CREATIVE WAYS OF EXPRESSING THE CONCEPT OF "NEVER". I: THE CALENDAR

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Resumen: *El tiempo, como dimensión física, pero también óntica, ha representado desde siempre un punto focal en la conciencia humana, y su expresión lingüística se puede realizar por una variedad de medios léxicos, morfosintácticos y fraseológicos. Nuestra ponencia pretende analizar las modalidades idiomáticas que se han desarrollado en las lenguas romances para expresar el fin del tiempo, es decir, el concepto de "nunca". Para nuestra investigación hemos recogido un corpus bastante extenso, por lo tanto, hemos decidido abordar, de momento, solo aquellos fraseologismos que expresan dicho contenido construidos alrededor del calendario, con sus días de la semana, nombres de meses o de estaciones del año, e incluso fiestas de índole religiosa.*
Palabras clave: *lenguas romances, fraseologismos, el concepto de "nunca", calendario, hagiónimos.*

From the dawn of ancient philosophy to the Newtonian physics and the theory of relativity, time has fascinated humanity, as it is the canvas of history and memories, of plans and expectations or of unfulfilled dreams and disillusions. The conscience of time is at the core of human civilization itself: no progress would be possible without the chronological build-up of knowledge, transmitted from one generation to another. The conscience of time is also a catalyst in the development of human language: it helps organize the discourse through its grammatical manifestations, both morphological (verbal tense) and syntactical (*consecutio temporum* or the sequence of times); any type of discourse has an intrinsic temporal component, since the process of communication is "grounded in the ecstatical unity of temporality" (Heidegger, 2001: 400), and it also favorizes the expression of subjective perception of events through its lexical and phraseological hypostases.

Among the numerous avatars of the human conscience of time, its lexicosemantic/ phraseological expression is perhaps one of the most creative and least investigated, especially in a contrastive-comparative view. In our paper, we will try to

scratch the surface of said lexicosemantic/ phraseological inventory in an attempt to identify and explain the ways in which Romance languages convey the meaning of "never" by means of idiomatic expressions constructed around the calendar. In this respect, we have selected a corpus of phrases in several Romance varieties from mono- or bilingual dictionaries, we have proceeded to a formal and semantic classification and we have attempted to offer interpretations or explanations regarding the construction of meaning of both the terms and the syntagmatic structures (Kintsch & Mangalath, 2010).

There are many ways to express the meaning of "never", from the simple use of a neutral temporal adverb to the emphatic adynaton or to the reference to imaginary dates or impossible events; in the pages below, we will try to identify, analyze and explain the mechanisms of such constructions in several Romance languages, in order to emphasize their continuity, but also their individuality, at least in this regard.

Emphatic structures

The concept of "never" is sometimes expressed by means of emphasis in Romance languages, in structures created by reduplication or pleonasms, similar to the English phrase *never ever*.

In the first category, the emphasis is created at the syntactic level, where a term becomes its own internal complement in genitive. To this respect, we can cite, for example, certain phrases of a religious origin, excerpted from the *Bible*, such as Rom. *în vecii vecilor* (lit. "in the centuries of the centuries"); oddly enough, while in the religious texts this phrase is employed with the meaning "forever and ever", in spoken Romanian it is used with the opposite meaning ("never ever") in negative sentences (whether the negation is expressed or deduced from the context). In a similar manner, the Spanish phrase *en jamás de los jamases* (lit. "in the never of the nevers") somehow follows the pattern of the religious phrase *en los siglos de los siglos*, the latter with the meaning "forever and ever", and it becomes a manner of expressing the idea of "never" in an emphatic syntactic structure.

The second category is based on the juxtaposed or copulative coordination of two terms with similar meanings, so the emphasis is based on the semantic compatibility at the lexical level. This latter category is illustrated by Cat. *mai més* and Sp. *nunca y jamás*, where both terms have the exact same meaning, "never", and the emphasis is created by tautology. On the other hand, the Rom. idiom *în veci şi pururea*, literally meaning – again – "forever and ever", is mostly used with the opposite meaning, even in affirmative sentences, where the irony is implicit contextually.

