

# On the Semantics and Syntax of the Romanian Verbs of Saying

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## Abstract

Grouped around the archilexeme to speak, the so-called *verba dicendi* are those verbs a speaker may use in order to perform a direct vs. an indirect speech act. If we take into account some of their specific features, such as: the message one wants to convey, the affective-emotional attitude, the register, the intensity and some other criteria, the verbs of saying can be classified in an attempt to create a taxonomy for organizational purposes, in order to reduce the degree of ambiguity, while trying to analyze them within a given lexical corpus composed of Romanian declarative verbs. This article outlines the specificity of the *verba dicendi*, the behavior of these verbs of saying being intrinsically linked to the process of communication.

**Keywords:** - *verba dicendi*, communication, (in)transitiveness, (in)direct speech, discourse.

## *Componential analysis of declarative verbs*

The verbs of saying are those that express specific communicative human activities, those that involve the intent to convey a message that contains a piece of information, to another person. Certain verbs, besides introducing a quote, also contain or add a comment on the linguistic act they reproduce. In the modern grammars of Romance languages, the verbs of speech are only outlined as a special class in the context of indirect discourse analysis, an extremely important aspect for the languages that inherited a set of strict rules of *consecutio temporum* from Latin. The possibility of introducing direct speech is one of the most important characteristics of the verbs of saying, but this feature cannot operate as an absolute criterion for their definition, since there are also other categories of verbs that can occupy this position.

The morphosyntactic behavior of the speech verbs or the active participants in the act of communication do not constitute sufficient criteria to identify them as

a group by itself (proximate genus) or to distinguish them from other classes of verbs (specific difference).

From a lexico-semantic point of view, the verbs of saying are a thematic series of lexemes that have the common semantic feature of using articulate language in order to convey orally some objective, subjective or emotional information<sup>1</sup>, therefore they group around the archilexeme *to speak*. As we set Maria Bîrcă's observations referring to the lexico-semantic groups of the verbs of speaking<sup>2</sup> as our starting point, we find that, within the thematic series consisting of these verbs, one can identify a number of semantic categories with a syntactic behavior that may differ depending on the semantic peculiarities that establish the oppositions between them:

1. Neutral speech verbs;
2. Verbs of saying which express an order, a request or a piece of advice;
3. Verbs of saying which express a reprimand;
4. Verbs of saying which express an assumption or a prediction;
5. Verbs of saying which express denial;
6. Verbs of saying which express an interrogation, etc.

No doubt, the categories identified above, motivated mainly by intuition and direct observation, cannot be accepted as a rigorous classification, especially since some of the verbs of saying may be perceived as belonging to several categories. The classification based on the componential analysis of verbs which have the verb *to speak* as an archilexeme reduces the degree of ambiguity and helps to draw well-defined boundaries between certain categories of declarative verbs. To this end, we propose a list of semantic components on which we report convergences and divergences of meaning that arise within the class of *verba dicendi*. The ten semes that we consider to be the most relevant are:

1. the speech component (present in all the verbs in this class),
2. the type of information they transmit,
3. the interrogative component,
4. the negative component,
5. the affective-emotional attitude,

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Maria Bîrcă, "Caracteristicile semantice ale verbelor zicerii," *Limba și literatura moldovenească*, 3 (1972), 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

6. reciprocity,
7. intensity,
8. speech intelligibility,
9. register,
10. the technical nature of the communication channel.<sup>3</sup>

Our analysis will focus upon a limited number of Romanian verbs of speaking, and it will underline the different changes of meaning undergone by each of them, depending on the elements that we have already mentioned. Within the framework of this componential analysis, we will mark with [+] the semes that are positively activated, with [-] the ones that are negatively activated and with [0] the unspecified ones. Thus, for example, in the case of a verb like *a striga* (to shout) the intensity component will appear as [+ INTENSE], for a verb like *a șopti* (to whisper) as [-INTENSE], and for the verb *a vorbi* (to speak) we suggest the neutral actualization [0 INTENSE], because this component is not specified in the semantic structure; it may be activated contextually as positive or negative by using determinants, nevertheless it does not constitute an intrinsic feature:

*He spoke **loudly** so that we could hear him from the street.* [+ INTENSE]

*He saw her listening to him, as he bent his head to **whisper** in her ear.*  
[- INTENSE]

Applied to a lexical corpus composed of 24 Romanian verbs of speaking, the componential analysis that takes these semes into account will result in the following table:

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<sup>3</sup> See also: *ibidem*, 37 et seq.; *idem*, “Analiza semică a verbelor zicerii cu sens de «a transmite o informație»,” *Limba și literatura moldovenească*, 4 (1977), 42 et seq.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Dickens, *Christmas Books* (Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1995), 201.

