

ON THE VITALITY
AND ENDANGERMENT OF THE ROMANI
LANGUAGE IN SLOVAKIA*

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Linguists expect that 90–95% of 6,000 –7,000 languages worldwide may vanish in the course of this century, which may also lead to a loss of the unique identities, cultures, and traditions that these languages embody. According to criteria proposed by a UNESCO commission,¹ various languages face different degrees of endangerment at present. The Romani language is classified as ‘definitely endangered’,² which is Degree 3 in the UNESCO’s classification system (safe, unsafe/vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered, extinct).³ The present article will focus on a detailed evaluation of the general socio-linguistic situation of the Romani language in Slovakia, its causes and consequences, which contribute to its level of endangerment and which have led linguists to classify the language as definitely endangered. The article will be framed mainly by a consideration of the factors as defined by a study drafted by the above mentioned UNESCO commission, namely intergenerational language transmission,

* This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-0689-12. and by the VEGA agency under the project No. 1/0845/15.

¹ BREZINGER, M. et al. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*.

² List of Endangered Languages, available from <https://www.google.sk/search?q=List+of+Endangered+Languages> [cit. 28 June 2016].

³ However, according to LEWIS, M. P. (ed.). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, it is labelled as ‘developing’.

absolute number of speakers, proportion of speakers within the total population, trends in existing language domains, response to new domains and media, materials for language education and literacy, governmental and institutional attitudes and policies, including official status and use, and community members' attitudes toward their own language. We will draw on published materials on the status and use of the Romani language in Slovakia as well as on the results of the field research that we conducted in 2015 by means of individual semi-structured interviews.⁴

Keywords: Romani in Slovakia, vitality, endangerment

Introduction

When examining the endangerment of the Romani language in Slovakia, it is necessary to focus in more detail on the circumstances that have led the commission of linguists at the UNESCO⁵ to classify the Romani language in the Slovak Republic as definitely endangered. The factors of endangerment established by these linguists need to be assessed in a complex manner because many of them are very closely interrelated. For example, how or if a language is transferred from generation to generation (which is generally considered to be the main factor attesting to the vitality or endangerment of a language) is related to a degree of integration of the Roma population, their attitudes toward their own language, and their education. All of these are then influenced by historical circumstances or socio-economic conditions of living in majority society and the state's policy. It is becoming apparent that even legal protection need not prevent a language from vanishing. Despite the state's official policy (the Roma have been recognised as a national minority in the Slovak Republic since 1991, and the Romani language enjoys all the rights of a national minority language specified by law) as well as despite some Romani activists' efforts, the Romani language is not used to an extent that would support its vitality and prevent its death. Of course, such a statement is based only on generalisation. It only suggests trends because in many respects there are no accurate data that researchers could rely on. For example, there are no reliable data about the absolute number of speakers and the proportion of speakers within the total population, which are considered important factors in determining the level of endangerment of a language. In the 2011 Census, 105,738 inhabitants of

⁴ The field research involved 11 respondents, who had been selected based on basic socio-linguistic criteria: age (18–58 years), gender (2 male and 9 female respondents), education (4 had elementary school education, 5 had secondary school education, and 2 had university education), and a different place of residence. All the interviews (except for one) were conducted in the Romani language, recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Respondents involved in the field research are quoted according to initials.

⁵ BRENNINGER, M. et al. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 2003.

Slovakia identified themselves as Roma (53,721 men and 52,017 women);⁶ however, qualified estimates of the number of Roma in the Slovak Republic are significantly higher. The authors of *Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku 2013* [The Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia] estimate that there are 402,840 Roma in Slovakia.⁷

From the point of view of the vitality or endangerment of the Romani language in Slovakia and the process of its intergenerational transmission, the degree of integration of the Roma in majority society is significant. It is also suggested by *Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku*, which brings a sociographic mapping based on a qualified estimate of the number of Roma in the Slovak Republic. The research was conducted in 1,070 of 2,890 municipalities in Slovakia: 120 towns and 950 villages. Altogether, there are 803 Roma settlements in these towns and villages, 324 of which are located on the outskirts of the municipalities, 246 inside the municipalities, and 233 are segregated settlements. It is estimated that 95,020 (23.6%) of the total number of Roma in Slovakia live on the outskirts of municipalities, 73,920 (18.3%) in segregated settlements, and 46,496 (12%) live in Roma settlements inside municipalities. The remaining 187,305 (46.5%) live scattered among the majority population. According to their spatial relation to the majority population, *Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku* distinguishes “four types of Roma settlements [...]: scattered (Roma live scattered among the majority population), concentrated inside a municipality (Roma live inside a municipality, but they are concentrated in one or several parts of it), concentrated on the outskirts of a municipality (Roma live concentrated in a peripheral part of a municipality) and concentrated outside a municipality (Roma live in a settlement remote from a municipality or separated from a municipality by a barrier)”.⁸ This distribution of the Roma population is reflected in the degree of intergenerational transmission of the Romani language.

Intergenerational Transmission of the Romani Language

The reason why the Romani language has survived in the territory of Slovakia for centuries despite various unfavourable circumstances (historical, political, socio-economic) is, inter alia, the fact that Roma have always constituted a closed off community which as a whole has not merged with the surrounding inhabitants. As is shown by our research, even today the highest degree of

⁶ Statistical Office, Tab. 115.

⁷ MUŠINKA, A. et al. *Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku* [The Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia].

