

A CHRONICLER HATH A FACEBOOK PAGE: ENREGISTERING “OLD ROMANIAN” ONLINE

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Drawing on Agha’s (2003, 2005) theory of enregisterment, our research is concerned with the linguistic practices through which “old Romanian” as an imagined variety is perceived and represented online by educated non-linguists contributing to the *Letopiseț* (“chronicle”) Facebook page. The administrator and the community gathered around this page write humorously about current political or social events using, more or less competently, an approximation of 17th-century Romanian – an endeavour similar to the one found on *Geoffrey Chaucer hath a blog* (Bryant 2010) and other pages. The purpose of our paper is to analyse how “old Romanian” is enregistered as such and what are the salient linguistic and cultural features indexically linked to the idea of “archaicity”. We contend that, on the *Letopiseț* Facebook page, “old Romanian” is enregistered in three main ways: by using a set of archaic graphic, morphosyntactic and lexical features (either authentic or invented by the administrator); by using dialectal features, thought of as old; and by using quotes and pseudoquotes (Minugh 1999) from old Romanian texts. In the end, we discuss a few possible reasons for using “old Romanian” online.

Keywords: *enregisterment; indexicality; new media; archaicity; “old Romanian”*

Introduction

With their affordances and constraints, the ever-expanding social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, have changed how we use

language and have led to new and creative ways of collaboratively building an online community. This paper aims to discuss one such online community – the “Letopiseț” Facebook page –, which strives to use old Romanian in their communication. We are mainly interested in the linguistic practices whereby “old Romanian” as an imagined variety (Chau 2021) is perceived and represented online by educated laypeople (the administrator of the page and the people posting comments) and in the processes through which particular linguistic forms and structures come to index archaicity and are used to perform a specific identity – that of the “chronicler”. Our paper is informed by recent theoretical work on enregisterment and indexicality, which we will present briefly in the first part. We will then introduce the Facebook page under discussion by placing it in the context of similar endeavours. We will focus on the three main ways in which we found “old Romanian” to be enregistered on this page. We will conclude with a discussion of the possible functions of creating and using this arcane variety online.

Theoretical framework

The concept of *enregisterment* refers to “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognised register of forms” (Agha 2003: 231). Agha (2003) shows how, with the help of prescriptivist books, popular handbooks, literary works and newspapers, what used to be a regional sociolect transforms into the supra-local variety that is nowadays known as Received Pronunciation, indexing social prestige and status. Later research has shown how, through various metapragmatic practices, a set of linguistic forms comes to be linked indexically to place (Johnstone et al. 2006, Johnstone 2009, 2016, Beal 2009, Remlinger 2009, Cramer 2013, Németh 2021), character, persona (Bennett 2012, SturtzSreetharan 2017, Johnstone 2017, Chau 2021, Huțanu 2021), or style (Stæhr 2015, Kelly-Holmes 2017). We argue that the concept of enregisterment can also be fruitful in studying the relationship between specific forms and ways of speaking (or, rather, of writing) and a period in the past.

To illustrate how a set of linguistic forms comes to create and be perceived as a distinct, imagined variety (which we call “old Romanian”), we build on Johnstone et al.’s (2006) analysis of how enregisterment relates to Silverstein’s (2003) orders of indexicality and Labov’s (1972) taxonomy of sociolinguistic indicators, markers and stereotypes, with the caveat that the linguistic features we discuss are all in written form and cannot be directly connected to a specific, geographically or socially circumscribed group of users (for a similar situation, see Squires 2010 and Chau 2021).

