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ON ROMANIAN POLITICAL NICKNAMES

За прозвищата на румънските политици

On Romanian Political Nicknames

The nickname which is given to a person and is initially used by a small group of people turns into a byname as the person becomes more popular in society. The byname contains indications about the individuality or the public image of its carrier. There is also a connection with the physical and psychic features of the person or to activities or events connected with him or her. On the political scene (the Romanian political scene is no exception) a byname is used as a weapon for discrediting or demonizing political opponents. Linguistic analysis of bynames of Romanian politicians shows the variety of linguistic resources and means used in the creation of a byname such as contraction, composition, derivation and abbreviation.

Keywords: nickname, byname, politics, truncation, composition, derivation, abbreviation

O *poreclă*, atribuită unei persoane și utilizată, la început, în colectivități mai mici, odată ce intră în conștiința publică devine *supranume*. Supranumele captează indicii despre personalitatea sau imaginea/percepția publică a posesorului. Dincolo de nume, există legături cu trăsăturile fizice sau psihice ale persoanei sau cu o acțiune/întâmplare a acesteia. Pe scena politică (scena politică românească nu face excepție!), supranumele este folosit ca armă pentru discreditarea sau demonizarea oponentilor politici. Analiza lingvistică a supranumelor din politica românească va scoate în evidență varietatea resurselor și mijloacelor limbii utilizate în atribuirea unui supranume (trunchierea, compunerea, derivarea, abrevierea).

A name given to someone by few people, once become public knowledge, is often used instead of the person's formal name. The nickname¹ received by a

person tells a lot about the personality or about the public image of the possessor. Behind the name there are many connections with what the person looks like or something he/she has done. On the political stage, sometimes a verbal fight camp, the nicknames are used as political weapons in order to discredit or demonize the opponent². *Mutatis mutandis*, the Romanian political stage provides important lexical resources for the linguistic study of nicknames.

1. Starting from the top. The Romanian President:

Popeye, Captain Planet, Sauron, Băzeus

1.1. History of the nicknames

From the beginning, it is easy to notice that the President's nicknames allude to powerful personages, even cartoons. The press articles remark that the nickname *Popeye* is the oldest, attributed to him by the President's colleagues when he was the navy commandant (1981)³. As everybody remembers, *Popeye the sailor* was an animated film in which the principal character was "a middle-aged independent sailor (or "sailor man," as he puts it) with a unique way of speaking, maybe missing one eye, muscular forearms with two (sometimes one) anchor tattoos, thinning gray hair, and an ever-present corncob pipe"⁴. Once the resemblance established, even partially, the transition from "the sailor Băsescu" – to "the sailor Popeye" is possible and the nickname functional.

Regarding the second nickname, *Captain Planet*, it appears to be connected with the Saviour image of the President, the providential person who comes to rescue in critical times. *Captain Planet* is a cartoon superhero of great strength, who can fly, has important powers (to blow hurricanes, telekinesis, telepathy, shape shifting and matter transmutation) and who defends the environment/planet from evil forces of pollution, toxicity and smog. According to the press, the cause of this nickname has nothing to do with the superhero qualities and motivation of the President, but with the habit of commanding everyone. Other source of the nickname is the President's practice of interfering with all international issues and presenting Romania like an important economic power:

"Băsescu a primit și supranumele de Captain Planet, chiar de la unii dintre foștii colegi de la PD. Și asta pentru că Băsescu le dădea ordine ca și cum ar fi fost stăpânul Planetei și nu doar al democrațiilor, conform unor surse din partid. I se mai spune Captain Planet și pentru că se implică în

toate problemele internaționale dând impresia că România este o mare putere economică internațională."⁵

In order to discredit the President's popular image, a representative of the political opposition, Ludovic Orban, calls Traian Băsescu *Sauron*, because, he says, "of the persons staying around him, *trolls*, *orcs* and *mamuts*"⁶. In the same time, the evil personage from *The Lord of the Ring* is an antagonistic personage, who has the characteristics of power and supreme domination and the ability of manipulation. In the public mentality, the name alludes to his (imaginary) owner and the correlation with the obvious evil restores the President's image in the frame of R.R. Tolkien's story. Googling, it can be observed that the nickname is often used both in the blogosphere and in press articles.

