
ROMANI WITHIN A MAJORITY COMMUNITY: INTRINSIC CASE STUDY FOCUSED ON YOUNG EDUCATED ROMA POPULATION

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Abstract

Romani represents one of many endangered languages of the world. Romani is normally maintained within the family and the Roma community, like many other minority and endangered languages, due to lack of support of state institutions to be taught as L1 and used in wider contexts. However, the family domain is the place where language shift has also begun due to negative attitudes of Romani community members towards their native language, as well as negative evaluation of the language in majority communities where Roma live. In spite of its marginalized status, Romani has not undergone a process of complete shift in favor of majority languages, primarily because of intra-group support present in the family domain in a number of Roma communities. Herein, an intrinsic qualitative case study is presented which aims to provide preliminary input regarding attitudes of young Roma population from Serbia towards learning and preservation of their native language, the importance of mother tongue in general, as well as attitudes toward learning a majority language, in this case Serbian. The results indicate the above statements about the relevance of the family language policy and planning as a key factor in Romani maintenance among the young speakers.

Keywords: Romani, endangered language, family domain, public domain, qualitative sociolinguistic research, intrinsic case study, family language policy and planning.

1. Introduction.

Like many other minority languages, the Romani language had a chance of preserving within a Roma family and a Roma community, since it did not have the support of state institutions to be learnt as a first language (L1) or used in a wider context. On the other hand, the family domain is precisely the domain from where the language shift had started under the influence of parents' negative attitudes towards their own minority language and culture (Filipović, 2009:54-106).

In this paper private and public domains are observed one opposite the other, where the family domain is considered a symbol of a minority/endangered language (terms "minority" and "endangered" are used as synonyms in the paper), while on the other side there is a public domain as a symbol of a majority language and a majority community. These two domains play key roles in the processes of language acquisition and language maintenance. The Romani language has not undergone the process of complete language shift (despite the difficult conditions), with the help of (conscious or unconscious) support it had within the family domain and the local community. Therefore, the Romani language herein is considered an example that it is possible for one language to survive, to persist and to be transmitted over the centuries without support of the educational domain and institutions, provided that it is spoken in a family environment. The isolation of Roma from the rest of the society, non-interference with members of the majority community, and the lack of access to majority languages in school framework (due to various factors) have contributed to the fact that members of this ethnic group maintain their language within the family and the Roma community, since they had the opportunity to acquire their mother tongue from parents or other members of the community. However, the language shift starts exactly from the family domain after some parents take a stance that it is better for their children to speak only the majority language because it will "simplify their journey through life" (Halwachs, 2005). The language ideologies of parents appear as an invisible language planning when it comes to language education for children (Curd-Christiansen, 2009).

A major role in reducing the number of Romani speakers, played the assimilation in the countries where the Roma people had migrated (Đurić, 2006: 344) and the question of evaluating group identity since a large number of representatives of the Roma community "have no high opinion on their own language and culture, nor do they have a clear need for their preservation" (Filipović, 2009: 80).

In the relation with the above topics, an intrinsic qualitative case study is presented which aims to provide preliminary input regarding attitudes of young

Roma population from Serbia towards learning and preservation of their native language, the importance of mother tongue in general, as well as attitudes toward learning a majority language, in this case Serbian. The paper refers to family language policy and planning as a key factor in Romani maintenance among the young speakers. Hence, the Romani language is seen from the perspective of minority/endangered language preservation under the private domain influence, taking into account the interactions of the Romani community members with the language of the majority community and the majority community itself.

2. The position of Roma and their language in Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries

When it comes to the position of Roma people in Europe, Dieter Halwachs (Halwachs, 2003:192-207) states that Roma are neither a regional nor an immigrant minority. The absence of its own state places this large ethnic group in an unfavourable position (Filipović, Vučo and Djurić, 2010:261).

On the territory of Europe, the Roma have not been recognized as a national minority for a very long time. Such situation lasted until 1993 when the Council of Europe declared them "the true European minority" (Filipović, Vučo and Djurić, 2010: 261), thus declaring that the Roma and their language contribute significantly to the cultural diversity of Europe (Halwachs, 2003:205). However, in some European countries, even after the declaration, the Roma remained a "hidden minority", officially denied by the states in which they lived without the right to education in their mother tongue (Filipović, Vučo and Djurić, 2010:261).

