

# Sociolinguistics

7.0

Romani-Project Graz / Dieter W. Halwachs

*The sociolinguistic situation of Romani reflects the sociopolitical and the sociocultural status of its speakers. Consequently Romani has to be described as a primarily oral, functionally restricted, dominated, stateless diaspora language with no monolingual speakers.*

REPERTOIRES OF ROMANI SPEAKERS	PRIVATE varieties in the social microcosm that are used in informal private domains: with the partner, in the family, when in contact with close friends, etc.	EVERYDAY LIFE varieties in the social macrocosm that are used in domains of everyday life: with acquaintances (at work, at school, etc.), with strangers, when shopping, etc.	PUBLIC varieties used in formal public domains: in the media, in religious contexts, in higher education, when dealing with authorities, etc.
<b>REPERTOIRE 1:</b> language use of most Romani speakers	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S) <b>Romani</b>	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S)	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S)
<b>REPERTOIRE 2:</b> language use of speakers of vital (Vlax) varieties	majority language(s) <b>ROMANI</b>	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S) <b>Romani</b>	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S)
<b>REPERTOIRE 3:</b> language use of international Romani activists	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S) <b>Romani</b>	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S) <b>Romani</b>	MAJORITY LANGUAGE(S) <b>Romani</b>

*A linguistic repertoire is the set of distinguishable linguistic varieties used in different social contexts by a particular speech community.* III. 1

Romani is a language that until recently has not existed in a written form and has exclusively been passed on orally. It has not developed a generally accepted written standard and, as a consequence, has no prescriptive norms. This linguistic situation reflects the sociopolitical situation of the Roma: Politically, economically and culturally marginalised,

ethnically stigmatised, discriminated against and persecuted up to genocide, the Roma could only survive in small groups which led to the geographical and social heterogeneity that still exists today. Consequently, Roma have never been in a position to build large political-economic structures or to get their share of political and economic

power. Considering the fact that the development of standard varieties generally follows the development of political and economic power structures, it becomes clear why Romani has not developed such a variety. Furthermore, the outlined sociohistorical situation explains why Romani is labelled a stateless diaspora language.

## LANGUAGE USE

For most Roma their respective Romani variety is reduced to intra-group communication, and thus limited to the private domains. Romani primarily functions as an

intimate variety in the social microcosm. Adult Romani speakers are always bi- or multilingual and use the language(s) of the respective majority population(s) for inter-group communication in the public domains and more often in the domains of everyday life. Consequently, Romani spea-

kers may be described as non-monolingual. Compared to the use of Romani, the dominance in the use of the respective majority language(s) is shown in the abstracted linguistic repertoire of Romani speakers.

Repertoire 2 above displays the full range of functions as, for example,

in *Kalderaš* Romani which dominates the internal communication and is also used when in contact with speakers of other Vlach varieties. More frequently, however, the functions of Romani as the inter-group variety in everyday life are extremely limited. In many cases it only functions as an intimate variety in the social microcosm, and even in these domains majority languages are often more frequently used than Romani (see repertoire 1 in Ill. 1). This dominance of majority languages in the linguistic repertoires of Romani speech communities – not only in the public sphere but also in everyday life and in private contexts – characterises Romani as a dominated language.

This asymmetrical relationship between Romani and the majority languages results not only in the functional restrictions mentioned, but also in strong

influence or rather pressure of majority languages on Romani. This influence results in lexical loans as well as in the replication of patterns of the majority languages, which account for the differences between individual Romani varieties. These lexical and structural differences are often perceived as obstacles to inter-group communication and sometimes even lead speakers of a particular Romani variety to value other varieties as different languages. Essentially, problems in inter-group communication are caused by the functional restriction of Romani to intra-group communication in the private sphere. If there is a constant need to use Romani in inter-group communication and in public life, Romani will adapt to these new situations. The ability to meet the communicative needs of its speakers is inherent to any language of the world. Although Ro-

mani has been written for some decades now, the constant communicative need to functionally expand it into all domains of everyday and public life has not generally been given until now. In inter-group communication Romani is primarily used by activists who are able and willing to adapt to each other linguistically. The same applies to the oral use of Romani in formal domains (see repertoire 3 in Ill. 1).

Formal written Romani, above all, has symbolic functions with only marginal communicative ones. The overwhelming majority of texts are translations from majority languages into Romani. Their main purposes are to highlight the ability of Romani to function in these contexts, to support the struggle for sociocultural equality of the Roma, to symbolise the will, need or demand for the sociopolitical integration of the Roma, etc.