Another depreciative nickname is obtained by truncating the name of the President (*Bă* from *Băsescu*); combined with the name *Zeus*, the supreme ruler of Olympian gods, results *Băzeus*. The effect is hilarious because of the *Bă* particle; in Romanian this is also a rude, impolite interjection. The unusual combination targets not only the comparison between Băsescu and the Olympian, but also the devaluation of the President:

*"Poreclit Zeus, pentru faptul că vrea să conducă singur România, Traian Băsescu s-a săturat să fie comparat cu stăpânul zeilor. Apropiații spun că Băsescu se supără foc când aude că i se spune Băzeus."*⁷

1.2. Functional tropes in nicknaming

The previous nicknames have not only an identifying function; they are strings of connotations. The connotation is realized by means of tropes; the common features allowed the denominative transfer.

In the first case, *Popeye* and President Băsescu share the same job and, maybe, some physic features. From now on, the name substitution is possible. *Captain Planet* recalls some behavioural characteristics: Băsescu acts *as if* he led the entire planet, *as if* he was *the captain* (he was a navy commandant, as the Romanian public does know!) of the whole planet. The features maintained from the cartoon superhero are the power, maybe the means (the cooperation with some others powerful figures) and, in his own imagination, the span of his actions.

The *conceptual metaphor*⁸ is a cognitive linguistics notion that could explain the nicknames' origin. Conceptual metaphor focuses on the understanding of one idea, one entity, one conceptual domain (entities in political life, in our case)

in terms of another (cartoons, for instance, or Greek mythology). In traditional rhetoric's terms, the tropes that dispute the origin of the nicknames are antonomasia (*Captain Planet*) and metaphor⁹ (*Popeye*). Metaphor is also functional in the case of *Sauron*: the demonic personage *lends* to the President some of his habits and powers: manipulation, domination, perfidy and histrionic behaviour.

The nickname *Băzeus* involves partially metaphor, in comparing the President to Zeus, the supreme God in Greek mythology. The compound form refers to a rude way of bringing the Olympus in Cotroceni, using the impolite interjection appellative *Bă*: this happens to be the first part of the President family name.

2. Some (ex-) Ministers:

2.1. *Răzgândeanu* (*Tăriceanu* + *vb.*, *Slăbiceanu* (*Tăriceanu* + *adj.*), *Cuki*, *El*

Other type of truncation leads to the nicknames of the previous Romanian Prime-Minister, -(i)ceanu or -eanu, the last one identical with the Romanian onomastic suffix. Once combined with the verb “a se *răzgândi* (“to change one’s mind”) or with the adjective *slab* (“weak, powerless”), it provides the political depreciative nicknames, *Răzgândeanu* and *Slăbiceanu*, the former being associated with his public promise to resign, never accomplished, and the latter with the political opposition’s appreciation. Other nickname leads to the scene image of the ex-Prime-Minister, once a célèbre model; it appears that the women were the source for *Cuki* (probably from the English cookie) by comparing him to a caniche dog.

*“Tăriceanu a fost în tinerețe un manechin renumit, fapt care i-a adus și porecla de Cuki, femeile comparându-l cu un caniş.”*¹⁰

The next nickname seems to be a codename: the personal pronoun *El* “He”, which refers negatively to the ex-Prime-Minister: *He*, *not one of us* or maybe the name seems to be taboo (*it is forbidden to say his name*).

The trope (as a figure of thought) responsible for the first two nicknames is antonomasia: *Tăriceanu* is “the one who changes his mind” or “the powerless one”. The second step is to use this linguistic material in order to create a proper name, with a symmetric sonority regarding the ex-Prime Minister family name. For the last two nicknames: *Cuki* and *He*, the functional trope is metaphor.

2.2. The current Prime-Minister: **Emil Boc-Poc, Piticul Atomic**

An unhappy and hilarious incident is at the origin of the current Prime-Minister's first nickname: a fall from the stage consumed live at a national television. The similar sonority determines the selection of the appropriate interjection: *Poc*, utilized specially when something is broken. The second nickname refers to some physical and psychical features: the height (the Prime-Minister is a short man) and the strength and energy put in his work:

*“Premierului i se spune Piticul Atomic pentru că e un tip scund, dar și pentru dezinvoltura cu care muncește.”*¹¹

The figures of speech involved in nicknaming are antonomasia (Piticul Atomic), associated (in the second nickname) with the linguistic means for obtaining new words: the conversion (the interjection *Poc*, in order to fulfil a denominative function is, first of all, converted into a noun).

2.3. The Minister of Education and Research, Ecaterina Andronescu: **Abramburica**. It appears that the name is given by the students (Ecaterina Andronescu is a professor, the Rector of Polytechnics, Bucharest). They compared her to a character from children TV programs who made a hash of it.

