CLIPPED ROLE NOUNS IN ROMANIAN AS QUASI-PROPER NAMES[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

Natural languages distinguish, at least descriptively, between definite descriptions and proper names as two major types of referring expressions. Definite descriptions are standardly treated as uniqueness-based and co-varying across contexts, while proper names are commonly analyzed as rigid designators, referring to the same individual across all worlds in which that individual exists. This binary picture, however, has long been complicated by a class of expressions that do not fit comfortably into either category: kinship terms such as English *Mom*, *Dad*, or role-denoting expressions such as *Doctor* or *Principal*, used vocatively or referentially to pick out a unique, contextually salient individual. Pelczar and Rainsbury (1998) label such expressions **quasi-proper names**, arguing that they occupy an intermediate position between indexicals and proper names, being directly referential yet indexically anchored to the speaker.

Romanian offers particularly rich empirical ground for investigating this intermediate category, for two reasons. First, Romanian proper names, unlike their English counterparts, are morphologically marked by a dedicated proprial article, homophonous with but grammatically distinct from the compositional definite article (Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2006; Cornilescu and Nicolae 2015; Muñoz 2019). Second, Romanian colloquial registers make productive use of clipped role nouns, such as *profa / profu* ‘teach.FEM/MASC’ or *diriga / dirigu* ‘class

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teacher.FEM/MASC.CLIP', which display a distribution unattested for ordinary role nouns: they resist the definiteness alternation typical of common nouns, occur felicitously in vocatives, and are interpreted as uniquely referential in the absence of the compositional determiner.

The present paper argues that clipped role nouns in Romanian are not simply informal or expressive variants of definite descriptions, but core instances of quasi-proper names, sharing the full set of properties argued to characterize this category in the theoretical literature: direct referentiality, indexical/functional anchoring, rigid designation, and vocative-compatibility (Capone 2024, 2025; Yip et al. 2024; Mizuta 2025). Crucially, the paper further argues that quasi-name status in Romanian has a dedicated morphological signature: the enclitic -a/-u attaching to clipped role nouns instantiates the same proprial article found on ordinary proper names, rather than a residual or "frozen" definite article. This distinguishes Romanian quasi-name formation from superficially similar phenomena in languages such as English, where forms like *mom* or *dad* involve article drop rather than reanalysis.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the core data and states the paper's main claims. Section 3 situates the analysis within the literature on referring expressions, discussing quasi-proper names (3.1) and the proprial article (3.2) as independent, converging diagnostics. Section 4 provides empirical evidence – from counterfactual rigidity, the Functional Characteristic Relation, and direct comparison with proper names – that clipped role nouns are core quasi-names in Romanian. Section 5 extends the analysis to kinship terms, showing that clipping constitutes one of two productive pathways to quasi-name status in the language. Section 6 offers the conclusions.

2. THE DATA AND MAIN CLAIMS

The present paper discusses clipped role nouns, of the type illustrated in (1-3), which are naturally occurring Romanian utterances:

(1) **Profa** a zis să nu venim mâine.
teach.CLIP.FEM has said SBJV not come.1PL tomorrow
"Teach said we shouldn't come tomorrow"

(2) **Profa**, puteți explica din nou?
teach.CLIP.FEM can.2PL explain of-new
"Teach, can you explain again?"

(3) **Profu** e super mișto.
teach.CLIP.MASC is super cool
"Teach is a super cool guy"

The paper aims at determining what kind of expressions *profa / profu* 'teach' are. When analyzing examples such as (1-3), three ideas become immediately apparent: *profa / profu* 'teach' look like definite descriptions, yet they are clearly uniquely referential; *profa / profu* 'teach' behave more like a name than like a definite description; *profa / profu* 'teach' occur in both argument positions and vocatives, i.e. a distribution not typically shared by other types of (role) nouns, as shown in (4):

(4) a. Femeie / cucoană, pleacă!
b. *Femeia / cucoana, pleacă!
woman / lady leave! woman.DEF lady.DEF leave
"Woman / lady, leave!"

The central claim made by the paper is that clipped role nouns in Romanian, such as *profa, profu* 'teach', *diriga, dirigu* 'class teacher.CLIP', function as **quasi-proper names**. They are directly referential, rigidly anchored to a functional relation between discourse participants, and syntactically insensitive to the definiteness alternation that governs ordinary nouns. In turn, this entails their behavior as rigid designators, not co-varying descriptions, as well as their being anchored to a shared pragmatic context via a functional relation between speaker and addressee (see Capone 2025, Yip *et al*. 2024).

