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### **WHO IS AFRAID OF THE RROMANI LANGUAGE?**

National languages have seldom been a restful issue in History. In this respect, the Rromani language is by no means an exception and one can observe a very complicated system of polemics about the various aspects of its affirmation: as a language and as a national one, as a mean of in-group and trans-frontier communication, as a written vehicle, etc... The main subjects of dispute are the following:

- Is Rromani a language or not?
- How many Rromani language(s) exist in Europe?
- How many dialects does this represent?
- What kind of relationship is there between these dialects?
- Do Rroms want to use their mother tongue?
- Can it be used as a modern language or not?
- Can it be standardized or not?
- Can it be written or not? If it can, how to spell it?
- One dialect? All dialects? Nonsense question if one understands the structure itself.
- Are Rroms able to write it or not?
- In my village, should I use an European norm?
- Is it difficult to write in Rromani? And implicitly, where does the difficulty lie?

Even a shallow investigation shows that most people raising these questions lack any conceptual instrument which could enable them to realize that, in most cases, the answer is easy and clear. For this purpose, one must free oneself of some preconceptions acquired in school in relation to majority languages. In addition, almost none of the polemicists are everyday users of Rromani.

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## 1. The dialect issue

First question: "How can we distinguish a language and a dialect?" In Europe<sup>1</sup>, there is a comparatively clear geographic border between languages, sometimes through so-called transitional dialects. In fact, genuine dialects are mainly smaller divisions within languages. In the case of a language without a compact territory, such as Rromani, one dialectal variety can be used by speakers scattered very far from each other, whereas at the same time, close neighbors may use quite distinct varieties. This is indeed puzzling. However, the principle remains the same, except that it is not linked to a territorial basis. A proper understanding of the issue requires some introductory clarifications:

**Dialects are always genetically related.** Accordingly "dialect" cannot be understood as to encompass forms of another language, as it was in the case with the Bajaš language, a particular form of Southern Romanian spoken by scattered people who are not of Rromani descent but have been labeled "Gypsies" by uninformed (and uninterested) peasants through analogy with Rroms<sup>2</sup>. The same is true about the Albanian dialects spoken by Balkan Egyptians.

**No two persons speak the same idiolect.** One could add: even the same person uses different varieties of his/her language in various circumstances: family small talk, ceremonial address, occupational intercourses, etc... However, except when the given person speaks two different dialects in different contexts, one may assume that he/she uses only various registers (styles) of his own dialect (or idiolect). Basically, even relatives do not speak exactly the same variety, and one should consider that linguistic differences

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the case on all continents, for example in India, most languages are in territorial continuity; this also happens with some European languages, as vernacular Serbo-Croatian.

<sup>2</sup> This concept mimics the situation of the Jewish people, who has abandoned centuries ago their mother tongue and have taken over various local languages. However Jews are related by a common origin and ethnicity, while Rroms come from India, Beás from Southern Serbia and Egyptians probably from Egypt. The situation is therefore radically different (even in the case of the Jews it would just sound like a joke to say that Yiddish is a Judeo-Spanish or Semitic dialect) but it is also clear that alien scholars confined to the social standpoint and unable to speak Rromani can hardly understand they are facing different people – especially when they refuse to know. This is why the true opinion of the "target group" (not only its "leaders") should be listened to carefully.

single out distinct dialects when these differences are significantly greater than between speakers belonging to the same family: this is the minimal threshold of dialectal differentiation.

**Dialects of one language are less distant from each other than languages.** Statistical dialectometry has demonstrated that the mutual distance between Rromani dialects is less than the distance retained to distinguish different languages<sup>3</sup>; accordingly, all Rromani varieties are dialects of a common language, called Rromani.

**The oblivion of a part of a language does not create a new dialect.** The formation of dialects within a language is due to a series of reasons, which are well known in linguistics. However the fact that some Rroms have forgotten a part of their mother tongue, due to particular circumstances, is not one of these reasons and it does not generate new dialects. For the sake of comparison, one may draw a parallel with Turks born in Germany: although many of them have forgotten a part of their mother tongue, they have not created a new Turkish dialect. They have just forgotten partly Turkish. If a young Turk from Germany, untaught in Turkish, meets a young Turk from France or England, also untaught in Turkish, they will face severe troubles in communication. This does not mean they speak different dialects of Turkish; they just try to speak partly forgotten (and differently forgotten) Turkish. The same is true for Rromani<sup>4</sup>.

**The integration of local modern vocabulary does not create a new dialect.** If one Rromani *endaʃ* is divided by a frontier in two parts, each subgroup will borrow from each of the mainstream languages most terms related to the host society (like Cerhàri Rroms

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<sup>3</sup> For the calculation of this distance, see Courthiade 1985:1-7. As a matter of fact, the distance between Rromani and Sinto, expressed in dialectometric units is around the critical value of one, while the distance with Spanish Kalo (or Chipi kali) is over one unit, as with a different language; however, Kalo is not a language but a scarce Rromani vocabulary used in Spanish or Catalan language. It is not either a Rromani dialect, but a particular linguistic object called "paggerdilect".

<sup>4</sup> For the main scenarios of impoverishment see Duka 2001:181-190. It is very often caused by the surrounding language: if the latter does not distinguish two notions while Rromani does, after a few decades, Rromani conforms to the mainstream pattern and loses one of the two lexemes labeling the two initial notions.