Structures constructed around the religious calendar

The idea of expressing the concept of "never" by referring to impossible, non-extant or non-existent religious holidays is anything but modern. Perhaps the most famous expression in this regard is the Latin structure *ad kalendas graecas*, based on the fact that the Greek did not celebrate the beginning of each month the way the Romans did. The orthography of the word *kalendae* is rather interesting. The sources pendulate between *calendae* and *kalendae* (the latter seems to be preferred in scientific works, such as the Lewis & Short dictionary, and even by the Latin *Vicipaedia*). According to Michiel de Vaan (and other dictionaries), the word *calendae* is etymologically related to the verb *calo*, "to call, announce, summon", and Meillet & Ernout note that it preserves the ancient orthography: the letter K was a Greek loan into the Latin alphabet with the name *ka,* /kaː/, from κάππα, and it was used to represent the consonants /k/ and /g/ before the open vowel /a/. In the earliest

versions of the Latin alphabet, there were three letters representing the voiceless and voiced velar occlusives, namely C, K and Q. The letter C was written before front vowels, Q before back vowels, and K before the central vowels (short and long /a/). This is not an uncommon feature in ancient alphabets: the Paleohispanic scripts, for instance, are semi-syllabic, i. e. the occlusive consonants are never represented by individual letters; instead, syllabic structures constructed with the aid of a vowel receive their own symbol. Back to Latin, in the classical period the use of the letter C (and its variant G) replaced the letters K and Q in most instances (with the letter Q surviving before a hiatus when the first vowel is a U). The letter K was preserved in certain "fossilized" forms such as *Kalendae* (Sihler, 1995: 21). So, as appealing as it may sound, the idea that the spelling of *Kalendae* with a K is a purposeful allusion to the Greek language, as jocosely suggested by someone, is but a joke. The above-mentioned Latin idiom is widely used all over the world, whether in Latin or in translated versions, so Romance varieties are no exception: Cat. *a les calendes gregues*, Fr. *aux calendes grecques*, It. *alle calende greche*, Rom. *la calendele grecești* etc.

Before Christianity, the pagan calendars, based on the phases of the Moon, equinoxes and solstices, used to celebrate rites of fertility and life cycles related to harvest, so they marked but a handful of fixed dates throughout the year; with the Julian calendar, the year would be divided into numerous conventional and arbitrary subdivisions, and temporal orientation becomes a quantified system (Preto, 2002: 153).

Later on, two millennia of Christianity have changed the perspective of the European peoples on the surrounding world and their way of conceiving and approaching day-to-day reality. Traditionally, the inhabitants of rural areas were deprived of a systematic education, so the institution of the Church used to represent a link with a different cultural world and a source of alternative education for the masses. Subsequently, traditional culture, based on folk wisdom and empiric approaches, was enriched by the adoption of a new set of pre-established ideas and concepts, whose motivation or explanation could not be deduced by simple contemplation or empiric analysis of reality. Folk mentality began, gradually, to acquire a syncretic character while synthetizing a hybrid view containing the traditional secular knowledge, based on experience and observation, and the new perspectives imposed by Christian spirituality (Pohoață & Seiciuc, 2011: 210). For a while, there was a rupture between the religious and secular calendars, or, in the words of Jacques Le Goff (1977: 14), a Church time and a merchant time; nevertheless, the liturgical year, with its holidays and hagiography, would prove to be more detailed, more complex, i. e. more useful in daily life, so the Gregorian calendar, introduced by the Catholic Church at the end of the 16th century, would slowly become the norm in both religious and secular life throughout Europe, except in the Orthodox countries, whose churches still use the Julian calendar for calculating the date of Easter and other movable feasts.

This schism between the Western and Eastern Christianity is sometimes visible in the idiomatic expressions pointing to an impossible event; for example, the Italian language contains the idiom It. *quando Pasqua viene a maggio*, "when Easter falls in May"; for the Eastern half of Christianity, such an idiom makes no sense, since Orthodox Easter sometimes falls in May (about 18% of the times), while the latest date for the Catholic Easter is the 25th of April.

A similar meaning is conveyed by the French idiom *à Pâques ou à la Trinité*, "at Easter or at Trinity Sunday"; both are real holidays, and both have mobile dates: Trinity is celebrated a week after Pentecost (50th day after Easter, or the 7th Sunday) and is considered

to be the beginning of the liturgical year. In this case, the meaning "never" is probably derived from uncertainty, in reference to the two movable feasts several weeks apart.

In a similar way, the Romanian idiom *la Ispas*, "at the Ascension", points to a religious holiday with a mobile date, 40 days after Easter. The term *Ispas*, with a Slavic origin (**sŭpasŭ**), refers to a rather important moment in folk culture in Romanian and the Balkans; after Easter, the usual greeting is *Hristos a înviat!* ("Christ has risen", i. e. from death), but only until the Ascension: from this day forward, the greeting changes to *Hristos s-a înălțat!* ("Christ has ascended").

