

Flavia Ioana Butu

A Survey on Some Communicative Strategies in Romania

Abstract

Using a semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS), filled out by 30 informants, it can be shown that the use of communicative strategies in Romania is characterized by extremes. This is reflected in the quick shift from the formal address pronoun to the informal address pronoun, often based on emotional decisions rather than specific rules. With regard to small talk behaviour, one may notice a variety of topics and situations which show that Romanians engage quite fast in casual conversations and do not avoid talking about personal matters. While sex is the big taboo, immediately followed by religion, the money topic has an uncertain status. In argumentative contexts, Romanians prefer to say their opinion first and then give reasons related to the issue itself. An invitation or an offer to help is generally supposed to be an honest one. Turning down an offer would rather have an indirect style, while a phrase like “No, I disagree” is the most common way for saying “no”. However, smiling as a disagreement is frequent as well. In Grice’s terminology: any of the maxims can be violated. In Brown and Levinson’s terminology: bald-on and off-record strategies can alternate in communication.

Sommaire

Au moyen d’un *semi-expert interview on communicative strategies* (SICS), complété par 30 personnes, on peut voir que l’usage de stratégies communicative est caractérisé d’extrêmes. Ceci est reflété par le changement rapide du pronom d’adresse formel au pronom informel, fondé souvent plutôt sur des décisions émotionnelles que sur des règles spécifiques. En ce qui concerne le comportement lié au small talk, on peut noter une variété de sujets et situations qui montrent que les Roumains s’engagent assez facilement dans des conversations habituelles et n’évitent pas à parler des choses personnelles. Tandis que le sexe est un grand tabou, suivi de près par la religion, l’argent a une statut contradictoire. Dans les contextes d’argumentation, les Roumains préfèrent de préciser d’abord leur opinion et fournir ensuite des arguments liés au sujet. Une invitation et une offre sont généralement à interpréter comme sincère. Tandis que les stratégies indirectes prévalent lorsqu’on doit refuser une offre, manifester son désaccord est formulé par une phrase telle que “Non, je contredis” sur un sujet (même si le sourire comme marque du désaccord est aussi largement rencontré). Dans la terminologie de Grice: les Roumains peuvent violer toutes les maximes. Dans la terminologie de Brown et Levinson: les stratégies du type *off-record* sont préférées et les stratégies *bald on-record* sont également fréquentes.

Zusammenfassung

Mit Hilfe eines *semi-expert interview on communicative strategies* (SICS), das von 30 Informanten ausgefüllt wurde, kann gezeigt werden, dass der Gebrauch von Kommunikationsstrategien in Rumänien von Extremen geprägt ist. Das zeigt sich etwa im schnellen Wechsel vom formellen zum informellen Anredepronomen, der oft von eher Emotion denn von spezifischen Regeln bestimmt wird. Bezüglich Small Talk kann man eine Vielzahl an Themen und Situationen ausmachen, die zeigen, dass Rumänen schnell ungezwungene Gespräche beginnen und auch nicht persönliche Themen vermeiden. Während Sex ein großes Tabuthema ist, gleich vor Religion, hat das Thema Geld einen unsicheren Status. Bei Argumentationen bevorzugen Rumänen, erst ihre Meinung und dann themenbezogene Gründe zu geben. Eine Einladung und ein Angebot können im Allgemeinen wörtlich verstanden werden. Ein Angebot ablehnen erfolgt eher im indirekten Stil, während eine Phrase wie “Nein, ich stimme nicht überein” Art typischste Nein zu sagen ist. Doch Lächeln als Zeichen der Meinungsverschiedenheit ist ebenfalls häufig. In Gricescher Terminologie: alle Maximen können verletzt werden. In der Terminologie von Brown und Levinson: es lässt sich ein Wechsel von “bald-on” und “off-record”-Strategien feststellen.

1. Background

Taking into consideration previous studies and existing data, Grzega (2006:193-254) drew a first contrastive picture of communicative strategies, or speech-act realization patterns in different civilizations. Since 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue and since Romanian conversational behaviour has not been in the scope of linguists so far¹, this would be a good opportunity to fill a gap. The present study also contributes to a larger project which aims at tracing a general European communicative behaviour, or “language guide”, which would further point out differences and similarities across nations. The communicative tasks or speech acts analysed in this survey are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, argumentation, making and turning down an offer, expressing a disagreement, and ending a conversation.

