

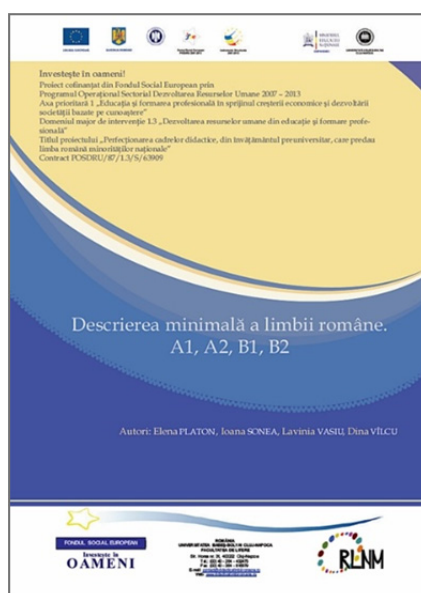
BOOK REVIEW

**Platon, Elena, Sonea, Ioana, Vasiu, Lavinia, Vilcu, Dina, *A Minimalist Description of the Romanian Language (A1, A2, B1, B2)*
Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărtii de Știință, 2014, 95 p.**

In what follows, we shall review the *Minimalist Description of the Romanian Language (A1, A2, B1, B2)*, a document that was drawn up on the basis of thorough and long-lasting studies on the teaching and assessment of Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL)/as a Second Language (RSL), undertaken by the research team of the *Department of Romanian Language, Culture and Civilization* from the Faculty of Letters of "Babeș-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

The work, totalling 95 pages, includes the following sections: a *Foreword*, signed by Elena Platon, wherein are briefly presented: 1. *The necessity and usefulness of the work* (p. 1-3), 2. *A brief sentimental history...* (p. 3-5), 3. *The structure of the work* (p. 5-8); the actual *description* of the Romanian language for each of the four levels: A1, A2, B1, B2 (p. 9-92), the document ending with the *Bibliography* (p. 93-94) and the *Contents* (p. 95).

In recent years, especially considering the need to issue Romanian language proficiency certificates that are also valid



abroad, the study of Romanian at international linguistic standards has been made possible by professionals who have developed teaching / assessment methods and techniques that have also been used for scholars working on other languages and having a considerable, vast experience in the field. At this moment, apart from the most important instrument drafted by the Council of Europe's *Language Policy Division*, namely the already consecrated

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), there are no other scientific instruments that would justify the teaching and assessment of Romanian in accordance with the common reference levels and ensure the international recognition of Romanian language certificates.

In this context, the establishment of a set of common standards, by which EU Member States can produce "transparent and coherent language policies" (Platon: 1) and of a "code of communication between those directly involved in the teaching/learning/assessment of a language other than the mother tongue" (Platon: 1)

is acknowledged by the authors of this work as one of the fundamental premises of the *Framework*.

Regardless of the language and the role assumed in the teaching process, the unanimous acceptance of the language proficiency levels proposed in the CEFR (namely the well-known A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 levels, with thorough descriptions of rigorously delineated competences in various stages of foreign language acquisition) and of all the other principles set out in the *Framework* confirms two complementary aspects: on the one hand, practitioners in the field should relinquish purely intuitive approaches; on the other hand, there is a mandatory need for a descriptive schema, outlined on the basis of objective, correct parameters. Only thus can the standardization of the teaching process be achieved, on the basis of a credible and efficient measurement of every learner's progress in language acquisition.

However, contradictory attitudes about the usefulness and authority of this document were not long to emerge (in the Romanian academic milieu, in any case), affecting the production of teaching materials and bearing major implications for the proposed assessment instruments. The emergence of this "teaching discomfort" within the area of Romanian as a Foreign Language/Second Language conceals, in fact, a "delicate" reality: the alignment did not pursue a natural course, *from* the drafting of a description of each specific level pertaining to the *Common European Framework* to the elaboration of teaching materials; on the contrary, the process followed the opposite direction, as the proposal of teaching materials for a certain level preceded the clarification of the particular proficiency level to which reference was made.

Moreover, those who teach RFL/RSL generally admit that there is an

obvious lack of consensus with regard to the profile of each level: a minimal control over the exploited vocabulary and speech acts, or the lack of precise delineations concerning the lexical-grammatical classes that are employed on each level within the system of the Romanian language.

Against this equivocal background, which lacks a description of the levels within the framework of the Romanian language, the authors from the *Department of Romanian Language, Culture and Civilization* have responded to the imperative need for determining, specifically, the "demands" imposed upon learners in various stages of Romanian language acquisition and embarked upon the project of writing the *Minimalist Description*, in the hope that the document would ensure the quality of the entire teaching process: the adequate planning of the curricular activity; the correct assessment of the learners' level of competence, regardless of their status; the appropriate selection of the necessary materials for the development of oral and written communication skills; the much more accurate drafting of tests for each level, with a view to obtaining a certificate for a certain proficiency level.

The usefulness of the aforementioned working instrument is no doubt attested by the rather broad range of potential recipients: authors of textbooks and auxiliary teaching materials in the field of RFL/RSL; authors of tests organized by CEFR levels; teachers of RFL/RSL and all those who begin teaching in this field; candidates wishing to obtain a language proficiency certificate in Romanian, for a particular CEFR level; pupils and students (non-native speakers) who wish to assess themselves; researchers interested in approaching the Romanian language from the perspective of non-native speakers.