By their mere presence and frequency in old texts, linguistic features of old Romanian can be seen as first-order indexicals (or indicators), going hand in hand with other elements such as script or font, type of paper, decorations etc. They can be discussed and analysed by linguists working on the old texts, but they are not part of anyone's speaking or writing repertoire, whether of linguists or laypeople. These linguistic features become second-order indexicals (or markers) when some regular language users become aware of their existence (for example, when they notice them in old texts they study in school) or when they use them in predictable contexts (for example, in prayers; for the use of old linguistic forms in religious discourse today, see Chirilă 2005). Textbooks and newer editions of the old texts can contain explanations or glossaries of some of the features, and language users may be hesitant and choose, deliberately or not, newer forms over the old ones. When these forms "rise to overt social consciousness" (Labov 1972: 292), they become third-order indexicals and are used actively, in less predictable contexts, as stereotypes of old Romanian, in contrast with standard contemporary Romanian. These forms are therefore enregistered as an imagined variety: a set of linguistic choices comes to be recognised and regrouped as belonging to the register of (something that looks like) old Romanian.

The "Letopiseț" Facebook page. Data collection and methodology

Our analysis focuses on the "Letopiseț" (Engl. *chronicle*) Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Letopiset>), which was created in February 2018, and, as of September 2022, has almost 28.000 followers. The page is administered by only one person, who uses a pseudonym (Nechifor Bugeac or Cronicarul – The Chronicler), but otherwise is not hiding his identity: he organised several meetings with his readers, did a Facebook Q&A session in June 2020, and even participated as his persona in a comedy competition TV show (called iUmor) on Romanian television. The Facebook page is indeed, first and foremost, a chronicle comprising texts of various lengths that cover events from Romania and the world, usually accompanied by the image of a cat. However, the page also includes other types of texts, such as biographies of famous people (Elon Musk, Stephen Hawking, Maradona, several Romanian politicians, etc.), translations of song lyrics (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Hey Jude*, *Let It Be*, *Waterloo*, *A Natural Woman*, etc.), movie synopses (*Home Alone*, *Star Wars*, *Eyes Wide Shut*, etc.). All texts are written in "old Romanian".

Although unconventional, the Facebook page is not a singular enterprise in the Romanian cultural context. Although he does not mention it, the Facebook page administrator might be familiar with Silviu Angelescu's *Calpuzanii* (*The Counterfeiters*), a Romanian novel published in 1987 and republished later. Written in old Romanian, *Calpuzanii* is an invented chronicle of Wallachia under Nicolae Mavrogheni (1786-1790), but it is, at the same time, a disguised chronicle of the actual times under the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. What is certain is that the administrator was inspired by a blog written in Old English, a fact he states in the Facebook Q&A we mentioned. The blog is not named, but it is probably *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog* (houseoffame.blogspot.com), which was started as a joke in 2006 by Brantley Bryant, a specialist in Medieval British literature. The blog, which was later turned into a book (Bryant 2010), was written in the voice of Geoffrey Chaucer and employed “a rough approximation of Middle English spelling, vocabulary, and syntax” (Bryant 2010: 17); its goal was “to place Chaucerian texts and topics, in all their historical particularity, into contemporary context, and see what kinds of resonances and similarities arise” (Bryant 2010: 22). A similar endeavour is *The Wake*, a 2014 novel written by Paul Kingsnorth, which uses what the author calls “a shadow tongue – a pseudo-language intended to convey the feeling of the old language by combining some of its vocabulary and syntax with the English we speak today” (Kingsnorth 2014: 353).

This “feeling of the old language” is explicitly circumscribed on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page by the administrator, who states more than once, on the page and in the Facebook live Q&A, that he uses (in fact, imitates) the language spoken in the 16th century north of the Danube. To analyse the concrete linguistic means through which this strict temporal frame is accomplished, we observed the page from the beginning and made screenshots of the page, which we afterwards sorted and classified. In our analysis, we concentrated mainly on the forms used by the administrator, as they demonstrate intention and agency. However, as enregistered forms are circulated in interaction and have to be recognised as such, we also took into account what Agha terms “the social domain” of the register, which refers to “a group of persons acquainted with – minimally, capable of recognising – the figures performable through use” (Agha 2005: 40), therefore we also looked at the comments made by the followers of the page. Our purpose was not to see if the linguistic forms are authentic, “correct”, adequate or period appropriate, but to identify the most salient linguistic features that have become enregistered as this imagined variety imitating old Romanian,

have reached index archaicity and are used to perform a particular identity, that of the chronicler. Our research revealed three main ways through which this imagined variety is enregistered, which we discuss in the following sections: archaic features, dialectal features, and quotes and pseudo-quotes.

