

PLANT NAMES IN ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH – A CONTRASTIVE APPROACH

NUME DE PLANTE ÎN ROMÂNĂ SI ENGLEZĂ – ABORDARE CONTRASTIVĂ

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Abstract: *The present paper studies the names of various plants that grow in Britain and Romania. The aim of the research is to discover the various mechanisms that are put into action when naming plants, namely what criteria are used when giving a plant its name. As we could see, sometimes the name provides information as to what practices were used involving that plant (that is the function of the plant, which can be medicinal, religious or practical). At other times, the name gives a description of the flower in question, or tells about its whereabouts.*

Rezumat: *Lucrarea de față studiază numele unor plante care sunt întâlnite atât în România cât și în Marea Britanie. Scopul lucrării este acela de a descoperi mecanismele care sunt puse în funcțiune în procesul numirii plantelor, și anume care criterii sunt folosite în acest scop. După cum am putut observa, uneori numele plantei aduce informații despre practicile în care era folosită planta respectivă (adică funcția plantei, care poate fi medicinală, religioasă sau practică). Alteori, numele dă o descriere a plantei în discuție, sau vorbește despre locurile unde aceasta poate fi întâlnită.*

Key words: *common name, Latin name, lexical equivalent*

Cuvinte cheie: *denumire comună, denumire latină, echivalent lexical*

INTRODUCTION

Plants have played an important role in people's lives, whether it was for their nutritional values, their medicinal uses or simply for their beauty. Even from the ancient times, people started to recognize them and to keep them in mind for one or more of their characteristics. Many of the names given to plants in the old times, the so-called "common names" or "vernacular names" can tell us many things about the plants in question.

It is extremely interesting to study wild plants rather than garden plants from the point of view of their vernacular names. Since garden plants have very well-known names, it seemed more intriguing to focus our attention towards wild flowers which are commonly met in the two countries: Romania and Great Britain. The people gave to flowers names they considered suitable, and we were extremely incited by the different approaches people used in the process of naming. We wanted to see whether the names tell us different things about the flowers, and about the people who named them. Another aim was that of identifying possible similitudes between the processes of naming, and between the two peoples at the same time.

The idea of the study seemed of interest to me as I have taught the students in Horticulture. When teaching a language, one surely teaches also about the culture of that country. And I found that this process of naming plants, process started a very long time ago, tells a lot about that people's way of thinking. Sometimes the name provides information as to what practices were used involving that plant (that is the function of the plant, which can be medicinal, religious, practical or food-related). At other times, the name gives a description of the flower in question, or tells about its whereabouts.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The material used in conducting this study comprises both Romanian and English books on the subject. The English book we focused on was “The Oxford Book of Wild Flowers”, written by B. E. NICHOLSON, S. ARY and M. GREGORY (found under Bibliography at number 4). This provided the English common names of the flowers. As it also contains pictures of the flowers themselves, it was a lot easier to identify them and then look for their Romanian names, as well.

The Romanian book which proved to be of utmost importance in our research is „Dictionar etnobotanic”, by Al. BORZA (to be found under Bibliography at number 1). Fortunately, this includes the Romanian common names as well as the Latin names for the plants, and also gives the common names in various languages. Usually the languages are given which are spoken in Romania by minorities (Hungarian, Russian, German). Still, as sometimes the English names are given, it was of real help in the study.

The etymology of the English words was found also in Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (Bibliography number 7). Here we found useful information regarding the origin of the words.

The material analyzed comprised 150 flowers. As we wanted to limit in a way the number of names under analysis, we chose to deal only with the yellow flowers. But although the number of the plants is the one mentioned above, the number of names is far larger: for each plant, we found at least 3 names in each language. Sometimes we found even 10 names for the same plant. The explanation for this can be found in that the names were all used in different parts of the country.