*“Pe Ecaterina Andronescu studenții au poreclit-o Abramburica, comparând-o cu Dana Rogoz (foto mic), vedeta PRO TV, care juca, în urmă cu ani buni, rolul unei fetițe cam “aiurite”.”*¹²

In fact, *Abramburica* has to do with the old substantive *brambureală* “confusion, flurry” (*brambura* is used as an adjective or an adverb) from which it has been obtained through parasyntetic derivation (prefix *a* and suffix *-ica*). Other press head-lines connect Ecaterina Andronescu with the confusion started in the Minister.¹³ For the Minister of Education, it seems to be a row of confusion: the previous Minister's nickname was *Adormiței*, an interesting combination of the proper name *Adomniței* (the last name of the Minister) and the verb *a adormi* „to fall asleep”. It differs from the formal name by a letter.

The nickname *Abramburica* has a double interpretation: it could be a metaphor (the Minister is compared with a known personage). Anyway, the name is obtained in two steps: 1. through the antonomasia (the common name: *brambura*) 2. from which the diminutive derivative *Abramburica* is formed. Regarding the name *Adormiței*, the antonomasia (maybe *Adormitul* is the common name behind

the nickname) is connected to the device of linguistic contamination (*Adomniței* + *a adormi*).

2.3. *Another ex-Minister: the ex-Minister of Transportation, Ludovic Orban: Pinocchio*, the ex-Prime-Minister Adrian Năstase: *Șapte Case* “Seven Houses” or *Patru Case* “Four Houses”, the ex-Minister of Internal Affairs, Vasile Blaga: *Buldogul* “the Bulldog”, the ex-Minister of Justice, Tudor Chiuariu: *Chihuahua*¹⁴

The previous nicknames combine antonomasia (*Buldogul*, *Chihuahua*), metonymy (*Șapte Case*/*Patru Case*) and metaphor (*Pinocchio*). The sources are various: the constant acquisition of property (Adrian Năstase), the public lie and childish behaviour (Ludovic Orban), the specific comportment (Vasile Blaga and Tudor Chiuariu).

3. Other political figures: The ex-Presidents, Ion Iliescu: *Bunicuța* “the Granny”, Emil Constantinescu: *Țapul* “the Goat”, The PSD President, Mircea Geană: *Prostănacul* “the Tomfool/Fathead”, PSD members Șerban Mihăilescu: *Miki Șpagă* “Miki Bribe” / Viorel Hrebenciuc: *Guzganul Rozaliu* “the Pink Big Rat” / Radu Mazăre: *Mafiotul* “the Mafioso”, *Gigolo de Constanța* or *Don Juan de Constanța*, *Alifie* “the Ointment / Balm”, a PNL member, the PRM President, Corneliu Vadim Tudor: *Tribunul* “the Tribune”.

The nicknames enumerated share the preference for the speech figures of antonomasia and metaphor (*Don Juan*). The motivation varies: the persistence in politics (*Bunicuța*), the physical appearance (*Țapul*), often combined with the habit/manners of the personage (*Guzganul Rozaliu*), but the political behaviour (*Tribunul*) or the political defects are nicknamed on a large scale. For instance, *Prostănacul* is attributed to Mircea Geana by “Granny”, discontent with his political mistakes, *Mafiotul*/*Gigolo* or *Don Juan* (referenced by *de Constanța*)/*Alifie* (that sends to a Romanian expression *un om uns cu toate alifiile* “a man that tried/knows all the balms” / “knows all the political tricks”), *Miki Șpagă* cover a specific comportment, which must be highlighted and castigated by means of nicknaming.

The codenames in the files of Security: *Felix* (a Member of Parliament now in function: Dan Voiculescu), *Dana* (the ex-Minister of Culture, Mona Muscă) and *Sanda* (the ex-Minister of Justice) are not spectacular at all: these are usual

first names. But the common mentality/mindset retains them and uses them as a public punishment for their owners, who were Security informers in the communist period.

4. The typology of nicknaming: the speech figures and the word formation means involved

While analyzing the domain of Romanian nicknames and trying to organize the onomastic material on linguistic criteria, one can easily notice the variety of domains and procedures that nicknaming supposes. The following table points out the

| The figure of speech utilized in nicknaming | The word formation means associated | The Romanian political nicknames |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| Antonomasia | – | <i>Bunicuța, Guzganul rozaliu, Buldogul, Captain Planet, Alifie, Piticul Atomic, Gigolo de Constanța, Șpagă, Mafiotul, Țapul</i> |
| Antonomasia | Conversion | <i>Prostănacul, Poc</i> |
| Antonomasia | Derivation (Affixes), truncation | <i>Răzgândeanu, Slăbiceanu, Abramburica</i> |
| Antonomasia | Siglum /Sigla | <i>OB (Bogdan Olteanu – PNL)</i> |
| Antonomasia | Contamination | <i>Adormiței</i> |
| Metaphor | – | <i>Sauron, Cuki, Abramburica, Pinocchio, Don Juan</i> |
| Metaphor | Truncation, composition | <i>Băzeus</i> |
| Metonymy | – | <i>Șapte case, Dl. Șantier</i> |
| – | – | <i>Felix, Dana, Sanda</i> |