## SOCIOPOLITICAL STATUS

The vast majority of Romani speakers still use Romani exclusively for intra-group communication, and majority languages in all other domains. As outlined in the last paragraph, this has nothing to do with the linguistic insufficiencies of Romani, but is sociolinguistically rooted. The functional restrictions of Romani are reflected by its sociopolitical status. Romani is marginalised in the media, marginalised in education, irrelevant in public life, and neglected in administration.

Romani is present in almost all types of media. Apart from daily and weekly newspapers, Romani is used in journals, brochures and books. There are radio and television broadcasts on public and private channels and even a few private radio and television stations broadcasting exclusively in Romani. Radio and television are also present on the internet, as are websites, mailing lists and chat rooms. Especially print publications, but also radio and television broadcasts, are often bilingual, thus reflecting both the linguistic repertoires of Romani speakers and the sociolinguistic situation of Romani as a dominated

language. But despite its presence in the media, compared to dominant languages, the impact of Romani media on Romani speakers is insignificant. Romani speakers are above all exposed to the mainstream media of dominant languages and Romani media products and broadcasts are in most cases symbolic, as is written Romani.

In most cases the demand to use Romani in education is part of the political agenda of the struggle of Roma for equal rights and equal opportunities. Resulting activities range from grassroots level actions via national and regional measures to European-wide initiatives. The latter mostly are international treaties or recommendations of supranational organisations which in a few cases are accompanied by concrete measures. One of these rare cases is the Council of Europe's Curriculum Framework for Romani and its corresponding Language Portfolios. These tools were developed according to the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which was recommended by the European Union as an instrument in setting up systems of validation of language competences. The most prominent example of an international treaty with an impact on Romani teaching is

the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Both recommendations and treaties are top-down instruments that are often accompanied by national or regional measures which – at least legally – make Romani teaching possible. In most cases such measures are embedded into the legal framework for the protection of (national) minorities of a particular country or region and are formulated in the accompanying regulations for minority language teaching. In the case of Romani these top-down measures are, almost as a rule, not actively implemented by the authorities. They just provide the possibility for Romani teaching but leave the implementation to NGOs. This has to be seen in connection with the plurality of Romani, educational authorities are used to dealing with homogeneous languages with a standard that serves as the norm in teaching. Furthermore, most top-down measures are triggered by bottom-up demands.

Without grassroots initiatives, most of the top-down measures would not be brought into force or would remain ineffective declarations of good will. Only a productive cooperation between NGOs and authorities offers the possibility that

Romani teaching becomes part of the education system. But being part of the system does not automatically mean that Romani is integrated into the regular curriculum. On the contrary, for the most part Romani is taught in extracurricular lessons, often only in the framework of lessons on Romani history and culture. Romani as a language of instruction is even more marginalised than Romani as a subject. If a teacher is competent in Romani – which is quite exceptional – it might be used with children whose mother tongue is Romani and who have a low competence in the majority language. In such exceptional cases Romani functions as an auxiliary language for the purpose of acquiring the majority language.

The outlined situation is most probably related to the fact that Romani teaching, and up to a certain point, minority language teaching in Europe in general is less a pedagogical than a political matter. Romani NGOs see Romani teaching as part of the political struggle for emancipation from the majority population and their dominant culture and language. Representatives and authorities of the majority try to value the language and the culture of the Romani minority by declarative acts which grant Romani a marginal role in mainstream education. Depending on the prevailing conditions, extracurricular Romani lessons which also discuss culture and history contribute to the empowerment of Romani children and counteract, at least to some extent, the pressure to linguistically and culturally assimilate into the majority population. Yet despite these side effects, the main function of Romani teaching remains, once again with the background of primarily political motivation, on a symbolic level. There are no known cases where Romani

is used systematically to teach literacy to children who have acquired it as their mother tongue during their primary socialisation. Such a systematic approach to Romani teaching would be the most suitable reason to include it into mainstream education. This would be in line with a recommendation of UNESCO (1953) that the best way to teach literacy is to use the mother tongue of the learner. The marginalisation of Romani in education, again, is a direct result of the sociolinguistic situation of a dominated diaspora language with almost no tradition in literacy. As public life as well as administration are always connected with dominant languages with a profound tradition in literacy, it becomes obvious why Romani is irrelevant in public life and neglected in administration.

