Temporal Prepositions in Romanian and German: A Contrastive Perspective

Oxana Chira[1]

Abstract: Objectives: The paper provides a novel integrated model that combines semantic, contrastive, cognitive, and diachronic perspectives to explain cross-linguistic asymmetries in temporal prepositions. Prior Work: The study builds on cognitive-semantic research on the metaphorical mapping of space onto time, as well as on contrastive and typological approaches that highlight cross-linguistic differences in prepositional systems and case government. Approach: The analysis combines qualitative contrastive linguistics with corpus-based illustration, drawing on lexicographic sources, academic texts, and didactic materials. Temporal prepositions are classified semantically and compared in systematic tables that reveal patterns of convergence and divergence. Results: Findings show that both languages encode similar temporal relations, yet German favors monolexical, case-governed prepositions, whereas Romanian relies more on analytic constructions. These asymmetries generate interpretive and translational challenges despite partial functional equivalence. Implications: The study provides a clearer framework for teaching German as a foreign language, improving translation practice, and refining contrastive grammatical description in academic settings. Value: The paper offers an integrated semantic, contrastive, and cognitive account of temporal prepositions, linking synchronic description with diachronic explanation in a novel comparative model.

Keywords: time; prepositions; contrastive analysis; translation; teaching strategies

[1] Associate Professor, PhD, Alecu Russo Bălți State University (USARB), Republic of Moldova, Address: Puskin 38, 3100 Bălți, Corresponding author: oxana.chira@usarb.md

1. Introduction[1]

Temporal prepositions play a central role in the linguistic expression of time, contributing to the structuring of events, actions, and temporal relations in natural languages. Through prepositional constructions, language anchors the temporality of events, establishes relations of succession or simultaneity, and provides information about duration, frequency, or temporal delimitation of the processes described in discourse. Unlike extralinguistic time, which is measured in physical units such as minutes or seconds, "linguistic time constitutes a deictic category anchored to the moment of speech and organized through functional oppositions such as anteriority, simultaneity, and posteriority" (Herțeg, 2010, p. 223).

This article proposes a contrastive analysis of temporal prepositions in Romanian and German, aiming to identify their semantic, syntactic, and functional properties, as well as to highlight similarities and differences between the two linguistic systems. The study is situated within the tradition of contrastive linguistics, drawing on both descriptive and cognitive perspectives on temporal expression. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate that, beyond apparent formal correspondences, the distribution and semantic specialization of temporal prepositions may vary considerably, with direct implications for sentence interpretation, translation, and foreign language pedagogy. This paper argues that superficial equivalences between Romanian and German temporal prepositions mask deeper structural and conceptual asymmetries, which have not been sufficiently systematized in previous contrastive research. Addressing this gap is crucial for both linguistic theory and applied domains such as translation and language teaching.

2. Relevance and Timeliness of the Research

The interest in studying temporal prepositions is justified by several converging factors. On the one hand, recent research in semantics and cognitive linguistics has demonstrated that temporal relations are frequently conceptualized through spatial metaphors, a phenomenon encapsulated by the well-known conceptual metaphor *Time is Space* (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As König and Nekula observe, "Space and time are fundamental categories and dimensions of human thought. Although neither of these two categories can be reduced to the other, we nonetheless find clear asymmetries in the ways these two dimensions are conceptualized and expressed

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linguistically." (König and Nekula, 2013, p. 32). This insight underscores the relevance of examining how different languages structure temporal meaning through spatially motivated linguistic resources.

On the other hand, within contrastive linguistics, prepositions constitute a particularly revealing domain for investigating fine-grained cross-linguistic differences, as they reflect not only grammatical structures but also distinct cognitive models of spatial and temporal organization (cf. König & Nekula, 2013).

Within this framework, prepositions are relevant not only as elements of micro-grammatical structure but also as indicators of how speakers project abstract relations such as succession, simultaneity, duration, or temporal delimitation into language.

In didactic and translation contexts, temporal prepositions constitute a particularly sensitive domain, often generating interference and errors, especially in languages with different case systems such as Romanian and German. Moreover, the timeliness of this research is reinforced by the need to develop applied contrastive descriptions useful in teaching German as a foreign language and in specialized translation practice. It should be emphasized that difficulties do not concern only the selection of the "correct" preposition but also its syntactic integration (including case government in German) and the pragmatic interpretation of sentences depending on discourse context.

