

Roma in Europe From Social Exclusion to Active Participation

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A Standard Romany Language - A pre-condition and basis for a national and cultural identity for the Roma.¹

The history, the culture and the language of the Roma have been for centuries a subject for study by the non Roma. Because the latter maintained that the Roma were wanderers, completely illiterate and a race without any history of scholarship, the Romany people found themselves unable to retrace and study the facts of their historical and cultural past, let alone cast light on it by theoretical thinking. So, when Romany intellectuals emerged towards the end of the 1960s, and when the first movement towards a national and cultural identity for the Roma began, the Romany language became a subject and a matter no longer to be considered merely as an object of study. Rromani began to be treated as an essential element for national and cultural identity. So since then, the existence of the Romany language has ceased to be looked upon as a mere linguistic and cultural fact, having now taken on major political significance.

As an element of live thought (knowledge), the Romany language has become the place where, at whose heart, you can find and get to know the past, the present and the future. In other words, we were no longer talking about Rromani from the point of view of etymology, comparative philology and dialectology - as had often been the case up till then. Now, we were beginning to look upon Rromani as the central pillar at the heart of lines, families, clans and tribes, especially of those groups living in Europe. This key moment in time showed that the Roma, the Sinti (in Germany) and the Kalé (in Spain) – having lived apart for 800 years, without any permanent contact and in very diverse economic, political and cultural conditions – had now acquired a greater degree of cultural, national and social integration.

This awareness and the strong desire to have their own language manifested themselves at the First Roma World Congress in

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London in 1971, at which time the “Commission for Rromani Language and Education” was formed. But for this idea to become a practical reality, it was necessary, as we have seen, to gather together a number of pre-conditions and redirect many false paths, from an objective as well as a subjective point of view. One of the most crucial pre-conditions for the Roma is the need to have their own political and juridical Statutes. To date, the Roma, Sinti and Kalé had had no Statute Book, they were neither ethnic group nor national minority group. In no country were they looked upon as a recognised community.

The former Yugoslavia was the very first country to include the Romany statute book within its constitution (Ustav). The Roma, as an ethnic group, were granted the possibility, through the Yugoslav constitution, to set up their own organisations and cultural clubs, to speak their language, to promote Romany spelling and culture, to learn Rromani in school and to have press and broadcasts in Rromani. In the areas with the greatest concentration of Romany people, like, for example, Skopje, Priština, Niš, Belgrade etc., schools were opened for young children from 5-6 years on, in which Romany teachers taught them in both Rromani and Serbian. The Romany children attending Primary school in those areas had a small amount of Romany language and history included in their curriculum. And again, a teachers’ Training Academy was opened, to allow prospective teachers of Romany language, history and culture to pursue their studies.

In Skopje, the “Phralipen” Theatre was formed, performing 4 or 5 plays in Rromani, and this theatre went on to gain an international reputation, working in Germany at the theatre in Mülheim an der Ruhr. At the same time and in parallel with the above activities, in several Yugoslav towns and cities (Skopje, Tetovo, Priština, Mitrovica, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Sarajevo, Maribor, Murska Sobota) radio and television broadcasts in the Romany language were launched, as well as newspapers. After the collapse of the RSFY, much of what had been achieved with these broadcasts was lost and no longer exists.

Among the newly constituted States, the law pertaining to the national minority of the Roma (“selorri”) was granted and included in the Macedonian and Slovenian Constitutions, albeit without actually defining in juridical terms what actually constitutes a “national minority”. In Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, radio and television broadcasts in the Romany language are featured and

there is also a Romany newspaper. And again there are similar television broadcasts in Serbia, and in Niš and Novi Sad.

It was this short-lived experience in the former Yugoslavia that was the origin of the idea for a common Romany language.

Teachers of the Romany children from 5-6 years of age have noted that, when it comes to speaking Rromani as well as Serbian, the children learn much better and quicker when the teaching is carried out in both languages – one hour in Rromani followed by an hour in Serbian. The Romany children, for the first time, had the chance to learn their basic lessons on an equal footing with the other children. Thus they were no longer handicapped when they started school as had formerly been the case.