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

intergenerational transmission and survival of the Romani language is in the Roma communities that have the least contact with the majority population.

(a) Roma who live concentrated outside municipalities and on the outskirts of municipalities

These Roma very clearly assess their attitudes, self-reflections, acceptances, preferences, and language leanings (Romani, Slovak) in terms of the intergenerational transmission of the Romani language and in terms of the use and knowledge of the Romani language.⁹ They agree that the Romani language is their mother tongue, they speak Romani more often than they speak Slovak, and they speak Slovak only if they have to. Subjectively evaluating their knowledge of the languages, they state that they are excellent at speaking Romani, much better than at speaking Slovak. In terms of the use of the Romani language according to communication situations such as the breadth of the language network of the Romani language, spatial restriction, use in frequent social spaces according to the social reach of the Roma, the respondents said that they most frequently use Romani at home, then outside home, and children also use it during breaks at school. They transmit the Romani language between generations; even the youngest generation speaks Romani.

(b) Roma who live concentrated inside municipalities

The Roma who live concentrated inside a municipality have more frequent communication contacts in Slovak than the Roma who live concentrated on the outskirts of a municipality or the Roma who live concentrated outside a municipality. At the same time, the Roma who live concentrated inside a municipality display certain differences in the scope and frequency of use of languages and in the use of languages at home. Based on this, they can be divided into two categories: the Roma who speak Romani more often than Slovak, prefer Romani to Slovak, and the Roma who speak Slovak more often than Romani and speak both Romani and Slovak more or less equally at home. In any case, however, it may be stated that the Romani language is transmitted between generations in these groups of Romani people.

(c) Roma who live inside municipalities scattered among the majority population

In terms of intergenerational transmission of the Romani language, the Roma who live scattered among the majority population can be divided into two categories: the Roma who pass the Romani language on to their children, and

⁹ We did a qualitative research into this issue in 2015 where we divided the respondents according to types of housing.

the Roma who do not. Based on the knowledge of the “field” and experience, we can estimate that only about 10% of the Roma who live scattered among the majority transmit Romani to the youngest generation by means of direct communication, child-oriented speech. We can further suppose that only about 20% of Roma transmit Romani indirectly, by means of the special domain of “Romani music”. They include families who do not speak Romani at home, but who listen to Romani music with lyrics in the Romani language and occasionally also sing in Romani.

The Number of Romani-speaking Roma

In determining the vitality or endangerment of a language based on the criteria established by the UNESCO commission, it is also necessary to take into account the number of people who speak this language. We believe that the number of speakers is less important than whether this number is more or less stable or whether the number of speakers of a particular language is considerably declining. As far as the number of Roma in Slovakia declaring themselves as speakers of Romani is concerned, according to the 2011 Census, 122,518 inhabitants speak Romani as the mother tongue (61,967 men and 60,551 women)¹⁰ (19,780 more than the number of people identifying themselves as Roma). Like the number of people claiming to belong to the Roma minority, this figure does not match reality. When determining the number of Roma who speak Romani in Slovakia, we can only rely on estimates. In particular, we proceed from the number of Roma and types of Roma settlements in Slovakia according to Atlas rómskych komún na Slovensku 2013, taking into account our findings that the more segregated the Roma population is, the more often they use Romani and the less often they speak Slovak. However, we must emphasise again that the above-mentioned figures are only rough estimates, whose purpose is to create a quantifiable image of the number of Romani speakers in Slovakia to predict the destiny of Romani in Slovakia.

Based on this analysis, we assume that all Roma who live in Roma settlements on the outskirts of municipalities, in Roma settlements inside municipalities and in segregated settlements speak Romani. In the language communication environment in the mentioned Roma settlements, Romani is functionally dominant and used in a wide generational and language contact context. Language contact in Romani between community members happens on

¹⁰ Population according to nationality, the mother tongue and gender, Tab. 156, available from <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>.

an everyday basis, including all generations. We estimate that based on the number of Roma in individual settlements (95,020 + 73,920 + 46,496), the number of Romani speakers is 215,436. We estimate that of the total number of Roma living scattered among the majority population (187,305), only 10%, or 18,730, speak Romani. As a result, the total number of Romani-speaking Roma in Slovakia is estimated to be 234,166, which accounts for 58.1% of the total Roma population in Slovakia. They include Roma who speak Romani as their first language, Roma who speak Romani as their second language, and Roma who speak Romani as a foreign language.

The total number of Roma who do not speak Romani is estimated to be 68,574 (41.8% of all Roma in Slovakia). They include Roma who neither can speak Romani nor are keen to learn to speak Romani, Roma who cannot speak Romani, but are keen to learn Romani, and finally Roma who can speak Romani but do not speak the language for various reasons, even claim that they cannot speak Romani (are in hiding).

The Romani language is also used by non-Roma, but their number is negligible. They are non-Roma speaking Romani as their first language, non-Roma speaking Romani as their second language, non-Roma speaking Romani as a foreign language, and finally non-Roma who cannot speak Romani, but are keen to learn the language.