		SPEECH	INFORMATION	INTERROGATIVE	NEGATIVE <sup>5</sup>	AFFECTIVE-EMOTIONAL <sup>6</sup>	RECIPROCAL	INTENSE <sup>7</sup>	UNINTELLIGIBLY <sup>8</sup>	FORMAL <sup>9</sup>	TECHNICAL <sup>10</sup>
1.	<b>a anunța (to announce)</b>	+	+	-	-	0	+	0	-	+	0
2.	<b>a bolborosi (to stutter)</b>	+	0	-	0	0	0	0	+	-	0
3.	<b>a certa (to quarrel/argue)</b>	+	+	-	-	-	+	0	0	0	0
4.	<b>a dezminți (to refute)</b>	+	+	-	+	-	+	0	-	+	0
5.	<b>a explica (to explain)</b>	+	+	-	-	0	+	0	-	+	0
6.	<b>a fonfăi (to twang)</b>	+	0	0	0	0	0	-	+	-	0
7.	<b>a gîngăvi (to stammer)</b>	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	+	-	0
8.	<b>a huidui (to boo)</b>	+	0	0	0	-	+	+	0	-	0
9.	<b>a interoga (to query)</b>	+	+	+	-	0	+	0	0	+	0
10.	<b>a întreba (to ask)</b>	+	+	+	-	0	+	0	0	0	0
11.	<b>a se jeluia (to wail)</b>	+	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-	0
12.	<b>a lămuri (to lighten)</b>	+	+	-	0	0	+	0	0	0	0
13.	<b>a mărturisi (to confess)</b>	+	+	0	0	+	+	0	0	0	0
14.	<b>a nega (to deny)</b>	+	+	-	+	0	+	0	0	+	0
15.	<b>a se oțărî (to scowl)</b>	+	0	0	0	-	+	+	0	-	0
16.	<b>a povesti (to narrate)</b>	+	+	-	-	0	+	0	0	0	0
17.	<b>a reproșa (to reproach)</b>	+	+	-	0	-	+	0	0	+	0
18.	<b>a spune (to say)</b>	+	+	-	-	0	+	0	0	0	0
19.	<b>a șopti (to whisper)</b>	+	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0	0
20.	<b>a telefona (to telephone)</b>	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0	+
21.	<b>a țipa (to scream)</b>	+	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
22.	<b>a urla (to howl)</b>	+	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
23.	<b>a vocifera (to shout)</b>	+	0	0	-	-	0	+	0	+	0
24.	<b>a zbiera (to yell)</b>	+	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	-	0

*Table 1*

This scheme could become a starting point for a more rigorous semantic classification of declarative verbs, to be drawn respectively according to the presence or absence of the semantic features of these verbs. We find that the actualization of some of the semes presented in the previous table can be associated to the categories of verbs of saying intuitively identified in the classification we suggested earlier:

<sup>5</sup> It refers to the infirmation of the information transmitted by the direct object structure.

<sup>6</sup> It refers to the speaker's attitude: the praises will be emphasized as positive, while the reproaches are stressed as negative.

<sup>7</sup> It refers to the sound intensity.

<sup>8</sup> It refers to the precision of pronunciation or expression.

<sup>9</sup> It refers to the communication register.

<sup>10</sup> It refers to the type of communication channel.

		SPEECH	INFORMATION	INTERROGATIVE	NEGATIVE	AFFECTIVE-EMOTIONAL	RECIPROCAL
1.	Neutral <i>verba dicendi</i>	+	0	0	-	0	0
2.	<i>Verba dicendi</i> expressing an order, a request or a piece of advice	+	+	0	-	+	+
3.	<i>Verba dicendi</i> expressing a reprimand	+	+	0	0	-	+
4.	<i>Verba dicendi</i> expressing an assumption or a prediction	+	+	0	0	+	0
5.	<i>Verba dicendi</i> expressing denial	+	+	0	+	0	0
6.	<i>Verba dicendi</i> expressing an interrogation	+	+	+	-	0	0