Notwithstanding their long presence in our country, only in the 21st century, in fact in 2003, the Roma were granted the status of a national minority (Filipović, 2009:80), which prevented them from obtaining different rights earlier. Since ancient times, Romani language had been in a very specific position within the majority societies due to the fact that different varieties of Romani (Halwachs, 2003:192) were spoken by the people who led a specific way of life and whose language for a long time did not enjoy institutional support in countries where the Roma settled down. However, regardless of the dialect they spoke, the Roma could understand each other. The exception is the Spanish Roma who have almost lost their mother tongue (Đurić, 1987:269).

When it comes to this language in education, a significant problem represents the fact that the Romani language until recently has been a purely oral language (Đurić, 1987:267), and even today, in the 21st century, there is no standard Romani variety. Regarding the education of Roma children in the Romani language

in our country, the problem is the lack of teaching staff who could perform the Romani teaching in elementary and secondary schools in Serbia (Filipović, 2009:80).

a) Ideologies and interactions within majority communities. All languages are born equal, but they grow up unequally where their potentials are developed unevenly, depending on the set of historical, cultural and social circumstances, that is, from valid social (and linguistic) ideologies (Bugarski, 1996:24). Consequently, whoever has political power, they impose their own language as dominant in society. Since the Roma are people with neither political nor economic power, living for centuries as the most marginalized and the most stigmatized ethnic minority in all the countries they live in (Filipović, Vučo, Djurić, 2010:261), their language is devaluated by majority communities.

Since the language itself is an integral part of the identity, any contempt for the language of others (the contempt of a majority for a minority community) is a contempt for the speakers who use that language (which is often present in respect of the Romani speakers). Therefore, as a result there is social discrimination (Bugarski, 1996:97).

Due to the fact that a language cannot function independently of the society in which it is present, it shares the fate and ideology of the community that uses it (Bugarski, 1996: 97), and the Romani language, unfortunately, is not well positioned within the majority societies where it exists. Linguistic situation always reflects both social and political situation in society (Halwachs, 2003:195), as is the case with the Romani language.

Within the majority communities, the Roma face various problems such as discrimination, difficult living conditions, illiteracy, etc. When it comes to acquiring a language (mother tongue/majority language) and overall education, in many countries still there is no opportunity for Roma children to succeed in the school system (Filipović, 2009:54-106; Filipović, 2011:351-364). Also, their cultural models are most often different from models that are valid in majority communities, so Roma children do not achieve social success outside the Roma community (Filipović, 2009:80).

Given the fact that there is two-way relationship, in terms of improving the living conditions and education of the Roma and the survival of the Romani language, on the one hand there was a lack of initiative by state institutions, while on the other hand there was resistance to successful integration into the majority community by the very members of this minority community (Filipović, 2009:83).

3.- Romani: language used in the family domain as a reflection of family language policy and planning.

When considering a language maintenance and a possible revitalization of endangered languages, it is inevitable to focus on the family domain, a domain that many authors have perceived as a key domain in the processes of language maintenance and language revitalization (Fishman, 1991:4-6; Hinton, 2003:44-55; Hornberger, 1998:439-458; King, 1996:267-281). Joshua Fishman (Fishman, 1991:4) points out that the role of a family, that is, a local community, is crucial for language maintenance and change in the language shift process (*reverse language shift*). This author believes that, instead of insisting on the institutional preservation of languages, attention should be paid to sociolinguistic processes that focus on the intergenerational transfer of the mother tongue (Filipović, 2009:100).

Given that the Roma for centuries had been deprived of any political, social and economic power in the countries in which they lived, as well as without the language in a written form, the Roma variety could persist and survive within the Roma domain (Halwachs, 2003:195). Therefore, the Romani language primarily functioned as an intimate variety of the Roma minority community, a variety limited to the Roma microcosm. The same situation is found even today in the 21st century, consequently, the Romani language continues to exist in limited domains of use (Halwachs, 2003:192-207).

Hence, language policy and planning exist even in those cases where they have not been made overt or established by authorities. In many countries there are social groups who do not have formal or written language policies, therefore, the nature of their language policy has to be derived from a study of their language practices or beliefs. When we talk about family language policy and planning, the language manager can be a family member who tries to persuade other family members to speak the language of their ancestors (*heritage language*) (Spolsky, 2004:8-10) which is also the case among young Romani speakers in Serbia.

