

THE WORD GEN: EVIDENCE FROM ROMANIAN

Roxana Magdalena PREDA¹**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the use of the word gen in contemporary Romanian, highlighting its shift from a nominal element meaning "type" to a versatile marker of approximation, exemplification, hesitation, and mitigation. Drawing on data from both spoken interaction and computer-mediated communication, the analysis suggests that gen is undergoing a process of pragmaticalization. Additionally, the paper posits that this transformation is influenced by linguistic interference from English, particularly the use of "like" in youth and informal speech. The paper concludes by emphasizing the significance of understanding the pragmatic functions of gen as part of a broader trend of linguistic innovation in Romanian, driven both by internal language dynamics and external influences.

Keywords: discourse marker; pragmaticalization; comparative marker; mitigation; filler.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the word *gen*, a seemingly simple word that will be shown to present significant challenges in its analysis and interpretation within contemporary Romanian. As the examples used in this article will show, it is commonly used by young speakers, mainly in spoken communication and in computer-mediated communication² characterized by a high degree of orality. Building on previous analyses of *gen* in Romanian (Zafiu, 2012; Terian, 2018; Popescu and Ionescu, 2019; Hanț, 2022; Preda (Dincă), 2023) and examining a corpus of examples, this study identifies three primary usages of the term³:

- (a) **Gen₁:** used within prepositional phrases such as *în genul*, *de genul*:
- (1) *A început promițător, în genul compunerilor clasice, cu frunze galbene și cafenii.*

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² Computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Herring, 1996, 2018) describes any form of human-to-human interaction that takes place through an intelligent device within a networked environment (recently, it has been used to refer to any technological device that can be used for communication, from laptops and tablets to the smartphones).

³ This analysis excludes its use as a noun with its primary lexical meanings.

‘He started promisingly, in the style of classic compositions, with yellow and brown leaves.’

(2) ...modul în care a fost amenajat permite și organizarea unor evenimente **de genul** concertelor de jazz.

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‘The way it has been arranged also allows for events like jazz concerts to be organized.’

- (b) **Gen₂**: an invariant comparative marker, exemplifier or approximator *gen* (or *ceva gen*):

(3) *Mirosul în cutie e delicios, **ceva gen** fructe uscate.*

(r/reddit/, II, 12)

‘The smell in the box is delicious, kind of dried fruit.’

(4) *Cunoaște cineva o limbă mai exotică **gen** japoneză, mandarină, etc. ...?*

(r/reddit/, II, 13)

‘Does anyone know a more exotic language, **like** Japanese, Mandarin, etc.?’

(5) *A plătit **gen** 1000 de lei pentru cazare.*

(CPRV, 4)

‘He paid like 1000 lei for accommodation.’

- (c) **Gen₃**: a pragmatic element which can be interpreted, in certain contexts, as a discourse marker, mitigator, or filler, and which may function as a calque of the English *like*:

(6) ***Gen** problema la noi nu e că nu avem dreapta, ci că nu avem nici dreapta, nici stânga. **Gen** orișicine știe că e viață-tată în țările nordice (cu excepția climei, desigur) tocmai datorită faptului că la ei chiar e stânga.*

(r/reddit/, II, 7)

‘Like, the problem here isn’t that we don’t have a right wing, but that we have neither right nor left. Like, everybody knows that life is great in the Nordic countries (except for the weather, of course) precisely because they actually have a left wing.’

(7) *Auzi, știi ce am făcut aseară? Efectiv, **gen**, m-am distrat, a spus un tânăr.*

(CPRV, 9)

‘You know what I did last night? Like, I literally had fun, said a young man.’

(8) *Treziți-vă, băi, aici e România și noi suntem români, n-o să se întâmple nimic din toate astea gen.*

(r/reddit/, II, 10)

‘Wake up, guys, this is Romania, and we’re Romanians, none of that is actually gonna happen, like.’

The word *gen* appears in constructions that denote an approximate comparison (e.g., *în genul, de genul; ceva de genul/ceva gen*). However, it also functions as an invariable element with a prepositional value (*gen* + NP). This study delves into the various occurrences of *gen* in collocations that either modify noun phrases (NPs) or establish a comparative link between syntactic structures. For example, *gen* can be employed to introduce direct speech, provide an example, express a comparison, or emphasize the speaker's utterance. It can also signal the speaker's attitude toward the information being conveyed, such as doubt, hesitation, or uncertainty (Preda (Dincă), 2023: 738-739).

The analysis of *gen* is based on two hypotheses: on the one hand, a shift towards an invariable marker defined by pragmaticalization (Preda (Dincă), 2023: 740-741), and on the other, the acquisition of new pragmatic values influenced by linguistic interference from the English discourse marker *like* (Zafiu, 2012).

1.1 Data and method

To inventory the uses and pragmatic functions of *gen*, a personal corpus was used, consisting of examples collected from four sources: personal recordings and WhatsApp messages from the period 2022-2025 (CPRV), comments on Romanian subreddit r/Romania, part of the well-known international forum Reddit, as well as data from Sketch Engine, a corpus manager and text analysis software, and CoRoLa – the Reference Corpus for Contemporary Romanian.

