

## TAKING OVER SOME ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE INTO THE LAIC DISCOURSE

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**Abstract:** This article intends to highlight the semantic evolution of some words that initially expressed only religious notions or that had meanings which were specific to the religious language. A series of such words can be found in the contemporary laic language, most of the times having deprecating significations. The influence of the (orthodox) religious language on the today's Romanian language has manifested, especially, through the spreading and the semantic degradation of some terms that used to express and still express specific religious activities. Some of the religious terms can be found today in the current language, having figurative meanings or being incorporated into collocations. Besides these, there are present, in the contemporary laic language, numerous expressions specific to the Holy Bible and to the prayers, such as: *a se spăla pe mâini* (to wash away), *a fi țapul ispășitor* (to be the scapegoat), *a merge/ a trimite (pe cineva) de la Ana la Caiafa* (to drive someone from post to pillar) etc. There can also be found certain anthroponims (which have suffered a semantic degradation, according to the manner a series of biblical characters were presented) as well as quotations, of biblical origin, used as aphorisms. Most of the religious terms still keep, as their fundamental meaning, their religious significance, thus, a determinologization being produced at the level of their figurative use (familiar, ironical popular).

**Keywords:** determinologization, semantic degradation, usual/common language, popular, transfer.

The formation of Romanian people once with the accession of Christianity is reflected in its behavior and language. Inevitably, the religious terminology occupies an important place within the speakers. The religious terms are present in all aspects of social life.

Some of the words that initially expressed only religious notions or that had meanings specific for the rite language were submitted to a semantic evolution, founding themselves in a laic language, for many times having pejorative meanings. The religious vocabulary is qualified as “a good language generator”<sup>1</sup>, considering the fact that many religious terms migrated towards

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<sup>1</sup> Dana-Luminița Teleoacă 2001, *Reflexe ale terminologiei religioase românești în limbajul comun (I)* [Reflexes of Romanian religious terminology in common language I], in „Limba română”, L, no. 1-2, Bucharest, 2001. Teleoacă p. 95.

other terminologies, such as botany or zoology, but also because of the transfer of religious lexemes in common language.

The influence of orthodox language on daily Romanian language manifested, mainly, by semantic amplification and degradation of some terms that named and still name activities specific for the rite. Some religious lexemes acquire laic significance independently from a certain syntagm/ idiom/ expression, and other appear with profane significance exclusively within a linguistic context represented by certain syntagms/ idioms/ expressions or in some derivatives.

In the category of religious terms that acquire laic acceptance, independently from a certain syntagm/ idiom/ expression, Dana-Luminița Teleoacă<sup>2</sup> includes the following words: *agheasmă* (*asperges*), that in ironical language means „țuică, rachiu” (plum brandy, brandy), *aleluia* (halleluiah), that acquires the meaning „s-a sfârșit, s-a dus pe copcă” (it ends, ends in smoke), *arhanghel* (archangel), that in some regions (Muntenia) designs „biciul, varga cu care se bat copiii” (the whip, the rod with which they beat children), *a boteza* (to baptize), with laic meaning “to mix the wine, the milk with water”, *cazanie* (homiliary), that means, in certain laic contexts, „povestire, descriere lungă și plicticoasă” (long and boring story, description), *chiraleisa* (*chiraleisis*) (Greek liturgical formula „Doamne miluiește” (Lord Have Mercy) designs, in popular mythology „un duh rău, necurat” (an evil, impure spirit), „o ființă fantastică, înspăimântătoare” (a fantastic, frightening being), *Crăciun* (*Christmas*), that in Muntenia designs „ciomagul” (bat), but which acquires the sense of „porniri rele, năravuri” (bad behaviors, bents), *litanie* (*lithany*), with the laic meaning „înșirare lungă și monotonă” (long and monotonous enumeration), *litie* (*litia*), that in Oltenia means, at plural, „vorbe goale, minciuni” (babbles, lies), *mironosiță* (*prude*), that in profane meaning means „femeie fățarnică” (double-faced women), *a mirui* (*to anoint*), that in popular language means „a lovi drept în frunte” (to hit right in front), *Sfântul Nicolae* (*St. Nicolas*), that means, in Moldova, „biciul cu care erau bătuți copiii la școală” (the whip with which were beaten the children at school), *parapanghelos* (*parapanghelosis*) (< ngr. „veșnică pomenire” (eternal memory)), that is used, as *aliluia* (*halleluiah*), with the value of an explanation that marks the end of an action, *pomelnic* (*memorial*), that is used with the laic meaning „listă lungă nesfârșită” (long unending list).