The main objective of the study is to develop a semantic classification of temporal prepositions in Romanian and German and to conduct a contrastive analysis of how they encode fundamental temporal relations. The study highlights both functional correspondences and structural asymmetries between the two languages. Consequently, it discusses both cases of relatively stable equivalence (such as "după" – "nach") and situations in which correspondence is only partial or context-dependent, which may lead to inadequate translations or errors in language acquisition.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on examples drawn from lexicographic sources, linguistic corpora, and didactic materials, enabling the investigation of both prototypical uses and context-dependent semantic extensions. Particular attention is given to classifying prepositions according to their semantic functions and identifying language-specific constraints regarding case government, syntactic distribution, and lexical combinatorics. To ensure a systematic and comparable

presentation, the data are also organized in tabular form, facilitating the identification of correspondences as well as areas of divergence.

3. Diachronic Perspective on Prepositions

In the diachronic approach to prepositions in Romance languages, the study by Mona Moldoveanu-Pologea provides a solid theoretical framework for understanding the evolution of this word class. The author demonstrates that over 90% of Romance prepositions are inherited from Latin and that, despite preserving their original semantic core, they have undergone significant processes of semantic extension and specialization (Moldoveanu-Pologea, 2008, p. 56). Morphologically, Romance prepositions originate from various Latin parts of speech, such as adverbs ("sub" < *subtus*), adjectives ("drept" < *directus*), nouns ("chez" < *casa*), or verbal participles (*durante, mediante*). However, Latin prepositions proper - simple or compound - play a central role, having been directly transmitted and adapted in Romance languages, including Romanian ("de" < *de*, "după" < *de-post*, "din" < *de-in*) (Moldoveanu-Pologea, 2008, p. 57).

This etymological perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing temporal prepositions, as many of them originate from Latin prepositions that initially expressed spatial relations. The semantic evolution described by Moldoveanu-Pologea confirms that temporal relations are frequently conceptualized through metaphorical extensions of space, a process observable in both Romance and Germanic languages. In this sense, the temporal prepositions analyzed in this study can be interpreted as results of a general mechanism of semantic abstraction, in which concrete spatial meanings are reanalyzed and reinterpreted in temporal terms.

Thus, the diachronic contribution to the origin of Romance prepositions not only complements the synchronic and contrastive description of Romanian and German temporal prepositions but also provides an explanatory basis for differences in distribution and semantic specialization observed in the comparative analysis. Consequently, the etymological approach supports the interpretation that present-day variations between the two languages reflect not only distinct grammatical choices but also different historical trajectories of semantic development. These diachronic developments help explain why Romanian relies more on analytic constructions, whereas German has developed a more compact system of monolexical, case-governed prepositions.

1. Semantic Classification of Temporal Prepositions

From a semantic perspective, temporal prepositions can be organized into several functional categories corresponding to the main types of temporal relations.

a. Simultaneity

Prepositions of simultaneity express the concurrent unfolding of two events. In Romanian, this relation is frequently conveyed through multi-word constructions such as "în timpul" or contextually through "la", whereas German uses monolexical prepositions such as "während" or "bei". For example:

Romanian: *în timpul / pe durata / sometimes la (contextual)*

German: *während (+ Genitive formally / Dative in common usage), bei (+ Dative)*

RO: În timpul ședinței, profesorul a explicat noile concepte.

DE: Während der Sitzung erklärte der Professor die neuen Konzepte.

RO: În timpul verii, mulți studenți lucrează.

DE: Während des Sommers arbeiten viele Studierende.

RO: În timpul examenului nu se vorbește.

DE: Während der Prüfung wird nicht gesprochen.

RO: La întâlnire am discutat planul.

DE: Bei dem Treffen haben wir den Plan besprochen. The formal difference is evident: Romanian uses an analytic, descriptive expression, whereas German prefers a synthetic form with fixed case government (Dative).

b. Anteriority

Anteriority marks an event that precedes a temporal reference point. Romanian consistently uses "*înainte de*", while German employs "*vor*" followed by Dative:

Romanian: *înainte de*

German: *vor (+ Dative)*

RO: Înainte de curs, am citit articolul.

DE: Vor dem Seminar habe ich den Artikel gelesen.

RO: Înainte de examen, studenții au recapitulat materia.

DE: Vor der Prüfung haben die Studierenden den Stoff wiederholt.

RO: Înainte de plecare, te rog să mă suni.

