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Language and the rise of a transnational Romani identity

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Abstract

Romani is a fascinating test case for the role that language plays in the process of identity consolidation in a globalised world. Standardisation is no longer inherently connected to the 'territorialisation' of language. Instead, we witness a bottom-up process in which individuals take ownership of language and negotiate language practices. Status regulation and language planning can be instigated and even implemented by institutions other than national states. All this leads to pluralism of form rather than unification. Yet language is a key locus for political mobilisation. It allows players to claim authenticity, it offers opportunities for intervention by external facilitators, and it provides a discussion platform through which traditional images can be challenged and recognition can be awarded.

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1. Introduction

The power of language to act as an identity symbol draws on its function as an emblem of individuals' loyalty to peer groups and hence as a way of flagging and shaping social and ethnic-national identity (cf. Giles & Johnson 1987, Baker 1992, Eckert 2003, Fought 2006). Researchers' interest in institutional efforts to plan and regulate language use was first triggered through attempts to capitalise on this symbolic and identity-forming role of language in the context of post-colonial nation-state building (cf. already Fishman et al. 1968). Language planning has since been understood as deliberate, future oriented action that aims to change (certain aspects of) the formal system of language and modify the linguistic behaviour of members of a community. Intervention is normally regarded as a form of management of linguistic practices that is guided by ideological beliefs (cf. Kaplan & Baldauf 1997, Spolsky 2003). Standardisation, including both regulation of form and status, is seen as an act that provides institutional legitimacy to language varieties (Milroy 2001) and which can thus help provide legitimacy to a claim for nationhood (cf. Jaffe 1999, Joseph 2004). A key objective of standardisation is to achieve a degree of uniformity in language, which in turn stands for similarities among individual user populations and thus for the essence of a shared identity (Edwards 2006: 19). The notion of 'linguistic human rights' (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1994) is based on accepting this premise. While the principle of language rights is, as Wright (2004: 183 ff.) acknowledges, supported by the discourses of liberty, fraternity, equality and

justice, it is also anchored in the assumption that explicit institutional recognition at a higher level is a necessary pre-requisite for the legitimacy of ideological claims to nationhood or ethnic identity.

Against the background of such institutional monopolisation of language regulation, language may take on performative functions (Joseph 2004) and efforts to support, promote or safeguard a minority language, especially an endangered minority language, can serve as a social and political weapon against colonial rule (cf. Crowley 2007). Post-colonial theory has therefore not surprisingly developed a framework for a critical approach to the interrelation between public language and ideological power (Fairclough 1989, Crowley 2003). In this context, discourse itself is seen as the site of ideology, and language is regarded as one of several identity-building resources (Blommaert 2005). The principle of uniformity is in turn substituted or at least weakened considerably by an acceptance of pluralism. Wright (2004: 96-98) describes how language planning was inherently associated with an ideology of nationalism. But with changing ideologies, the idea of regulating language has become less acceptable. Instead, the paradigm shift that is influenced by postmodernist and postnational thinking lends support to diversity and pluralism.

This critical approach to the role of language in nationalist ideology is strongly inspired by Anderson's (1991) argument that nationalism revolves around the construction of 'imagined communities'. Anderson attributes a key part in the emergence of nationalist discourses to linguistic practices and specifically to the emergence of literary versions of vernacular languages. As late medieval European elites began using their idiolects in correspondence, they removed the traditional association between script and global religious ideology that was represented by Latin (as well as Old Church Slavonic and Greek). The invention of print enabled the spread of scripted vernaculars to wider regions and the emergence of codified varieties that became widely understood by users of related dialects, giving rise to 'territorial' languages. These were then imposed top-down as part of the ideological edifice of emerging nation states, from the nineteenth century onwards. In Anderson's narrative, functionality and convenience of communication thus precede the symbolic, unifying effect of language codification. At the same time, 'territorialisation' of language plays a key role both in language standardisation and in the process of nation building, which it serves.