A total of 150 occurrences of the word *gen* were identified, occurring both in fixed constructions (*în genul, de genul, ceva de genul, ceva gen*) and as an invariable element (with only 30 such occurrences). A purpose-built corpus comprising these examples was compiled in order to conduct a qualitative analysis aimed at identifying its functions. While this study focuses primarily on qualitative aspects, a quantitative investigation remains a potential direction for future research.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The analysis of *gen* is situated within a theoretical framework that incorporates core concepts from pragmatics and discourse analysis, including pragmaticalization, linguistic calquing, pragmatic vagueness, mitigation, and the role of fillers in spontaneous speech. Pragmaticalization is a synchronic linguistic

phenomenon in which words originally carrying descriptive semantic content evolve to acquire pragmatic and discursive functions, often accompanied by a loss of their original meaning (semantic bleaching) (Traugott, 2007). According to Traugott (1995: 2), linguistic innovation and change (whether involving the transition of a lexical item into a grammatical morpheme or a discourse particle) are driven by speakers' communicative choices. In various discourse contexts, speakers select specific words or expressions to better convey their intentions, with both the speaker and the communicative situation playing crucial roles in initiating linguistic change. Language evolves towards economy, where speakers aim to reduce effort in message production and interpretation, while expressivity also influences this evolution (Hopper and Traugott, 2003: 72-73).

Discourse markers (DMs) have been the topic of numerous researches and theoretical debates. The category of DMs is not a fixed, closed class, which explains the difficulty in proposing a subclassification according to the functions they perform within one or more levels of discourse. The decision to include or exclude elements from the DMs class varies across researchers and is predominantly influenced by the theoretical framework employed in their analysis. For instance, according to Schiffrin (1987), DMs operate at three levels of discourse: the ideational or propositional level, where they establish relationships between components of the utterance or between larger discourse segments; the actional or illocutionary level, where they delineate the relationship between the speaker and their message; and the interactional or exchange level, where they signal relationships between the speaker and the interlocutor (Schiffrin, 1987: 24-29; Ștefănescu, 2007: 26).

DMs contribute to the relevance of the utterance by functioning as signals that inform the interlocutor on how the utterance should be interpreted, thereby reducing the processing effort required for the interlocutor to understand the message. In the case of *gen*, the process is reflected in its shift from a nominal element meaning *type* or *kind* to a discourse marker signaling approximation, exemplification, or hesitation in informal speech. Initially used in constructions like *de genul X* ('of the type X'), *gen* has undergone syntactic reduction (*de genul X* > *gen X*) and expanded its functional range (Zafiu, 2012). The pragmaticalization of *gen* is part of a broader trend in Romanian towards the development of new discourse markers, influenced by both internal linguistic evolution and external factors, such as English. Future research could explore its syntactic constraints and semantic nuances, particularly in comparison with similar markers in other languages.

Linguistic interference is understood as any type of transfer between languages resulting from contact, including partial borrowing, lexical borrowing, code-switching, and linguistic calques (Poplack, 2004: 589). In lexical borrowing, both form and content are transferred from the donor language. In contrast, linguistic

calquing involves replicating a foreign model using native elements (Stanciu-Istrate, 2006: 45). This is also our hypothesis regarding the use of *gen* as a discourse particle in Romanian. Its usage as a mitigator and filler appears to be influenced by the contact with the English language among the younger generation, as well as adults under 40. More data from spoken interactions, along with a detailed sociolinguistic analysis, could strengthen the intuitive hypothesis of the influence of *like*.

Therefore, two additional concepts are applicable to the analysis of *gen*: mitigation and fillers. Mitigation is understood as a communicative strategy used by speakers to reduce the force of their message, thereby conveying distance (Briz, 2003; Briz and Albelda, 2013). As a form of attenuation or downgrading, mitigation weakens interactional parameters, minimizing the illocutionary force of speech acts and the roles of participants (Caffi, 2007). Fillers are discourse elements that do not contribute propositional meaning but serve cognitive and interactional functions. As a filler, *gen* can function as a discourse marker that interrupts the flow of speech, providing the speaker with time to process their thoughts without contributing to the propositional content of the message. In this capacity, it primarily serves to regulate the pacing of conversation. As a mitigator, it attenuates the force of a statement or comparison, diminishing its directness and assertiveness. This mitigatory role enables the speaker to signal approximation or uncertainty, thereby reducing potential conversational or social risks.

Vagueness, or imprecision, is an inherent aspect of language that manifests both semantically and pragmatically. At the semantic-lexical level, it appears through prototypical meaning and genericity, while at the pragmatic level, it is reflected in verbal interaction, implications, and implicatures (Zafiu, 2002: 400). Imprecision allows speakers to attenuate the illocutionary force of an utterance, avoiding direct commitment to a speech act. *Gen* in Romanian marks comparison, triggering cognitive inferences by referencing a prototype. It can function as both an attitude marker, indicating the speaker's stance toward the propositional content and context (evidential), and an interactional marker, signaling relationships between participants in discourse, such as hesitation or digression markers (Cojocaru, 2016: 37).