An additional claim made by the paper is that the enclitic -a/-u on clipped quasi-names is the **proprial article**, the same morpheme that appears on proper names like *Mihaela* and *George* in Romanian. Quasi-name formation in Romanian involves reanalysis of article function, not article drop (as with English *mom, dad*).

Finally, the paper shows that Romanian kinship terms (*tata, tati 'Dad, Daddy'* vs. *tatăl* 'father.DEF') show that quasi-name status is not exclusive to clipped forms, but that clipping is one productive morphological pathway to quasi-name status in Romanian.

3. ON REFERRING EXPRESSIONS

Referring expressions in Romanian are of three types: definite descriptions (5), proper names – both complex proper names (6a, see Tănase-Dogaru 2022, 2024) and simple (6b) -, and quasi-names (7).

(5) **Profesoara** a plecat din clasă.
teacher.DEF has left from classroom
'The teacher left the classroom'.

(6) a. **Profesoara** **Popescu** a plecat din clasă.
teacher.DEF Popescu has left from classroom
'Teacher Popescu has left the classroom.'

b. **Maria** a plecat din clasă.
Maria has left from classroom
'Maria left the classroom/'

(7) **Profa** a plecat din clasă
teacher.FEM.CLIP has left from classroom
'Teach left the classroom.'

Definite descriptions (5) are uniqueness-based, they carry the compositional definite article and occupy argument positions (but resist vocatives); (complex) proper names (6) are rigid, they carry the proprial article and vocative use is possible; quasi-names (7) are also rigid, they carry the proprial article, and may appear both as arguments and as vocatives.

Quasi-names are not simply informal descriptions. They have a genuinely different semantic and syntactic profile, which brings them closer to proper names than to definite descriptions, despite their descriptive origins.

3.1. ON QUASI-NAMES

The term quasi-proper name originates with Pelczar & Rainsbury (1998), introduced to capture expressions like *Mom*, *Dad*, *Grandpa*, that occupy an intermediate position between indexicals and proper names. The literatures registers consensus with respect to some core properties of quasi-names. Quasi-names are seen as directly referential; the descriptive content is inert, i.e. present but not functioning as a satisfaction condition (Capone 2024). A second property is that quasi-names are indexically anchored, in the sense that reference is fixed relative to the speaker (*Dad* means *my dad* see Pelczar & Rainsbury 1998). Thirdly, quasi-names are rigid designators, their reference does not co-vary across possible worlds (Yip et al. 2024). A fourth property is vocative-compatibility; quasi-names are usable to call someone, not just to refer to them (Capone 2024). Finally, quasi-names are not introduced by baptism; rather, they are acquired as conventional lexical items within a social group.

A very important dimension of analysis is The Functional Characteristic Relation (FCR), discussed by Yip et al. (2024). According to the FCR, reference is fixed by a function mapping speaker and addressee jointly to a unique individual. For example, *Dad* maps the discourse participants to the father of the speaker, while *Principal* (as quasi-name) maps them to the principal of their shared school.

Current work classifies quasi-names along a continuum (Capone 2024, 2025; Mizuta 2025). This continuum is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

The continuum of quasi-names

Category	Properties	Examples
Core QP-names	Rigid, relational, stable over time, both vocative and argument	*Mum*, *Dad*, *Mamma*, *Papà*
Quasi-quasi-proper names	Partly name-like, restricted distribution or stability	Japanese *anata* (Mizuta 2025) (*you* spoken by wives to husbands, polite service context)
Pseudo-quasi-proper names	Ad hoc, created for the local discourse situation	Discourse-specific role terms (Mizuta 2025) (*o-nii-chan* "dear older brother")

In the following sections, the paper will show that Romanian clipped role nouns (*profa* 'teach', *diriga* 'class teacher.CLIP') and kinship endearment forms (*tata* 'Dad', *tati* 'Daddy') are core quasi-proper names, instead of a weaker or ad hoc category.

Taken together, these five properties – direct reference, indexical/ functional anchoring, rigid designation, vocative-compatibility, and non-baptismal acquisition – define quasi-proper names as a coherent grammatical category, distinct from both definite descriptions and canonical proper names, rather than as a loose, ad hoc grouping of expressive nominals. The continuum proposed in the literature (Capone 2024, 2025; Mizuta 2025) further predicts that individual quasi-names may satisfy these properties to different degrees, ranging from peripheral to core instances of the category. Sections 4 and 5 test Romanian clipped role nouns and kinship terms against exactly this profile, arguing that they instantiate core, rather than peripheral, quasi-names.

