

Romanian Words of Arabic Origin: Scientific and Technical Vocabulary

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Abstract

There are 141 Romanian words of Arabic origin acquired either directly from Arabic or else indirectly by passing from Arabic into other languages and then into Romanian. Most entered one or more of the Romance languages before entering Romanian. **To qualify for this list, a word must be reported in etymology dictionaries as having descended from Arabic.** Words associated with the Islamic religion are omitted. Archaic and rare words are also omitted. Given the nature of the journal in which the paper is to be published, the author selected for analysis only about 126 terms belonging to the scientific and technical vocabulary: *Adobe, alambic, albatros, alcalin, alchimie, alcool, alfalfa, algebră, algoritm, alidadă, alizarină, amalgam, ambră, anil, antimoniu, azimuth, azur, benjoin, bezoar, bor, cafea, calibre, camfor, carat, carciofoi, caric, cârmâz, carob, chimie, cifru, coton, curcuma, cușcuș, erg, falafel, fanfară, felucă, fenec, gazelă, gerbil, girafă, halva, hamada, humus, iasomie, jar, julep, kaliu, lac, lămâie, lazurit, liliac, lime, marcasit, masicot, mizenă, muson, nadir, natriu, papagal, rachetă, realgar, sabkha, safari, șah, sandarac, șaorma, șerbet, sirop, sodium, sofran, sorbet, spanac, sumac, tabac, tahân, taifun, talc, tamarin(d), tangerină, tar, tară, tarhon, tarif, tasă, țechin, ton, varan, zahăr, zenith, zero, zircon*, etc. Some of them are obsolescent, but a large number are in everyday use and have been so well assimilated into Romanian that they have produced other words through derivation and composition, or they have acquired new meanings.

Keywords: Romanian vocabulary, Words of Arabic Origin, Scientific and Technical Vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Most peoples around the world have had diverse and long-lasting relationships with other languages than theirs due to social, political, economic, and cultural factors and this **language contact** has always brought about **language changes**. **Language contact** is largely associated with **borrowing**: in most situations of **languages in contact**, **borrowing**, i.e. 'the taking over of a word from a foreign language' [1], occurs most extensively on the part of **minority language speakers** from the **wider communication** into the minority language; there are rare cases of words that have become accepted within **majority**

language communities – a process called **stratum influence** [2]. Romanian is no exception.

Each period in the development of the **Romanian language** has had its **neologisms**, i.e. its **linguistic borrowings** or **loanwords**:

- **Slavicisms** (Slavic terms that entered the Romanian language through the translations of religious books, in the middle Ages);
- **Turcisms** and **Graecisms** (specific to the Phanariot Period, 1669-1821);
- **Hungarianisms** (during the Austro-Hungarian rule, 1867-1918);
- **French borrowings / loanwords** (in the modern era, the 19th and 20th centuries);
- **Anglicisms** and **Americanisms** (at present).

Romanian language has never been in direct contact with Arabic. However, there are hundreds of **Romanian words of Arabic origin** and many

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of them belong to what is commonly known as **Scientific and Technical Vocabulary**. These borrowings have been acquired indirectly by passing from Arabic into another language (usually, a Romance language such as French or Italian), and then into Romanian, as detailed by language dictionaries.

Arabic borrowings can be analysed from different perspectives: *history and distribution, lexical fields, routes of transmission, usage restrictions, re-use of linguistic materials, and semantic evolution*. Given the purpose of this paper, we refer below only to **lexical fields, routes of transmission and semantic evolution**.

2. Material and Method

This is a primary research paper reporting on the findings related to the Romanian words of Arabic origin (more exactly, to the **scientific and technical vocabulary of Arabic origin**). We did not include religious terms (e.g., *muftiu* ‘mufti’) or spiritual ones (e.g., *talisman* ‘talisman’).

The paper focuses on **lexical fields** (‘range / system of referents that have some aspect of meaning in common’ [1]), on the **routes of transmission** of these Arabic borrowings (given that there has been no direct language contact) and on their **semantic evolution / shift** (i.e., ‘a change in the meaning of a word taking place over time’ [1]).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The **lexical fields** to which belong the 126 Romanian words of Arabic origin are [1-28]:

