

ABOUT STUPIDITY – ITS PRESENCE AND ROLE IN PHILOLOGY

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Abstract. *This generous topic could lead us, through some of the lanes of man's labyrinth of psychological and cultural determinations, to a tentative summary of the main types of stupidity – which appears to be a universal human datum. The paper was meant basically as an essay on that natural, in-born feature of the human status, and it deals with such varieties and subtypes of stupidity and human foolishness as: arrogant stupidity, solemn stupidity, vain stupidity, well-organized stupidity, unethical stupidity, humourless stupidity, naïve stupidity, eager stupidity, aggressive stupidity, wicked stupidity, voluptuous stupidity, anti-scientific stupidity, intolerant stupidity, stupid narrow-mindedness (or intellectual blindness), morbid self-sufficiency, didactic stupidity, stupid legalism, short-sighted stupidity, hyper-analytical stupidity, historical and traditionalist stupidity, ranting stupidity, cheerful stupidity, grotesque stupidity, dogmatic and dictatorial stupidity, superior stupidity, learned or educated stupidity, snobbish stupidity, official stupidity, PC stupidity. We pointed out a number of issues having to do with the dialectics of stupidity (mainly in view of fuzzy logic), and also some paradoxical matters pertaining to stupidity. Moreover, we tried to add special emphasis on some issues treated, or conceived of, in a stupid way within the province of philology studies, i.e. linguistics and literature: the rush for universals, regularities and abstraction at all costs, over-generalization, aspects of scientific stupidity, technical and professional stupidity, extremism, unconditional tolerance and relativistic extremism, the primacy of form over content, issues relating to neologisms, etymology and grammar. When – and if – recognized, stupidity can become our ally, and probably a factor of progress: undoubtedly the first step towards wisdom.*

Keywords: *stupidity, errors, science, philology*

Mottoes:

- (1) The resilience of a fool or a stupid person is a true force of nature.
- (2) The only ailment that does not actually hurt, or heal – at least in one's lifetime – is stupidity.
- (3) One of the possible definitions of intellectual misery: loads of knowledge, and very few ideas.
- (4) A curse of modern times: the more highly educated one is, the less conscious...
- (5) What could the IQ of the average compiler of IQ tests really be?
- (6) Many scientific undertakings, which are otherwise honest, end up as mere collections of petty naiveties, especially through the excess of abstract profoundness they arrogate – as a matter of principle.
- (7) "One of the greatest calamities of civilization – the scholarly oaf" (Karel Čapek)
- (8) "A wise man sometimes changes his mind; a fool never will".
- (9) "Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind" (Eccles. 1:17)

We would like to proceed, in dealing with this topic (a generous topic in a totally positive sense), from the obsession that the great French writer Gustave Flaubert

fostered – and his personal crusade – against stupidity of any kind (which his equally great disciple, Guy de Maupassant, referred to in relation with the (unfortunately) unfinished book titled *Bouvard et Pécuchet* – where a systematic table including the main types of stupidity, silly behaviour and ideas, with appealingly hilarious illustrations, quoted from some works by famous names of letters, history and, in general, French culture – yet not restricted to French culture).

Here are a few examples: "The wealth of a country depends on its overall prosperity"; "The floods of the Loire are due to the abuse of the press and to the fact that Sundays are not observed"; "The cantaloupe was divided into slices by Nature itself, so that it can be eaten with the family. Being larger, pumpkins can be eaten with one's neighbours"; "Thus, it seems to me most afflicting to find man positioned, in keeping with Linnaeus's system, among monkeys, bats and sloths"; "If we had a dictionary of a savage language, we could find the manifest traces of a previous language, spoken by an enlightened people; and even if we did not find such traces, it would only logically follow that the degradation is so serious that it wiped all traces"; "Prelates, noblemen, senior government officials have the task of being guardians and keepers of conservative truths, the task of showing their nations what is wrong and what is right, what is true and what is false in the moral and spiritual order"; "Learning and teaching history can be, in my opinion, a rich source of drawbacks and dangers for teachers. Likewise, for pupils"; "Rabelais, the garbage man of humanity"; "Molière was a common buffoon"; "Byron's genius seems to me rather silly"; "(Bonaparte) is indeed a big winner of battles, but apart from that the last of the ordinary generals is more skilled than him"; "As soon as a Frenchman crosses the border, he enters foreign territory"; "When you exceed the limits, there are no limits any more"; "Grocery is respectable. It is a branch of trade. (...) Grocery is useful, while the army is necessary" (Quotes from Guy de Maupassant, *Opere complete*, vol. III, Editura pentru literatură universală, București, 1966, pp. 525-535, *passim* – translation mine).

Flaubert's crusade against stupidity was essentially the same common-sensical indictment that, for centuries, nations of the world have recorded through the good judgement of wise saws, proverbs, puns, anecdotes, maxims and sayings; in other words, Flaubert joins the illustrious lineage of Till Eulenspiegel, Nasreddin and Păcală: "Ignorance, whence entrenched beliefs draw their source, the so-called immortal principles, conventions and prejudices, the whole arsenal of trivial or "elevated" opinions, drove him to distraction. Instead of smiling, like many others, at the universal folly, the intellectual inferiority of most people, he suffered excruciatingly. His excessively cerebral sensitivity caused the silly banalities that we all repeat daily to sting him like a wound (...). Flaubert considered stupidity his personal enemy, intent on tormenting him". (*ibid.*, pp. 546-547).

Obviously, stupidity is a universal human datum; moreover, it is representative of humans – in all the senses of the term; likewise, it is perfectly, though not completely, explicable; virtually no one is safe from it. More often than not, it is just unavoidable. As a type of error, it creeps into nearly all human enterprises. But, like error itself, if repeated, stupidity becomes demonic, evil (v. the Latin dictum *Errare humanum est, perseverare – diabolicum*). As a matter of fact, a lot of remarks were made in connection with stupidity. The world's paremiology provides us with numerous proverbs and maximum regarding the unerring strength and universality of stupidity, e.g. "Numerus stultorum infinitus", "Nomina stultorum undique locorum", "The mother of all fools is constantly pregnant", "Imagine the clamor there would be if stupidity hurt", "Stupidity is an unlimited natural resource", "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe." (Albert Einstein), "The two most common elements in the universe are hydrogen and stupidity." (Harlan Ellison)¹, "Talk sense to a fool and he calls you foolish" (Euripides), "Irony is wasted on the stupid" (Oscar Wilde), "Beauty fades, dumb is forever" (Judy Sheindlin), "To be stupid, and selfish, and to have good health are the three requirements for happiness – though if stupidity is lacking, the others are useless" (Julian Barnes), "A stupid man's report of what a clever man says can never be accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something he can understand" (Bertrand Russell), "In politics, stupidity is not a handicap" (Napoleon Bonaparte), "The more often a stupidity is repeated, the more it gets the appearance of wisdom" (Voltaire), "Stupidity is the same as evil if you judge by the results" (Margaret Atwood), "Evil isn't the real threat to the world. Stupid is just as destructive as Evil, maybe more so, and it's a hell of a lot more common. What we really need is a crusade against Stupid. That might actually make a difference" (Jim Butcher). Of course the higher spirits could use the objective and the ever-present reality of folly to more clearly distinguish the opposite of it – wisdom (or at least rationality and righteous judgment): "Better be ignorant of a matter than half know it" (Publilius Syrus), "Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance" (Confucius), "Acquaint yourself with your own ignorance" (Isaac Watts), "I am not ashamed to confess I am ignorant of what I do not know" (Cicero), "Not engaging in ignorance is wisdom" (Bodhidharma).

We believe that such "etymological stories" involving the notion of stupidity would be quite interesting, not only in the present context: see, for example, the etymology of the Romanian term *prost*, which means "foolish, stupid; dumb", though it originally meant "simple" and "uneducated"; the French term *crétin* is an older variant – and the etymological doublet – of *Chrétien* "Christian"; Fr. *benêt* (meaning "silly, simple; a simpleton") derives from Latin *benedictus* "blessed"; Fr. *imbécile* means "weak, feeble (especially in reference to the body)"; Eng. *silly* comes from Old English *gesælig* "happy, fortuitous, prosperous" (cf. Germ. *selig* "blessed, happy, blissful").