Put another way, the Romany children in the past had not possessed a good knowledge of the Serb language, and consequently, they were not on a level playing field with the spoilt children from well-off families when it came to taking in and learning the school curriculum. It is in fact true to say that non Rroma children who come from the same background; i.e. from poor families, are also not able to speak Serbian well. Their vocabulary and grammar are very poor and mixed up, but it is said by the teachers that the reason for the Romany children not being able to speak Serbian well is that they are Rroma and speak another language in the home. They look differently upon non Rroma children with social handicaps than they do upon Romany children – with the Rroma, they pin the blame on their nation, their family language etc. For this reason, our children lag well behind in their studies compared to non Romany children, who learn at school in their mother tongue.

And yet again, the Romany children were treated as “less intelligent” than the non Rroma and were shipped off to special schools, schools for the retarded and deranged. When the psychologists and educationalists in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Maribor carried out tests on the Romany children placed in these special schools, it was apparent that they were much more intelligent than the other children. These tests, however, were not based on vocabulary (verbal or word tests) but rather on mathematics and logic, and in these fields the Rroma children showed themselves to be more intelligent.

Experience gained so far demonstrates that Romany children who learn in Rromani with Rroma teachers have more confidence and

ambition in themselves, and they aspire to a greater and more fulfilling future. This was particularly apparent with the Romany children who had lessons at school on the language, history and culture of the Rroma. Previously, Romany children attended school to the end of the fourth year, with many of them subsequently giving up school altogether.

When they started to study their own history and their mother tongue, this caused many of them not only to complete eight years of elementary schooling but also to go on to High School, and even in some cases to continue on to University. Rromani has emerged as an important factor in developing the personality and the intelligence of young people, a fact acknowledged by linguistic and psycho-linguistic studies. Language is not only a means of speaking and communicating; it is, as has been recognised, attached like flesh to bone to conscience and understanding, to human values and emotions etc. In short, language plays a major role in the process of self-realisation and affirmation of the personality.

This experience was also observed at the Rroma Summer Schools held from 1989 to 1993 in Belgrade, Vienna, Karia, Rome and Montpellier. For the children attending the School, this confrontation with the Romany language proved to be a meeting with their own inner selves. Having become acquainted with the etymology, vocabulary, grammar and syntax of Rromani, it appeared to them as if their national and cultural identity had been opened up before them as well as the road leading to their inner selves, to their heart and soul.

Many of them realised for the first time that the Rroma, living as they do in countries very distant from one another, are in fact very close in the language they speak. This fact increased their motivation to learn Rromani to the best of their ability, because they see that this will be the golden path towards the unity of the Rroma, the Sinti and the Kalé.

The idea of formulating one standard Romany language has been the major topic of several Conferences attended by educated Rroma. In 1976 at the Belgrade Academy of Arts and Science, a symposium was held, entitled "Life and the Rromanipen". On this occasion, several papers were presented on the subject of Language. Then in Chandigarh, India, a symposium was held in 1983, within the framework of the 1st International Festival of Culture. Following this in 1986 came the major symposium on gypsy studies held in Beaubourg (Paris) entitled "Etudes Tsiganes".

The most important symposium, held also in 1986, took place in Sarajevo under the heading "The Language and Culture of the Roma". Following this came the Warsaw conference in 1990, and two days later the "4th International Roma Congress". At this gathering, a series of most fruitful discussions took place with more than half of the 30-35 speakers being professional linguists. It was here that the foundation stone for the standardisation of the Romany language was laid, and, for the first time, people became aware that language was to play a major political role in establishing a national identity for the Rroma. As was underlined at this Conference, standardisation is a complex process involving difficult joint co-operation, and for it to come about, many conditions have to be satisfied involving scholarly expertise and reaching into schools, universities, the media etc.

