

# THE CREATION OF THE ROMANIAN LITERARY LANGUAGE THEORIZED BY GHEORGHE ASACHI

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## **Abstract**

The principal objective of this paper is to investigate the question of the Romanian literary language creation as it was viewed by Gheorghe Asachi at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since the writer remained known more as a poet by the public, our purpose is to focus on the linguistic preoccupations of Gheorghe Asachi, precisely to reveal the way he positioned himself towards the problematic of the language formation. To answer to this interrogation, we intend to analyze his theoretical points of view from the prefaces of his volumes and also from other articles. In order to have a wider perspective of the subject, we cannot leave beside his cultural initiatives which were important for the language development and also for the awareness of its importance in the epoch. The idiom was still in search for a norm in those times, lacking grammatical rules and, thus, being pursued by the danger of receiving ill-fated influences. In the middle of the struggle for imagining a national language, the contribution of Gheorghe Asachi is pertinent, some of his theoretical ideas being even continued by his predecessors.

**Keywords:** language, theories, nationalism, Gheorghe Asachi, nineteenth century

## **1. Introduction**

Gheorghe Asachi (1788-1869) was a Romanian poet, prose writer, historian, dramatist and translator who had a significant role in the development of the national culture at the beginning of the 19th century in the Moldavia province. His theoretical ideas about the creation of the literary language in the epoch are significant and worth analyzing.

Firstly, Gheorghe Asachi considers that in order to impose the use of Romanian, it would be necessary to familiarize the population with it. Therefore, the poet organizes in 1816 the first theatrical representations in Romanian: the actors play the pastoral Mirtil and Chloe by Gessner and Florian in the parlor house of Costache Ghica, the minister of war. In this way, the Romanian language was heard and spoken in those hard times when it was seen rather as a dialect. Regarding this action the poet confesses that: 'In an epoch of foreign habits, at 1816, I had set up a society theatre at the house of the deceased minister of war Constatin Ghica, a kind-hearted and culture lover landowner. The actors were sons and daughters of the first families that play roles in the French plays. To those I had placed the charge, in those times courageous, to do a gap in that foreignism, addressing the language of the nation to patriotic hearts. And because it would have been too much to suddenly speak in Romanian about the heroic events or about the salon intrigues, which then only in foreign languages circulated, the modest muse rolled in lowlander garments and with the help of this prestige and of the national costume, the most picturesque for

the shepherds, the hearts filled up and the hearing began to get used with the language that until then they have called just a dialect' (Asachi 1957: 253).

Secondly, in order to revitalize the education system too, Asachi travels to Transylvania from where he brings teachers that have Romanian classes at the Seminary of Socola monastery in Iași. The critic George Sorescu sees the poet projects as a fight between the Romanian spirit and the Greek spirit 'on the level of culture, in which the Romanian language droops the calumnies and imposes itself in schools with a real success. Once this initiative achieved, the well-known myth which says that the Romanian language would not have the capacity to communicate students the notions of 'high learning' is dissipated'. (Sorescu 1970: 64)

Finally, in 1828 Asachi sets up a gymnasium named The Vasilian School, which will become 'an expression of the higher education system in Romanian language build on an enlightenment conception. The selection of a number of poor students with scholarship, the introduction of European languages in the syllabus and the training of specialists for the different domains of social and political life complete the image of Asachi activity on the line of organizing the higher education system'. (Sorescu 1970: 75-76)

In 1835, the Vasilian School became The Mihailian Academy, a higher education establishment with three faculties: philosophy (three years), law (three years), theology (three years). These are just a few of the most important cultural initiatives of the poet which contributed to the development of the Moldavian society and national language.

## **2. Asachi and the Italian model of poetry**

Being educated in an enlightenment cultural environment with solid knowledge of the classic authors, Asachi imprints on his creation a classicist mark with a slight tendency towards romanticism, but the intention of adequacy to this literary movement remains on the exterior. In the *Preface* of his poetry volume from 1836, the poet talks about an attachment to the Latin model of poetry: 'driven by classical models and by the language character, I strove to follow the system which asks that poetry, the utmost product of thought through elevating feeling, sound through graceful and harmonious words, so that the language being transformed, it can be worthy in her brilliant origin with the Italian language'. (Asachi 1991: 58) By adopting the Latin model of poetry, Asachi recognizes and assures the readers that the Romanian has implicitly a noble origin, which is the Latin one. Why he chooses to apply the Italian rules in poetry? Due to the Romanian lacuna in set of norms and also for the affinity between the two languages: 'Because I did not have classical models in the Romanian language of the different kinds of writings, I turned, as much as it was possible towards the Italian poetry rules which are more similar with the nature of our language'. (Asachi 1991: 59)