In order to elicit the production of speech acts, two methods have been frequently employed in pragmatics research so far: the *discourse completion task/test* (DCT) and the *metapragmatic judgement task/test* (MPJT) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 and Hinkel 1997). In a DCT the informants are asked to complete dialogues connected to various situations. The disadvantage in this case is the fact that the answers provided represent the most typical individual behaviour. Therefore a MPJT was designed as a supplementary method to DCT: the informants are provided with a list comprising all the answers from a DCT and a new selection is made based on their salience. Both methods require a large number of informants.

The *semi-expert interview on communicative strategies* (SICS) has been designed for this issue of *Journal for EuroLinguistiX* (JELiX) by the editors. This type of questionnaire aims at collecting representative data for the typical linguistic behaviour of a nation. It presents typical situations which have to be evaluated by the informants: they may select one or more of the provided communicative patterns, as well as provide further ones. People who deal with language on a professional level are preferred as informants for the accurateness of the observations. Since they analyse and use the language in the same time, the informants are called *semi-experts*.

2. Data Collection

The introductory article to this special issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008) presents also a sample of the SICS questionnaire. The questionnaire (in its English version) was distributed via e-mails among students and graduates of philology (mainly from the University of Bucharest), some of whom also work as translators. The informants were allowed to answer either in English or in Romanian. 30 questionnaires were received back, filled out by 2 men and 28 women, aged between 22 and 33 (average age: 25.9). The regions the informants come from are diverse, Muntenia (Southern Romania) being the best represented.

3. Results

3.1. Section A: Starting a Conversation

With regard to address pronouns, Romanian follows the same pattern as most European languages by displaying the formal/informal pair (after Brown/Gilman 1960: a V- form and a T- form). The formal pronoun in this case, mentioned by all the informants, is the compound *dumnevoastră*/ (reg./coll.) *dumnevoastră* (> *domnia voastră* ‘your Majesty’), used both for

¹ In the past many studies of this type were carried out in the field of dialectology. Some more recent ones deal with pragmatics and conversational behaviour on a rather theoretical level.

one and for several addressees²; the informal one is *tu* (singular)/*voi* (plural).

Other formal pronouns in Romanian are: *dumneata(le)*, *dumitale*, *mata(le)*. Their degree of formality varies: while *dumneata* can be close to *dumneavoastră*, *dumitale* and *mata(le)* are restricted to certain geographical areas, registers or age groups. Moreover, these pronouns are usually used in a pejorative way or as address terms in an argument.

A special place should be attributed to the third person pronoun *dânsul* (m.)/*dânsa*(f.). The grammars record it as an informal pronoun equivalent with *tu*, and sometimes placed on a lower level than this one, as in some regions it is used when referring to inanimates. However, nowadays it is often used as a formal pronoun and it was also mentioned as such by the informants.

The distribution of these pronouns according to our informants is as follows:

- According to 83.3% of the informants, children use the T-form when addressing their parents. However 30.0% mentioned also the V-forms *mata(le)/dumneata*, but mainly as restricted to rural areas or to elder people (talking to their parents). 2 informants wrote down *dumneavoastră*. When addressing other relatives, both forms can be used, depending on the kinship and on the emotional relationship. There are no fixed rules as to in which circumstances one or the other form should be used. The address pronouns for relatives can also change with age (T-form used by children, V-form used by teenagers).
- The relation pupil-teacher is usually a T-V one (pattern given by all the informants). In very rare cases, a pupil may use the T-form when addressing a teacher (mainly to young teachers who explicitly ask for this.).
- At work, the address pronoun is T among colleagues. The relation employer-employee is a V-V at first, but can very soon become a T-T, in case it is permitted by the age. It is also possible that the employer uses T-form and the employee V-form, never the other way round. Business partners use V-form until otherwise agreed.
- In rather official and neutral situations, such as people-administration officials or clerks-customers, the V-form is used, although in the latter case T-form can also be accepted, depending on the age and sex.
- The address term for strangers is generally V, except for cases when people have the same age or address to somebody who is younger or just consider that it is appropriate to use T (this decision is rather an emotional one).