The main part of this study consists in a qualitative analysis of the position and the function of *gen* in the corpus data, having as constituent elements, from a theoretical perspective, the concepts presented above.

1.3 Previous analyses of *gen* in Romanian

Although the word *gen* has undergone significant semantic expansion in spoken Romanian and online communication in recent decades, it has not received as much scholarly attention as its counterparts in other languages⁴.

Zafiu (2001) was the first to note the function of *gen* as a connector in contemporary public discourse, particularly in youth language. Later, in 2012, Zafiu dedicated an entire article to *gen*, providing a concise inventory of its main functions and meanings. Among these, the author identified an invariable comparative particle used to establish a comparison with a prototypical reference for a given class of objects. In this context, *gen* consistently appears in a medial position within the sentence and can be paraphrased as *ca* ('like') or *(ca) de exemplu* ('(like) for example') (see e.g. (9)). Additionally, Zafiu categorizes *gen* as a marker of approximation and relativization, enabling the speaker to soften their assertions and requests în (10):

(9) *De obicei nu suport nici fructele care sînt foarte acre, **gen** mere din astea verzi.*

(aurarusu.wordpress.com, cited by Zafiu, 2012)

'Usually, I can't stand fruits that are really sour either, **like** those green apples'

(10) *...scumpe (pentru ce au în ele) și nasoale (finisare din ciocan, **gen**)*

(deceblog.ro, 2008, cited by Zafiu, 2012)

'very expensive (considering what they contain) and ugly (hammer-finished, **like**)'

In this usage, which is predominantly associated with spoken language and occasionally found in informal exchanges on online forums, *gen* is obligatorily placed in the final position. Zafiu (2001, 2012) suggests that *gen* is an internally developed form, emerging from the progressive simplification of literary syntactic constructions such as: *X de genul Y > X de gen Y > X gen Y*. This evolution could have occurred in both spoken and written registers, potentially influenced by analogous structures featuring the noun *tip* ('type'): *X de tipul Y > (X) de tip Y*, as "comparison with a prototype implies approximation" (Zafiu, 2012). However, this hypothesis concerning the evolution of constructions with *gen* remains provisional and requires further testing on a sufficiently large corpus. Consequently, Zafiu

⁴ English: *like* (Andersen, 1998, 2000; Buchstaller, 2001; D'Arcy, 2017); French: *genre* (Yaguello, 1998; Rosier, 2002; Noailly, 2006; Dufaye, 2014; Isambert, 2016); Italian: *tipo* (Voghera, 2013; Ghezzi, 2022, 2024); Spanish: *tipo/como* (Jørgensen and Stenström, 2009; Marques, 2015; Mihatsch et al., 2023); Portuguese: *tipo* (Bittencourt, 1999; Thompson, 2019).

(ibid.) acknowledges that such an evolution could have been modeled after a construction in a foreign language, such as the use of *like* in English.

Terian (2018: 132-133) analyzes the use of *gen* in contemporary Romanian from the perspective of intersubjectification⁵, noting its loss of lexical autonomy due to grammaticalization. The author emphasizes that *gen* is preposed as an exemplifying element (equivalent to *such as*, *for example*, etc.) in relation to a noun or a sequence of nouns. In this context, *gen* functions as an adverb, as illustrated by the example:

(11) *Or, avertizat că la Euro 2019 vor participa «marile puteri» ale fotbalului continental, **gen** Spania, Anglia, Franța, Italia și Germania, va îndrăzni Rădoi să nu-l convoace pe cel mai prețuit dintre actualii «tricolori», Marin fiind cotelat la 7 milioane de euro?!».*

(Ovidiu Ioanițoaia, <https://blogsport.gsp.ro/ioanitoaia/2018/10/24/a-gresit-radoi/> cited by Terian, 2018)

‘Or, warned that the *great powers* of continental football, such as Spain, England, France, Italy, and Germany, would participate in Euro 2019, will Rădoi dare not to call up the most valued of the current *tricolori*, with Marin valued at 7 million euros?!’

Additionally, Hanț (2022: 157) examines *gen* within the category of newly formed prepositions in contemporary Romanian, emerging through the recategorization of lexical items, alongside *stil*, *tip*, *exceptând*, *excluzând*, and *privind*. The prepositional meaning of *gen* conveys a comparative relation.

In the French linguistic literature, Noailly (2006) uses the term ‘prepositional nouns’ to describe such structures, which are characteristic of spoken discourse.

Popescu and Ionescu (2019) identify the metadiscursive uses of *gen* and its French counterpart *genre*, comparing their pragmatic values to highlight both common and divergent aspects of their usage. *Genre*, as well as *gen*, convey procedural and instructional meanings in the examples analyzed by the authors, this supporting their classification as metadiscursive and pragmatic markers. However, in certain contexts, and among specific sociocultural groups, these items become semantically bleached and function merely as verbal tics.

