

SOME REMARKS ON ROMANI IDENTITY*

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The Romani language as one of the important criteria of the Romani identity is discussed here. Problems of the standardization and codification of Romani are also examined.

The Roma, Gypsies, and travellers were mentioned as a minority for the first time in the 1977 UN document of the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities of the Economic and Social Council's Commission on Human Rights. This act was naturally preceded by numerous activities of the Romanies at different levels. One of the most important was the establishment of the International Romani Union in 1971, whose members pursued the interests of the Roma at various levels. The European Community also dealt with a number of issues concerning the Roma: they published a series of resolutions on social issues, education, and health care (for details see Liégeois 1994, pp. 273–290) and encouraged a wide variety of activities in favour of the Roma in the European Community member states. After the change of the political situation in Eastern Europe, the Romani activities in this geographical region significantly increased.

In many European countries the Roma were formally and legally recognized as a national minority (in Slovakia in 1991), thus gaining equal rights with other national minorities, for example they can publish their own newspapers and periodicals, they have access to the mass media with their own radio and television programmes, they can establish associations, cultural centres and have their political representatives in national decision-making bodies, etc. Some Roma struggled for the recognition of the status of national minority, others alerted to the difficulties which could follow from such a status of the Romanies. For instance, N. Gheorghe writes: "I personally am critical towards this trend in the Romani movement which seeks to fashion Romanies as a national minority because I consider that in reality, the true concept of national minority is only a by-product of nation-state-

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building. The discourse of national minorities is another way to reproduce and to reinforce the nation-state. The fact that the nation-states are so generous now with these "minorities" is just one device to reinforce the legitimacy of these states as ethnic states, which actually belong to an ethnic "majority" (Gheorghe 1997, p. 160). Gheorghe presents, in contrast to the idea of the Romani national minority in the nation-state, as he says, a "Utopian" vision of transnationalism. This concept should indicate that "we can evolve in a different way from nation-states and national minorities" (p.161), "... that we can build up an ethnic dynamic and a new image by reference to and in interaction with non-national institutions or supra-national institutions" (p. 161). This vision of "universalist identity" (p. 161) is interesting and in principle correct, although, in its implementation, he relies too much on the supra-national bodies. Those can only provide recommendations, but, ultimately, the Roma will always live in particular states, which are the only institutions that can take practical steps to promote their development whether as a social stratum, an ethnic group, or a national minority. The identity of the minority ethnic group develops precisely in contradiction to the majority ethnic group, in everyday contacts, especially in social and political contacts.

Gheorghe's notion transnationalism helps to characterize the Romani minority, which is scattered in many states as a non-territorial group. The Roma do not actually form a typical national minority as we know in Europe. In contrast to most national minorities, they have no support in any mother country. Although it is recognized that their common place of origin is India, which they left about a thousand years ago, the overwhelming majority of the Roma have no Indian consciousness or any relation to India, they do not regard it as the country to which they would like to "return" as to their homeland. And India does not perceive them as its citizens, who found themselves as a national minority in other countries. Moreover, the Roma, in contrast to some national minorities, do not long for a common Romani territory, which would be the basis for the Romani nation, as, for example, Israel for the Jewish people. Although the Roma and the Jews have in common their living in diaspora, the Romani diaspora differs considerably from the Jewish diaspora and from the Jewish ethnic identity also because of the absence of such a strong, significant sign of identity as is the religion of the Jews.

The Roma are dispersed almost all over the world and they usually declare that they are citizens of the country in which they live. For instance, in the 1991 population census in Slovakia, only 80,627 out of the estimated number of 250, 000 – 500,000 Roma declared their nationality to be Romani. The others declared their nationality to be either Slovak or Hungarian. Naturally, they had a number of reasons for that, starting with the non-existence of a tradition of national consciousness through their aversion to identifying themselves with a group society holds in disdain, probably up to the fear of racism.

If the motherland is not a basis of the Romani identity, it should be sought elsewhere.