The patterns for answering the telephone at home in Romania are *Alo/Da(, vă rog)!* ‘Hello/Yes(, please)!', or *Alo, da!* ‘Hello, yes!', without any further hint (such as name, address, or phone number), the person who called being expected to introduce oneself. Elderly people might use sometimes: *Alo! Casa X (family name)* ‘Hello! House X'. According to some of the informants, the mobile phone is answered with *Da* ‘Yes', *Spune* ‘Say it!', *Salut* ‘Hi', *Ce mai faci?* ‘How are you?' or other familiar variants. At work the answering formulae are: (*Alo* ‘Hello’/*Bună ziua!* ‘Good afternoon!') (+ name of company) (+ one’s first/last/full name) (+ ‘What can I do for you?'). The order may vary and, as suggested by the brackets, any of the elements can be omitted so that almost any combination should be possible (one informant indicated only full name of the person).

² While *dumneavoastră* requires a verb in plural, the other formal pronouns are used only with the verb in singular and only for one addressee. Grammars register the form *dumitale* as the Genitive-Dative for *dumneata*, but speakers often use it in Nominative (the same holds for *mata – matale*).

3.2. Section B: Keeping Up a Conversation

This section deals with small talk behaviour. Small talk can be defined as anything which is not part of the greeting or leave-taking phase; neither does it represent the very point of the conversation. The term was first coined by Malinowski (1923), who called this “phatic communion” (the same term is used in Jakobson 1960). Laver (1975) pointed out three functions of small talk: 1. avoiding silence; 2. initiating the conversation in order to get to the target topic later; 3. exploring (the interlocutor). Depending on the relation between the interlocutors, certain rules have to be taken into account. Further on, Ventola (1979) distinguishes between direct/personal topics (e.g. health, appearance) and indirect/impersonal ones (e.g. weather, latest news)

The questions grouped under this heading received the most productive answers. Most of the informants agreed upon the fact that small talk in Romania is quite “big talk”: it appears very frequently, in the most diverse situations, it can have different additional functions (information, advice, confession, argument) and it may very often have a personal character. One informant described it as being “a function of the personality or of the emotional state” and, as a consequence, normal in any situation.

In what situations is small talk common or even required in your nation? 23.3% of the informants considered small talk in Romania as being common (almost) everywhere. The highest percentage, though, found trains or long distance public transportation means as most common places for small talk (66.6%); two informants mentioned also train stations.

Other small talk situations which were mentioned by more than half of the informants are:

- waiting lines (60.0%); according to 4 of the informants small talk in this situation is mainly represented by complaints and arguments; one informant explained the phenomenon as being a communist inheritance
- during meals (56.6%); 4 informants evaluated this situation as being required or “almost a necessity”
- in waiting rooms (53.3%); 10 informants specified the doctor’s waiting room.

According to at least a third of the informants small talk is also likely to appear on public transportation means (33.3%). 23.3% wrote it is common in stores, 36.6% said it is common to engage in small talk with clerks or shop-assistants as well. As a general rule small talk is always regarded as being normal, but the quantity may vary: in public transportation means for shorter distances, such as buses, or in stores, it might only consist of asking for information or of very short remarks. This situation varies with age, being more frequent at elderly people. Only two informants found small talk common in the street and 3 others mentioned the elevator. 4 persons mentioned also the working place as a common situation for small talk.

Further comments were made about the degree of necessity (“required only if you need something”, “not required anywhere”, “quite frequent, but not always necessary”), as well as about conditions for and functions of small talk (“to avoid awkward silence”, common “wherever people must spend a great deal of time together” and not common “in places where people very briefly encounter each other” or “in narrow places”).

In what situations is it not common to start small talk, but to remain silent? The answers to this question come to supplement the ones above, as many of the informants (43.3%) pointed out, in different ways, the fact that there is no such thing as uncommon places or situations for small talk in Romania; it might only happen that “the quantity is lower and the volume as

well” or that communication between different age groups would not be so efficient.