The Romanian and English names were the interest of this paper, but sometimes the Latin name proved important too, whether because it was similar to the English or Romanian name, or because it brought some new information about the plant. That is why the Latin name is also sometimes mentioned and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are very inciting. Just as we supposed at the beginning, the names can tell many things about the plant itself. We can differentiate several classes of names of plants, based on the process of naming. First of all, there are the names which describe the appearance of the flower. Thus, we can have names referring to the color of the plant (either of the leaves or of its inflorescence). Such an example is the English “silverweed”, named this way because of the color of the leaves. The Romanian equivalent is “argentină”, with its variants “argințică”, and “argințel”, clearly referring to the same thing as the English counterpart. We only found one English name of this plant, but eight Romanian names, not all referring to the color of the plant. Some of them refer to its use: thus we have “buruiana scrântiturii”, “scrintitoare”, “scrintea”, “scrinteală”. All these refer to the fact that the plant was often used in folk medicine to treat hurt ankles, or sometimes it was simply placed in shoes to keep the feet comfortable when walking long distances. Interestingly enough, although we found the same use at the English, the name does not reflect this. This is not all: the Romanians also gave another name to this plant: “iarba găștii”, which refers to the place where the plant can usually be found. It grows freely on closely-grazed land, such as goose greens, hence the name. Actually, this name resembles very much the Latin name, which is *Potentilla anserina* L.

Besides the names referring to the color of the plant, there are those referring to the color of its inflorescence. Thus, we have “goldilocks”, which in Latin refers to the same characteristic: *Ranunculus auricomus* L., but which in Romanian is totally different. Here it has the name “buruiana de nouă daturi” – referring to its use rather than its appearance- and

“talpa cocoşului”, referring to the shape of its leaves.

Another class is the one made up of names which give information as to the shape. We are talking about the shape of the leaves, as in “herb tuppence”, also known as “pennywort”, which owes its name to the fact that the leaves are nearly round, as a coin. The Latin name also has the same meaning: *Lysimachia numularia* L. Also, the shape of the inflorescence has been taken into consideration when naming other plants, such as “globe flower”, with the perfect Romanian equivalent “bulbuci”. It is clear that both refer to the globe-like inflorescence of the plant. Still other names refer to the whole plant, as in “creeping Jenny”, which is a plant that “creeps” on the ground. Although usually the name refers to the leaves or flower or the entire plant, sometimes other parts of the plant were taken into consideration. Such an example is a plant whose three names (English, Latin and Romanian) all refer to the supposed resemblance of its fruiting receptacle to a mouse’s tail: “mouse tail”, *Myosurus minimus* L., “codiţucă”.

Though less common than the ones already mentioned, there are instances when other characteristics are emphasized by the name of the plant. Thus, we have the plant named “stinkweed”, obviously because of its strong smell. This characteristic seemed to strike the Romanians too, since the Romanian name is “puturoasă”. The taste is also one of the features taken into account when naming. Such a plant is “wall pepper”, with the Latin name *Sedum acre* L., both referring to the bitter, peppery taste of its tiny swollen leaves. However, the Romanian name has no bearing on this characteristic: it refers to the fact that in the past it was used in folk medicine in treating haemorrhoids: ”buruiana de trânji”, “trânjoaică” (as trânji is the vernacular name used in some parts of Romania for the above-mentioned medical problem).

There are also other physical characteristics underlined by the names. One such example is “touch-me-not”, which owes its name to the fact that the ripe seeds explode when touched, shooting out their seeds. The Latin name refers to the same thing: *Impatiens carpendis noli-tangere* L. Obviously, the Romanians were not struck by this characteristic, since the Romanian name gives information about the use of this plant, rather than anything else: “slăbănog”, “buruiana celor slabi”. The plant was used in folk medicine.

“Bladderwort” is a good example for the class including other characteristics of plants emphasized by their names. Its name comes from the fact that it has small bladders on its leaves. The Romanian name refers to something else, namely to the place where it grows: on water: ”otrăţel de apă”.

Although the English name of “wayside cudweed”, also known as “marsh cudweed”, refers to the fact that it grows in damp places and waysides, the Romanian name of the same plant underlines one of its physical aspects: the fact that the leaves are wooly on both sides. Thus, the Romanian names are “iarbă flocoasă”, “iarbă lănoasă”, “lânărică”.

“Honeysuckle”, a well-known plant both in Romania and Great Britain, has been given this interesting name because its light color and strong scent attract moths and bees, which pollinate it while hovering in front of it while feeding.

We have presented so far the names of plants referring to one of their physical characteristics. But more often than not, the name refers to more than one such characteristic. For instance, the name “buttercup” refers both to the color and to the shape of the flower. The Romanian name does not refer to the same thing: it is called “piciorul cocoşului”, due to the shape of its leaves.