Accepting stupidity as a natural, in-born feature of the human status, we also accept, as evidence, the fact that both

its forms of expression and its typology practically defy any ordering effort by a (normal) person. Consequently, the only solution left for us could be to glean and exemplify several main types, while drawing attention especially on their varieties and the most relevant consequences for our world – including the domain of scientific pursuits. Among the common types of stupidity, the most interesting seems to be the kind associated with undue pride, resulting in the profile of the conceited fool – i.e. arrogant stupidity. One could constantly check and prove the way in which most vainly self-satisfied fool considers it useful, sensible and even indispensable to give others bits of his overflowing abundance of wit – especially in the form of advice. Many fools are also stolidly dull, but none of them will admit it; the typical fools are (that is, believe themselves to be) also resourceful, energetic and brisk! Such stupid people tend to go up in the various hierarchies – they are successful social climbers. It seems natural, very much as in the biological process of metamorphosis, that a fool, once promoted, i.e. reaching a higher rank, should automatically acquire the *personality* status of their position – very much as, in real nature, a tadpole will ineluctably turn into a mature frog. As a rule, the authentic fool is also solemn. Those who also manifest a kind of sense of humor (for instance, those who laugh heartily when watching grotesque films) rather lack spirit, or are possibly mentally retarded. If a fool is also wicked, his/her figure can usually be seen (mainly by their likes) as that of a *determined* person; if they are rather nice, they can be seen as simply imbeciles or simpletons. More often than not, resolute fools become, or proclaim themselves, "successful people". In this respect, Calistrat Hogaș's words, though written one hundred and thirty years ago, are still valid: "When you are carried by stupidity, you can rest assured, as it can take you even to the topmost steps of the governments of peoples!" Similarly, stupidity is known to defend itself with immense zeal. You should not tell a fool he/she is not right – especially when they reproachfully look at you with that typical self-opinion: you are then likely to begin having doubts.

Moreover, this world is also home to the *well-organized* kind of stupidity. One can say that it counts among the most common strategies for human survival, as part of the larger social intercourse: to know as little as possible, gaining the most advantages possible. Those who do not comply with this strategy are the idealists, commonly also called *misfits* and *losers*; in the opinion of a majority that tends to become comfortable, the above strategy really is an axiom.

What matters, really and essentially, is a fool's attitude towards the others. One of the saddest shows possible is the fool (who, needless to add, believes he/she is clever, sometimes even witty) who is trying to taunt someone else... It can be said without fear of being (too much) mistaken, that a fool's irony is the most saddening type of humour there is. An imbecile who drops a brick can possibly amuse you... Failure to adjust oneself humour can doubtless be considered as just another kind of stupidity (though, very much like literary expression, humour has many different varieties, subclasses and subtypes).

Proving a sense of profound realism – or maybe just trying to smile in the face of adversity – French crooner Georges Brassens said (actually quoting E. A. Poe): "To understand that you're stupid, you must still have some intelligence!"...

¹ Also known as *Zappa's law*: "There are two omnipresent things on earth: hydrogen and fools".

Unfortunately however, stupidity and *naiveness* are often confused... In this binomial a special angle is involved, in a more or less insidious or interested manner – that of human *morality*. It is perfectly true that a good, kind-hearted person will constantly look – and virtually always based on solid arguments – rather immature, naive, puerile, goofy, clumsy, etc., although the common wisdom of the world’s nations has perpetually sought to contradict this opinion – which can be said to be (at best) rather minimalist. Here is, to give only an example, a bit of wisdom – and humaneness – drawn from the Talmud (in the words of the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis-Singer): “It is written in the book that it’s better to be stupid all your life than be a bad man one single hour”. However, from the point of view of most of our contemporaries, the ethical code, verging on sainthood, which Rudyard Kipling presents in his famous poem *If*, seems simply a synthesis of absolute practical imbecility (*and being lied about, don’t deal in lies... and never breathe a word about your loss... etc.*). Besides – and unfortunately –, in the world where we all live there are numerous extremes that are often confused for one another – for instance, consistency and rigidity in thinking, ludic inclination and frivolity, radicalism and extremism, seriousness and dogmatic attitude, etc.

Anyway, when you do not share the opinions of some rather irritable or impassioned interlocutor, you automatically risk becoming *stupid* – or at least poorly informed: ‘Come on, my good man, I thought you were a bit more widely read!’

One may make some interesting observations (which do not necessarily conduce one to optimism) on the dialectics of the manifestations of stupidity. For instance, the fact is noticeable that, very often, stupidity and wickedness, or malice, are intimate allies. Malice could be defined, from this particular point of view, as a form of continued stupidity. In this context, we think it would be very interesting to see the dialectics that holds between malice and stupidity – “legitimated”, it may seem, even by the Gospel: “Forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do”...

Those who sentenced Socrates to death, or those who ostracized some of the worthiest people in ancient times (who, ultimately, had to conclude for themselves that they were “wicked” only because it had been so decided, and that was how the people had voted in a *majority*... – though, in actual fact, those people hardly knew them at all)... What were those people like – stupid, or wicked? It was said – by Jonathan Swift – that you can recognize a person of great merit mainly because a bunch of blockheads will throw stones at him/her (“When a great genius appears in the world you may know him by this sign: that the dunces are all in confederacy against him”).

There exists the mania of making silly mistakes, but there also exists the *voluptuousness* of making such mistakes. (It is true that, as naturally as anything, “sometimes even good Homer may slumber”). The paradoxical coexistence should also be noted of stupidity with... information and culture, hence with *intelligence!* (In the old times, the Romanian people believed that “Where there is much wit there is also much stupidity”). In most of its manifestations, stupidity has a *paradoxical* character (and the Romanian folk recorded this truth in many wise sayings and meaningful stories –

such as, for example, the extended anecdote called ‘Wisdom and Luck’). Here are only a few examples of paradoxicality:

- A particularly good memory is the attribute of those who practiced it through various intellectual pursuits; and also, paradoxically, of those who do not reason, or who read very little – those whose mind has been at rest.
- The logic of *teaching* means, mostly, permitting an understanding by the student, to the detriment of scientific logic (based on provable or model-copiable reality).
- It may seem at least strange, yet a lot of areas of modern science are largely based on the idea of uncertainty, blurred limits and *fuzziness*...
- The average IQ tends to remain constant, which actually means it does not rise, while the number of universities in the world continually goes up.
- Paradoxically or not, there are cases when linguistics (due to its theoretical grids, general principles, mental matrices, etc.) is an obstacle to learning a foreign language...

In many cases, stupidity actually consists of a basic lack of mental organization. For instance, we frequently hear the exclamation (the intentions of which are supposedly annihilating) “You know nothing at all!” – though, indeed, the person in question may or does know something (and even quite a bit), but the trouble is he/she does not know it well. Similarly, you can hear the admiring exclamation: “That man can answer any question!” – which is in actual fact a derogatory remark rather than a praise. The opposite can, of course, be encountered in real life, too: the uneducated or illiterate have, in contradistinction to educated, well-informed people, the undeniable advantage of not being likely to forget, in their old age, because they do not actually have *what* to forget; their senility is smoother and easier to bear.

Among several other related paradoxes, one can enumerate the fundamental anti-scientific orientation of the average – or the *common* – human being, who is not necessarily stupid: for example, for us ordinary people, it is clear that the Sun rises – as to the Earth, although in reality things happen in just the reverse order; or that cold infiltrates our bodies / clothes / houses, although thermodynamics says that it is heat that is lost from the human body / from buildings. And yet, this is the way you, in your capacity as a mere human, perceive things (seeing them, as it were, with your own eyes and feeling them through your own skin)... Or the truth that an expert in any field of science (an *-ist* or a *-logist*) will virtually never agree with another *-ist* or *-logist* in the same field, particularly in matters: (1) of minute detail; (2) of great generality. Or the paradoxicality of the following witticism (used worldwide, as it seems – and taken over mainly as a *Murphyism*), “(...) and those who do not know how to do something teach the others”², a maxim which is only apparently paradoxical, absurd (and grotesque), taking in consideration the fact that, for instance, a lot of former athletes or actors, though (sub)mediocre, become trainers and instructors (i.e. coaches, stage directors, etc.) of nationwide or world-wide fame in their respective fields. Or the reality that *positive manipulation* is, all things considered, an integral part of education.