<sup>5</sup> **Endaj** (fem.) is the old Rromani word (still in use in Bulgaria) meaning "group of Rroms characterized by a common linguistic variety, their *endajolect*".

in Hungary and Ukraine). This does not mean that cousins are speaking different dialects, but just that the most recent layer of the language presents lexical divergence. Conversely, when Rroms of various dialectal backgrounds inhabit a common mainstream language area, they borrow from this language most terms related to the common host society. This does not mean they are speaking the same dialect – even if as a result their communication in Rromani is made easier. Although the everyday vocabulary is a very easy reference point for outsiders<sup>6</sup>, it cannot be used to distinguish dialects.

**Dialectal differentiation relies on deep dialectal features.**

Not all dialectal differences are of equal weight to identify dialects; some are "superficial" and occur very easily in any language<sup>7</sup>, others are quite specific and of greater dialectological value. In the case of Rromani, the crucial discriminatory feature is the vowel of the ending of the first person (sing.) of the past of the verbs: **o**<sup>8</sup> in the so-called O-superdialect and **e** in the so-called E-superdialect. The second level of division, which seems to be more recent, is based on the pronunciation of the phonological units spelled **čh** and **z**: respectively aspirated "ch" (as in "catch-him") and "j" (as the first letter of "jazz") in non-mutational varieties and very smooth "sh" and "zh" (much smoother than in "sheep" and "pleasure") in mutational varieties. These two features differentiate four "strata": 1 or non-mutational O, 1# or mutational O, 2 or non-mutational E and finally 2# (more commonly called 3) or mutational E. The 1<sup>st</sup> stratum is divided further in four dialects, what makes together seven groups of endajolects (cf. note 5), as the following table shows (to be read from beneath upwards):

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<sup>6</sup> Most of the everyday objects you can see around you rather belong to the mainstream society and they are far less appropriate for the dialectal identification than lists elaborated by dialectologists.

<sup>7</sup> Among such non-relevant features, one may mention the various palatalizations of consonants, like "ge" in **gelem** "I went" pronounced spontaneously [g], [ǰ], [dj] or even [dž], in various areas and dialects, without any connection between them.

<sup>8</sup> The vowel **u** may also occur in the **o**-superdialect, for example: **phirdöm** (or **phirdŭm**) "I walked", **gelöm** (or **gelŭm**) "I went", **xalöm** (or **xalŭm**) "I ate" etc..., contrasting to **phirdem**, **gelem**, **xalem**.

E	E# = <i>E with mutation</i>	3 (or 2#)	lovàra, kelderàra, drizàra etc...
↑	Ẽ = <i>E without mutation</i>	2	gurbet, ćergar, zambaz, filipiji etc...
↑	O# = <i>O with mutation</i>	1#	cerhàri, colàri, ćuràri etc...
O		1N	Polska Rroma, xaladitka etc...
↑	Õ = <i>O without mutation</i>	1C	karpatiko, rromungro etc...
↑		1V	fenětika-šlajferika
↑		1S	baćòri, fićiri, mećkàri, kabuzìa, èrli, thare-gone, mahažàri etc...
↑			

**In addition, some sociolinguistic scenarios have generated some specific idioms called para-Rromani and paggerdilects.**

Two main developments have to be considered as the agents of the separation between rromani on the one hand and Sinto and Paggerdilects on the other hand (about the dialectal distance between Rromani and these idioms, see above):

- a very strong intrusion of alien linguistic items (mainly vocabulary) has created the Sinto idioms (with Germanic influence in the north and Italic in the south);
- giving up of Rromani as a home language lead to the formation of paggerdilects (residual Rromani vocabulary reinjected, mainly for social purposes, into basically Spanish, Catalan or English speech). The overwhelming part of this sorting goes to Eastern Rromani (almost 90%), then to paggerdilects (almost 10%) and the rest (1 or 2%) to Sinto and similar peripheral idioms.

To sum up, one should distinguish four types of differentiation among the Rromani and para-Rromani idioms:

a) the strict dialectological division, with two crucial isoglosses (dialectal frontiers): the O/E contrast (accompanied by a lexical differentiation of a few dozens items) and the mutational contrast. These contrast are not damaging for the unity of Rromani, because O/E concerns but a reduced segment of the language (one verbal ending), whereas the mutation is not always perceived by the ear; in addition both are quite systematic and rigorous.

b) the socio-linguistic level, with two major types of scenarios for the formation of peripheral idioms and paggerdilects. Their users

are not very numerous (some 10% of the total number of Rroms) and as a result the unity of Rromani is not very much affected.

c) the level of local or regional oblivion of lexical items (including lack of development due to life conditions: rural surrounding language poorer than Rromani, marginalization etc... This does not concern the language itself, just the way it is used in certain areas, and therefore – if an efficient didactic effort is developed in a context of language valorization – oblivion could be compensated by lexical reacquisition and the problem could be solved.

d) punctual lexical discrepancies, involving a very low number of lexemes : **korr/men** "neck", **gilabel/bagal** "he sings" etc...

**Conclusion n° 1:** The so-called "dialectal" disparity of Rromani should be renamed "oblivional" disparity because two Rroms of different dialectal backgrounds understand each other, while each speaking his Rromani dialect, far better than two Rroms of the same native dialect, who have not properly acquired their mother-tongue. This is related to the fact that the properly Rromani (Asiatic) element in Rromani is amazingly uniform in all dialects, and this fact points at the uniqueness of language of the Rroms' Indian ancestors.

The following comparison has been used to express this:

- the core of the Rromani language is basically the same for all dialects, as the human body is basically the same for everybody (as a result, the terms of anatomy are shared more or less by all dialects, since they refer to common natural concepts);
- the European borrowing differ among the Rroms, just like garments differ among countries (as a result, the terms referring to non-Rromani life (garments, administration, food etc.) differ among Rroms, since they refer to artificial concepts);
- when a Rromani word has been lost, it is replaced by a non-Rromani one, just like an organ/limb missing is replaced by an artificial one but this is by no means a model of life;
- when other dialects can supply a word missing, this solution is preferable, just like transplant is preferable to artificial limbs – but it needs more sophisticated skills.