Modern or Israeli Hebrew is a perfect illustration of the link between nationalism and the territorialisation of language. It is probably the only language that has been successfully revitalised as the main vernacular of a sizeable community after it had lacked any documented use as a vehicle of everyday, face-to-face oral communication for many centuries. Safran (2005) claims that a modern Jewish state could not have been formed without the adoption of Hebrew as a national language. Kuzar (2001) regards Hebrew language revivalism as an ideological form of discourse that accompanied the Zionist narrative of nation building as a 'return' to old territorial roots. Apart from its historiographical function, revivalism also dictated a prescriptive agenda in the study of language. This encouraged people at the beginning of the process to abandon their spoken languages and to shift to Hebrew instead. It then continued to make the next generations of native speakers feel insecure, and allowed them to be guided in their language usage by language planning

authorities. While Rabkin (2010) emphasises the role of language in bridging the considerable differences in cultural practices and religious and ideological persuasions among Jews in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century, Nahir (1998) suggests that the practical communicative function of Hebrew as a lingua franca among linguistically diverse communities played a key role in facilitating its 'vernacularisation'. The observation that communicative needs may act as a factor in safeguarding language status, alongside the pure symbolic value of language to ethnic identity, is made in other contexts, too. Oakes (2004), for instance, discusses how the concern for the status and role of French in public life in Québec and the realisation that the strengthening of French relies on its adoption by immigrants has prompted the adoption of a more civic rather than ethnic-based language ideology.

Joseph (2004) argues that national languages are invented in order to flag or facilitate nationalism, but he also points to the role of individuals in the process when he mentions that national languages start off as the product of intellectuals and only become a widespread ideology and a national property once they enter the education sphere, facilitated by state institutions. The role of individuals in shaping the formation of national languages has been described for a number of cases, including that of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda for Hebrew (Kuzar 2001), Ziya Gökalp for Turkish (Aydınül & Aydınül 2004), Nathan Birnbaum for Yiddish and Celadet Ali Bedir-Xan for (Kurmanji) Kurdish (Matras & Reershemius 1991), and more. In the absence of state institutions that can promote a national language, efforts to instigate widespread change in language usage must rely on the persuasive power of individual language activists. I will demonstrate below how key players in efforts to promote Romani as a symbol of ethnic-national identity often engage in what Spivak (1985) terms 'strategic essentialism', asserting that their authenticity as language activists is acquired by descent and that it therefore lends them the authority to shape language practices and thereby to define group identity. Such observations are well in line with May's (2005) suggestion that minority language rights are often entangled with the problem of essentialism. May questions the inherent link between language and ethnicity and argues instead in favour of viewing language as a more contingent marker of identity.

Some lessons might be drawn from Heller's (2003) discussion of the role of authentication through language choice in the marketing of products. Heller proposes that the commodification of language shows how an identity can be predicated on new local spaces that are opened up by globalisation and which in fact challenge or at least supplement spheres that have been traditionally dominated by state institutions. It is tempting to relate this viewpoint to the Romani experience: In the absence of a state, individual activists' initiatives to promote the language in the public domain for both communicative and emblematic purposes and to instigate a public discourse on the future of the language serve to consolidate an ethnic-national group identity and at the same time to legitimise self-identification with a trans-national or even cosmopolitan society or interest group that is not centred around territorial boundaries or political sovereignty.

With upwards of 3.5 million speakers living in dispersed communities, Romani is by far the largest language in the European Union that cannot be identified with a majority population in any particular region. Traditionally an

oral language whose use was largely limited to informal interaction in the family domain, over the past few decades Romani has experienced a gradual expansion of its functions to include both formal and informal literacy and a variety of uses in public discourse. Having started in the 1960s, this development took on a new momentum since the 1990s following the democratisation process in central and eastern Europe, where the majority of the Romani-speaking population resides. The emergence of new Romani political, cultural and religious networks, support for those networks from trans-national organisations, and the rise of electronic communication have all contributed to a massive expansion of Romani into new domains.

