BACKGROUND AND CURRENT SITUATION OF LITERACY OF ROMA PEOPLE IN SLOVAKIA

Žofia Bárcziová, Gizela Tóthová

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (SLOVAKIA)

Abstract

Each ethnic group has its own communication symbols, with which the members of a given community can communicate with each other. That includes the language and cultural traditions of a community. Although the Romani language was first standardised on the basis of the fundamental principles of the Slovak grammar, it has different rules. In the last century, the Romani language was mainly a spoken language, which meant that the rules of written language were not laid down. A number of questions arose with regard to the codification of the Romani language: Are Romani dialects spoken around the world dialects of a language or rather a language family comprising closely-related languages? Which of Romani languages/dialects is most intelligible? Which language/dialect can be considered ‘presentable’? Which of them should be used at important international conferences? Which language/dialect important international conventions should be translated into? The aim of the study is to map the situation of the Romani language and to point out that although the Romani language was codified in 2008 research has shown that it is not intelligible to all Roma groups.

Keywords: Roma, language, dialects, spoken language, written language.

1 INTRODUCTION

The entirety of language and cultural traditions determines communication between the members of a community. The aim of the present study is to map the situation of the Romani language in Slovakia. The Romani language was codified in 2008, however research highlights that the codified language variety is not intelligible to all Roma groups, on the one hand, and the state language or the language used by the Hungarian minority is given preference over the limited use of the Romani language, on the other hand. In addition to the uncertainty about national affinity, the importance of the Romani language also tends to recede into the background due to linguistic Hungarianisation and/or Slovakisation. It is therefore crucial to address the issue of the Romani language, as it constitutes an important part and element of tribal/ethnic origin, and there are regions where the members of Roma communities still use the Romani language as their mother tongue, and Roma children often meet with Slovak and/or Hungarian language only after enrolling in primary school. The study focuses on the period commencing in 1971, as the Romani language was first standardised in that very year.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study concentrates on the linguistic situation in Slovakia regarding the Roma. First, the designation of Roma people is discussed, then a brief overview of the Romani language of Slovakia and its varieties is given. The first Romani linguistic record, the first hypothesis of Indic origin of the Romani language, the common origin of the Slovak and Hungarian Romani languages, the policies of assimilation of Maria Theresa of Austria and her son Joseph II, and segregation measures against the Roma in the former Czechoslovak Republic are also addressed in a historical context to provide a clearer picture of the situation of the Roma in Slovakia. The standardisation of the Romani language and its function in society are also briefly considered below.

3 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION OF SLOVAKIA

3.1 Who are the Roma people?

It is not possible to accurately define who the Roma are. There are many views on the definition of the Roma and their social formation. The relevant definitions include ethnicity, cultural group, social class, social stratum, and deviant social group. The group of the Roma has also undergone great changes throughout history. In one approach, those persons are to be regarded as Roma who are regarded as
Roma by much of society. From another perspective, the Roma constitute an ethnic group whose
cultural traits are highly differentiated from its environment; disadvantaged and multiple disadvantaged
status is socially inherited from one generation to the next, and social communities end up as victims
[1]. There are only a few written records about this ethnic group primarily penned by outsiders, their
history and historical origin are therefore based on oral tradition. And who are the Roma people? It
cannot be clearly defined, but various definitions exist: those who live according to specific Roma cultural
standards; those who declare themselves Roma and speak the Romani language; those who declare
themselves Roma but do not speak the Romani language; those who declare themselves Roma, live
according to Roma standards, identify themselves as Roma but their mother tongue is not the Romani
language; and those who are regarded as Roma by their environment. Separating themselves from
other Roma does not entail that they feel closer to non-Roma (gadjo). The members of separate groups
also preserve their ethnicity — Roma identity — that is reflected in their specific tastes, mindset and
acts. Since they had been wandering for centuries, it would have been very difficult to preserve written
records [2].