DE: Vor der Abreise ruf mich bitte an.

RO: Înainte de 2020, nu foloseam platforme digitale.

DE: Vor 2020 haben wir keine digitalen Plattformen genutzt.

Functional equivalence is stable, but German realization is more concise and strictly governed by case.

c. *Posteriority*

Posteriority is expressed in Romanian by "după", and in German by "nach" or, when marking the beginning of an interval, by "ab":

RO: După curs, am discutat rezultatele.

DE: Nach dem Seminar haben wir die Ergebnisse besprochen.

RO: După cină, mergem la plimbare.

DE: Nach dem Abendessen gehen wir spazieren.

RO: După 15 minute, începe pauza.

DE: Nach 15 Minuten beginnt die Pause.

RO: Începând de mâine, proiectul intră în vigoare.

DE: Ab morgen tritt das Projekt in Kraft.

RO: Din luna octombrie se aplică noul regulament.

DE: Ab Oktober gilt die neue Regelung.

The use of "ab" in German (*Ab morgen beginnt das neue Projekt*) shows German's orientation toward precise temporal delimitation.

d. *Duration*

Romanian uses constructions such as "timp de" or "pe parcursul", whereas German distinguishes between completed duration ("für … lang") and ongoing duration ("seit"):

Romanian: timp de / pe parcursul / de… (often context-dependent)

German: für (completed/planned duration) vs. seit (ongoing duration up to the present)

RO: Am lucrat timp de trei ore.

DE: Ich habe drei Stunden lang gearbeitet.

RO: A stat în Germania timp de un an.

DE: Er/Sie war ein Jahr in Deutschland.

RO: Pe parcursul semestrului, am colectat date.

DE: Im Laufe des Semesters habe ich Daten erhoben.

RO: Învăț germană de trei ani.

DE: Ich lerne seit drei Jahren Deutsch.

RO: Programul a durat două săptămâni.

DE: Das Programm dauerte zwei Wochen.

e. *Temporal Intervals*

Romanian: *de… până la… / între… și…*

German: *von… bis… / zwischen… und…*

RO: Biblioteca este deschisă de luni până vineri.

DE: Die Bibliothek ist von Montag bis Freitag geöffnet.

RO: Cursul are loc de la 10:00 până la 12:00.

DE: Der Kurs findet von 10:00 bis 12:00 Uhr statt.

RO: Am fost la conferință de pe 3 până pe 6 mai.

DE: Ich war vom 3. bis zum 6. Mai auf der Konferenz.

RO: Între 2018 și 2021 am lucrat la proiect.

DE: Zwischen 2018 und 2021 habe ich am Projekt gearbeitet.

f. *Frequency*

Romanian: *în fiecare / de două ori pe…*

German: *jeden/jede/jedes (+ Accusative); am (for recurring days/times), an (especially for holidays)*

RO: În fiecare luni merg la sport.

DE: Jeden Montag gehe ich zum Sport.

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RO: În fiecare săptămână avem seminar.

DE: Jede Woche haben wir ein Seminar.

RO: În fiecare an participă la conferință.

DE: Jedes Jahr nimmt er/sie an der Konferenz teil.

RO: De două ori pe lună avem evaluare.

DE: Zweimal im Monat haben wir eine Evaluation.

RO: De Crăciun ne întâlnim cu familia.

DE: An Weihnachten treffen wir die Familie.

RO: În zilele de luni biblioteca e închisă.

DE: Montags ist die Bibliothek geschlossen.

The contrastive analysis shows that although Romanian and German share similar temporal categories, their distribution and formal realization differ considerably. German exhibits a more concise, monolexical, and case-governed system, while Romanian favors analytic and context-dependent structures.

Temporal category	Romanian (form)	German (form)	Semantic value	Case government (German)	Contrastive notes
Simultaneity	în timpul	während	temporal concomitance	Genitive (formal) / Dative (common use)	German uses a monolexical preposition; Romanian prefers an analytic construction.
Contextual simultaneity	la	bei	temporal-situational simultaneity	Dative	bei has broader contextual extensions than la.
Anteriority	înainte de	vor	prior temporal relation	Dative	vor is semantically more restricted than înainte de.
Posteriority	după	nach	subsequent temporal relation	Dative	Stable equivalence, but obligatory case in German.
Beginning of interval	începând de la	ab	temporal onset	Dative	ab signals deictic orientation toward the future.
Temporal limit	până la	bis (zu)	terminus ad quem	Dative	bis may occur without an article; Romanian remains analytic.

