

## NINA CASSIAN'S SPARGAN – A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract** In the centennial year since Nina Cassian's birth and a decade after her passing, this article delves into her Spargan poems. Drawing comparisons with well-established nonsense verse traditions, this article argues that Spargan is not a constructed language but rather a variety of Romanian-sounding speech. While Spargan poems maintain Romanian prosody and syntactic structures, they intentionally lack semantic content. However, Cassian's careful manipulation of language demonstrates her linguistic creativity. By exploring the boundary between language and nonsense, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Cassian's literary experimentation and her contribution to the tradition of poetic playfulness in Romanian literature.

**Keywords** Constructed language, nonsense verse, Spargan, lexical and function words, pseudowords.

### Introduction

It is hard to imagine a more auspicious moment to write about Nina Cassian than 2024, the year that marks a century since her birth and ten years since her passing. From Cassian's extensive body of work,<sup>1</sup> this article will focus on her poems written in the so-called *Spargan language* and will primarily look at them from a linguistic perspective. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romanian nonsense verse did not have any established representatives who could even hope to rise to the level of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear or Dr. Seuss, and this may explain why most bibliographical sources mention reverently that Cassian was, besides everything else, the inventor of a new language named *Spargan* by the poetess herself. The claim is probably

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2024.29.2.07>.

<sup>1</sup> Considering she published over 50 books of poetry, essays, and prose, we can admit her work is indeed extensive.

informed mainly by Cassian's interviews like, for instance, the one in 2020 in which she told Rad that due to her structural propensity for playfulness she had invented Spargan in 1946 and even translated one of the poems into English Spargan subsequently.<sup>2</sup> She further explained that, because Ion Barbu had forbidden her from including these "exercises" in her debut volume (although his *Domnișoara Hus* is not far from a sense of absurd similar to that of nonsense verse), she only published them much later in *Loto-Poeme* (1972) and in *Jocuri de vacanță* (1983). The presence of Cassian's self-declared playful spirit, identified by Manolescu especially in *Ambitus* (1965) and in *Loto-poeme*, where, he says, "this blend of seriousness and play, gravity and derision, intellectual and visceral, abstract classicism inspired by Doinaș and Nichita Stănescu's Dadaism is clearly evident,"<sup>3</sup> is what justifies the poetess's creation of the series of Spargan poems.

Nevertheless, before taking a closer look at Cassian's Spargan poems and attempting to decide whether they were indeed written in a new language or in nonsense verse, the present investigation needs to begin with some terminological and conceptual clarifications concerning the nature of Spargan.

### Spargan – conlang or nonsense verse?

The first required clarification starts from the research proposition I make that Cassian's Spargan is not a language in the true sense, much in the same way Carroll's *Jabberwocky* is not written in an invented language but in English. Exactly in the same way, Spargan is not a language in the true sense of the word, but rather a variety of Romanian-sounding speech in which the roots of several of the lexical words, i.e. the majority of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, are replaced with non-words invented by Cassian. The analogy in the proposition above is obvious if we just look at a few lines of *Jabberwocky*<sup>4</sup> (on the left) and their rendition in Romanian in Cassian's translation<sup>5</sup> (on the right).

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

*Dădeau în plopot țopi asprili,  
Trombind, borțind prin ierboteci.  
Stifoșii stupureau sporili  
Și muimele zglăveci.*

This article though will not approach the stanza from the perspective of evaluating its translation into Romanian, this being the concern of a future investigation, yet from a linguistic

<sup>2</sup> Ilie Rad, *America din Cortland* (Cluj Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2020), 132.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008), 942, my translation.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking Glass* (Webster's Thesaurus Edition) (ICON Classics, 2005), 11

<sup>5</sup> *Bâzdâbocul/Jabberwocky*, in Nina Cassian, *Dans. Poeme rostite la Radio (1959-2003)*, carte + CD (Bucharest: Editura Casa Radio, 2024), 38/92.

perspective we can agree that Cassian's target text (TT) is as much in Romanian as Carroll's source text (ST) is in English. Exactly what makes both the ST and TT linguistically identifiable is indeed relevant to this discussion, but before addressing that, it is essential to establish the appropriateness of the terms *constructed language* (conlang) and *nonsense language*, as I will demonstrate further on.