In the following I discuss the Romani case study as an example of the role of language in the consolidation of an ethnic-cultural identity that transcends national boundaries. In the absence of a state or territorial coherence, public use of the Romani language serves to flag individuals' loyalty to a trans-national collective. Codification and the promotion of Romani in new functions is a de-centralised and pluralistic process; institution-driven language engineering and regulation and unification attempts are marginal. The agents who promote the language are in all but a few cases individuals who draw on a range of international networking opportunities; only in some cases do they benefit from the support of governments at the national and local levels. Yet despite the absence of centralisation and territorialisation, the promotion of Romani is a key element in the consolidation and politicisation of Romani identity and language serves as a key argument in attempts to legitimise demands for Romani political representation and for protection from discrimination and exclusion.

2. Conceptualising Romani identity

The link between the Romani language and Romani ethnicity has been the subject of academic discourse since Rüdiger (1782) published his short essay in which he proved the structural coherence and Indo-Aryan roots of Romani while blaming the social exclusion of 'Gypsies' on racial hatred ("Volkshass"). Yet centuries of fictional depiction of 'Gypsies' in the arts and literature as vagabonds and nomads have anchored in public perception an image of a lifestyle rather than an ethnicity with linguistic coherence and clearly identified territorial roots. This perception is supported in part by the presence in Europe of various populations of indigenous origins, not speakers of Romani, who tend to specialise in a family-based, mobile service economy and are therefore collectively subsumed under the label 'Gypsies'. The social-anthropological discourse that is pre-occupied with the cultures of so-called 'peripatetics' or 'commercial nomads' (e.g. Rao 1987) and the critical-theory oriented historical discourse that centres around outsiders' literary images of 'Gypsies' (e.g. Lucassen 1996, Mayall 2004, Bogdal 2011) complicate the matter inasmuch as they lend academic support to the wholesale categorisation of diverse populations as 'Gypsies' on the basis of their socio-economic status and certain elements of their apparent lifestyle. Streck (2008) for instance defines 'Gypsies' as groups whose common characteristic is occupying a socio-cultural niche in which they are economically and culturally dependent on sedentary society, and Ries (2008) argues that 'Gypsy' is essentially an external definition, awarded to

those whom outsiders consider to be ‘Gypsies’. Such viewpoints tend to question markers such as language or historical origins as stable indicators of Romani identity, and so they also tend to be critical toward any Romani nationalist aspirations, including language planning efforts. Okely (1983, 1984, 1997) and in her footsteps Willems (1997) explicitly question the link between language and Indian origins¹. Stewart (1997) and Gay-y-Blasco (2001, 2002) both claim that collective historical memory is absent from the culture of Romani communities and that they therefore have no sense of ethnicity, either anchored in the notion of a common legacy or in a shared destiny. Jakoubek (2004) asserts that Romani identity is oriented toward kinship rather than an ethnic group or nation, and that it therefore makes no sense to define a Romani ethnic or national minority. Both van Baar (2011a, 2011b) and Canut (2011) regard the concept of a Romani identity as the product of a recent European political discourse that attempts, in their view, to represent heterogeneous populations as a single minority. Here we must note that there is some confusion between the wholesale term ‘Gypsy’ that is often assigned to linguistically diverse populations of different origins, and the term ‘Roma’ (and the corresponding adjective ‘Romani’), which is the self-appellation of populations that speak *Romanes* (‘Romani’). The proposition that the label ‘Roma’ serves to ‘ethnicise’ diverse populations (cf. Canut 2011, Willems 1997) is based on a misunderstanding of ‘Roma’ as a mere politically correct substitute for ‘Gypsies’, ignoring the fact that the label is a citation form that represents the endonym of a linguistically coherent community.