Asachi supports his interest for the Italian using the argument of the Romanian language Latin character. We, however, think that the poet exaggerates when he considers that the Romanian of his epoch is the language spoken to a large extent by Romans and the colonists from Dacia. He says that: 'If the study of the Italian language is very interesting for all those who have a preoccupation for the new literature, all the more it is proper that it were the object of serious research also for a Romanian person that speaks to a great extent the language which, in ancient times, was spoken by the Roman legions and the colonists come from Italy to Dacia, because the scholars and a lots of facts shows that the common vulgar Latin of that time is the mother of all those languages which were formed by turns in the provinces conquered by the Roman army and which, then, took particular characteristics after the different localities they

named. And, so, in Italy the common vulgar Latin was transformed in Tuscan, (Italian), in Gallia was French, in Spain was Castilian and in Dacia was transformed into the Romanian language'. (Asachi 1991: 60)

Asachi travel to Italy makes him observe not only the linguistic closeness, but also the cultural one between the Romanian and the Italian nation, while the study of the Italian literature convinces him that only the latter can make a contribution to the development of the national Romanian language and literature. The poet confesses about his cultural experience that: 'The result of such research it was the assuredness that I had had about the greatest affinity which in spite of years passing and interrupted communication, it had been kept between the inhabitants of Rome and those that lived here in Dacia, not only in language, but also in customs, traditions, even of folk music, because more than several songs belonging to the inhabitants of Rome, and also the dance called tarantella and many of these were sung and danced today by the Romanian habitants of Dacia. Beside these, the study of Italian classics convinced me no language more than Italian could make easier and could develop especially the literature and in particular the Romanian poetry'. (Asachi, 1991: 60) Both for Asachi and for the other writers of his generation, the city of Rome with its noble culture it means the supreme argument of Latinity. Regarding this aspect, the critic Dumitru Popovici affirms that: 'To Rome, the province of Transylvania sent his greatest sons. But they were thirsting souls after deep knowledge, tormented by the grand social problems of their time, lashed by the miserable mood in which the Romanian mass of people struggled. For all these, Rome did not live but through its old history, it was driven at the function of historical argument in the fight that they gave'. (Popovici 1969: 129)

### **3. Asachi theory about the creation of the Romanian literary language**

Asachi did not build a so-called system of language, but he expresses some pertinent points of view in various articles published in the epoch regarding the formation of it. So, in 'Lexicography', the writer encourages the creation of the national language through the borrowings of words. Therefore, he proposes three possible ways to accomplish it: the first is the keeping of the words from the popular stock transmitted orally; the second one implies the use of words from the old books. The last way suggested is the selection of words for the new realities in the language: 'Today, when the redeemer establishments favors the moldoromanians, when the affairs of the state, the education and the politics are expressed in this language, it started to enrich itself with so many words that the antagonists of all renewal say that if a Romanian ancestor returned today in the world, he would not understand our texts, as if, in fact, we should subdue the examinations of the formers for our acts. The improvements that are done are useful for the contemporaries and for the future generations; that it is why is a duty and a need to enrich our idiom through all means, introducing in language the classic words that were kept in the oral heritage of the Romanian people, renewing those discovered in books and old documents and adopting all that is needed in order to make clear the new ideas for the Romanians. Who does not cherish with pride a precious discovered thing, about which he knows that it has been used by his ancestors?' (Asachi 1991: 469)

The poet is living in an epoch in which the language is imperfect, undeveloped, thus, it cannot offer him all the time the right words to communicate his ideas. The reason for this situation is the fact that at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Romanian language is still laying on unstable grounds, searching for a norm. Because of this weakness, the idiom is threatened by

all kinds of linguistic heresies. Therefore, in order to save it, Asachi considers that it should be turned to its original roots. And the road that the idiom must follow is the one that leads to its inner self: (...) 'in order to be for the nation, the grammar must be settled on the nature of language and the practical rules that it has within and which the linguist has the duty to collect and put into an organized system. Hypotheses, inventions and subjective ideas of the author cannot turn into grammatical rules and the creation of new words is forgiven when it is done with moderation and only when is needed'. (Asachi 1991: 332)

