

Making sense of the Romanian verbal system: a ‘LEGO[©] pieces’ approach

*“Regardless of how incisive an analysis might be, or how clever,
it can never be any better than the data it is based upon.”*
(Davies 2009: 18)

Before building any theoretical analysis, one needs to have a clear picture of the empirical facts. Since I am concerned with verbal morpho-syntax in Romanian, ‘the facts’ mean how many verbal paradigms the language has, how they are formed, and how the various components of the verbal structure interact with other elements. The aim of this talk is mainly methodological: I present problems of the previous descriptions, propose an alternative, and explain the advantages of my approach.

The traditional taxonomy (Pană-Dindelegan 2013, a.o.) lacks consistency. On the one hand, based on meaning, it groups *several* distinct structures under one label (‘the future indicative’ in (1a) to (1d) on the next page), while giving different labels to the *same* structure when in different contexts ((3a) and (3b)). On the other hand, based on morphology, it ignores patterns of distribution ((1e), if inserted in (2), is not another variant of ‘the future indicative’, but ‘a future value of the present indicative’). This unpredictability severely undermines the utility of such a classification, making it unworkable for any analysis that sets out to discover systematic form-meaning correlations.

Consequently, I put aside grammar-book labels and instead suggest a purely formal taxonomy, based on discrete components and their combinations. If language is an abstract system, then the elements of structure are like LEGO[©] pieces: building blocks that combine in several ways (and in a certain order) based on their shape and size. This view is not new, but follows a very basic Structuralist ethos (*cf.* Guțu-Romalo 1962, 1968).

The first step is identifying the pieces: the lexical verb in a finite or non-finite form, auxiliaries, and particles (which I list in Table 1). Second is putting the pieces together, detecting combinations, and giving them a neutral label (S1, S2, S3... for synthetic, A1, A2, A3... for analytic structures); I decided to include all the *possible* combinations (*i.e.*, attested and/or computable by speakers, regardless of whether grammars recognize them or not, *cf.* Zafiu 2002). Finally, by arranging the structures (as in Table 2), several questions become apparent: why are certain combinations possible and others not? what causes the gaps in the system? what does it all *mean*?

In the end, the answers will, of course, be theoretical—yet without such a re-organization of the facts, we were not even aware that there were answers to be found. By forgetting what we think we know and looking at old data with new eyes, patterns and challenges emerge. A more abstract perspective sets the ground for any analysis: for me, it enables establishing a correct cartography (Cinque 1999), further decompositions, and abstract features, exponents, and linearization patterns (*cf.* Svenonius 2012, Ramchand 2014)—but such a ‘LEGO[©] pieces’ view can equally be used by any linguist, irrespective of their framework of choice.

- (1) a. *voi merge* c. *am să merg* e. *merg*
WANT_{1a}-1ST.SG go-V_{INF} HAVE₁-1ST.SG SĂ go-V_{FIN}.1ST.SG go-V_{FIN}.1ST.SG
- b. *oi merge* d. *o să merg*
WANT_{1b}-1ST.SG go-V_{INF} O SĂ go-V_{FIN}.1ST.SG
- (2) *Măine dimineață _____ la bibliotecă.* (insert any of the structures above)
tomorrow morning to library
‘Tomorrow morning, I will go to the library.’
- (3) a. *Dacă aș fi avut timp, aș fi mers și eu la seminar.*
if WANT₂-1ST.sg FI have-V_{PART} time WANT₂-1ST.SG FI go-V_{PART} and I to seminar
‘If I had more time, I, too, would have gone to the seminar.’ (‘conditional mood’)
- b. *Colega mea pretinde că aș fi mers și eu la seminar.*
colleague-the mine claim-V_{FIN}.3rd.sg that WANT₂-1ST.SG FI go-V_{PART} and I to seminar
‘My colleague claims that I, too, went to the seminar.’ (‘presumptive mood’)

	WANT _{1a}	WANT _{1b}	WANT ₂	HAVE ₁	HAVE ₂	HAVE ₃	FI	O	SĂ
1 ST .SG	<i>voi</i>	<i>oi</i>	<i>aș</i>	<i>am</i>	<i>aveam</i>	<i>am</i>	invariant	invariant	invariant
2 ND .SG	<i>vei</i>	<i>ăi/ei/îi/oi</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>aveai</i>	<i>ai</i>			
3 RD .SG	<i>va</i>	<i>o / a</i>	<i>ar</i>	<i>are</i>	<i>avea</i>	<i>a</i>			
1 ST .PL	<i>vom</i>	<i>om</i>	<i>am</i>	<i>avem</i>	<i>aveam</i>	<i>am</i>			
2 ND .PL	<i>veți</i>	<i>ăți/eți/îți/oți</i>	<i>ați</i>	<i>aveți</i>	<i>aveați</i>	<i>ați</i>			
3 RD .PL	<i>vor</i>	<i>or</i>	<i>ar</i>	<i>au</i>	<i>aveau</i>	<i>au</i>			

Table 1: The auxiliary verbs and verbal particles of Romanian.

	+ V _{FIN}	+ V _{INF}	+ FI + V _{GER}	+ FI + V _{PART}	+ V _{PART}
WANT _{1a/b} +	—	A5a/b	A7a/b	A10a/b	—
WANT ₂ +	—	A6	A8	A11	—
SĂ +	A1	—	A9	A12	—
O + SĂ +	A2	—	—	A13	—
HAVE ₁ + SĂ +	A3	—	—	A14	—
HAVE ₂ + SĂ +	A4	—	—	A15	—
HAVE ₃ +	—	—	—	—	A16

Table 2: Analytic structures in Romanian: combinations of auxiliaries, particles, and forms of the lexical verb.

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