Enregistering “old Romanian” through archaic linguistic features

The first way in which archaicity is indexed on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page is through linguistic choices made by the administrator, who uses a set of archaic lexical, morphosyntactic, and graphic features. The lexical level is the easiest to attain by the administrator and also the easiest to be recognised by his audience as indexical of archaicity. There are several strategies the administrator employs in order to make the text look old, but, at the same time, still comprehensible to the contemporary reader.

One such strategy is to use words that are still commonly understood by (educated) Romanians, but which are rarely used nowadays (sometimes only in specific contexts), as they have a more frequently used and less specialized synonym, so they are construed as old by comparison and contrast. Table 1 lists some examples from our corpus, often of Slavic, Hungarian or Turkish origin, instead of the more frequently used Latin or Romance origin words, with other substitutions possible as well (as in the last three examples).

Letopiseț	Contemporary Romanian	English translation
<i>a ocârmui</i> (< Sl.) ¹	a conduce (< Lat.)	to rule
<i>ostrov</i> (< Sl.)	insulă (< Lat.)	island
<i>prăvălie</i> (< Sl.)	magazin (< Fr.)	store
<i>pusti</i> (< Sl., Bg.)	deșert (< Fr., Lat.)	desert
<i>slobod</i> (< Sl.)	liber (< Lat., Fr.)	free
<i>a tălmăci</i> (< Sl.)	a traduce (< Lat., Fr.)	to translate
<i>surghiun</i> (< Turk.)	exil (< Fr., Lat.)	exile
<i>chezaș</i> (< Hun.)	garant (< Fr.)	guarantor, backer
<i>a făgădui</i> (< Hun.)	a promite (< Lat., Fr.)	to promise
<i>veșminte</i> (< Lat.)	haine (< Sl.)	clothes
<i>a purcede</i> (< Lat.)	a începe (< Lat.)	to start
șiitoare (< ține (< Lat.) + suffix -tor)	amantă (< Fr., Lat.)	lover

Table 1.

¹ For etymologies, we consulted MDA (2001-2003).

Apart from using words that are still recognisable by readers, even though they deviate from standard contemporary Romanian, another strategy employed by the administrator consists of inserting words that are not in use anymore but which belong to specific semantic fields, such as old professions, old units of measurement for length or weight, old types of currency, old names for time periods, including names of months, but also simply old words, which, according to the Facebook live Q&A, he finds in authentic chronicles or dictionaries. Table 2 contains some examples found in our corpus.

	Letopiseț	Contemporary Romanian	English translation
professions	<i>logofăt</i>	ministru	minister
	<i>vel-logofăt</i>	prim-ministru	prime minister
	<i>zapciu</i>	polițist	police officer
	<i>vistier</i>	trezorier	treasurer
	<i>gerah</i>	chirurg	surgeon
	<i>pojarnic</i>	pompier	firefighter
measurement units	<i>stânjen</i>	aprox. 2 m	approx. 2 m
	<i>palmac</i>	aprox. 3.5 cm	approx. 3.5 cm
	<i>oca</i>	aprox. 1250 g	approx. 1250 g
time periods	<i>leat</i>	an	year
	<i>meseșă</i>	lună	month
	<i>florar</i>	mai	May
other old words	<i>a se pristăvi</i>	a muri	to die
	<i>ocop</i>	tranșee	entrenchment
	<i>zavistie</i>	ceartă	quarrel
	<i>glavă</i>	capitol	chapter

Table 2.

