

Adverbial clitics in Romanian the disambiguating function of ambiguous words

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This article examines the behavior of three adverbial clitic particles in Romanian. The clitics exhibit a high degree of polysemy, and have uses which cannot be classified unambiguously. It is argued that the three particles are in an intermediate stage of a process of grammaticalization to aspectual markers. The ongoing grammaticalization process is an important factor behind the ambiguity.

Keywords: clitic, aspectual marker, grammaticalization, polysemy, homophony

1. The adverbial clitics *mai, și, tot*
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1. The adverbial clitics *mai, și, tot*

Grammar books can create the illusion that languages are neatly ordered systems, with words and constructions fitting smoothly into clearly labeled slots. This paper will discuss the case of three items that defy the labeled slot approach to language description, the adverbial clitics *mai, și* and *tot* in Romanian.

Romanian has a large number of clitic elements belonging to different word classes: pronouns, auxiliaries, complementizers, adverbs. The clitics tend to cluster on the left periphery of the verb in a rigidly fixed order¹.

- (1) că nu I-am mai văzut²
 [COMP neg pron-aux adv] see
 (that) I haven't seen him any more.

As can be seen from example (1), the adverbial clitics occupy the slot closest to the verbal host in the clitic cluster. They may be separated by the verb only by aspect auxiliaries. All other ordering variations are prohibited, as illustrated in (2).

- (2) a. ar mai fi mâncat
 mod adv aux-perf eat
 He would have continued eating

¹ Abbreviations used in this article: acc: accusative; adv: adverb; aux: auxiliary; cl: clitic; COMP: complementizer; dat: dative; det: determiner; imp: imperative; m: masculine; mod: modal; neg: negative; P: preposition; perf: perfect; pl: plural; pres: present; pron: pronoun; refl: reflexive; sg: singular; 1: first person; 2: second person; 3: third person

² The example sentences are based on the authors intuition as a native speaker of Romanian.

- | | | | | |
|----|------|----------|----------|--------|
| b. | *mai | ar | fi | mâncat |
| | adv | mod | aux-perf | eat |
| c. | *ar | fi | mai | mâncat |
| | mod | aux-perf | adv | eat |

Compared to the other clitic elements, the adverbial clitics have received little attention in the linguistic literature. Traditional grammar, such as Graur (1963), and Dimitriu, 1999, does not discuss their clitic status and classifies them in terms of meaning, placing them in the category of time adverbs alongside such lexical words as *ieri* 'yesterday', *niciodata* 'never', *deja* 'already', *inca* 'still', etc. Although the meaning of individual clitics is correctly described in such studies, there is no attempt to capture generalizations.

The reverse is true for generative approaches, where the clitic status and the syntactic properties resulting from it receive considerable attention while the semantic aspects are largely ignored. For example, Dobrovie-Sorin(1993) assumes that adverbial clitics are adjoined to the Infl node in order to account for the word order peculiarities of various tenses and modalities, but does not discuss the correlation between this position and the semantic function of the clitics. In spite of their semi-grammatical status, the clitic adverbs receive the same semantic treatment as regular lexical items, i.e. they receive individual semantic descriptions, but there are no attempts to characterize the three clitics as a class and no comments are made on their function within the system of the verb.

The position adopted in this article is that the three adverbial clitics belong to a semantically coherent class, and that their status is that of partly grammaticalized aspectual markers. This analysis explains the polysemy of the clitics and the ambiguities in their syntactic status. The proposal is compatible with their role within the tense-aspect system of Romanian.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 will present a proposal for treating the three clitic adverbs as semi-grammaticalized aspect morphemes. Section 3 will discuss the polysemy of the three clitics and present a number of cases that raise difficulties for any linguistic framework based on structuralist principles, approaches that insist on resolving ambiguity and classifying forms in a univoque manner. The article will conclude with some remarks on the status of the adverbial clitics and the role of ambiguity in language and linguistic theory.

2. Aspectual markers

The semantic role of the adverbial clitics can be associated with the distinction between continuous (imperfective) and perfective, although none of the three clitics has the full grammatical status of aspectual marker.