Table 2

Such a classification cannot be exhaustive, because in the semantic structure of the verbs that belong to each of these categories that we empirically identified, there will be some constant semes, while others will differ from one verb to another. We may also state other semes in addition to the ones we proposed above. First of all, the feature [+ HUMAN] should be reflected in the semic formula of all verbs of speaking. Verbs like *a glumi*, *a șugui* (to joke), etc. will contain the feature [+ HUMOR], which is an indefinite feature in other verbs. The verb *a minți* (to lie) is identified by the feature [- TRUTH]; in the case of *a prezice* (to predict) or *a presupune* (to assume) the value of truth is questionable, since it depends on the extralinguistic reality, although at a logical level we intuitively perceive the importance of its determination. A verb like *a tăifăsu* (to prattle) involves the feature [+ DURATION], that is, it carries an information on verb modality. Other verbs, such as *a țipa* (to scream), *a striga* (to shout), *a urla* (to howl), *a huidui* (to boo) etc. may be detected in different contexts with values that are different from those of speaking; the verb *a țipa* (to scream), for example, may have a noun as subject [- HUMAN], while *a striga*, *a urla*, *a huidui*, etc. do not necessarily involve using articulate language. Further on, it is rather difficult to decide if certain verbs like *a cânta*<sup>11</sup> (to sing), *a doini*,<sup>12</sup> *a fredona* (to hum), etc. belong or not to the class of *verba dicendi*.

<sup>11</sup> It seems that there is an etymological sense of “to read” of the verb to sing (see: Gh. Brâncuș. “Sensul «legere» al verbului a cânta,” *Limba română*, XXXIX, No. 5-6, 389-390.

<sup>12</sup> A specific verb in Romanian, that does not have a perfect equivalent in English; “to sing the *doina*”, a traditional Romanian song.

The meanings of the verbs *a nara* (to narrate) and *a povesti* (to relate/ tell) are very similar, if not identical, yet in Romanian the difference between them is given by the feature [ $\pm$  FORMAL]. In this case, the two verbs differ in terms of the communication register in which they are used, so the difference is not about their intrinsic semantics; the feature [ $\pm$  FORMAL] is, therefore, artificially inserted.

Based on the observations stated above, we can draw the conclusion that a classification made solely on the basis of the componential analysis of the verbs of saying is hardly convincing and does not have sufficient practical benefits. The analysis of the semic formula of these verbs may be useful in particular cases, in which a feature of meaning can be distinctive.

### *Morphosyntax of the semantic categories of the verbs of saying*

The intuitive classification suggested in the previous paragraph is not exclusively based on the semantics of verbs in these categories, but it also takes into account the specific behavior of these verbs within the sentence or phrase. Delimitation of the specific valences of these verbs and the analysis of the relations between the participants in the process of communication are needed in order to achieve a more precise shaping of the categories of the verbs of speaking in this classification.

#### TRANSITIVITY OF THE VERBS OF SPEAKING

The verbs of speaking are intrinsically linked to the process of communication. Therefore, it would seem natural that the activities expressed by these verbs would assume the existence of a collocutor, translated on a syntactic level by an indirect, an associative or even a direct complement, in some cases (especially in Romanian, where there are a few verbs that present double transitivity), as would seem natural to assume the existence of a message or of a piece of information, materialized in a direct object. Nevertheless, as we analyze the behavior of the verbs of saying in Romanian, we can observe, however, that none of the above statements is automatically checked in all the cases.

Considering the relationship agent-object-patient as a criterion, we can identify the following categories of *verba dicendi*:

1. Intransitive verbs, such as: *a glumi*, *a minți*, *a pălăvrăgi*, *a conferenția*, *a interoga*, *a huidui*, *a certa*, etc., that do not accept any complement, not even an internal one.