Thus, unlike a natural language (that occurs and evolves naturally and unconsciously through usage in a given human community), a constructed language is a language consciously created by an individual or group of individuals to serve various purposes. Such purposes include communication in fictional worlds (like Tolkien's Elvish languages Quenya and Sindarin from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Okrand's Klingon from *Star Trek*, Peterson's Dothraki and High Valyrian from the *Game of Thrones*, or Castithan and Irathient from the sci-fi show *Defiance*), international communication (like Esperanto and Interlingua), and experimentation with linguistic and/or cultural theories (like Láadan that meant to test the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or toki pona with which its creator, Sonja Lang, intended to reduce the overwhelming complexity of the modern world). What essentially characterizes conlangs is having a defined set of rules and consistent vocabulary and grammar that allows them to be utilized for communication purposes, with many of their inventors being reputed linguists.<sup>6</sup> Such languages can subsequently be learned and spoken in real life events such as fan conventions,<sup>7</sup> and Esperanto, the oldest most successful conlang, already has its second generation of native speakers. Conlangs may even have specific cultural or artistic goals, and a good example for this is Elgin's Láadan, a language designed specifically to express the views and experiences of women.

Nonsense language, on the other hand, may completely (or at least manifestly) lack structure, rules or any obvious intended meaning and is often made up of random sounds or gibberish. It is not created with the intention of being learned or used for communication, so that it cannot serve a communicative purpose in itself, in contrast with conlangs like Esperanto or like the ones used in the *Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Trek*, that have a logical coherent linguistic structure, grammatical rules, and sometimes communities of speakers around them.<sup>8</sup> Strange as it may seem, there are now popular language learning apps like

<sup>6</sup> Conlangers Suzette Haden Elgin, Marc Okrand, David J. Peterson, J.R.R. Tolkien all had solid linguistic backgrounds.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson quoted by Hart (2015) says that while he cannot precisely estimate the current number of Dothraki speakers, he is always surprised when he hears of a new one or meets one at a convention, because though he used to know everyone interested in the language, they're currently too numerous to estimate. Due to Dothraki's ascending trend, Peterson maintains that in his view, "if people keep writing in it, it will eventually have enough tokens to work with Google Translate." (Hart 2015)

<sup>8</sup> There are sites that list conlangs by number of speakers, for example <https://tmh.conlang.org/conlang-speakers/>, but the figures need constant updating. Hart notes the impressive evolution of conlangs in the entertainment industry that started with Klingon in 1979. Klingon was subsequently developed by Okrand into a full-fledged language, whose dictionary was published in 1984 (with more than 300,000 copies sold) and is still the third-largest conlang spoken (after Interlingua and Esperanto). As she puts it, "[a]ccording to the most recent stats, it is estimated that a few thousand people know a little Klingon,

Duolingo that even offer courses in Klingon, High Valyrian and Esperanto. Besides the obvious entertainment purposes and the connection to communities of people with similar interests, there are other benefits of learning a conlang, first and foremost the learner's opportunity to develop a metalinguistic awareness and reflect on the structure, features, and functions of language.

This much can be said about nonsense language to a certain extent, even if it is created to be typically used for entertainment, mostly in comedy sketches, children's games and fiction, and mainly coming in the form of verse. Creators of literary nonsense<sup>9</sup> also use their innate metalinguistic competence and their understanding of how language is processed and used in communication, although what we call *nonsense literature* typically refers to works that employ absurdity, humor, and unconventional language to create entertaining or thought-provoking pieces apparently addressed chiefly to children. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, authors famous for their contributions to this literary genre do not exclusively specialize in nonsense in the same way the inventors of conlangs do. The Romanian Nina Cassian is no exception: apart from her Spargan series, the rest of her ludic poems cannot truly be classified as nonsense verse.