It might be common Indian roots. These are mirrored in the physiognomy of the Roma and on their tradition, many features of which have survived in spite

of various long-lasting pressures from the majority setting. It is reflected in folklore, in the system of rules of the family community, in the style of life (attitude to property, potential nomadic existence, prevailing opposition to the non-Romani world). The Romani identity could further lean on the common roots of the Romani language and maybe also on the common fate of an ethnic group, oppressed from time immemorial, mostly uneducated or not very learned, and therefore doing unprofitable jobs or being jobless.

In other remarks, we shall concentrate on the Romani language as a rather reliable criterion of the manifestation of the Romani identity. The use of the current situation as a starting point is necessary.

All Romani dialects in various parts of the world have Indian roots, but developing in contacts with different languages and cultures, they have departed from each other. The majority of them have more or less preserved the basic Indian vocabulary that has been gradually enriched by lexical units from contact languages. Some dialects have also preserved an essentially Indian grammatical structure, for example, Slovak Carpathian Romani or North Welsh Romani dialect, while some other dialects have undergone major alteration of grammar, for example the majority of para-Romani idioms where a more or less Indian vocabulary is employed within a borrowed grammatical structure (Liégeois p. 47). Moreover, some groups of Roma have taken on a borrowed language as their mother tongue, for example the Rudari in Bulgaria or Beas in Hungary who speak a Romanian dialect, the Kaulja in Italy, who speak a dialect of Arabic, the Xoraxané in Bulgaria, who speak Turkish (Liégeois p. 48) and others consider the language of the majority as their mother tongue, for example 60 per cent of Romani population in Hungary. Within this context of a large linguistic variety, the old saying of the Slovak Roma *Romaňa dumaha dodžaha pal calo svetos* (Godaver lava phure Romendar, p. 38) – You can travel all over the world with the Romani language would hardly be valid. As a matter of fact even this saying would be incomprehensible for non-Slavonic Roma thanks to words *calo svetos*.

Although there is no uniform Romani language and separate Romani dialects were developing in different ways, in the world of the Roma, language takes on great importance as an element of identity. Liégeois writes: "In the absence of geographical frontiers, language marks adjustable social boundaries and denotes the individual's perception both of his own group and of that to which the person he is speaking with belongs" (Liégeois 1994, p. 56).

The International Romani Union also realized the meaning of the language as an important feature of the Romani identity. As early as at the foundation meeting in 1971, they set up a Language Commission "insisting on the notion of a polynomic language of convergence which would respect the separate identities of diverse speeches" (Liégeois 1994, p. 57). The building of the standardized Romani language was regarded as one of the important tasks of the Commission. However, with the existence of various Romani dialects and the above cited effort to respect "separate identities of diverse speeches" it is difficult to implement the idea of one standardized Romani at international level. Such a Romani language would probably not be the manifestation of the identity of the

Roma in a transnational measure. It would become, similarly as Esperanto, only a type of (auxiliary) means of communication, which does not fulfil all linguistic functions, lacking particularly the ethnosignificative function. It should be rather the local language identity of the Roma that should be built up, trying to create the standardized Romani language in the particular country where the Roma live and which would be used in literature, in the press, in schools, and where it is recognized by law, also in official contacts. Of course, it need not be simple either, as the example of Slovakia can illustrate.

In Slovakia several Romani dialects are spoken. They differ, to some extent, phonetically, grammatically but mainly in vocabulary. These dialects belong to three varieties: Carpathian, Danubian, and Vlach.