The first four questions have been answered and we can conclude that, if the common Rromani vocabulary, gathered all over Europe and sorted according to the phonological rules of the various

dialects, is circulated again (used in public life and taught to persons who have forgotten it), there no reason to claim that Rromani differs from other European languages in terms of dialectal splitting up.

## 2. The practice and commitment issue

The second main issue is related to the actual use of Rromani among Rroms. Before discussing this point, one should recall that most immigrant languages are totally lost within four generations<sup>9</sup>. Quite often one can observe young Albanians, born in Albania or Cossovia, speaking French rather than Albanian among themselves. On the other hand the vigor of Rromani, after almost one thousand years of migration, arouses the unanimous admiration of all observers: "Every visit in a Rromani family shows that the children learn first Rromani, their mother tongue, and only then the language of the host country" (Reinhard 1976:III). Nevertheless, a recent pamphlet by Halwachs and Zătoreanu points out that the Rroms now speak Rromani only for greetings and switch to majority language as soon as they begin a real conversation (2004:12-14).

**How can we give an objective assessment of the situation?** Although everybody can see that at the European level Rromani is far more present in everyday life than stated in Halwachs' pamphlet, signs of decline have indeed been growing alarmingly in the last decades. One should accordingly explore the reasons why Rromani is in decay, probably sharing the fate of most minority languages in wide urban settlements. Sociolinguists have pointed out that the greater the degree to which an exiled population consists of mixed social backgrounds, the stronger and the longer it will carry on transmitting its original language. The manifold social structure of the Rroms' ancestors when they left India can account for the phenomenal survival of Rromani – as opposed to the situation of other migrants' languages (cf. note 9). One should emphasize that Rromani successfully overcame the drastic changes of cultural context when the Rroms were deported from northern India to Afghanistan and Persia, and later moved to Asia Minor and various

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<sup>9</sup> Generation 1: mother tongue prevails upon host language; Gen. 2: balance between mother tongue and host language; Gen. 3: host language prevails in everyday use; Gen. 4: host language becomes new mother tongue; According to *Jan Japp de Ruiter "Moroccan and Turkish Communities in Europe"* in: ISIM Newsletter 1/98.

European countries, where each time they faced totally unknown civilizations. The mixed character of this population was probably a factor of preservation. The fact that most Rromani communities are now reduced to homogenous poor groups similar to other migrants' communities put them in a similar risk of linguistic acculturation. However the will of forwarding Rromani to upcoming generations is widely expressed in all declarations.

Beyond the gradual weakening of the Rromani language presence and the Rroms' declared commitment to preserve it, it is essential to emphasize that **language survival is far less a matter of declaration than of motivation**. Since language, as a social phenomenon, has two main faces: communication and identity, the motivation to keep it alive may be twofold. As an expression of identity, it is supported by everybody aware of this social function but as a mean of communication, some Rromani speakers find it indeed inappropriate to convey modern messages – an opinion originating from several misunderstandings.

**The first task of linguistic practice is not to convey highly sophisticated information** but to create a friendly and warm space of *divâno* between people who want to express their feelings to each other, but also all kinds of common-place utterances, worth nothing in terms of information but highly significant for the community's psychological comfort. All dialects of Rromani are suitable for this purpose. The problem arises from the fact that, under the influence of schools and media, the mainstream languages have recently developed a kind of pseudo-intellectual slang, even in the sphere of everyday life. In addition school and media circulate the image that language is a matter of terminology. Minorities tend to imitate the style of the majority language, but they do not succeed because their mother tongue has not enjoyed the same special care, which has developed a sophisticated style in official languages. This leads minorities to under-estimate their mother-tongue and to switch more and more to the majority language. This occurs because they have ceased to think in their mother-tongue and it is far easier to express the majority way of thinking in that language than in their mother-tongue, anyway totally ignored, if not despised, by the majority society spaces of activity: media, school, movies, public places, shops, sporting, games, etc... which leads them to think in the language of all these activities. The family circle constitutes a kind of private sanctuary hosting the last stages of use of a linguistic relic.

In this respect, one can understand that many parents do not perceive the values of Rromani (even if they claim they want it to be transmitted to their children – by others):

- **Rromani needs (and has the right) to be formally valorized in public life** and accessible at any time of the day: media, school, games, sporting, etc. on an equal footing with the main language(s), which brings also revalorization of the Rroms themselves. Mainstream societies, but also Rroms themselves, have a duty toward the truth to publicly restore respect not only for Rromani but also for all elements of the Rromani heritage, which have to be treated as belonging to a non-territorial nation, not to a formless amalgamation of socially marginalized groups.

- **Awareness-raising campaigns should be conducted in school and the media about the importance of all mother-tongues**, among others for human feelings of internal solidarity; the idea that language is not only an instrument of communication but also of identity and intellectual development has to be taught to everybody. In this respect, the importance of *gnossodiversity*<sup>10</sup>, beyond *glotto-diversity*, should be pointed out, as well as the role of language in expressing non-material heritage.

- **Education in Rromani should be provided to teach how to express modern messages** in a more accurate way in Rromani (to raise up from "the analysis were bad" to more accurate "his blood sugar level is so much %" – true enough, this involves also minimal education in physiology, but also in administration, law, politics etc. This would be true empowerment). At the same time, modern terminology should be presented as a secondary device, as compared with the genuine Rromani expressivity in terms of images, typical lexical resources, proverbs and similar spiritual wealth.

