

## **Factual and Symbolic Information in Educational Diplomas. A Comparative View on Anglo-Saxon, French, Russian and Romanian Documents**

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**Abstract:** The term *diploma* is largely employed to designate a document assessing qualifications of the recipient, in a variety of contexts. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational systems, diplomas are, nevertheless, subjected to various interpretations, a fact that is highlighted by the fact that instructions, regulations and laws are drafted to describe the content, interpretations and uses of diplomas. While preserving the phonetic and lexical similarity when travelling across languages and cultures, the term *diploma* develops specific lexical and semantic associations in each of the analyzed languages. Definitions are drawn from major dictionaries of the target languages and conclusions serve to further the understanding of the term for translation, educational and managerial purposes.

**Keywords:** diploma, document, factual information, symbolic information, education.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Definitions of the word *diploma*: prevalence of the educational reference**

The word *diploma* is defined in most European and North American dictionaries by selecting the educational reference as a primary meaning, the descriptors pointing at the fact that the term covers the idea of a document “issued by an educational institution, such as a university, testifying that the recipient has earned a degree or has successfully completed a particular course of study” ([www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)). Rare are the cases when the broader meaning is

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selected first, as in [www.yourdictionary.com](http://www.yourdictionary.com), where the meaning “an official state document or historical document; charter” is stated as the first choice, while the educational explanation is only the third. In French, Larousse chooses the generic interpretation as the first, but the exemplification immediately hints to the educational context: “Pièce émanant de l'autorité légale et destinée à conférer, établir ou confirmer un droit ou un titre: Diplôme de bachelier, de docteur” ([www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais](http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais)). Most important dictionaries carefully choose to describe diploma as a written document, issued by an authority to certify a right, title, honor or (educational) degree. Major Russian and Romanian dictionaries make the same assumption, that the educational reference prevails over the other uses, but all the explanations convey similar meanings. Ozhegov (<http://www.ozhegov.org/>) and Ushakov – for Russian - present this interpretation as having priority over the one that explains diplomas as documents related to competition or... certification of a genealogy for dogs (Ushakov – 3<sup>rd</sup> meaning, [ushakovdictionary.ru](http://ushakovdictionary.ru)). The newest and most authoritative source explains the word as follows:

- 1) Документ, свидетельствующий об окончании высшего или среднего специального учебного заведения, а также о получении звания, ученой степени и т.п.
- 2) разг. Работа, исследование, проект и т.п., выполняемые для получения свидетельства об окончании высшего или среднего специального учебного заведения.
- 3) Документ, свидетельствующий о победе в соревнованиях, на конкурсе и т.п., об общественном признании кого-л., чего-л.
- 4) Официальное свидетельство о сделанном научном открытии или техническом изобретении.

In Romanian, Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române (DEX), Dicționarul Limbii Române Literare Contemporane and Marele Dicționar de Neologisme, as well as the online dictionary [www.dexonline.ro](http://www.dexonline.ro) select the educational reference over the other ones, as document certifying participation/excellence in a competition or, historically, as entitling the bearer to privileges or freedoms. As an illustration of this selection of explanation, the example is drawn from DEX ([www.dexonline.ro](http://www.dexonline.ro)):

**DÍPLOMĂ**, *diplome*, s. f. **1.** Act oficial care certifică pregătirea profesională a unei persoane, un anumit titlu etc. **2.** Act eliberat unui premiant, unui participant la o expoziție sau la un concurs, prin care se recunoaște valoarea acestuia. **3.** (În Evul Mediu) Act prin care se acorda cuiva un titlu de noblețe, anumite privilegii etc. – Din fr. **diplôme**, lat. **diploma**.

Those dictionaries that give etymological explanations trace the word back to the Ancient Greek *δίπλωμα*, via Latin (for Romanian – via French), meaning literally

“folded paper” (in two), a reference which is lost, since in contemporary practice such a document is rarely presented in a folded manner.

If Wikipedia articles can be treated as indicators of popularity, in all the above mentioned languages the educational reference comes first, and only on a second or third place comes the reference to historical uses of the term as being connected to granting liberties or rights. Wikipedia gives, at a glance, a disquieting picture: in 12 major countries or groups of countries, the educational document covers different realities. The differences come from historical traditions concerning the issuing authority, the level of studies, the number of years, the quality of the educational level, etc. No wonder that the vast scientific literature, analyzing the educational diplomas invariably start with the explanation of the reality covered by the word *diploma*.