At this point, it can be inferred that Spargan is not a conlang since it lacks essential conlang linguistic and nonlinguistic characteristics. The creation of a new language is, as Peterson quoted in Hart (2015) puts it, "very much an artistic process, albeit one that requires a lot of technical knowledge."<sup>10</sup> He makes another useful observation that applies to the present discussion, even if it primarily refers to the entertainment industry: conlangers "are in ever-increasing demand" because viewers and fans can no longer be fooled with inconsistent gibberish and to "create an authentic-sounding language, one needs to employ an authentic methodology." Moreover, the actual creation process needs to incorporate contextual factors, explains Peterson about his own process of language creation:

"To create Dothraki's grammar, I was sensitive to the realities of Dothraki life: the fact that they're less technologically advanced than the societies that surround them; the fact that they keep mostly to the steppes and eschew 'civilised' life; the fact that they apparently have weddings [...]. All these factors determined the lexical make-up of the Dothraki language, because a language's vocabulary will contain exactly those words it ought, and will lack those it ought not have."<sup>11</sup>

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several hundred can read and write it, and perhaps a few dozen can speak it fluently. But the success of *Game of Thrones* means that Dothraki is widely expected to take over as the conlang of choice (Hart 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein are probably among the most influential representatives in the English-speaking world.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Hart, "Speaking in Game of Thrones: How one man created the Dothraki language from scratch." *The Independent, Culture TV & Radio Features*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/game-of-thrones-how-one-man-created-the-dothraki-language-from-scratch-10039904.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Showing that Spargan is not truly a conlang does not mean that its artistic merits are not recognized; in *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* Alex Ștefănescu convincingly describes what he calls Cassian's "spectacular experiment" of writing poems in an imaginary language, Spargan:

"Using words that do not exist in dictionaries, but having the sound of Romanian words, Nina Cassian composes verses capable of conveying emotion. It is therefore a comedy of poetic language, but also a moment of authentic lyricism, created with metalexical means: *Au înmorit dramatice miloave/ sub rocul catinat de niturași./ Atăția venizei de bori mărgași.../ Atâtea alne strămătând, estrave.*"<sup>12</sup>

If the Romanian literature does not have a conlang creator in Cassian (and, in fact, no established conlang creator whatsoever), things are somewhat different with authors of nonsense verse whose inspiration is often national folklore. Writers like Tudor Arghezi and Ion Barbu, among others, with their own unique style and approach to creating nonsensical and whimsical worlds through language, had their own significant influence on the creation of Cassian's Spargan.

A somehow related, but more extreme example of nonsense verse in Romanian literature is Virgil Teodorescu's *Poem în leopardă* (1940), Cassian's Spargan and Teodorescu's Leopard thus being two different varieties of nonsense verse based on strong prosodic elements like rhythm and rhyme, in which the poets keep the lexical information to a minimum or even close to zero in the case of the latter. The nonsense variety employed by Cassian can be assimilated to what Orero aptly described as the occurrence of "a nonsense word within a meaningful syntactic unit,"<sup>13</sup> such a word being further defined by Wright (2011) as "a word that does not have a dictionary entry and is not recognizable outside its context."<sup>14</sup>

### The language of the Spargan poems

For the reasons presented above, we can safely conclude that Cassian did not in fact invent a language and that what she called *Spargan* cannot be classified as an actual constructed language in the generally accepted sense. At the same time, we need to note that any reader of the Spargan poems, regardless of their age or literary background, will identify the language

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<sup>12</sup> Alex Ștefănescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane, 1941-2000* (București: Mașina de Scris, 2005), 318, my translation.

