The Functional Approach to Syntactic Structures in Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language

Ion Bărbuță[1]

Abstract: Objectives: The study aims to analyze the role of the functional approach to syntactic structures in teaching Romanian as a foreign language and to argue for the systematic reintegration of grammar into current communicative methodologies as an essential tool for developing communicative competence. **Previous Research:** The paper is grounded in the principles of functional grammar and in research on communicative-oriented foreign language pedagogy, adopting a critical stance toward approaches that minimize the explicit role of the grammatical component in the acquisition process. **Approach:** The approach is theoretical and applied, based on the functional analysis of syntactic structures and on the design of a teaching manual organized around frequent syntactic patterns of spoken language, integrated into authentic communicative contexts. **Results:** The results highlight the effectiveness of a didactic progression from minimal utterances to micro-discourse structures, facilitating the gradual acquisition of syntax and reducing cross-linguistic interference. **Implications:** The study provides useful methodological guidelines for researchers and authors of teaching materials in the field of Romanian as a foreign language. **Value:** The original contribution lies in the reconceptualization of syntax as the core of language acquisition, through the systematic correlation of form, meaning, and communicative intention.

Keywords: grammar teaching; functional approach; syntactic structures; functional progression; communicative competence

---

[1] Researcher, PhD in Philology, Institute of Romanian Philology "Bogdan Petriceicu-Hașdeu", Moldova State University, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, Address: 3 Academiei Street, MD-2028, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova. Corresponding author: ibarbu2@gmail.com.

1. Introduction

An analysis of textbooks designed for teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL), with regard to the structuring of grammatical content, reveals a persistent predominance of morphology over syntax. This orientation can be observed both in older textbooks, shaped by the tradition of descriptive grammar, and in some more recent materials aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

In most Romanian-language textbooks for foreign learners, grammar is introduced primarily through morphological categories: parts of speech, inflectional paradigms, and oppositions of gender, number, case, tense, voice, and verbal mood. The sequencing of lessons generally follows the logic of accumulating grammatical word forms, while complexity is defined in terms of morphological difficulty rather than the diversity and functional importance of syntactic structures. Even when units are organized thematically or functionally (e.g. self-presentation, description, expression of opinion), the grammatical component remains focused on isolated forms, treated as ends in themselves.

Syntax, by contrast, occupies a secondary position and is often addressed only implicitly, through examples. Syntactic relations between words are rarely conceptualized, although they play an essential role in meaning construction and discourse organization.

This situation is all the more problematic in the context of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, given that Romanian is characterized by a high degree of syntactic flexibility, manifested through significant variation in constituent order and a close interdependence between syntactic organization, pragmatic information, and the speaker's communicative intent. Under these conditions, a predominantly morphological approach risks obscuring the actual functioning of the language, reducing it to a mere inventory of grammatical forms and neglecting the relational mechanisms that govern the construction and interpretation of utterances.

It may therefore be concluded that, in the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language, morphology continues to occupy a dominant position, while syntax is insufficiently exploited as an autonomous and systematically taught object of study. Such an approach, centered on grammatical forms treated in isolation, limits the formative potential of grammar, as it fails to provide learners with the tools necessary to understand how linguistic elements are organized and function at the level of the utterance and of discourse.

The consequences of this orientation are reflected in learning outcomes. Learners frequently come to master complex morphological paradigms without being able to use them effectively in authentic communicative situations. The morphological competence thus acquired does not automatically develop into discourse competence, since the organizing principle that ensures the correlation between form, meaning, and communicative intention is lacking. In the absence of an explicit and systematic syntactic approach, the flexibility of Romanian is not exploited as an expressive resource but is perceived by learners as a source of instability and confusion, which negatively affects their ability to produce coherent and communicatively appropriate utterances.

From the perspective of the CEFR, grammatical competence is not conceived as an autonomous goal, but as an integral component of communicative competence, alongside its semantic, pragmatic, and discourse-related dimensions. Moreover, European reference documents emphasize that linguistic structures must be related to the functions they perform in communication. As a result, more recent RFL textbooks have begun to reflect these orientations to some extent, by introducing syntactic patterns associated primarily with speech acts. Nevertheless, in most cases syntax remains subordinate to morphology, being treated as an extension of verbal forms or as support for vocabulary, rather than as an organizing principle of discourse.