2.1. Continuous aspect markers

The main function of the clitics *mai* and *tot* is to mark continuity, as in (3a,b). There is a slight semantic distinction between the two. While *mai* is fairly neutral the use of *tot* has emotional overtones, indicating the speaker's subjective attitude (surprise, irritation) towards the fact that the event is continuing.

- (3) a. Ion mai vorbește.
 Ion adv talk-pres
 Ion is still talking.
- b. Ion tot vorbește.
 Ion adv speak-pres.
 Ion still keeps talking.

Depending on various factors such as the lexical aspectual properties of the verbal host, its tense marking, and the presence or absence of negation, the two clitics can yield different interpretations. For instance, *tot* acquires an iterative reading with telic verbs, as in (4), and attaching *mai* to the past form of verbs yields an experiential reading, as in (5).

- (4) a. Ion vine pe aici.
 Ion come-pres P here
 Ion comes/ will come/is coming here.
- b. Ion tot vine pe aici.
 Ion adv come-pres P here
 Ion keeps coming here.
- (5) a. Am mâncat sushi
 aux-past-1sg eat sushi
 I ate/have eaten sushi
- b. Am mai mâncat sushi
 aux-past-1sg adv eat sushi
 I have eaten sushi (before).

This type of polysemy is found with progressive forms cross-linguistically. The experiential reading of *mai* is reminiscent of the perfect reading of the Japanese *-te iru* form. The habitual or iterative interpretation of progressive forms is cross-linguistically extremely frequent, cf. Bybee (1994). This polysemy of the clitics supports the analysis in terms of grammaticalization; the semantic changes involved are less likely to occur with individual lexical items, but are not surprising if the morphemes have acquired the status of aspectual markers.

The adverbial clitics can co-occur, subject to semantic and syntactic restrictions. When combined as in (6a,b), the *mai* and *tot* can mark only continuity. Although *și* can be used in combination with the other adverbial clitics, the aspectual reading becomes unavailable. The semantic role of *și* in (6c) is to create pragmatic implicatures, a function discussed in Section 3.2.. The blocking of the aspectual reading is to be expected if the semantic role of *și* is, as will be argued in the next section, to mark perfectivity; the aspectual features of *și* would clash with those of *mai* and *tot*.

- (6) a. Tot mai plouă
 adv adv rain
 It is still raining.
- b. Nu mai tot critica.
 neg adv adv criticize-imp
 Don't keep criticizing.

- c. să mai și râdem un pic
 COMP adv adv laugh a little
 Let's laugh a bit (implied: not be serious all the time).

2.2. Perfect

The function of *și* is less obviously associated with aspectual distinctions. English translations of sentences containing the clitic, such as (7) below, employ the adverb 'already', but this does not mean that *și* itself can be regarded as the equivalent of the English adverb. It would be closer to reality to say that, like English sentences containing the adverb *already*, Romanian sentences figuring the adverbial clitic *și* have conventional implicatures to the effect that some event has been completed earlier than expected. Two semantic aspects are important, the completion of the event and the evaluation by the speaker. The two properties make the Romanian sentences semantically similar to English present perfect constructions, they describe a completed event, but the event is related to the moment of speech through the speaker's evaluation.

- (7) Ion a și ajuns.
 Ion aux-past adv arrive
 Ion has already arrived.

The clitic *și* in its aspectual reading co-occurs only with past, non-continuous forms of the verb, or with narrative present. This fact, combined with the blocking of the aspectual reading in the presence of the clitics *mai* and *tot*, supports the analysis of *și* as a marker of the perfect.

2.3. The role of the adverbial clitics in the Romanian verb system

The clitic adverbs play an important role in resolving aspectual ambiguities. The Romanian verb lacks a number of aspectual distinctions in some of the tenses. Thus, there is no marking for the progressive in the present, although there is in the past. The perfect is marked in the past and future of the indicative, as well as in the subjunctive and desiderative mood, but there is no form equivalent to the English present perfect. The adverbial clitics serve to disambiguate between neutralized aspectual interpretations. For instance, the present form of an activity verb such as *studia* 'study' can have a progressive or a present, generic or habitual, interpretation as illustrated in (8a). Adding the clitics *mai* or *tot* will yield an unambiguously progressive reading as in (8b).