<sup>13</sup> Pilar Orero, *The Problem of Translating "Jabberwocky": The Nonsense Literature of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and Their Spanish Translations* (New York: Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Wright, "A Linguistic and Literary Analysis of Two ASL Translations of Jabberwocky", *TriCollege Libraries*, 2011, <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/items/ac499093-e710-4076-af18-5616f17ecbb3/full>.

in which they are written as some kind of Romanian due to the way it sounds based on a limited range of Romanian words combined with the more numerous pseudowords Cassian creates. These pseudowords mimic actual units of speech from the Romanian language while in fact having no meaning, although they do combine phonemes and functional morphemes that belong or at least conform to the rules of the Romanian grammar. On the one hand, this characteristic makes it possible for a Romanian to learn and recite Cassian's poems, and even to translate them into another language. The first two are doable because the poetess – also an accomplished pianist and composer – closely observes the phonotactic rules of the Romanian language and convincingly mirrors them in her verse which makes it utterable even when it is meaningless. Translation is possible for the same reasons. Nonsense language, but not gibberish, can be rendered into another language because of its systematicity, in which the systematicity of the actual language, in this case Romanian, remains visible and can be intuitively recognized. On the other hand, sentence structure in the Spargan poems allow for the investigation of syntactic processing of constituents that lack (most of the) lexical information. Syntactic processing is performed automatically by the competent speaker (again, regardless of their age or literary background) who is innately capable to recognize syntactic patterns at sentence, clause and phrase level, and distinguish word class based on functional morphemes and word order.

Consequently, as I noted previously,<sup>15</sup> even if the Romanian inflectional system is much richer than the English one, the same association of linguistic patterns can be applied in a similar process of recognition of the grammatical structures in both Carroll and Cassian's nonsense poems. For instance, it is enough to look at the excerpt<sup>16</sup> *Huțelu care-i huțat,/ N-are fleanță, nici cherbat./ Huțeaua care-i huțată/ N-are cherbă la trizată* to see that except *a avea*<sup>17</sup> and *a fi*<sup>18</sup> and a few function words (*care, n-, nici, la*), the rest of the words in the four lines above are pseudowords. Even though they provide very scarce lexical information, all the words are combinations of phonemes that result in units that either exist or at least seem possible according to the rules of the Romanian grammar. Put simply, while referential meaning is erased by the presence of nonsensical words, word endings, function words, word order and syntax are clearly Romanian. The remaining referential meaning, the one comprised in the titles of the Spargan poems is discussed further on.

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<sup>15</sup> Ileana Oana Macari, *English Morphosyntax – A view from Romanian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Iași: Casa Editorială Demiurg Plus, 2022), 46-7.

<sup>16</sup> *Strigături (în limba spargă)*, in Nina Cassian, *O Mie de Poeme* (Bucharest: Cărțile Tango, 2020), 483.

<sup>17</sup> *A avea* is used here as a lexical verb expressing possession.

<sup>18</sup> *A fi* is used as copular.

## Real lexical words<sup>19</sup>

For clarity reasons, it was useful for this investigation to deal separately first with the real lexical words, the function words and the affixes, and, secondly, with the pseudowords created by Cassian. The initial observation is that, like *Jabberwocky*, the Spargan poems also comprise items from all these categories. Unlike Carroll's poem whose title is a nonsense word, Cassian uses real lexical words as titles for all the poems otherwise written in Spargan:<sup>20</sup> *Baladă, Bocet, Imprecație, Orație, Poezie, Rondel, Sonet, Strigături (în limba spargă)*. Even if in all of them the prosodic pattern - that is central in nonsense verse - is perfectly recognizable for Romanian speakers who have studied any Romanian literature in school and not only, Cassian still felt it necessary to 'label' them with the help of generic titles that named their genre. The four-line sequence quoted above, for example, is a *strigătură*<sup>21</sup> not (only) because its title identifies it as one but because of its rhythm and rhyme, as well as because of its binary parallel structure that is suggestive of similar folk creations.<sup>22</sup>