Put in a theoretical way, standardisation involves ten phases: (1) Selection of norms, in other words the choice of the organic idioms which will form the basis for the standard language, (2) An analysis of the internal articulation of this basis, (3) Choice of a standard model (monolectal or polylectal) with an acceptable level and degree of tolerance, (4) Codification of the handwriting, (5) Normalisation of comprehension problems, (6) Elaboration of the various terminologies, (7) Experimentation, (8) Acceptance, (9) A description of the norm, which will involve bringing in scientists (10) Cultivation and spread of the language through literature, popular writings and journalism.

So far, we can say that the process of standardising Romani has not gone past stages 5, 6 and 7, because the basic conditions have not yet been assembled to permit wide experimentation in the whole world.

Marcel Courthiade² is working on this major and difficult task along with the other Roma members of the Language Commission. This Commission was elected at the time of the 4th Congress, and, in his role as Co-ordinator, he has already achieved significant results which have been put before the Commission and been approved. Based on what he has accomplished so far, Marcel Courthiade's name can take its place in history, as will be ensured, I believe, by

² appointed Commissioner for Language and Linguistic right at the Prague Congress in 2000 and re-appointed at the Pietraterrazana Congress in 2004

those who one day will be entrusted to write the history of our language and our culture.

This standardisation work requires research into the dialects of numerous countries. For example, Milena Húbschmanová, Professor of Indian studies at Prague University, has compiled a Rromani-Czech dictionary; Georghe Sarău from Bucharest a "Compact Rromani-Rumanian Dictionary"; Ian Hancock, a professor from Austin (Texas) is the author of a publication entitled "Notes on Rromani Grammar"; in Moscow, there is available a "Tsigane-Russian and Russian-Tsigane" Dictionary"; in Paris, much important work has been carried out by Dr René Gsell, an eminent linguist and phonetician; mention can also be made of Kenrick, Bakker, Pobožniak etc...

At the same time as the above activity, in a number of European countries new books appeared - literary and scientific - as well as translations from other languages into Rromani. Trifun Dimić in Yugoslavia translated passages from the Bible into Rromani, as did József Daroczi Choli in Budapest and several others. We see numerous magazines in Rromani, radio, television, as in Yugoslavia, Hungary and the Czech Republic etc... Finally, and for us an historic event, at the University of Paris a Department of Romology is established where the young can study not only the Romany language but also its history, ethnology, traditions, sociolinguistics, and the literature of the Roma. Similarly, the history and ethnology of India can be studied with six or seven Indian languages to choose from. This point alone merits a substantial article to itself.

I should like here to mention and analyse certain reactions to the work of the Commission working on a standard Romany language. These reactions have two sides to them: there are some folk who are convinced it is not possible to standardise Rromani, hinting on the quiet and never to your face that it is a "very poor language". On the other hand, it is claimed by some people that Rromani does not need to be standardised, because if this were to happen, its dialects would grow further and further apart.

Generally speaking, it is prejudice against the Roma which gives birth to these theories; like certain ethnologists who claimed that "the Roma comprise a number of marginal groups mixed with all sorts of dust"! and not a nation. Similarly, there are linguists and philologists who, knowingly or not, put forward certain racist theories on the Roma. As an example, I quote Rade Uhlik in his

article "Remarks on the speech sounds of Rromani"; "A loose articulation of the consonants and a criminal carelessness in pronunciation, this is what is responsible for all the deformations and corrupted forms in the vocabulary of this primitive world. The way this linguistic tool has degenerated is indicated by the receding of the teeth, along with a number of other bad signs. In the same way, for example, that certain ethnic groupings suffer degeneration through over-production of children leading to poor health, so the vocabulary of certain Rroma groups is characterised by an inordinately large choice of similar words and nuances, which are, in spite of everything, often morbid and filthy."

Rade Uhlik was acquainted with a number of Rromani dialects, and in every article or book, he is referred to as "the greatest philologist and linguist". It may be true that he was well acquainted with the language and was a learned philologist, but what he wrote has its origin in basic racism, and to this day, no-one has pointed this out.