In this context, a reconceptualization of the didactic approach toward functional syntactic structures is required. Such a perspective would allow for the coherent integration of morphology within syntactic patterns that are communicatively relevant. The ultimate goal of the teaching process would no longer be the accumulation of formal knowledge, but the development of utterance-construction competence and discourse competence, fully in line with communicative principles and with the orientations set forth in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

2. Reassessing the Role of Syntax in Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language

Before highlighting the importance of syntax in the process of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, it is necessary to consider the following aspects.

First, if we accept the fundamental premise that linguistic communication is achieved through utterances rather than through the isolated use of words or grammatical forms, it follows that the true functional unit of language is the syntactic structure. Indeed, one may imagine a language without morphology, without certain variations in word forms, but it is impossible to conceive of a language without syntax. Words and morphological forms acquire their full communicative meaning only insofar as they are integrated into an organized utterance. Syntax, therefore, does not constitute a secondary level of grammatical description, but rather the essential framework within which the semantic and pragmatic values of language are actualized, making the realization of concrete communicative intentions possible.

Accordingly, in the process of language acquisition, the central role of syntax derives from its function of organizing the utterance as the basic communicative unit. Linguistic competence is not limited to the recognition or reproduction of morphologically correct forms, but entails the ability to construct utterances that are coherent and appropriate to the context and communicative purpose. In this sense, syntax becomes the fundamental mechanism of communication, and language learning is shaped as a gradual assimilation of functional syntactic patterns, rather than as a mere accumulation of isolated grammatical forms.

Second, the relationship between lexis, morphology, and syntax should be conceived as one involving distinct levels of language that are nevertheless structurally and functionally interdependent. They do not operate autonomously, but are fully realized only through interaction within the utterance. The integration of lexical material into syntactic structures constitutes an essential condition for communicativity and for the practical orientation of the instructional process. The effectiveness of language acquisition is not determined by the quantitative accumulation of vocabulary, but by the assimilation of syntactic structures which, on the basis of a sufficient lexicon, enable the learner to construct meaning and to communicate in the target language.

At the same time, morphological forms do not possess autonomous value; rather, they actualize their grammatical meaning within syntactic relations. From this perspective, syntax emerges as the integrative level of grammatical description, where the lexical and morphological resources of the language converge and are functionally actualized.

3. Theoretical Foundations of the Functional Approach to Syntactic Structures

The theoretical foundations of a syntax-centered textbook fall within a functional conception of language, according to which syntactic structures must be related simultaneously to both the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the utterance. Syntax thus constitutes a level of meaning articulation in discourse, mediating the relationship between linguistic structures and the speaker's communicative intentions. This approach is supported both by functional grammar (cf. Halliday, 1994; Dik, 1997) and by cognitive grammar (cf. Langacker, 2008), both of which emphasize the interdependence between form, meaning, and use in concrete communicative contexts.

Eugen Coșeriu attributes an essential role to functional grammar in the description of language, considering it "the central and determining part of any grammar" (Coșeriu, 1994–1995, p. 65). In Coșeriu's model, functional grammar describes the speaker's competence to construct utterances that are semantically and pragmatically appropriate, depending on the communicative intentions and the communicative situation.

The didactic approach focused on syntactic structures is based on the premise that the fundamental unit of language learning is not the isolated word or the abstract rule, but the syntactic structure associated with a specific communicative intention. Syntax is not conceived as an autonomous formal level, but as an essential mechanism for organizing and realizing meaning in discourse. As Widdowson (1978, p. 3) emphasizes, the goal of learning a foreign language is not merely to know grammatical rules, but to be able to use the language for real communication—an objective that can only be achieved through a functional approach to grammar teaching.

Consequently, the organization of teaching materials does not follow traditional morphological or thematic-lexical criteria, but is structured around functional syntactic patterns correlated with specific communicative functions (for example: requesting, reporting, explaining, evaluating) and illustrated through authentic contextualized examples. The didactic progression is designed gradually, starting from the minimal utterance—as the elementary unit of communication—and advancing toward more complex structures: the clause, the dialogical sequence, and finally the micro-discourse. Language is thus acquired through the progressive

assimilation of these construction patterns, which are consolidated and diversified through lexical variation and the expansion of usage contexts.