The prosodic structure of *Baladă*<sup>23</sup> ("*Gorsul își astringe dagul, / neurcit, nemirunit. / Jos, sub magăre,-i vereagul / surf pe care l-a țonit...*"), *Bocet* ("*Areu, areu, lortul mai mild, mai setău. Alna mai hagără-n laie, veltul mai lil se-mbilaie...*"), *Imprecație* ("*Te-mboridez, guruhă și stelpică norangă, / te-mboridez să-ți calpeni introstul și să-ți gui / multembilara voșcă pe-o creptiră pangă / și să-ți jumizi firiga lângă-un hisar mărzu...*"), *Orație* ("*Custuliță, custă nață, / voitane de sâmbinică, sâmbineată, / felitul Cinere, / fetelute să-i fie trinele...*"), to quote just from the Spargan poems inspired by folklore in the tradition of Arghezi and Barbu previously noted, is so transparent that it needs no further clarifications. As for the poems inspired by high literature - *Poezie, Rondel în limba spargă*, and *Sonet* - Cassian might have anticipated that their structure was going to be even less familiar to the reader, due to their more complex prosodic structure that, combined with the obliteration of meaning caused by the scarcity of lexical information, might have rendered the whole unit incomprehensible. Consequently, all three titles are in plain Romanian and, exactly like with the previous group of poems, they merely name each respective poetry genre.

There are yet other real lexical words that appear in the lines of the Spargan poems and one observation concerning them is necessary: the least frequent class of real words is that of the central adjectives<sup>24</sup>, with only one occurrence, followed by the lexical verbs<sup>25</sup> (n=6)

<sup>19</sup> By *real lexical words*, I mean the Romanian words that are the main carriers of information in a text and that appear in actual dictionaries or text corpora.

<sup>20</sup> They are all included in Nina Cassian, *O Mie de Poeme* (Bucharest: Cărțile Tango, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> The *shouts* (rom. 'strigături') are simple structures - usually made up of 2-4 verses with introductory exclamations - that have an epigrammatic character and often contain allusions that may be satirical or humorous, sometimes erotic or sentimental, which are improvised and shouted, usually during the performance of folk dances in villages.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, "*Fata care joacă bine / Mai mă-nvață și pe mine. / Ea mă-nvață la jucat / Eu o-nvăț la sărutat*".

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>24</sup> *Mare*.

and by the noun class<sup>26</sup> (n=8). The adverb class<sup>27</sup> has the most occurrences (n=16) and the rest of the words that can be recognized as adjectives, nouns, lexical verbs and adverbs are pseudowords. Based on these figures, we can agree that Cassian's linguistic creativity mainly acted on the word classes with the most complex morphosyntax – adjectives, lexical verbs and common nouns, those whose marking indicates class membership and the relationships between words in the sentence, thus allowing the poetess to empty them of lexicosemantic information. The higher frequency of adverbs can similarly be explained with morphosyntactic arguments: unlike in English, where many adverbs are described as 'words ending in *-ly*' ('adjective + *-ly*'), most Romanian adverbs are originally adjectives or participles<sup>28</sup> and this generates homonymy between the two word-classes. As a result, a word is recognised as adjective or adverb in a particular clause based on the morphosyntactic relations among the constituents within it, by identifying the constituent it modifies. Still, if we agree with Tallerman's plastic description of the adverb class "as a ragbag for any words that don't neatly fit into the categories of nouns, verbs or adjectives,"<sup>29</sup> we can expect difficulties in doing that. Cassian's choice was to avoid them by using real Romanian adverbs like *jos*, *foarte mult*, *nicicând*, etc. instead of processing them into Spargan words.

A mock moral signaled as such<sup>30</sup> where all words are either real lexical words (n=4) or function words (n=3) is placed at the end of *Poem* thus suggesting it belongs to the didactic genre. One problem is that the lines do not reflect any social values or norms and do not teach any lesson or principle, since they will in any case be incomprehensible. Another is that the four lines above the moral incongruently read and sound like actual curse words in Romanian.

### Function words and affixes

Function words and affixes are morphemes that serve a grammatical purpose rather than conveying lexical meaning. As Laka aptly puts it, "[f]unction words are the little words no one pays much attention to, although they are the true keepers of grammar. In fact, language cannot exist without them."<sup>31</sup> Romanian function words<sup>32</sup> include articles (i.e., *un*, *o*), prepositions (*cu*, *de*, *în*, etc.), conjunctions (*dacă*, *dar*, *și*, etc.), pronouns (*care*, *ce*, *cine*, *noi*, etc.), auxiliary verbs (*-ai*, *-i*, *-i fie*, etc.) and other words that help to structure sentences and convey relationships between constituents in a sentence.

