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English Graffiti on Romanian Walls

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The massive influence of English upon Romanian is easily noticeable in the mass media, in the use of English words for shop names or company names, and, more recently, in the frequent use of English as the language of graffiti.

The paper makes a brief presentation of a small corpus of traditional graffiti in English, found on Timișoara walls in the academic year 2001/2002.

The influence of English on the Romanian language started more than a century ago, in spite of only occasional direct contacts between the English and the Romanian speaking communities; initially the borrowing took place mainly through other languages (especially French, but also German). The phenomenon continued after the Second World War, with more direct borrowing, and literally “exploded” after the political changes of 1989, when the country opened to the West. It was analyzed from different points of view in quite a number of studies of varying length (see Górlach 2002), and was registered in several Romanian dictionaries (Ionescu 1972, DEX 1975, Marcu, Maneca 1978, DEX supplement 1988, Dimitrescu 1982, 1997), as well as in the more recent dictionary edited by Manfred Górlach (2001).

This influence takes various forms nowadays: one can find words of English origin, in greater or smaller numbers, in absolutely all Romanian newspapers and journals, and one can hear words of English origin mingled in Romanian sentences on any TV channel; English words are frequently employed as shop names, and more recently, English also seems to be the preferred language of Romanian graffiti.

The word *graffito* has undergone a semantic shift, registered by dictionaries. While *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (fourth edition, 1956) defines it as “drawing or writing scratched on wall etc., esp. on ancient wall as at Pompeii”, *Chambers*



Twentieth Century Dictionary (1978) distinguishes between the singular *graffito*, “a mural scribbling or drawing, as by schoolboys and idlers at Pompeii, Rome, and other ancient cities”, and its plural, *graffiti*, “scribblings or drawings, often indecent, found on public buildings, in lavatories, etc.” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (fifth edition, 1995) and *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2002) manifest a change of attitude and register only the plural, explaining it as “drawings or writing on a wall, etc. in a public place. They are usually rude, humorous or political” (the former) and as “words or pictures drawn on walls in public places” (the latter).

These definitions reflect in fact the evolution of graffiti themselves: if in the beginning they may have been simply names or obscenities scrawled on walls, nowadays they have become more diversified and more sophisticated. There has been a great amount of research done in the field, and a wide array of approaches has been applied: cultural, gendered, linguistic, folkloric, quantitative, etc. A taxonomy of graffiti forms has been worked out. Researchers often distinguish between traditional graffiti, usually handwritten (slogans, political statements, four letter words, etc.), “tags” (the writing of one’s name or nickname, meant to indicate the writer’s presence in a certain place), both, as a rule, with no artistic appeal, and graffiti art, which makes use of spray paint to produce an artwork (“spraycan art”).

What makes current graffiti in Romania (or at least in my part of the country) special is, as already suggested, that the majority (i.e. those which are legible) are written in English, which to me is a significant linguistic event. They are mostly of the traditional kind, while spraycan art is just beginning to emerge (one can see it occasionally on tram cars or in underground passages/ underpasses).

In the following pages, I shall pay attention to the former and comment briefly on the traditional graffiti from a rather small corpus, gathered in the fall and spring of the academic year 2001/2002 in the town where I live and work (Timișoara). A precise classification of these graffiti has been rather difficult to establish, on the one hand because of their wide variety, and on the other because graffitists remain unknown: I have not met any who should explain to me what the reference of many of the used words/ texts is.

The simplest graffiti are represented by English names, written plainly, in block letters or in thick letters, whose size varies: e.g., *Mary, Ann, Roy & LJO*; most of them cannot be treated as tags, as they are obviously not the names of the writer(s). *Blade* also appears - the name (found on the internet, I assume) of a famous graffiti writer in the U.S., in the 70’s. One’s presence in a certain area is sometimes marked by sentences like *C was here* (where C appears in a circle) or *Napoleon was here*, to which some known or unknown person added (the humorous) *No, I wasn’t*.

English names of music groups or rock bands abound; I have no idea whether they are Romanian or English groups or, sometimes, whether they are groups at all. Here are some examples: *Sex Pistols, Fear Factory, Coal Chamber, Black Leaf, Pungent Stench, Limp Bizkit* (which were identified as music groups by several high school students), *Entombed* (?), *Wing T* (?), *Shift 2001* (?), *Cypress Crew* (?), *Red Dot* (?). The name of a



famous rapper appears twice: *eminem 07 4 all my rap-ers, eminem 07 & Brother "Gun" Danny*.

Isolated English words can often be seen on walls. They are, in decreasing order of their frequency, nouns (*Punk, Love, Age, Peace, Bitch*), verbs (*Think, Sucks*), an adjective (*Cool*, which is a favourite and appears several times in different places), an adverb (*Forever*), and a word that could be either a noun or an adjective (*Criminal*)

Many of the graffiti are declarative, stating a point of view.

Some express dissatisfaction or protest. Close to a high school, I found the ungrammatical *The school sucks*; across from the regional court of law, one can read \square ! *Public Enemy No 1*, with the arrow pointing in the direction of the court of law; in a side alley, there is a statement about the writer's lack of regard or concern about things: *We still don't give a fuck*. In a central area, where sometimes young people gather in the evening to skateboard, probably annoying the passers-by or those who live in the neighbourhood with the noise they make, the following protest is visible on a nearby wall: *Skiboarding is not a crime*. In *Mafia sucks*, we do not know whether reference is made to the U.S. crew called "MAFIA", famous for its writing on walls, trains, yards, etc. in late 1977, to the organization engaged in criminal activities or to a Romanian music group (*Bug Mafia*).

