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## THE PHONETIC OR THE ETYMOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE IN ROMANIAN ORTHOGRAPHY?

### SUMMARY

*In their pursuit to create the Romanian literary language and bring Romanian orthography closer to that of Latin, genuine philologists and noted connoisseurs of the history of the Romanian language, representatives of the cultural movement known under the name of Școala Ardeleană (The Transylvanian School), tried to elaborate a system of spelling based on the etymological principle. The use of the Latin alphabet in writing was regarded as an imperious necessity to support the idea of the Latin origin of the Romanian language and of the Roman origin of the Romanian people – ideas which animated the scholars of the Transylvanian School. The Cyrillic alphabet had been in use for four hundred years. Not only did this make Romanian spelling difficult, but it also inadequately represented many of the sounds of the Romanian phonemic system and the Latin structure of the language. The efforts of the Transylvanian representatives of the Enlightenment met the approval of all men of letters; nevertheless, as the etymological principle in writing would have required good knowledge of Latin, the phonetic principle prevailed after a series of debates that lasted more than two centuries.*

*After 1989, when the political regime changed in Romania, the Romanian Academy decided to revert the Romanian spelling regarding the use of *î/â* /*î* and the present tense forms of the verb 'to be' to some former rules, cause of further debates which, in some respects, still continue.*

*This paper reviews the development of the Romanian system of writing and the pros and cons of the latest changes in spelling.*

**Key words:** *pronunciation, phonetic principle, etymological principle, the Romanian language*

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## REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROMANIAN WRITING SYSTEM

Despite its millenary existence as the language of an entire nation that was unfortunately divided into several provinces, for centuries the use of Romanian was limited to oral communication, and its Latin character was often contested. In the course of time the inhabitants of the three Romanian principalities (Walachia, Transylvania, and Moldavia) had to use Greek, Cyrillic, and finally, Latin characters when writing, and if one considers the vicissitudes the Romanian language spoken in Transylvania had to face until 1918, one might be surprised to find this language unitary and unaltered in structure. But it is this very unitary language that preserved the unity of the nation.

During the eighteenth century it had become a matter of political significance to prove the Latin character and origin of the Romanian language and people, and those who brought linguistic and historical arguments into the discussion were the representatives of the cultural movement known as *Școala Ardeleană* (the *Transylvanian School*). This group stressed the necessity of introducing the Latin alphabet in writing as a tool that might serve their purpose, considering the Cyrillic alphabet, which had been in use for four hundred years, to be inadequate for representing all the sounds of the Romanian phonemic system and the Latin structure of the language. The Transylvanian scholars considered writing Romanian with Latin characters to be another opportunity to prove the Latinity of the Romanian language and people. "This is how the etymological principle came to life and continued to be in use, more or less, until 1953, when the new orthographic rules officially favoured the phonetic principle". (Nicolescu, 1971:101)

The complicated system of writing Romanian with Cyrillic letters imposed the necessity of simplifying this alphabet, which was unable to render some of the sounds characteristic of Romanian.

Deacon Coresi, who laid the foundation of the Romanian literary language at the end of the sixteenth century; Dimitrie Eustatievici-Brașoveanul, who set the rules of writing Romanian with the Cyrillic alphabet in his *Gramatica rumânească* (1757); Samuil Micu, whose *Carte de rugăciuni* (1779), written with Latin characters, set the first spelling rules for the Romanian language written with the Latin alphabet; Petru Maior; and Gheorghe Șincai are only a few of the intellectuals who dedicated their efforts to the standardization of the Romanian language and spelling.

The proponents of *Școala Ardeleană* elaborated an orthographic system which promoted the etymological principle in writing, devised to "provide, as much as possible, a Latin attire to the Romanian language" (Munteanu and Țăra, 1978:102). Largely explained by Samuil Micu and Gheorghe Șincai in *Elementa linguae dacoromane sive valachicae* (1780), the first printed grammar of the Romanian language, the orthographic system set forth the following rules:

