LIMBA ROMÂNĂ, LIMBĂ ROMANICĂ

EXTRAS

BULGARIAN *МАЙ:*
FROM APPROXIMATION TO MODALITY?

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It is unanimously accepted in the linguistic literature that the Bulgarian discourse marker *май* is a Romanian loan. This is the point of view of some older authoritative sources such as Kiril Mirčev's *Historical Grammar of the Bulgarian Language* (Мирчев 1978: 82), the academic *Bulgarian Etymological Dictionary* (БЕР 3: 615), the *Etymological Dictionary of the Slavic Languages: Grammatical Categories and Pronouns* (ESSJ 2: 421–422) as well as the most recent surveys of the Romanian lexical influence on Bulgarian (Nestorescu 2002: 51; Osman-Zavera 2002: 101–102 with further bibliography). Bulgarian *май* occupies a place of honour on the list of Romanian loans: it not only belongs to a minority of the terms that have been adopted into the standard language but it also happens to be one of very few Bulgarian functional terms of Romanian origin.

Bulgarian *май* has been traced back to the multifunctional Romanian *mai*, itself an element inherited from Latin *magis* 'more' (DLR 1965–1968; DEX 1998). There can be no objection on formal grounds to the connection between the Romanian and the Bulgarian words. As to semantics, Virgil Nestorescu (loc. cit.) points out that Romanian *mai* was borrowed into Bulgarian as an expression of approximation. And indeed, if one compares the meanings of the Romanian and Bulgarian words as presented in DEX 1998 and БЕР, one will find 'aproape; aproximativ; cam [almost, nearly; approximately; roughly, about]' and 'почти [almost]' respectively. The Romanian marker of approximation is attested since the second half of the sixteenth century and has been localized – perhaps not exhaustively – in the dialects of Maramureş and Moldova (DLR 1965–1968, 6: 41–42).

To clinch this etymological solution, one should perform a standard procedure of the etymological analysis of functional elements; namely, pinpoint the context, in which the transition from the source to the target expression could have taken place. Since the existing etymology requires that both Bulgarian *май* and Romanian *mai* be markers of approximation, serving to blur the boundaries of semantic categories, this is the general area in which one should search for such a context. The *Bulgarian Explicative Dictionary* however treats Bulgarian *май* solely as a particle expressing supposition or uncertainty and provides the following equivalents: *изглежда* 'it looks, it seems, it appears', *като че ли* 'as if', *комай* 'as if', *сякаш* 'as if, as though, it seems' (БТР⁴: 431). The author of entry *maj* in ESSJ complains that, even though meaning 'téměř [almost, nearly]' is given in the Bulgarian sources, there are no examples and cites (quoting Vladimir Šaur) the

following illustration: **май не е вероятно** 'je to téměř nepravděpodobné [this is nearly improbable]'. I would rather opt for something like 'it doesn't seem probable', which invalidates this illustrative example. No more convincing are the three nineteen-century examples cited in the newest Bulgarian dictionary (РБЕ 9:62).

Still, since as opposed to Bulgarian lexicography, Romanian dictionaries provide clear examples of the use of *mai* as a marker of approximation, it should be possible to check the ability of Bulgarian *май* to function in contexts congenial for Romanian *mai*. My Bulgarian translations of Romanian sentences from various sources show the following picture:

(1) **Mai** îmi vine a crede. (DEX 1998)

Почти ми иде да повярвам/**Аха** да повярвам.

'I can almost believe it.'[1]

(2) Cetina **mai** că-i ajunge la pământ. (DEX 1998)

Четината му **почти** стига до земята/Четината му **аха да** стигне до земята/Четината му стига **кажи-речи** до земята.

'Its bristles almost touch the ground.'[2]

(3) Te-ai schimbat foarte mult, **mai-mai** să nu te recunosc. (Forăscu, Popescu 2002)

Много си се променил, **за малко** да не те позная.

'You have changed so much that I almost failed to recognize you.'[3]

(4) E drept, nu-i lipsea **mai** nimic [...]. (Adina Kereneş, *Rochia de crin*)

Вярно е, че не й липсваше **почти** нищо/Вярно е, че не й липсваше

кажи-речи нищо.

