpretation (Tănase-Dogaru 2024):

(18) a.   b.
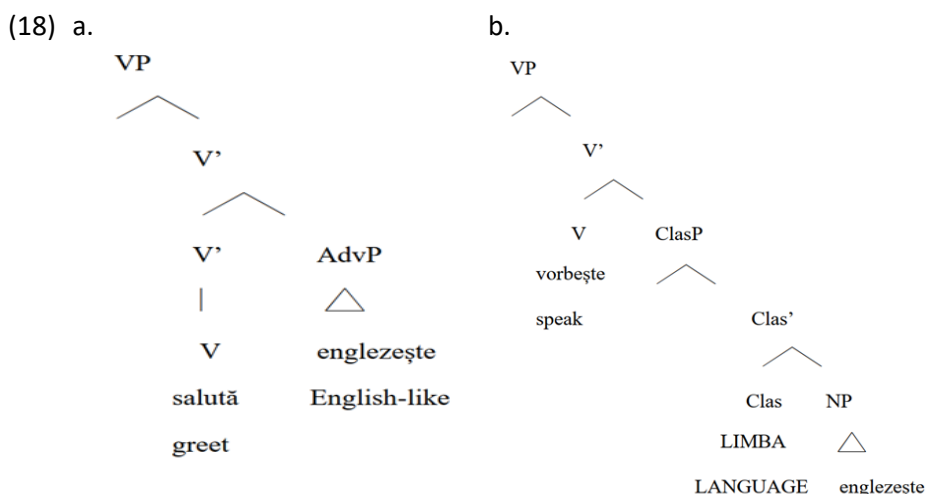
It will be seen next that the usage of glossonyms in internet languages also exploits the ambiguity *like X / language X* for humorous effects.

3. An analysis of non-standard glossonyms

The aim of the present section is to analyze non-standard glossonyms, i.e. the way in which names of languages are used by internet language. In doing so, the section brings additional evidence in favor of the presence of a silent classifier LANGUAGE / WAY in the make-up of (complex) proper names of languages. Secondly, the section discusses the role played by the preposition *in*, which surfaces with all non-standard glossonyms and which is taken to signal the presence of the silent classifier.

3.1. The data

By far the most numerous examples in the present corpus belong to the Verb + glossonym proper type (19):

(19)   smells in Greek / shrugs in French / drinks in German / walks in Spanish / hydrates in Spanish / waits in Spanish / opens in Spanish / runs in Spanish / chops in Spanish / tastes in Spanish / conjures in Spanish / breaks up in Spanish / exorcises in Spanish

The Manner-of-speaking Verb + covert glossonym (20) and the Verb + *like X* glossonym (21) constructions are less well illustrated; however, it is clear that these patterns, although only emerging at this point, are rapidly gaining ground.

(20)   screams in teenager / mumbles in grumpy adolescent / yells in mom
(21)   stares in wife   / cries in Italian silk / cries in pianist

In what follows, the types of non-standard glossonym constructions will be discussed in turns, in order to show the complex interplay between their syntax and pragmatics.
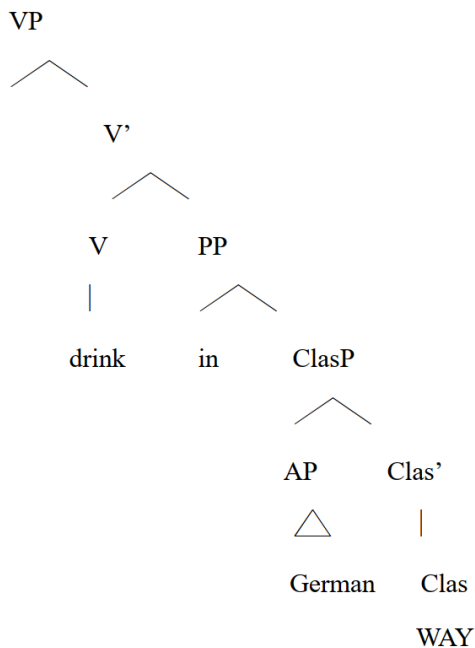
3.2. Waiting in Spanish and drinking in German: The Verb + glossonym proper construction

The pattern discussed in this section and exemplified in (19) is a combination of a verb whose selectional restrictions do not require a glossonym direct object and a glossonym proper, giving rise to obvious humorous effects. As shown in section 2.1, the glossonym is part of a complex proper name, which consists of a glossonym + silent classifier sequence.

(22)   a.   smells in Greek
        a'.   smells in the Greek WAY (like the Greek do)
        b.   shrugs in French
        b'.   shrugs in the French WAY (like the French do)
        c.   drinks in German
        c'.   drinks in the German WAY (like the German do)

Thus, the pattern Verb + glossonym proper represents a close approximation of the *like X* pattern identified with *–eşte* glossonyms in Romanian[4].