Yet, sometimes it is better to keep silence: out of the items already provided by the questionnaire as such possible places, only “the toilet” was mentioned by more than half of the informants (53.3%); however, a considerable percentage of the persons (40.0%) noted down ‘(in the)church’. Further additional items mentioned by the informants as places where silence should prevail are: in hospitals (26.6%), in the proximity of death/dead people (23.3%), in official situations or in the proximity of official persons (23.3%). One informant considered small talk as being uncommon in the street, with strangers. Bus stops, public transportation means and waiting lines were mentioned at this point as well, as places where small talk could only be short and objective (asking for information, short remarks); if longer, it might be an argument. One of the informants added a comment as a conclusion, which I am quoting here: “But even there [church, toilet] people would find a solution to get out of silence.”

What are common small talk topics in Romania if you’re not talking to a close friend or relative? In comparison with other European nations, where the weather seems to be the favourite small talk topic, Romanians prefer to talk about themselves and their life: compared to the weather, which was mentioned by 56.6% of the informants and which is often used as a mere start for a conversation or as a passage to the life story topic, the latter one acquired a percentage of 83.3 of the answers and it seems to be one of the most frequent and productive types of small talk. Included here are topics such as: talking about one’s personal problems, one’s children, house, animals or harvest (if living in the countryside), about deaths in the family. Of the same type are discussions about health (diseases, doctors and remedies) and about religious things (priests, miracles, prayers, pilgrimages to churches, religious festivities). Asking for and giving advice (about doctors, treatments, recipes, reliable priests) represents an important part of the talk in this case. According to 5 of the informants life story talks are most likely to occur while waiting to visit a doctor or during longer journeys by train.

Further small talk topics are:

- (1) traffic and local administrative problems (70%)
- (2) sports, hobbies and entertainment such as books, movies, music (66.6%, out of which more than half for sports). Football is preferred among sports (explicitly mentioned by 46.6%)
- (3) travelling experiences (50%). Often this topic is related to unemployment and work abroad (possibly part of the life story topic); otherwise it might refer to services offered by travel agencies or to travels connected to studies
- (4) politics and politicians; complaints, frequently combined with mockery, are preferred to praise (46.6% and 10% respectively)
- (5) jobs and unemployment (46.6%)
- (6) prices and the living standard (46.6%)
- (7) recent political events (43.3%)
- (8) other people’s problems, natural disasters, accidents (36.6%), often as presented by mass media (“which emphasizes all the bad luck in the world”, as one informant commented)
- (9) food and cooking (36.6%)
- (10) entertainment industry (23.3%) (*Telenovelas* obtained the majority of votes in this case.).

Out of this list, the items # (1), (5), (6), (8), and (9) were not provided as examples in the questionnaire, being added by the informants. For item # (1) it is worth specifying that all informants (but 4) live in Bucharest, the capital city.

Education/studies and scientific news were mentioned by only two informants each. “Speaking about a foreign interlocutor’s language competence” as a possible topic was labelled four times with ‘no’, while all the other informants simply didn’t mention it. Further on it received one comment saying that it would most likely occur in order to praise or support a foreigner, or even to encourage him/her to talk.

Based on the informants’ answers one can also draw some clear lines between genders and ages:

- While men talk about football, women like to talk about *telenovelas* and to identify their own life with their stories. Exchange of recipes, religious talk and other people’s problems are also topics favoured by women. One informant mentioned weather as a female topic as opposed to football as a male topic.
- Hobbies and entertainment (movies, books, music) are reserved to the youth, while life story, religious and medical issues would rather occur among elder people, although it is not a general rule. Criticizing the younger generation and complaining are also favoured by the elderly.

What are taboo topics in Romania if you’re not talking to a close friend or relative? With 76.6% of the answers, sex is by far the top taboo topic for Romanians. 4 persons added that vocabulary connected to sex could also be taboo (including the word *sex* itself). 36.6% of the informants explicitly mentioned taboos concerning sexual orientation.