3.2. ON THE PROPRIAL ARTICLE

With respect to definiteness encoding on the Proper Name, languages fall into two categories: those where proper names appear bare in argument position (English, German, etc.) and those where the proper names carry some marking (Romanian, Portuguese, etc.)'. The examples in (8-9) illustrate this sort of special marking, i.e. the proprial article, carried by proper names in Maori and Icelandic, respectively.

(8) Ka whakarongo puku a Ponga. Maori (Bauer 2003, 143)
TAM listen silent PROP Ponga
'Ponga listened in silence'

(9) Hún María kom í gær. Icelandic (Sigurðsson 2006)
she.PROP Maria came yesterday
'Mary (you know) came yesterday'.

Following in essence Muñoz 2019 (but also Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2006, Cornilescu and Nicolae 2015, Dragomirescu et al. 2016, a.o.), the paper adopts the view that Romanian has a proprial article, which is phonologically homophonous with the definiteness article but grammatically distinct, that converts name-bearing nouns into rigidly referring DPs.

The surface form -a/-u/-l serves double duty: it behaves both as a compositional definiteness article on common nouns and as a proprial article on names. Table 2 summarizes the paradigms of the proprial vs compositional definite article in Romanian.

Table 2

The proprial vs compositional article in Romanian

		Article type	Vocative?	Rigid?
Profesoara 'teacher.DEF'	*-a*	Compositional definiteness	✗	✗
Maria	*-a*	**Proprial**	✓	✓
Tata 'Dad'	*-a*	**Proprial**	✓	✓
Profa 'teach.FEM'	*-a*	**Proprial** (after reanalysis)	✓	✓

As shown in Table 2, the morphosyntactic signature of quasi-name status in Romanian seems to be a shift from carrying the compositional definiteness article to carrying the proprial article, a grammatical reanalysis that is detectable through vocative compatibility and semantic rigidity.

Yip *et al*. (2024) discuss the very interesting case of Cantonese and Bangla. These languages have proprial articles, - *aa* and -*moshai*, respectively, but they also make a distinction between configurations where definite bare nouns behave as quasi-names, while definite bare classifiers are standard definite descriptions (10):

(10) Situation-uniqueness-teacher: ✗ Bare CL vs. ✓ Bare N

Context: A new colleague has joined the school you have been teaching at, and you are responsible for guiding him/her. This morning, when the new colleague and you arrive at the school, you tell him/her:

a.{#go-haauzoeng/ haauzoeng} wui bei fan sigaanbiu nei Cantonese
CL-principal/principal will give CL timetable 2SG
'The principal will give you the timetable.'

b.{#headmastar-Ti/headmastar} toma-ke nishchoi timetable-Ta diyech-en?
Principal-CL / principal you.DAT of.course timetable.CL give-PERF-3
'The principal must have given you the timetable?'Bangla
(Yip *et al*. 2024, 256)

Table 3 summarizes the cross-linguistic data and places Romanian in the typology of quasi-names discussed in the literature.

Table 3
Typology of quasi-names

Language	Proprial article form	Definiteness article form	Quasi-name diagnostic
Māori	*a* (overt, distinct)	*te/ngā*	Presence of overt proprial *a*
Cantonese	*aa-* (overt, distinct)	Null D1 via classifier	Absence of classifier
Spanish	Null (covert)	*el/ la* etc.	Absence of definiteness article (Profesor, venga aquí. / Profe, venga aquí.)
Romanian	*-a/-u* (**homophonous** with definiteness article)	*-a/-u/-l* etc.	**Reanalysis** from definiteness to proprial function, detectable via vocative and rigidity

The cross-linguistic picture that emerges is that quasi-name status is not tied to a single morphological exponent: some languages mark it via a dedicated proprial article (Maori, Icelandic, Romanian), others via the bare noun / bare classifier contrast (Cantonese, Bangla), yet the underlying grammatical distinction, i.e. that between compositional definiteness and rigid, name-like reference, remains constant across these systems. For Romanian, this predicts that clipped role nouns, if genuinely quasi-names, should pattern with proper names in carrying the proprial, rather than the compositional, exponent of *-a/-u/-l*. Section 4 tests this prediction directly, using counterfactual rigidity and FCR-based diagnostics to determine which article clipped role nouns actually carry.

4. CLIPPED ROLE NOUNS AS CORE QUASI-NAMES IN ROMANIAN: RIGIDITY AND THE FCR

This section undertakes to amass some evidence in favor of the central thesis of the paper, i.e. clipped role nouns are core quasi-names.