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- **a** /a/ is spelt **á** (*cáp, nás* / today's form *cap, nas*) and **aa** (*cápraa* / today's form *capra*);
- **ă** /ə/ is spelt **a** or **e** (*caldáre, septamana* / today's form *căldare, săptămână*);
- **î** /i/ is spelt: 1. **i**, in initial position and followed by **-mb**, **-mp**, **-n** (*imperat* / today's form *împărat*); 2. **e** or **a** when situated both inside the word and in nasal position: (*fen, camp, pane* / today's forms *fân, câmp, pâine*); 3. **â** in other cases (*târg* / today's form *târg*);
- **e** /e/ is spelt **ë** when it is in nasal position (*vënen* / today's form *venin*);
- **i** /i/ is spelt **e** when followed by **-nt** or **-n** (*cuvente, dente* / today's forms *cuvinte, dinte*);
- **u** /u/ is spelt: **o** when it is followed by **-mb**, **-mp**, **-n** (*bombac, monte, compar* / today's forms *bumbac, munte, cumpăr*), or in words of Latin origin when it is not stressed (*rogacione* / today's form *rugăciune*);
- the diphthong **oa** /õa/ is spelt **o**: (*porta* / today's form *poartă*);
- the diphthongs **ea** /ëa/, **ia** /ĩa/ are spelt **e** (*ferestra, epa* / today's forms *fereastră, iapă*);
- **č** /tʃ/ and **ǵ** /dʒ/ are spelt **c** and **g** when followed by **e**, **i** (*cruce, cine, fugit*);
- **c** /k/ (+ **a**, **o**, **u**, **î**, **ă**) is put down as **qv** (*qvále, qvand* / today's form *cale, când*);
- **ĩ** is rendered by **li**, when followed or preceded by a vowel: (*muliere, filiu* / today's forms *muiere, fiu*);
- **l** /l/, **n** /n/, **r** /r/ and **s** /s/ are sometimes doubled (*valle, ann, folositoare* / today's forms *vale, an, folositor*);
- **ș** /ʃ/ is rendered by **s** (+ **i**) (*si, rusine* / today's forms *și, rușine*);
- **ț** /ts/ is spelt according to the Latin sound it originates in: **ç** (*façie* / today's form *față*) or **ti** (*tie* / today's form *ție*);
- **z** /z/ is spelt **d** (+ **i**) (*dice, dieu* / today's forms *zice, zeu*);
- **pt** is rendered by **ct** (*lacte* / today's form *lapte*);
- **mn** is rendered by **gn** (*pugn* / today's form *pumn*);
- **șt** /ʃt/ (+ **e**, **i**) is written as **sc** or **st** (+ **i**) as in (*creștere, esti* / today's forms *creștere, ești*).

Some letters without phonetic value are also used: **u** in intervocalic position (*boui* / today's form *boi*) and **h** in initial position (*hom* / today's form *om*).

One would have needed a good knowledge of Latin to use this complicated system, so the Transylvanian scholars made some concessions to the phonetic principle: **â**, **ê**, **î** are used to render the vowel **î** /i/; the diphthongs **oa**, **ia** are written as such; **ĩ** followed or preceded by a vowel is written **i** (*muiere, fiu*); **i** and **u** in nasal position are spelt according to the pronunciation (*minte, bun*); **pt**, **mn**, **z** are preserved unchanged (*lapte, pumn, orez*); the use of the symbol /ʃ/ (+ **i**) is suggested in order to render the consonant **ș**; the palatal stops **ǵ** and **č** are spelt as nowadays **ghi**, **ghe**, **chi**, **che**; **u** in intervocalic position; and **h** in initial position is left out. Petru Maior, in *Ortographia romana sive latino-valachica*

*una cum clavi* (1819) also makes some concessions to the phonetic principle: he uses the symbols *ş* /ʃ/ and *ţ* /ts/ preserved in today's spelling.

Several texts written in Latin characters had created a precedent for the endeavour the Transylvanian men of letters decided to make, yet it was not a simple process at all to replace Cyrillic letters with the Latin alphabet, which had only been used sporadically. To illustrate the difficulty of this exploit it is necessary to say that, despite the fact the implementation was intended to take place in 1779, it was not until 1860/1862 that it was achieved. The implementation of the Latin alphabet generated some problems: some of the Latin letters did not correspond to any phonemes in the Romanian system (i.e., the letters *q*, *k*, and *y*); on the other hand, there were several Romanian sounds that had no letters to adequately represent them (*a*, *ă*, *î*, *ş*, *ţ*).