Table 1 Ratio of Roma speaking and not speaking Romani to the number of Roma in the Slovak Republic

| | The number of Roma according to Atlas 2013 | The number of Roma speaking Romani | | | | The number of Roma not speaking Romani |
|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| | | Total | Significantly more Romani than Slovak | Approximately equally Romani and Slovak | Significantly more Slovak than Romani | |
| Scattering | 187,305 | 18,730 | - | - | 18,730 | 168,574 |
| Inside a municipality | 46,496 | 46,496 | 23,248 | 23,248 | - | - |
| On the outskirts of a municipality | 95,020 | 95,020 | 95,020 | - | - | - |
| Segregation | 73,920 | 73,920 | 73,920 | - | - | - |
| Total | 402,840 | 234,166 | 192,188 | 23,248 | 18,730 | 168,574 |

The number of Roma is based on Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku, 2013. The numbers of Roma speaking and not speaking Romani are based on our own estimates.

The fact that Roma cease to speak Romani contributes to the possible gradual extinction of Romani. Since no community can remain without a means of communication, they (gradually) replace their traditional language with another language, namely the contact (dominant) language. Several linguists point to the role of a contact language in the decline of a traditional language, also to the fact that a contact language as such cannot be a cause or an indicator of the extinction of a language. However, it is one of the conditions that may contribute to the extinction of a language, especially if it is in a dominant position, whether socio-economic or political, as is the case of Slovak in relation to Romani.

In the case of a language shift, some linguists theorise that such a shift is either voluntary or forced.¹¹ However, we are inclined to think that a language shift is always forced, but there is a difference in the degree of the involuntariness. A language community or an individual are forced to shift to another (dominant) language, for example, if they find themselves in a situation when their ancestral language does not make it possible for them to find employment, gain education, make arrangements at various institutions, get rid of the stigma of a member of a despised minority, etc. If a national minority lives in a state where the official language holds a dominant position, it is inevitable for them to master this language if they want to make it in the majority society. If the members of a minority accept this, it may seem that their language shift is voluntary. However, T. Skutnabb-Kangas compares this situation to accepting the inevitability of a slave's death in his fight against a lion in an arena, writing: "Today's minority parents, killing off their languages by not speaking them to their children, are also sometimes accepting what is presented to them as 'the inevitable' (= a (false!) choice between language and identity, or jobs) and depriving their children of their linguistic heritage, 'for their own good', proud over the children's competence in a dominant language. But most of them would, given a choice, rather tame the lion (= learn the dominant language) **and** live (= maintain the mother tongue(s))."¹²

T. Skutnabb-Kangas¹³ points out that the shift to the dominant language is involuntary also in education, which she refers to as "assimilationist submersion education", "where indigenous and minority children are forced to accept teaching through the medium of dominant languages. /It/ can cause serious mental harm and often leads to the students using the dominant language with

¹¹ See e.g. NETTLE, D., ROMAINE, S. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. In SMITH, E. *Measuring and Understanding Ethnolinguistic Vitality in Papapana*, p. 262.

¹² SKUTNABB-KANGAS, T. *Linguistic Genocide in Education*, p. 48.

¹³ SKUTNABB-KANGAS, T. *Human Rights and Language Policy in Education*, p. 111.

their own children later on, i.e. over a generation or two the children are linguistically and often in other ways too forcibly transferred to a dominant group... The transfer to the majority speaking group is not voluntary: alternatives do not exist... disappearance of languages cannot be labelled 'language suicide', even if it might at first seem like the speakers are themselves abandoning their languages." Also, Roma children in Slovakia are exposed to such an involuntary shift to the Slovak language because schools only use the official language, Slovak, as the language of instruction.

An express prohibition of the use of a language and the imposition of another (dominant) language constitute the most forced language shift. It was the case of Romani in the Austro-Hungarian Empire under the rule of Maria Theresa whose edicts issued in 1758 – 1773, besides other things, prohibited Gypsies from speaking their mother tongue and forced them to use the language of the nation in which they lived, which was supposed to integrate them into the majority population.¹⁴

Also, bilingualism may play a role in language shift and the gradual extinction of an ancestral language. Bilingual Roma in Slovakia probably often do not speak both Romani and Slovak, or possibly Hungarian, equally well. Bilingualism sometimes represents only a transitory stage in the development of a language community/individual from monolingualism in the ancestral language through bilingualism in the ancestral and dominant language to monolingualism in the dominant language. In practical life, for example, Roma children living in segregated settlements are monolingual in Romani until they go to school where they come into contact with the dominant Slovak language and become bilingual. In their adulthood, parents can cease to pass on the traditional language to their children although they speak Romani to each other and "children become *semi-speakers* of their own language (*receptive bilinguals*)".¹⁵ They only speak the dominant language.

In some cases (...) parents do not speak Romani to their children at all.
(...) It is quite common that although parents speak Slovak to their children, they speak Romani to each other...¹⁶

The next generation becomes monolingual – however, not in the ancestral language, but in the dominant language.

¹⁴ AB HORTIS, S. A. *Cigáni v Uhorsku* [Gypsies in Hungary], pp. 158–159.

¹⁵ BREZINGER, M. et al. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, p. 10.

¹⁶ CINA, S., CINOVA, E. *Využitie rómskeho jazyka na 1. stupni ZŠ* [Using Romani in Junior Primary School], pp.13–14.

The Roma's and the State's Attitude to Romani

Another important factor which may lead to the endangerment of the Romani language in Slovakia is the question of attitude toward the language, both the attitude of the Roma population/individuals and the attitude of the state. These attitudes are a result of various external and internal circumstances (in the case of the Roma community, they are most often of socio-economic character) and intentions (in the case of the state, they are primarily political), they are interlinked and interconditioned, or in one word, interrelated.