On the other hand, there is what we may call *idiotic legalism* (of the type: “I did not know it, there was no

² The witty aphorism actually belongs to George Bernard Shaw: “Those who can, do; those who can’t teach”.

mention of it in the user's manual!"). The real case is cited of a caravan (or *trailer*) bought by an American, for which there was no written specification to the effect that the towing car, if *running* down the road, could not be left without a driver, while the owner was *inside* the caravan... The man sued the manufacturer, of course... and won the case.

If stupidity can be equated to a type of *intellectual myopia*, its opposite – which is every bit as foolish and damaging – is what we might call *analytical farsightedness*. Jerome K. Jerome wrote a brilliant fragment, which is often quoted, about aesthetic criticism in the Middle Ages, in which a case of possible ambiguity due to the use of deictics or indexicals is solved by using a relationship of a mathematical type: young man A declares, categorically and violently, in front of young man B that his (i.e. A's) girlfriend was more beautiful than B's girlfriend³. And the same Jerome K. Jerome demonstrated that, in most cases, a limited level of understanding does not necessarily (or exclusively) pertain to educational or cultural criteria and reasons: in his masterpiece, *Three Men A Boat*, an exceedingly narrow-minded fellow wanted to get rid of the sixteenth-century carved oak panelling in his house in order to have wallpaper applied instead...

It is something relatively easy to prove that opacity to the new can only incidentally be equated to stupidity. The more serious flaw is, however, narrow-mindedness (i.e., mainly lack of curiosity), materialized and doubled by superficiality, lack of empathy (added to an exaggerated appreciative opinion of one's own acquisition of knowledge), seclusion in humdrum patterns, modelled after the (so-called) ostrich figure, when someone "sticks his/her head in the sand" before evidence; and, of course, there are also manifestations of imbecilic silliness that verge on the absolute...

Aggressive stupidity – or aggressive lack of sensibility – is actually the same thing as malice. Here is what a young man who failed to pass the *baccalaureate* exam in the first session declared on the Internet, in an outraged and violently sarcastic tone: "The generation of idiots! The Facebook generation! – this is what we, the pupils who have just taken the *baccalaureate*, are styled by the media and the public opinion across the country these days; what I can only tell them is just – SHAME! Shame on you all! Shame for ending up blaming a generation that you yourselves have raised (...) Shame on the system that brought us up! Shame on the models that have been promoted for more than 20 years now! Shame on us, on you, teachers, students, politicians, media, on ROMANIA! (...) We can take no more of that!

³ "When a twelfth-century youth fell in love he did not take three paces backward, gaze into her eyes, and tell her she was too beautiful to live. He said he would step outside and see about it. And if, when he got out, he met a man and broke his head – the other man's head, I mean – then that proved that his – the first fellow's – girl was a pretty girl. But if the other fellow broke his head – not his own, you know, but the other fellow's – the other fellow to the second fellow, that is, because of course the other fellow would only be the other fellow to him, not the first fellow who – well, if he broke his head, then his girl – not the other fellow's, but the fellow who was the – Look here, if A broke B's head, then A's girl was a pretty girl; but if B broke A's head, then A's girl wasn't a pretty girl, but B's girl was. That was their method of conducting art criticism." (*The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*)

We refuse to believe that we are a lost generation! We are actually the first generation that will be sacrificed to benefit, and that's because we've had enough of what is happening in this country! (...) We are different! We are different in that we say ENOUGH! Enough of the actual garbage in this country! You can't fool us any longer! (...) We, the ethnobotanists' generation, as we call us, will show you that we have more guts than all your communists' generations rolled into one! We represent the real force, because we are THE FUTURE, and you're just trash that will die and be forgotten by history!"

Generalizations (which are often rather harsh) are also made in assessment, and their harshness is all the more evident on account of their superficiality, which tends to reach the absolute value. Paradoxically (yet maybe also very naturally?), the most representative individuals – especially in point of number, i.e. statistically – for the attitude of superiority within a community which compare themselves, in a laudatory manner, with another one, or several other ones (e.g., the German Arian who is proud of his/her "race", or the Transylvanian, or the Banat dweller who is convinced that everything lying "South of the Carpathians" is "no good") are, in their majority, mere pub orators – or possibly café rhetoricians. Actually, this is the very essence of the mechanism that modern racism is based on, the very essence of any fundamentalism mainly underpinned by cultural or ethnic principles.

The aggressiveness of the partially or poorly informed individual is quite symptomatic: personally, I happened to be contradicted even by brethren in the domain of philology, linguistics and letters – for instance, about the reason for rejecting the phrase *trebuie că* (instead of *trebuie să*), as a case of mistakenly formed, pretentious calque; or about the definitions of the concepts *pragmatics* and *corpus*! These are clear cases of aggressive superficiality that mimic scientific accuracy – a shallow attitude that needs constant justifications and notional definitions (not only in the field of sciences, to be true).

Lack of information is not necessarily tantamount to stupidity, but believing that only what *you* know is true... is sheer stupidity. For example, some North Americans do not want to know anything other than what they already know; some Romanians lack quite trivial notions of overall cultural education, but are willing to call a foreigner uneducated or uncultivated just because he/she never heard of Romania or Bucharest; similarly, I have known Arabic students who considered that everything produced in England was the best of its kind – including *wine*! Many of our fellow citizens hold the unshakeable belief that stuffed cabbage (*sarmale*), grilled meat rolls (*mititei*), tripe soup or meatballs (*chiftele*) are purely and traditionally Romanian dishes, very much like lots of Greeks who firmly believe that *baklava* is a purely Greek dessert; there are myriads of people who are convinced that pizza appeared in North America, just as most Slovaks know for a fact that *bryndzové haluški* is a purely Slovak national culinary specialty.

One of the mistakes that are constantly – and persistently – circulated by individuals who are less half-learned than stupid (especially as a result of their relentless false-beliefs-cum-prejudices) is that "Southerners" (i.e. the people living south of the Carpathians) were not so keen on literary writing, and on culture in general – unlike Moldavians –

while it is perfectly true that many authors came from Moldavia. And the “argument” is further translated into the field of literary or standard language: it seems to function, in their opinion, as a strong counter-argument relating to the (very general) “model” presiding over the establishment of the Romanian language (“Look here, the Wallachian variant is simply out of the question, because these Southerners are rather illiterate... Besides, they have no idea how to make decent bacon or some serious brandy!”). Obviously, this kind of silly squabbling bickering is apt to propagate and be circulated, quite in keeping with the pattern of the old folk adage that runs like this: “A shard laughs at a cracked pot”⁴; some Transylvanians say “*N-am numai un leu la mine*” (meaning “*Am numai / doar un leu la mine*”) or “Potoliți-vă-ți!”, yet they mock, and judge harshly, the famous *Wallachianism* “*Avem decât ce se vede*”, or the (really mind-boggling) forms *loseserăți* (instead of *luserăți*), *noi am făcutără* (instead of *noi am făcut*), *dîntre* (instead of *dintre*) and *pîntre* (instead of *printre*); the Moldavian, who is convinced that the standard form is “*Nici într-un caz*” rather than “*În niciun caz*”, and it is equally appropriate to say *a mea* and *a meu*, makes fun of grammar concord solecisms committed by “Southerners” such as *ei zice, ei face, ei vine, ei zicea, ei făcea, ei venea*; the Oltenian, who pronounces *acia* (“aici / aicea”), *elea* (“alea”), *dupe* (“după”), *pintrre* (“printre”), *fusasă* (“fusesse”), *iassă* (“ea zise”) and *ioscă* (“eu zic că”), laughs at the phonetic regional variants *acilea* and *acoloșa* as used by people living east of the banks of the Olt river; the inhabitants of the former counties of Vlașca and Teleorman, who say *șăfule*, “*aldor* Nelu” and “Te-oi vede eu”, are amused by the forms *ălea*, *el veniră*, “*unchea mea*” and *doape*, as used by people living further up north near Cămpulung, and the fact that “those blooming Moldavians say *gin* instead of *vin*”... And so on, and so forth...