In the article 'The man of letters' the poet militates in favor of the return at the model of ecclesiastical language: 'The substance of our language, which is searched elsewhere, it is localized in the Holy Scripture, which is understood by all Romanians; this language should be kept clean and intact as being the only bond that still unites the Romanians separated in different places, and it should be improved after a simple method and which should be legislated by a commission formed of Romanian linguists from Transylvania, The Romanian Country and Moldavia'. (Asachi 1991: 332)

The use of the religious idiom as a pattern for imagining the national language it will be an idea promoted in the epoch by Ion Heliade Rădulescu as well as by others contemporaries of him. They turn towards it because of its unitary, homogenous form. Ion Heliade Rădulescu affirms that: 'the only way to unite our writing and to create a general literary language is to follow the ecclesiastical language...' (Rădulescu 1973: 94) Later, Mihai Eminescu talks in his journalistic texts about the literary language which was formed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the orthodox church began to publish clerical books. These writings, in the poet vision, 'stop the process of diversification and formation of dialects; the language received through books an unitary norm both in speaking and writing because, by a happy coincidence, the translators pick up as model the most archaic dialect of the Romanian people, the one spoken in the provinces The Romanian Country and a part of Transylvania, since to the oldest of all they could reduce, as to a prototype the dialects that were trying to form then. Maybe it was an instinct of truth, maybe the Latin conscience itself urged them to do so'. (Eminescu 1985: 168)

In another article where Asachi discusses the problematic of the national language, entitled 'Philological observation', he suggests that the Cyrillic alphabet introduced by the parents of the eastern Church in the centuries of Christianization be replaced by the Latin alphabet: '(...) it is appropriate to adopt in the Romanian language the simply Italian orthography and with a little addition of signs not only will be written and pronounced correctly, but also could the foreigners read and understand better our writings and through this share with us their luminous and straightforward criticism so useful for the development of the national literature on a classic way'. (Asachi 1957: 346-347) The poet recommends that the words needed for enriching the vocabulary be borrowed from the Italian language, which, as he says, is cultural superior to Romanian and also the sister of it. These new expressions will not be taken directly, but adapted to the specific of the Romanian language: '(...) we wish, in order not to degenerate the language into a chaos, that her development be done according to a more rational recognized system. After the archaeologists, the Romanian is the rustic language belonging to Romans, being contemporaneous with the Latin, so that the improvements which are necessarily introduced, it is right to be done from the treasures of her more cultivated sister; and because the Latin is dead, its privilege was inherited by Italian, her daughter. Therefore, the missing words, the phrases and the new expressions about the ideas and the present sciences must be borrowed from the Italian, with the Romanian form and ending'. (Asachi 1957: 346-347)

Beside the imitations from Italian, Asachi considers other foreign influences dangerous for the Romanian language creation: 'a deep poison went through the Romanian being and the language, popular costume and many others got contaminated by it. The diplomatic and the salon language became Greek in spirit, while the Romanian one was thrown to the rural peasants, who kept it for 1700 years'. (Asachi 1991: 473) The poet advice for the readers is to maintain the ancestral cultural and linguistic inheritance: 'Honor the old customs and festivities of your country, honor the language of your country and look after her conservation, because language is the clothing of a nation'. (Asachi 1991: 447)

Asachi also considers that the formation of the national language begins once with the discharging of the foreign linguistic elements which have no value, action that must be done before the creation of the language: 'our duty is to clean the language through the removal of foreign words and to adopt the ones that we have as synonyms donated to us by the mother-language, because even if some ask that these words remain like ones that through centuries have received Romanian citizenship, we answer that abuses, even old, remain abuses and it would be easier for us to purify the language now until a national idiom is not formed'. (Cornea 1969: 209)

#### 4. Conclusion

'Born too late to still live under the spell of the old myths and too soon to participate with the romantics at the invention of others' (Cornea 1990: 60), Gheorghe Asachi remains a man of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who displayed the enlighten program of civilization, always in front of the cultural initiatives when he was needed. His interest in revising the Romanian language as he believed to be the most appropriate, by approaching it to her more cultivated sister, the Italian, shows his receptiveness to the major subjects of the epoch and an active involvement in its also. Nonetheless, the passing to the requirements of a new age, the changing of time was felt by him too, who gloomy confesses in an article that: 'A new nation appeared, with another wishes and ideas; full of wonder I hear new names and new verses; the sound of old names passed as myself too I faded; maybe I am respected by few, defamed by many and loved by none!'. (Asachi 1991: 429)

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