In educational practice, diplomas are treated as official documents bearing information regarding a stage in a person’s development, within an institutional setting, where the recipient acquired knowledge, skills and/or competences enabling him/her to either continue studies, or apply for a position in the labour market. Educational diplomas have a high signaling value and empower the holder to claim a special status in society (Martorell & Clark 2010; Millet & Moreau 2011). This is a very tempting area of research, but for the scope of the present paper, we shall remain within the realm of linguistic analysis.

## **1.2. The lexical power of the term *diploma***

French seems to be the most prolific with respect to the capacity of the noun *diploma* to generate word families and meanings. From French the derivative words *diplomat* and *diplomacy* travelled into other languages, losing the initial link to credential systems and representative power.

The French *diplômé* (adjective) is trickier for the English/American interpreter, because it can be read as *chartered, trained, degreed, certified* etc. English/American *diploma* is more precise when associated with another term: program. Unlike the Romanian term for an educational program, which does not explain in an easy manner whether the qualification is assessed by a certificate or a diploma, the *diploma-program* or *certificate-program* in the American practice explicitly give the receiver the key information regarding the certified outcome of that particular educational experience. French makes the distinction not so much with reference to the programs themselves, but to the quality (and reality) of the document of completion, *diplôme* being of a hierarchical and judicial status stronger than *Certificat d’assiduité*. Romanian practices only started developing such forms, of issuing a document assessing that the recipient followed an educational program, without the final exam – leading to a diploma. In Russian, the noun *диплом* is used to

signify both the official document of completing studies, and the scientific paper, presented for the graduation exam leading to diploma awarding. By contrast, Romanian use of the word *diplomă* in the construction of the meaning scientific paper (*lucrare de diplomă*), obligatory for the examination leading to obtaining the diploma is used only in informal contexts, the consecrated, official 21st century terms being *lucrare de licență*. Thus the term diploma is losing some of its productive features in Romanian, but gains in other spheres, since the types of diplomas increases rapidly all over Europe, if not globally (Millet & Moreau 2011).

In all the four languages similar differences are understood between the words designating diploma and certificate, as educational documents, the first bearing a heavier value and legal power. The term itself seems to be transparent and its symbolism does not depend on the variety of objectual forms (Jaspers 1959). Irrespective of the content of diplomas as documents, the credentialing power stands in place.

## **2. Information content: factual and symbolic, verbal and non-verbal aspects**

Diplomas, even though are short text documents, carry heavy information loads, expressed both in a verbal, and in non-verbal forms. The choice of typographic styles, the quality of the paper, the imagery linked to the logo if the issuing institution, stamps, watermarks, presence of photo of the recipient (in Romanian practice for certain types of diplomas), the serial numbers, even the cut of the diploma and its dimensions (A4 paper for most countries, A3 in Malta and North of France) – all add significant meaning and enforce the interpretation that diplomas have an aura of symbolic power. Additionally, the fame and status of the issuing authority may contribute to the symbolism of diplomas. In Romanian practice, for instance, although no clarification is made, in the academic setting reference to “famous universities” give heavier value to diplomas issued by such long-standing universities as Oxford, Sorbonne, MIT or CalTech. In Europe, the differentiation between public or private universities is relevant, while in USA such a differentiation is less important. In France, prior to reforms triggered by following Bologna declaration policies, distinction was made between national and state diplomas, between diplomas issued under state authority or in the name of the issuing institution etc. And those diplomas are still in full power and use. In the Russian Federation, the hierarchy of universities – federal vs. regional, public vs. private etc., - creates an even more complex view, if seen from the perspective of international practices. On the national level, each educational system tries to convey a hierarchy among diplomas in higher education by adding qualifiers, most of which try to differentiate the mere level of completion of an educational cycle from the excellence attained at that particular level.

Excellence is expressed either by using the Latin qualifiers: *cum laude* (in American and Romanian universities), or a national equivalent («красный» - “red” in Russian, “de merit” – in Romanian, “avec félicitacions” in French). The most important feature relevant to discussing these aspects is that diplomas function and must be interpreted in their systemic and cultural contexts. Therefore, the task of the interpreter, for instance, or for the global citizen, travelling, learning and working in international contexts, a high level of competence is required to read, understand, use and even translate the requirements regarding diplomas in each of the specific given situations.

Although the topic of non-verbal information carried by diplomas is, in itself, a fascinating topic, this paper will focus on the other factual and symbolic meanings conveyed by the verbal dimension of these documents. A last amendment, though, to the non-verbal information, is important, when it is interpreted in verbal forms. Enrollment in a university or recruitment with an employer, other than the one in the applicant’s own culture often require an authorized translation of the diploma. In such cases, the logo of the issuing authority and the existence of stamp(s) and other relevant non-verbal signs are expressed in verbal forms, to render the largest possible information on the content of the presented document. The quality of the paper, the specificity of typographic letters, even the language style, however, lose relevance in translation, which, by contrast, has to adopt a mix of formal style, specific to the cultural and linguistic context of the target language, plus an accurate wording of the factual information contained by the document in the source language.