- **The lack of formal education in the mother-tongue leads to diglossy**, which means that the mother-tongue is viewed as an instrument devoted to express less and less a sinking world, while the host language conveys all the positive values of modernity, social integration and success. This split leads to the death of the minority language, even if it can go through a stage of artificial respiration

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<sup>10</sup> *Glossodiversity* stands for "linguistic diversity" and *gnossodiversity* for "diversity of perceptions of life" (these terms were coined by Native Americans of Colombia).

thanks to school classes addressing children who have already lost any native proficiency in their former mother-tongue.

**One should wonder why language communication is so effective:** we may use a word of a few phonemes and understand immediately its meaning: "dog", "house", "son", "father" etc... just because such a group of phonemes has been associated through education to the object concerned<sup>11</sup>. In the cases of these words, the meaning is simple and immediately accessible but for more sophisticated concepts, each culture first creates the image of the concept itself before expressing it through a set of phonemes according to pretty strict rules of derivation, analogy, borrowing etc. This explains the efficiency of language communication and why at the same time language is the inner mirror of our society and cultural references.

**Conclusion n° 2:** Giving up one's language is a response of naive people who are aware only of its informative function (and of its incapacity to fulfill it – and indeed, if it is totally inappropriate, why should they transmit it to their children?). It does not take into account its power of mirroring an entire universe; this sacrifice misleads them to a foreign world they need years, maybe generations, to be integrated in and at the same time, they lower the level of sophistication of the newly adopted language – as it has been evidenced for foreigners' English. The strategy set forth above, including education in how to perceive language(s), provides a powerful motivation for an effective use of mother-tongue in all circumstances of life. Classes of linguistic recovering have only a symbolic function and can by no means preserve a language alive if the other prerequisites are not met. It is meaningful to observe that a lot of money is devoted to such futureless classes, whereas nothing is done to keep healthy and develop Rromani where it is in regular use as a home language – or to say it other terms, such classes are useful

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<sup>11</sup> In modern languages, the lexical image itself may be used as a referent to build so-called new age compound words: *poverty trap*, *soap opera*, *clearing house*, *shadow cabinet*, *dead line* etc. Due to their greatly metaphoric dimension, they can be properly understood only within the culture which has produced them (in contrast to regular compound words, which are immediately decipherable: *firewood*, *wood fire*, *time difference* etc.). However there is no sharp cut line between the two; the position of the frontier is anyway to some extent subjective and related to one's native culture.

only as a collateral measure and if the native speaking population constitutes a solid reference contingent enjoying the four basic measures developed above. This is a reply to two further questions.

### 3. The standardization/modernization issue

Here again we are facing quite confused concepts about the idea of standardization.

**Some people still stick to the romantic conception that action upon languages is impossible.** Modern linguistics has evidenced that "there exist no 'natural languages', free of any regulation or of any normative process aiming at meeting somehow the needs of their linguistic community [...]. As a matter of fact, either at the micro- or at the macro-linguistic level, language building inevitable and all degrees are possible" (Eloy 2004:18). Therefore the idea of "improving", "engineering", "standardizing" or "modernizing" Rromani should not be rejected *a priori* as many observers do. They insist on keeping Rromani outside any evolution (except lexical impoverishment, which they admit as a fatality) but they would never accept this for their own everyday language – hiding their discriminatory approach under the colors of respect. Yet it is now clear that if you do not enlarge the expression abilities of the language, you are condemned to use it only for trivial purposes and you create *diglossy* leading to language total extinction or symbolic fossilization (with possible mascotization), which postpones the final outcome but does not change it. The real problem is not "if" but "how" it is possible to have an effect on a language in order to help it optimize its social roles of communication and identity.

**Many people mix up standard language and written language.** These are two different concepts and we will deal further with *graphization* (*means of writing, созданные алфавита*) of Rromani. When thinking of standardization, they imagine a unique model, as in most "established" languages. In Rromani on the contrary, the traditional feeling of mutual respect among various *endaja* have lead to the very democratic London decision that "no dialect is better than anyone else but we need an international form of language allowing us to understand each other in international conferences and literature" (First Rromani Congress – London, 8 April 1971). So apart some bystanders who claim that there is no need, no profit or no possibility of standardization in Rromani (Rroms are extremely rare, if

any, in this camp), other people are divided between those who want a unique model imposed for all Roms of their country, as in majority languages (these usually lack any European perception of the Rromani nation) and those who yearn for a flexible European Rromani language, respectful of dialectal cultural riches but easy to use at a wider level of communication.

**Some people still believe that Rromani dialects are so dissimilar that a common language is a dream.** As a matter of fact, a European Rromani language already exists in the mouth of people having a good command of their native dialect. In the light of the rectified definition of dialects, as given above, of a systematic review of the Rromani *endajolects* and of a clear concept of their mutual relationships, one can conclude that almost all of them are suitable as parts of the basis for common Rromani – provided that one uses their non-forgotten variety. Only peripheral groups (like speakers of very atypical south Italian Rromani, Finnish *Kaalenqi čhimb* or Welsh Rromani – now extinct) show out-of-the-way features but they represent hardly 2-3 % of all speakers. The method of linguistic elaboration consists in:

- collecting as much as possible of all the genuine vocabulary and forms of Rromani all over Europe, including local items (except provincial loan-words, which break mutual intelligibility without bringing a cultural benefit); this task has been carried out by now probably for up to more than 99% of vocabulary from interviews and publications – sometimes very old ones<sup>12</sup>;
- sorting this material after the various dialects and looking for equivalents in others;
- considering inter-dialectal borrowings if possible, but only in cases of lexical gaps, since dialectal consistency is encouraged;
- considering resources like derivation, reutilization of obsolete words or semantic extension to widen the language's abilities of expression, as needed by actual present day communication but avoiding to follow, every time it is possible, the strict pattern of foreign models; this method is advisable when all European

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<sup>12</sup> For example the word **berno** (masc. noun) "circle" has been found in a 16<sup>th</sup> century Latin text; other example: the word **trom** (fem. noun) "boldness, courage" has been evidenced in a letter written by Radics Lajos from Miskolc to Archduke Joseph von Habsburg in 1888 (while the equivalent verb **tromal** "he dares" is widely known).

languages have different words for a specific modern object and it is impossible to choose a pan-European cover-term.