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<sup>25</sup> i.e., *zicem*, *să trăiască*, *n-are*.

<sup>26</sup> i.e., *ani*, *câmpul*, *lanțuri*.

<sup>27</sup> i.e., *azi*, *mai*, *doar*, *tot*.

<sup>28</sup> Compare, for example, *un copil politicos* and *se comportă politicos* (adjectiv → adverb) and *un om grăbit* and *merge grăbit spre gară* (participiu → adverb).

<sup>29</sup> Maggie Tallerman, *Understanding Syntax* (London: Hodder Education, 2011), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 63.

<sup>30</sup> *Morala: În lanțuri apa să se tragă!*

<sup>31</sup> Itziar Laka, "Jabberwocky, or the poetry of function words," *THE BILINGUAL MIND*, December 13, 2013, <https://mappingignorance.org/2013/12/13/jabberwocky-or-the-poetry-of-function-words/#author>.

<sup>32</sup> The examples were selected from the Spargan poems.



Because Spargan mimics Romanian, a synthetic fusional/inflected language, it employs actual inflections that normally mark the grammatical categories of number (*noafe, voitan*), gender (*zura, linful*), case (*cărbosul, custuliță*), mood (*s-ar fi crâmbat, a cărmotat, să trăiască*), tense (*cozimiream, a clăuns*), voice (*s-a ochelit, îmi zurnuie, fetelite să-i fie*) and definiteness (*gorsul, dagul, zarga*), on nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs. In *Imprecație* and *Orație*, Cassian uses *conjunctivul*, the Romanian correspondent of the subjunctive mood, to express the speaker's affective state, that is, feelings of discontent in *Imprecație* (*te-mboridez să-ți calpeni introstul și să-ți gui / [...] și să-ți jumizi firiga lângă-un hisar mârzu. / Te-mboridez, cu zarga veglină și alteră, / să-ntrauri eligența unui letusc ațod*)<sup>33</sup> and well-wishing in *Orație* (*felitul Cinere, / fetelite să-i fie trinele, [...] Și chiar felitul Cinere, / fetelite să-i fie trinele, [...] zicem mulți ani să trăiască*).<sup>34</sup> Its role is in both poems is to substitute the imperative and thus to emphasize subjectivity. The conditional-optative is used in *Rondel* to express an unreal situation (*S-ar fi crâmbat, dar nu cu blină*)<sup>35</sup> which also accentuates the subjective tone of the poem. Inverted forms like *Jos, sub magăre,-i vereagul*, and *Făligată-i craia vendă. / Făligată foarte mult in Baladă*<sup>36</sup> and especially *Țichi-mi-ai sima simibleagă!* in *Poezie*,<sup>37</sup> that amplify the expressive role of the verb, are characteristic of folk verse that speakers of Romanian recognize effortlessly.

Similar observations can be made about the nominal phrase starting, for example, from the excerpt from *Strigături* quoted at the beginning of this section. As I showed on another occasion<sup>38</sup>, any Romanian native speaker will understand that *Huțelu* is a common noun with a suffixal definite article, masculine, animate (probably human), while *Huțea* is his female counterpart, also including the suffixal definite article in the form of the noun. They are both qualified by the adjective *huțat* (masc., sg.)/*huțată* (fem., sg.), respectively. The *huțel* does not possess a *fleanță*, nor a *cherbat*, while the *huțea* does not possess a *cherbă* at her *trizată*. The fact that they do not possess such things can be either a good thing or a bad thing, we cannot tell. As this discussion shows, both free and bound morphemes are essential for constructing grammatically correct well-formed sentences in Romanian and play a crucial role in conveying meaning and syntactic structure, which makes them central in Cassian's nonsense verse.