'It is true that she did not lack almost anything.'[4]

According to these translations, suitable Bulgarian equivalents to Romanian *mai* are *почти, аха да, за малко* and *кажи-речи*. Depending on the context, synonymous *едва, горе-долу* etc. may also be an option. But what about Bulgarian *май*? Would it not fit any of these typical contexts of Romanian *mai*? In fact, it

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[1] This quotation apparently comes from Ion Creangă, *Povestea lui Harap-Alb*, cf. *Din copilăria mea sunt deprins a asculta de tată şi, tocmindu-te pe tine, parcă-mi vine nu ştiu cum. Dar, fiindcă mi-au mai ieşit până acum înainte încă doi spâni, şi cu tine al treilea, apoi **mai**-mi vine a crede că asta-i ţara spânilor şi n-am încotro; mort-copt, trebuie să te iau cu mine, dacă zici că ştii bine locurile pe aici.* The broader context makes the interpretation proposed in DEX 1998 more convincing.

[2] Other structural parallels in my collection are: *la pământ **mai** că-i ajunge al ei păr de aur moale* (Mihai Eminescu, *Călin*); *inima-i zvâcneşte, **mai** că-i sare din loc* (Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Fiziologia provincialului în Iaşi*); *o priveam [...] de aproape, **mai** că-i puteam atinge cu palma faţa* (Cornel Nistea, *Pripăşită în valea noastră*); *nu simţea gerul ce **mai** că-i îngheţa picioarele* (Monica David, *În goana timpului*). Examples with the conjunction *să* includ: *tropăia, juca, sărmana... mai să se dărâme casa* (Petre Dulfu, *Isprăvile lui Păcală*); *trânti victorios ciocănelul în pupitru, **mai** să-i crape lacul* (György Györfi-Deák, *Năravul din fire*).

[3] The reduplicated version occurs with both *să* and *că*: *numai iaca ce dă de-un cuptor nelipit şi **mai-mai** să se risipească* (Ion Creangă, *Fata babei şi fata moşneagului*); *toată cartea a-nvăţat-o, **mai-mai** că-l întrecea pe calfă; carte ştiu, dar acesta **mai-mai** să mă-ntreacă* (folk tale *Trişti-Copil şi Inia Dinia*); *se agaţă iar de stele, **mai-mai** să le rupă* (Ada Demirgian, *Atinge stelele cu mâna*).
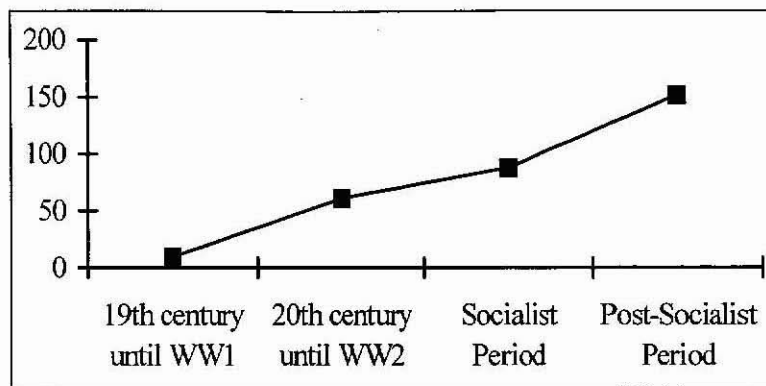
[4] Similar is the situation with other examples, containing **mai** nimic (Răzvan Petrescu, *Mici schimbări de atitudine*); **mai** tot satul; flăcăii, **mai** toţi (Barbu Delavrancea, *Sultănica*); visele [...] **mai** toate (Barbu Delavrancea, *Trubadurul*); **mai** toată lumea; **mai** toţi (Camil Petrescu, *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*).

would – at least some of them – as the following grammatical Bulgarian sentences demonstrate. Their meanings however are different from those of the respective Romanian sentences:

(5) **Май** ми иде да повярвам.
'It seems that I am ready to believe it.'

(6) Четината му **май** стига до земята.
'Its bristles apparently touch the ground.'

(7) Вярно е, че **май** не й липсваше нищо.
'It is true that she did not seem to lack anything.'

In view of this information it appears necessary to define the functional scope of Bulgarian *май*. My attempt at a definition is based first and foremost on ninety-six tokens excerpted from a Bulgarian representative selection of over 1 000 000 words. The texts included into the selection belong to the standard and the colloquial varieties of Bulgarian since the second half of the nineteenth century.[5] To these ninety-six examples (the only ones to be used for statistical purposes) I have also added data from other sources.