- considering the benefit of borrowing foreign words, mainly for notions related to technical spheres with no emotional dimension; as far as these spheres are concerned, it is common sense to produce common neologisms for all the Rromani varieties: if all Europe says **planèta** for "planet", there is no point to say **bojgòvo** in Hungary, just because Hungarian for "planet" is *bolygó* [bojgo]. Be it as it may, borrowing is a natural necessary phenomenon in language evolution allowing getting free of the conceptual ghetto of the past.
- avoiding ambiguous borrowings, especially when they create problems in communication: in some dialects **glàso** means "glass" (< Germ. *Glass* "id.") and in others "voice" (south Slavic *glas*); it is rather unproductive to use **glàso** instead of Rromani **taxtaj** "glass" and **zan, krlo** "voice"<sup>13</sup>. The same may be said for **nipo** "people" (< Hung. *nép*) and "grand-son" (< Alb. *nip*). Interesting enough, the over-whelming majority of such ambiguousness is due to loan-words, not to Rromani inherited items. As a matter of fact, due to the geographical distance separating the dialects in traditional life, such ambiguities were automatically avoided, but modern wider and wider personal and written exchanges have radically changed the situation.
- checking the given neologisms have an appropriate morphological pattern;
- proposing the concerned forms to wide circulation, with explanation if the context is not sufficient to make the meaning clear, keeping in mind that only practice can confirm the use of specific expressions. This is a major aspect of language affirmation, since it is of no benefit to propagate words if the notions standing behind them are not defined: not only "new" (or

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<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful to teach that a "missing word" has also its story: the oblivion of **amal** "friend" in some dialects witnesses of the evolution of the family system in contact with Slavic tribes; the lack of an inherited word for "grand-son", often replaced by "son", mirrors also a specific family relationship; the common word for "God" and "Heaven" expresses a cultural standpoint etc... One should not forget that Rromani distinguishes sometimes two notions where other languages do not, for example **luçh** "white cloud" and **maruth** "rain cloud" – the "lack" of a general word for "any cloud" has led to borrowings in many Rromani dialects.

"modern") concepts of law, medicine or journalism but also traditional Rromani cultural concepts, which more and more often have lost their natural way of transmission.

The IRU Commission for language and linguistic rights has been active in this field for more than 20 years, through cooperation of dozens of members. However the results of this collective pan-European work is under-esteemed due to the lack of financial resources to make them know and to the obstructive attitude of some "friends of the Rroms" who consider that Rromani will lose its "Gypsy" identity if its European dimension is restored and promoted in addition to local varieties. Keeping Rromani locked in its "genuine" former rural form is an incitation to use it only for songs and folklore and to speak majority languages about important subjects of life.

**In addition, one can see quite odd projects of "standard Rromani"**, improvised here and there but unsuitable to actual use, mainly for the following reasons:

- The promoters of such projects do not have the patience, will and competence to check the real resources all over Europe for as many dialects as possible. Instead of elaborating the Rromani language on the basis of proficient speakers, they take as initial corpus the knowledge of a random speaker (often a local self-proclaimed leader who, due to his biography and low needs of communication, has a poor command of Rromani) and try to reconstruct the whole language out of his scarce remainder of Rromani, while borrowing massively from neighboring languages and sticking closely to mainstream language and style of thinking.
- If such resources (vocabulary, expressions etc...) are supplied to them, they refuse to take them into consideration under the pretext of dialectal chauvinism but in fact chiefly out of laziness. They view the European dimension of Rromani as irrelevant or just believe they can force their construction on millions of Rroms. By doing this each of them contributes in splitting an existing language into feeble individual projects of idioms remaining to be constructed on uncertain basis.
- Crude grammatical mistakes are even quite common in their speech: **kodo buti** "this work" (**kodo** is masc. but **buti** is fem.), **na šaj** "he cannot" (correct form: **našti**), **na si** "it is not" (correct forms: **naj, nane, nanaj**, more seldom **naj si**). When commented on, these neo-speakers just pretend it is their dialect, which is

but another manipulation of the word "dialect", increasing the erroneous impression of a dialectal split up of Rromani. In this case, one should rather speak of "fantasiolects".

- In many cases they do not need great accuracy in their discourse. They just copy empty main language declarations, as one may observe in numerous associative meetings, e.g.: **Anda kodo kritično kontèksto, amaro sociàlno projèkto šaj popravil i ekonomična situàcia e Rromenqi thaj lenqe problème** (anda, kodo, amaro, šaj, thaj, lenqe "in", "this", "our", "may", "and", "their" are Rromani & **popravil** "improve" is Slavic – no need of translation for the rest of the sentence). It is even impossible to retranslate such sentences into regular Rromani, due to the vagueness of the content; all interpreters know how it is difficult to translate if the original text is too vague, except if the target language has developed a similar vague phraseology as it is the case among most "modern" languages. Rromani has not fallen into this kind of political cant and it is also a matter of culture; it is maybe a paradox but it is true to say that this gap is an asset, because it compels to a more concrete analysis of quite important problems.