The Roma in Slovakia display different attitudes toward Romani. Some (often as a result of an objectively existing situation in contact with the dominant language community) consider their language to be underdeveloped and unhelpful in giving them a better social status. Others, on the other hand, especially since the Roma were recognised as a national minority in 1991, emphasise the equality of Romani with the other languages of national minorities in Slovakia and seek its revival. They contributed to its standardisation in 2008 and promote its use in literature, the media, and education.

The attitude toward language has an impact on whether its speakers will transmit the ancestral language to the next generation, whether they will promote its use in new domains, whether they will seek to develop and preserve it. As has already been shown, another very important factor affecting the endangerment of the language is the structure of the population whose ancestral language is Romani, namely their degree of integration with the dominant population (integrated Roma often lose their ancestral language; Roma living in segregated settlements, on the other hand, preserve it to a higher extent) and their education (higher education often leads to the loss of the ancestral language and the estrangement of potential community leaders from their language community¹⁷).

There is a whole range of groups with different attitudes toward the Romani language between these two borderline groups of Roma population in Slovakia. Field research as well as long-term knowledge of the environments in which the Roma in Slovakia live and work suggest that Romani is mainly spoken by the Roma with a lower social and educational background, especially those living in concentrated settlements. It confirms Kymlicka's assumption, although expressed in a different context, that "language communities can only survive inter-generationally if they are numerically dominant within a particular territory [Roma settlements are inhabited almost exclusively by the Roma], and

¹⁷ CONKLIN, N., LOURIE, M. A Host of Tongues: Language Communities in the United States. In WILLIAMS, C. H. *Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context*, p. 96.

if their language is the language of opportunity in that territory”.¹⁸ However, once the Roma come into more frequent contact with the dominant language community or live scattered among the members of the dominant language community, it results in the specialisation of the functions of the ancestral and the dominant language and the stratification of the languages.¹⁹ Romani is used at home or in contact with the other Roma; the dominant language is used at school, in contact with institutions and the majority population. Laponce states that “the specialisation and the stratification of languages is determined by the socially dominant group” and “the social dominance of a language is a function of the number of its speakers and the political and social stratification of the linguistic groups in contact”.²⁰ The Roma resort to diglossia not only when communicating in the indicated areas, but often also when communicating in families, where parents still speak Romani, but do not teach the ancestral language to their children, so they communicate with them in the dominant language, which eventually leads to Romani not being used in many families at all. Such a situation contributes to the extinction of the ancestral language.

The Roma’s attitude toward Romani is also related to their attitude to Romani identity and culture. One of the consequences of the death of a language that is often mentioned in literature is the loss of the original ethnic and cultural identity of the population who speaks the language. It is pointed out that the traditions, culture, philosophy, and the history of a community are preserved in their language. Language is often considered one of the main markers of an ethnic group’s identity, but the link between the usage of a particular ancestral language and the awareness of ethnic identity may be questionable. It is also attested to by the results of our field research, which demonstrated that the Roma do not cease to regard themselves and their Roma friends as the Roma only for the reason that they do not speak Romani.

“I know a lot of people who don’t speak Romani, but they are more Roma than those who speak Romani.” (J. V.)

*“I have friends who are **visibly** [emphasis added by the authors] Roma but don’t speak Romani. Some of them are my family; they don’t speak Romani, but it doesn’t matter.” (V. B.)*

¹⁸ KYMLICKA, W. Politics in the Vernacular, p. 79. In WILLIAMS, C. H. *Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context*, p. 81.

¹⁹ See, for example, LAPONCE, J. A. Languages and Their Territories, p. 266. In WILLIAMS, C. H. *Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context*, p. 87.

²⁰ LAPONCE, J. A. *Languages and Their Territories*, p. 87.

“A lot of Roma don’t speak Romani. Most Roma speak only non-Romani today. /Despite that/ they are Roma and can feel like the Roma.” (D. M.)

Our research has shown that the Roma’s attitude to Romani ethnicity is similar to that of the majority population, who consider the knowledge of Romani to be only one of the markers of a Rom’s Romani identity. They regard a Rom as Rom even though he or she does not speak Romani. The attribution of Romani ethnicity is independent of the knowledge and use of the Romani language or possibly other languages. It is also independent of a Rom’s education and overall status. Also, the Roma regard those who do not speak Romani for different reasons or cannot speak Romani as Roma. They are respected and accepted by the Roma community regardless of the language they use.²¹

Such an attitude to an ancestral language may contribute to its death. However, the opposite attitude of the Roma, who emphasise the relationship between language, identity, and culture, is not very likely to have a significant impact on preserving the vitality of the Romani language under current circumstances. This attitude has been common since 1991 when the Roma started fighting for the preservation of their language, elevating it to a symbol of their right to an equal position among the national minorities in the state.

A sense of belonging to the Roma, i.e. ethnic self-identification, requires familiarising oneself with the respective culture, including its language. (...) Becoming aware of one’s ethnic subjectivity and identity is simply impossible without one’s own language.²²

Of interest in this respect is the relationship between language and culture, a set of customs, relationships, institutions, arts, and other features that characterise society or social groups, and the question whether the loss of a language leads to the loss of the culture associated with it. For example, Salikoko S. Mufwene²³ admits the possibility of a close link between culture and language as well as the possibility that language and culture do not need to go hand in hand. Both possibilities are illustrated by the following examples. The

²¹ A similar situation in relation to the Welsh and the Irish is pointed out by WILLIAMS, C. H. in *Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context*, p. 365: “Proficiency in the language is not necessarily a marker of individual national identity (many people who identify themselves as Welsh or Irish do not speak Welsh or Irish).”

