

ROMANI WORLDS:

ACADEMIA, POLICY, AND MODERN MEDIA

A selection of articles,
reports, and discussions
documenting the achievements
of the European Academic
Network on Romani Studies

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Roma Language and Roma Culture

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This text aims to provide a brief introduction for non-specialists to a number of key issues surrounding the study of the Romani language and its place in Romani society, and policy that supports the use of the Romani language. For a more detailed discussion of these and related issues see the bibliography at the end of the text.

1) Language as a carrier of culture and identity

Language helps the Roma define who they are, and so it helps us understand who the Roma are. In popular images, ‘Gypsies’ are often equated with travellers or nomads of various backgrounds. Some research traditions, especially in the

social sciences, define Gypsies as populations of diverse origins, but with a specific particular socio-economic profile, specialising in mobile trades and services. Both popular images, and this research tradition, have led to confusion in the political discourse. European institutions such as the European Commission and the Council of Europe struggle to define whom they mean when they talk about Roma/Gypsies. On the one hand they acknowledge a Romani nation with its own distinct culture and history; on the other hand they keep referring to the label 'Roma/Gypsies' as an 'umbrella term' that includes travellers and nomads of different backgrounds. Since there is still no clear definition of the target group for Roma/Gypsy policy at the European level, there can be no guarantee that any implementation of policy and recommendation can have a chance of success.

What does being 'Roma' mean to Romani people? In some cases, individuals identify as Rom because their parents or grandparents spoke Romani, even though the language has not been passed on to the younger generation. In some other cases, notably among the Romani populations of England, Scandinavia, Spain and Portugal, identifying as Rom usually entails acknowledgement of a Romani-derived vocabulary that is still used in family conversation, even though the language itself has been lost. But by and large, Roma define themselves as people who speak or spoke Romani. This is in contrast to the way they are often defined by outsiders, as travellers or nomads. Understanding the relevance of the Romani language to Romani culture is therefore a key to understanding who the Romani people are.

2) Language as a mirror of social history

Sharing a language is not a historical coincidence. Romani people don't share a language because they went out and taught themselves a common language. They obviously don't share a language of their own because it is the language of the territory in which they live; Romani speakers are always a minority, and Romani populations are dispersed. Rather, Romani

people share a language, because they share a history, and because maintaining a distinct language is a vital part of the shared tradition that Romani populations maintain.

There have been many suggestions that Romani culture manifests itself in the Romani language, and that the language is a key to understand Romani culture and traditions. I tend to be skeptical toward such assertions. It is true that some aspects of Romani vocabulary point to key cultural concepts. For example, the fact that the default words for ‘man’ and ‘woman’ differentiate between ‘Rom/Romni’ and ‘Gajo/Gaji’, depending on whether the person referred to is a member of the group or not, is an indication of the importance given in Romani culture to the distinction between insiders and outsiders. But this is an exception.

There are many myths about Romani language as a mirror of culture, and I’d like to mention just a couple of those.

Some authors have suggested that some Romani people have difficulties following time schedules because their dialects of the Romani language do not differentiate between the words for ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’ or because some dialects don’t have a separate future tense. I’ve heard many schoolteachers repeat this assumption. This is complete nonsense. Every concept of time can be expressed in Romani and there is no such thing as grammatical deprivation.

Some writers, including scholars and even linguists, have suggested that the Romani language lacks important vocabulary and that Romani people therefore need to include words from other language or switch to other languages in the middle of their conversation. The reality is that codeswitching and the insertion of foreign words is common among every population of bilinguals around the world, and it is not unique to Romani. English has a high percentage of French words, Japanese has

a high percentage of English words, and Persian has a high percentage of Arabic words. The borrowing of words from one language to another is a natural process, and has nothing to do with language deficiencies.

Some authors have suggested that the presence of certain words in the Romani language point to a particular ancient culture that the Roma had before they came to Europe. Activist author and linguist Ian Hancock has claimed that the Romani words for 'knife', 'shout', and 'argue' are Indic and that this proves that the ancestors of the Roms were warriors. There is absolutely no scientific basis for such assertions. Romani also has Indic words for 'to beg', 'to sing', 'to dance', 'to steal', and 'to cheat', and that does not indicate that the ancestors of the Rom were beggars, singers, dancers, or thieves. And Romani has Indic words for the numbers up to six, but nor for 'seven', 'eight' and 'nine' (the words for these numbers are Greek). That doesn't mean that the ancestors of the Rom could only count up to six.

But the Romani language does allow us to learn much about Romani history, even beyond what is recorded in historical documents. I will give just two examples.