⁵ The term subjectification, as employed by the author, follows the framework proposed by Traugott. Subjectification is defined as the semanticization over time of subjectivity, understood as relationship to the speaker and the speaker’s beliefs and attitudes. In contrast, intersubjectification refers to a parallel process of semantic development, but one that encodes intersubjectivity, understood as relationship to the addressee and addressee’s face (Traugott, 2010: 30).

2 GEN₁ – prepositional phrases

The analysis of occurrences of *gen* reveals that it fulfills multiple functions across various modes of communication, including written, spoken, and computer-mediated communication (such as comments, messages, etc.). First, we will analyze the syntactic contexts, focusing on various collocations (such as *în genul* and *de genul*) that modify a noun phrase (NP) (examples (12)-(14) and (15)-(19)) or establish a comparative link between two syntactic structures (examples from (20) to (25)). *Gen* can be followed by a noun or pronoun in the genitive form (examples (12), (13), (15), (16)), by a noun/proper noun in the nominative/accusative form (examples (14), (17), (18), (19)):

În genul:

(12) *Cu ajutorul unor softuri speciale și a câtorva gadget-uri suplimentare, poți transforma un iPad, utilizând capacitățile sale touchscreen, într-o claviatură portabilă (keytar) în genul celor folosite de formațiile pop din anii '80.*

(r/reddit/, I, 7)

‘With the help of specialized software and a few additional gadgets, you can transform an iPad, utilizing its touchscreen capabilities, into a portable keyboard (keytar) similar to those used by pop bands in the '80s.’

(13) *Vom controla un personaj în genul lui Ellen Ripley din Alien, care se confruntă cu vreo duzină de specii de extraterestri.*

(r/reddit/, I, 14)

‘We will control a character similar to Ellen Ripley from *Alien*, who faces a dozen or so species of extraterrestrials.’

(14) *Era un telefon în genul Iphone.*

(CPRV, 11)

‘It was a phone similar to/like an iPhone’

De genul:

(15) *Având în vedere legislația existentă ar fi teoretic imposibil să apară situații de genul celor care în fapt apar zi de zi.*

(r/reddit/, I, 22)

‘Given the existing legislation, it would theoretically be impossible for situations like those that occur on a daily basis to arise’

(16) *Îți trebuie un becul de genul martorilor din bord (pe 6 V în cazul Jawei tale, e suficient de 2 - 3 wați) căruia să-i lipești două fire.*

(r/reddit/, I, 33)

‘You need a small light, similar to the dashboard indicators (at 6V for your Jawei, 2-3 watts is sufficient), to which you can attach two wires.’

(17) *O altă păcăleală este cea cu produsele de genul margarină și maioneză light.*

(r/reddit/, I, 37)

‘Another deception is the one involving products such as light margarine and mayonnaise.’

(18) *Final care nu știu dacă va fi chiar de genul Neagu Djuvara sau Mihai Șora, dar sunt optimist.*

(r/reddit/, I, 26)

‘The end which I’m not sure will be exactly like that of Neagu Djuvara or Mihai Șora, but I am optimistic.’

(19) *Comisia Europeană avertizează statele membre să nu închidă businessuri de genul Uber sau Airbnb decât în cazuri extreme.*

(r/reddit/, I, 35)

‘The European Commission warns member states not to shut down businesses like Uber or Airbnb except in extreme cases.’

The structures followed by either the genitive or the nominative/accusative occur with comparable distributional frequencies. However, in contexts where *gen* precedes a nominative or accusative form, there is a marked tendency for the complement to be a proper name (examples (14), (18), (19)).

Expressions containing *gen* are most commonly followed by quotations or, in some cases, by complex quotations:

(20) *Și încă ceva: dacă eu am un text în manualul în engleză americană în genul “he bought some gas for his car”, iar un elev îmi spune că ‘gas’ e gaz, nu benzină, care e petrol în engleză, c-așa știe el, eu ce-i spun? ‘Îmi pare rău, eu predau doar Standard’.*

(r/reddit/, I, 40)

‘And one more thing: if I have a text in the American English textbook like “he bought some gas for his car”, and a student tells me that “gas” means gas, not gasoline, which is petrol in English, because that’s what they know, what should I tell them? “Sorry, I only teach Standard.”’

(21) *Conversația o începi în mașină și o termini afară cu o replică în genul: „Bine, maestre, hai că acuma sunt afară și mai am puțină treabă”.*

(r/reddit/, I, 39)

‘The conversation starts in the car and ends outside with a line like: “Alright, boss, now that I’m outside, I’ve got a little more to do.”’

(22) *Dacă mi s-ar cere să fac eu un slogan personal, cred că ar fi în genul „Cititul te face sexy”, pentru că, sincer, chiar așa mi se pare.*

(r/reddit/, I, 27)

‘If I were asked to create a personal slogan, I think it would be something like “Reading makes you sexy” because, honestly, that’s how I truly feel.’