3.2 The Romani language and its varieties

The first proof of written Romani dates back to 1547, which had been mistakenly called Egyptian for
hundreds of years. The millenniums-old language has several dialects, which are closely related but are
often not mutually intelligible with each other. Since the Romani language had been the language of
illiterate people for a long time, it lacked a uniform structure for written language [3]. The assumption
was formulated more than 200 years ago that the Romani language is of Indic origin. István Vályi
originating from the area around Komárno went to the university in Leiden, the Netherlands to study
theology. There he noticed that the language of his Indian (Malabari) fellow students sounded very
similar to the language used by the Roma people living in his village. He wrote down more than a
thousand Malabar words, and after returning home and reading out the words, it turned out that the
Roma people of Győr could translate almost all the words. He also revealed in 1776 that there was a
district named ‘Gypsyland’ in the Malabar region [2]. Research on Roma origins reached its peak by the
last quarter of the 19th century. Scientific works on Roma folk poetry, history, ethnology and the Romani
language were published throughout Europe [4].

According to Z. Kumanová and H. Zelinová, the Roma can be divided into three major groups:

- Slovak Roma (Servike Roma);
- Hungarian Roma (Ungrike Roma) who live in the southern part of the country and usually speak
  Hungarian;
- Vlach Roma (Vlachike Roma) who immigrated in 1959 and their group was named from present-
day Romania.

Slovak and Hungarian Roma have a common origin and belong to the group of Servike Roma. The
Roma are not a homogenous group and are usually distinguished from the society they are also
members of on the ground of differences [5].

The present Roma population began to settle in the area covered by present-day Slovakia in the 14th
century. The earliest specific written information about the Roma is to be found in the account of Zemplín
County and dates back to the 1300s. Ottoman Turks forced them to wander, and thus they reached the
Balkans and then Central Europe. The ethnically heterogeneous country had admitted the strange
wanderers without problems, and the ancestors of the Roma integrated well within the then society.
They were mostly received because they were skilled in blacksmithing, made and repaired weapons.
The letter of safe conduct issued by Sigismund of Luxembourg in the Spiš Castle in 1423 allowed them
to settle as early as in the 15th century. Although the seamless process of admittance was not of long
duration. In their centuries-old history, Roma groups needed to constantly assimilate into majority
societies. As host societies refused to accept their differences, they were forced to give up their
traditional lifestyle. Maria Theresa of Austria and her son Joseph II took repressive measures to
assimilate the Roma and exercised repression in all respects, e.g. because of their ethnicity- and culture-
specific characteristics, in the 18th century. In the 20th century, the Roma were subjected to various
political and social oppression and violence in Slovakia. First Czechoslovak Republic, despite its
democratic character, did not hesitate to legalise certain methods for their segregation, isolation and
punishment. The worsening economic situation and post-war crisis multiplied media and violent attacks
against the Roma. The assimilation of the Roma ethnic group was further hindered by the Second World
War, the dissolution of the common state, and the formation of the Slovak State. The Slovak Roma were
not transported to the German concentration camps during the Holocaust, nonetheless several measures of discrimination against the Roma were taken (e.g. transfer to labour camps, prohibition of the use of public transport, restriction of their free movement in villages and towns, and order to move to certain towns). Thereby their contacts to the majority society were also restricted, which further retarded and hindered the development of their communities. It marked the start of a process leading to the discarding of traditional values by the Roma society, which would pass down from generation to generation. The Roma were not recognised as a separate ethnic group but were considered to be a disadvantaged population group with a different lifestyle in Third Czechoslovak Republic formed in 1945. 1989 saw the rise of the Roma movement, which sought to achieve national-ethnic integration, recognition of the Roma as an ethnic minority, and freedom to use their own language and promote their culture, thus seeking to reduce their disparities and adapt to the majority society. The Slovak Government adopted a resolution on the equality of the Roma on 9 April 1991, which has guaranteed support for the promotion of their culture and education. Several Roma associations were established at that time: Theatre Romathan in Košice, the Roma Culture Department in Nitra, Secondary School of Applied Arts in Košice, Roma literary works and newspapers were published, a Roma radio station was established, and secondary schools providing a large variety of studies became available. Theatre Romathan is the only professional Roma theatre in Slovakia, which was established by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic in Košice in May 1992 and employ the Romani language as its main language of performance [5].