In her study titled *Limbaajul religios de la sacru la profan. Termeni pătrunși în româna comună și dialectală*<sup>3</sup> (*Religious language from sacred to profane. Terms appeared in common and dialectal Romanian language*), Mihaela Mariana Morcov signalizes the presence of such terms in usual language, also mentioning their new meanings. The verb *a aghezmui* (*to asperge*) means, in religious ritual

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 97-101.

<sup>3</sup> Mihaela Mariana Morcov, *Limbaajul religios de la sacru la profan. Termeni pătrunși în româna comună și dialectală* (*Religious language from sacred to profane. Terms appeared in common and dialectal Romanian language*), în Gabriela Pană Dindelegan (coord.), *Limba română– aspecte sincronice și diacronice* (*Romanian language – synchronic and diachronic aspects*, University of Bucharest Publishing House, 2006, pp. 619-626.

„a sfinți, a stropi cu apă sfințită” (to beatify, to asperse with beatified water). But, in laic language, it appears with the meaning „a se îmbăta” (to get drunk). In the same situation are the terms *a tămâia* (to cense), *a târnosi* (to incense). If in religious field, *a târnosi* (to incense) means „a inaugura” (to inaugurate), „a sfinți o biserică” (to beatify a church), in regional language, this verb acquired the meaning of „a se îmbăta” (to get drink), but also „a împinge încoace și încolo” (to push back and forth), „a chinui” (to crucify), „a bate” (to beat), „a tăvăli” (to wallow). The justification for this semantic evolution would be of etymological nature, starting from the word *târn*, a type of swab<sup>4</sup>.

From the category of words that keep the proper sense, but are also used with figurative sense, also belongs the verb *a blagoslovi* (to prosper). Except the well known meaning „a binecuvânta” (to bless), the verb also appears with the meaning „a aduce un prejudiciu cuiva” (to do somebody an injury).

We notice that, in case of words mentioned above, the relationship between the proper sense and the figurative sense is easily noticeable. But, there are terms incorporated in expressions, whose theological significance is, for many times, unknown. Such an example is represented by the terms *aghios* (*aghios*) and *ison* (*echos*), in expressions: *a trage la aghioase* (to draw to aghios) and *a ține isonul* (to keep the echos). Both terms have neogreek origin and belong to religious music field. *Isonul* (*echos*) designs the vocal or instrumental part, with low notes, that can be heard with no interruption to church songs. Receiving a metaphoric sense, the syntagm acquired the acceptance „a aproba faptele cuiva” (to approve the somebody's facts), „a-i cânta în strună” (to dance to somebody's tune), „a-i ține hangul” (to keep somebody's hang). *Aghios* from the expression *a trage la aghioase* (to draw to aghios) had represented, at the beginning, only the hymn sung to the Holy Liturgy, that starts with the verse „Sfinte Dumnezeule, Sfinte tare...” (Holy God, Holy You...).

Many **words and expressions** specific to the *Bible* or to prayers are today found in actual language, although their origin is less known. Thus, the word *fariseu* (Pharisee), frequently used in *Bible*, entered in current language in order to design, as in many other European idioms, an hypocrite person<sup>5</sup>. In his study about the influence of religious texts on the modern literary languages, Mihaela Mariana Morcov presents three books<sup>6</sup> regarding French, Italian and Spanish languages, approaching the topic from the point of view of Romanic compared linguistics. It is interested to notice the fact that some religious words and expressions appear both in actual Romanian language, and in languages mentioned. One of religious expressions used in actual laic language is *a se spăla pe mâini* (fr. *se laver les mains*) (to throw the blame on somebody), having the meaning „a nu-și asuma responsabilitatea pentru anumite fapte” (not assuming the responsibility for certain facts). The expression remembers from the Roman governor Pilat din Pont, care,

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 620.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 294

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Taverdet, *Paroles d'Évangile*; Gian Luigi Beccaria, *Sicut erat. Il latino di chi non lo sa. Bibbia e liturgia nell'italiano e nei dialetti*; Nuria Calduch-Benages, *Otro gallo le cantara*.