Looking beyond the theoretical framing, a clear-cut understanding of Romani identity is also complicated by a series of seemingly conflicting facts and terminological practices. Firstly, individuals in Europe who belong to populations who define themselves as ‘Gypsies/Travellers’ (or equivalent terms in other languages)² may or may not identify culturally or politically with the people whose language is Romani.³ On the other hand, some communities that speak a form of Romani do not use ‘Roma’ or any etymologically related term (e.g. *Romnichal* or *Romacil*) as their group-appellation, although they do refer to their language as *Romanes* – most notably the Sinti and Manouche populations in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, northern Italy and France. Furthermore, there are communities that obviously descend from Romani-speaking populations, who merely preserve a Romani-derived vocabulary within a variety of the majority language (cf. Matras 2010). These include the English and Welsh (Romany) Gypsies, the Gitanos of Spain and Ciganos of Portugal, and the Resande of Sweden and Norway.

¹ Okely (1997: 236) speaks of the “mythical or apparently empirically proven historical origin of the Gypsies” and suggests that the Romani language developed “along the trade and pilgrim routes” (ibid.: 240) and so does not necessarily prove an immigration from India.

² Common self-appellations include French *gens de voyage*, Dutch *Woonwagenbewoners*, German *Jenische*, Swedish *Resande*, Spanish *Gitanos*, Portuguese *Ciganos*, Italian *Camminanti* and more.

³ The European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF), founded in 2004 to represent Romani populations at the Council of Europe, adopted its name as a result of pressure put on its leadership by the European institutions (Rudko Kawczynski, p.c., 2005).

Even when used as a citation of the group's own self-appellation, the attribute 'Romani' describes a community that is different from most ethnic groups. Romani speakers are geographically dispersed and do not occupy any coherent territory. But unlike other dispersed diasporas, such as Jews, Circassians, or Armenians, the Roms have, by and large, no awareness of a shared territorial origin. Such awareness has only been acquired fairly recently through exposure to academic literature. It is now promoted by political activists but still treated with much scepticism in many Romani households. By contrast to dispersed minority populations such as the Jews, the Karaim, or the Druze of the Middle East, the Roms do not maintain any distinctive form of religious institutions or scripture. On the other hand, their socio-economic profile as stigmatised communities that are engaged primarily in a family-based, informal service economy tends to be, historically at least, fairly uniform, lending the group a seemingly caste-like character, albeit not one that is part of any contemporary, explicitly defined social caste configuration. Despite the dominance of kinship-based networks in Romani society, the Roms can hardly be regarded as tribes since their boundaries are often flexible and open, through marriage or adoption, to outsiders of both Romani and non-Romani descent (cf. Marushiakova & Popov 2004). Speakers sometimes even regard their common language (*Romanes* 'Romani'), whose dialects are by and large mutually intelligible, as a set of closely related but different language forms. This is largely due to the absence of a standard literary language, of any tradition of literacy, or indeed of Romani terms that differentiate 'language' from 'dialect'.⁴ We can conclude that while the coherence of Romani as a language of Indo-Aryan background, and by implication the historical coherence of its population of speakers, are proven facts, in the absence of a home territory, collective historical awareness, leadership structures, formal institutions, and literacy, it is particularly difficult in the Romani case to identify the elements that would build an 'imagined community', to use Anderson's (1991) substitute term for 'nation'.