²² GODLA, F. *Ovplyvňuje (ne)využívanie posilňovania rómskej identity nízku vzdelanostnú úroveň rómskych žiakov?* [Does (Non)Strengthening Roma Identity Influence the Low Education Level of Roma Pupils?], p. 25.

²³ MUFWENE, S. S. *A Cost-and-Benefit Approach to Language Loss*, pp. 118–119.

fact that the loss of a language does not have to mean the loss of culture is illustrated in the example of European colonies. "In places where a European colonial language has prevailed as the other or an official language, European cultural influence is typically minimal and often superficial, as speakers of the language have typically retained most of their cultural traditions." On the other hand, he also writes that "...if one assumes that language is one of several aspects of culture and constitutes the particular technology used by a population to communicate within itself, then the historical evidence generally shows that those who have shifted languages have typically also indigenised the language they have appropriated". As an example, he mentions the indigenisation of English in former British exploitation colonies. Examples of the transfer of traditional patterns in cases where a language community shifted from an ancestral language to English are given by Lisa Lim.²⁴ Such a transfer happens in the event of emergence of a contact variety in which "aspects of the ancestral culture involving address practices, food, certain cultural and religious practices, and terms of emotive import and value judgement" are transmitted. "The evolution of a mixed code affords the maintenance of culture even if the ancestral language is no longer maintained."

As has been proved by the above-mentioned examples, minority communities may display a different relationship between language and culture and a different manifestation of the preserved culture. As we have seen, the Roma's declared ethnicity may remain Romani even if they lose language and part of their cultural identity. Due to the diversity of the Roma population in Slovakia, there is also diversity in the degree of loss of their ancestral culture and appropriation of the dominant culture. Of importance are also the degree of integration or segregation of the members of the national minority and an individual's attitude. The respondents' replies to the question if the knowledge of the Romani language is necessary for one's self-identification as a Rom suggests that Romani culture in the broadest sense of the word may be more important for identification with Romani ethnicity than language:

"They can say they are Roma even though they don't speak Romani; they still have Romaniculture, Romani dishes, Romani music." (B. V.)

Although the loss of the language involves the loss of the part of Romani culture contained in the language, for example, a manner of expression of emotions, thinking, deciding, experiencing different situations and, last but not least, a manner of language-cultural socialisation, Romani culture is also preserved in other forms. It is an integral part of, for example, Romani literature

²⁴ LIM, L. *The Art of Losing*, pp. 300–302.

written in Slovak, which reflects Romani folklore, Romani issues, Romani life experience and environment, Romani imagination things that cannot be found in the work of an author with Slovak roots.²⁵ Romani culture and Romani worldview are also reflected in visual arts and in Romani music. It is true that a relationship between Romani identity, language, and culture is sometimes presented directly, but more often only symbolically. For example, events organised on the occasion of the International Roma Day present Romani and Romani culture by means of Romani songs, sometimes they involve an opening or thank-you speech in Romani, otherwise they use Slovak.²⁶ Of course, there are a lot of integrated Roma in Slovakia who intentionally do not identify with Romani culture.

Trends in the Existing Language Domains and a Response to New Domains

The degree of vitality and endangerment of a language also points to the domains in which the language is used. The loss of domains is considered one of the factors of language endangerment. As has been shown, many Roma shift from Romani to Slovak also in the main domain, i.e. when communicating in the home environment. As far as the use of Romani in new domains is concerned, it is fluctuating. Since 1991, when the Roma acquired the status of a national minority in the Slovak Republic and Romani obtained all the rights pertaining to national minority languages in Slovakia, the number of domains has increased. The cultural Romani elite sought to introduce Romani, which was previously only used at home or in contact with other members of the Roma minority, to new domains (newspapers, media, literature, and theatre).²⁷ It did not happen at the expense of the dominant state language, but Romani came into use alongside Slovak. For example, Romani newspapers written in Slovak feature contributions in Romani, in literature there are Romani texts alongside Slovak texts, etc. However, the use of Romani in new domains is not convincing. Some domains in which Romani began to be used at least to some extent after 1991 are disappearing. For example, 1991 saw the emergence of a

²⁵ See, for example, the work of Dezider Banga, the authors associated in the ROLIK club, and others.

²⁶ It is strongly reminiscent of the situation that is, according to WERMAN, G. mentioned by B. SPOLSKY in relation to *Yiddish, Jewish Language Varieties: Loss and Survival*, p. 387.