From a methodological perspective, the functional-syntactic approach promotes the natural integration of morphological and lexical elements within syntactic structures, reduces interlinguistic interference, and systematically correlates linguistic form with fundamental communicative functions. Contemporary research confirms that this organic integration of functional grammar into the teaching process—through activities that contextualize linguistic units in authentic communicative situations—facilitates the development of all components of communicative competence (cf. Hymes, 1972; CECRL, 2003).

4. Adopting a Functional Perspective in Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language: Methodological and Didactic Implications

Adopting a functional-communicative perspective in teaching Romanian as a foreign language involves reconsidering the status of syntactic structures in the learning process, treating them primarily as instruments for achieving specific communicative tasks and intentions. In this context, syntactic structures are no longer presented as mere formal configurations or illustrations of abstract grammatical categories, but as recurrent units of communication, selected according to their frequency and pragmatic value in real interaction.

Within the functional approach, syntactic structures are taught as active communicative resources, shifting the emphasis from the descriptive question "How is the utterance organized?" to the pragmatic question "What can the learner accomplish using this utterance?" In this context, a central question arises for the didactic process: how can syntactic structures be correlated with communicative tasks so that they effectively support the development of learners' communicative competence? Answering this question requires relating syntactic structures to the communicative functions they perform in discourse and incorporating them into authentic communicative tasks (Dincă, 2013, p. 69). This shift in perspective becomes the fundamental criterion for selecting, prioritizing, and sequencing teaching content.

From a didactic standpoint, developing an RFL textbook with a functional-communicative orientation involves establishing coherent criteria for selecting and presenting syntactic structures according to their communicative roles. In a functional approach, learning objectives are formulated at the level of syntactic

structures and the communicative functions they fulfil, rather than exclusively at the level of grammatical categories. Consequently, the teaching process focuses on highlighting the relationship between form, meaning, and communicative intention, moving beyond the fragmented treatment of grammatical elements and facilitating language acquisition through prototypical and recurrent structures.

The selection and sequencing of syntactic structures is naturally guided both by their communicative relevance and by their degree of difficulty and structural complexity. Teaching may begin with elementary syntactic models corresponding to predicative auxiliaries (Sabeau-Jouannet, 1977, p. 94), followed by the introduction of simple sentences of the [Subject + Predicate] type, which provide the minimal framework necessary for producing utterances. In subsequent stages, these structures are progressively developed by integrating secondary sentence elements and increasingly complex syntactic relations. Such a progression has a dual effect: on the one hand, it contributes to expanding the informational content of the utterance; on the other hand, it creates the conditions for systematic organization and lexical material diversification.

An RFL textbook constructed on functional principles must select and organize linguistic material starting from syntactic structures that correspond to learners' immediate communicative needs. Thus, the fundamental selection criterion is the ability of these structures to support common speech acts and facilitate participation in authentic communicative situations. Structures are introduced and practiced to the extent that they enable the performance of functions such as self-presentation, description of people, objects, or situations, event narration, expression of logical-semantic relations (cause, purpose, condition, consequence, contrast), argumentation, or justification of an opinion.

Based on the classification of basic syntactic structures, the correlation between types of formal utterance organization and the fundamental communicative functions they realize in discourse can be clearly highlighted. From a functional perspective, basic structures are not mere grammatical configurations but privileged instruments for constructing meaning in real communicative contexts.

Simple copulative structures (*Eu sunt student. Maria este profesoară.*) are primarily associated with the functions of self-presentation and identification, frequently used in interaction initiation. By extension, these structures also serve for describing people, objects, or situations, especially when complemented by attributes or

developed predicative nouns (*Bucureştiul este un oraş mare. Casa este foarte veche.*).

Transitive and intransitive verbal structures, organized around the verbal predicate, are central for narrating events and actions (*Venim de la gară. Elevul citeşte cartea.*). Their succession allows for narrative construction and the expression of temporal dynamics, being indispensable in narrative and informative discourse.