(23) *Și culmea, când mai văd câte o situație inedită pe unde umblu, de genul un moș care cade pe gheață, îmi vine tot melodia asta în cap.*

(r/reddit/, I, 30)

‘And the funny thing is, when I come across some unexpected situation while I’m out and about, like an old man slipping on ice, this song always pops into my head.’

(24) *...cine face offtopic sau are replici de genul „am auzit eu că, știu de la...”, primește warn.*

(r/reddit/, I, 35)

‘Whoever goes off-topic or uses phrases like “I heard that, I know from...” will receive a warning.’

(25) *Ar fi existat și un răspuns la întrebări posibile de genul: De ce se adaugă două puncte procentuale și nu trei, patru sau o altă cifră?*

(r/reddit/, I, 29)

‘There could have also been an answer to possible questions like: Why are two percentage points added and not three, four, or some other number?’

The structure “de/în genul” is often used as a determinant for the indefinite pronoun “ceva” (‘something’), with the tendency to approximate/soften the comparative structure.

The structures *în genul/în gen* and *de genul/de gen* are employed as a determiner for the indefinite pronoun *ceva* (‘something’), serving to approximate or mitigate the comparative structure, as shown in the examples below.

(26) *Pentru noi aceste lăcașe de cult sunt ceva în genul unor reprezentanțe diplomatice ale lui Dumnezeu.*

(r/reddit/, I, 43)

‘For us, these places of worship are something like diplomatic representations of God.’

(27) *Pe lângă toate astea mai folosește și un limbaj de biciușcar, ceva în genul lui Mircea Badea.*

(r/reddit/, I, 45)

‘In addition to all that, he also uses a language reminiscent of a provocateur, something like Mircea Badea’s style.’

(28) *Un sistem AI este programat să facă ceva benefic, dar își dezvoltă singur o metodă distructivă de a atinge respectivul obiectiv, **ceva în genul** „scopul scuză mijloacele”.*

(r/reddit/, I, 58)

‘An AI system is programmed to achieve something beneficial, but it independently develops a destructive method to reach that objective, something like “the end justifies the means”.’

(29) *...pentru a permite modificarea online a lexiconului, **ceva în genul** wikipedia, altfel nu văd cum am ajunge la numitor comun tot schimbând documente rtf sau doc.*

(r/reddit/, I, 55)

‘...to allow online modification of the lexicon, something like Wikipedia, otherwise I don't see how we would reach a common ground by constantly changing RTF or DOC documents.’

(30) *...să cântărească mai mult de 50% din greutatea corpului tău, **ceva în genul** minim 10 kg.*

(r/reddit/, I, 39)

‘To weigh more than 50% of your body weight, something like at least 10 kg.’

(31) *Și dacă-mi trântea pe piață **ceva de genul** motocicletei din filmuleț și de calitate adusă la standarde globale...*

(r/reddit/, I, 56)

‘And if he had slammed something like the motorcycle from the video on the market, with quality brought to global standards.’

(32) *Poate când îl vor lansa pe plan mondial va fi **ceva de genul** HBO și HBO go.*

(r/reddit/, I, 38)

‘Maybe when they launch it worldwide, it will be something like HBO and HBO Go.’

(33) *Este **ceva de genul**: am o poză cu un bloc, dar vreau un program să îmi afișeze poza cu un munte în loc de bloc, pentru că nu are blocul ce să caute în poza aia.*

(r/reddit/, I, 49)

‘It's something like: I have a picture of a building, but I want a program to display a picture of a mountain instead of the building, because the building has no place in that picture.’

(34) *Un timid poate gândi despre comunicarea în cyber ceva de gen „ce
dificil este să comunic, e o persoana străină, cum să deschid o conversație.*
(r/reddit/, I, 60)

‘A shy person might think about communication in cyberspace something like: “How difficult it is to communicate, it’s a stranger, how do I start a conversation?”’

In all the aforementioned examples, *gen* forms part of syntactic constructions that possess a phraseological function, appearing in informal registers, both in spoken discourse and in written forms (such as online communication). It is also noteworthy that *gen* occurs both in contexts with and without the presence of the definite article. This may be a sign of its evolution into an invariant (see *Section 3*) marker (examples (29), (30), (34)). Its role seems to be that of marking approximation and relativization, which is applied to the statement in its entirety. Thus, *gen* serves as a mechanism through which the speaker mitigates their assertions or requests.

3 GEN₂ – invariant comparative marker, exemplifier or approximator

The use of structures such as *ceva de/în genul* and *ceva gen* with a comparative and exemplifying value ((35)-(40)) leads, in parallel, to a reduction of the structure and the use of *gen* as a fixed form:

(35) *E chiar mai ushor să faci ceva gen reportaj decât o revistă...*
‘It’s even easier to do something like a report than a magazine...’