Here is a brief summary of my conclusions. The first thing that strikes the observer is that there is an impressive dynamics of *май* over time. Let us for now limit ourselves to *май* and *май че* (to be referred to as *май$_1$* and *май$_2$*), which account for 92% of all examples. The following chart shows the growth of their frequency by period from 1 token per 102,907 words in the earliest period to 1 token per 6,591 words in the most recent one:

19th century until WW1	20th century until WW2	Socialist Period	Post-Socialist Period

My earliest – of a total of sixteen – token of *май₂* comes from Peju K. Javorov's 1910 play *В полите на Витоша*. *Май₂* can be encountered in oral texts, in plays (which imitate colloquial language) and in the more recent texts. Every single instance of *май₂* could have been replaced by *май₁*. The relative rarity of *май₂* paired with its more recent rise and lack of functional individuality seem to indicate that it is an innovation of no relevance for the origin and early history of Bulgarian *май*. Regardless of that, it is worth noting that *че* is the equivalent of Romanian *că* and that, as opposed to Romanian *mai că*, Romanian *mai să* has no counterpart in Bulgarian. In the sequence *май да*, which does occur, *да* [= *să*] is present for syntactic reasons of its own, e. g. *той не обича май да говори* 'it seems that he does not like to talk' and not as a part of a collocation **май да*.

The next two distinct types of *май* are present since the earliest records. The reduplicated type *май₃*, of which I have three tokens in the Bulgarian text selection[6], is illustrated in (8). Note again that on the level of form this type has a Romanian counterpart, illustrated above in (3).

(8) И ако се взрем внимателно в пътя, по който сме я подкарали, с радост ще забележим, че **май-май** не сме далеч от Римската империя (Aleko Konstantinov, *Panem et circenses*).

'And if we look carefully at the road we have taken, we will be happy to notice that we are not that far from the Roman empire.'

I have a total of five examples of type *май₄*'s two sub-variations. In this type *май* is followed by a prepositional phrase headed by either *с* 'with' or *из* 'from'.[7] All tokens are part of characters' utterances; usage, which underscores the colloquial character of *май₄*. The referent of the prepositional phrase is always a human being who has stirred the feelings of the speaker. The formal structure and the details of the putative semantic derivation of the expressive type *май₄* from other Bulgarian types or Romanian *mai* are puzzling. The type's sub-variations are illustrated in (9) and (10):

(9) Каранов [...] отиде за брата си, заедно ще бъдат, защото брат му каза, че ще запали дюкяна, ако го оставят... **май из** юнак!... (Ivan Vazov, *Немили-недраги*)

'Karanov went to fetch his brother. They will be together because his brother said that he would set the store on fire if he were left behind... What a brave guy!'

(10) Очите му да завържеш, **май с** човек, пак ще да може да ви изтърси в троянските колиби. (Zahari Stojanov, *Записки по българските въстания*)

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[6] In Hristo Botev's 1873 newspaper article *Това ви чака!*, in Aleko Konstantinov's 1894 short story *Пази Боже сляпо да прогледа* and in Cvetanka Nikolova's 1975–1977 *Corpus of Spoken Bulgarian*. The last example is not easy to interpret semantically.

[7] Sub-variation with preposition *с* in Hristo Botev's 1873 newspaper article *Това ви чака!* (one token) and in Čudomir's short stories *Оцетеното буре* and *Сърдитият* (three tokens) and sub-variation with preposition *из* in Ivan Vazov's 1881 short novel *Митрофан и Дормидолски* (one token).

'Even if you blindfold him, he – the smarty that he is – will still be able to drop you off at the homesteads near Trojan.'

These two final types of *май* raise the question about regional variation. Now is the time to confess that my English translations of illustrations (8), (9) and (10) are tentative because my own variety of Bulgarian does not include such usages of *май*. The authors who use *май₄* are affiliated with Eastern Bulgaria, mostly with the areas of prevalence of the Balkan and Moesian dialects.[8] At this time I have no access to the Bulgarian dialect databases to check for additional evidence but this testimony localizes *май₄* well enough.

The Bulgarian settlers in Southern Romania also employ *май* differently from Bulgarian speakers elsewhere. The following illustrations outline the range of their usage:

(11) **май** напре́де не бе́ше така́‖ (MMEC-BDR, Coteana [Jud. Olt] I: 114)

'It wasn't like that before.'