We know that Romani has accepted many loanwords from contact languages, which means, for example within the Slovak context, that the Roma living in the Slovak milieu, enrich their vocabulary with Slovak words, first borrowed from dialects (different in the east, central or western Slovakia: *duchna*, *šrumpandľa*, *sklepos*), later from the standard Slovak language (*gitara*), and neologisms borrowed from the latter as well (*telefonis*, *televiza*). On the other hand, the Roma living in the regions in contact with the Hungarian national minority use lexical units from Hungarian (*ritos*, *hajos*). The existence of the several forms of Romani led to misunderstandings in efforts to introduce a Romani basic reading textbook (Banga, 1992). It contained some words which differed from those used by the Roma in other regions of Slovakia (e.g. *paparuga* butterfly versus more common *lepetka*, *udud* light versus *švetlos*, *ričhuno* bear versus *medvedis*, etc.)

There are also differences in the grammatical system of the language. For instance, the "Slovak" Romani language uses, in contrast to "Hungarian" Romani, Slovak prefixes to express the verbal aspect, i.e. the beginning, the end, suddenness, completeness, or the spatial determination (for details, see Rácová, 1999). For example, prefix *po-* in *podel* – *podat'* – hand over specifies the verb spatially (an action towards the object), *z-* in *zvičinel* – *zvolat'* – call out expresses the suddenness of the action, *do-* in *dochal* – *dojest'* – eat up, expresses the completeness of the action, etc.

Although the Slovak prefixes are not used in the "Slovak" Romani in all regions, by all authors and by all speakers in the same measure and some even avoid them, as can be seen, for example in the dictionary of A. Koptová (1995), they form an organic part of the "Slovak" Romani language and as such, they are also included in 'Romsko-český a česko-romský kapesní slovník' (Romani-Czech and Czech-Romani pocket dictionary (Hübschmannová et al. 1991).

The differences between "Slovak" and "Hungarian" Romani are also seen at the syntactic level. For example, in the "Slovak" Romani, some old Romani syntactic models are changed for Slovak constructions, for example original Romani 'sa hin tiro lav?' what is your name? is changed for 'sar tut vičines? Similarly original Romani 'savo mardo?' what is the time? (liter. which it beats) is changed for 'keci ora?' (liter. how many hours?).

Moreover, as we have already said, there are also Roma speaking Vlach Romani in Slovakia.

Because of these linguistic differentiations one can hardly think of a codified Romani language within Slovakia. A practical problem arises: which variant will be used in the official contact and/or whether the three mentioned codifications should be required (Carpathian, Danubian, Vlach).

In this connection, it should be noted that in the discussions about the possibility of codifying the Romani language it is sometimes stated that Romani was codified as early as 1971, when the linguistic commission of the Union of the Gypsies-Roma in Slovakia, operating between 1969 and 1973 adopted a binding norm for registering the Slovak dialect of Romani. Others regard the Romani language as uncoded. This controversy also arises because of different understanding of the concepts of codification and standardization in our country and in the West. J. Horecký points out that in the West, codification is usually understood as the fixing of writing and spelling, standardization means fixing and development of the vocabulary. By contrast, in our country codification means a provision or declaration of the particular system of the national language as generally binding on public communication and standardization is the effort to introduce norms at all levels and in all parts of language (Horecký 1999, pp. 156–166).

Such an understanding of the codification and standardization of language indicates that this is a task that is waiting for the Roma in Slovakia. At first it might concern Slovak Carpathian Romani which is spoken by about 80 per cent of the Roma living in our country. It also has several dialects. For the purpose of codification the most widely spread dialects, but mainly those best explored and described, with at least some hints of their application in written form should be used as a basis. In Slovakia, it is the east Slovak dialect from the region of Humenné.

In this Romani dialect we have recently noticed an interesting effort to return to the Romani roots when adding neologisms to the vocabulary (for details see Ráková, 1999).