- (8) a. Ion studiază.
 Ion study-pres
 Ion is studying.
 Ion studies.
 b. Ion mai/tot studiază.
 Ion adv study-pres
 Ion is still studying.

The use of *tot* with dynamic verbs resolves the ambiguity between simple, non-progressive present, and progressive/iterative in favor of the iterative reading as illustrated in the contrast between (9a) and (9b).

- (9) a. Ion se plânge.
 Ion cl-refl cry-pres
 Ion complains
 Ion is complaining.
 Ion keeps complaining.
- b. Ion se tot plânge.
 Ion cl-refl adv cry-pres
 Ion keeps complaining

The periphrastic past form, in spite of its naming *perfect compus* 'composite perfect', is ambiguous between a simple past interpretation and a present perfect interpretation. The clitic *și* is used to express surprise at the completion or occurrence of the event. As such it serves to relate the event described by the verb to the moment of speaking and obviates the simple past interpretation, yielding a (present) perfect reading.

- (10) a. Ion a plecat.
 Ion aux leave
 Ion has left.
 Ion left.
- b. Ion a și plecat.
 Ion aux adv leave
 Ion has already left.

An exhaustive analysis of the syntactic properties and the semantic role of the clitic adverbs is beyond the scope of this paper. The aim of the preceding discussion was to show that there is a grammaticalization process in progress, and that as a consequence of this process, the three adverbial clitics can be regarded a coherent class with easily recognizable morpho-syntactic and the function to disambiguate between neutralized aspectual oppositions. The disambiguating function is interesting if we consider the fact that all the three clitics exhibit polysemous behavior which results in ambiguity.

3. Semantic scope and ambiguity

This section will discuss another shared property of the adverbial clitics, namely the fact that they all have homophones, as illustrated in (11).

- (11) a. Vreau o cană mai mare.
 want-1sg-pres a cup adv large
 I want a larger cup.
- b. Aruncă tot zahărul.
 throw-imp det sugar
 Throw all the sugar.
- c. Copiii cântă și dansează.
 Children sing and dance
 The children are singing and dancing.

Although the homophones do not represent a single syntactic class, they share some properties. All the homophones are items with high frequency. They are close class items whose semantic function belongs to the logical domain; quantifiers, connectors, operators. Thus, the clitic adverb *și* is homophonous with the coordinate conjunction, *mai* to the comparative marker and *tot* to a determiner functioning as universal quantifier. The existence of homophones for all the clitics is hard to explain on the traditional account, which treats them as lexical adverbs, but is not surprising if the grammaticalization account proposed above is adopted.

Although the two semantic poles associated with each form are easy to define, there is a continuum of usages scaling the semantic space in between, and it is impossible to find the point where the two diverge. There seems to be little semantic connection between the coordinate conjunction interpretation of *și* and the adverbial sense 'already'. The same is true for the other forms. The universal quantifier sense of the pronoun *tot* seems to be semantically quite remote from the adverbial use marking continuity. In the case of *mai*, the grammatical function of comparative marker is quite distinct from the aspectual function. An examination of a larger amount of data reveals a series of usages connecting the two semantic poles associated with each of the three items.

What appears to be a clear case of homophony at first sight, turns out to be after all a case of polysemy. The polysemy account is not without its problems, however. There are certain senses where the syntactic and the semantic properties of the clitics appear to be mismatched. The deep-set ambiguity of the pairs of so-called homophones could be regarded as manifestation the ongoing grammaticalization process. Language in this area is not yet fixed, but in a fluid stage. In the following section I will illustrate the semantic range covered by each of the three clitics and discuss the problematic uses.