(12) онава́ моми́че пробра́ло ч'а́ **май** гро́зна ла́да‖ (MMEC-BDR, Puntea cu Greci [Jud. Dâmbovița] VIII: 135)

'That girl chose the ugliest trunk.'

(13) а кога́ пра́иш ма́сло не́ма **май** пра́иш сире́н'е‖ (MMEC-BDR, Băileşti [Jud. Dolj] I: 182)

'When one makes butter, one does not make cheese any longer.'

(14) ъми ва́р уд мъга́зину| гу уга́с'ъми‖ дъпаче́ гу угас'ъми **май** седи́ идн́ъ ниде́л'е като ка́ш (MMEC-BDR, Epureşti [Jud. Giurgiu] I: 14–15)

'Well, lime from the store, we slake it. After we slake it, for one week it continues to be like whey cheese.'

(15) кът гу прето́чим ку́съми чурбъ́тъ| ки́съла й и суле́на ор ни йе́‖ кът ни йе́ суле́на **май** му ту́рвъми со́л'‖ (MMEC-BDR, Epureşti [Jud. Giurgiu] I: 28–29)

'When we have decanted it [the cabbage], we taste the juice [to see] whether it is sour and salty or not. If it is not salty, we put some more salt.'

(16) **май** по́вна йа́зе| ма́ма кво́ е било́‖ по́ нъпре́де?‖ (MMEC-BDR, Calomfireşti [Jud. Teleorman] I: 87–88)

'How am I supposed to remember, dear, what [life] was [like] before?'

(17) дру́го кво́ че да **май** и́ма‖ и́ма зъ́би| (MMEC-BDR, Urzicuţa [Jud. Dolj] I: 168–169)

'What else would it [the lamb] have? It has teeth.'

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[8] Ivan Vazov, Hristo Botev, Zahari Stojanov and Petko R. Slavejkov were born and grew up in Sopot, Kalofer, Medven (near Kotel) and Veliko Tŭrnovo, respectively; Čudomir spent his entire adult life in Kazanlŭk, Vasil Drumev was born in Šumen and Vasil Popovič in Brăila in a family of émigrés from the Jambol area.

Examples (11) – (17) demonstrate that the Bulgarian dialects in Romania have borrowed the majority of functions of Romanian *mai* described in DEX 1998. Sentences (11) and (12) show adjectival and adverbial comparative and superlative degrees formed with *май*. It is a relatively rare usage, as the regular Bulgarian constructions with *по* and *най*, respectively, still predominate, as one can see in (16), where the equivalent of Romanian *mai înainte* 'before' is not *май напреде* but *по напреде*. Entire Romanian expressions containing comparatives may be embedded in otherwise Bulgarian sentences, e.g. *май ку с'амъ* (MMEC-BDR, Licurici [Jud. Teleorman] IV: 814) ~ Romanian *mai cu seamă*; *май департе* (MMEC-BDR, Puntea cu Greci [Jud. Dâmbovița] V: 576), (MMEC-BDR, Cioplea [Sectorul Agricol Ilfov]: 908) ~ Romanian *mai departe*; *май алез* (MMEC-BDR, Epurești [Jud. Giurgiu] II: 351) ~ Romanian *mai ales*.

Examples (13) – (16) correspond to Romanian *mai* before verbs and to mainstream Bulgarian *вече* in negative sentences like (13) and *още* in positive sentences like (14) and (15). *Май* here denotes the continuation of the action expressed by the verb or its repetition. This is the best-rooted usage of *май* in the Bulgarian dialects in Romania. There are dozens of it in the speech of different speakers in different villages. Yet, the old expressions continue to exist, sometimes pleonastically side-by-side with *май*, cf. *май* 'any longer' and *веке* 'any longer' in *то съ свърило|| не го май вариш веке||* (Calomfirești [Jud. Teleorman] I: 761–762) 'It [the dish] is ready. You don't boil it any longer.' The bewilderment expressed by *май* in (16) also has close counterparts in Romanian (cf. DEX 1998 s. v. *mai* IV.3).