3.3 The situation and position of the Romani language in Slovakia after 1971

Nation states aim to forge a common political identity that prevails over the ethnic identity of individual citizens; thus, citizens define their identity as the residents of a nation state, belonging to an ethnic group is of secondary importance [6]. Each ethnic group has its own communication symbols, with which the members of a given community can communicate with each other. That includes the language and cultural traditions of a community. The present-day trends for preserving, protecting and promoting minority languages in Europe suggest that each language is a unique cultural value that has to be protected and promoted [6]. Each language develops its users’ self-consciousness and is suitable for articulating and transferring knowledge. This is one of the reasons why the interest of both non-Roma and Roma people in Roma issues has resurred, as the Roma themselves also lack knowledge of their own origin and culture. The Romani language was, until very recently, a colloquial tongue without written form. The past decades saw increased efforts to standardise the Romani language, which were party achieved. The Romani language was first standardised in 1971, when spelling rules were laid down, and it led to a process aimed at the unification of these rules in order to make the Roma’s spoken and written language recognised and propagated in everyday language use. At the first standardisation of the Romani language in 1971, only certain spelling rules were laid down in particular in relation to the varieties used in the Czech Republic and Slovakia [6].

Although the Romani language was first standardised on the basis of the fundamental principles of the Slovak grammar, it has different rules. Although literary works written in Romani were published in the last century, the Romani language was mainly a spoken language, which meant that the rules of written language were not laid down. After 1989 the Government of the Slovak Republic in its Resolution no. 153 of 1991 declared the recognition of the Roma as a national minority and the name ‘Roma’ as a single designation for the Roma and guaranteed them a versatile and ethnic development. There was an explosion of scientific research, and several monographs were published in Slovak and Hungarian on Roma lifestyle, history and the Roma issue (E. Krekovcová, E. Davidová, A. Jurová, V. Bacová, J. Belišová, V. Gecelovský, M. Hübschmannová, Z. Kollárová, E. Krekovcová, A. Mann D. Siváková, P. Šalamon, J. Drenko, H. Zelinová, etc.). An early research was carried out by Emília Horváthová assisted by the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences [7]. The need to standardise the Romani language and ensure language equality emerged on the initiative of Erika Adamová, Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Roma Communities, at the end of 1999. A coordinating council on Romani language and literature was set up at the Roma Culture Department of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, which gradually prepared the modification of the rules of the Romani language on the basis of the Romani dialect spoken in Eastern Slovakia with the involvement of other experts, which was a further step towards the standardisation of the Romani language [8]. A number of questions arose with regard to the codification of the Romani language: Are Romani dialects spoken around the world dialects of a language or rather a language family comprising closely-related languages? Which of Romani languages/dialects is more intelligible? Which language/dialect can be considered ‘presentable’? Which of them should be used at important international conferences? Which language/dialect important international conventions should be translated into [9]?
Roma philologist, linguist and ethno-sociologist Vania de Gila-Kochanowski mapped Romani dialects and developed an alphabet appropriate for the Romani language. He devoted himself to the issue of the standardised Romani language since 1949 (however his vision would only come to fruition at the first World Romani Congress in 1971). Vania de Gila-Kochanowski suggested the building of a common language that could be the language of communication, documents and publications at international level [9]. Vania de Gila-Kochanowski, who chaired a commission created to examine the language at the second World Romani Congress held in Geneva in 1978, proposed to replace elements of the contact variety with Sanskrit words that were also contained in the Hindi vocabulary in the dialects of the Romani language, thus international expressions that had affinity with the words from the Romanian and English languages could be added to the modern vocabulary and technical terminology. Although the Congress unanimously supported his proposal, it was not implemented for many years [10].