3.1. The semantics of *mai*

The first item on the list, *mai*, is the least problematic. Etymologically it is related to the Latin *maior* 'large'. Although, at first sight, the clitic appears to have a wide semantic scope, ranging from comparative marker to aspectual adverb, the concept of additivity underscores all the uses, as can be seen from the examples in (12). The comparative sense refers to 'more', an additional amount, of a quality, while in the aspectual use, we are dealing with 'an additional amount of the same process.

- (12) a. Acesta este mai scump.
 this is adv expensive
 This one is more expensive.
- b. Pune -l mai la dreapta.
 put cl-3-sg-adv to right
 Put it more to the right.
- c. Mai vino pe la noi.
 adv come around pron-1-pl
 Come visit us again.
- d. Copilul mai doarme.
 child adv sleep
 The child is still sleeping.

The semantic distinction comparative vs. continuative, is roughly associated with syntactic distinctions. The comparative sense 'more' occurs when the adverb modifies adjectives, adverbs, or prepositional phrases, while the aspectual use emerges only when the adverb is in pre-verbal position. However, the separation is not watertight, as illustrated by examples (12c) and (12d), both involving the adverb modifying the verb. In (12c) the reading is closer to the 'more' sense, whereas (12d) is clearly an instance of the aspectual sense. The two examples illustrate how the additive reading is fading into the aspectual one.

The only less than transparent use of the clitic is found in constructions where it modifies a clause, as in (13).

- (13) a. Mai că te-am crezut.
 Adv comp pron-2sg-acc aux believe
 I nearly believed you.
- b. Mai să cad.
 Adv comp fall-1sg
 I nearly fell.

In (13), the clitic appears in a structure of the form (14).

- (14) *mai*[_S complementizer....]

The construction is associated with a modal interpretation of irrealis, and the clitic can be paraphrased as 'almost', 'nearly', expressing proximity between the irrealis event and reality. Although it may be possible to trace the modal proximity sense to the additive sense of *mai*, the process requires considerable ingenuity, and will not be attempted in this article.

The semantic behavior of *mai* will be found with the other adverbial clitics. A superficial analysis suggests the existence of two items sufficiently divergent semantically to be regarded as homophones. On closer scrutiny, however, a semantic continuum is revealed between the two poles. At a certain point on the continuum, it becomes impossible to separate the senses, and a form cannot be given an unambiguous semantic description.

3.2. The uses of *și*

The adverbial clitic *și* has a homophonous form used as the coordinate conjunction, corresponding to 'and'. The two homophones are associated with distinct syntactic properties. The adverbial use illustrated in (7) is available only in pre-verbal position. The conjunction, on the other hand is not subject to any similar syntactic restriction. As illustrated in (15), the conjunction *și* can link nouns, adjectives, or sentences.

- (15) a. Ion și Maria au venit
 Ion and Maria aux come.
 Ion and Maria came.
- b. Ion este inteligent și norocos.
 Ion is intelligent and lucky.
 Ion is intelligent and lucky.

- c. Ion a pierdut și Maria a caștigat.
 Ion aux lost and Maria aux win
 Ion lost and Maria won.

Romanian does not have a special correlative conjunction, but repeats the co-ordinate conjunction in order to achieve the same effect as English *both... and...*, as illustrated in (16).

- (16) a. Si Ion și Maria au venit.
 And Ion and Maria aux come
 Both Ion and Maria have come.
 b. Ion este și inteligent și norocos.
 Ion is and intelligent and lucky.
 Ion is both intelligent and lucky.

The correlative conjunction use requires two conjuncts, each marked with a conjunction. There is a semantically related use of *și*, which does not require overt multiple elements. In this case the interpretation of *și* is close to the English adverbial particles *too* or *also*, and its function is to create pragmatic implicatures to the effect that the modified element is not the only one in its class.

This function is transparently derived from the coordinate conjunction use through conversational implicatures, i.e. the presence of the coordinate conjunction in the absence of a conjoint element gives raise to the implicature that the overt element is not the only in its class, and that there exists some other item, not overtly mentioned, which shares its properties, see Caluianu (1995) for details.

- (17) a. Si Maria a venit.
 and Maria aux come
 Maria has come too.
 b. Ion e și norocos.
 Ion is and lucky.
 Ion is lucky too (on top of everything else).