## Pseudowords

The presence of pseudowords in the Spargan poems is exactly what those who believe that Cassian has invented a new language base their claim on, but I have shown previously that this

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 487.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>38</sup> Ileana Oana Macari, *English Morphosyntax – A view from Romanian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Iași: Casa Editoriala Demiurg Plus, 2022), 48.

is not exactly the case. Still, her pseudowords remain interesting from a linguistic perspective that understands them as modified/processed lexical words that respect the phonotactic restrictions of the Romanian language. Such restrictions apply to all morphemes, which makes them utterable for speakers of Romanian. In general, due to the methods that create them, pseudowords are often felt to be somehow familiar and suggestive of words that actually exist, though not fully comprehensible, which is exactly what Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass* felt regarding *Jabberwocky*:

“‘It seems very pretty,’ she said when she had finished it, ‘but it’s RATHER hard to understand!’ (You see she didn’t like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn’t make it out at all.) ‘Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t exactly know what they are!’”<sup>39</sup>

Such methods create pseudowords that can be assessed according to the above-mentioned linguistic criteria that compare them to existing Romanian words. In simpler terms, the more matches there are between a given pseudoword and a real word in terms of criteria, the more credible and Romanian-sounding that word is.

Take Cassian’s *laili*:<sup>40</sup> it can be read/pronounced easily and is clearly suggestive of the Romanian ‘caii,’ while *coroavele* in the next line clearly alludes to ‘potcoavele.’ The noun *laili* is created by changing the initial ‘c’ in the Romanian noun ‘caii’ to ‘l’ while preserving all the others and especially the affixes for number and definiteness. The operation of replacing one or more letters in the root is one of the most common methods of processing lexical words, and Cassian uses it consistently, i.e. *lortul, zercă, trinele, zâmbat*.<sup>41</sup> In other instances, the author additionally deletes or adds a syllable or two, as in *felitul* and *dal Logodal*, respectively, from the same *Orație*<sup>42</sup> or *areu* and *dovelnicenete* in *Bocet*.<sup>43</sup> Yet, in further situations, Cassian combines the two methods and that makes the decoding of the pseudoword more complicated, as in the first two lines of *Baladă: Gorsul își astrige dagul / neurcit, nemirnuț*.<sup>44</sup> Especially such instances remind the reader of children’s secret languages that use sound or syllable addition following various patterns. Perhaps inspired by Carroll’s inventiveness in creating proper names, Cassian includes in two of her poems three pseudo-names of imaginary characters (*Chilnic Margă* in *Baladă*,<sup>45</sup> *Bion* and *Bioana* in *Orație*<sup>46</sup>) and two place pseudo-names (*Logodal* in *Orație* and *Dod* in *Imprecație*<sup>47</sup>).

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 403.

Interestingly, even in such contexts where lexical information is blurred and figurative language and imagery are semantically restricted, the Spargan poems manage to render the poetess' attitude in each poem, in keeping with its respective title. As a result, moods range from sentimental and melancholic in *Sonet* and *Rondel*, heavy-hearted in *Bocet*, laudatory in *Orație*, playful in *Strigături* to aggressive in *Imprecație* and taunting and allusive in *Poezie*, thus making the reader emotionally relate to her verse.

## Conclusions

As conlangs are designed to be used in communication in real or imaginary worlds, real or imaginary people learn and use them in verbal exchanges. This happens with Esperanto, for instance, whose speakers not only use it in oral or written interactions, but have even developed a body of original and translated Esperanto literature. It is also seen in Dothraki, one of the languages spoken by the characters in the series *Game of Thrones* that was developed by David J Peterson starting from the limited number of words and phrases in George R. R. Martin's homonym fantasy-novels. Unlike constructed languages, nonsense language does not adhere to any specific grammar or vocabulary rules and is not intended for communication. Cassian's Spargan is created to sound like the Romanian language without conveying any meaningful content, but a certain systematicity in the lexical processing and the use of recognizable free and bound morphemes make it at the same time enjoyable and translatable.

Although nonsense verse has a relatively scant history in Romanian, it briefly rose to prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Nina Cassian's Spargan series that has intermittently enjoyed a favorable reception from critics and readers alike. Nonetheless, if the literary merit of these poems can be argued, Cassian's linguistic creativity is apparent in the careful manipulation and processing of words that is her most significant contribution to the tradition of poetic playfulness in the Romanian literature.