However, the most interesting, but at the same time the most obscure way of indexing “old Romanian” lexically is by inventing new words or phrases for the realities of the 21st century. As the examples in Table 3 show, the administrator ingeniously creates the old words through loan translations, thus generating compounds that mirror the words in contemporary standard Romanian.

Letopiseț	Contemporary Romanian	English translation
întrunăvod	internet	internet
<i>Ceaslovul Chipurilor</i>	Facebook	Facebook
<i>Ortacul Plății</i>	Paypal	Paypal

<i>pravoslavie obștească</i>	corectitudine politică	political correctness
<i>podosfariu</i>	fotbal	football
<i>departevădător</i>	televizor	TV
<i>hrubă cernită</i>	gaură neagră	black hole

Table 3.

Besides lexical choices and creations of the administrator, “old Romanian” is also enregistered through morphosyntactic means. Table 4 illustrates several frequent structures encountered on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page, which the audience recognises as obsolete and specific to old, mainly religious texts.

Letopiseț	Contemporary Romanian
Verb + Infinitive începând a striga; <i>izbutiră a-i sărăci</i> ; <i>binevoise a che- li</i> ; <i>nu izbutea a dobândi</i> ; <i>chibzui a tocni</i>	Verb + Subjunctive
Adj. + Noun word order „aflând <i>preafrumoase cadre</i> în mormânturi”; „darea în vileag a <i>tainicului zapis</i> ”	(mainly) Noun + Adj. word order
Number and gender inflexion of the relative pronoun <i>care</i> (“which”): „ <i>carele</i> avea mare pizmă pe femeia <i>carele</i> îi giudeca”; „o vreme pre <i>carea</i> ”; „cinstitele fețe boierești <i>carii</i> au primit să slujească”	Invariant form of the relative pronoun <i>care</i> (“which”)
Periphrastic perfect word order: Participle (+ Clitic) + Aux. <i>a avea</i> (“to have”): „ <i>fost-au</i> și dânsa”; <i>pristăvitu-s-au</i> ; <i>trimis-am</i> ; <i>venit-a</i>	Periphrastic perfect word order: (Clitic+) Aux. <i>a avea</i> (“to have”) + Participle
Periphrastic perfect auxiliary: 3sg – 3pl syncretic forms: „de <i>i-au făcut</i> aceasta și colivă, noi nu avem știință”; „deaspre cum acest boiear <i>au fost</i> întemnițat, deaspre cum <i>au fost</i> cercetat că <i>au băgat</i> în țeară o pușcă fără <i>zapis</i> de la vamă”;	Periphrastic perfect auxiliary: 3sg – 3pl distinct forms
old complementizers; old coordinate and subordinate connectors: „că s-a întâmplat aceasta <i>au</i> nu, nu poci a vă spune”; „Ori cum îi dzic unii, Teslarioteanul, <i>măcar</i> că nu iaște mucenic”; „ <i>Măcar</i> de se vroia lucrarea lui Orve- lie a fi numai închipuire, aceasta fu prevestire”; „ <i>Af- ară</i> numai că îmblă vorba prin țeară că Dracnea ar fi furat de la cotoii sărmani”; „Subțire, <i>că au doară</i> ‘subtil’ nu s-o fost scornit încă”;	

Table 4.

“Old Romanian” can also be indexed through certain graphic features², which approximate various older stages in the development of standard Romanian orthography, but which are still comprehensible for the audience. Table 5 gives some examples of graphemes used by the administrator in place of the ones used in contemporary Romanian.

Letopiseț	Contemporary Romanian
đ, đz, dz <i>optđeci; slobodđenia; Dumnedđzău; dzic</i>	z <i>optzeci, slobozenia, Dumnezeu, zic</i>
e- <i>eri; epurii; „să mă erți”</i>	ie- <i>ieri, iepurii, ierți</i>
final u <i>„cronicarul celu leșescu”; „am fost plecatu”; „vă voiu spune”; giocu; copaciu</i>	Ø <i>cel, leșesc, plecat, (vă) voi, joc, copac</i>
-é <i>așé; mé</i>	-a, -ea <i>așa, mea</i>
iia, iie <i>„domniia ta”; pravoslaviia; pușcăriia; a scriie; „una miie”; visteriia</i>	ia, ie <i>domnia, pravoslavia, pușcăria, a scrie, o mie, visteria</i>
sci <i>Bucuresci</i>	ști <i>București</i>

Table 5.