The way stupidity is perceived also differs in accordance with the historical period: for instance, what now could be called an *ecological* attitude was (rightly) labelled, at the turn of the twentieth century, as *narrow-mindedness*; to give only one example: the backward, ankylosed attitude of the traditionalist rural petty aristocracy and yeomanry – as appearing in the appalled description of the ‘terrifying’ reality in the “country of the Germans and suchlike Western countries” that some of Sadoveanu’s characters in *Hanul Ancuței* make.

What we are dealing with, in most cases above, is elementary lack of patience (or availability) – in listening to your interlocutor. To take an example from my personal experience: one of my older colleagues warned me, in an interrogative-rhetoric tone, when hearing that the theme of my doctoral dissertation was “The etymological structure of the neologistic vocabulary of Romanian – with special reference to Anglicisms”, that “is it still possible to find any new today etymologies today?” The same person observed to me, contemptuously, that “everyone is compiling dictionaries at present” – which I have since heard said by other people, including a publishing house manager! The *normal* attitude (i.e. the attitude that differs from a fool’s hard-line opinion) should involve at least an attempt to

⁴ The closest English equivalent is: ‘The frying-pan said to the kettle, “Avaunt, black brows!”’

understand the other’s point of view. Besides, stupidity can result from misunderstanding the terms of the discussion (when, in fact, two people speak in parallel – or, concurrently, about the same thing, using a slightly different terminology).

When “common sense” manifests itself as simplifying primitivism, that attitude is confusable with stupidity. The direct opposite could be, in this context, the affected, solemn stupidity of petty scientists: in his masterpiece, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift shows us the caricatured image of the Academy in Lagado. Similarly, Poincaré mathematically proved the impossibility of a craft heavier than air to fly, only one or two years before the Wright brothers’ successful aviatric experiment. In parallel, however, when fantasy is manifested fully and freely in the scientific field, the very notion of science is damaged to the point of annihilation; one could exclaim, parodically paraphrasing Rabelais, “Conscience without science is the ruin of spirit”). Actually, one can say that one of the worst curses of modern times is (pseudo)science in excess – which logically implies less and less conscience...

Today, some favourite areas of manifestation and expression of omniscient stupidity are politics and football, and unfortunately also scientific disciplines such as linguistics and history. Quite often, the humanities and most artistic pursuits have been adept at exploiting (indeed, through intermediaries, i.e. through ‘advertising agents’, officially recognized as such or not), and even at speculating stupidity – rising straight from human gregariousness (see for instance the parable we are presented in the H. C. Andersen’s famous tale of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*)... And yet experimentalism in the field of the fine arts was just at its beginnings (which were rather naïve, we have to admit) when Andersen wrote this profound parable-story. Let us be frank, a rather confusing and unsettling, if not even troubling, question is that referring to the percentage of the experimentalist artists and writers who really *liked* what they created. It seems that, especially in more recent times, originality is also appreciated in keeping with the amount of nonsense that you say, casually and *judiciously*.

Typically, intelligence, expressed verbally, suffers from the (anyway, relative) drawback of superficiality. One could hence define a subtype or subclass that one might call *ranting stupidity* – that is, confusion between speech and thought: when someone (excessively) likes the buzzing words that (they think) they hear in their head. It can be assumed in all truthfulness that, for at least a couple of decades, the worst antisocial force is (not only in this country) *cheerful* stupidity – and, when this proves fit or at least enjoyable – very *aggressive* stupidity.

Both absolute generalization and sickly perverse relativity can generate manifestations of stupidity. One can notice the following dilemma – perhaps the most painful one in our time: the conspiracy theory vs. supreme (and undeniable) relativity of all human knowledge. In the context, the best way to legitimizing the absurd is perhaps permanently reducing things to the absurd, particularly through the noticeable widespread relativization: one of the clearest cases in point is juggling with the various and numerous conspiracy theories. *Unconditional tolerance* seems to be the new type of absolutist *orthodoxy*; likewise, relativistic *extremism*. From this angle, we can say that the dogmatic

historian-dictator, for instance, is the individual who really believes that, in history, nothing happens without a cause.

There are people who will not believe normal things – or who are not interested in the normality of things – but who would instead believe, anytime and unconditionally, the most implausible assertions or the craziest, mind-boggling gossip, especially if they relate to people that are well known (even, or mainly, from the media, including *Radio Erevan*). Hannes Stein, in his book *How I have given up thinking*, satirizes the ease with which people give credit to dozens of contemporary stereotypes, labels, preconceptions and other *idées reçues*, which mostly belong to the complex set of “conspiracy theories”. It is however noticeable that, the author’s bias or *parti pris* (for conservatism, neo-liberalism and ironic relativism) is, to a large extent, of a similar order as... self-fooling.

In a completely paradoxical (but all the more human) manner, various manifestations are reported, which are of the same kind as stupidity, when great personalities are blinded by the brilliance of their own thinking... There are embarrassing and yet natural moments when the lint and creases of the clothes of people who are really great, real Titans of humanity, are also enormous – or at least give the clear image of what the absolute prevalence of subjectivity can mean. Personally, I had such an experience, which I count as sad but ultimately instructive and wisdom-suggesting, when, talking to a “sacred monster” of Romanian and global linguistics, I suggested the theory according to which “the marked variants” tend to influence the “unmarked variants” within the border area of the isoglosses, though the opposite rarely happens – and, when I was asked to give examples, I referred to such adjacent regions of Moldavia as Buzău and Brăila (making the unpardonable mistake of forgetting that the great man was... Moldavian, by pure chance); the outbreak of revolt and contemptuous anger which followed will remain in my memory for the rest of my life: a typical case of local – or regionalist – patriotism pushed to the extreme.

In the past, various sciences – and pseudosciences – were apt to produce or exhibit theories that finally remained perfect examples of stupidity in human history – used, however, for purposes of limited or personal interest. One could cite, among the many instances of silly (pseudo)theories displaying valences of manifest human manipulation, as many parables of using science in a grotesque and interested manner, the “learned” explanations through which the Catholic monks of the Middle Ages tried to persuade the believers that there were special oaktrees, growing near big lakes, which generated geese (and those birds could obviously be eaten only and exclusively in monasteries). Currently, quite a lot of pseudoscientific, grotesque enterprises would like to fool the taxpayer, trying to “document” the wasting of public money into unprofitable investment that are dictated from the center and are based on political (i.e. predominant ideological, not economic) criteria, especially through studies, projects or PhD theses on the so-called *gender quotas*, the classification of disadvantaged areas, or the best ways to optimize the curvature of bean pods.

Similarly, the primacy of *form* over *content* is now officially proclaimed, through multiple channels (not least through school); more recently, it is an official request that

the (scientific) papers or articles should have a certain hard-and-fast format, a certain typical pattern, containing as many subtitles as possible (“because that is why they are scientific papers”). In much the same way, history textbooks (also called *alternative textbooks*) began to be “tailored” strictly, including 4 (four) pages for each topic of discussion (very much like the nearly identical ‘revolutionary’ uniforms in Maoist times); the said pages should necessarily include explanatory texts, glossaries, case studies, illustrations, themes, and are sometimes likely to leave a blank page for the sake of some miserable illustrations or quotations printed on the opposite page.

In the strict field of *philology*, a patent (and quite common) manifestation of stupidity lies in opacity (based on an attitude that claims to be analytically scientific or “strictly grammatical”) as to the profundity of the idea or the artistic refinement of the literary expression: there are many so-called critics or teachers who strictly sequentially, or purely referentially and contextually, analyze texts like: “Sara pe deal buciumul sună cu jale, / Turmele-l urc...”, “Când, cu gene adormite, sara suflu-n lumânare...”, “Fruntea albă-n părul galben / Pe-al meu braț încet s-o culci, / Lăsând-pradă gurii mele / Ale tale buze dulci” sau “Ale turnurilor umbre peste unde stau culcate...”).