trying to exculpate him from the death of Jesus, washed symbolically the hands before people. Other expressions were created according to some stories told in New Testament *a merge/ a trimite (pe cineva) de la Ana la Caiafa* (with its equivalent in Spanish *ir de Herodes a Pilatos*) (to be driven from pillar to post), with the meaning „a amâna” (to adjourn). Other idioms are explained by their connection with certain Judaic habits or rituals mentioned in *Bible*<sup>7</sup>: *a fi țapul ispășitor* (sp. *ser el chivo expiatorio*; it. *Fare da capro espiatorio*) (to be the whipping boy) refers to a person that is found guilty for the mistakes of other persons, because in *Bible* the scape goat represents the animal abandoned in dessert, after which he was loaded with the sins of the entire people.

Certain **anthroponomical** suffered a semantic degradation, depending on the way a series of biblical characters were presented: *Jude*, being the person that betrayed Jesus, remained in the consciousness of the speakers the symbol of the traitor; *Cain* – the symbol of envy, *Pilate* – the symbol of brutality and ugliness, *Pharisee* – the symbol of hypocrisy, *Mathusalem* – the symbol of longevity.

In actual laic language, are also met **quotes with maximum value**, of biblical origin. Such a quote is the phrase *nimic nou sub soare (all quiet under the sun)*, which represents an aphorism from the Ecclesiastical Book. Also, the proverb *cine seamănă vânt culege furtună (he that sows the storm will reap the whirlwind)* has the origin in the book of the Prophet Osea. Some Romanian proverbs have on base thoughts or affirmations of Jesus: *cel care ridică sabia va pieri de ea (one who takes the sword will perish by it)*, *cei din urmă vor fi cei dintâi (the last shall be the first)*, *îi ajunge fiecărei zile răul ei (each day has its wrongs)*; the expression *a arunca mărgăritare porcilor (to cast pearls before swine)*, with the meaning „a da dovadă de atenție și delicatețe față de oameni care nu sunt capabili să aprecieze această atitudine” (to prove attention and delicacy for humans that aren't capable to appreciate this attitude), has also, as a base, an affirmation of Jesus; also, the syntagm *a construi pe nisip (to build on sand)*, referring to the fool man that built his house on sand, from the parable told by Savior.

In actual Romanian language, we find a considerable number of expressions and idioms, with pejorative connotations, from which are part religious terms. The most frequent expressions are those in which appear terms such as: *angel, demon, God, priest, crucifix, church, holy, Easter, prude any many others*:

- *a face pe mironosița* (to be a goody-goody): is an expression that took the pejorative meaning. The biblical term *mironosiță* (prude) makes reference to religious women who, after Jewish habit, brought flavors and chrism to the tomb of the Savior;

- *a-i merge buhul ca de popă tuns*: very ancient expression, apparently with no significance in our days, but with value in previous centuries; it refers to the fact that the priest should have an exemplary behavior, and the crop was the punishment for a serious deviation;

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<sup>7</sup> Mihaela Marian Morcov, *Textele religioase și limbile literare moderne (Religious texts and literary modern languages)*, in „Limba română”, no. 5-6/2004, p. 300.

- other expressions in which appears the word *popă* (priest) are the following: *a-i cânta popa la cap*, *a-i cânta popa aghiosul*, *a da ortul popii* (to croak), all these being related to the passage in the other world of Christians;

- another category of expressions used in laic language include the name of some biblical characters: *a trăi ca în sânul lui Avraam*, (to life in the Abraham's bosom), *de la Adam și Eva* (as old as Adam), *e un Iuda* (Iscarioteanul) (he is a Judas), *e Toma necredinciosul* (unbelieving Thomas), *e de pe vremea lui Noe* (since Adam was a boy);

- the expression *a fi lungă cât o zi de post* (as long as a day of fasting) makes reference to the difficulty of the Christian to meet the clerical habits, respectively the fasting;