2. Commonly intransitive verbs, such as: *a vorbi*, *a discuta*, *a fonfăi*, *a bodogăni*, *a bolborosi*, etc. In some cases, these verbs can receive direct completion:

*Vorbesc engleza și franceza. (I speak English and French).*

*Am discutat lucruri interesante. (We discussed interesting things).*

*Ce tot bolborosești acolo? (What are you babbling about?)*

3. Commonly transitive verbs, such as: *a spune*, *a zice*, *a dezbate*, *a întreba*, *a nega*, *a pronunța*, etc. These verbs, although generally require the determination of a direct object, may appear as intransitive, too:<sup>13</sup> *Spuneți, vă rog (Tell me, please.); Nu v-ați săturat să tot dezbateți atâta? (Aren't you tired of debating so much?); Întreb și eu de curiozitate (I am just wondering out of curiosity).*

Some of these verbs, used as intransitive, may receive an object predicative complement and become attributive verbs:<sup>14</sup> *Copiii îi ziceau "Morcoveață", pentru că avea părul roșu (Children were calling him "Morcoveață" because he had red hair); Alexandru a fost numit director executiv (Alexander was named chief executive).*

In this category, we also notice the trivalent verbs (of double transitivity) in Romanian, such as: *a întreba pe cineva ceva*, *a învăța pe cineva ceva*, *a sfătui pe cineva ceva*, *a anunța pe cineva ceva*, that may accept a patient in the position of a second direct object.

4. Transitive verbs, such as: *a afirma*, *a susține*, *a dezminți*, *a reproșa* etc. that always need a direct object for completion.

5. Reflexive verbs, such as: *a se sfădi*, *a se ciondăni*, etc. (that do not accept a direct object) and other verbs that may occasionally appear in reflexive voice: *a se întreba* (reflexive proper, does not lose its double transitivity), *a se sfătui* (reciprocal reflexive, does not necessarily lose its transitivity), *a se pronunța* (pronominal, intransitive).

The situation is slightly different within the phrase, where intransitive verbs may become bivalent and may introduce direct object subordinate clauses: *A mințit că e răcit și nu poate veni. (He lied about being down with a cold and not being able to come).*

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<sup>13</sup> According to *Gramatica Academiei*, it is about "transitive verbs used absolutely", *Gramatica limbii române* (București: Academiei Române, 2005, vol. I), 342.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 353 et seq.

MODAL REGIME OF THE VERBS IN SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

In Romanian, the verbs of saying can actualize their transitive values in indirect speech by accepting a direct object clause. Considering the verbal mood of the subordinate clause as a criterion, the *verba dicendi* may be classified in three categories, as follows:

1. verbs of saying that accept the indicative: they are speech verbs proper, plus verbs of prediction and interrogation, in other words, transitive verbs that are marked [+ AFFIRMATIVE] [+INFORMATION]: *L-am informat că dosarul era gata* (I informed him that the file was ready), *I-a prezis că o să ajungă faimos* (She predicted that he would become famous), *M-a întrebat când mă întorc din vacanță* (He asked me when I was going to come back from my vacation);

2. verbs of saying that usually request the subjunctive<sup>15</sup>: they are verbs that express an order, a request or a piece of advice: *Îți interzic să vorbești cu el* (I forbid you to talk to him); *L-am rugat să plece* (I asked him to leave) and verbs that express denial: *Inculpatul neagă să fi vorbit cu martorul* (The defendant denies having spoken to the witness); the action expressed in the subordinate clause is hypothetical, so it has a higher or lower degree of incertitude;

3. verbs of saying that accept both moods and even a third one, the conditional, depending on the context: in this category we can classify certain verbs from the above mentioned categories, that accidentally change their regime in particular contexts, i.e. when they appear with a different meaning from the normal one *Le-am zis să se grăbească* (I told them to hurry up) or when the subordinate verb has a presumptive value *A negat că ar fi primit mită* (He denied having been bribed).

*Conclusions*

As we have performed the semantic and morpho-syntactic analysis of some relevant verbs of saying in Romanian, we noticed that both approaches may help us understand the mechanisms they put to work within the process of communication. All these metalinguistic verbs express either some type of evaluation or the speaker's attitude towards the message or the receiver, with the differences created by contextual factors and communicative situations, and the elements of the process of communication are reflected in the grammatical

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<sup>15</sup> Romanian does not have strict rules for expressing the sequence of times, so some of these verbs, that will only allow the subjunctive mood in the subordinate clause in other modern Romance languages, permit the use of the indicative.

behaviour of these verbs. Of course, ambiguities and exceptions are not missing from this attempt to classify and evaluate the verbs of saying, as we must take into consideration that in some cases, it is a question of different perceptions regarding the same verb, both from a semantic and a grammatical viewpoint, which reveals the importance of the semantic-pragmatic area of mental activity and the permanent necessity to refer to the extralinguistic context for a further insight.

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