- Technology (apparatuses, devices, equipments, instruments, fabrics, recipients, sizes): *aba* ‘thick wool fabric’, *alambic* ‘alembic’, *alăută* / *lăută* ‘lute’, *alidadă* ‘alidade’, *arsenal* ‘arsenal’, *calibru* ‘calibre’, *carafă* ‘carafe’, *carat* ‘carat’, *chitară* / *ghitară* ‘guitar’, *cifru* ‘cipher’, *damasc* ‘damask’, *darabană* ‘drum’, *erg* ‘erg’, *gaz* ‘gauze’, *jar* ‘jar’, *lufă* ‘loofah, luffa scrubbing sponge’, *magazin* ‘magazine’, *matlasă* (v.) ‘to mattress’, *moar* ‘mohair’, *mohair* ‘mohair’, *muselină* ‘muslin’, *rachetă* ‘racket / racquet’, *rismă* ‘ream (quantity of sheets of paper)’, *tambur* ‘tambur’, *tamburină* ‘tambourin’, *tar* ‘tare (weight)’, *tară* ‘tare (weight)’, *tasă* ‘demitasse, tazza’;
- Botany: *alfalfa* ‘alfalfa’, *ambră* ‘amber’, *cafea* ‘coffee’, *carciofi* ‘artichoke’, *carub* ‘carob’, *coton* ‘cotton’, *curcuma* ‘curcuma’, *hașiș* ‘hashish’, *henna* ‘henna’, *iasomie* ‘jasmine’, *lămâie* ‘lemon’, *lime* ‘lime’, *liliac* ‘lilac’, *spanac* ‘spinach’, *sumac* ‘sumac’, *șofran* ‘saffron’, *tabac* ‘tobacco’, *tamarin(d)* ‘tamarind’, *tangerină* ‘tangerine’, *tarhon* ‘tarragon’;
- Chemistry: *alcalin* ‘alkali’, *alchimie* ‘alchemy’, *alcool* ‘alcohol’, *alizarină* ‘alizarin’, *amalgam* ‘amalgam’, *anil* ‘anil’, *antimoniu* ‘antimony’, *benjoin* ‘benzoin (resin)’, *bor* ‘boron’, *camfor* ‘camphor’, *catran* ‘tar’, *chimie* ‘chemistry’, *kaliu* ‘kalium’, *lac* ‘lacquer’, *natriu* ‘sodium’, *sandarac* ‘varnishing resin’, *sodiu* ‘sodium’, *zahăr* ‘sugar’, *zircon* ‘zirconium’;
- Food and drinks: *candel* ‘candy’, *chebab* / *chebap* / *kebab* ‘kebab’, *cușcuș* ‘couscous’, *halva* ‘halva’, *humus* ‘hummus’, *julep* ‘julep’, *rachiu* ‘brandy, raki’, *șuorma* ‘shawarma’, *șerbet* ‘sherbet’, *sirop* ‘syrup’, *sorbet* ‘sorbet’, *tahân* ‘tahini’;
- Geography (climate features, geography-related activities, minerals, forms of relief): *hamada* ‘hamada’, *lazurit* ‘lazurite’, *marcasit* ‘marcasite’, *muson* ‘monsoon’, *realgar* ‘realgar’, *sabkha* ‘sabkha (landform)’, *safari* ‘safari’, *taifun* ‘typhoon’, *talc* ‘talc’;
- Zoology: *albatros* ‘albatross’, *bezoar* ‘bezoar’, *fenec* ‘fennec’, *gazelă* ‘gazelle’, *gerbil* ‘gerbil’, *girafă* ‘giraffe’, *papagal* ‘popinjay (parrot)’, *ton* ‘tuna’, *varan* ‘varan’;
- History: *cadu* ‘gadi’, *calif* ‘caliph’, *emir* ‘emir’, *sultan* ‘sultan’, *șeic* / *șeih* ‘sheikh’, *vizir* ‘vizier’;
- Clothes: *jupă* ‘jumper’, *macramé* / *macrameu* ‘macramé’, *masicot* ‘massicot’, *năframă* ‘handkerchief, kerchief’;
- Transports: *caravană* ‘caravan’, *caric* ‘carrack’, *felucă* ‘felucca’, *mizenă* ‘mizzenmast’;
- Astronomy: *azimut* ‘azimuth’, *nadir* ‘nadir’, *zenit* ‘zenith’;
- Science: *algebră* ‘algebra’, *algoritm* ‘algorithm’, *zero* ‘zero’;
- Anatomy: *mumie* ‘mummy’, *safenă* ‘saphenous’;
- Architecture: *harem* ‘harem’, *mahala* ‘neighbourhood, suburb’;
- Commerce: *tarif* ‘tariff’, *țechin* ‘sequin’

- Computer science: *Adobe* (*Systems Incorporated*);
- Linguistics: *Swahili* ‘Swahili’;
- Medicine: *elixir* ‘elixir’.