Enregistering “old Romanian” through dialectal features

The features discussed so far are very prevalent in the chronicler’s discourse. They are repeated over time (even though not always consistently), and the community created around the page try to mirror them in their comments. However, as Agha (2005: 57) notices, “the competence to *recognize* a register’s forms/effects may have a much wider social domain than the competence to *speak* [or write] the register fluently”. This is why the people posting comments sometimes fail to comply with the conventions imposed by the administrator, or they tend to use regional forms to index old Romanian by equating non-standard, dialectal forms to old forms. The administrator and the commenters resort mainly to phonetic and lexical features specific to the Moldavian dialect and rarely the Banat dialect. There are several reasons for choosing forms and dialectal respellings emblematic of the Moldavian dialect. First, it is a matter of perceptual dialectology: the Moldavian dialect is felt by speakers as the most distant, linguistically, from the standard language, which can lead to its features having negative, stereotypical connotations (see two examples in Huțanu 2012: 264;

² In some cases, the graphic features correlate with archaic or regional phonetical features.

for details, see Cohal 2022). However, on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page, there is no noticeable stigmatisation of the dialect; on the contrary, it is a case of covert prestige (Trudgill 1972). Second, most old texts (from the 16th and 17th centuries), which the older generations studied in school, belong linguistically to the Moldavian dialect area, so they display Moldavian features, thus leading people to correlate “Moldavian” to “old”. Later, especially in the 20th century, writers and filmmakers capitalized on this cultural and linguistic heritage in their works, thus making it even easier for the “Moldavian” – “old” correlation to be activated. While these factors influence the linguistic choices made by the commenters, there is also a biographical element at play in the case of the administrator. The chronicler lives in an area belonging linguistically to the Banat dialect; therefore, he is at least familiar with its characteristics, but in the Facebook live Q&A he states that he learned the Moldavian dialect in childhood. Table 6 illustrates a few of the more prevalent dialectal characteristics used by the administrator, but especially by the commentators, on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page.

Letopiseț	Standard Romanian
full palatalisation of the labial consonants, mostly [f]>[h], [p]>[k], [b]>[g]: „blid <i>hierbinte</i> ”; „calea de <i>hier</i> ”; „stuchite-ar mâțâli”; ³ „cocoana cari udă <i>copchilu</i> ”; „tare <i>ghine</i> le zâci”	non-palatalized labial consonants fierbinte, fier, (a) stupi, copil, bine
word-final [ə] > [i] „gâlceavî marii”; „di <i>buni ispravî</i> mâțuri”	word-final [ə] gâlceavă, bună, ispravă
[e] in middle and final position > [i] „piste Apa cea Mare”; „vai di obrazu țearci”	[e] peste, de
[t̪] > [ʃ]; [d̪ʒ] > [ʒ]; [ʒ] > [d̪ʒ]; [t] > [t̪] „nu-s Bată-l <i>Crușea</i> , îs om ca matali”; „minte <i>ajeră</i> ”; „balci eftin din acela <i>dgiucat</i> de atigani”; „ <i>giudetul</i> a dat liber a se pufai iarba dracului”; „in <i>fruncea</i> dregătoriei”	[t̪ʃ]; [d̪ʒ]; [ʒ]; [t] crucea, ageră, jucat, județul, fruntea
dialectal words <i>cuhnie</i> ; <i>festi</i> ; <i>șuguială</i>	bucătărie, (a) vopsi, glumă.

Table 6.