However, it seems that the most interesting variety of stupidity is foolishness that is (at least allegedly) *learned* or *educated*. Here are some incredible quotes that we found in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (excerpted from the article about the Romanian language – *Rumanian*): “In all, there are two diphthongs (*neam, oare*). The sequence *eo* is controversial, but is generally regarded as two separate vowels, rather than a true diphthong: *deoparte*.” (...) “Table 2 shows a further unusual feature of Rumanian: the occurrence of a viable neuter gender (again the result of Slavic interference), which revived the dying Latin neuter system. (...) However, Academy-inspired linguistic engineering has seen to it that only loans with inanimate reference have entered the neuter paradigm, thus reinforcing the semantic basis for the ‘neuter’ label”.

Among the main mistakes of some relatively recent artificial, stilted approaches to various philological topics, there are “stylish” imposture, (neo)snobbery (which looks rather like wearing a tuxedo and carrying a demijohn in one’s hand), stupid absolutism, theoretical authoritarianism, or obsessive longing for language *universals*. It is true that *abstraction* is the brilliance of human intellect – more often than not, a diamond’s brilliance; yet sometimes, abstraction is mere rhinestone shine.

At one point in the course of Western history, the Latin language was seen as a universal model, based on (formal) logic; currently, it is the English language... and GTG... In the name of looking for the absolute by means of scientific-explanatory and synthesizing universality, some books of linguistic theory incongruously and unscientifically mix the various levels of analysis or research: for instance, what is a phenomenon belonging to diachrony is dealt with as the object of synchronous description (e.g. Ioana Ștefănescu referring, in her book *Morphology. Word Formation*, to Truncation Rules applying to a noun like *reception* – cf. *to receive*).

In many such enterprises, the original intentions were good, and the work carried out was immense, but the final

results were at least (or at best) questionable – being very similar, from this angle, to artificial languages such as Esperanto. Incidentally, artificial languages, in general, no matter if we refer to Esperanto or volapük, are genuine linguistic hotch-potches – all the more appalling as they actually resemble natural languages: terrible, puzzling – though perfectly functional – mixes of shape, meaning, purpose and convention; only the former were made methodically. Here are some more remarks on, and illustrations of the role of stupidity in linguistic and philological research, analysis, reflection, etc. (out of a whole a series that could result in “A Brief History of Stupidity in the Domain of Philology”): there are quite numerous would-be experts in the field who enormously like to pose as small dictators, although they lack the real knowledge for the job (and sometimes elementary logic). They want to impose pseudo-rules (such as *haină din piele* – not *haină de piele*, *cană cu apă* – not *cană de apă*, *a-și pune căciula pe cap* – not *a-și pune căciula în cap*, or avoiding the phrase *prima prioritate* as pleonastic), which essentially go against the usage of the Romanian language and its functional logic. Likewise, some Romanian grammarians dictatorially claim that there is a crucial difference between the relatives *ce* and *care*, or that one must needs say “*acest lucru îl determină pe vorbitorul comun de română să utilizeze...*”, as though “*acest lucru determină vorbitorul comun de română să utilizeze...*” were not correct. There are textbooks of contemporary Romanian in which we are informed, in the language history section, that words like *ceară* or *ceapă* were historically derived from Latin *cera*, and *cepa*, respectively (through the diphthongization of vowel *e* under stress – in much the same way as *roată* evolved phonetically from Latin *rota*), whereas in the phonetics section the transcription of the same does not show the diphthong – [čară] and [čapă], respectively! A similar category of linguists indulge in the proclaiming “rules” that are nothing but self-deception attempts of a more theoretical type (a case of *wishful thinking*, in fact); for example, the “rule of the feminine gender exception” (or *REF*), which nobody knows who suggested, and which is allegedly applicable in cases like *I-am văzut pe băiat*, but *am văzut-o pe fată*... Or trying to postulate the existence of a degree of comparison called *inferlative* (!) in an attempt to replace the already existing, traditional comparison degree commonly called *superlative of inferiority* (as in *the least intelligent student*)... Or the idea that English possesses a type of selectivity, based on the indexical-deictic value of *I* (and *you*) vs. *he* / *she* and *they*, which allegedly led to the capitalization of the personal pronoun for the first person singular (spelt as *I*)!... In reality, the explanation, although by no means very simple, is much more mundane: “(A) an isolated *i* was liable to be misunderstood (though this is not true nowadays on, for example, facebook) or misread; this is not true of pronouns of two or more letters (i.e. all others); (B) quoted off Internet: “The pronoun *I* began to be ‘capitalized’ around the middle of the 13th century. But this was not true capitalization. Note that it was long before the printing press: all texts were in manuscript. Before the 11th century, the letter *i* was normally just a short vertical line, without a dot, *ı*. The *j* did not exist as a separate letter. When an *ı* was written as a separate word or mark, as the Roman numeral *i/I* and the pronoun *i/I*, or when it was the last one

of a group of *ı*'s, it began to be written elongated, somewhat like a straighter *j* (without a dot). This elongation of the separate, single *ı* was probably done in order to avoid confusion with punctuation marks. That of the last *ı* of a group was mostly in order to avoid confusion between *u* and *ı*, between *n* and *ı*, and between *m* and *ıı*, which often look identical in manuscripts: from then on, such groups looked like *ıj* and *ıj* (without dots). I believe that this convention of elongating the pronoun *I* had already been established by the time the dot was first used. Because a long *j* without a dot looks much like a capital *I* – which has been written the same way since Antiquity – , it was later assumed to be a capital. (Incidentally, the dot was then usually written as a very short diagonal line above the *ı* or *j*). (C) From <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=I>: “The reason for writing *I* is... the orthographic habit in the Middle Ages of using a ‘long *i*’ (that is, *j* or *I*) whenever the letter was isolated or formed the last letter of a group; the numeral ‘one’ was written *j* or *I* (and three *ııı*, etc.), just as much as the pronoun”. [Otto Jespersen, “Growth and Structure of the English Language”, p. 233].

From what we can see in this area of knowledge, there is a myth of *novelty* restlessly haunting some scholars (which is *novelty* at any price), plus some massive *rewriting* (not only of history). This attitude is very similar to the kind of “modern” wondering about the achievements of the past, which is usually expressed as: “Hey, those guys before us were pretty clever, after all!” One of the most absurd replies addressed, for example, to someone who is seen as an “old boy” is: “You know, there are quite a few new things in the field that have recently appeared”... A possible answer could be that *new* things are very often of too little practical use and value – especially in areas like philology (though, indeed, they can be collected, dissected, emphasized, brought to light, etc.). Besides, not all theoretical or procedural novelties represent something superior, while older things do not necessarily need to be *outdated*, *obsolete*. (In linguistics, there has even been a *minimalist* type of research...) Yet various superabstract “explanatory” systems continue to be cultivated, systems that fail to further research or bring new things, but rather *postulate* rules invented by their authors (*wishful thinking* again!)... It seems that the quest for abstract principles leads to mock-philosophical superficiality; modernism at all costs can lead to hyper-abstract constructions and systems..., which are mere mental constructs! Such systems will most likely remain perfectly unusable mental creations. It can be seen as a totally counterproductive “palimpsest pattern”. Absurd imposition of one’s own beliefs or tables of values can be perceived, as it were, even in “higher places” (we often heard declarations based on the conviction that “What I do is superior, *The Real Thing*” – for instance, the late Professor Petru Mihai G., who was of the opinion that “linguistics can stunt and warp your intellect, unlike literature...”, or professor Dan M. declaring “I am also a devotee of the letters, in actual fact, but I am doing linguistics just for a change”). Actually, it can be seen from multiple real-life examples that a linguist is by no means a *nerd*, just as every follower of literature is automatically an inspired individual, whose thought flies high. (The mutual and cordial contempt opposing linguists and literary people, or the conflict opposing grammarians

and lexicologists, seems to be ... another form of stupidity.)

One can often perceive (extreme) subjectivity in linguistics, or else voluntarism manifested to the full: for example, we heard the late professor Gheorghe Mihăilă, an expert in Slavic studies, talking about the Croats' joy (which was, incidentally, quite justified) because they had proclaimed their state independence – without however trying to counterpose it, humanly and historically, the idea that, unfortunately, Croats and Serbs speak virtually the same language (a language that is, objectively, called Serbo-Croatian, or Serbian-and-Croatian) and, in economic, political, historical, etc. terms, their leaders made a big mistake, allowing themselves to be driven by foreign interests and continuing, and then escalating, a senseless historical conflict.