In Walachia the first supporter of the new way of writing was Iancu Văcărescu, who, using Latin characters, wrote a grammar book which unfortunately has not been preserved.

Ion Heliade Rădulescu, the foremost champion of Romanian culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, advocated in the *Preface* to his *Gramatică românească (Romanian Grammar)* (1828) the idea of a unitary Romanian language, based on the simplification of the Cyrillic alphabet and the elaboration of a joint one. Following the principle - *one sign for each sound* - I.H. Rădulescu proposed an alphabet consisting of 27 signs, which was kept in use until 1860, when the Latin alphabet was adopted in Walachia as the official writing Romanian writing system. Contrary to Rădulescu's proposal, the etymological principle prevailed, and many years passed before the etymological principle was phased out and the phonemic principle was applied in writing.

In 1856 the Ephoralty of Public Education in Bucharest appointed a committee to reform spelling and establish Latin characters for all Cyrillic letters; in Moldavia, a similar committee carried out the same mission a few years later. As the spelling rules established by the two committees followed the etymological principle, writing was still difficult and complicated, requiring good knowledge of Latin:

- there were six recommended ways of spelling the vowel *ă* /ə/: 1. *ă* - when it originated in unstressed *a* (*căra*); 2. *a* with a circumflex accent - *â* (*cumpără*); 3. *ě* (*mergătoru*); 4. *e* with a circumflex accent - *ê* (*adevăru*); 5. *õ* in an unstressed syllable (*dupõ*); 6. *o* with a circumflex accent - *ô* (*fôră*);
- depending on the Latin letter from which the vowel *î* /i/ derived, it was rendered by: 1. *â* (*plâng* < Lat. *plango*); 2. *ê* (*jurământ* < Lat. *iuramentum*); 3. *î* (*ripa* < Lat. *ripa*); in Moldavia there was one more sign used to mark *î*, namely *û*: (*mûndru*);
- *é* and *ó* were used to represent the diphthongs *ea* and *oa* (*négră*, *fromósă*);
- *ţ* /ts/ could be spelt in three possible ways: 1. *ţ* (*dinţi*, *cărţi*); 2. *ç* (*aça*, *faça* < Lat. *acia*, *facia*); 3. *tz* (*iutzeală*); in Moldavia *ţ* was spelt *ti*, with an accent on the *i* when it was stressed (*tié* / nowadays *fié*) and with a short *i* when unstressed (*cruntî* / nowadays *crunţi*);

- *ș* /ʃ/ was spelt *și* in Moldavia, with an accent on the *i* if it was stressed (*și* / nowadays *și*) and with a short *i* if it was unstressed (*alesi* / nowadays *aleși*);
- *d* with a cedilla and *z* were used to spell *z*; in Moldavia *z* was spelt *dî*, with an accent on the *i* when it was stressed (*dî* / nowadays *zi*) and with a short *i* when it was unstressed (*fragedî*/nowadays *fragezi*);
- the palatal stop *ķ* was spelt *k* (*keltuială*, *kirie*), but *ġ* was written *ghe*, *ghi* – this spelling has been preserved until the present time;
- *c* /k/ was used to represent the corresponding velar of Latin origin (*corbu* < Lat. *corvus*), but *qu* denoted *c* /k/ when it originated in *qu* (*quare* / nowadays *care* < *quale*, *quând* / nowadays *când* < *quando*).
- the fricative *č* /ʃ/ is spelt *ce* when it derives from its Latin correspondent (*cruce* < *crucem*), but when it derived from Latin *qua* or *qui* it was spelt *que*, *qui* (*quere* / nowadays *cere* < *quaerere*, *quinqi* / nowadays *cinci* < *quinque*).

The following two years brought some changes in the spelling rules in Walachia: *ç* and *tz* were eliminated and only *ț* /ts/ was kept in use to render the consonant; *c* /k/ was used to render the palatal stop *ķ*; and several new graphic symbols were introduced for use in the spelling of foreign names: *k*, *q*, *w*, *x*, *y*.