Finally, *май* in example (17) points to a new element that has appeared beside those already known, another familiar usage of Romanian *mai* (DEX 1998 s. v. *mai* V). A characteristic Romanian expression *ce mai atâta vorbă* or *ce mai încoace-ncolo* (abbreviated as *ce mai*), which aims to cut off further discussion on a given topic, has also been calqued, cf. *беа ънъпойати къкво май||* (MMEC-BDR, Calomfirești [Jud. Teleorman] II: 228) 'They [people of the earlier generations] were backward; the point needs no further elaboration.' Another expression – Romanian *câte și mai câte* – was borrowed as it is, cf. *и он зима ковор| зима| къте ши май къте|* (MMEC-BDR, Târnava [Jud. Dolj] III: 69) 'And he takes a carpet, takes all kinds of things.'

Copious data from the Bulgarian dialects in Romania clearly show that there can be no doubt as to the origin of *май* in these dialects. It reflects faithfully six out of the ten functions of *mai* presented in DEX 1998. It is noteworthy however that there is no trace of either the modality of Standard Bulgarian *май* or the approximation of Romanian *mai*. Thus *май* in these Bulgarian dialects must be considered the outcome of an independent act of borrowing. The state of affairs in these dialects also indicates that at the time of emigration to the north of the Danube (end of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries) speakers of the Northern Bulgarian dialects were not familiar with *май* as a marker of either approximation or modality. This absence can be interpreted in a twofold manner. A chronologically oriented explanation would place the act of borrowing of Bulgarian

май after the mid-nineteenth century and alternatively a geographically oriented one would localize the area of *май* to the south of the North Bulgarian regions identified by Maxim Sl. Mladenov as centres of colonization (Младенов 1993). Further dialectological research is needed in order to make a choice between these hypotheses. For now I can only venture a general remark: the former explanation seems more plausible than the latter because research in the linguistic geography of Romanian loans in Bulgarian locates them mostly in the Northern Bulgarian dialects in the vicinity of the Romanian linguistic territory (Младенов 1970; 1983).[9]

The scarcity of the reduplicated type *май₃* in my Bulgarian text selection could in principle also have been explained as the reflection of limited regional distribution if it weren't for one intriguing circumstance. To my surprise, I discovered that it is currently extremely broadly used on the Internet and, judging from the content of the texts, by many very young speakers of Bulgarian. I will give a few characteristic chatroom examples and provide them with tentative English translations:

(18) А и на тоя стадий на турнира случайни отбори **май-май** няма.

'And besides, not just any teams participate at this stage of the tournament.'

(19) Иначе пръстите му са дълги и **май-май** ще пише на клавиатурата още преди да започне [да] говори.

'Otherwise his [the new-born baby boy's] fingers are long and it seems that he will be writing on the keyboard before he starts talking.'

(20) Аз нямам време за парка, а за фитнес... нещо не ме влече **май-май**.

'I have no time for [walks in] the park, as to fitness programs ... I do not feel attracted that much.'

(21) А кога ще стане това **май-май** само той знае.

'And apparently just he knows when this will take place.'

The opinions of my informers on *май₃* divided: some like myself claim no knowledge of this usage; others consider it an ordinary, albeit more colloquial, variant of *май₁*. Intuitively, *май₃*, when compared to *май₁*, appears to point at a heightened certainty of the speaker. Together with the evidence of spectacular expansion of *май₁* and *май₂* during the last century and a half, the (recent?) proliferation of *май₃* brings to the fore an important theoretical question about the

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[9] In view of the double act of borrowing postulated above, it is worth exploring whether *май₄* cannot be seen as the outcome of yet another (and earlier) act of borrowing from the same source. *Май₄* seems closest to the superlative function of Romanian *mai*, which at the Proto-Romance stage must have sounded as **májs* (Hall 1976: 27). The imported superlative **майс* with strong affective overtones was later (after the arrival of *май₁*) reinterpreted through folk etymology as *май + с* or *май + из*. On the other hand, since *-s* in Eastern Romance was lost, presumably by the end of the Proto-Romance stage, dated for Romanian from the seventh to the first decades of the eighth century (Rosetti 1986: 125–126; Fischer 1985: 66, 210), such an etymology assigns a very early date to the act of borrowing. It does not seem very compelling in conjunction with a late chronology of the next act of borrowing. An early next act of borrowing directs us to a source situated not in Dacoromanian territory.

life-cycle of discourse markers. The traditional period of Bulgarian culture and language (investigated in some detail and from various perspectives in Mladenova 1996; 2001; 2002; 2003; Младенова 2003) apparently featured a characteristic set of discourse markers that it shares only to a limited extent with the subsequent modern period. An in-depth analysis to follow up this insight is still a matter of the future. It remains to be seen whether discourse markers' quick turnaround, semantic fluidity and insular distribution among segments of the population are linguistic universals or they are only features of the periods of linguistic and social upheaval. The available sum total of data regarding *май₁*, *май₂* and *май₃* make them however a clear-cut element of the Bulgarian modern period. I have no evidence confirming their use during the Bulgarian traditional period.