**As a matter of fact, Rromani is able to express far more than many people could expect**, even in its current stage, provided that the analysis of the whole meaning is done through a Rromani cultural sieve instead of trying to stick Rromani words to a foreign conceptual pattern. This is the reason why, when speaking among Rroms in Rromani (at a **kris** for example), one can solve many problems far better than when speaking a foreign language or shadow-Rromani. This shows the close connection between language and culture. When giving up all-European genuine Rromani and its approach of reality, be it out of ignorance, unawareness, chauvinism or laziness, we are ruining a treasure far more valuable than the language itself – and without which the language is just a lexicon: the Rromani cosmovision.

It is a pity to hear in many meetings how Rromani activists say, after greetings in Rromani: "Well I do not have the words in Rromani, I will continue in **gazikanes**" – although you can chat during hours in Rromani with them. This demonstrates a deep misunderstanding about the notions of language and culture.

Similar mistakes often occur when undertaking the translation of a non-Rromani word list into Rromani, with obvious good intentions but

also with a serious risk for the language if the task is not carried out carefully. There are cases in all countries with the vogue of children's picture-books (*slikovnice*).

As a rule these cute books for children present exclusively the Western modern urban rich way of life with standard houses, emblematic objects (various pieces of clothing, furniture and accessories of all kinds, meals etc.), typical activities (sporting, games, gardening, fitness, entertainment, employment, feasts etc.) and the concerns linked with them. This is quite legitimate from the majority standpoint but should not be turned into an absolute model of life<sup>14</sup>. Other ways of life are equally entitled to visibility but they do not enjoy it. As a result, when translating these picture books into Rromani, many words seem to be missing but in reality they do not exist just because they are not needed out of this very specific society, where their presence is dictated mainly by market rules. Translating into Rromani such books, issued at the same time in dozens of urban languages, has a threefold outcome:

- on the one hand, it is a good opportunity to fix many words of great usefulness in everyday life and to develop new vocabulary for real social needs (like school supplies, health care, administration etc.),
- but at the same time you face a number of notions basically useless in a non-mainstream society for the following reasons:
  - because they do not exist in your sphere of practice (and you can do without them very well);
  - because if they exist, they are not so crucial as to need a specific word for them (you may use a phrase);
  - because it is often more efficient, mainly with items deprived of any cultural value, to borrow the corresponding word from English (but there remains the question of grammatical adaptation);
- be it as it may, all the specificity of Rromani vocabulary, as a mirror to Rromani cultural, social and spiritual values, is dropped as unknown by all gazikane readers or albums.

**Accordingly such publications reinforce the erroneous image of deficiency attached to Rromani (or the impression of artificiality**

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<sup>14</sup> This has also been pointed out by teachers in post-colonial countries.

when the translator imagines all kinds of solutions), while concealing the genuine conceptual wealth of the language. The use of host language to Rromani dictionaries can be only a part of the linguistic strategy and the affirmation of Rromani should rely mainly on genuine texts (including Rromani to host language dictionaries), produced directly in Rromani from a Rromani perspective because they contain many words and expressions with non counterpart in host languages<sup>15</sup>, together with the feelings, allusions and connotations these words and expressions convey. Promoting this heritage is far more significant than promoting Rromani lists of words elaborated on a foreign pattern.

**Conclusion n° 3:** Rromani development can be achieved only through additive capitalization. In order to reduce the lexical distance between the Rromani varieties, one has to make widely known the existing vocabulary and to produce common neologisms for new concepts, if and only if needed. This may be called "additive capitalization" and it has been the main device of modernization in all languages. On the contrary, the subtractive approach of eliminating all the vocabulary which is not immediately understandable by individual activists (the "lowest denominator method") leads to the loss of 90% or more of the lexical funds. The resulting impoverishment challenges speakers to replace the lost wealth by artificial constructions and loan-words creating a Rromani shadow-language, deprived of any cultural density. Special efforts have to be done to reactive all the means of expression of the Rromani conceptual heritage.

#### 4. The spelling issue

When considering spelling strategy, one has to bear in mind the following crucial differences between the mechanisms of oral and written understanding:

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<sup>15</sup> The foreword of a recent dictionary (2004) mentioned as examples: **manralo** "covered with remainders of fresh bread dough", **bašakārèla** "to provoke a sound", **muzgonèla** "to coat with a kind of adobe", **lokoćinèla** "to prepare mud", **dipi** "center (bottom) of the basket [weaver's term]", **xonòta** "particular smell of the earth after the rain", **paparinòla** "to lose one's qualities while soaking in water", **phućivèla** "to lay [eggs] without shell", **žambàla** "kind of ritual collective game during Herdelèzi feast (6 May)", **uždàga** "specific stick of the Rliia tribe" – to quote but a few; hundreds idiomatic expressions should be added to this list.

a) **When enlarging their use through the emergence of a written form**, all languages face a series of new exigencies: they lose significant extralinguistic elements, such as intonation, gesture and the presence in the visual field of objects referred to, but at the same time they need to express some more complex, more precise and also often more abstract ideas; they also lose the opportunity the receiver has in oral exchanges to ask if he does not understand; from a prolix and redundant style limited to a small amount of familiar topics, they shift to a dense and economic expression which treats the most varied matters; they have to construct longer sentences with more rigorous articulations; they are supposed finally to confront the trial of time, for as one knows *verba volant, scripta manent*. As a result they have not only to compensate for the lost means of expression by new ones but also to elaborate extra devices of meaning consolidation. A written language is never a transcribed oral language. A transcribed oral text is readable only if the content is extremely simple (this is why demagogic texts, mainly insults, are understandable in written even if just transcribed from oral utterances – in such cases, oral and written registers overlap to a great extent) but the more a text is meaningful, the widest the gap between oral and written registers is.