A year after Walachia and Moldavia were united, Ion Ghica, the Minister of Internal Affairs, issued an order grounded on the work of the above-mentioned committees, by which the use of the Latin alphabet in public administration became mandatory. The following simplifications were decided: the six ways of rendering the vowel *ă* /ə/, are reduced to the letter still in use at present; the vowel *î* /i/ will be spelt as such, all the other signs eliminated. The spelling of *ț* /ts/ and *z* will be achieved by these graphic symbols as well as, respectively, by *tz* and *d* with cedilla. The order introduces the use of *șt* (*așterne*) but *sce*, *sci* are maintained in writing in those Romanian words where *șt* derives from the Latin *sc* (+ *e*, *i*). This system of writing was still complicated, and debates continued, so the intervention of Titu Maiorescu was beneficial and generally accepted by all men of letters of the time. In *Despre scrierea limbii române* (*About Romanian Spelling*, 1866) Maiorescu supported, with linguistic arguments, the necessity of adopting the phonetic principle. Consequently:

He rejected the idea of using all the Latin characters; according to the Maiorescu, only 14 letters could be adopted from the Latin alphabet as such: *a*, *o*, *u*, *b*, *d*, *g*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *r*, *s*, *v*, *z*. On the basis of his solid knowledge of Latin, for the remaining 13 sounds Maiorescu laid down their spelling and Latin pronunciation: the letters *e*, *i*, *j* /ʒ/, *f*, *c* /k/ (and *ch* before *e* and *i*), *h*, *g* /g/ (and *gh* before *e* and *i*) were to render the corresponding Latin sounds;

- Diacritics were to be used for those letters that fulfil grammatical functions: the vowel *â* (considered as an inflectional derivative of *a*: *parte-pârți*, but spelt *ĕ* when derived from Latin *e pēcat*<*peccatum*; *â* also signifies the difference between (1) the third person singular present indicative and the third person singular imperfect: *cântă-cânta*; (2) articulated versus non-articulated forms of feminine nouns belonging to the first declension: *casa-casă*; (3) singular/plural forms in some feminine nouns belonging to the third

declension: *carte-cărți*; **ș** (the inflectional derivative of *s* marks number: *pas-pași*, as well as the first and second person singular: *las-lași*); **ț** (the inflectional derivative of *t* marks the number of nouns, *frate-frați*, as well as person, *pot-poți*); as to the sound **î(â)**, initially rejected on the grounds that it doesn't fulfil any grammatical function, Maiorescu changed his point of view and accepted the use of this letter, as it was deep-rooted in general use;

- **ște, ști** were introduced instead of **sce, sci**: *cunoaște, ști*;
- the diphthongs **ea, oa** were rendered as such;
- **u** in final position was eliminated;
- **s** in intervocalic position in neologisms was used: *poesie, filosofie*.

Spelling was far from being simple, so that most prominent scholars became active in the battle for a system of writing with Latin characters based on the phonemic principle that "...asks for perfect harmony between writing and pronunciation." (*apud*. Macrea, 1982:152). This legitimate protest voiced by specialists determined the spelling reform of 1904, which stated:

the diphthongs **ea, oa** will be written as such; **sce, sci, d** with cedilla will be replaced by **ște, ști, z** (*cunoaște, București, zece*); **s** in intervocalic position in neologisms will be replaced with **z**: (*poezie, filozofie, ocazie*); the elimination of final **u** in all cases, except for those in which it differentiates between singular and plural: *ochiu-ochi, unchiu-unchi*; two graphic signs are kept in use to represent **î**: 1. **î** at the beginning and the end of words, and inside derivatives when it is the last letter of the former element or the first of the latter: *împărat, hotărî, horărire, reînoire*; 2. **â** (**a** with circumflex accent) in: *român, cânta* < Lat. *romanus, cantare*; double **s** was maintained in *cassă, massă, rassă*; parallel forms of the type *mănușă-mănușe, țapăn-țepăn, galben-galbin* are kept in use.