3. Domain expansion in Romani: emerging practices

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Romani was used exclusively in face-to-face oral communication, predominantly in the family domain or among interlocutors who were personally familiar with one another. Aside from research-oriented documentation of the language, which began as early as the mid-sixteenth century, Romani texts first appeared in print in the form of a Gospel translation produced in Germany by Christian missionaries in the late 1800s. More widespread Romani literacy was first introduced in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s as part of a comprehensive policy to utilise minority languages to support education and ideological mobilisation. Hundreds of Romani-language textbooks, political pamphlets and literary translations were published during this period. The Soviet practice set the model for what was to become the common pattern of country-based literacy in Romani. The variety of Romani used in the texts was the one that was most prevalent in the region, the so-called North Russian Romani dialect (cf. Ventcel 1966), and the writing

⁴ The most widespread term for both being *čhib* 'tongue'.

system was adopted from the principal state language, Russian. Little is known about the extent to which Romani literacy was actively embraced by speakers of the language outside the institutional context of state-run education and propaganda, though in 2005 the Rombiblio Project run by Russian Romani activist Edourad Schilline documented some 400 Romani language book titles that had been published during this period.

Elsewhere, Romani only entered more formal domains of use in the 1960s. An initiative to promote Romani literacy was launched in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring of 1968 by a union of Romani writers, who adopted the East Slovak Romani dialect, the most common Romani variety in the country, and a writing system based on Czech and Slovak. Both the Soviet and the Czechoslovak writing conventions for Romani took account of what is perhaps the most distinctive phonological feature of the language that is not shared with surrounding European languages, namely the distinctive aspiration of voiceless stops /p:ph, t:th, č:čh/, by creating grapheme combinations to express aspirates (*nx* etc. in the Cyrillic version, *ph* etc. in the Roman version). Apart from that, the writing system largely replicated that of the respective main contact or state language. This principle was adopted from academic transliteration conventions and continues to be used in many popular text productions today, in various countries.

Romani literacy initiatives continued to spread in the 1970s, but were limited to small circles of activists and academics. A Romani alphabet was drafted in Finland in the early 1970s based on the local Finnish Romani dialect but making use of academic transliteration conventions (containing symbols such as *č, š, ž*). A Romani reader for schoolchildren was produced in Sweden in 1979, using the Kelderash dialect⁵ and also employing academic transliteration symbols rather than a Swedish-based orthography. In the United States, Christian missionary organisations began distributing leaflets and Gospel translations in Kelderash Romani and related dialects in the 1970s, using an orthography based on English and in some cases on academic transliteration conventions. In Macedonia, a prescriptive Romani grammar appeared in 1980, propagating the use of either of two local Romani dialects, Arli and Džambazi/Gurbet, in Roman rather than in the Cyrillic script. Elsewhere in Yugoslavia, text production in Romani is attested sporadically from the 1980s among culture activists and intellectuals. In Hungary, teaching and learning materials and text compilations for non-academic audiences in the local Lovari Romani dialect first appeared in the late 1980s in an orthography that distinctively used the symbols *ch, sh, zh* for the palato-alveolar sounds, in contrast to Hungarian.

Parallel to these emerging, de-centralised literacy practices in Romani, a discussion began in the early 1970s surrounding the creation of an international standard Romani language. This was part of an emerging international network of Romani political activists and lobbyists, known as the International Romani

⁵ The Kelderash dialect was formed originally in or around the Banat region of Romania, but is now widely dispersed following waves of migrations into northern and central Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. There is a large Kelderash Romani community in Sweden.