If this use of *și* were barred from appearing in pre-verbal position, analysis would be straightforward. However, this is not the case. The pre-verbal position allows both the pragmatic implicatures and aspectual reading. In the absence of a context it is often impossible to decide which sense is implied, as illustrated in (18).

- (18) a. A și intrat în spital.
 Aux and enter in hospital
 He has also been hospitalized.
 He has already been hospitalized.

A structuralist analysis automatically analyzes (18) as a case of homophony, cf. Nida, (1946:p56). If we are dealing with homophony, the two senses should be able to co-occur, in the same way that *și* may co-occur with *mai* and *tot*. This expectation is, however, not fulfilled as can be seen from example (19).

- (19) *a și și intrat în spital
 aux cl cl enter P hospital

It could be argued that the awkwardness of (19) is due either to semantic or phonological reasons. The phonological explanation is improbable. The sequence *și-și* is very frequently found in Romanian. The acceptable examples, however, do not involve two occurrences of the adverbial clitic, but the adverbial clitic and a homophonous form of the pronominal clitic, as illustrated in (20).

- (20) **și-și** caută de drum
 and 3-sg-dat search P road
 And (she) walked on.

It is even possible to add a second adverbial clitic to the sequence, obtaining three identical forms in a row, as in (21).

- (21) **și-și și** caută de drum
 conj-3-s-dat adv search P road
 And (she) walked on promptly.

What renders (21) acceptable is the fact that a clearly distinct element, i.e. the pronominal clitic, intervenes between the two occurrences of the adverbial *și*. Example (21) casts doubts on the semantic account for the unacceptability of (19). If there were some semantic factor preventing the co-occurrence of the two senses of the clitic, it should be seen at work in this sentence, where the two senses co-occur, separated by the homophonous pronominal clitic.

The most reasonable explanation for the unacceptability of (19) is to assume that the two occurrences of *și* are interpreted as the same element, in spite of the semantic distinctions between the aspectual *și* and the pragmatic *și*.

To review, in the case of *și* we have, on the one hand, a number of semantically closely related and syntactically distinct uses: the conjunction, the correlative conjunction, and the pragmatic marker. On the other hand, there are two semantically unrelated but syntactically identical uses; the pragmatic marker and the aspectual adverb. If an ambiguous element is defined as an element analyzed differently at different levels and, as a consequence, cannot be given a coherent description, *și* is a prime example of an ambiguous element. Although the particulars are quite different, we found a similar situation in the case of *tot*.

3.3. The syntax and semantics of *tot*

The morpho-syntactic differences between items situated at the two poles of the semantic continuum are most obvious in the case of *tot*. At one end, is the variable pronoun or determiner, inflected for number and gender, illustrated in Fig (1). At the other end, is the invariable adverb.

Fig.1

	masc	fem
sg	tot	toată
pl	toți	toate

The semantic link between the two is not immediately obvious, as can be seen by comparing (22a) and (22b).

- (22) a. Au venit toți invitații.
 Aux come det guests
 All the guests have arrived
- b. Invitații tot dansează.
 guests adv dance
 The guests are still dancing.

As in the case of *și*, there are usages which illustrate the semantic steps linking the two poles. Example (23) represents a case where the universal quantifier reading blends into the adverbial reading. The literal interpretation of the universal quantifier yields implicatures which coincide with the interpretation of the adverb, i.e. continuity, in such a way that it is impossible to separate the two. As illustrated in example (23), by going in one direction all the way, one continues going in that direction.

- (23) Mergi tot înainte.
 go-imp adv/det ahead
 lit. Go all ahead.
 fig. Keep going ahead.

The two examples in (22) illustrate the morpho-syntactic poles associated with the form *tot*. Although it is not particularly surprising to find borderline cases such as (23), where it is difficult, if not impossible to decide which of the two senses is involved, one hardly expects to find the same situation with respect to form. Yet, this is precisely what we find. Example (24) illustrates such a case.