(36) *Mirosul in cutie e delicios, ceva gen fructe uscate.*
‘The smell in the box is delicious, something like dried fruits.’

(37) *Aranjarea era ceva gen semi-bufet suedez. Na, ca am inventat si eu ceva!*
‘The arrangement was something like a semi-buffet. Well, I invented something too!’

(38) *Ar mai fi ceva gen Peugeot 605*
‘There could be something like a Peugeot 605’

(39) *Dacă vor divertisment și sunt în stare, să facă ceva gen „Românii au talent” sau „Dansez pentru tine”.*
‘If they want entertainment and are able, they should make something like “Romania’s Got Talent” or “Dancing for You”.’

(40) *Ceea ce vrei tu este ceva gen: „semnează ca primarul”.*
‘What you want is something like: “sign as the mayor”.’
(r/reddit/, II, 72-77)

The expression *ceva gen* establishes a link between two structures (S): S₁ *ceva gen* S₂ (which can be noun phrases or quotations). It can also appear in postposition, where the comparative element is omitted but remains implicitly understood.

(41) *Cum sunt ei numai după bani nu au putut să facă un simplu DLC la BF4 cu Faction War sau **ceva gen**.*

‘They are all about money, and they couldn’t even make a simple DLC for BF4 with Faction War or something like that.’

(42) *Menționez că menstruația e normală, ca de obicei, de 8 zile, fără simptome anormale sau **ceva gen**.*

‘I mention that menstruation is normal, as usual, for 8 days, without any abnormal symptoms or something like that.’

(r/reddit/, II, 80-81)

Whether functioning as a noun or with prepositional/adverbial value, *gen* is incorporated into various syntactic structures. The growing frequency of its use in spoken language has contributed to the simplification of syntactic patterns, as seen in constructions such as *de/în/genul*, *ceva de/în genul*, *ceva gen*, and simply *gen*.

When used in isolation, *gen* exhibits an invariant character, as it has undergone morphological bleaching, resulting in the loss of typical nominal properties. Its form is unmarked, appearing in the nominative/accusative singular, unarticulated, and without a preposition, as illustrated in examples (43)-(49).

(43) *...cum sunt cele cu ramă groasă, viu colorată, sau rotunde, supradimensionale, **gen** anii 70’.*

‘...such as those with a thick, brightly colored frame, or round, oversized, like in the ‘70s.’

(44) *Invitatul împreună cu prezentatorul se vor distra în locații diferite, dar atent alese cu un spectru foarte larg de la parcuri de distracții, sărit cu parașuta cât și în locuri elegante **gen** restaurant, club.*

‘The guest, along with the host, will have fun in different locations, carefully chosen with a very broad spectrum, from amusement parks, skydiving, to elegant places like restaurants and clubs.’

(45) *...ce conține un editor word, un program pentru calcul tabelar **gen** Excel.*

‘...which includes a word processor, a spreadsheet program like Excel.’

(46) *A fost cineva de aici la vreun reality-show **gen** Schimb de mame/Comanda la mine? Cum a fost?*

‘Has anyone here been to a reality show like Schimb de mame or Comanda la mine? How was it?’

(47) *El e blond sau cărunț, uatevăr, cu ochi **gen** moartea pasiunii.*

‘He’s blond or gray-haired, whatever, with eyes like the death of passion.’

(48) *Povești **gen** „au zis că e corona, dar era doar o răceală”.*

‘Stories like “they said it was corona, but it was just a cold”.’

(49) *Fiecare utilizator, din browser, apasă pe butonul „Stumble” (**gen** dai cu zarul).*

‘Each user, from the browser, clicks the “Stumble” button (like rolling the dice).’

(r/reddit/, II, 90-96)

In these examples, *gen* behaves prepositionally, conveying a general meaning of comparison. A restrictive determination is introduced through reference to a prototype, which adds nuance to the expression, while simultaneously signaling a form of identification.

It can be observed that in these contexts, *gen* has lost its specific combinatory features: it is invariant (it cannot be used with the plural form: *locuri elegante* **genuri restaurante*); it cannot take an article (*locuri elegante* **genul restaurant*) and it cannot combine with a pronominal adjective (*locuri elegante* **acest gen restaurant*).

Simultaneously, with the same functional values, it is also employed in postposition in examples like (50). This illustrates that *gen* is undergoing a process of pragmatization, as its syntactic position becomes increasingly flexible.

(50) *Pentru o experiență culturală de neuitat și niște servicii de excepție, recomand Cărturești Magheru. Într-un acces de aroganță mă duc la raft, caut Radu Tudoran @ Fiul Risipitor. Nu găsesc, ofc [= of course]. Deși pe site era disponibil. Dar eu vroiam [sic] să (re)citesc AZI. Întreb o tristă de acolo. Cu o aroganță Nicolae Manolescu **gen** (oare știe cine e?), îmi răspunde superior: Avem decât „Toate pânzele sus”, filmul [...].*

(<https://www.facebook.com/Carturesti/posts/pentru-o-experientaculturala-de-neuitat-si-niste-servicii-de-exceptierecomand-/10151083535221385/>, in

Terian, 2018: 133-134)

‘For an unforgettable cultural experience and exceptional service, I recommend Cărturești Magheru. In a fit of arrogance, I head to the shelf, searching for Radu Tudoran’s *Fiul Risipitor*. I don’t find it, of course. Even

though it was listed as available on the website. But I wanted to (re)read it TODAY. I ask a sad-looking staff member there. With a superiority reminiscent **like** Nicolae Manolescu (I wonder if anyone knows who that is?), she responds condescendingly: “We only have *Toate pânzele sus*, the film [...]”.’