The cognitive linguistics' point of view or the rhetoric's point of view is not sufficient for explaining the means of nicknaming. The political intention in demonizing or devaluing the opposition makes use of the concepts, captured in widely known words (compounds, derivatives, abbreviations), *via* the word formation weapon.

Notes

¹ cf., Bidu-Vrănceanu, Angela et al., 2001; Dicționar de științe ale limbii, Editura Nemira, București: *supranume*. In Romanian there are two words which codify the person's "nickname" – *porecla* (the usual informal name of a person, used in small collectivities) and *supranumele* (the public informal name).

² cf. <http://endithinks.wordpress.com/2008/09/30/on-political-nicknames/>

³ http://www.ziare.com/Politicienii_romani_au_porecle_traznite_de_la_Captain_Planet_la_Alifie_-267559.html

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popeye>

⁵ http://www.ziare.com/Politicienii_romani_au_porecle_traznite_de_la_Captain_Planet_la_Alifie_-267559.html.

⁶ ibidem.

⁷ <http://www.libertatea.ro/stire/s-au-saturat-de-porecle-225478.html>

⁸ v. Lakoff, George & Mark Johnson, 1980: *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁹ 8. 7. v. Bidu-Vrănceanu, Angela et al., 2001: Dicționar de științe ale limbii, București, Editura Nemira, *antonomază, metaforă*, as well as Parpală-Afana, Emilia, 1998: *Introducere în stilistică*, Pitești, Editura Paralela '45, p. 159 sqq. where metonymy is included in the class of metasemems.

¹⁰ <http://www.libertatea.ro/stire/s-au-saturat-de-porecle-225478.html>

¹¹ ibidem

¹² ibidem.

¹³ v. sites of Romanian journals: *cancan.ro*, *hunedoreanul.ro*, *ziua.ro*, *observatorcultural.ro*

¹⁴ <http://www.libertatea.ro/stire/s-au-saturat-de-porecle-225478.html> :“Ministrului Vasile Blaga, i se spune Buldogul întrucât “mușcă” dur din dușmanii politici. Nu-i place deloc porecla și, când e comparat cu un buldog, face scene de supărare.”. Tudor Chiuriu a primit porecla Chihuahua pentru că, acuză gurile rele, s-a tot gudurat pe lângă șeful lui de partid, Tăriceanu, exact ca un cățel.; for Pinocchio, v. <http://stiri.rol.ro/content/view/99034/2/>, for *Șapte Case* or *Patru Case* v. http://www.cotidianul.ro/nastase_inca_o_casa_la_mizil-64470.html, for *Bulldog* v. <http://www.evz.ro/articole/detalii-articol/832886/EDITORIALUL-EVZ-Buldogul-Blaga-eutanasiat-de-Basescu/> etc.

¹⁵ <http://www.9am.ro/stiri-revista-presei/Actualitate/29604/Miki-Spaga-acuzat-si-oficial-de-spaga.html>, or <http://www.libertatea.ro/stire/s-au-saturat-de-porecle-225478.html>: “*Datorită longevității pe scena politică, lui Ion Iliescu i se spune Bunicuța. El se supără foarte rău atunci când aude că este luat peste picior, spunând că are mintea încă tânără. | Lui Viorel Hrebenciuc i se mai spune și Gușganul rozaliu, aluzie la modul în care șobolanii își strâng proviziile pentru iarnă, sub pământ. Hrebe nu e deloc încântat de porecla sa. El spune că nu e adevărat și că n-a făcut asta. | Președintele Senatului a fost “gratulat” de Ion Iliescu cu porecla de Prostănașul, pentru greșeli politice făcute. Geoană se înfurie rău atunci când*

aude apelativul. / Lui Bogdan Olteanu, răuvoitorii îi spun O.B., un produs pentru igiena intimă a femeilor, de la inițialele numelui său. Olteanu nu e de acord cu apelativul și nu îl recunoaște”; for Mazăre: v. http://www.telegrafonline.ro/1216414800/articol/59885/mazare_si_mihaela_radulescu_singuri_pe_lac.html, <http://htdig.informatia.ro/jurnalul/afisez.php?sid=146004&date=2009-03-12&afisez=local>

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