As could be expected, many crackpot, pseudo-scientific ideas are to be found within the field of etymology, where ignorance, superficiality, unbridled fantasy and stupid arrogance combine, resulting in absolutely rare pseudo-etymological howlers, such as suggesting etymological relatedness between the Soviet-inspired term *politruc* and the old Romanian place names *Sălătruc* and *Bălătruc*, or fanciful etymologies (e.g. *mujdei* derived from French *mousse d'ail*, *mișto* derived from Germ. *mit Stock*), or even whole series of “etymological stories”, for example the false etymology of the phrase *raining cats and dogs* (“A false theory stated that cats and dogs used to cuddle into thatch roofs during storms and then be washed out during heavy rains. However, a properly maintained thatch roof is naturally water resistant and slanted to allow water to run off. In order to slip off the roof, the animals would have to be lying on the outside – an unlikely place for an animal to seek shelter during a storm”), or the false etymology of the old saying *Do not throw the baby with the bath water* (from the idea that, in the past, infants were the last to be bathed, so the water in the bathtub became so dirty that they could be lost; “The oft-quoted origin, that babies in medieval times were bathed last, when the water was pitch-black and dirty enough that an infant could be lost in it” – which “began life in the German language, and is still popular in the form *das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten*”).

Another variety of silly pseudo-etymology (somewhat more aggressive, as it also tries to “find arguments” on the plane of theories) is represented by the group of the “esoteric experts”. As in the case of other incredible eccentricities, older or more recent, one can even admire the amount of energy and sheer imagination invested in such extravagant Romanian-centred “etymological explanations”, which more often than not involve exaggerated pseudo-Dacianisms and protochronisms such as: “In the beginning was the *Word*” (in Romanian: *Cuvântul*, derivable from *cu* “with” + *vânt* “wind”, i.e. “inspired by the breath of the ghost or spirit”); the Sanskrit for *father* was *pitar* (just like Rum. *pitar* “baker” – hence, “the one who administers the bread, or the one who is master of bread”). The eagerness of such arguments meant to prove “pre-Dacian etymologies” can sometimes generate absolute gems, such as the following literal “equation”: *GODEANU* = *GOD E ANU* (“God is Anu”)!

We can refer to etymology, in principle (starting from the very etymology of the term, i.e. “quest for truth”), in a superlative manner. But what some people try to turn it into,

while invoking “the absolute truth”, is the clearest token of lack of wisdom... David Crystal speaks about etymology as not precisely adequate in point of understanding the analytic elements, general structures and actual usage of natural languages – in fact, sometimes etymology is even “subversive” (v. the *humble* etyma of words like *religion*, *quintessence*, etc. – or the numerous etymological and translation errors that truffle most books of etymology and Translation Studies)... And yet, what a cultural, or widely spiritual, loss would mean to ignore, reject or marginalize etymology! Especially when one remembers that, etymologically, *etumon* means “basic sense of”, and came, in turn, from the adjective *etumos* “real, true”... Moreover, it can be said – without exaggerating in the least – that etymology helps with research of the “cultural archaeology” type. Let us remember the linguistic research direction called *Wörter und Sachen* (“German for *words and things*) (...) a philological movement of the early 20th century, based largely in Germany and Austria. Its proponents believed that the etymology of words should be studied in close association with (in fact, in parallel with) the study of the artifacts and cultural concepts which those words had denoted. This process would, it was argued, enable researchers to study linguistic data more effectively. Many of the principles and theories of the *Wörter und Sachen* movement have since been incorporated into modern historical linguistics; for example, the practice of cross-referencing with archaeological data”. Therefore, both the attitude of extreme laxity, and extreme (supposedly scientific) strictness are equally grotesque. There are, on the one hand, the “arcane mysteries” of aural-proactive etymology (when, for example, *sictir*, *canci* and *fă / fa* are adorned, by the linguistic imagination of most Romanians, with the high status of cursing or salacious, spicy speech – although they mean simply: “Go away!”, “nothing” and “hey” – for a female interlocutor). It is this sort of “oral etymologists” that can be entirely happy: only they can have “revelations” that can throw them into ecstasies, such as *maramă* (“folk veil” – falsely derived from *mă-nramă* “it is framing my face”), *aleluia* (“Hallelujah” – falsely derived from *ale Lui (e)* “it is His”), *Plosca* (name of a village in Teleorman county, literally meaning *flask*, where, “as it is said”, Michael the Brave once passed through, being very thirsty, and a local invited him to drink water from a flask); or that *Rîmnicu* (Vilcea/Sărat) etymologically derive from *Romnicu* (cf. *Romanicus*). On the other hand, there are enough examples of “etymological correctness and strictness” carried to the absurd: we can even imagine a general who, being a highly educated man, would obsessively like to *decimate* the population of a region conquered in the strict 1/10 ratio and keep sick people in *quarantine* for 40 days on the dot, or a dictator, as cultured as the former, who would apply *nepotism* only to *nephews*.

It is observed that, insofar as language is concerned, rubbish, if apparently interesting, spreads like wildfire (or, as the French say, *elles font tache d'huile*, in keeping with one of the postulates belonging to “Murphy’s Laws”: if one pours only one spoonful of sewage water into a barrel filled with the best wine, it will turn all the wine into sewage water). Here are just a few examples illustrating the usage of the Romanian language: *Trebuie că el s-a speriat* (instead of *Trebuie să se fi speriat*); *Lucrează ca și inginer* (instead of

Lucrează ca / în calitate de inginer); *Tocmai ce a plecat* (instead of *Abia (dacă) a plecat / Numai ce a plecat / Adineauri a plecat*).

If there does exist *official* stupidity – a type of stupidity that is affected and “intellectual”, and also “scientifically” standardized – in much the same way there is the *authority* of stupidity, which is manifested by abusing the semantics of the Romanian language. For example, the terms *staționare* (“stationing”) and *parcare* (“parking”) are defined, while *oprire* (“stopping”) is redefined by the Romanian police; if one stops – i.e., “immobilizes the vehicle” – only a few moments, for instance as long as someone needs to get off the car, the action should not be called stopping or *a stop*; in other words, if *stopping* is short, it is not *stopping*! It is a clear case of semantic-conceptual voluntarism, which is utterly laughable (and also terrible, on closer analysis).

Another aspect of foolishness, a calmer one to be sure, is disbelief in front of the evidence, which is usually expressed through questions like: “Are you sure this is correct / accurate?” Here are some examples, that we culled from own experience: the pronunciation of words like *Somerset Maugham* and *love*, the spelling of *fleur* or *etymology* (vs. **floeur* and **ethymology*). No doubt, the cultural past is by no means devoid of such stupid and arrogant errors: e.g. would-be “educated”, (pseudo-)Latinate spellings, such as *doubt*, *debt*, *receipt*, *verdict*, and also *gaol*. The same category surely comprises the cases of hypercorrection, including phonetic hypercorrection – some of which have already become history, e.g. *sunt* (instead of *sînt*), *egrasie* (instead of *igrasie*), *plastelină* (instead of *plastilină*), *elastec* (instead of *elastic*), *ceaslă* (instead of *chasselas*), *cătină* (instead of *cătină*), *căpsulă* (instead of *capsulă*), *măscul* (instead of *măscul*), etc. Similarly, the shape and meaning of a number of neologisms (which are quite common in the language) are stubbornly used erroneously, e.g. *grizonat* (instead of *grizonant*), *inopinant* (instead of *inopinat*), *salutar* (meaning “care merită salutat”), *inerent* (meaning “inevitabil”), *lasciv* (meaning “molatic”), *fobie* (meaning “obsesie”). As a socio-linguistic phenomenon, we can state that the same class includes the so-called *PC words*, a category of abusive euphemisms, proclaimed dictatorially and hypocritically. Euphemisms, this universal anesthetic of verbal operations conducted from one human to another, currently make up a whole *PC vocabulary* – not only in the Anglophone world. Here are some examples of *PC euphemisms* (not necessarily the most tasty bits), which we randomly collected from the English lexicon: *rather economical with the truth*, *to have a drink problem*, *intellectually challenged*, *to be tired and emotional*, *past one’s sell-by date*, *to be in a non-profit situation*, *visually impaired*, *senior citizens*, *financially embarrassed*, *to have the cat put to sleep*, *to downsize a company*. Euphemisms (or *politically correct* terms), when used in matters of race or ethnicity, sound – if we think more than twice – very much like cynicism; here’s what Whoopi Goldberg said: “I dislike this idea that if you’re a black person in America then you must be called an African American. I’m not an African. I’m an American. Just call me black if you want to call me anything”. In the ocean of euphemisms that surrounds us – among *dizabilitați* “disabilities”, *disponibilizare* “redundancy”, *externalizare* “outsourcing”, *delocalizare* “relocation”, *pierderi colaterale* “collateral losses”, etc. –

what precisely should those whom poverty causes to commit suicide be called, maybe *terminally underprivileged*?