In the examples below, *gen* expresses an approximation: in (51) *gen* is not marking the entire statement, but a numeric expression. *Gen* here has a prepositional value, serving as a marker of approximation. In (52), *gen* can function as a marker of the preceding numeral, serving as an approximator, while also acting as a mitigator of the entire statement. This can be explained by the presence of an existing element within the numeral (*vreo*), which already conveys approximation.

(51) a. *El a plătit gen 1000 de lei pentru cazarea în Bulgaria. Eu zic că e bine.*

‘He paid **like** 1000 lei for accommodation in Bulgaria. I think that's fine.’

(CPRV, 22)

(52) *The Young and The Restless* adică *Tânăr și Neliniștit...* ăștia au 15 ani de când se difuzează la noi, odată cu PRO-TV -ul, da' în America, au vreo 30... **gen**.

‘The Young and The Restless, meaning *Tânăr și Neliniștit...* has been airing here for 15 years, ever since PRO-TV started broadcasting, but in America, it's been around for about 30... **like**.’

(r/reddit/, II, 90-96)

4 GEN₃ – discourse marker

As a DM, *gen* expresses the attitude of the speaker regarding what is being communicated, such as doubt, hesitation, and uncertainty. The occurrences of *gen* presented above reveal that, at the level of ideational structure (Schiffrin, 1987) or propositional content, *gen* serves as a marker of exophoric exemplification, referring to situations or opinions that are considered typical or generally valid but are presented without the speaker commitment. At the actional or illocutionary level, *gen* functions as a mitigator of illocutionary force, particularly when introducing comparisons through prototype invocation or when exemplifying factual states of affairs. The attenuation of illocutionary force observed in most cases can be attributed to the speaker's partial detachment from the propositional content they convey.

Finally, at the interactional level, *gen* encodes the relationship between interlocutors, acting as an index of familiarity or in-group membership within a shared social context.

- (53) A: – *Ce ai făcut aseară?*
 B: – *Oho, multe. **Gen** m-am distrat și m-am simțit foarte bine.*
 (CPRV, 27)
 ‘A: – What did you do last night?
 B: – Oh, a lot. Like, I had fun and felt really good.’
- (54) *Am fost la mall **gen** și am văzut multe piți îmbrăcate supercool **gen**.*
 (CPRV, 23)
 ‘I went to the mall, like, and saw a lot of trendy girls dressed super cool, like.’
- (55) *Am rămas fără net **gen**. Vreo trei zile mi-am ocupat timpul cu alte chestii.*
 (CPRV, 8)
 ‘I ran out of internet, like. For about three days, I kept myself busy with other stuff.’
- (56) *Se uita la mine și dădea din cap **gen**.*
 (CPRV, 10)
 ‘He was looking at me and nodding, like.’
- (57) (despre un afiș cu un cântăreț de manele) *Asta în Viena **gen**...*
 Comentariul 1: *Viena e capitala mondială a muzicii, **gen**..*
 Comentariul 2: *Cred că e sold out ... **gen***
 Comentariul 3: ***Gen**... pe bune? 😊*
 Comentariul 4: ***Gen**, sunt mândru.*
 (r/reddit/, III, 4)
 ‘(about a poster featuring a *manele* singer)
 This in Vienna, like...
 Comment 1: Vienna is the world capital of music, like...
 Comment 2: I think it’s sold out... like.
 Comment 3: Like... seriously? 😊
 Comment 4: Like, I’m proud.’
- (58) *A propos! - Contează cine va fi primar **gen**? NU!*
 (r/reddit/, III, 2)
 ‘By the way! – Does it matter who will be mayor, like? NO!’

In all these examples, *gen* functions as an optional discourse particle, and its occurrence in language appears to be influenced primarily by the English variant

*like*⁶. This is the second hypothesis, which posits that the Romanian discourse marker *gen* is the result of linguistic interference, specifically a calque from the English *like*. While *like* has been extensively studied in English⁷, *gen* appears to be a relatively recent innovation in Romanian (see *Subsection 1.3.*), emerging primarily in informal spoken discourse and potentially influenced by contact with English.

Both markers introduce examples or clarify an idea through a prototypical reference (exemplification and prototypicality) (D'Arcy, 2017: 392):

(59) *You should wear something **like** a jacket, it's cold outside.*

(60) *Nu am nimic la mine. Mergea să iau **gen** un caiet cu mine.*

(CPRV, 9)

'I don't have anything with me. I could have gotten like a notebook with me.'