²⁷ For more on the use of Romani after 1991 see RÁCOVÁ, A. *Uplatňovanie rómčiny ako jazyka národnostnej menšiny na Slovensku* [Introducing Romani as a National Minority Language in Slovakia].

newspaper for the Roma entitled *Romano nevořil*, published by Jekhetane-Spolu in Prešov, which features texts in Romani occasionally. For financial reasons, the newspaper has been published sporadically, unsystematically in the past several years. The latest issue came out about a year ago. The Slovak Television broadcasted a 26-minute Roma bimonthly *So vakeres?/Čo hovoríš?* [What Are You Saying?] both in Romani and Slovak. Other magazines that ceased publication include the monthly *Ternipen/Mladost'* [Youth], the monthly *Roma*, *Sam adaj/Sme tu* [We're Here], and the children's magazine *Lulud'i/Kvietok* [Flower]. It is probable that also *Mišusori/Myš(u)lienka* [Small Mouse/Idea], a Slovakia-wide family humour magazine for Romani and disadvantaged pre-school and school-age children, which was published by the civic association *Multikultúra v nás* [Multiculture in Us] in Bratislava, has not received financial support this year and will no longer be published. Romani is still used in radio and television broadcasts, but only in a limited extent: Radio Patria – The Ethnic Broadcast Office prepares a 60-minute *Rómsky magazín* [Roma Bulletin]; *Rómske slovo* [Roma Word] – 20-minute daily news. The television also broadcasts a 26-minute weekly *Sam khere* [We're at Home] in Romani with Slovak subtitles (or vice versa). It is questionable if the broadcasts are sufficient and accessible to the Roma; in many cases the Roma are not aware of their existence. Their influence on the status and vitality of Romani in Slovakia is thus debatable.²⁸

An important domain which attests to the vitality or endangerment of a language is its use in education. If a language is only a language of instruction, and only at some schools, it does not contribute to its high ranking. If a language is to be preserved, it is important to use it in education not only as an auxiliary language when a child starts school attendance (teacher assistants), when Romani is supposed to help a child overcome the first difficulties with instruction in the dominant (Slovak) language. Neither is it sufficient to introduce it as a language of instruction at some schools. T. Skutnabb-Kangas²⁹ points out that if a child does not have an opportunity to further develop his or her language in the educational process, it is a serious human rights violation, which may result in linguistic genocide. To preserve a language and prevent a linguistic and cultural genocide, she considers crucial “especially an unconditional right to mother tongue medium education” although she is aware that “neither LHRs nor schools alone can in any way guarantee the maintenance and further development of languages”. Also, the commission of linguists at the

²⁸ According to Attila Lovász, Ethnic Broadcast Director at RTVS, the national broadcasting company, *Sam khere* is watched by 8–10 thousand viewers, the Roma accounting for a half of them. Available from <https://romovia.sme.sk> [cit. 11 July 2017].

²⁹ SKUTNABB-KANGAS, T. *Human Rights and Language Policy in Education*, p. 108.

UNESCO identifies with T. Skutnabb-Kangas's opinion. They say that "[e]ducation *in* the language is essential for language vitality".³⁰

This factor, which is essential for the preservation of the Romani language, is absent in Slovakia. The Roma in the Slovak Republic have no real opportunity to study in their mother tongue. At the moment, there is no school with Romani as a language of instruction. Neither is Romani used at so-called ethnic schools, attended exclusively by Roma students. According to the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Roma Communities, "[these schools] do not aim to develop Roma minority education".³¹ However, Romani is taught as a subject at several private schools: the Private Educational and Social Academy in Košice, the Private Combined School in Kremnica, Jozef Adamovič Conservatory in Košice, the Private Conservatory of Music and Drama Arts in Košice, and the Private Conservatory of Music and Drama Arts in Rimavská Sobota. The number of these schools is insufficient given the number of municipalities in Slovakia where the Roma constitute at least 20% of the total population.

The situation is not different with respect to educational materials in Romani. There are no textbooks in Romani for all subjects and grades. There are only partial materials and publications for instruction in Romani. For example, the State Institute of Education has brought out a limited edition of publications that schools can order. They include: *Rozprávky v slovenskom a rómskom jazyku* [Fairy Tales in Slovak and Romani],³² *Rómsko-slovenská čítanka pre 2. ročník ZŠ* [Romani-Slovak Reader for the Second Grade],³³ *Rómsko-slovenská čítanka – pracovný zošit* [Romani-Slovak Reader – Workbook],³⁴ the Romani-Slovak reader *Amari Romaňi Čhib/ Naša rómčina* [Our Romani]³⁵, and the workbook *Amari Romaňi Čhib/ Naša rómčina*.^{36,37} These publications are not automatically made available to all Roma pupils or

³⁰ BREZINGER, M. et al. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, p. 12.

³¹ Available from <http://www.narodnostnemensiny.gov.sk/romska-narodnostna-mensina/> [cit. 14 July 2017].

³² ADAMOVIČ, I., ADAM, G. *Rozprávky v slovenskom a rómskom jazyku* [Fairy Tales in Slovak and Romani].

³³ FACUNA, J., MANCOVÁ, M. *Rómsko-slovenská čítanka pre 2. ročník* [Romani-Slovak Reader for the Second Grade].

³⁴ GAŠPAROVÁ, E. *Rómsko-slovenská čítanka – pracovný zošit* [Romani-Slovak Reader – Workbook].

³⁵ GAŠPAROVÁ, E., LUKÁČOVÁ, I. *Amari Romaňi Čhib/ Naša rómčina* [Our Romani].

³⁶ GAŠPAROVÁ, E. *Amari Romaňi Čhib/ Naša rómčina* [Our Romani].

³⁷ See also RÁCOVÁ, A. *Uplatňovanie rómčiny ako jazyka národnostnej menšiny na Slovensku* [Introducing Romani as a National Minority Language in Slovakia].

other interested persons. Using this publication at schools requires placing an order and a teacher with a command of Romani. This means that the Roma are not taught to read and write in Romani, and most of them have no experience with written text in Romani.