Returning to the functions of the core type *май₁*, we can distinguish between functions A and B with numeric strength of 63 to 10 tokens (or 66% vs. 10% of the total of tokens in the Bulgarian text selection)[10]:

A [Speaker is not   **B** [Epistemically unqualified *p* accompanied with speaker's
certain that   distance from a certain too categorically formulated aspect of
p]   his/her utterance]

Where *p* stands for the propositional content of the sentence

Typical illustrations are (22) for function A and (23) for function B:
(22) **Май** не си се променил... (Elin Pelin, *Край воденицата*)
'It seems that you haven't changed.'
(23) Карах бавно и внимателно и **май** повече гледах в огледалото за обратно виждане, отколкото пътя. (Andreja Iliev, *Когато един мъж е на колене*)
'I drove slowly and carefully and watched, I think, more the reverse mirror than the road.'

The slot of *май₁* in (22) could have been filled by *като че ли* and in (23) by *кажи-речи* without changing the meaning of the sentence. Word order may play an important role in distinguishing between functions, as demonstrated by (24), which illustrates function A, and its modification (25), which instantiates function B.

(24) **Май** това беше единственият ѝ шанс за спасение. (Donka Petrunova, *Отровният паяк*)
'This appeared to be her sole chance for survival.'
(25) Това беше **май** единственият ѝ шанс за спасение.
'This was her almost sole chance for survival.'

The numerically weak function B has two varieties. One (B1) is illustrated in (23) and (25) and represented in my Bulgarian text selection by eight examples of *май₁*,[11] and the other (B2) by two of *май₁* and one of *май₂*. Here because the qualified element of the utterance is not a unique referent, a zero or a totality as in function B1, but a member of a set, *кажи-речи* is not a possible alternative, cf.

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[10] In the realm of *май₂* these functions are distributed in a similar manner: 15 tokens of function A vs. 1 of function B (or 16% vs. 1% of the total).

[11] It is also definitely present among the *май₃* data. An especially clear example appears to be (21).

(26) Неговият випуск се събират, да, за девети септември **май че**, не мога да си спомня датата, добре за девети септември. (Corpus Nikolova 1975–1977)

'The graduates of his class meet, yes, on September 9, I think. I cannot remember the date. OK, on September 9.'

Function B1 (accounting for 8% of the data) comes closest to the Romanian marker of approximation *mai* and may almost provide a bridge to it. As we saw above, normally Bulgarian *май* cannot fit into the characteristic contexts of Romanian *mai* of approximation. However, on extremely rare occasions, the leap may be small enough to be difficult to notice, cf. the two Bulgarian translations in (28), which are precise equivalents to the Romanian sentence in (27) and the *май* version in (29), which, to a lesser extent than (5),(6) or (7), but still is situated at some distance from (28):

(27) Curtea-i strâmtă, **mai** numai cât o grădinuță de flori, și în curte crește iarbă măruntă și tânără. (Ion Agârbiceanu, *Doi bătrâni*)

'The courtyard is narrow, almost [as small] as a flower garden, and fine young grass grows in the courtyard.'

(28) Дворът е тесен – **почти** само колкото една цветна градинка – и в двора расте дребна млада трева/Дворът е тесен – **кажи-речи** само колкото една цветна градинка – и в двора расте дребна млада трева.

(29) Дворът е тесен – **май** само колкото една цветна градинка – и в двора расте дребна млада трева.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that, given everything discussed in this article, the probability of a Romanian descent for Bulgarian *май₁*, *май₂* and *май₃* appears quite low if we do not consider the impact of two unknowns: Romanian dialect usage that may be closer to the Bulgarian state of affairs than currently known to me and the haphazards of bilingual interaction, which may gloss over mutual misunderstanding, especially as far as the finer details of meaning are concerned. These two factors, coupled with the lack of data regarding Bulgarian and Romanian usage at the time and place of borrowing make the reconstruction of the process tenuous. Even so, this attempt to trace the path of Bulgarian *май* back to its Romanian roots will be useful to linguists in the prevalent atmosphere of lively interest in discourse markers.

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