- (24) Tot omul aspiră spre mai bine.
 adv/det man aspire to better
 Every man aspires towards the better.

Distribution and interpretation suggest that we are dealing with the universal quantifier *tot*, that is, the variable determiner. However, this is not the case. The determiner *tot* normally co-occurs with plural or mass nouns. In example (24) it modifies a singular form of a countable noun. The interpretation of the determiner acquires the additional feature of distributivity. The form appears in sentences associated with a generic interpretation and is most acceptable with nouns situated at the high end of the animacy scale. The use, although idiomatic, is fairly productive.

- (25) a. Tot americanul vrea să viziteze Europa.
 adv/det American want to visit Europe
 Every American wants to visit Europe.
- b. Tot mitocanul se crede domn.
 adv/det oaf refl-acc believe gentleman
 Every oaf imagines himself a gentleman.
- c. Tot școlarul stă cu gândul la vacanță.
 adv/det student tay with thought to vacation
 Every schoolchild thinks about the vacation.

There is a curious restriction on the gender of the modified noun. Feminine nouns cannot occur in this combination, as illustrated by the unacceptability of (26).

- (26) *Toată femeia vrea să fie frumoasă.
 det woman want to be beautiful
 Every woman wants to be beautiful.

There are no semantic grounds for this restriction. All the examples given so far imply no gender restriction, i.e. the set of referents very likely includes both males and females. It is not the case, however, that semantic gender cannot be specified in the construction, as demonstrated by the examples (27a, b), where the nouns modified by *tot* have masculine gender both grammatically and semantically.

- (27) a. Tot bărbatul vrea să fie șef.
 adv/det man want to be boss
 Every man wants to be the boss.
 b. Tot motanul se crede leu.
 adv/det tomcat refl-acc believe lion
 Every tom-cat thinks he is a lion.

The only plausible explanation for the ungrammaticality of (26) is that we are dealing with the variable determiner *tot*, which, in this particular use, must be invariable, or otherwise said, that the item is ambiguous between the variable determiner and the invariable adverb. The syntactic ambiguity is resolved by limiting the use of the form to contexts where the same phonetic shape is associated with both functions, i.e. *tot*, the masculine, singular determiner or adverb. Although semantic gender is not an issue, constructions involving forms that differ from *tot*, the form of the adverb, are ruled out. It is a compromise solution that helps avoid the clash between the semantic content and the formal requirements.

4. The place of ambiguity

The data presented in this article has shown that it is not possible to give a satisfactory account of the Romanian adverbial clitics in a framework which assumes that lexical items belong unambiguously to one lexical category or another. The three adverbial clitics are emerging as a coherent class, with a specific role in the tense-aspect system of the Romanian verb. At the same time, each of the three items has homophonous forms, and the aspectual use can be traced back, more or less smoothly, to these forms. For each of the three forms, there is a series of intermediate forms, and there are contexts where it seems impossible to decide the exact status of the clitic.

Among the requirements of the gricean maxim of manner, figures the dictate 'avoid ambiguity'. In spite of this, linguistic systems seem to thrive even in the presence of ambiguity. The behavior of the Romanian adverbial clitics illustrates this point. We may conclude that, although the maxim embodies a desideratum of actual communication, this may not be enough to qualify it as a law determining the organization of language systems. The ubiquitous, and harmless, presence of ambiguity in language, at the level of morphology, syntax, or the lexicon, might be due precisely to the fact that the maxim of

manner functions at the pragmatic level. Speakers will strive to avoid the ambiguities built into the system, which for reasons of economy is built upon ambiguities.

The elements discussed in this article are inherently ambiguous. Despite this 'flaw', they have been part of the language for at least 400 years without any apparent negative effects on the efficiency of communication. This might be due to their 'minor' status, or to the fact that ambiguity of the system is not a problem. If this is true, it lends weight to Bybee's remark, Bybee (1994), that linguistic theories built on the structuralist premise that language is a well ordered system of oppositions are not adequate, and linguistics must be designed in such a way as to be capable to account for the fluid nature of language as a matter of fact, not by setting it apart as an exception.

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