Like and *gen* signal that the object mentioned (*jacket/caiet*) is not necessarily the exact reference but rather an illustrative example.

They can serve as markers of approximation, indicating that a statement should not be taken as exact (approximation and vagueness):

(61) *He paid **like** \$1000 for the rent.*

(62) *A dat pe geaca asta **gen** 400 de lei.*

(CPRV, 23)

'He paid, like, 400 lei for this jacket.'

In both cases, the markers signal that the numeric expression is an estimate rather than a precise value. This function aligns with the broader category of "epistemic mitigation" where the speaker hedges a claim (D'Arcy, 2017: 394).

Another function of *like* is its quotative use, introducing reported speech or internal thoughts:

(63) *And he was like, "I can't believe this!"*

(64) *Când a apărut în peisaj, nu i-a venit să creadă. Se uita la el **gen** „unde ai fost până acum?!”*

(CPRV, 30)

'When he showed up, he couldn't believe it. He looked at him, like "Where have you been until now?!"'

⁶ However, this hypothesis requires further validation through research, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, aimed at a comparative analysis with *like*.

⁷ Some of them are mentioned in the footnote n° 4.

In English, *like* is used as a discourse marker to organize speech, introduce new ideas, or buy time for cognitive processing:

(65) *I was, **like**, really tired after the trip.*

The Romanian *gen* can sometimes appear in similar contexts, although it seems to be less used with this function:

(66) *Mama era **gen** supărată că nu am anunțat-o că voi întârzia.*
(CPRV, 28)

‘Mom was, like, upset that I didn’t let her know I’d be late.’

In both cases, the discourse marker softens the statement and signals an informal or spontaneous speech style.

Like and *gen* function as mitigators, making statements less direct or assertive:

(67) *She’s, **like**, kind of rude sometimes.*

(68) *Nu am suportat niciodată atitudinea asta. Uneori se comporta **gen** fără scrupule.*

(CPRV, 31)

‘I have never tolerated this attitude. Sometimes, he/she would act, like, without any scruples.’

They do not contribute meaning but rather help the speaker maintain fluency or structure their thoughts (fillers) in (69) and (70):

(69) *I was, **like**, walking to the store, and then I saw this, **like**, huge dog just standing there.*

(70) *Nu știu dacă ți-am povestit visul: se făcea că mergeam sau, nu, **gen**, alergam pe străzi și, deodată mi-a apărut un balaur în față. Apoi, nu mai știu. S-a întâmplat ceva **gen**, dar nu-mi mai aduc aminte.*

(CPRV, 33)

‘I’m not sure if I told you about my dream: it seemed like I was walking or, no, like, running on the streets and suddenly, a dragon appeared in front of me. Then, I do not remember. Something, like, happened, but I cannot recall it anymore.’

In this case, *like* serves as a filler, allowing the speaker to process their thoughts while maintaining the flow of conversation/story. It does not add semantic meaning but softens the speech and makes it sound more spontaneous. Similarly, *gen* in Romanian is used here as a hesitation marker or filler, giving the speaker time to think while keeping the conversation fluid.

The discourse markers *like* in English and *gen* in Romanian function as discourse-pragmatic devices that reduce the cognitive load of speech production, making communication more natural and interactive. They share several core pragmatic functions, including approximation, exemplification, and discourse organization. While *like* has been extensively pragmaticalized in English, *gen* appears to be undergoing a similar process of pragmaticalization in Romanian, possibly influenced by linguistic calquing.

5 Conclusions

This study has explored the multifaceted uses of *gen* within contemporary Romanian, highlighting its complex pragmatic behavior despite its ostensibly straightforward nature. By analyzing a corpus of spoken and online interactions, three primary usages have been identified: as part of prepositional phrases (Gen₁), as a comparative marker or approximator (Gen₂), and as a discourse marker with functions analogous to the English *like* (Gen₃).

The findings suggest that *gen* embodies a shift towards pragmaticalization, evidenced by its progression from a taxonomic noun to a discourse particle with various pragmatic functions. While previous literature has laid the groundwork for understanding *gen* as an emerging discourse marker, this study expands on these insights by highlighting its pragmatic diversity and interactional relevance in contemporary Romanian. Additionally, the influence of English appears to contribute to the development of *gen* as a discourse marker, particularly in younger speakers and digital communication contexts.

Future research could benefit from a more extensive corpus to explore the sociolinguistic dimensions and pragmatic nuances of *gen*, particularly in comparison with similar markers in other Romance languages. Understanding these dynamics may provide deeper insights into the processes of linguistic change and the interplay between language contact and internal language development.

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Corpus

CoRoLa = Reference Corpus for Contemporary Romanian Language
(<https://corola.racai.ro/>)

CPRV = Personal spoken Romanian corpus (personal recordings)

r/Reddit = examples from a platform which is a popular online community

Sketch engine corpus

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