Easter also appears in a Romanian idiom in relation to the meaning "never", but with a humorous twist: Rom. *la Paştele cailor [şi la nunta vacilor]*, which literally translates to "at the horses' Easter [and at the cows' wedding]"; according to sources in the mainstream media, the *horses' Easter* was not an imaginary holiday in the beginning, but it referred to a date in those years when all Christians celebrated the holiday at the same day (Russu, 2007). In Transylvania, the ethnic configuration is multi-confessional (Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox), so, in medieval times, the communities who did not celebrate Easter and other mobile holidays on a certain date used to borrow horses from the ones who rested during the holiday, in order to get ahead with their labor. When the dates of mobile feasts coincided, the horses rested, too. According to some authors, horses' Easter was also known as *mares' Thursday*, and, during this day, legends say all horses got tired of eating grass for an hour, as a punishment given by the Virgin Mary for their noisy behavior in Bethlehem during the birth of Jesus Christ. The horses' Easter was celebrated at the above mention *Ispas*, on the Thursday 40 days after Easter (Danalache, 2012). The average Romanian is not aware of any such information, so, for the average speaker, this *horses' Easter* is a make-believe holiday, much like the *cows' wedding*, which explains the meaning attributed to the idiom by the majority of speakers.

The next idiom comes from Catalan and points to another obscure Christian holiday, celebrating a lesser-known martyr in the hagiographic calendar: Saint Cyricus or Quiricus; Cat. *l'any d'en Quirze/ Quinze* (lit. "the year of Cyricus") originally meant "a long time ago", but it extended its meaning to that of "never", just like Cat. *l'any de la María Castanya*. The latter was a 14th c. woman from Galicia, who led a rebellion against the taxes imposed by the bishop of Lugo, Pedro López de Aguiar; after the death of the bishop's butler, María Castaña was forced to donate her fortune to the Church. The idiom is, obviously, imported from Castilian, but the legend of María Castaña (or Maricastaña), despite her name being present in the expression, was not widely known, so it became the synonym for "a long time ago", and, later, for "never".

Both Catalan phrases mentioned above were (probably) constructed around anthroponyms which designated real people. Nonetheless, many Romance languages (and not only!) express the meaning of "never" by means of idioms containing agionyms of make-believe saints, whose holiday does not feature in any calendar. The most obvious ones refer to the day of a *Saint Never* (It. *il giorno di San Mai*, Port. *no dia de São Nunca*, Sp. *el día de San Nunca*) or a *Saint Wait* (Rom. *la Sfîntu' Aşteaptă*). The French language goes further on creativity with the idiom *à la Saint-Glinglin*, a phrase that, apparently, was at some point used as a real deadline in a contract about a debt (Planelles, 2019: 538); the expression is based on folk etymology and homophony (*saint – seing*, "sign", then "clock chime"), and the adaptation of a German verb, *klingen*, designating the sound of church tower bells. Combined, the two terms create the best context for the creation of an idiom

that expresses the concept of "never", while providing the appearance of a legitimate holiday (and a real deadline).

The last phrase in this category comes from Spanish and it is based on traditional Christian iconography. The concept of "never" can be expressed in Spanish with the phrase *cuando San Juan agache/ baje el dedo*, lit. "when St. John bends/ points down his finger", in reference to the traditional depiction of St. John Baptist, with his finger pointing upwards, to the skies. Overthrowing the established Christian iconography must have seemed impossible to the medieval Catholics, which guarantees the transparency of the idiom.

Structures constructed around the secular calendar

As we have seen *supra*, the modern secular calendar generally follows the structure of the Roman calendar, composed of arbitrary subdivisions, such as weeks of seven days and months that do not follow the lunar phases. It is not surprising to find that the Romance languages include a series of idioms based on the suppression of the pre-established organization of days, weeks and months, especially in contemporary secular contexts, as opposed to the traditional idioms, which were based mainly on the religious calendar.

Romance languages have inherited the denomination of the **days of the week** from Latin; in the Greco-Latin tradition, the days of the week used to bear the names of gods associated with astral bodies, and the regular seven-day week was borrowed from the Hebrew tradition. The Christian Church replaced the pagan names of *Dies Saturni* and *Dies Solis* with the more appropriate *Shabbat* and, respectively, *Dies Dominicus/ Dominica*, still in use in all Romance languages. The Galician-Portuguese varieties constitute an interesting exception, since the working days, Monday to Friday, are numbered; the situation dates back to the 6th century, and the change was due to religious arguments.