Besides the special characteristics of one plant or another, the names also refer to the places where they grow. These names make up the second large class of names classified according the naming process. Thus, we have names such as “rock rose”, due to the fact that it grows on chalk and limestone. As a matter of fact, it is not a rose at all, but it resembles one,

and it was given its Latin name (*Helianthemum chamaecistus L.*), which means sunflower, probably because the flowers open fully only in bright sunshine. The Romanian name keeps the meaning of the Latin one: "ruja soarelui".

As stated above, many plant names refer to more than one characteristic. We will present further on some that combine emphasizing one physical characteristic with the place where the plant grows. The "yellow stonecrop" refers both to the color of its flowers and also to the fact that it forms mats of short stems in dry places such as walls, roofs, sand dunes and even grassland. It is also known as "wall pepper" and "biting stonecrop", both names clearly referring to the same habit of growing on walls; the second characteristic emphasized, however, is not the same as before, so we are not talking about the color, but about the taste. "Pepper" and "biting" both indicate the peppery taste of the leaves.

The same holds true for "yellow water lily", which gives us information about the place where the plant is to be found (on water) and also about the color of the flower (yellow).

A third large class of names is the one composed of the names referring to the use people gave these plants. Several under-classifications are possible. First of all, there are the plants used in folk medicine and the names of which are given according to the disease it treats. In some cases, the plant is no longer used for the purpose stated by its name. This is what makes the study the more interesting, since by looking at a plant's name one can learn a lot about the past of the people that named it. Such a plant is the already-mentioned "silverweed", whose English name says nothing about the use, but whose Romanian name "buruiana scrântiturii" tells us that it used to be important in treating sore ankles. At the same way, the plant which in English bears the name "creeping cinquefoil" (referring to the fact that the flowers are made up of five petals each and also to the way it grows), has a Romanian name which indicates that it was used in folk veterinary medicine for the illness called "apucătură". The Romanian name is "buruiana apucatului"; it indicates both what it is used for and also the fact that it grows wild, so that it is not a garden plant.

There is another plant the names of which refer to its use in traditional medicine. The plant which in English is called "tormentil" (word coming from "torment", which means pain, anguish, annoyance), clearly reflects that it was used against something that was troubling sick people. Actually, in Great Britain its roots used to be boiled in milk to treat diarrhea in children and calves, thus putting a stop to an annoying situation, just as the name suggests. Interestingly enough, although the plant was recognized as a medicinal plant in Romania, too, its use is totally different, just as the name lets us know. It is called "strânsurea", and it is still used in folk medicine for the disease called "strânsura la coș", a disease of the lungs.

The "yellow loosestrife", the English name of which is a mistranslation of the Latin "Lysimachia" (the plant is said to have been named after a certain Lysimachos), has four distinct Romanian names, all providing different information about the plant, depending on the part of the country they (the names) come from. Thus, the generic name, "gălbenele" refers merely to its color. Another name, "iarba sângeului", is a proof that in traditional medicine the plant is used for diseases of the blood (both for humans and for animals). The third name found for this plant (called *Lysimachia vulgaris* in Latin) is "floare de lungoare". As "lungoare" is the common Romanian name for "typhoid fever", we easily understand another use this plant had in folk medicine. And it would be misleading to believe that the fourth name found for the same plant, "buruiana de argint", refers to the color of the plant, especially since the plant does not resemble silver at all. In order to really understand its meaning, we have to remember that "argint" has the meaning of "syphilis" in the Romanian countryside. Then the mystery is solved: the plant was used in treating syphilis. This interpretation is supported by another name which exists for the flower: "rușinici". If we think of the fact that this disease was considered shameful, everything makes sense.

A series of wild plants were also used for religious or even superstitious reasons. I placed the religious in the same class with superstitious, since more often than not, these two are intertwined, as we shall see in the following lines. These are the ones to be found in the following class of names. One example is “St. John’s wort”, which was associated (in many countries, not only in Britain) with Saint John the Baptist. It used to be hung in doors and windows to prevent the entry of evil spirits. It has the same name in Romanian too: ”floarea lui Ioan”, “iarba lui Sfântu Ion”. Somewhat related to these names are other two we found: ”iarba crucii”, “iarba spaimei” – which again tell us about the mixture between popular beliefs and religion. In Romania, it has the same use already stated for Britain; it is believed to protect against evil spirits. Still, in Romania we found other various names of the same plant which account for its being used in circumstances related to medicine. Thus, it is also known as “iarba sângelui”, because it is a traditional remedy for the cattle which eliminate blood in their urine. It is also called “pojarniță”, due to its use in treating measles.