At a higher level of complexity, circumstantial structures and subordinate clauses specialize in expressing logical-semantic relations. Causal, final, conditional, or concessive subordinate clauses allow for explaining reasons, purposes, and conditions (*... pentru că plouă, ... ca să înţeleagă, ... dacă va veni, ... deşi este obosit*).

Finally, complex structures characterized by multiple coordination and subordination are essential for argumentation and justification of opinions. They enable the formulation of hypotheses, the support of viewpoints, and the logical organization of arguments (*Cred că…, deoarece…, însă…*).

Thus, the classification of basic structures shows that syntactic progression is inseparably linked to functional progression: from expressing identity and immediate realities to constructing reasoning and argumentative discourse.

A Romanian course for foreign learners can be organized in thematic modules, each centered on a type of syntactic construction with a clearly defined functional value, rather than an isolated grammatical category. At advanced levels, these modules can integrate the communicative variation of the utterance, encompassing all constructions derived from transforming the basic structures. Although these variants convey the same referential content, they differ in parameters such as modality, informational organization, situational anchoring, and communicative purpose.

This forms a communicative paradigm of the utterance, comparable to an inflectional paradigm, in which the differentiation of variants is determined by the speaker's intention and the context of use.

In an RFL textbook, the communicative variation of the utterance can be presented as the result of transforming basic structures according to communicative intentions and the informational organization of the message. Such an approach allows for integrating syntax within a functional framework, where form is explained with reference to its discursive use.

Associating the representative, nominative content of the utterance with modal, situational, and illocutionary values can be achieved by presenting neutral basic structures, followed by series of contextualized variations. For example, the declarative sentence *Studentul citeşte cartea.* expresses representative content with a nominative value. This utterance can undergo transformations through modal, deictic, and illocutionary markers, resulting in forms such as *Studentul citeşte cartea?* (interrogative), *Să citească studentul cartea!* (imperative), *Studentul ar putea citi cartea.* (epistemic modality, uncertainty), or *Studentul citeşte cartea acum, în bibliotecă.* (situational anchoring).

In all these cases, the basic propositional content remains unchanged; however, the utterance acquires different communicative values determined by the speaker's intention and the situational context. From a didactic perspective, the textbook can organize these variations into micro-sequences that start from the same basic syntactic structure and systematically track the effects of formal changes on the communicative function of the utterance. Such an organization allows for highlighting the correspondence between linguistic form and the type of speech act performed (statement, question, request, suggestion).

The reorganization of representative content from the perspective of informational structure can be introduced through the theme–rheme distinction and the notions of focus and topicalization. Starting from a neutral sentence, such as *Profesorul explică regula.*, the textbook can illustrate derived variants, such as *Regula o explică profesorul.* (focus on the agent) or *Profesorul explică regula, nu exerciţiul.* (contrastive focus).

These transformations can be linked to concrete discourse contexts, such as answering a question, correcting an assumption, or emphasizing relevant information, facilitating an understanding of how word order contributes to the organization of information within the utterance. In this sense, practical exercises should include explicitly formulated contexts, for example: *Cine a cumpărat cartea?* → *Maria* (*a cumpărat cartea*) versus *Ce a cumpărat Maria?* → (*Maria a cumpărat*) *o carte.* Such oppositions highlight that the informational structure of the utterance is determined by the implicit question it answers and by specific communicative needs.

Through the systematic integration of informational reorganization alongside modal and illocutionary variation, the textbook can provide a coherent perspective on the communicative variation of the utterance, demonstrating that syntax functions as a

flexible instrument for constructing meaning in discourse. These transformations are essential in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, as they reflect authentic communicative competence: the choice of a syntactic variant is not arbitrary but determined by context, communicative intention, and discourse structure.

In this way, the learner understands that the diversity of utterances does not require the accumulation of entirely new structures, but rather the functional derivation and extension of the same basic syntactic patterns, adapted to different communicative intentions.

Centering the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language on syntactic structures does not imply marginalizing the morphological dimension of the language. On the contrary, grammatical categories are systematically integrated within syntactic structures according to their communicative role. Indeed, some grammatical categories, such as noun case, verbal mood, and voice, acquire their full semantic and pragmatic value only in the context of concrete syntactic relations, which justifies the need for an integrated approach to the levels of language in the teaching process.