Romani has been used only as a spoken language until recently. The 1990s witnessed the appearance of the first works in Romani (folktales, narratives, poems, memoirs), mostly with a simple theme and thus the common vocabulary was sufficient for the authors. The need to enrich the Romani vocabulary emerged with the use of Romani in newspapers, for example the need to name various public institutions. Unfortunately, the Roma use more often Slovak rather than Romani even in their own newspapers. But those who have the courage to write in Romani, have to cope with the insufficiently developed vocabulary of their language. Then there occurs the need to express the basic concepts (for example by writing textbooks, grammatical terminology is formed). An individual can also feel the necessity to express his ideas, his own world (in a work of art). Thanks to their bilingualism, the authors borrow Slovak words to express the lacking words. But it is probably associated with the boosted Romani consciousness that some try to reduce the ample borrowings of the Slovak names

and replace them either by descriptions or by new Romani nominations created from Romani bases. Of course, these are only attempts of several individuals, not of an institution, because the Romanies do not have any as yet, that is it concerns so-called occasionalisms. It will only be shown in the course of time how they will be accepted and how will they integrate into the common vocabulary of the Romani population. In any case, however, they show that Romani is not dependent exclusively on loanwords for supplementing its lexicon, it is able to enrich itself from its own sources. And it is a sign that the language is understood as an element of ethnic identity.

By forming neologisms on the Romani bases, the authors mainly use analogical nomination, derivation and calquing.

Analogical nomination is one in which a pre-existing form is used to denominate a new concept. Such a designation is most frequently transferred through metonymy and metaphor. In metonymy, meaning is transferred on the basis of some inner relationship, for example the word *šeralo*, in common lexicon meaning "having big head" and also "a head" denominates analogically "a chairman" as well as a "major", that is somebody who stands at the head of something.

On the basis of external similarity, for instance a neologism *phala* – stage (in theatre) has originated which is derived from *phal* – a board.

Quite a popular means for forming neologisms on Romani bases is calquing of Slovak words, for example, *jekhetane buŕi* – cooperation < *jekhetane* – together + *buŕi* – work.

However, the most common way of forming neologisms on Romani bases is derivation. Here new lexical units are formed with the aid of Romani roots and proper Romani suffixes, for instance, *dikhiben* – 1. medical examination, 2. attitude, 3. aim, *dikhlariben* – theatrical performance, *dikhaviben* – theatrical performance, *dikhado* – theatre, *dikhad'i* – television, *dikhľardo* – spectator, etc.

Of course, Romani neologisms are not only formed when a new phenomenon emerges, which has no name in the language, but often also for puristic reasons – in an effort to replace the borrowed words by the "more Romani" names. These tendencies are actually known in many other languages. The Romani neologisms of that type include *dikhado* – theatre versus the commonly used *divadlo*, *tijatros*; *ľilango* – postman (*ľil* = letter) versus *poštaris*; *gend'i* and *ľilali* – book – versus *kniška*, etc.

By the selection of the synonyms in Romani, it is not a semantic or stylistic differentiation because all synonyms are neutral. It is more a manifestation or a reflection of the uncoded Romani language, which has no particular institution and a shortage of authors – writers or journalists and possibilities for publications. In any case, however, the return to the Romani linguistic roots can be regarded as an evidence of the Romani consciousness and as an attempt to emphasize the Romani identity. If it would also take place in other Romani dialects, it might bring them closer together, at least at the lexical level. Of course, provided that these would not be sporadic attempts, but that a group of writers and journalists would be able to apply them systematically in practice. Such efforts of the Roma to achieve the codification of Romani would approach those

applied in other native languages and would reinforce the position of Romani as one of the features of Romani identity.

Language can be regarded as a "priority" feature of ethnic identity but one should not forget that this feature is always connected with the whole culture of the particular ethnic group, with their way of thinking, and their corpus of writing both artistic and factual. It is correct to say that language is the memory of culture. But to be able to fulfil this task, it must have all common linguistic functions – not only cognitive and communicative – as basic functions, but also the representative (ethnosignificative) function. All members of the particular ethnic group must take an active part in the development of such functions (in our case it seems to be only wishful thinking), and more or less official institutions are also necessary. This is practically impossible on a world scale, by means of a universal language, but can be achieved in smaller regional ethnic groups and in contrast to particular "majority" communities.

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