The first piece of evidence comes from counterfactual rigidity. In (11) below, the clipped role noun *dirigu* 'class teacher.CLIP' stays anchored to the actual class teacher, behaving like a rigid designator. In contrast, in (12) below, the full form *dirigintele* 'class teacher.DEF' more readily takes a co-varying reading, behaving like a typical definite description.

(11) Și dacă am fi avut alt diriginte,
and if have.1PL be had another class teacher
dirigu tot ne-ar fi urmărit ca un vultur
class teacher.CLIP still us-would be followed like a vulture
'Even if we had had a different class teacher, our (current) class teacher would have still followed us everywhere like a vulture.'

(12) Dacă am fi avut alt diriginte,
if have.1PL be had another class teacher
dirigintele ne-ar fi urmărit ca un vulture.
class teacher.DEF us-would be followed like a vulture
'If we had had a different class teacher, that class teacher would have followed us everywhere like a vulture.'

The second piece comes from the Functional Characteristic Relation (FCR), discussed by Yip et al. (2024). According to the FCR, as shown in section 3.1, reference is fixed by a function mapping speaker and addressee jointly to a unique individual. In (13) below, the clipped form *profa* 'teach' is felicitous among classmates sharing the same teacher. It is infelicitous when the discourse participants do not share a school context or when multiple teachers are equally salient.

(13) Profa a zis că am luat toți nota zece.
teacher.CLIP has said that have.1PL taken all grade.DEF ten
'Teach said we all got a ten.'

This interpretation reflects the FCR, in the sense that *profa* maps both speaker and addressee jointly to a unique individual via the relation *teacher-of-this-class-of.* When that function is not uniquely defined for the discourse participants, the quasi-name is infelicitous.

The final piece of evidence is the parallel behavior of clipped role nouns and proper names. As shown in (14) below, the clipped role noun *diriga* 'class teacher.FEM.CLIP' behaves similarly in terms of rigidity and FCR to the proper name *Mihaela.*

(14) Și dacă am fi avut altă dirigintă,
and if have.1PL be had another class teacher.FEM
Mihaela / diriga tot ne-ar fi urmărit ca un vultur.

Mihaela / class teacher.FEM.CLIP still us-would be followed like a vulture.
'Even if we had had a different class teacher, Mihaela / our (current) class teacher would have still followed us everywhere like a vulture.'

Therefore, the rigidity and FCR-anchoring of clipped role nouns like *profa* 'teach' parallel the behavior of proper names like *Mihaela* under the same tests, thus confirming that both carry the proprial article and are rigid designators, not descriptions.

5. KINSHIP TERMS AS QUASI-NAMES IN ROMANIAN

Romanian kinship terms show that quasi-name status is not exclusive to clipped forms. Consider the *tatăl* 'father.DEF' / *tata* 'Dad' / *tati* 'Daddy' paradigm in Table 4 below:

Table 4

Kinship terms in Romanian

	Morphology	Article type	Vocative?	Rigidity	Affective load
tatăl	Full form + enclitic *-l*	Compositional definiteness	✗	Low (descriptive)	Neutral
tata	Conventional form + *-a*	**Proprial**	✓	High (name-like)	Neutral/warm
tati	Endearment / hypocoristic	**Proprial?**	✓	High	High

There seem to be two morphological pathways to quasi-name status in Romanian. One is the kinship pathway, where conventional forms (*tata* 'Dad', *mama* 'Mom') behave in a manner parallel proper names. The second is the clipping pathway, which reanalyzes clipped role nouns into core quasi-names carrying the proprial article.

When it comes to differences between *tati* 'Daddy' / *mami* 'Mommy', on the one hand, and *tata* 'Dad'/ *mama* 'Mom', on the other, the paper suggests that the best treatment of *tati* and *mami* is that of core quasi-names carrying pragmatic enrichment. Although not as stable across life course as their counterparts, and restricted to the intimate register, they exhibit referential rigidity and indexical anchoring. The proprial article is present and functional in *tati* just as in *tata*, the difference being entirely at the level of pragmatic register, not grammatical category.

In what follows, the paper investigates the behavior of a clipped kinship term in Romanian: *buni* 'Grandma'. Just like the clipped role nouns investigated in section 4, *buni* 'Grandma' shows no co-variation effects and maps speaker and addressee jointly to a unique individual via the relation grandma-of-the-

speaker-that-the-hearer-knows-about (15). In addition, *buni* 'Grandma' resists restrictive modification (16), in a manner parallel to proper names.

(15) De câte ori mergem în vizită, buni aduce flori / gătește.
of many times go.PRES.1PL in visit, grandmother.CLIP brings flowers / cooks
'Whenever we go for a visit, Grandma brings flowers / cooks.'