The authors' concerns for designing an instrument that could support the en-

tire process of teaching RFL/RSL, on each of the proficiency levels, were outlined, for the first time, 10 years ago, when the affiliation with the *Association of Language Testers in Europe* (ALTE) took place and when certain exchanges of experience and opinions were occasioned within the framework of various conferences and meetings organized by this well-known organization. Thus, the *Minimalist Description* began with the proposal for developing a simplified guide, comprising sections exclusively devoted to morphosyntax, lexicology and speech acts.

Considering that the document could not remain unvalored, given its very high stakes and the considerable effort made up to that point, its improvement occurred, naturally, along several complementary coordinates: the authors' teaching experiences, the students' results, the tests on each level, the suggestions made by the professors from the universities in the country and abroad who participated in the training courses organized by the *Institute for the Romanian Language as a European language*, coordinated by the *Department of Romanian Language, Culture and Civilization*.

As the outcome of all these authentic barometers in the field and of the feedback provided by almost 3500 specialists with vast experience in the teaching of RSL to non-native speakers, from all age groups, the final version of the document is certainly one of the most important achievements of the project under whose aegis it was compiled: "Improving the Training of Secondary Education Teachers of Romanian to the National Minorities", SOPHRD/87/1.3/S/63909 contract.

The descriptive structure of the Romanian language complies, very thoroughly, with the fundamental objective of studying any language: *developing oral and written communicative skills in the*

target language, so much so that, under these circumstances, the *communicative-functional perspective* remains the only one able to guide the relevant delineations within such a document. Within the description itself, on each individual level A1, A2, B1, B2, there are three major sections, each with a series of specific subsections: **1. Communicative functions:** (A) *Social conventions*, (B) *Information exchange*, (C) *Expressing attitudes*, (D) *Expressing moods and feelings*, (E) *Influencing actions*, (F) *Remedial acts*; **2. Communication structures:** 2.1. *Grammar classes*, 2.2. *Lexical items*, 2.3. *Expressing circumstances*, 2.4. *Sentence construction*; **3. Types of texts.**

In the first section, dedicated to *Communicative functions*, the authors have tried to present, as comprehensively as possible, "what can be done with language" in different communication situations. To give one example, under (B) *Information exchange*, the following utterances are proposed for the function of *requesting the identification of someone / something*: **A1:** *Who are you? / Who is he? / What is on the table?*; **A2:** *What is his name? / Who is that man? / What book is he reading?*; **B1:** *Do you happen to know who this gentleman is? / Can you recognize this woman? / Do you happen to know what this woman is reading?*; **B2:** *Do you, by any chance, know who this gentleman is? / Can you recognize this woman? / What is the woman holding in her hand?*

The next section, *Communication structures*, which is also the most extensive, proposes a rigorous organization of the linguistic tools the speaker has to use in order to accomplish the functions presented above. As regards the first subsection, 2.1. *Grammar classes*, all the parts of speech in the Romanian language, along with the specific grammatical categories – where necessary, of course – are gradually

and traditionally divided by level. The distribution is made into two columns placed in parallel, demonstrating, according to the model above, “*how language works morphosyntactically*”. The second subsection, 2.2. *Lexical items*, observing this logical thread, is dedicated to the vocabulary, in the absence of which the materialization of the communication process becomes impossible. The proposed vocabulary is organized systematically, based on delimitations into 20 lexical spheres, which are easy to keep under control and manage: *weather, personal features, education, professions and the professional sphere, body parts, personal hygiene, health, etc.*

Thus, depending on the level, the lexical spheres “expand” gradually, in terms of their inventory, the distribution of the vocabulary being made according to certain “variables”: the RFL-RSL textbooks available on the market, the basic word-stock of the Romanian language, teaching experience and, last but not least, intuition. For example, for the lexical sphere *apparel/footwear/accessories*, there are inventoried words such as: **A1:** *trousers, shirt, t-shirt, sweater, skirt, dress, cap, gloves*; **A2:** *overcoat, coat, jacket, suit, socks, stockings, shorts, etc.*; **B1:** *long/short-sleeved topcoat, pocket, poncho, waistcoat, etc.*; **B2:** *leggings, collar, jumper dress, tunic, etc.*

The third subsection, 2.3. *Expressing circumstances*, indicates how one can express in Romanian fundamental notions related to *time, space, place, manner, cause, etc.* These are entirely devoid of lexical-grammatical classifications, the emphasis being laid exclusively on their pragmatic aspects. For example, *rela-*

tions of posteriority are expressed as follows: **A1:** *then, after, next year*; **A2:** *after, afterwards, later*; **B1:** *right after (wards), after that*; **B2:** *subsequently*.

The last section of the description is reserved for the *types of texts* that non-native speakers ought to be able to comprehend and/or produce both orally and in writing: on the one hand, according to the teachers’ and the learners’ actual needs; on the other hand, depending on the correspondence between a particular text and the skill best suited to it.

To conclude, we may state that, unlike in the case of teaching, where the limits are “much more relaxed”, being directly dependent on the language students’ needs, it is recommended that in developing tests on the basis of which certificates of language proficiency will be issued, the degree of compliance with the description put forth should be as high as possible, out of a desire to comply with the following fundamental principle: the validation of a standardized, objective evaluation process, especially in the context in which the description in question is also made available to the students.

Without aiming to impose any restrictions on the teaching process, given that communication itself is a phenomenon with an actual propensity for change, the *Minimalist Description of the Romanian Language* should be considered a flexible working tool, which may “contribute to the professionalization of the entire process of Romanian language teaching” (Platon: 8), in light of the *overall objective of informing the interested parties about the order in which it is recommended that language structures should be gradually taught*.

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