Another name for “cowslip” is “Paigle”, because the heads of nodding flowers are thought to symbolize St. Peter’s bunch of keys.

“Bedstraw” is known in Romanian as “floarea lui Sântion”, again related to Saint John. It is the best example of how religion and superstition intertwine: (another name for it is “sânziene”, or “drăgaică”), as the same flower has names which refer to religion (St. John the Baptist’s birth) but also names indicating feasts having nothing to do with religion, but with superstition. It is true that the two celebrations follow shortly one after the other. The plant is thought to bring luck, healthy cattle, wealth and a long and happy life. That is why people hang it at their gates, bring it in their homes and make wreaths of it which they throw on the roofs of their houses. Still another Romanian name of this plant has nothing to do with beliefs, whether religious or not. It refers to a much more practical use: curdling milk to make cheese: ”închegătoare”, or ”smântânică”.

The latter name is to be included in the last class of names we will deal with here: the class of names indicating what we called practical uses. The English name of the same plant, “yellow bedstraw” or “lady’s bedstraw” refers exactly to such a use, since in old days people used to sleep on a mattress of dried bedstraw and other plants, covered with a sheet. Such a mattress smelt pleasant and could be easily burnt and renewed when it became soiled.

“Wormwood” owes its name to the fact that its aromatic scent made people use it to keep away moths and other insects.

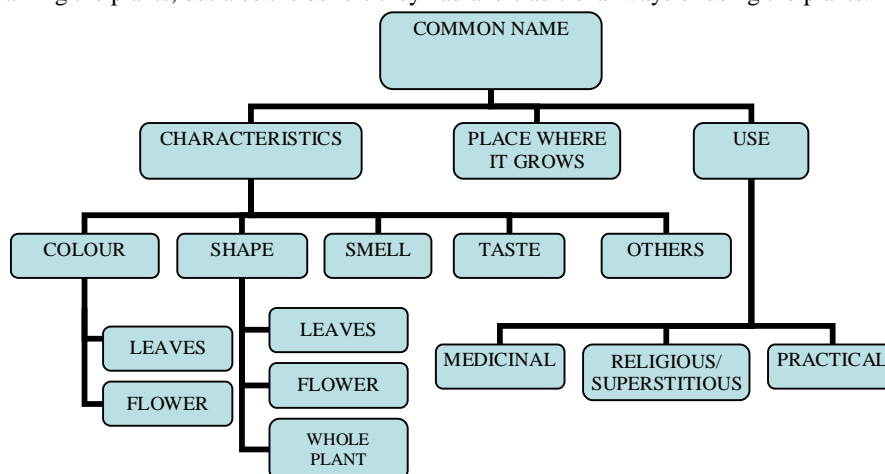
There is another plant the names of which are the perfect translation from one language into the other: “broom”, with the Romanian equivalent “mături”. It is clear that this plant has been used for the same thing in both countries: in broom-making. Even the Latin name reflects the same thing. It is called *Sarothamus scoparius L.*, the first word meaning a shrub growing like a broom, and the second word having the meaning of a broom made of twigs. Another use of this plant was that of keeping witches away (probably because the link existing in superstition between brooms and witches).

The name “dyer’s greenweed” tells a lot about the use of the flower. The plant was once used because a greenish-yellow dye was obtained from the leaves and stems - as both the English and the Latin names suggest (Latin *Genista tinctoria L.*, tinctoria = used in dyeing). Although it is no longer used for this purpose, the name perpetuates its history. In Romania, it was used for the same reason: still, the name tells us nothing about that. Instead, one of its names, “grozamă”, indicates that it was used in folk medicine against what the Romanians called “poceală”, namely paralysis.

CONCLUSIONS

As predicted at the beginning, the study of the naming processes in English and

Romanian presented inciting results concerning not only the mechanisms of thought when naming the plants, but also the beliefs they had and traditional ways of using the plants.



According to the process of naming, we could classify the names into three main categories: one including names which take into account the characteristics of the plant, another comprising names which indicate the places where the plants grow, and a third made up of names suggesting the uses that the plants have, or had at some time in the past. All classes have their subdivisions.

This classification is by no means a clear-cut one, since many plant names can be found which indicate two or even all three of the above-mentioned features of plants.

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