- many terms are used with connotive meaning: *a mâncat de dulce* (to break one's fast), meaning „de frupt”, *s-a spovedit tuturor* (he confessed to everybody), meaning „a povestit tuturor” (he told to everybody), *a mânca de sec* (to fast), meaning „a mânca de post”(to break one's fast), *și-a dat sufletul până a ajuns* (he went west), meaning „a obosit”(he was tired), *a (nu) fi ușă de biserică* (not quite the clean potato), meaning „a nu fi cinstit”(not being honest), *a apuca pe Dumnezeu de picior*(to take the cake), meaning „a fi norocos”(to be lucky), *a fi pâinea lui Dumnezeu* (to be the milk of human kindness, meaning „a fi om bun”(to be a good man), *a ține predică* (to read somebody a lesson), meaning „a cicăli”(to mock), *a călca pravila* (to contravene the code), meaning „a păcătui”(to err), *a trage clopotele* (to ring a peal), meaning „a face curte unei femei”(to pay one's courtship to a lady), *a scoate pe Sfântul Nicolae* (to take out the bat , meaning „a scoate bățul”(to take out the road) , *a da vama* (to give tolls), meaning „a plăti”(to pay) (with reference to the Christian tradition regarding the tolls of the air);

- *a-i purta sâmbetele* (to owe somebody a grudge) meas „a dori răul cuiva”(to mean ill by somebody). The significance of the expressions is related to the fact that, in christian cult, the Saturday was ranked for the commemoration of death persons; after the somebody's death, commemorations are made during forty days, on Saturday. Another expression including the word Saturday is *a se duce pe apa sâmbetei* (to end in smoke), meaning „s-a pierdut”(it was lost). This expression refers to death persons, named in christian tradition *blajini* (benigns), who life beyond Sâmbetei River, to the border from the world from here and the world from there. Housewives throw red eggs shells on a flowing water in Holy Week and then, the benigns knew that Easter was coming (Benigns Easter – day when death persons are commemorated, in orthodox tradition);

- in laic language are met many expressions formed with the term *cruce* (*crucifix*): *a se face cruce și punte* (to move hell), with the meaning „a face orice pentru a atinge un scop”(to make anything in order to meet a purpose), *a face cruce fără biserică* (to put a tick without church), meaning „a face ceva inutil”(to make something useless), *a se pune cruce*(to put crucifix), meaning „a se împotrivi” (to be against something), *a pune cruce* (to put point), with the meaning „a încheia ceva” (to end something), *a ajunge crucea în/ la amiază* (to reach to midday), the meaning of this expression – „momentul când soarele a

ajuns în punctul cel mai înalt pe cer”(the moment when the Sun reached the highest point from the sky) – having relation with the christian tradition according to which all tombs have crucifix, right object that keeps the place of the clock for indicating the hour;

- *expressions in which appear the term drac (devil) : a face pe dracu în patru (to move hell), meaning „a face orice, a face un compromis” (to make anything, to make a compromise), a nu avea nici pe dracu (not to be a halfpenny the worse for it), meaning „a nu avea nimic, a fi sănătos” (to be healthy), a da de dracu (to get into trouble), meaning „a ispiti” (to tempt), a-și băga dracul coada(the devil is in it), also with the meaning „a ispiti” (to tempt), a băga în draci (to give somebody rats), with the meaning „a pune pe treabă” (to put in hand), a căutat pe dracu și a dat de tată-său, a da dracului (to frighten the French), meaning „a renunța” (to renounce), a șede ca dracul pe măracini (like the devil on thorns), a șede ca dracul în cânepă (like the devil in hemp), having the meaning „a fi într-o situație neplăcută” (to be in an unpleasant situation), a fugi ca dracul de tămâie/ aghiazmă (to give somebody a wide berth), a-i lua dracul din pupeze, meaning „a-și pierde răbdarea” (to lose the patience), a nu fi dracul chiar atât de negru (the devil is not so black as he is painted);*

- there are some phraseology units, also formed round the term *drac (devil)*, designing „un loc îndepărtat, în care nu se poate ajunge cu ușurință” (a distant place, where one cannot easily reach : *la dracu-n praznic (at the back o'beyond), unde și-a înțărcat dracul copiii (at the bottom of the sea), unde și-a pierdut dracul potcoavele, unde și-a spart dracul opincile, unde-a pus dracul roata și mutul iapa;*

- are also frequently met the expression where the term *biserică (church)* appears: *a nu fi ușă de biserică(not to be quite the clean potato)*, with the meaning „a nu fi cinstit” (not to be honest), *a nu fi dus de multe ori la biserică (unfaithful person)*, meaning „a fi în stare de orice” (to be capable of anything);