What he wrote about the phonemes found in the Romany language is an example of paradigm, showing just how many major prejudices and racist arguments against the Rroma are raised even by those people like Uhlik, who all their lives have been writing about the Romany language and people. He also went so far as to declare that Rromani could not be "raised to the level of a standard language" nor was it capable of developing. We have also seen young people who, without being acquainted with the language, caused quite a stir by putting it about that Rromani is "very impoverished" and its attraction lies in its poverty. An American woman by the name of Foncka asked a non Rroma, educated but not well versed in Rromani, to translate a passage from Shakespeare into the language, after which she asked a different person to reverse the operation back into English. She could see that the two English texts were not identical, and concluded from this that the Romany language was very deficient, that it had little vocabulary and this was the reason for it being rather "spicy", like a wild language spoken by savages. It is a fact that she broadcast this insult in a book.

Others possessing a better education in general linguistics and social sciences avoid speaking as explicitly about Rromani as Uhlik and the American woman. In order to conceal their racism, they have sought different ways. One method consists of saying: "it would not be good to carry out standardisation of Rromani, as the language could find itself depleted as a result".(!) Another uses the

fact that “there are numerous dialects, and, because of this, it is impossible to arrive at one standard language”.

It is a fact that that there are many dialects in the Romany language, but we know equally well that there is no living language without its dialects. So why is this well known fact forgotten, as is the fact that there are language reformers to be found in every country? Moreover, it can be clearly seen today that in many Asian and African countries, and also in our own continent of Europe, the standardisation of language is an accepted fact. Given the above, if Rromani is a language and if the Rroma are a nation like any other in Europe, Asia or Africa, you have to ask yourself: why is the “*a priori*” standardisation of Rromani looked upon in exactly the opposite way as “a bad course of action”?

Now, it is not the Romany language and its dialects which are here a matter for dispute; rather it concerns issues from other areas, above all prejudice, even if in our times such prejudice against the Rroma cannot be openly and officially given free expression, being confined to “more neutral ground” as provided by the language and its dialects. Certain philologists and Rroma “padre padroni” bring forward as evidence the various Romany clans to lend weight to their argument. They argue that these tribal groups have claimed that “their language” as spoken is the best! This “argument” is not a new one! Many anthropologists in the United States and in other countries have brought up this example. Each tribal group in Africa, in Latin America etc. maintains: “Our language is the best and the richest”. And why? Because, as anthropologists have explained, the question as to “Which group among you has the best language?” is understood and perceived as an ethnic enquiry and not as a philological or linguistic one. People who know nothing of linguistics and philology feel that the dialect they speak.

“The Tsigane language must be regarded as one, homogeneous and possessing the same rights as others in the same family. It is the duty of science to get to know this language in a standard form of its own, to extract from the various dialects the essential tsigane basis which they have in common, to clean up the pure metal by removing any alloys which have been deposited on it with the passage of time or as a result of various circumstances.”
Antoine Kalina “Language of the Slovak Tsiganes”(Poznan 1882)

gives them value and tradition, and at times even that it is their possession, their concern and their very flesh. They state their belief: "I have to say that my dialect is the best, for the reason that our group is also the best." Nowadays, when this type of enquiry is conducted among the Roma, it indicates above all the degree of knowledge (or ignorance) of the very people who are conducting the research. Frankly, they have no knowledge of the rudiments of linguistics and anthropology, but this does not stop them claiming to be "the tribunal" for everything. This is why the arguments they come out with are so untrue, and why it is useless to take them into consideration in any serious debate on standardisation. Sadly, there are also certain people who, whilst being fully aware of all this, nevertheless go ahead and carry out such enquiries, because they have destructive designs towards the Roma. This is nothing less than hidden racism.