(23)

```
                    VP
                    /\
                   V'
                  /\
                 V    PP
                 |    /\
              drink  in   ClasP
                           /\
                        AP    Clas'
                        /\     |
                   German    Clas
                             WAY
```

3.3. Screaming in teenager and yelling in mom: the Manner-of-speaking Verb + covert glossonym type

In the case of this pattern (illustrated in (20)), the preposition *in* introduces a complex proper name of the type noun + silent classifier LANGUAGE / WAY (see (24)).
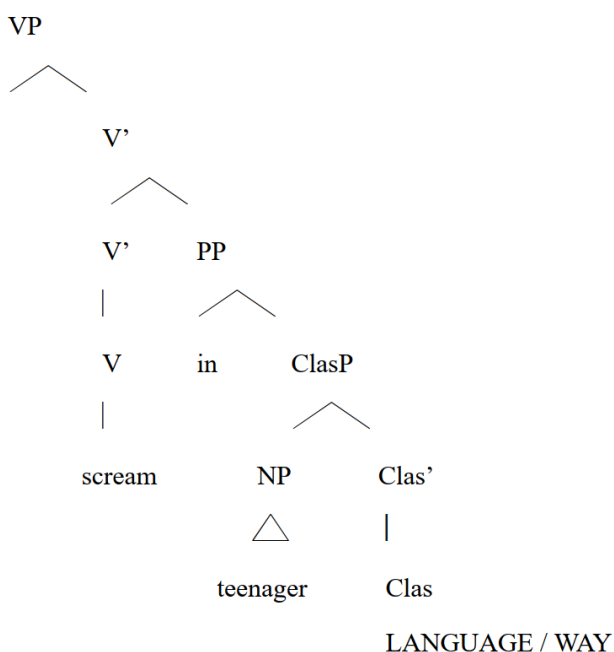
(24)   a.   screams in teenager
        a'.   screams in teenager LANGUAGE / WAY (like a teenager)
        b.   yells in mom
        b.   yells in mom LANGUAGE / WAY (like moms usually do when upset)

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[4] For instance, Mîrzea Vasile (2012) observes that many new *-eşte* formations in Romanian are modelled after an expressive model, in the sense that they select a well-known property of a type of person or animal (Mîrzea Vasile 2012, 100):

      avocăţeşte,   cizmăreşte,   cronicăreşte,   piratereşte
       lawyer-eşte, shoemaker-eşte, chronicler-eşte, pirate-eşte
      'lawyer-like, shoemaker-like,   chronicler-like, pirate-like'

(25)

```
VP
 |
 V'
  |
 V'      PP
 |        |
 V      in     ClasP
 |             |
scream      NP      Clas'
             |       |
          teenager  Clas

          LANGUAGE / WAY
```
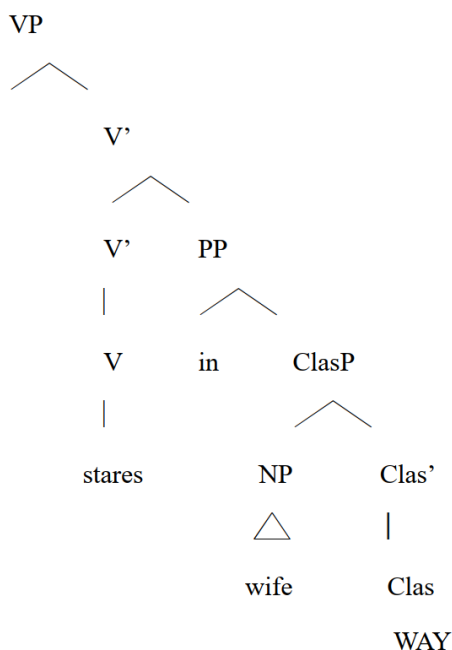
3.4. Staring in wife and crying in pianist: The Verb + *like X* glossonym pattern

Perhaps the closest approximation of the interpretation possessed by Romanian -*ește* glossonyms is the pattern Verb + *like X* glossonym, as indicated by the paraphrases in (26). In all these cases, the preposition *in* introduces a complex proper name of the type noun + silent classifier WAY (27):

(26) a.   stares in wife
      a'.   stares in a wife-like manner
      b.   cries in pianist
      b'.   cries in a pianist-like manner

(27)

```
    VP
     ╱╲
        V'
        ╱╲
      V'    PP
      │     ╱╲
      V    in   ClasP
      │         ╱╲
   stares     NP    Clas'
              △     │
             wife   Clas

                    WAY
```

3.5. The role of the preposition *in*

In both Romanian and English, there is a contrast (with standard glossonym constructions) between the prepositionless and the prepositional glossonym constructions.

As illustrated in the examples below (28-29), the contrast is consistently that between a generic / habitual sentence and progressive one, i.e. a stage-level property.

(28)   She speaks English.
(29)   She is speaking (in) English.

(30-31) show the same contrast between individual-level and stage-level properties, but this time the classifier LANGUAGE is overt.

(30)   She speaks the English language.
(31)   She speaks in the English language.

Romanian exhibits the same contrast between a genericity / habituality and stage-level properties, both with overt (31-32) and covert (34-35) classifiers (where 33 and 35 roughly correspond to the English progressive).