Delimited interval	de… până la…	von… bis…	complete temporal interval	Dative	Functionally equivalent, but formally stricter in German.

Cognitively, these differences reflect distinct conceptualizations of time. The German preposition "um", analyzed by Szulc-Brzozowska, is structured around the idea of a central point or landmark, often metaphorically associated with the circular movement of a clock (*um 12 Uhr*, *um Weihnachten*) (Szulc-Brzozowska, 2010, p. 12). König and Nekula emphasize that prepositions reveal typological differences in the relationship between space and time (König & Nekula, 2013, p. 32).

From a diachronic perspective, most Romanian temporal prepositions derive from Latin, either through direct inheritance or complex semantic restructuring. This confirms the dynamic nature of the prepositional class and its tendency to shift from concrete spatial to abstract temporal meanings. For instance, Romanian "până" (< *paene ad*) developed both spatial and temporal senses from its original directional meaning. Similarly, "pe" (< *per*) initially expressed spatial superposition before acquiring temporal uses. The Latin preposition "ad" has been particularly productive, giving rise to Romanian forms such as "de", "după", and "din".

Despite not being genealogically derived from Latin, German prepositions exhibit comparable mechanisms of semantic abstraction. Prepositions such as "nach", "vor", "bis", and "seit" originally had spatial meanings before becoming specialized for temporal relations. From a theoretical standpoint, prepositions are "inflexible parts of speech that establish subordinate relations (through junction) within sentences between the predicate noun and the subject, between attribute and noun, and between complement and verb" (Bejan, 1995, p. 248). This relational function explains their semantic mobility from space to time.

Although German prepositions are not of Latin origin, Latin influence persists in scientific, legal, and academic German — especially in fixed expressions containing *ad*. Examples with the Latin ad (originally spatial meaning "to, toward" → also temporal meaning): *ad hoc* – „für diesen Anlass / kurzfristig"; ad interim – „vorläufig / für eine bestimmte Zeit"; *ad infinitum* – „bis ins Unendliche (zeitlich gedacht)"; *ad tempus* – „für eine bestimmte Zeit"

These are not German prepositions but borrowed Latin expressions that are used primarily in formal and scholarly contexts. In foreign language teaching, temporal prepositions are typically introduced in structured units, accompanied by examples and exercises. A contrastive approach highlighting differences in origin, semantic

evolution, and contextual distribution between Romanian and German can effectively reduce linguistic interference.

4. Conclusions

This study has examined temporal prepositions in Romanian and German from a contrastive, semantic, and cognitive perspective, demonstrating their central role in structuring temporal relations in discourse. The analysis shows that, although both languages encode similar temporal categories - such as simultaneity, anteriority, posteriority, duration, interval, and frequency - their formal realization and semantic distribution differ considerably. German tends to rely on monolexical, case-governed prepositions with relatively fixed meanings, whereas Romanian more frequently employs analytic, multi-word constructions that are often more context-dependent. These structural asymmetries help explain why direct translation is not always possible and why learners of German whose first language is Romanian may encounter persistent difficulties with temporal prepositions.

The findings also confirm that temporal prepositions cannot be fully understood through a purely grammatical or lexical approach. A comprehensive account must integrate semantic, cognitive, and diachronic perspectives. In particular, the diachronic development from spatial to temporal meanings in Romanian, alongside similar conceptual mechanisms in German, supports the view that time is commonly conceptualized through spatial metaphors across languages. Additional insights into German–Romanian contrasts in grammatical structure can be found in Engel et al. (1993), whose comprehensive two-volume study provides an extensive comparative analysis of the two languages.

From an applied perspective, the results are relevant for contrastive grammar, foreign language pedagogy, and translation studies. Greater awareness of the differences between Romanian analytic structures and German case-governed forms can contribute to more effective teaching strategies, improved translation accuracy, and reduced interference in multilingual contexts, particularly when these differences are understood in relation to culturally grounded models of time conceptualization (see Chira 2025 for a broader discussion on the interplay between contrastive linguistics and cultural models in language use). Future research should extend this analysis by incorporating learner corpora and experimental methods to investigate how Romanian speakers acquire German temporal prepositions in real time. Comparative

studies involving additional languages could also further refine the typological insights proposed in this paper.

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