The sociolinguistic status of Romani outlined so far explains that changes in the situation of Romani will only result in improvements in the status of its speakers, the Roma. Although it is obvious that Romani will most probably never reach a balanced relationship with the dominant national languages of Europe, the ongoing emancipation process is already effecting changes in its status. Romani is perceived by the majority population as a primary cultural identity factor, public opinion more often attributes it the status of a language. The previously dominant opinion that regarded it as gibberish, as the jargon of fringe groups and as the idiom of crooks is slowly losing strength. This change in opinion results, inter alia, in moderate official attention attributed to Romani as a European minority language. Furthermore, the use of Romani among activists on the international level has an effect on both its functions and structures. Although limi-

ted to a small subgroup of speakers, as a means of communication of the political movement, Romani is functionally expanding into formal domains. This expansion results in lexical enrichment as well as in structural changes. Romani is developing the vocabulary needed to discuss legal, administrative, scientific, etc. topics, as well as structures that enable its users to reflect, write and publicly talk about any relevant topic. Due to its communicative use in formal domains among Romani representatives, Romani has entered the stage of development from a vernacular to a standard language. This development in no case follows the traditional standardisation pattern – i.e. the imposition of a codified variety by law through education – but has to be described as harmonisation, by trial and error in actual communication processes using all linguistic resources at hand. Therefore, translations and standardisation products with primarily symbolic functions as well as communicative experience, repertoire resources, etc. of all speakers involved contribute to this harmonisation process, which is slowly resulting in something like an international Romani. The higher the numbers of Romani speakers participating in this process, the more this international variety will spread and contribute to overcome the communication obstacles between speakers of different Romani varieties. Preconditions for the further development of this international variety are further improvements of the sociopolitical situation of the Roma. Current conditions not only limit the development of Romani, but above all hamper the integration of Roma as equal citizens of their native countries and, consequently, also as European citizens.

#### ROMANI AND THE CHARTER FOR REGIONAL OR MINORITY LANGUAGES

Despite the ongoing socioeconomic marginalisation and sociopolitical stigmatisation of the Roma, the status of Romani has – as indicated above – improved over

the last decades. This is above all due to the ongoing emancipation process which would not have been possible without changes in the general approach towards minority languages at an overall European level. These changes were initiated by the representatives of traditional linguistic minorities of western Europe – Frisians, Irish, Welsh, etc. – during the second half

of the 20th century. The most important instrument created in this context is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Charter was adopted as a convention by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 1992, and entered into force on 1 March 1998. On the web page of the Charter its purpose is described as follows:

*The Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is a convention designed on the one hand to protect and promote regional and minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe's cultural heritage and on the other hand to enable speakers of a regional or minority language to use it in private and public life.*

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The Charter defines regional or minority languages as *different from the official language(s) of a state and not a dialect of an official language*, as *traditionally used by nationals within a given territory* (= territorial languages) or by *nationals within the territory of that state* (= non-territorial languages), and as *not a language of (recent) migrants*.

This basic blue print for the definition of a European minority language fully complies with Romani. On the background of the criteria listed, Romani has to be described as different from all official languages of Europe and as used all over Europe since the Middle Ages by nationals of all states of Europe.

Consequently, Romani should be protected as a minority language by the Charter in the territories of all countries which have ratified it up to 2011. But not all countries have recognised Romani and the majority of these opted for the minimum protection as a non-territorial language.

Among the states that excluded Romani are small countries like Liech-

tenstein, which declared that there are no regional or minority languages in the sense of the Charter spoken on its territory, and also countries with quite a number of Roma like Croatia. In this case non-territorial languages are excluded from the ratification in general, thus avoiding the official recognition of Romani. This does not mean that Croatian authorities neglect Romani. There is support for Romani speaking communities both in education and in the media. But the Croatian non-ratification of the Charter for Romani is a symptom of the low sociopolitical status of the Roma in general.

To declare the whole Romani population of a particular country as recent migrants is another way to neglect the necessity to recognise Romani as an official minority language. To counter-argue such an assertion and to prove that Romani is spoken traditionally in a specific European country is sometimes almost impossible: Because of social exclusion Roma have been prevented from owning land and property. Furthermore, quite often their settlements have not been registered properly.

Another consequence of marginalisation and discrimination is ongoing migration which, again, is used to make a case against the autochthonous status of Roma. The differentiation between autochthonous, or indigenous Roma, and allochthonous, migrant Roma, is another symptom of the low support for Romani as a minority language. For instance, Austria declared Romani in its ratification of the Charter as a non-territorial language on the territory of Burgenland, which is the easternmost province bordering Hungary. Therefore, the recognition of Romani is legally limited to the variety of a minority among the Austrian Romani population. The Romani varieties of recent migrants are not only theoretically excluded from protection by the Charter, but also of other autochthonous groups. Practically, the other speakers are supported by the authorities as well. Nevertheless, the fact that this distinction is made in a legally binding convention not only demonstrates the low sociopolitical status of Roma and, consequently, Romani, but also the reservations about the status of Roma as one linguistic minority.

## Literature

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