According to 46.6% of the informants another taboo topic is religion. It represents a conversational taboo especially if one does not share the general religious orientation (i.e. Christian) or has a different religion (i.e. not Christian) or no religion. The situation may upset not only the other persons, but also the one who breaks the taboo (who consequently might have to listen to long morals or to religious advice).

Embarrassing things (such as farting, burping, smelly feet) and physical shortcomings were also mentioned as taboos (by 4, respectively 3 of the informants). Delicate family or personal matters were considered taboos by 4 of the informants and marital status by 1. One (male) informant mentioned feelings. There were also 3 informants who stated that nothing would be forbidden in a discussion.

The money issue seems to be very controversial, being regarded as a common topic as well as a taboo one (53.3% and 43.3%, respectively). Moreover, as part of the life story, some topics can lose their taboo value, so that discussions about money or even physical shortcomings are accepted.

With regard to the quantity of small talk in private conversations as compared to business conversations the answers provided do not help with drawing a clear picture.

3.3. Section C: Being Nice in a Conversation

How do Romanians typically present their opinion on a topic? Out of the seven argumentative styles offered by the questionnaire, only one was found typical by more than 50% of the informants: first you say your opinion, and then you give reasons related to the issue itself. This strategy was ticked 18 times, twice labelled as “very typical”.

Presenting one’s opinion bit by bit (opinion on aspect A, issue-related reasons for this, opinion on aspect B, issue-related reasons for this) was found typical by 30% of the informants (10 times ticked, once labelled as “very typical”). Giving issue-related background

information and then saying your opinion was only ticked by 20% of the informants, but two times it was evaluated as very typical.

The next question aimed at detecting possible “ostensible invitations” (as defined by Isaacs/Clark 1990). In Romania, an invitation or an offer for help can generally be assumed to be an honest offer, according to 73.3% of the informants. However, a considerable percentage (30%) thinks that it depends on different factors: the circumstances, the persons and their relations, the way the invitation/offer is formulated (if it does not contain sufficient details or if the persons are not close enough, then it might well be just a politeness phrase).

3.4. Section D: Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

Informants were then asked about the linguistic means one would use in order to say “no” in a polite way in Romania. They commented their selection of strategies with the labels “very frequent/very typical”, “frequent”, “sometimes/maybe/less frequent” (or marked only as restricted to certain contexts, such as “informally/formally/only among friends”), and “rarely”. If we convert these labels into points from 4 to 1 and multiply them with the corresponding number of ticks (where uncommented ticks were treated equal to the label “frequent”), the highest possible amount of points a strategy could get is 120. The first three most common strategies are:

- a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time” or “No, I have something else to do”, which received 76 points. It was also considered as being “very frequent” by 46.6% of the informants
- a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again, with 59 points
- a concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse), with 59 points.

“A direct phrase like ‘No, I don’t feel like going there/doing X’” was labelled as “informal” (or “among (close) friends/relatives” by 9 informants (30.0%) and as “untypical” by 2.

The same behaviour holds for the way people disagree with somebody else’s opinion in a polite way. Neither “saying a direct ‘no’” nor “never saying ‘no’” was recognized as a disagreement pattern by the informants (they received only 17, respectively 6 points). In this situation people would most likely utter phrases such as:

- (1) “No, I disagree/I have a different opinion” (64 points). This phrase can also be softened by means of intonation or by smiling
- (2) “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...” (57 points)
- (3) “Just smiling” (31 points).

It is worth noticing that, although the first two most common strategies are direct, the third one is indirect.

“Never saying the word ‘no’” received only 6 points (every time labelled with “rare”).

According to the informants’ commentaries, some of the strategies can be used in certain circumstances:

- between strangers or in order to obtain a benefit: saying nothing and remaining silent
- only between close friends: a direct “no”
- informal or used by elder people: disapproving look.

Section E: Ending a Conversation

What do people say to show that they want to end a conversation? This question aims at building up a basis for an intercultural leave-taking scheme, as there are no relevant studies on

this topic yet.

The answers were difficult to interpret because different informants used different types of labels: some used the frequency scale, others the age groups or the genders and some others mixed both. That's why it is more relevant to present here the first three most salient strategies for ending a conversation (the points were calculated in the same way as above):

- (1) say what they have to do now (if there really is something) (54 points)
- (2) a phrase like "I don't want to bother you any longer" (51 points)
- (3) a phrase like "I have to go now, I have something else to do" (48 points).