b) On the other hand, **the mental system of understanding is quite different in oral communication**, which is natural and relies on innate abilities, and reading, which is artificial and relies on acquired skills. Our mental system is able to compensate widely dialectal discrepancies when hearing a speaker of a different background, through automatic familiarization to his/her dialectal structure but such a "decoder" does not exist in reading. One has to make up for it through specially elaborated writing strategies. A major difference between oral and written codes is that all phonetic realizations which may occur in a given place of the chain ("sounds": [a], [e], [i], [m], [b] etc...) constitute a continuum, with no sharp distinctions between them (the language habits create the distinction in order to identify phonemes which "make sense"), whereas the distinction of their equivalents in writing (the letters) is very sharp, especially in print. In addition, the phonetic features of these "sounds" intersect partly and this gives further flexibility to oral communication, a quality lacking in print. When you hear an indistinct sound (or seemingly indistinct for your dialectal structure, while it can be quite clear for the speaker's dialectal structure), your brain will

give this sound a specific value, according to the context and prior experiences. Yet when one writes down the equivalent, one has to choose between clearly distinctive letters and put on the paper some differences which maybe are not relevant in the original dialect, while overlooking other features, essential in the original dialect, but unknown to the reader's variety.

This is the case when everyone is writing in the majority language spelling of his country. The first situation may be exemplified by the mutation already mentioned above: in oral communication dialects with or without mutation are mutually quite intelligible and mutation looks rather like an accent, with no incidence on meaning: [tʃhavo] / [çavo] "boy", [tʃhib] / [çib] "tongue" etc.). However, writing the two kinds of pronunciation according to non-Rromani spellings (not to mention that it is impossible to render properly the sounds [tʃh] and [ç] in almost all European languages) creates a huge difference between them and the reader has to think over the word and its context in order to understand it properly, if spelled according to foreign pronunciations. Reading becomes a puzzle.

Rajko Djurić has found in various books about Rroms and in Rromani dictionaries the expression "Rromani language" written in the following forms: **románi czib, románi čib, rōmani tschib, románi tschiwi, romani tšiw, romeni tšiv, romani tscheeb, rromani čhib, romani chib, rhomani chib, romani čhib, romaji šjib, romai šib, romanyi shib** etc. (not to mention non-Latin scripts, Greek, Cyrillic...) all this to render the pronunciations: [rroma[n]i tʃhib/çib].

The second situation may be exemplified by the two kinds of r-sounds: [tʃoripen] "theft" / [tʃorripen] "poverty", which often are not distinguished by non-Rromani ears and therefore written the same way (some scholars have even drawn moral conclusions of what seemed to them a total homonymy). Note that the second r-sound appears at the beginning of the words **Rrom** itself. Even young Rroms who learn Rromani from books (or the internet) believe "theft" and "poverty" are homonymous in Rromani.

This system, called "diasystematic", has been established by the 4<sup>th</sup> Rromani Congress in Warsaw in 1990 (after years of consultations) and it is the most efficient so far proposed, bearing in mind that no spelling is absolutely perfect and that choosing a spelling means often to choose between various disadvantages. The principle is that everybody has to make a little effort to stick to a common spelling in order to save great efforts to all other users who want to read.

People write more or less the same way and everybody read the way he/she has learnt from his/her family. The entire system may seem complicated and indeed it is to some extent but this is only the linguist's concern, since every user has to know his/her own dialectal rules of spelling and reading, which are not more complicated than in Italian or Spanish.

**Some politicians and observers have appealed for a simplification of this spelling.** What does this mean? This means they want a spelling which they can use immediately, without the hour or two of learning, which is necessary for a correct command of the European spelling. This means that the spelling they suggest has to be the one they have personally learnt in their respective schools in majority languages. For Bulgarians, this means to bulgarize the spelling, for Hungarians to hungarize it, for Poles to polonize it<sup>16</sup> etc... every time breaking down the unity of Rromani for the sake of conformity to local languages. The argument is generally that Rromani children are not able to learn a specific spelling of their own (when other minorities' children are able). The moderate wing suggests the Croatian alphabet for everybody, but they do not realize that such an alphabet seals and perpetuates superficial differences of pronunciation, which do not impede oral communication but, once written, make reading very opaque. Yet the radical wing sticks to local alphabets and even promotes several alphabets for one country like for example in Austria<sup>17</sup> where the same sentence "the woman said she knows the truth" is spelled:

*i dschuvli pentscha so dschanel o tschatschipe* (in Fenětiko or Vend dialect [O:F], German spelling)

and

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<sup>16</sup> *Zis iz az if aj uer rajting ingliš zis uej* in Jugoslaviija, *youzing razeur zisse euzeure oueille* in France and *stil anăzăr uan, laic zis for instăns* in Romania, *нот ту меншън зъ уан ай ўуд чуз фор България...* instead of regular English spelling. One can understand more or less any short sentence of a given language (here English) written in any spelling, not a real text intended for meaningful communication.

<sup>17</sup> The same scholars who declare that Rroms are not able to use a script of their own promote several scripts within one State. In fact, with local spellings, one spends all one's energy in deciphering and finally forgets about the most important of the text: the human message.

*e žuvli phenda so žanel o čáčimos* (in Lovari dialect [E#L], Croatian script). One should notice that this last sentence is spelled, in Lovari also but beyond the Hungarian border, the following way:

*é zsúlyi phéndá szó zsánél o csácsímó* (same dialect but Hungarian spelling), while both sentences look in common spelling as below:

*i žuvli phendá so žanel o čácipe* (Fenětiko dialect)

and

*e žuvli phenda so žanel o čáčimos* (Lovari). This demonstrates that what could be a simplification at the regional level is much of a puzzle even within one country, and all the more at the European level (cf. note 16). Such a treatment would involve texts circulating only in national areas. As a matter of fact, one or even two hours of training is just nothing as compared with the advantages of maintaining pan-European a language of continental size and with the dimensions of the heritage made accessible this way to millions of Rroms. The fact that over 16,000 Rromani pupils attend Rromani classes with this script in Romania every year demonstrates that this problem is forged.