During the following years orthography became the philologists' first concern and the main topic of their congresses. Their pressure imposed upon the Romanian Academy determined the reform of 1932, which brought further changes:

- **î** was to be used at the beginning of a word, in compound words, in verbs ending in **-rî** and in their derivatives: *înger, neînsemnat, preînalt, urî*. In all other cases **â** was to be used in order to render the phoneme **î**: *vânt, sfânt, român* and its derivatives;
- **s** instead of **z** was to be spelt in some neologisms - *folosofie*, but in others - *poezie* **z** would be used;
- final **u** was maintained in some nouns as a marker of the singular form of nouns: *ochiu, unchiu, obiceiu*;
- the following forms of the verb *to be*: first person singular and plural - *sunt* and *sunte*, respectively; second person plural *sunteți*; and third person plural *sunt* instead of *sînt, sîntem, sînteți, sînt*.
- The year 1953 and the new social order brought about new rules, which were published in the *Small Dictionary of Orthography*:
- the **î/â** contrast was eliminated even for the word *român* and its derivatives, so the correct forms became: *Romînia, romîn, romînește, aromîn, istroromîn* etc.;

- final **u** in nouns were dropped: *unchiu, ochiu* > *unchi, ochi*;
- the use of the hyphen (*m-am dus*) was introduced instead of the apostrophe;
- compounds with the prefix **des-** in which **s** before a voiced consonant is always pronounced **z**, was spelt accordingly: *dezbate, dezvolta, dezlega*;
- double **s** in: *cassă, massă, rassă* was eliminated irrespective of the resultant homonymy;
- the names days, months, points of the compass, nations (when either nouns or adjectives), were no longer capitalized: *român, luni, mai, sud*.

The forms of the verb *to be*, for the persons mentioned, were determined according to a phonetic basis, with the idea that most people pronounced them as follows: *sînt, sîntem, sînteți, sînt*. It was asserted that the forms *sunt, suntem, sunteți, sunt* were characteristic of cultivated Latin, which had never been spoken on the territory of Dacia, for it was colloquial Latin formed the basis of Romanian.

Loanwords naturalized in Romanian were spelt according to their actual pronunciation: *interviu, fotbal, hol*, unlike new loanwords (e.g., *cow-boy, watt*), which were to be spelt as in the language in which they originated.

## THE PRESENT DEBATE CONCERNING SPELLING

During the communist era, in 1965, the Romanian Academy stated that only the name of the country and the lexical family of the word *român* must be written, as an exception, with **â**. In 1993, after the 1989 Revolution, the members of the Romanian Academy decided to revert the Romanian spelling regarding **î/â** /**i/** and the present tense forms of the verb *to be* to the rules of 1932. The declared purpose of the Academy's decision was that of restoring the image of the Romanian words of Latin origin. This decision was hailed by men of letters, journalists, politicians, and ordinary people who felt and thought along the lines of Alexandru Ștefănescu, who declared: "I write with **â** because in Romania there is a decree that asks me to do so. Besides, the Academy's rule is good... If it hadn't been passed now, I would have militated in favour of it... I have one more reason to use **â** in spelling: because this is the way in which I reject daily an orthographic rule abusively imposed by Stalinism... I write with **â** because this is the way all our classic writers, who taught me Romanian, used to write, before the communist era." (Ștefănescu, 2002:6)

On the other hand, the Academy's decision met the disapproval of both a part of the civil society and of numerous linguists who spoke against this decision, arguing that in Romanian the sound **î** originates not only with the Latin *a* but also with the Latin *e, i, o*, and *u*, not to mention its origins in other languages: French in *a frâna* < *freiner*, Slavic in *drâmbă* < *drymba*, *rând* < *red*, Turkish in *geamlâc* < *camlic*, Greek in *lăimâie* < *limioni*, Hungarian in *gând* < *gond*, and so on.

Further arguments were used to support the use of **î** instead of **â**, namely the vowel alteration *i-î* (*vinde-vînd*) or *i-î* (*cuvînt-cuvinte; sfînt-sfînți*), which

shows that *î* is related to *i* and not to *a*, "and spelling with *î* preserves the awareness of the relation between the letter and the basic morpheme and thus, the awareness of semantic unity: *tînăr-tineri-tinerețe-a întineri*; (*a*) *vinde-vînzare-vînzător*; *sfînt-sfinți-sfințenie-a sfinți-a consfinți*. (Irimia, 1997:12)

Advocating spelling with *î* in all cases except for the country's name and the derivatives of the word *român*, the Romanian linguist Alexandru Graur wrote: "This vowel has been the cause of endless discussions, although from the point of view of pronunciation the solution is very simple". (Graur, 1995:17)

Mioara Avram, an authority in the field, expressed with great competence her disagreement towards the latest changes in Romanian spelling, mainly concerning the issue of using *î* or *â*. According to her scholarly arguments, the rule of writing *î* or *â* is only partly justified by the etymology of the words.