Union (IRU)⁶ (cf. Kenrick 1981, Kochanowski 1989, Hancock 1991). At a conference in Sarajevo in 1986, French language activist Marcel Cortiade (also Courthiade, Kortiade) put forward a proposal for an international alphabet that would include meta-graphemes representing cross-dialectal phonological variation. This writing system, along with a series of neologisms created by the same author, first appeared in print in the Romani abstracts of contributions to the conference proceedings volume (Balić et al. 1989). An assembly of around 30 delegates at the IRU's Fourth World Romani Congress held in Warsaw in April 1990 adopted Cortiade's alphabet as the official 'standard' Romani. Its author and his followers continue to refer to this writing system and the pool of neologisms and grammatical conventions that accompany it as 'standard Romani' today. It is clear, however, that the IRU declaration had little impact on the direction in which domain expansion and codification in Romani continued to take in the early 1990s and thereafter. Cortiade and his associates produced a handful of translations, dictionaries and readers, but their distribution remained limited. The most influential supporter of Cortiade's concept to date is Gheorghe Sarău, an official of the Romanian Education Ministry, who adopted Cortiade's alphabet and vocabulary preferences for use in a national Romani language curriculum in Romania. According to some reports⁷, Sarău trained several hundred teachers in the use of this 'standard Romani', and many were deployed as Romani language teachers in state schools across the country. It is likely that many thousands of pupils were at one point or another exposed to 'standard Romani'. However, there is no documentation of any use of the concept, either privately or in public, save in the textbooks produced by Sarău himself and his collaborators at the Ministry, and thus no evidence that 'standard Romani' plays any role at all outside a relatively modest number of classrooms. Elsewhere, Cortiade's 'standard' has found a handful of followers among some Romani activists in Albania and Macedonia, as well as in Spain, where it was adopted by the influential NGO 'Presencia Gitana' in a Romani language textbook published in 2012.⁸

There are few other comparable 'language engineering' efforts. In Spain, former parliamentarian Juan de Dios Ramirez Heredia, of Gitano origin, developed a language, which he referred to as 'Rromanó-Kaló', after the Romani-derived vocabulary that is used by the Gitanos in Spain, known as Caló. Heredia's invented language consisted of Romani vocabulary picked from a variety of

⁶ For a general account of the IRU's political lobbying activities see Klimová-Alexander (2005).

⁷ Toma (2013) reports that a total of 254 teachers taught Romani language in altogether 230 schools across Romania between 2009-2011. Gheorghe Sarău (personal communication, 21.10.2013) puts the total number of those who enrolled on the Romani Language Diploma course at Bucharest University since it opened in 1999 at 1,100 and the total number of graduates at 360. Mihaela Zatreanu (personal communication, 23.10.2013) reports that between 10-15 textbooks in Romani were produced by the Romanian Education Ministry, and estimates the number of pupils who had Romani language instruction at schools as around 31,000.

⁸ Jiménez, Nicolás and Cañadas, Araceli. 2012. *Sar san? ¿Cómo estás? Rromani chibaqo kûrso. Curso de Romanó*. Madrid: Instituto de Cultura Gitana

contemporary dialects, with simplified inflectional morphology and an enormous number of neologisms that calqued Spanish lexemes, especially in the formal domain. Ramirez promoted his language through websites, printed materials, and a magazine, 'Nevipens Romani', that appeared regularly in the early 1990s. In Denmark, Kosovo-born Romani activist Selahetin Kruezi developed a 'standard Romani' based on the Arli Romani dialect that is widespread in the Balkans, and drawing in part on Albanian orthography. Kruezi has been promoting his form of written Romani since 2003 in a series of teaching and learning materials, beginning with two textbooks for maths and spelling, none of which has been reported to be in use in any education facility, as well as on websites.⁹ A Romanian Romani activist, Alin Dosoftei, writing under the name Desiphral, propagated the use of Devanagiri script for Romani between 2007-2011 and even maintained an entire section in this form of Romani on Wikipedia until it was shut down by the resource's editorial team in 2012 following disputes with other Romani activists.

Without a doubt, in the two decades that followed the fall of communism opportunities to engage in language activism attracted many dozens and possibly hundreds of individuals in central and eastern Europe, as well as, inspired by rising awareness of Romani cultural and political aspirations and increased networking opportunities, in western countries. The dominant pattern remained one of de-centralised, local codification activities. While Romania remains the only country in which there is continuous state support for a Romani language curriculum, initiatives to introduce Romani into the classroom can be found in Finland, Sweden, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. In many countries, classroom assistants of Romani origin use Romani informally to support Romani pupils. This appears to be widespread in Macedonia, but also among Romani immigrant communities from central and eastern Europe in the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Austria, and other countries.