The first is well known: It is thanks to the study of language that we know that the Romani people originated in India. Some scholars, such as Okely and Willems, continue to dispute this. They claim that the Romani language was acquired by nomadic traders on the trade routes. There is no precedent in the history of language for a population acquiring a language in such a way. The Romani language is clearly of Indic origin, and that clearly points to India as the country of origin of the Romani people. Popular sources continue to claim that the language originated in North India, although historical linguistics has shown that the language originated in central India, but then underwent some changes in the north before leaving south Asia.

The second point for historical reconstruction concerns the connection between Romani groups in Europe. For many years, some linguists were engaged in postulating so-called dialect Branches of the Romani language. They proposed that the present-day dialects of Romani each belonged to a sub-family of the language. There are speculations as to where exactly these sub-families emerged; some say they may have emerged before immigration to Europe, some say that they reflect different waves of migrations across Europe. This notion of dialect branches has become so prevalent that it has been taken over by some social scientists, who believe that Romani populations can always be classified according to the dialects they speak, and that dialects form strict boundaries.

I take a critical approach to this view. My own research and that of my collaborators has shown over the past decade that Romani dialects form a geographical continuum, just like in most other languages. Of course this continuum is sometimes interrupted when groups migrate from one location to another. But our historical and comparative research shows that most of the differences between the Romani dialects emerged after the initial settlement in Europe, around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Today's dialect map shows that neighbouring Romani populations tend to speak similar dialects. This means that travel and nomadism in the history of the Roms were not random; but that Romani populations were settled and had contacts mainly with those Romani groups that settled close to them.

3) Language as an identity badge and symbol of political recognition

My final point concerns the political status of Romani. Language has always served as a badge of national identity, and the elites of every emerging nation put much effort into elevating language into a symbol of national unity. This kind of thinking inspired the members of the International Romani Union when they began their activities in the early 1970s. Developing a standard Romani language was high on the agenda. There are still a number of activists who believe that there should be

a uniform way of writing and perhaps even of speaking Romani at least for official purposes. Some argue that this would make it easier for Romani people from different countries to understand one another. This argument finds some support among activists and intellectuals who are engaged in international networks. The main argument however is that a standard language can act as a symbol of unity and that it can be used to inspire people to promote Romani emancipation.

There are several reasons why efforts to promote a standard Romani have failed, and why such efforts appear to be futile and not necessary.

Firstly, there are practical obstacles. There is no central Romani government or education system that can promote a standard Romani. The international Romani union has failed to unite Roma, and most Roma do not find its ideas on language inspiring. Only a handful of people follows the IRU's guidelines on standard Romani.

But more importantly, Romani people recognise that a standard is not necessary and that it serves no function.

Romani activists and ordinary Romani people alike are able to communicate with one another when they meet Roma from other countries. The barriers are negligible in face-to-face communication. They are also marginal in writing. My research collaborators and I have been studying online written communication in Romani in a variety of media — translations of documents, email discussion lists, social media, and websites. We encounter a mix of dialects, and communication works very well.

Activists do not seem to feel a need for a unified symbol, either. The mere act of writing in Romani is seen as an emancipatory act and a demonstration of one's identity. Indeed, most activists prefer to express their own identity in their own dialect rather than comply with an imposed standard.

Finally, modern technology and online communication means that people are moving away from strict norms and over to flexible and creative use of language. This is a universal trend and it can be observed in emails, text messages and chat forums worldwide and in all languages. It would be odd if Romani were to go against this trend.

Where does that leave policy? Acknowledging the Romani language and its role in public discussion and in education is important, and it is right that European institutions continue to refer to the need to promote Romani. Many have done so already, but there is little implementation on the ground. There is a very strong network of linguists as well as of language activists and they are in a position to make a contribution toward promoting Romani. Romani is one of few languages for which the Council of Europe has designed a European Curriculum Framework. We have recommendations on how to teach Romani, and an online animated learning forum for the language, RomaniNet, was developed last year with the support of the European Commission. We need to expand such resources especially by training teachers and raising awareness of the language.

The Romani Project at the University of Manchester, which I have been leading since 1999, developed a website which it launched in 2006. We have since had some 50,000 unique visitors annually, which shows the considerable interest. Another online resource, Romlex, and online multi-dialect dictionary for Romani, has some 70,000 unique visitors annually. And our project is about to launch the Romani Virtual Library, which will document online teaching and learning materials for Romani, international resolution texts and translations into the language.

PART THREE: EVENT REPORTS

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