A phrase like "I want to go now" received only 7 points and was evaluated twice with "no" and once with "no, never". It was also labelled with "between strangers" (once), "teenagers" (once) and with "rare" in all the other cases. Women seem to prefer phrases like "It's already late now", "I don't want to bother you any longer", while men would rather use "Ok, good-bye now", "I have to go now, I have something else to do" (each of them with two votes for women, respectively men; unfortunately not all the informants indicated as to which social groups certain strategies are typical). According to one of the informants, a phrase like "It's already late now" is just a signal for the end, but it needs to be repeated and accompanied by stronger formulae, while after saying "I have to go now, I have something else to do" the person usually goes on talking for a while; a phrase like "I don't want to bother you any longer" can also mean that the speaker would like to continue the conversation.

The last question aims at finding out the interlocutor's reaction when one ends the conversation. 66.6% of the informants think that the interlocutor would first try to persuade you to stay (labelled 4 times with "very typical"). According to 3 persons, this is done out of politeness and according to 1 informant, also out of care for the interlocutor. Yet 1 further informant considers it to be typical for the countryside, while immediately letting the person go at the end of the conversation would be typical in the city. Another person commented: "Getting rid of Romanian interlocutors is easier said than done; so, in order for you to 'get away' as soon as possible, you have to try harder and state your intention at least three times."

4. Summary

To sum it up, the use of communicative strategies in Romania tends to be contradictory. In Grice's terms, Romanians are liable to violate each of the maxims: in a small talk, they would rather respect the maxim of quality than the ones of quantity and manner; in case of a refusal, quality would not count that much any more; however it would be respected in case of a disagreement and for making an invitation. For saying 'no' or ending the conversation the maxim of relevance is not always respected. In Brown and Levinson's terminology: positive politeness is preferred in more uncomfortable situations, while bald-on and off-record strategies can be used alternatively.

Flavia Ioana Butu
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg
Händelstr. 20-00-03
79104 Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany
fla_ib@yahoo.co.uk

References

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana et al. (eds.) (1989), *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*, Norwood

- (N.J.): Ablex.
- Brown, Roger / Gilman, Albert (1960), "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity", in: Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed.), *Style in Language*, 253-276, Cambridge (Mass.): Technology Press of M.I.T.
- Brown, Penelope / Levinson, Stephen (1987), *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grzega, Joachim (2006), *EuroLinguistischer Parcours*, Frankfurt (Main): IKO.
- Grzega, Joachim / Schöner, Marion (2008), "Introduction: *ELiX*'s Contribution to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue", *Journal for EuroLinguistiX* 5: 1-12 (<http://www.eurolinguistix.com>)
- Hinkel, Eli (1997), "Appropriateness of Advice: DCT and Multiple Choice Data", *Applied Linguistics* 18.1: 1-26.
- Isaacs, Ellen A. / Clark, Herbert, H. (1990), "Ostensible Invitations", *Language in Society* 19: 493-509.
- Jakobson, Roman (1960), "Linguistics and Poetics", in: Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed.), *Style in Language*, 350-373, New York etc.: Wiley .
- Kaplan, Robert (1975), *Anatomy of Rhetoric*, Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development.
- Laver, John (1975), "Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion", in: Kendon, Adam / Harris, Richard M. / Key, Mary Ritchie (eds.), *The Organisation of Behaviour in Face-to-Face Interaction*, 215-238, The Hague: Mouton.
- Malinowski, Bronisław (1923), "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", in: Ogden, Charles K./ Richards, Ian A. (eds.), *The Meaning of Meaning*, 146-152, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Otterstedt, Carola (1993), *Abschied im Alltag: Grußformen und Abschiedsgestaltung im interkulturellen Vergleich*, München: iudicium.
- Ventola, Eija (1979), "The Structure of Casual Conversation in English", *Journal of Pragmatics* 3: 267-298.

first version received 15 August 2008
revised version received 31 August 2008