From the point of view of the theory of functional styles (Cernicova 1999), the style of diplomas belongs to the official register, characterized by a specific choice of words, grammatical structure and predetermined functional units, rendering the needed information on the issuing authority, the type of diploma, the level of education, the signing authorities. Within each educational system the name of the issuing institution, as well as of the signing person(s) are adapted to the specific use of the institutions, in a given period of time. The registry number and the name of the recipient transform, however, the piece of paper into a document to identify one person only, accompanying him/her in the future educational and/or professional path.

Given the official status of diplomas, most often laws are drawn regarding the right of an institution to issue such documents, the content of information and the further circulation of the documents. For instance, in the Romanian higher education system, Law 1/2011 describes the conditions for diploma awarding, while the Decree no. 607/2014 explains in detail what kind of information is contained in the educational documents and how diplomas represent a scale to be followed by the prospective student, from baccalaureate to bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. In Russia, the standardization of documents is also high

(<http://www.rosnou.ru/entrant/entrance/samples>). Most countries tie the recognition of the diploma to a certain standardized practice, but whether this standard is underpinned by a legislative act or not needs to be seen country by country. The change in the content of the document follows a European and an American practice. In USA, given the variety of practices, as well as the individual educational paths of most students, (the cohort system is not the norm, unlike the European one), diplomas contain explanations regarding the grading system. In the European Union, the process of creating a European Area of Higher Education ([eacea.ec.europa.eu/search/site/education\\_en](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/search/site/education_en)), as well as the necessity to ensure the prerequisites for the genuine freedom of individuals to seek education and employment within the unified continent led to the development of the Diploma Supplement. This supplement is an explanatory companion to the various types of diplomas, issued in each member country in compliance with its own historical and legislative traditions. Even larger, the model is embraced beyond the borders of the European Union, by the countries that adhered to the so-called Bologna process, such as the Russian Federation or Kazakhstan (Asia). The Diploma Supplement is the one standardized document that ensures a relatively uniform information structure which diminishes the subjective interpretations of individual translators and makes educational paths “readable” across the continent and internationally, in a manner previously painfully diverse from the point of view of understanding the facts behind the text of diplomas (even when accompanied by a transcript of records). It provides information regarding the recipient of the diploma, the qualification, the issuing institution, the grading system, the uses of the diploma within the social system (access to higher level of education, access to a given profession) and the national education system in its whole ([www.enic-naric.net](http://www.enic-naric.net)). Among other interpretation issues, clarified by the Diploma supplement is the large variety of grading styles. In France, for instance, a 20-points system is in use, in Romania the highest grade is 10, in Russia – 5, and in UK – a four-level scale (4 being the highest) ranks the completion of a study cycle. Moreover, while factual information, rendered in verbal fixed constructions is apparently easier to grasp and translate, the seemingly universal language of numbers, in this given context, to an unexperienced reader builds up unsurmountable walls, if not placed in the global (verbal) explanation of the grading systems.

The diploma supplement creates an interpretation context which lowers ambiguities for educational diplomas in the countries where the model is implemented. Also in is easier to understand than the lengthy and specific legal language of laws and regulations, describing the production, awarding and circulation of these documents. However, the reader of the diploma and supplement still has to take into consideration additional non-linguistic factors, such as the legitimacy of the issuing institution not only to award diplomas, but to do so in connection with

specific educational programs, a quality which is assessed by accreditation agencies, independent from ministries of education (or other governmental bodies – in compliance with national laws) which periodically revisit educational institutions and grant them the authority to issue diploma under their own authority or in conjunction with another, higher qualified education provider. (In Romania, this is the temporary procedure for higher education institutions that are authorized to provide educational services, but did not undergo the accreditation procedure.)