(16) a. Bunica pe care am cunoscut-o în parc
grandmother.DEF DOM whom have.1SG met-her in park
'The grandmother I met in the park'
b. *Buni pe care am cunoscut-o în parc
grandmother.CLIP DOM whom have.1SG met-her in park
'Grandma, whom I met in the park.'

Therefore, *buni* is a clipped (or, better said, truncated) kinship term which become a quasi-Proper Name. Just like *tati* and *mami*, it conforms to the prosodic requirement that truncated first names with diminutive suffixes is generally that of a disyllabic trochaic foot (Avram 2014, 14). In this sense, it behaves like other Romanian pet names: Adrian – Adi, Ciprian – Cipi, Eduard – Edi, Gabriel – Gabi.

As for the "vocalic ending -i" (Zafiu 2001, 246), it is analyzed by Graur (1965, 64) as "a new suffix, -i […], with which diminutives are formed". Vascenco (1995, 36–37) also states that "after truncation most of [the diminutive hypocoristics] have been augmented by the attachment of the suffix -i". Vasiliu (2001, 589) writes that "some truncated names are developed by the attachment of the suffix -i".

Romanian possesses, therefore, two subtypes of core quasi-names: kinship quasi-names and institutional quasi-names. Table 5 summarizes their main properties.

Table 5

Two subtypes of core quasi-names in Romanian

Property	**Kinship QP-names (*tata*, *mama*)**	**Institutional QP-names (*profa*, *diriga*)**
Morphological pathway	conventional form	Clipping + proprial article reanalysis
Article type	Proprial *-a* (conventional)	Proprial *-a/-u* (after reanalysis)
FCR type	Universal biological/family relation	Local institutional relation
Stability across time	Lifelong (same referent)	Role-bound (new teacher = new referent)
Community of use	Family	Community of practice (class, school)
Lexicalized in language?	Yes (in the general lexicon)	Partially — conventionalized within social groups
Affective variants	*tati*, *mami*	

Kinship quasi-names are anchored to universal relations (everyone has a mother, a father), while institutional quasi-names are anchored to locally contingent relations that hold only within a specific community of practice.

This distinction shows that the FCR does not require a universal or biological relation. Any stable functional mapping between discourse participants and a unique individual can ground a quasi-name, provided the community of practice is stable enough to conventionalize the form.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that Romanian clipped role nouns (*profa* 'teach.FEM', *profu* 'teach.MASC', *diriga* 'class teacher.FEM.CLIP) are core quasi-proper names, in the sense that they are directly referential, rigidly anchored to an FCR, as well as compatible with both argument and vocative positions.

In the same vein, the paper has claimed that the enclitic -a/-u on clipped quasi-names is the proprial article, the same morpheme that appears on proper names like *Maria*, reanalyzed from its definiteness function through conventionalization within a community of practice.

Thirdly, the paper has dealt with Romanian kinship terms (*tata* 'Dad', *tati* 'Daddy' vs. *tatăl* 'father.DEF'; *bunica* 'gramdmother' vs. *buni* 'gramdmother.CLIP') and shown that kinship terms provide a parallel paradigm that confirms the proprial / definiteness article contrast through a different morphological pathway.

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Abstract

This paper examines clipped role nouns in Romanian, such as *profa / profu* 'teach.FEM/MASC' and *diriga / dirigu* 'class teacher.FEM/MASC.CLIP', which show a distribution unexpected for ordinary role nouns: they are uniquely referential without carrying the compositional definite article, resist the definiteness alternation, and occur felicitously in vocatives. The central claim is that clipped role nouns function as quasi-proper names (Pelczar and Rainsbury 1998): directly referential expressions, rigidly anchored to a Functional Characteristic Relation (FCR) between discourse participants (Yip *et al.* 2024), and compatible with vocative use, while remaining descriptively transparent. A second claim concerns the morphological exponence of quasi-name formation: the enclitic *-a/-u* on clipped role nouns is analyzed as the proprial article, the same morpheme attested on Romanian proper names, rather than as a residual definite article. Quasi-name formation in Romanian is thus argued to involve reanalysis of article function, not article drop, unlike English hypocoristics such as *mom*, *dad*. Finally, the paper extends the analysis to Romanian kinship terms (*tata* 'Dad', *tati* 'Daddy', *buni* 'Grandma.CLIP'), showing that clipping constitutes one of two productive morphological pathways to quasi-name status in Romanian, alongside conventionalized kinship terms, both converging on the same grammatical signature.