**Some users claim that the letters are not available on their key-board.** This is not true because several fonts have all the Rromani letters: the most widespread font are Arial Unicode and Times New Roman and there is an executive driver, called EuroUniv which allows to write Rromani – as well as all other Latin based European languages using a regular British keyboard. In lack of such driver, it is very easy to ascribe a shortcut to the various special letters on the keyboard. In addition, when the Same (or Lapp) language, spoken by less than 40.000 persons, enjoys 9 keyboards of its own on any recent Microsoft set, isn't it a striking discrimination that Rromani with millions of speakers is not even taken on account? So we have to commit ourselves to have all Rromani letters at easy reach for all kinds of European keyboards.

**Conclusion n° 4:** Thinking globally but acting locally is also true for Rromani. When a village teacher says "Why should I write the European way for my pupils in my remote mountains?" – this does not mean that Rromani spelling is difficult, just that she has not understood the European dimension of the Rromani language, culture and nation and how much the pupils lose while sticking in

written to the local pronunciation, perceived through the local non-Rromani spelling system.

### **5. Current problems and needs**

Actually the main problems are the following:

1. Lack of commitment and money to publish and circulate as much material as possible in a common graphic cloak and in the original dialectal variety (edited, as in all other languages, in order to avoid troubles in understanding) – but also on other supports, like films, tapes, electronic games etc...
2. Lack of motivation, awareness and sometimes industriousness of some Rroms who are reluctant to spend one or two hours in training the common spelling and further leisure to acquire genuine Rromani words forgotten in their community but alive elsewhere in Europe.
3. Lack of consciousness of some Rromani translators who content themselves with most incoherent translations, just to meet an obligation and be paid for it (this is the case with many political documents of the Council of Europe<sup>18</sup> or even literary books, like the first Rromani translation of "The Little Prince"). Such publications demoralize the potential readers, misuse scarce funds and torpedo the healthy affirmation of Rromani as a modern European language.
3. Lack of education and motivation by the surrounding world, which still ignores Rromani as it ignores the Rromani people itself, the Rromani genocide, the Rromani contribution to universal civilization, the Rromani part in history etc...
4. Endemic despise of the intellectual abilities of the Rroms (see above).
5. Last but not least: one can observe a clear obstructive attitude of some non-Rroms, a kind of fear to view a so far despised people, numerous and living within Europe, other than as "Rromani communities<sup>19</sup>" (formerly "tribes") but instead as "one Rromani

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<sup>18</sup> As I was commenting this to one of them, he answered with a cynical smile: "Anyway Rroms do not read and Gazes do not understand"...

<sup>19</sup> The argument often given is the diversity of Rromani culture. Behind this apparent respect for diversity, two inaccuracies are hidden: 1. *amalgamation* - some non-Rromani groups are viewed by unaware outsiders as Rroms, just because they share some social features of poverty and marginalization with the Rroms (such a negationist attitude, namely the denial a positive national identity and its substitution by a negative social viewpoint, has a long history of sufferings, even if it is presently masked under

nation" with a great diversity of visages and Rromani not as "clusters of dialects" but instead as "one Rromani language" with also great riches of cultural means of expression. It looks as if they fear to have their own national identity, based on a territorial state, weakened if they recognize the unity of language and identity to a non-territorial huge people. In other words they go out of their depth when national unity is recognized, beyond political borders and cultural diversity, to a people basing his specificity upon a traditional feeling of otherness, a common language (whether it is actually practiced or just remembered as a symbol of the past) and a common historical fate – all this without any compact territory. This reminds one of the great Sanscritist Jules Bloch's statement: "the Rroms view themselves as a unique people, in spite of the dispersion of their groups and their lack of uniformity. This shared feeling of community allows considering them as one nation, although they lack precisely what has become for us the symbol of a nation, namely unified institutions and a defined territory. Lot of people remain Rroms, even [...] persons who have lost the use of the hereditary language" (Bloch 1953:54).

Illiterate and marginalized Rroms have kept so far the Rromani language alive but they are more and more acculturated to majority languages, except for the heirs of a robust oral culture, who still maintain their love and pride for their mother-tongue. In contrast with the common belief, it is not at all natural to cultivate one's ancestral language: a strong awareness and motivation are required to fight against inertia leading to acculturation. In present time Europe, minority languages have a chance to survive only thanks to volunteerism in the elite<sup>20</sup>. If Rroms benefit from correct aids for

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the cloak of charity) and 2. *carving up* – some people invoke the Rroms' cultural diversity to deny they are a specific nation. This attitude is unsustainable especially now, when old-fashioned dreams of national uniformity belong to the past. It is worth mentioning that both amalgamation and identity carving up have been used extensively in colonial times against subjected peoples and that the force of the colonialists was nourished among others by the fact that they could convince the subjected people or at least some leaders to adopt this view – sometimes out of unawareness, often for immediate individual interest.

<sup>20</sup> In both meanings: the formally educated elite becomes aware of the linguistic heritage value (sometimes after one generation of reluctance toward this heritage) and fights to forward it in their turn but also simple persons who feel anxious at preserving their mother-tongue come to be a real elite with all its attributes.

studies and can develop their European elite, this elite will hopefully act as a model (a kind of national middle class) for other Rroms and incite them in middle term future to reactivate the language they are currently neglecting.

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