These people completely forget the "third dimension" of language, which is closely linked to the future and the prosperity of the Romany people. The Roma cannot alter their political and social status if they do not receive political recognition as a national minority. Likewise, nor can they emancipate their culture and develop their language without such recognition. It is impossible for the Roma to achieve a new political status unless there is a set policy and a firm plan for their language. This is how it has worked with the history of other nations.: all language reformers have had to pay due regard not only to spoken linguistics and the knowledge available – they must also have in mind the actual current situation of their nation, its politics and cultural trends.

Without a standard Romany language, the Roma, Sinti and Kalé cannot achieve their national and cultural identity, nor will they be socially integrated. Often, they are not even granted their human Rights, even though these are recognised in numerous legal documents and international treaties. Here are two examples taken from Germany. A Roma had to go to the State court having committed a crime. He told the Court that he wished to speak Rromani and maintained this was his right, recognised throughout Europe and beyond. The Court in Hamburg replied: "You may speak in Rromani, but your evidence cannot be taken as official, as Rromani is not a recognised official language." In other words, Rromani as a language cannot be used for official matters. When I was summoned to Hamburg to do the translation into German, I became aware the Romany language was the only one he really knew. His knowledge of other languages was superficial. So what happened to him? If you were to go by what the opponents of

standardisation maintain, he should only have spoken Rromani when under cover of his tent or when he was on the highway! These “purveyors of theory” believe that this is all there is to the true liberty of the Tsigane – the Bohemian, and that only those travellers who live by the wayside count as the real Rroma!!

Another story – this time from Berlin: a young Rroma whose only fluent language was Rromani was summoned to Court. He also asked if he could give evidence in Rromani, and this was granted to him by the Court. This young man was innocent and he is now free! But what would have been the case if the Court in Berlin had not accepted the Romany language as official?³

These two examples illustrate to what extent recognition of Rromani is a current problem in daily life and how important it is for people to understand and stand up for their elementary human rights. For all the Roma who have been forced to flee from Yugoslavia or Rumania, standardisation is a vital question, it is their very existence. There is in effect a close link between the fact that Rromani is not yet recognised as an official language and the fact that the Roma are not recognised as a national minority; under these conditions, they have no chance of receiving information in their mother tongue, nor of enjoying any effective legal protection etc.

For the Romany language to gain recognition is not enough, however, for it must be able to express every nuance, and it must contain juridical terminology. Furthermore, the Roma themselves must learn not only the vocabulary but also the concepts to be found in the Law, in the Human Rights Bills which are quoted in Court. What must be avoided is what happened in Hungary 50 years ago – then, the authorities ensured that the Roma were not allowed to study Law, for fear they would steal more and then be able to present a better defence in Court. There again you have pure racism.

Opponents of standardisation want to see the Roma still living in social and cultural ghettos, being denied recognition either as

³ It has to be noted that in France, the Commission for Help to Refugees calls in Rromani interpreters whenever the applicant requests such help. In this way, they are much more able to find the right words to express problems and grievances linked to their past., whereas very often, a statement in the predominant language is stereotype, seen as having to be couched in “officialese”, even if the speaker has a good grasp of this predominant language in another connection.

individual beings or collectively as a nation; and whether they want to state this openly or not, this constitutes normal racism. Alas, there are also certain Rroma and Sinti who are quite willing to accept these racist arguments propagated by non Rroma. To begin with, these people have no knowledge whatever of linguistics or philology, they regard language as a fact of life, natural and tribal *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is quite normal that among the Rroma and the Sinti, there may be found some people who are not educated, as in all other countries. But if the uneducated man is allowed to instruct the graduate on how things should be, and lecture him on scientific truths, then any reasonable man may well give up the quest for truth. This does not happen in any other nation and this is also racism rejected.

Yet another group of racists view Romani as "a marvellous secret". They seek arguments from the past, from the fact that Nazi philologists sent numerous Rroma and Sinti to concentration camps. But this delving into the past by racist philologists had at its roots a quite different aim and motive. Here there emerged confusion between the search for real truth and a search aimed at achieving certain anti-human objectives. This is definitely not an argument against standardisation, it merely shows that all research can be motivated by perverted aims, and it can be led astray. In no way is the Romany language a taboo, it is a philological and cultural phenomenon as are all other languages. He who claims to see a taboo there is either ignorant of the meaning of the word "taboo", or he is hoping to get some other result out of it, masked in the "wafers" of the language; namely that the Rroma should remain unrecognised as a nation, and continue to be looked upon as an asocial (even "antisocial"), folkloric group, with whom you can do anything you like.