- with pejorative meaning, are used the expressions: *a fi lungă cât o pomană țigănească (as long as a gypsy alms), a face capul calendar (to carp at somebody about something)*, with the meaning „a cicăli” (to mock), the expression making allusion to the multitude of saints from the christian calendar, *a face capul ceaslov*, meaning „a învăța foarte mult” (to learn very much);

- *a fi sfânt fără de argint (to be saint without money)* is used with the meaning „a îngriji pe cineva, fără nu lua bani” (to take care of somebody without asking money), making reference to St. Cosma and Damian, doctors without asking moneys; *până la Dumnezeu te mănâncă sfinții (till God, you will be eaten by Saints)* refers to the multitude of obstacles that the man endures; *a se ruga de cineva ca de toți sfinții (to ask someone as being a saint)* has the meaning „a insista, a implora” (to insist, to implore);

- the expression *a purta un hram (having a church wake)* is sometimes used with connotative meaning and means „a avea un renume sau o funcție” (having a name or a function); the meaning of the expression has, as base, the christian conception according to which each church, town, house or family has a protector saint;

- for many times, in laic language appear syntagms coming from biblical stories: *a aștepta pe cineva ca pe Hristos* (to wait for somebody as waiting for the Christ) (The Savior was waited by Jewish people as a liberator from the domination of Romans and, on the other way, savor from the sin), *a se duce pe pustia neagră* (to go on the black solitude) (allusion to the forth days of fest passed by Jesus Christ in Carantanian Desert, before starting the activity on earth), *a mânca din fructul oprit* (to eat from the prohibited fruit), meaning „a păcătui” (to sin), *a nu-și înmulți talanții* (not to increase his money), meaning „a lenevi”(to lie idle) (with sending to the story of talants told by Christ), *a predica în pustie* (to cry in the wilderness), with the meaning „a vorbi în zadar” (to talk in vain), *a se spăla pe mâini* (to throw the blame on somebody), meaning „a nu-și asuma responsabilitatea pentru o faptă” (not to assume responsibility for a fact) – making reference to the biblical character Pilat din Pont, Roman governor who, judging Christ, didn't find him a guild, washing hands and leaving the people to chose the destiny of the convicted”;

- are also frequent the expressions where appear name of holidays, specially Paștilor (Easter's name): *din Paști în Paști* (From Easter to Easter), *din joi în Paști*, *din an în Paști* (once in a blue moon), meaning „rarely”; *la Paștile cailor* (at latter Lamas) meaning „niciodată” (never); about somebody that makes calculus errors we say that he *și-a pierdut pascaliile* (lost calculations), referring to the fact that the celebration date of Easter differs from year to year;

- is interesting to notice the meaning of the expression *colac peste pupăză* (to make matters worse) – „un necaz în plus” (another bay): *pupăza* (hoopoe) has a big bread used in wedding ritual, and the *colacul* (ring biscuit) is usually used to funerals. So, *the ring biscuit* after *hoopoe* meant a funeral after a wedding;

- a special place within the religious terms is occupied by the word *Dumnezeu* (God): *Doamne ajută!*(God Help), *Doamne iartă-mă!*(God Forgive), *Doamne ferește!*(God forbid), *Dumnezeu cu mila!*(God Helping), *Dumnezeu știe!*(God Knows), *Slavă Domnului!*(Thank God), *Ferit-a sfântu'!* (God Forbid), *Cât ai zice Doamne-ajută!*, *de Doamne-ajută* (God Help), with the meaning „lucru care nu e făcut temeinic” (the thing that has no base), *uitat de Dumnezeu* (forgotten by God), meaning „în vârstă”(in age)<sup>8</sup>.

Considering the multitude of religious terms that migrated both in other fields and in common language, acquiring new meanings, both independently and in certain linguistic contexts, represented by syntagms/ expressions/ idioms, we can affirm that religious language is a pilot moderated language. Mostly, religious terms keep, as basic meaning, the religious sense, producing a determinologization to the level of their figurative use (familiar, ironic, popular).

Most of religious terms, transferred in common language, represent fundamental terms of christian faith: *to baptize*, *Epiphany*, *Christmas*, *crucifix*, *God*, *angel*, *demon*, *law*, *Easter*, etc. Other terms, although more frequent, have Slavic origin, having a technical character more pronounced: *aghios*, *homily*, *lithany*, *lithia*, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> Mile Tomici, *Dicționarul frazeologic al limbii române*, București, Editura Saeculum, 2001.