Many Roma people learn and speak their mother tongue only in their families, their neighborhood and quarter. Since the Romani language has been under different influences, there are often many differences and problems. Even if it is not possible to do much in a short period of time regarding language preservation and its use, activities should be oriented to the long-term goals. First of all, it might be possible to begin with a wide practice of learning and nurturing a mother tongue, where various scientific institutions should take part (Acković, ed. 2001:109-132).

a) On the road of replacement and language preservation. When it comes to a language shift due to various challenges and pressure in majority communities, in order to avoid the replacement and to survive, an endangered language must be used in various domains. It is by no means sufficient to be used only in the family domain, but there must be support from the public domain (education, media, etc.). Since in the case of the Romani language such support was often absent, the language shift started from the family domain due to the lack of prestige and the inability to use the language outside the minority community (Halwachs, 2003:192-207) Furthermore, the negative attitudes of Roma parents towards their own language made that the number of speakers was steadily declining, which led the Romani language to the status of an endangered language (Halwachs, 2005:145-196), as well as the question of evaluating group identity since large number of representatives of the Roma community "have no high opinion on their own language and culture, nor do they have a clear need for their preservation" (Filipović, 2009:80). For the above-mentioned reasons, for Roma people it was always (and still is) necessary to be bilingual or multilingual speakers (Halwachs, 2003:196).

Describing the situation of Romani language in Austria in the 21st century, Dieter Halwachs (Halwachs, 2005:9) states that the attitudes of parents are very important factor in the formation of monolingual Roma children in the majority language, stressing that behind these attitudes there are economic considerations, since only a high level of competence in the majority language represents education, which further enables successful involvement in a rich society.

In order to prevent the complete disappearance of the language, scientists (Halwachs, 2003:192-207; King, 1996:267-281) emphasize the necessity of starting up initiatives in the local communities in the direction of revitalization, as well as the necessity of carrying out series of activities aimed at preserving the language (*grassroots activities*). It is precisely in this way that the awareness of the need for preserving the Romani language has originally arisen in the Roma community in Austria (Halwachs, 2003:197)

The European Union itself is interested in language as one of the basic strategic instruments for the constitution of an integrated community of people of Europe (Bugarski, 2002:158). Regarding the attempt to preserve the Romani language by European institutions, the European institutions contribute to the preservation of the Romani indirectly via recommendations and agreements, as well as directly by providing support to educational programs (Halwachs, 2005:145-196) However, the main minority languages document of the Council of Europe (1992), (*European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*) does not grant any

significant rights to the Romani language (nor any other minority language) (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008:107-119). Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2008:107-119) criticizes this document as the Charter leaves minority languages unprotected, since it does not oblige states to improve the minority languages status.

Certain initiatives were carried out with regard to the Roma in Serbia in the past. The strategy for achieving the goals of the Decade of the Roma (2005-2015) was implemented and there were many initiatives aimed to improve the education of the Roma children at preschool and elementary school level, as basic levels of knowledge acquisition. Since 2007, secondary school students in Vojvodina have systematically received support in order to achieve good opportunities for university education until 2015 (Savić and Grbić, (ed.), 2008:5).

4. Intrinsic case study focused on young educated Roma population: attitudes towards mother tongue learning/preservation and the learning of Serbian as a majority language

For the purpose of this paper, an intrinsic qualitative case study is presented which aims to provide preliminary input regarding attitudes of young Roma population from Serbia towards learning and preservation of their native language, the importance of mother tongue in general, as well as attitudes toward learning a majority language, in this case Serbian.

When it comes to qualitative research and a case study as a methodological procedure, the accent is precisely on a comprehensive and detailed description of a particular situation, so that the qualitative method provides an abundance of detailed data on a relatively small number of cases. A certain social phenomenon and explanation of the situation are considered from various aspects (Ajduković, 2007:1-2). The qualitative methodology is the most suitable for investigating and presenting the phenomena in the focus of this paper, since these phenomena are important to be perceived from the perspective of the participants in the research. Given an intrinsic interest in the case and awareness that it does not generate results for a wider population (Stake, 1995:3), an intrinsic case study has been applied for this paper.

a) The research. Since the Romani language was not introduced in preschool institutions/primary schools/secondary schools, the hypothesis of the research was that young Roma people could acquire their own language only within the family and the Roma community. In this regard, it is assumed that the respondents do not use the Romani language in the public domain. There is also an

interest in finding out how the respondents of the research learned Romani and whether they used an oral tradition during their learning process, which is a valuable source when it comes to language preservation and revitalization. As far as Serbian as the majority language, there was an interest in examining when and where they began to learn this language.