Finally, there are those who do everything they are told to do by those outside the Rroma circles - sometimes for money, sometimes for illusory advantages, or again for the sake of kudos. They are not the slightest bit interested in the future prospects and the emancipation of the Rroma, but only in the money coming to them in the name of the Rroma and the Sinti, or even in a brief moment of glory at their low level offered them by the racists.

Alas, there are certain so-called Romany foundations who are categorically opposed to standardisation. Within these foundations, uncultured and uneducated Rroma have been appointed to top, decision-making positions, because the way they speak is exactly what the privileged want to hear them say. And these very people,

with their two or three years of schooling are ruling upon the fate of projects which have been worked out by Rroma experts with University doctorates. In reality, these people are playing a truly shameful game! They form a protective screen behind which the privileged can conceal their racial feelings towards the Rroma and the Sinti.

From what has been said, the following conclusions may be drawn.

1. The Rroma, Sinti and Kalé who have been persecuted for 1000 years and who went through genocide (the Holocaust) without their language dying out have now reached the stage of asserting their human and national Rights, and, in the process, of raising the issue of the standardisation of their language – which numerous individuals are attempting to block.
2. This procedure for standardisation rests more with those in political, cultural and educational power (the authorities) than it does with the Rroma and the intellectuals among them. Whilst it is true that a number of very good documents have been approved, these measures must also be put into practice, and it is only then that the Rroma can seize their opportunity to become a national and linguistic minority in Europe.

“Nothing gives the right to maintain that languages are merely simple means of communication. As they function in real life, they exercise a power within the heart of society, which, far from being neutral, points in a very specific direction .

Kasuya Keisuke “Linguistic Hegemony”.

3. The London “Minority Rights Group” at the Zürich conference on 17-05-1976 declared that to discriminate against a language is to discriminate against all those who speak it. Through his native language, man does not merely utter words, for it is by means of this language that he gives voice to his thoughts, his aspirations, his loves, his feelings, his vision of the world, his life, his morality etc....If his language is not recognised and accepted, then he himself is discriminated against as a human being. Today, at a time when national chauvinism and fascism are re-emerging in many countries, each one of us should realise

that catastrophe can ensue from this, and we should campaign to make it possible for the Rroma to be recognised, and not to be forgotten, as a linguistic minority within Europe.

4. The current situation in many countries is alarming. This is why the UNO and European Institutions must recognise the Rroma as “a national minority without their own territory”. They must find the measures and powerful enough means to offer better protection to Rroma, given their status as a nation without a country.
5. A European Fund must be put in place for the integration of the Rroma, to finance, amongst other things, the process of standardising Rromani.
6. The right to possess a mother language is a basic element to be found in numerous documents. It is underlined notably in the “Convention against Discrimination in Education” (UNESCO, Doc.11C. 14.12.1960). It is a fact that in education and culture, the Rroma are the most discriminated against people in Europe, and this should stop. To begin with, it is necessary to bring about a situation in which the Rroma are allowed to express themselves freely in their language in everyday social life.
7. The Romany language is a vital element of national and cultural identity. Therefore, just as UNESCO has recognised the cultural heritage of other countries and nations, by the same token, it should acknowledge Rromani and seek, within its programme, means and concrete measures to develop and enrich the language of the Rroma.
8. What is imperative today is for the Department of Romany Studies in the University of Paris (Inalco) to become better known. More students should be able to matriculate there, to study Rromology seriously and proceed to its development to the same high level as all other cultural and scientific subjects. Gradually, similar Departments must be opened in other countries and in their work must co-operate closely together at a European level.