### 3. Challenges in translation

The diploma as a document has different meanings and readings to the actors implied in interpreting it, even within one culture only. The issuing institution displays its qualification and authority to operate fully and award such documents to ensure recipients access to education and professions. It is a symbol of status, a carrier of image, bridging educational and other social structures, and a visible mark on the (numerous) generations of students, pursuing knowledge and skills. The recipient views diplomas as keys, unlocking the future and a companion throughout various stages of life, granting privileges and access to elites. For the institutional reader, the diploma is the first filter for evaluating the quality and qualifications of job/position applicants, sometimes even disconnected from the field in which the diploma was awarded. Within the legal system, diplomas are documents that necessarily interact with other legal documents, in an intricate way, where words, images and meanings are carefully aligned to convey information relevant for a specific society, in a given historical time. Under the forces of globalization, accompanied by the massification of higher education and the diminished control of national authorities over the educational and career paths of mobile citizens, diplomas remain control mechanisms, regulating the advancement (or blockage) of people in pursuit of education enhancement or career development. In this larger geographical context such terms and concepts are discussed as *diploma mills* – with reference to diploma providers that have reduced (or none at all) requirements for awarding certification to recipients, willing to pay for expedite acquisition of diplomas. Another discussion, popular in the literature on educational diplomas, carries on the debate over the inflation of documents and the necessity of recipients to accumulate increasingly more complex certifications, throughout their lifelong career. However, these directions or debates, while tempting, do not concern the scope of the present paper.

The translation of diploma documents poses multiple challenges to the translator, who has to find linguistic means to convey the intentions, legal provisions and cultural signals present in the source text to the target audience(s) (Dejica 2013; Dejica & Stoian 2016).

A Romanian diploma “travels” more or less easily into other languages, as it is shown in Fig. 1 (names and personal identification elements have been removed):

SERIES A No. xxx

Socialist Republic of Romania  
Ministry of Education  
University of Timișoara  
Faculty of Philology

**Bachelor's Degree**

Based on the decision of the Board of examination in June session, 1983, (name, surname), born in (date, place), has obtained the Bachelor's Degree in Philology, **Romanian and English Language and Literature** specialization, passing the final examination with the grade 10.

Rector

Chief Secretary Dean

Nr. 8/7 July 1983

**Перевод с румынского языка на русский**

ГЕРБ СОЦИАЛИСТИЧЕСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ РУМЫНИИ

Серия А № xxx

СОЦИАЛИСТИЧЕСКАЯ РЕСПУБЛИКА РУМЫНИЯ  
МИНИСТЕРСТВО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ И ПРОСВЕЩЕНИЯ  
УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ТИМИШОАРЫ  
ФАКУЛЬТЕТ ФИЛОЛОГИИ

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Fig. 1 Translation of a Romanian and of a Russian Bachelor's Degree



However, some American diploma texts can pose serious problems to the translator, when the issuing authority resorts to stylistic repertoires meant to impress the public (while bearing little information to an employer, for example):

The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York to all persons to whom these presents may come greeting be it known that (name, surname) having completed the studies and satisfied requirements for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS has accordingly been admitted to that degree with all the rights privileges and immunities thereunto appertaining in witness whereof we have caused our corporate seal to be here affixed in the City of New York (...) (Fefelov 2000).

The phrase *with all the rights privileges and immunities thereunto appertaining* has a correspondent in modern French bachelor degree diplomas: *pour en jouir avec les droits et prérogatives qui y sont attachés*, but neither in Romanian, nor in Russian such *privileges* and *prerogatives* do not give an anchorage to contemporary linguistic practices and, therefore, create dilemmas regarding the possibility to accurately convey the intentions of the document from the source language into the target one(s). Such difficulties lead, ultimately, to quasi-pan-European descriptions of credentials in the diploma supplements, issued according to the Bologna process. The texts of diplomas remain anchored in the linguistic, judicial and social practices across countries, but the descriptors in the diploma supplements are worded according to already approved forms, making the translators' work easier. Not only do diploma supplements convey information about competencies and abilities, underpinning the obtained degree, but also they provide the information regarding the overall educational system, helping the audiences relate to the socio-cultural and legal information needed to produce the meaning of the diploma itself ([www.enic-naric.net](http://www.enic-naric.net)). These diploma supplements are seen both as functional documents, bridging educational systems, and as instruments towards standardization and fostering the emergence of the unified European Area of Higher Education.

#### 4. Conclusions

The word *diploma* belongs to the international vocabulary that travels across languages and cultures successfully carrying the meaning of credentialing. In each society and country, the real document, however, covers a number of communicative practices, with a variety of uses. It needs to be understood that diplomas occur and function within a system of diplomas, that issuing authorities, diploma holders and audiences for the diplomas as documents cross-influence each other. Diplomas have to be *readable*, in order to convey meaning, but they also need to enjoy *recognition*, in order to be considered documents. The production of meaning for the document *diploma* depends largely on the above mentioned factors. Translators are bound to master lexical knowledge of how to convey social relations and legal realities, associated with diplomas. In addition, while institutional solutions to the divergence

of meanings are put in place for countries aligning themselves to the Bologna processes, the gap between diploma issuing practices is increasingly more visible within the European Higher Education Area, and by comparing European practices with those from other continents.

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