The research was conducted during the August/September of 2013 and involved three respondents – two young Roma women and one young Roma men from Serbia. At the time of conducting the research one respondent was 17 years old, the other 29, while the male respondent was 24 years old. All three belong to educated Roma population and have high academic aspirations. One of the female respondents has a bachelor's degree. After having completed the undergraduate academic studies that lasted four years, she obtained the degree and the academic title of graduate journalist, while the other respondent was a high school student at the period of the research. The third respondent was a geography student then.

For the purpose of the research, young educated Roma people who speak the Romani language were chosen, because it is considered and believed that they are fully aware of the importance of mother tongue and its preservation. Also, as members of the Roma community, they are the most competent to talk about the necessity of preserving the Romani language, culture and tradition.

A questionnaire in Serbian was designed that consisted of eleven questions. Within five questions, it was necessary that the respondents explain their answers/their own opinion in more detail, while within other questions it was sufficient to just answer the question asked without any additional explanation. Assuming that the young educated Roma people are plurilingual, they been asked what languages, besides Serbian and Romani, they speak.

b) The research results. When it comes to where they learned the Romani language, all three respondents stated that they learned the language in the family circle. The male respondent, besides the family domain, answered that he also learned Romani with his friends. These statements, at the same time, confirmed the hypothesis of the research that all who speak Romani learned that language owing to the fact that the language was transmitted to the young ones by someone from the family or Roma community, which is the case with endangered languages in general. When the transgenerational transmission of the language ceases, the language is threatened by the complete loss (Filipović, 2009:44-55) In this regard, the respondents were asked to indicate who had taught them to speak Romani. One female respondent answered that her parents and grandparents taught her, while the other one wrote that only her grandparents taught her. The male respondent stated

that all members of his family were taught to speak Romani by his grandfather. When it comes to the language knowledge, it is usually raised the question of our language competences and the level of linguistic knowledge we possess, therefore, the same question was asked in the survey. The youngest respondent thinks she possesses an intermediate level of Romani, while the other respondents answered that they have an advanced level of Romani language. The female respondent with the advanced level of Romani wrote that she used one of the oldest subdialects, as well as the grammatical and linguistic rules appeared in the process of the language standardization which is currently in progress.

Then the respondents were asked to indicate whether they were using oral tradition (poems, fairy tales, folk tales) in the process of the Romani language learning, as a very useful material or as a corpus, which, at the same time, represents the linguistic minimum of each language, in addition to the existence of grammar and vocabulary (Hinton, 2003:45). All the participants stated that they acquired Romani language spontaneously via conversations with the members of their families. Both female respondents added that they acquired Serbian in the same way because it was used in their homes as much as Romani.

The question related to the Romani language use in the public domain, has disproved the hypothesis that the participants of the research do not use Romani in the public domain at all, given that one female respondent and the male respondent use Romani language at work. The youngest respondent answers that she rarely uses Romani in the family environment, and even more rarely outside of it. This information is not surprising since this language, unfortunately, is not used within the wider context of our society.

Being asked if they would like to have learnt the Romani language at school, all three respondents gave the affirmative answer, as that would enrich their knowledge and the number of Romani speakers could increase. One of the female respondents answered that she was the only Roma student both in primary and secondary school, and that it would be unfeasible to have classes in Romani just because of one student. She also added that the advantage is that she learned her mother tongue at home, but younger generations do not speak Romani at all or speak it very badly. Therefore, it would be nice and useful that Roma children learn their mother tongue at school. The other respondent states she thinks that she will not be able to transmit the Romani language to the next generations because she speaks Serbian more frequently and better than Romani, which probably would not have happened that the language was taught in schools.