Legislation regulating the position of national minority languages in Slovakia³⁸ or the state's activities aimed at the education of Roma children and youth have no significant influence on the possibility of use of Romani in education and its development or at least preservation either. For example, in 2007 the Slovak government approved the Concept Policy for the Education of National Minorities³⁹ and in 2008 the Concept Policy for the Education of Roma Children and Youth, including the development of secondary and higher education.⁴⁰ Both policy documents speak about Romani in relation to the education of Roma students. Both policy documents as well as the Strategy of the Slovak Republic for Roma Integration until 2020,⁴¹ which was adopted in 2012, emphasise the pre-primary education of children as of three years of age and the education of children from marginalised Roma communities with the aim to improve their preparedness for starting a primary school, reduce the number of children who attend a special primary school, and use their mother tongue when working with Roma students. In 2011 the State Institute of Education approved a state education programme in Romani Language and Literature (Educational area: Language and Communication) – Appendix ISCED 1.⁴² Its content and performance standards are aimed at the language, literature, history, and culture of Roma students. In the first and second grade pupils are expected to learn basic information, and in the third and fourth grade they are supposed to expand on their knowledge. In 2011 the State Institute of Education approved a state education programme in Romani Language and Literature (Educational area: Language and Communication) – Appendix ISCED 2. With regard to the objectives of the content and performance standards for lower secondary education, this state education programme sets

³⁸ *Zákon o štátnom jazyku* [Act on State Language], *Zákon o používaní jazykov národnostných menšín* [Act on the Use of National Minority Languages].

³⁹ *Koncepcia výchovy a vzdelávania národnostných menšín* [Policy Concept for the Education of National Minorities]. Available from <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/948.pdf>.

⁴⁰ *Koncepcia výchovy a vzdelávania rómskych detí a žiakov vrátane rozvoja stredoškolského a vysokoškolského vzdelávania* [Policy Concept for the Education of Roma Children and Youth, including the development of secondary and higher education]. Available from <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/944.pdf>.

⁴¹ *Stratégia SR pre integráciu Rómov do roku 2020* [Strategy of the Slovak Republic for Roma Inegration until 2020].

⁴² *Rómsky jazyk a literatúra* [Romani Language and Literature].

framework requirements for pupils' language competences at A2 level. It is possible to teach this subject in the fifth to ninth grade at primary school and in the first to fifth grade at eight-year grammar school. The Slovak Ministry of Education approved target requirements for the knowledge and skills of students taking a school-leaving exam in Romani Language and Literature, which are in accordance with the content and performance standards in Romani Language and Literature for higher secondary education and became valid on 1 September 2013.

It may seem that the state's policies pay adequate attention to Romani education. The state language policy grants Romani the same legislative possibilities as to other minority languages; however, the state insufficiently supports and creates conditions for implementing the Romani-related legislation. Legislation makes the use of Romani at schools possible, but this possibility is not feasible without the state offering practical active support and creating suitable conditions. The state language policy, for example, does not deal with the shortage of teachers of Romani. In Slovakia, it is currently impossible to qualify as a teacher of Romani. None of the Slovak universities offer such studies, nor are they accredited to do so. However, universities do not even apply for the accreditation of such a teaching programme, the reason being the system of evaluation and funding of universities. Universities do not find the prospect of opening such studies profitable. In the case of a low number of applicants, the studies would become loss-making. On the other hand, students do not seem to be interested in studying Romani for fear of zero career prospects upon graduation.

The possibility of use of Romani in education is not guaranteed by the principles set forth by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages or the obligations that the Slovak Republic assumed by its ratification in 2001 either. Vague formulations and modifications with regard to the use of minority languages in education in the Charter provide the state with a relatively wide range of possibilities how not to implement a minority language in education. This fact has been pointed out, for example, by T. Skutnabb-Kangas, who writes: "The Charter permits a reluctant state to meet the requirements in a minimalist way, which it can legitimate by claiming that a provision was not 'possible' or 'appropriate', or that numbers were not 'sufficient' or did not 'justify' a provision, or that it 'allowed' the minority to organise teaching of their language as a subject, at their own cost."⁴³

The issue of use of Romani at schools has also been commented on by representatives of the Roma minority. They presented their views of this issue, for example, at the seminar *Rómsky jazyk – cesta sebaurčenia a sociálnej*

⁴³ SKUTNABB-KANGAS, T. *Human Rights and Language Policy in Education*, p. 4.

inklúzie [Romani – A Way of Self-Determination and Social Inclusion],⁴⁴ held in Bratislava on 11 December 2012. Their attitudes, on the one hand, take account of what would be the best for Roma children, and, on the other hand, take into consideration the current real opportunities for the Roma in Slovakia, as is illustrated by the following statements. For example, E. Gašparová recommends “[i]ntroducing Romani to schools with a higher percentage of Roma students. Particularly to schools only attended by Roma students because it is their mother tongue and means of communication they use in their families, it is the language which they understand, in which they think and learn and consolidate new information”.⁴⁵ On the other hand, for example, E. Cinová says, “We don’t think it is ideal to use Romani as a language of instruction because Slovak schools haven’t yet created good conditions for a full-fledged implementation of such a plan”.⁴⁶ A similar opinion has been voiced by E. Lacková, who “recognises Romani as a cultural heritage which needs to be developed because it is still alive and Romani is still the mother tongue of this ethnic group as long as it is viable...” and “does not think Romani has to be an official language or a language of instruction”.⁴⁷