Independently of the etymology of its name, each weekday comes regularly once a week, so there are several phrases that convey the meaning "never" by expressing an alteration in this pre-established rhythm. Most of these phrases share the structure *the week with x Y-days*, where the numeral varies freely, but the preferred weekday appears to be Thursday: It. *nella settimana dei due giovedì*, "the week with two Thursdays", It. (Piedmont.) *smana dij tre giòbia*, "the week with three Thursdays", Cat. *la setmana dels tres/ set dijous*, "the week with three/ seven Thursdays", Fr. *la semaine des quatre jeudis*, "the week with four Thursdays"; the most optimistic ones point to the repetition of Sundays: Fr. *la semaine des trois dimanches,* "the week with three Sundays", Cat. *la setmana dels set diumenges*, "the week with seven Sundays". The equivalent Spanish expression, *la semana que no tenga viernes*, "the week with no Friday", might be a reference to the Good Friday.

In Romanian, the rhymed phrase *de joi pînă mai apoi*, lit. "from Thursday until later", has different meanings according to context: "immediately", "always" or, in negative sentences (or in ironic ones), "never". In this context, we also have to mention another expressive formation in Romanian, the compound *poimarți*, lit. "the day after Tuesday", created as a calque from *poimîine*, "the day after tomorrow", and *marți*, "Tuesday"; the word is used colloquially with the meaning "never" and is not present in Romanian dictionaries. Italian also has a make-believe day name, similar to the religious idioms we discussed *supra*, in the phrase It. *il giorno di mai [ed il mese di poi]*, "the day of never [and the month of later]".

In this regard, the names of the **months** are also inherited from Latin in Romance languages; in Romanian, the inherited forms, sometimes affected by folk etymology, as well as the internal creations, were replaced by the neological Latin terminology, and the ancient lexemes are not in use anymore, except, perhaps, in poetry (and sometimes publicity). In

the context of our paper, we notice that the majority of idioms expressing the concept of "never" by means of evoking the names of the months point to the number of days attributed (arbitrarily) to each of them, so it is not surprising to find references to the month of February: Fr. *au 30 février*, "on the 30th of February", It. *il 31 febbraio*, "on the 31st of February", etc. The French language also plays on the predictability of the 28-30-31-day length of the months with the expression Fr. *tous les 36 du mois*, "every 36th of each month".

The name of the month of May appears in the Catalan idiom *pel segar del mes de maig*, "at the harvest in the month of May", based on a different approach; the Catalan expression focuses on the agricultural calendar rather than on the conventional division of the year, so the concept of "never" is created here by means of an anachronism.

Finally, there are a few idioms expressing the concept of "never" by pointing out to the **year** and its characteristics or contexts. First of all, the Catalan idiom *l'any xeix*, "the year x", is quite transparent and predictable and lacks in creativity and expressivity. In Romanian, the idea of "never" is sometimes expresses by the simple colocation *la anul*, "next year", pointing to an uncertain future, a period of more than 360 days when everything is possible; frequently, the speaker feels the urge to increase expressivity, so the same idea is conveyed by the idiom *la anul cînd o înflori bostanul*, "next year, when the pumpkin blooms", based solely on rhyme, since pumpkin vines flower every year. Another phrase used colloquially in Romanian, *la anul și la mulți ani*, is the typical well-wish used on every occasion, from birthdays to anniversaries or other celebrations. A literal translation may be "[see you] next year and for many to come" or "next year and many more", an obviously positive wish, so the meaning of "never" is, again, conveyed by the first part ("next year"), and the second part is only featured for expressive purposes.

Conclusions

The inventory of Romance idiomatic expressions associated with the idea of *never* shows certain similitudes and peculiarities. The similitudes derive from the common Latin origin or from universals of thought, while the discrepancies are caused by the geographical, historical, political, social, etc. context of the development of Romance varieties. If we take into account the inventory of idioms constructed around the calendar, we will notice that the main factor of discrepancy is religion; while the Romanian culture is tributary to the orthodox Church, with its pendulation between the Julian and Gregorian calendars in the calculation of the movable and fixed feasts, in the remaining Romance cultures the secular and religious calendars coincide, so the movable feasts occupy different timeframes than those of the Eastern Churches. Moreover, the same factor is sometimes responsible for the existence of different holidays or of a different inventory of saints and martyrs celebrated throughout the year, which only leads to more discrepancies between the two poles of Romanity.

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