The respondents were also asked to give their opinion and express their own view regarding language preservation and factors that are crucial for it, as well

as regarding the importance that each minority community has an opportunity to learn and preserve its original language, which is directly related to an issue whether for the language maintenance and preservation is more important private or public domain. Both female respondents believe that in order to preserve one language, the public domain is very important, e.g. mother tongue implementation in school system, public promotion of democratic values, equality and diversity, although the minority language should also be taught at home, that is, represented simultaneously in various domains. Media in minority languages, programs of educational and informative content would greatly contribute to the preservation of minority languages, as well as awareness raising among the Roma people about how important it is to preserve their own language, tradition and culture. On the other hand, the male respondent considers that for the preservation of language the private domain is vital, that is, the transgenerational transmission of language and culture, as many scholars believe too (Fishman, 1991:4-6; Hinton, 2003:44-55; Hornberger, 1998:439-458; King, 1996:267-281).

Being asked why it is important that each minority community learns and preserves its mother tongue, the respondents consider that a language represents an integral part of the identity, nation and tradition, therefore, the language must not disappear. It is a symbol of the cultural heritage and the collectivity. To preserve minority languages means to preserve the identity of each minority community. If total minority language loss and minority community assimilation occurred, the minorities would identify themselves with the majority population, and thereby disappear.

The last three questions of the survey were related to the learning of Serbian as the majority language, and the importance of the minority people integration in the majority community. Regarding the competences in the majority language, all the participants state that they have an advanced level of Serbian, since the Serbian language was acquired as the mother tongue from the very birth, and that they communicate in Serbian in their families. Possession of an advanced level of the majority language is not surprising, because all the respondents are educated people who have successfully integrated into the majority community. All of them consider that all members of the minority community should learn Serbian language well. With the good knowledge of Serbian, there is a greater chance for successful integration in society, in terms of working conditions, education, etc. One of the female respondents emphasizes that it is necessary for all citizens, regardless of the community they belong to, to be good at the official language of the state and the society they live in, but to learn and nurture their mother tongue as long as personal will and other possibilities exist. Otherwise, a person can not

sufficiently be integrated into the society, which is accompanied by series of other difficulties that are supported by stereotypes and prejudice.

5.- Conclusion.

All languages, whether minority or majority, official or unofficial, undoubtedly contribute to the cultural diversity of the world and form an important part of the world history. Unfortunately, there are many endangered languages and it is not known whether those languages will cease to have such a status (Krauss, 1992:4-10). The Romani language for centuries has been losing its native speakers under the influence of various factors, including assimilation, prejudice, negative attitudes towards the Romani language and its speakers. Owing to the support it still had within the family domain, the Romani language did not undergo a complete process of language loss (Acković, 2001: 109-132; Halwachs, 2003:192-207).

When we talk about how to save a language, it is necessary to “train new speakers – to find ways of helping people learn the language in situations where normal language transmission across generations no longer exists” (Hinton, 2003: 45). An endangered language will be able to strengthen if the reputation of its speakers grows in the eyes of members of the dominant community, as well as if its speakers gain a better material position, which, on the other hand, depends on political, economic and social conditions in majority communities (Kristal, 2003:178-180).

As the results of the qualitative research have shown, all the respondents speak the Romani language because they were taught by members of their immediate and extended family in the childhood. The results indicate the relevance of the family language policy and planning as a key factor in Romani maintenance among the young speakers. The public domain has been regarded as an important one, as well as the institutional support, but the family context must not be neglected. As long as there exist and prevail prejudice and contempt towards any minority language and minority community within majority communities, it will be difficult to achieve success and major progress regarding language revitalization and minority language use within public domain.

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Appendix.

A questionnaire used in the survey of the attitudes of young educated Roma population towards the acquisition and preservation of mother tongue and the acquisition of Serbian language

Sex: _____

Birth year: _____

Education: _____

Languages: _____

1. Where did you learn the Romany language?
2. Who taught you? Was it one of the members of the family or the Roma community?
3. How did you learn Romani? Did you use oral tradition (poems, fairy tales, folk tales) during your learning?
4. Do you use Romani outside the family/community? (Please specify on which occasions/in which situations)
5. How would you describe your Romani language skills (basic, intermediate or advanced level)?
6. Would you like to have learnt Roma in school? (Please explain)
7. Why is it important, in your opinion, that each minority community learns and preserves its mother tongue? (Please explain)
8. How, in your opinion, can a language be preserved and what are the most important factors for its preservation? (Please explain)
9. When did you begin to learn Serbian language and where? Who helped you with your learning?
10. How would you describe your Serbian language skills (basic, intermediate or advanced level)?
11. Do you think that all members of the minority community should learn Serbian language well and what kind of opportunities does it provide to speak well that language? (Please explain)