French linguistic Marcel Courthiade continued to implement the initiative, thus marking a new period, and was conducting field research to examine the dialects of the Romani language (particularly in the Balkans). Marcel Courthiade divided Romani dialects and languages into three classes:

1. The first stratum includes the Romani dialects that are used extensively and are highly intelligible to all Roma speakers.
2. In the second stratum there are the Manuš dialects heavily influenced by the German language, which are less intelligible to other Roma groups.
3. The third stratum comprises ethnolects that have many expressions borrowed from other languages (e.g. English, Romanian, Slovak, or Hungarian), which, even when contain lexical items of the Romani language, are completely unintelligible to the members of other Roma groups [11].

This classification of Romani languages was presented at the International Congress of the International Romani Union (IRU) held in Paris in 1986, which resulted in the review of the above-mentioned standardisation of the Romani language. Discussions about the issue were taken forward at the session of the IRU Congress held in Warsaw in 1990, where the Romani alphabet, i.e. the standard alphabet for Romani, was presented, which also set out 21 rules of written Romani dialects and was signed by 17 Roma linguists (inter alia R. Djurič, I. Hancock, L. Čerenkov, M. Courthiade, A. Daróczi, A. Joshi, etc.). The proposed material was finally adopted on 8 April 1990, and a 10-year trial period began, during which it was assessed whether the new rules were acceptable to the speakers of various Romani dialects. The second and third strata of the Romani dialect and language classification of Courthiade — i.e. Romani dialects spoken in Germany, France and northern Italy and ethnolects spoken by the Roma living in Spain, Great Britain, Scandinavia, Romania and Armenia — were not included in the proposed material. The aim of the standardisation is to standardise various written language forms with the general principle that one should write according to the rules of a standardised written language but can speak as (s)he wishes. However, the use of the internationally accepted spelling rules is still very limited in Slovakia (and in the Czech Republic as well). It is also doubtful whether the rules will be more widely and properly used, since the so-called ‘Czechoslovak spelling rules’ accepted in 1971 have also not been properly employed (e.g. in Romani periodicals, even in the fields of art and literature) [12].

Differences between the Romani and Slovak languages:

1. In contrast to Slovak, the Romani language has aspirated consonants — čh, ph, kh, and th —, the proper use of which is very important, as improper use totally changes the meaning of words (for example, koro – khoro [blind – jug], te čorel – te čhorel [to steal – to pour] etc.).
2. Articles (o, e, o, for example, o čhavo [boy], e čhaj [girl], o murša [boys]) are used before nouns in the Romani language.
3. As regards declension, the Romani language distinguishes eight different cases.
4. Vocative forms are often used in the Romani language.
5. ‘Y’ is not used in the Romani language according to the spelling rules laid down in 1971.
6. A soft sign is also inserted in syllables di, ti, ni, li, de, te, ne, and le in the Romani language. Words have a different meaning without a soft sign (for example, dilos – dives [lunch – day], linaj – dilino [summer – silly], etc.).
7. The Romani language usually does not use accents, but it varies by region (for example, the vowel o in pora [to wash] is short in the Šariš region and long in the Zemplín region: póra or póura). An important rule is to never use accents in writing.
Modul verbs are conjugated in a different way in the Romani language than in the Slovak language.

The grammar of Romani often reduces unstressed vowels (for example, miro – mro [my], tiro – tro [your], etc.) [8].

The Romani language, like all other languages, is constantly evolving and replaces archaisms with new and modern words. Just like the majority of languages, the Romani language also tends to adopt contact phenomena. Since suffixes or prefixes are added to loanwords or these words are otherwise conjugated or declined, adopting neologisms does not threaten the vocabulary of the Romani language [9].