Enregistering “old Romanian” through quotes and pseudo-quotes

The third way in which old Romanian is enregistered on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page is through quotes and pseudo-quotes from old Romanian texts. The administrator sometimes extensively quotes his “predecessors” – the Romanian chroniclers writing in the 17th century, such as Grigore

³ Here and below in the table, we kept the spelling used by the commentators.

Ureche and Ion Neculce, thus positioning himself as a chronicler⁴. More often, however, he resorts to shorter famous quotes and quips, generally known to educated speakers of Romanian, or to “deliberate twists or extensions” (Minugh 1999: 294) of such famous quotes. Thus, one can find quotes and pseudo-quotes from the oldest text in Romanian (*Scrisoarea lui Neacșu*, a letter from 1521), from old religious texts and chronicles, traditional pieces of oral literature, but also from literary texts written in the 19th century (by canonical Romanian writers such as Mihai Eminescu, Vasile Alecsandri, Ion Creangă, Costache Negruzzi, etc.). This type of intertextuality is also widespread among the commenters, and the temporal range of quotes and pseudo-quotes suggests that their purpose is to typify “old Romanian” and help to enregister this variety.

Conclusions and discussion. Why use “old Romanian” online?

Our analysis has shown that archaicity and “old Romanian” are indexed in three complementary ways on the “Letopiseț” Facebook page: through a set of linguistic features from older periods of development of Romanian, through using various dialectal features (mainly Moldavian) thought of as old, and through various quotes and pseudo-quotes which are considered typical of old Romanian. As the particular forms, structures and features discussed above (and other similar ones) are used and then reappear and persist, they become enregistered, i.e. they indicate a recognizable register, that of “old Romanian”. In our opinion, using this imagined variety online fulfils several functions that are brought to light in some of the administrator’s and commenters’ posts, but also in metacommentaries the administrator made on several occasions.

Probably the primary function of using “old Romanian” online is simply that of entertaining readers. In the Facebook live Q&A, the administrator admits that he started the Facebook page as a joke (similar to Bryant’s confessions about his blog). However, some of the first posts became viral very quickly, so he took his job as a chronicler more seriously because he did not want to disappoint his readers. The humour and playfulness go hand in hand with the intellectual pleasure of finding an old form or of creating new words, and they select an elitist audience ready to engage in various interactions.

In an interview given as his persona, the chronicler states that the language he uses is the appropriate one for the events he describes (Istodor

⁴ In September 2021, he even tried to edit the Wikipedia page dedicated to the Romanian chronicles, but he was not allowed to add his Facebook page to the list of chronicles.

2018). In other words, a second function of old Romanian is to index a particular type of society or events closer to medieval times than contemporary times. Paul Kingsnorth similarly justifies his choice of writing his novel in the “pseudo-language” he invented:

“I simply don’t get on with historical novels written in contemporary language. The way we speak is specific to our time and place. Our assumptions, our politics, our worldview, our attitudes – all are implicit in our words, and what we do with them. To put 21st-century sentences into the mouths of eleventh century characters would be the equivalent of giving them iPads and cappuccinos: just wrong.” (Kingsnorth 2014: 355)

However, some commenters have noticed that using “old Romanian” can also signify distance from the events; when described in this imagined variety, the events seem less unpleasant. This is also confirmed by the fact that in the case of an extremely grim event that shook Romania in 2019 (the kidnapping and murder of Alexandra Măceșanu, a 15-year-old girl), the disguise of the chronicler fell, and he wrote a post about the event in standard Romanian.

Lastly, old Romanian has the function of a secret language, which brings to mind Silviu Angelescu’s *Calpuzanii*, written in “old Romanian” particularly to mislead communist censors. Numerous posts and comments make it clear that the administrator of the “Letopiseț” Facebook page has conservative, often right-wing convictions, which are usually easily sanctioned by Facebook. However, as the administrator admits, the technology that detects posts violating the community standards cannot understand posts written in old Romanian, whether it is authentic or imagined.

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