More recently, we witness (because there is nothing much one can do about it) the onslaught of an *antiscientific* (or *anti-knowledge*) attitude, especially in the fields of linguistics and history: for example, there are people who claim that the correct pronunciations of *eu*, *el*, *ei*, *ele*, *ea*, *este*, *era* are [eu], [el], [ei], [ele], [ea], [este], [era], respectively; that *datorită* is semantically different from *din cauza / din pricina*; or people who staunchly support the widespread idea that the population of Dacia cannot have been Romanized “in about 170 years”, etc... It is evident that Romania has been, at least ever since Caragiale’s period, the country where the average people have multiple and *solid* theories as well as “personal ideas”: from the *magnetism* preached by Caragiale’s *Catindate* to the current relentless of those who know (better than the experts in linguistics) everything about the so-called ins and outs of the “imposition” of rules for the Romanian standard and literary language that were based on the (Southern and / or) Wallachian varieties of pronunciation and grammar; or why we have to spell and pronounce *sunt* (rather than *sînt*), *monetă* (rather than *monedă*), *cruciată* (rather than *cruciadă*), *Iisus Hristos* (rather than *Isus Cristos*), “am plătit factura de / la gaz” (rather than “factura la gaze”); why it is still more acceptable to say “eu, ca și inginer...”, though it is utterly wrong to say “am decât un leu”; why it is better to write *târât* (rather than *tîrît*), *mă(-)ti* (rather than *mă-tii*), *niciun, nicio* (rather than *nici un, nici o*), etc... Anyway, it is pointless to try to refute them, because “they know better” (as the late Alexandru Graur used to say). Then, we could ask ourselves what is the use of dictionaries and (official) grammar since, anyway, “usage dictates the standards”, and, in general, common people have their own ideas about “what is right” in using their language (which is, after all... *their own!*), and everything that you tell them in this respect, to correct them in the spirit of the standards and rules (which are established by *specialists*), is seen as outdated, self-centred, affected or dictatorial?

But the (sometimes general) lack of interest leads to enhanced narrow-mindedness (or even intellectual blindness), or else to morbid self-sufficiency. The late Ileana Vulpescu gave the example of one of her acquaintances, who was a member of the Western academic world, yet did not know (mainly because she did not want to) that the Romanian language is a Romance idiom – like Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Provençal and Romansch. Anyway, it is really strange that, while we Romanians know (that is, most of us, of course) that our neighbours are, linguistically and ethnically, Slavs – and, respectively, Asians (i.e. the Hungarians), common Hungarians, Serbs or Poles do not know that the language we Romanians speak (*Romanian*, right?) is *Romance*, i.e. derived from Latin; it might be that the explanation involves a bit more than mere disinterest.

Extremism and a type of fundamentalist approach are the basic ingredients of the despotic type of stupidity, which is, by definition, arrogant and self-assured – or seems to be encouraged (mainly by the effect of coteries). From the national literature, we have the great satirical example of Caragiale’s *Românii verzi* (“True-blue Romanians”); or the memorable figure of the Hungarian in Caragiale’s sketch

Meteahnă, who would rather eat soap wrapped in his national colours than chocolate in a differently coloured packaging...

Sometimes very honest scientific concerns may have a somewhat silly air; for example, the question, “Is linguistics a science?”, accompanied by the claim that what one desires is to establish a foundation based on scientific (i.e., efficient, repetitive, relevant, objective, etc.) concepts, criteria, principles and methods. It may perhaps be the case, however, that natural languages themselves evade – at least in certain aspects – from pure objectivity, which is strictly observable and measurable or quantifiable; perhaps again, a natural language, as a functional system, possesses a lot of the *fuzzy* dimension. A language may be subjective in that it is linked to the concrete in very specific and unpredictable ways, which are paralogical and rather hard to define, or else predominantly vague (cf. the concept of *fuzzy logic*), hence more difficult to standardize, regulate and decide on. There are sub-areas of linguistic research that lends themselves to suggesting quite well. Arguably, from that angle, linguistic analysis is very similar to the systematics of the phenomena presented and analyzed by history.

In addition, there are quite numerous cases in human history when the truth came to light as a result of some simple errors, i.e. essentially... silly approaches. For example, the Copernican revolution, which basically placed the Sun at the center of the solar system, was virtually the result of a set of estimates and calculations based on the old, erroneous model proposed by Ptolemy (in which the existence of the so-called “fixed stars” was postulated); similarly, the prerequisites of Maxwell’s central, epoch-making discovery were partially false.

Then there is a type of exclusive approach to scientific research, lying in imposing *novelty* at any cost (starting from the naively quantitativistic principle according to which newer things must by necessity be better... simply because they are more recent – *Uterior, ergo melior*). Why, for instance, should the grammatical description and analysis done in keeping with the ancient canons no longer be relevant or appropriate (e.g., the Romanian Academy’s *Grammar* edited in the mid-sixties)? The new edition seems to have brought rather few elements of novelty other than those bits of information taken over from a number of Anglo-Saxon grammars that were incompletely digested – e.g., eliminating the old, traditional Romanian reflexive voice.

Speaking of this, a rather damaging tendency seems to be, today, the attitude of absolute servility, kow-towing in front of foreigners (the “technical experts”, as it were), which ranges from their superior technical skills and abilities, their sophisticated machineries and equipment, superior public order, civic spirit, humor, etc., to their arts, culture, science, politics, language textbooks (e.g., for TEFL), etc.... Here is an example of the extremest absurdity: editing an English-Romanian dictionary under the aegis of the German publishing house Langenscheidt, by *translating* and *adapting* it! In fact, copying “the elements of novelty” in a mechanical, parrot-like manner starts with the so-called *xenisms* or *foreignisms*, i.e. that class of neologisms that are not yet adapted to the spirit of the source-language – or the connotative neologisms, which currently tend to form an Englished neo-jargon, e.g. *locație, emfatic, gradual, patetic,*

furtuna creierelor, oportunitate, determinat, a implementa, mentenanță, a se focusa, hair stylist / stilist, expertiză etc. Similarly, there are cases when philological research seems “to force open doors” (in much the same way Molière’s character Monsieur Jourdain “faisait de la prose sans le savoir”).

Moreover, one can come to wonder what was fundamentally wrong with the old approaches of literary theory and criticism? At present, feminist, postmodernist, etc. views or grids are encouraged in an absolute manner. Even in those cases where, for instance, even the author being analyzed (Ishiguro, to take an example) specifically stated that “Thinking further about the characteristics of postmodernism writing, I’m personally not interested in ‘metafiction’, in writing books about the nature of fiction. I’ve got nothing against such books, but for me there are more urgent questions than the nature of fiction.” (Quoted from *Ishiguro edited by Sean Matthews*, p. 117), some critics are making every effort to find or at least suggest some postmodernist meanings (hinting at the postmodernist appetite for demythisation, rewriting, deconstruction, vagueness, etc.).