The panel of experts preparing the codification of the Romani language was established at the Roma Culture Department of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. The Language Council proposed that the Eastern Slovak dialect of Romani (spoken in Spiš, Šariš, Zemplín and Abaúj regions) should form the basis of the codification of Romani, since 85% of the Roma used this dialect as a spoken language in Slovakia. The Romani language became a medium of instruction on 29 June 2008. It was a historic moment for the Roma, which meant a crucial change regarding the (further) education of Roma children [2]. As regards the education, the Slovak State provides mother-tongue instruction for Hungarian and Rusyn/Ukrainian pupils until graduation. In contrast, the education of the Roma has shortcomings, e.g. the basic lack of instruction in Romani, moreover Romani has not been introduced as a subject or an auxiliary language of instruction; if required, Romani is taught as a foreign language. Certain non-governmental organisations have begun to organise Romani language courses. Roma assistant teachers are increasingly being employed in schools, the issue of bilingual instruction for Roma children is occurring increasingly, and Romani is rarely being used as a second (auxiliary) language in teaching. The Constitution of the Slovak Republic guarantees the right of citizens to set up and maintain educational and cultural institutions operating in minority languages. The Slovak state language law regulates the usage of language at public cultural events. Although the educational and cultural scenes have become enriched for minorities regarding the usage of minority languages after the democratic transition, minority cultural events are still ‘rural’ in nature and limited to choirs, folk dancing, and amateur dramas group. Currently, there are a Ukrainian, a Roma and two Hungarian state-subsidized professional theatres in Slovakia [13].

4 CONCLUSIONS

Although the first written record about the Roma living in the area covered by present-day Slovakia dates back to 1322 and can be found in the account of Zemplín County, the Roma in Slovakia do not form a homogeneous ethnic group, and disharmony between the various groups is not rare. The research also showed that research on the Roma has mainly focused on the fields of ethnology and sociology so far. The negative attitude of political leaders towards the Roma only changed in Slovakia after the democratic transition, the earlier taboo subject of the Roma issue has become a particularly topical subject of late. However, the majority society is reluctant to fully accept the Roma, and the main reasons for this are high unemployment among, early departure from education and the lifestyle of the Roma living in segregated Roma camps (e.g. in Central Slovakia). As has already been mentioned, efforts to codify the Romani language in Slovakia were first made in 1971 by accepting the spelling rules of the Romani language. Since then, efforts have been made to standardise the language by publishing articles and books in Romani and promoting the use of Romani at home. In addition, rapid social changes and close-knit communities have contributed largely to the preservation of the Romani language. Romani language is taught in a few primary and secondary schools and two universities in Slovakia, however there is still a need for much more Romani language teachers and Roma experts. A key priority for the future is to ensure that the Romani language is a medium of instruction (even as an auxiliary language) and that graduates who are fully aware of the Roma cultural specificity are produced. The imperative of dealing with the culture and language of this minority is important because the number of the Roma population is increasing.

The Romani language is primarily spoken by the Roma living in close-knit communities in the eastern part of the country. If there were no Roma camps in Slovakia, the Romani language would be a rare sight, Tkáčová said. However, since Romani has been mostly spoken in these camps, the language has preserved, and thus the urban Roma have begun using the Romani language again thanks to the Romani media, e.g. Gipsytv.eu, PressTv, Radio Pátria and the nationality programmes of RTVS Sam Khare. Roma children usually use Romani in Roma camps in Eastern Slovakia and in towns where the population mainly constitutes of Roma people (e.g. Košice, Vranov Nad Topľou, Prešov, and Spišská Nová Ves), secondary schools and universities therefore have endeavoured to teach the Romani
The research also revealed that although the Romani language has several dialects, the dialects of Romani are only intelligible to Roma groups that live alongside each other, meaning that Romani dialects spoken by groups separated geographically are not mutually intelligible. Romani dialects share a grammatical structure, however their vocabularies differ greatly, since Romani dialects often adopt loanwords from the languages of majority societies. As regards the use of Romani by the Roma in Slovakia, most of them are functional multilingual (i.e. they speak Romani, Hungarian, and Slovak), thus, generally speaking, the Roma population of Slovakia constitutes of bi- or trilingual Roma people.

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