When the same borrowing designates both a plant and a product obtained from that plant, the word appears under “Botany”. When the same borrowing designates both an animal and a product obtained from that animal, the word appears under “Zoology”.

3.2. From the perspective of the **routes of transmission**, these Romanian words of Arabic origin have come mainly indirectly from Arabic through [1-28]:

- French: *alambic, albatros, alcalin, alchimie, alcool, algebră, algoritm, alidadă, alizarină, amalgam, ambră, anil, antimoniu, arsenal, azimut, bezoar, bor, calibru, calif, carat, caravană, carob, chimie, cifru, coton, curcuma, elixir, emir, erg, felucă, fenec, gaz, gazelă, gerbil, girafă, hamada, hașiș, jar, julep, jupă, lazurit, lufă, macramé, magazin, marcasit, masicot, matlasa* (v.), *mizenă, moar, muselină, muson, nadir, natriu, rachetă, realgar, safari, safenă, sandarac, sirop, sodium, sorbet, sumac, Swahili, talc, tamarin(d), tambur, tamburină, tangerină, tarif, tasă, ton, varan, zenith, zero, zircon*;
- Turkish: *aba, alăută / lăută, cadiu, cafea, catran, chebab / chebap / kebab, cușcuș, darabană, halva, harem, mahala, năframă, rachiou, sultan, șeic / șeih, șerbet, tarhon, vizir*;
- Neo-Greek: *camfor, carafă, iasomie, lămâie, mumie, papagal, spanac, tară, zahăr*;
- German: *candel, kaliu, lac, tabac, taifun*;
- Italian: *carciofoi, caric, chitară / ghitară, damasc, țechin*;
- English: *Adobe, alfalfa, lime, mohair*;
- Bulgarian: *liliac*;
- Hungarian: *tar*;
- Latin: *benjoin*;
- Russian: *șofran*.

Only seven words have come directly from Arabic: *falafel, henna, humus, rismă, sabkha, șaorma*, and *tahân*.

3.3. As for the **semantic evolution** of the Romanian words of Arabic origin analysed in this paper, we can distinguish between [1-28]:

a) **New meanings** (cases of **semantic shift**):

- *alchimie* ‘alchemy’ > *alchimie* ‘(pub., pejor.) political, economic activity, etc. with an occult component’;
 - *alcov* ‘alcove’ > *alcov* ‘(Slang) whorehouse’;
 - *algoritm* ‘algorithm’ > *algoritm* ‘(Slang) the system of distributing management positions within a coalition proportionally with the share of each party’;
 - *girafă* ‘giraffe’ > *girafă* ‘(Slang) a tall, slim person’;
 - *papagal* ‘popinjay (parrot)’ > ‘(Slang) a person that repeats mechanically somebody else’s words or opinions’;
 - *sirop* ‘syrup’ > *sirop* ‘(Slang) artistic production that is extremely corny’;
 - *spanac* ‘spinach’ > *spanac* ‘(Slang) low-quality (artistic, intellectual) products’;
- b) **Idioms** (‘forms of speech peculiar to a nation or to a limited area’ – 7):
- *alambic* ‘alembic’ > *a trece prin alambic* ‘(Slang) to examine thoroughly’;
 - *chimie* ‘chemistry’ > *Dealurile Chimiei* ‘(Slang) nickname for low-quality, counterfeited wines’;
 - *papagal* ‘popinjay (parrot)’ > *a avea papagal* ‘to be a good speaker’;
 - *spanac* ‘spinach’ > *spanac pe prispă!* ‘(Slang) you’re saying nothing’;
 - *zahăr* ‘sugar’ > *a fi de zahăr* ‘(Slang) to be nice’.

4. Conclusions

The 126 words of Arabic origin belong to a wide range of **lexical / semantic fields** (technology, botany, chemistry, food and drinks, geography, zoology, history, clothes, transports, astronomy, science, anatomy, architecture, commerce, computer science, linguistics, and medicine) and almost 25% of the Romanian words of Arabic origin belong to the lexical field “Technology”.

The most important **routes of transmission** of these words of Arabic origin have been French (almost 60%), Turkish, Neo-Greek, German, Italian, English, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Latin, and Russian, while only 5% have come directly from Arabic (words designating mainly foods).

Besides the large number of derivatives and compounds based on these words of Arabic origin, the **semantic evolution / shift** of these words shows that they are no longer perceived as foreign

words: they have acquired new meanings and make up idioms.

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