Along the same general lines of linguistics and philology, or research of the philological type, one has to note that the worst thing is that, sometimes, elementary mistakes are made primarily because the very bases (or the “old truths”) of philology are no longer taught or cultivated: for example, there are so-called grammarians who do not teach or recognize the frequentative value of *will* and *would*, as a phenomenon that is subordinated to the grammatical category of aspect, stating instead that they are part of the system of modality; or people who do not have the most elementary notions of etymology – or the patience to search for derivations, nay even accept to be guided by someone better informed; just an example from our personal experience: a young linguist said that the Romanian slangy term *brand* was related to the English word *brand*, and she persisted in giving that information in a paper that was subsequently published, even after being told that the correct etymon was German *Brandt* (a type of mortar used in WW2). Indeed, the only way to real progress is to (critically) capitalize on tradition!

Once it happened to me to give the transitive verb *a crește* as an example of English-inspired decalcomania (as illustrated by a number of articles excerpted from the Romanian press), cf. Eng. *to increase*, and a person who worked for the Linguistics Institute of the Romanian Academy urgently asked me to “produce evidence” – in other words, to come up with examples proving that the transitive forms used for that meaning were very rare in press materials previous to the year 1990! Similarly, it seems that many journalists regularly use material – or keep at the back of their minds models – of texts written in English, e.g. in the journal *Historia*, January 2014, p. 3: “cel mai mare masacru cunoscut până atunci de *rasa umană*” (cf. Eng. *the human race* – anyway, it would be interesting to find the respective collocation of *race* in press materials predating 1990); or “Wallis Simpson, o *femeie americană* divorțată deja de două ori” (ibid., p. 6 – cf. Eng. *an American woman*). There is also – and obviously – a kind of “enlightened” (or “raisonné”) linguistic imperialism; but is it just another expression of self-delusion, or of voluntarism springing from

a type of elitism? A similar attitude lacking good judgment is not being able to admit that you, or someone you approve of, made a mistake, and trying to “cover it up”; for example, an author who is well-known (and of a rather disputable reputation) interviewed former King Mihai, and the latter said that he “a zburat avioane” instead of “a pilotat avioane” (cf. Eng. *fly planes*); the interviewer-author found it appropriate to “cover up” the interviewee’s slip-up, trying to find imaginary excuses for it in a footnote, instead of recognizing, honestly and scientifically, that the venerable character had been carried away by his (natural) familiarity with English, producing a trivial – and quite excusable – instance of *calque*.

A notable – and downright inspiring – counterexample may be the stand that the great Caragiale illustrated as a linguist and etymologist in his own right. In questions of language standardization, his attitude was brilliant: for instance, in the sketch titled *Țal!*, the writer mocked the use of the French-inspired negative form of the infinitive with imperative force (the final reply in the text is “A mă slăbi!”); in other sketches, such as *Proces-verbal*, Caragiale satirized the pseudo-etymological spelling fastidiousness of the time (e.g. *didul*, *contesteadă*, *icre moiū*). As an etymologist (“against his will”), he coined and used, in most of his literary pieces, memorable proper names such as *Ftiriade*, *Lingopolu*, *Guvidi*, *Pristanda*, *Girimea*, *Trahanache*, *Bob Schmecker*.

Stupidity (naturally vain – while also springing from crass incompetence) combines, especially in the media, with interested *manipulation*: in both the media and cyberspace, one can come across hundreds of titles that have virtually nothing to do with the information in the content proper of the articles in question, being used only to arouse the reader’s or Internet user’s curiosity; data and information with practically no grounding at all, misinterpretations and distortions, stereotypes, lack of basic logic and consistency of information, etc.

On the other hand, *manipulation* by means of language (with plenty of examples available in the field of *PC vocabulary*, but also forcing nomenclature in legislation – such as the relatively recent use of the term *reabilitare* “rehabilitation” instead of *renovare* “renovation”) is more encompassing. It is one of the (often very subtle) manifestations of eternal human swindling and deceit. Take, for example, the renewal of vocabulary in some recent examples: *invalid* → *dizabilitat*; *șomer* → *disponibilizat*; *mită* → *comision*, *găști* → *relații interpersonale*. An astounding illustration of the vagaries of “Gender equality” expressed linguistically is the relentless, active fight of the (majority of the) French-speaking female linguists against ‘Common Gender’ nouns (also called *epicene nouns*); we could safely recognize it as a theoretical and ideological attempt of fictionalisation of reality: if a *hangîță* “hostess” can be, all things considered, the owner or *manager* of an inn (not just, or not necessarily, the innkeeper’s wife), and there are plenty of female welders (Rum. *sudorițe*), crane-operators (*macaragițe*), drivers (*șoferițe*), painters / artists (*pictorițe*), notaries (*notărițe*), lawyers or barristers (*avocate*), police officers (*polițiște*), taxi drivers (*taximetriste*), footballers (*fotbaliste*), brickmakers (*cărămidărese*), money-lenders or pawnbrokers (*cămătărese*), officers (*ofițerese*), colonels (*colonele(se)*,

cabinet ministers (*ministre(se)*, journalists (*gazetare / gazetărese / ziariste*), militants (*militante*), and activists (*activiste*), how many female coopers (Rum. *dogărițe*) does one encounter in reality – or how many female miners (*minerițe*), shepherds (*ciobănițe*), engine drivers (*mecanice de locomotivă*), tractor divers (*tractoriste*), pointsmen / pointspersons (*acărițe*), corporals (*caporale*), admirals (*amirale*), generals (*generale / generălese*), sommeliers (*someliere*), boxers (*boxere*), and butlers (*majordome*)? Not to mention the female mowers (*cosașe*), outlaws (*haiduce*), buccaneers / corsairs (*corsare / corsărițe*), porters (*hamale / hămălițe*), hunchmen (*cirace*), rapists / violators (*violatoare*), etc.! Maybe one day the idea will occur to a group of men to engage in protests over the miserable fate of *male nurses*, *male kindergarten teachers*, *male hairdressers*, *male typists* or *male mulches*; or trying to get hired (as Caragiale himself jocularly suggested) as *military midwives*! (Although, on the other hand, the list of the notable pioneers of “neutral expression” includes a great name like John Stuart Mill, who proposed that, instead of *man* and *woman*, one should say simply *person*).

The worst thing happens when the “professional”, the “skilled man”, tricks the consumer, the *layman*, turning into a real predator as soon as he/she catches the latter *offguard*: I have had several personal experiences; for example, in the early 1990s, I happened to have a TV set “BLC bridge replaced”, although the device merely lacked a safety fuse that had been burned, but the money was given without further ado, for the respective piece, plus the manual labour costs; at about the same time I happened to be swindled – or tricked – off a fair amount of money for an electric typewriter... though there was actually nothing amiss! And most people call such tricks a “tax on stupidity”! Which may be true – especially from their point of view! But, this way, we should all take advantage of the minute intricacies and specialized formulas of the profession we practice, in order to outsmart THE OTHERS as lucratively and efficiently as possible; for example, a doctor should squeeze extra money out of you by telling you, either directly (with the usual grim frown) or, better still, via a close relative, that you have a very serious form of *fistulo-reticular hemostasis of the palpebral-vegetative system, combined with a slight gluteo-hexalic embolism with a distal lipidomurinic syndrome*.

Consequently, like mistakes, diseases and other manifestations of all-present evil in the world, stupidity, if recognized, can become an ally of humans, and thus an undeniable factor of *progress*. By discriminating judgment, it can return (v. the concept of *feedback*) onto the matter under investigation / analysis, like an authentic delivering boomerang; in fact, it can act redeemingly, in the guise of a vaccine, which turns disease into cure. Avoiding stupidity and (unprovoked) foolishness, you can progress... (Similarly, the preventive attitude of a driver should be underpinned by basic fear of stupidity: the stupidity of others in the traffic, or – if you are completely honest – your own, as well). So there is still a *positive* role (sic!) of stupidity: recognizing stupidity could be the first step towards wisdom... When one “makes separate peace” with stupidity informedly (v. also Ion Creangă’s story entitled *Prostia omenească / Human stupidity*, the conclusion of which gives the simple peasant the well-earned satisfaction of having seen people even more foolish than the fools in his own

family), you can actually congratulate yourself on having defeated stupidity... For the time being, at least... Yet, by overcoming it, you can somehow rediscover yourself, better and less vulnerable – in other words, a little wiser. *Encomium moriae...*

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