From this perspective, the syntactic structure acquires the status of an active organizing principle of the language, facilitating the progressive assimilation of morphological information, introduced and reinforced in close correlation with the syntactic functions performed by the involved grammatical units. Morphology is thus not an autonomous object of study but an instrument supporting the construction of meaning within the utterance.

Within the functional approach, morphological categories are treated as means for realizing syntactic and communicative functions, moving beyond a formalist perspective. The case of nouns and pronouns is explained through the syntactic roles they assume in the utterance, which allows the relationship between form and communicative value of the constituent to be highlighted. Verbal voice is approached as a mechanism for reorganizing the enunciative perspective, enabling the focus on the agent, the patient, or neutralization of the agent reference, depending on the discursive intention. Similarly, verb tense and mood are contextualized discursively and correlated with semantic and illocutionary functions such as description, event narration, expression of intention, formulation of requests, or hypothesis construction. Through this integrative perspective, grammar becomes a functional means of organizing meaning in communication, directly contributing to the development of learners' communicative competence.

5. Conclusions

The analysis confirms that the functional approach to syntactic structures represents an effective and theoretically grounded didactic option in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. The study's results highlight that treating syntactic structures as functional units of communication facilitates language acquisition by directly orienting learners toward producing correct, pragmatically appropriate, and contextually grounded utterances, even before full mastery of the grammatical system.

One of the essential contributions of this approach lies in the organic integration of the morphological component into the syntactic structure. Presenting grammatical categories in relation to the syntactic functions they perform allows for the explanation of their semantic and pragmatic values, enhancing the transparency and relevance of the learning process. This perspective proves particularly useful for learners from typologically different linguistic systems, for whom specific elements of Romanian may pose significant difficulties when approached in isolation.

Furthermore, the functional approach supports a coherent learning progression, from simple structures to complex constructions, and subsequently to the level of micro-discourse. The gradual expansion of basic syntactic patterns ensures structural continuity and reduces the risk of fragmenting grammatical knowledge. At the same time, focusing on syntactic structures contributes to minimizing interlinguistic interference, providing learners with consistent models for organizing utterances and facilitating the acquisition of Romanian-specific syntactic constraints.

Another significant outcome is the strengthening of the relationship between syntax and pragmatics. Associating syntactic structures with clear communicative intentions (narrating, requesting, justifying, evaluating) promotes the development of discursive competence and supports the transition from declarative knowledge of the language to its effective use in authentic communicative contexts. In this framework, the utterance emerges as the fundamental unit of teaching and learning, as it encompasses both structural organization and the semantic completeness necessary for communication.

In this way, the syntactic component should occupy a central role in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, functionally integrating the morphological and lexical dimensions. The functional approach to syntactic structures provides a coherent model that aligns linguistic description, didactic practice, and learners' real communicative needs. Future research directions may include the empirical

validation of this model in diverse educational contexts, the development of teaching materials centered on functional syntactic patterns, and the investigation of this approach's long-term impact on the development of discursive competence.

References

CECRL. (2001). *Cadrul european comun de referinţă pentru limbi: învăţare, predare, evaluare* [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment]. Council of Europe. Romanian edition: translation coordinated and revised by G. Moldovanu (2003). Tipografia Centrală.

Coşeriu, E. (1994–1995). Principii de sintaxă funcţională [Principles of functional syntax]. *Dacoromania, I*, 29–68.

Dik, S. C. (1997). *Functional grammar. Part 1: The structure of the clause* (2nd rev. ed.). Mouton de Gruyter.

Dincă, D. (2013). Enseigner la grammaire autrement: pourquoi et comment? [Teaching grammar differently: why and how?]. *Synergies Roumanie*, 8, 67–81.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold.

Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: Selected readings* (pp. 269–293). Penguin Books.

Langacker, R. W. (2008). *Cognitive grammar: A basic introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Sabeau-Jouannet, É. (1977). Syntaxe et faits d'acquisition [Syntax and facts of acquisition]. *Langue française*, 35, 92–96.

Widdowson, H. G. (1978). *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford University Press.