(32)   Vorbește   limba   engleză.
        Speak.PRES.3SG   language.FEM   English.FEM
        '(s)he speaks English'
(33)   Vorbește   în limba   engleză.
        Speak.PRES.3SG   in language.FEM   English.FEM
        '(S)he is speaking English'
(34)   Vorbește   engleză.
        Speak.PRES.3SG   English.FEM
        '(S)he speaks English'
(35)   Vorbește   în engleză.
        Speak.PRES.3SG   in English.FEM
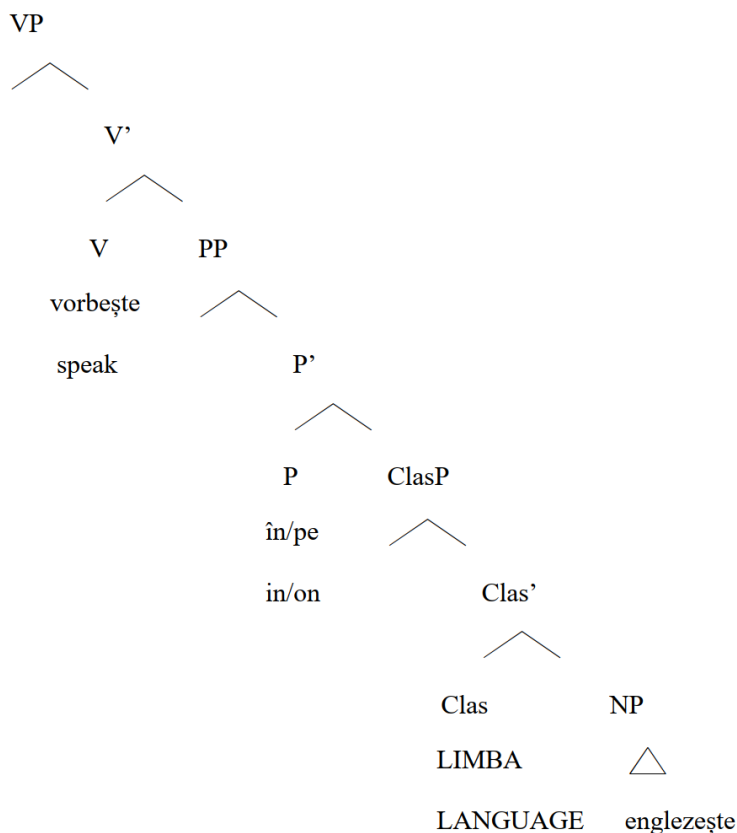   'She is speaking English'

It seems safe to assume that the preposition *în* 'in' signals that the speaking event is unfolding and that it is also temporally bounded, thereby encoding progressive aspect.

The prepositions *în* / *in* (in English and Romanian) and *pe* 'on' (in Romanian) also serve to disambiguate between the two available readings: the *like X* and the *language X* interpretations:

(36)   Salută   în / pe engleze̦te.
        Greet.PRES.3SG   in / on English-ește
        '(S)he greets people in English'
(37)   Salută   engleze̦te.
        Greet.PRES.3SG   English-ește
        '(S)he greets people like English people do / using English')

The paper will therefore assume a syntactic structure where the prepositional head embeds the Classifier Phrase hosting the overt or covert classifier, therefore signaling the presence of the classifier and, at the same time, serving to disambiguate between the two available readings of glossonyms (38).

(38)

```
VP
  \
   V'
     \
   V      PP
 vorbește    \
             P'
  speak        \
          P       ClasP
        în/pe       \
                   Clas'
        in/on         \
               Clas       NP
                            △
               LIMBA

            LANGUAGE    englezește
```

As previously mentioned, non-standard glossonyms of the three types identified in the paper consistently use the preposition *in* to the extent that it is the only robust linguistic mark signaling the presence of a glossonym, in other words that it is the name of a *language* at work. At the same time, when discussed from a pragmatic point of view, it becomes clear that the preposition introduces an ambiguity between the *like X* and the *language X* interpretations. It is this very ambiguity that gives rise to humorous effects.

Glossonyms of the first type, i.e. Verb + glossonyms proper, may be easily interpreted as real glossonyms since they involve the name of a language; in these cases (see Figure 3, for example), the humorous effect arises from the incongruity between the *language X* interpretation, prompted by the use of the glossonym proper, and the use of a verb whose selectional restrictions trigger expectations different from the *language X* interpretation.

Glossonyms of the second and third types, however, do not involve a true name of a language and, therefore, have to rely for humorous effects solely on the ambiguity introduced by the preposition *in* (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Verb + glossonym proper triggering incongruity (*waits in Spanish*)

Figure 4. Verb + *like X* glossonym (*cries in Italian silk*)

4. Conclusions

The paper has looked at the syntax and contexts of use of non-standard glossonyms in internet language, i.e. reels and memes. Identifying three major types of non-standard uses of glossonyms, the paper has shown that all three uses involve a covert classifier LANGUAGE / WAY and, perhaps more importantly, all three uses involve the preposition *in*. The role of the preposition, unlike cases of standard glossonym usage, where it serves to disambiguate between the *like X* and the *language X* interpretations, is to actually introduce an ambiguity between these interpretations, which in turn triggers humorous effects.

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