Professor Dumitru Irimia, Ph.D., of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași, author of several scholarly works, asserts, in his *Gramatica limbii române* (1997), that the Academy's decision created confusion because the changes are not scientifically justified.

Professor George Pruteanu, Ph.D., also considers that "...the Academy made a scientific error, generated by anti-communist sentimentalism... ; with the restoration of the use of *â*, Romanian orthography becomes more difficult..." (Pruteanu, 2002: 23)

The new orthographic rules were adopted by all educational establishments and by numerous publishing houses, while others still resort to the old way of writing, the newest changes in spelling being considered as unnatural and complicated.

The President of the Romanian Academy expressed his point of view, considering that the issue of Romanian orthography had become a subject of public debate that had moved into the field of politics, and issued an appeal for a unitary orthographic system, namely the one that imposes the use of *â* in the already mentioned cases, as well as the use of *sunt*, *suntem*, *sunteți*.

The renowned literary critic Nicolae Manolescu replied in the journal *Romania literară* (2002) asserting that "the wisest thing for us to do is to take advantage of the relative simplicity of an orthography based on the phonetic principle". (Manolescu, 2002:2)

As to our point of view, we respect and subscribe to the judgements and scientific arguments of most Romanian and foreign linguists, whose opinions were very rarely asked by the Academy, and, in the very few cases when they were asked, they were equally and ultimately disregarded. We support the idea of having an orthographic system based on the phonological principle not only because it is somehow simpler and unproblematic, but because this is an unnatural path that spelling must follow from a simple and very accessible stage to a complicated one. We declare that we are in favour of those Romanian linguists who make use of scientific arguments, without political passion, which has already brought enough wrongs to Romania, but, at the same time I agree with all

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my being with those who make use of feelings of patriotism. Reverting to the use of both *î* and *ă* is not such a great effort when you must always remember and remind the others where you come from.

Of course, we obey the orthographical rules established by the Romanian Academy and put them in practice in the act of teaching; and this does not in any way mean disrespect towards scientific arguments.

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## FONETSKO ILI ETIMOLOGIJSKO NAČELO U RUMUNJSKOM PISMU?

### SAŽETAK

*U svom nastojanju da stvore rumunjski književni jezik i približe rumunjski pravopis latinskom, istinski su filolozi i priznati poznavatelji povijesti rumunjskog jezika pokušali razviti sustav pisanja temeljen na etimologijskom načelu. Oni su bili predstavnici kulturnoga pokreta poznatog pod nazivom Școala Ardeleană (Transilvanijska škola). Uporaba latinskoga pisma smatrala se neophodnom za dokazivanje latinskoga porijekla rumunjskog jezika te rimskoga porijekla rumunjskog naroda. Te su ideje pokretale učenjake Transilvanijske škole. Ćirilicno pismo upotrebljavalo se stotinama godina. Ova činjenica nije samo otežavala rumunjsko pisanje, već je dovela do neadekvatnog bilježenja mnogih glasnika rumunjskoga fonetskog sustava te latinske jezične strukture. Nastojanja predstavnika Transilvanijske škole tijekom prosvjetiteljstva podržali su mnogi umjetnici i učenjaci. Budući da je etimologijsko načelo pisanja pretpostavljalo dobro poznavanje latinskoga, fonetsko načelo prevladalo je u raspravama koje su trajale duže od dva stoljeća.*

*Nakon 1989., promjenom političkog sustava u Rumunjskoj, Rumunjska akademija odlučila je vratiti stara pravila o pisanju *î/â /#* te pravila o oblicima prezenta glagola "biti". To je uzrokovalo daljnje rasprave, koje se do određene mjere i danas vode.*

*Ovaj rad daje pregled razvoja rumunjskoga sustava pisanja, te navodi razloge za i protiv zadnjih promjena u pismu.*

**Ključne riječi:** *izgovor, fonetsko načelo, etimologijsko načelo, rumunjski jezik*

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