As far as the range of domains where Romani is used in Slovakia is concerned, their number is not decreasing as might be expected in the case of an endangered language. Just the contrary, their number has increased considerably since 1991; however, the use of Romani in these domains is not sufficient and fluctuates according to current circumstances. In many cases, a full application of legal regulations related to minority languages founders on the lack of allocated funds (for example, for the publication of periodicals). However, in other cases it depends on a given national minority to what extent it can take advantage of the opportunities provided by law (for example, to give more preference to the use of Romani in newspapers and literature). From the viewpoint of the endangerment of the language, it is important to note that the use of Romani in the domains where it has been introduced is minimal. Often it is accessible only to the knowledgeable Roma population. As a result, the

⁴⁴ *Rómsky jazyk – cesta sebaurčenia a sociálnej inklúzie* [Romani – A Way of Self-Determination and Social Inclusion], a seminar held in Bratislava on 11 December 2012.

⁴⁵ GAŠPAROVÁ, E. *Rómsky jazyk – prostriedok zlepšenia vzdelávania a uľahčenia vstupu rómskych detí do školy* [Romani Language – Means of Improving Roma Children’s Education and Making the Beginning of Their School Attendance Easier], p. 32.

⁴⁶ CINOVÁ, E. *Podiel ROCEPA pri implementácii rómskeho jazyka do vzdelávacieho procesu* [The Role of ROCEPA in the Implementation of Romani in Education], p. 22.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in VARGOVÁ, B. *Určíme si hierarchiu úloh* [Let us Define the Hierarchy of Tasks], p. 92.

higher number of domains does not necessarily attest to a higher vitality of the Romani language.

Conclusion

Our research, which has taken into account the factors of language endangerment as defined by various linguists (e.g. M. Krauss⁴⁸, M. Brenzinger et al.⁴⁹ or N. F. Conklin and M. A. Lourie⁵⁰), has unambiguously shown that the Romani language in Slovakia is endangered. It is not transmitted from generation to generation in the entire Roma population, the number of Romani-speaking Roma is insufficient, and the proportion of Romani-speaking Roma to the total number of members of the Roma national minority living in Slovakia is on a constant decrease. In this respect, the Roma living scattered among the majority population are in the worst situation. An estimated 90% of the Roma who claim Roma ethnicity abandoned their language for Slovak a long time ago, but Romani is also rapidly vanishing (we may be witnessing the last stage of its extinction) among the other Roma living scattered among the majority. However, Romani is also gradually dying out among the Roma still living in concentrated settlements.

An important cause of the extinction of the Romani language is the attitude of many Roma to the ancestral language, caused by historical circumstances and the current socio-economic situation. Romani is not generally considered to be the most significant marker of one's belonging to the Roma. The changed status of the Roma and their language after 1991, when the Roma were officially recognised as a national minority in Slovakia, has had a negligible effect on the vitality of Romani. It has contributed to an increase in the number of the domains in which Romani is used, but it has not penetrated into the awareness of most Roma. Romani is not used sufficiently in the new domains. Neither are the development and preservation of Romani sufficiently supported by the state, which focuses mainly on dealing with the social issues that the Roma population have been grappling with. Ironically, it can be expected that the more the living conditions of the Roma improve, i.e. the fewer Roma live in segregated settlements and the more Roma attain higher education, the more endangered their language will be. This may be evidenced by an excerpt from an interview with the respondent Katka (pseudonym), recorded during our field

⁴⁸ KRAUSS, M. *The World's Languages in Crisis*, 1992.

⁴⁹ BRENZINGER, M. et al. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*.

⁵⁰ CONKLIN, N. F., LOURIE, M. A. summarized by BAKER, C. In WILLIAMS, C. H. *Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context*, pp. 95–97.

research, in which she is speaking about the death and vitality of the Romani language.

R: Can the Romani language die?

Katka: *I'm optimistic. I say it can't die. It can't die, and I believe it won't. Romani is beautiful. It has such words which cannot be found in other languages, words which, even if translated, will not be intelligible to the non-Roma. They will say it is non-sense. I believe many Roma speak Romani. We're speaking Romani too; we aren't speaking Slovak. We have to safeguard it. It won't happen by itself, belief is not enough. We have to do something about it, develop the language, show that it is a sovereign language, which can be used for any purposes.*

R: Will Romani die among the Roma with secondary and university education?

Katka: *This is a problem in integrated families too. They speak Slovak more often or other languages, which are used elsewhere, such as English, and they are losing this language. Our strength is in segregated settlements, it is where the language is really powerful, it is the first language for everything, it is where you can see that the language is not dying. Integration can take away much of the language, but we must come up with a strategy to turn the integrated around as far as the language is concerned [...].*

R: Is Romani dying because people are educated?

Katka: *Well, it is true, I have experienced it. I know such Roma, I have met such people. I often go to different educational programmes, and once I experienced such a culture shock when I was watching them. I told myself these weren't Roma anymore; there was something wrong about what I saw. They were educated people, they had been to great schools, they had everything, but they lacked Roma identity. Their culture was completely non-Romani, their language only non-Romani, all Romani people, there were thirty of us on the bus and only three of us spoke Romani. This was a very bad experience for me. I told myself, this is the golden generation that is supposed to lead us, but how? How will they lead us if they don't have, if they have lost their Roma identity?*

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