Several graffiti give advice. One is the reverse of what adults usually advise their children to do: *before u think act*, followed by the drawing of a heart. *Drugs – don't do* touches upon one of the major post-1989 issues in Romania. Unfortunately, the need for drugs also finds its place on the walls, in a statement like *All you need is seed/feed* (it was difficult to decipher whether the first letter was an *s* or an *f*) *and weed*. *Respect all* is an appeal to people to show consideration and care to everybody.

There are graffiti that are purely informative, like *punk's not dead* (which might, however, be interpreted as a warning) or malicious and meant to harm: an example is *Dr. Dan – Killer*, written outside a surgery.

Quite common are classic political statements, like *Make peace not war, Greenpeace No Nukes*. Others are closer to home, like *People are not expendable, government is or System Fucked up*. Surprisingly and disquietingly for a multiethnic town like Timișoara, well-known for its great tolerance, one can also come across alarming statements like *Jews No more* or *White Power*; each is accompanied by the Nazi emblem (a swastika) and the latter is also followed by *Heil Victory*. It is true (to my relief) that the opposite attitude is present as well: *Nazis Stinx* and *Skins [swastika] No more* (the words of the latter are arranged on a vertical axis).

In my corpus, one graffiti only, which refers to the Supreme Being, the Creator, could be classified as religious: *God – Father*.

Two graffiti are written by persons who obviously had some introduction to history and Shakespeare in school: *U 2 Brutus* and *To be or not to be*.

As one can notice in the first example above, numbers and letters are exploited in graffiti because they are homophones of other words. Thus, *U* has an identical pronunciation with the pronoun *you*, number *2* is a homophone of the preposition *to* (its



strong form), and *4* is a homophone of the preposition *for* (again, in its strong form). They are used in *Net 4 U* (I was told this is a club in Timișoara), *4 ever UNITY* and *4 ever "U"* (where *U* may stand for the pronoun *you* or may be short for *Unity*).

A group apart, quite difficult to ignore, is formed of obscene or indecent graffiti, containing "unmentionable" words; in this case, the English words can be viewed as euphemisms, as substitutes for Romanian taboo words (whose number on the walls has suddenly decreased). *Fuck*, used as an interjection expressing extreme anger or annoyance, occurs repeatedly, either by itself, or in some context (which is no surprise, since in movies, especially the American ones, the word is heard *ad nauseam*): *Fuck, Fuck you, Fuck you, crazy people* are quite common. One may include in the same category *You get HIV trough the dick* (sic!), found on the walls of an institution in charge of public health. On the one hand this may be meant to be educational, as it offers useful information, but on the other it contains the taboo slang word that refers to the male sex organ. Some of the graffiti are outright pornographic: e.g., *Suck everybody. Excite me*.

It is difficult to give a reason as to why people write graffiti. I think that a great role in their development in Romania has been played by cyberspace: a great number of web sites appeared in the 1990's, where graffiti of all kinds, simple or elaborate, are posted, and to which anyone can have access. This would be a plausible explanation for the use of graffiti in English that refer to phenomena non-existent in Romania either before or after 1989, like *punks* or *skinheads*, or for statements like *West Coast For Life*, or *Live by the gun die by the gun*, etc. which are not connected in any way to the Romanian everyday life, or the directive *Log in*, which advises the reader to use the computer system.

It remains to be seen whether the use of English graffiti on Romanian walls will go on developing or not, whether it is just a prudent way of expressing oneself (criticizing, protesting, rejecting or agreeing, giving an opinion, etc. in a language that is not accessible to the majority of the population), or whether it is just a trendy occupation, which will pass away.

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APPENDIX 1: CORPUS

Proper Names

Mary C was here
 Ann Napoleon was here/ No, I wasn't.
 Roy & LJO
 Blade
 Music groups and names of music stars
 Sex Pistols Entombed Red Dot
 Fear Factory Wing T Limp Bizkit
 Coal Chamber Shift 2001 eminem 07 &
 all my rap~ers
 Black Leaf Cypress Crew eminem o7 & Brother
 "Gun" Danny
 Pungent Stench

Isolated words

Think	Cool	Punk	Age
Love	Peace	Sucks	Bitch
Forever	Criminal		

Declarative Informative
 The school sucks punk's not dead
 ß Public Enemy No 1
 We still don't give a fuck
 Skiboarding is not a crime
 Mafia sucks

Before you think act

Drugs – don't do	Malicious
All you need is s/feed and weed	Dr. KILLER - Dan
Respect all	

Political	Religious	Numbers,
Letters		
Make peace not war	God – Father	Net
4 U		
Greenpeace No Nukes		4 ever Unity
People are not expendable, government is	Educated	4 ever "U"
System Fucked up	U 2 Brutus	U 2 Brutus
Jews No More	To be or not to be	
White Power Heil Victory		



Nazis Stinx
Skins No More
Fuck the State

Indecent

Fuck
Fuck you
Fuck you, crazy people
You get HIV trough the dick
Suck everybody
Excite me
citement
Enjoy EX treme

Varia

West Coast for Life
Live by the gun die by the gun
Timisoaraz most wanted
Slim Shady
FAT RAT
Hei M.A.D., I want my CD

ENGLNESKI GRAFITI NA RUMUNJSKIM ZIDOVIMA

Snažan utjecaj engleskoga na rumunjski jezik primjetan je u masovnim medijima, u upotrebi engleskih riječi za nazive trgovina i drugih poduzeća, te – u novije vrijeme – u raširenoj i često upotrebi engleskoga jezika u grafitima.

Autorica analizira manji korpus tradicionalnih grafita zabilježenih na zidovima Temišvara u školskoj godini 2001./2002.