Probably the most concentrated efforts outside Romania to promote the Romani language in the education system can be found in Sweden, Finland, and Austria. In Sweden, the state-run agency for teaching and learning publications 'Skolverket' produced a series of readers in a variety of Romani dialects, catering both for the population of Kelderash Roms who have been settled in the country since the late nineteenth century, and for more recent immigrant Romani groups from Finland and the Balkans. There are no reports on any active use of any of these materials as part of a regular teaching curriculum, save at the initiative of individual teachers entrusted with mother tongue instruction that accompanies the general teaching curriculum, nor of any popular dissemination or consumption among the target audiences.¹⁰ In Finland, the Ministry of Education had been involved in developing resources to support Romani language teaching since the early 1980s, but ceded this task in 1996 to the state-funded Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (Granqvist 2006). The Institute has since

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http://rmy.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standardizuyimi_Romani_qhib_%28Selahetin_Kruezi%29. Accessed 21.10.2013.

¹⁰ Interviews with Angelina Dimiter-Taikon and Mikael Demetri, 21.09.2012 and 05.11.2013.

been active in producing Romani teaching and learning materials, supporting radio broadcasts in the language and training teachers. These activities are seen as, for the most part, emblematic, since the Finnish Romani community is undergoing a process of language shift with few members of the younger generation able to converse freely in Romani.

In Austria, government grants dedicated to support the language and culture of national minorities were made available to a research team at Graz University from the mid-1990s, enabling to document and codify several varieties of Romani spoken by communities of Lovara, Sinti, and Burgenland Roms as well as by the communities of more recent immigrant Roms from the Balkans (Halwachs 2005). Much of the effort concentrated on the endangered dialect of the Burgenland Roms, for which extensive learning resources and teacher training opportunities were created, leading to the introduction of a school language curriculum for Burgenland Romani and a series of newsletters and heritage publications by young members of the community (Halwachs 2012). In Macedonia, a state-sponsored Romani Language Standardisation Conference took place in November 1992. While users do not generally follow the principles of orthography and dialect choice set in the Conference's final document in any strict way, use of Romani in the public domain has nevertheless expanded into printed and broadcast media (Friedman 2004, 2005). In the early 1990s, magazines and newsletters in Romani (often in bilingual editions) appeared with some regularity, produced almost exclusively by Romani NGOs, in several countries, including Poland, Bulgaria, Austria, Sweden, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. A compilation produced as part of the RomIdent project in 2011 lists over 130 titles of pedagogical publications in Romani (not including academic reference works and translations) that appeared in print between 1990 and 2011.¹¹

There is no doubt that the presence of Romani in the domains of formal education and print has been expanding over the past decades, especially since 1990. This expansion is carried out by 'agents', who are the initiators (writers and editors), and by 'facilitators', who are the sponsors. But it is intriguing that there is little evidence of any active involvement of 'audiences'. Hardly any Romani-language newsletters have regular paid subscribers, and very few if any Romani-language textbooks, translations or anthologies are marketed commercially. Distribution targets primarily collectors, either academics with an interest in Romani language and culture, or Romani cultural and political activists. In this respect, the use of Romani in print and even in the classroom context might be viewed as largely symbolic. Its primary impact on target audiences is to send out the message that Romani literacy is possible and in this way that Romani identity has a place among other institutionally recognised ethnic-cultural affiliations. This message is broadcast not only to Romani target audiences but also, perhaps even in the first instance, to outsiders – officials, journalists, and policy-makers to whom Romani printed media can be presented as evidence of a 'legitimised' Romani culture. In this respect, pushing Romani into the formal and printed domain of language use constitutes essentially a political lobbying activity.

¹¹ See <http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/virtuallibrary>

The lobbyists are the 'agents' – the authors of Romani printed material. They are invariably Romani activists who are involved in political and human rights campaigns alongside their cultural and literary activities. Most appear to be just occasional contributors to the Romani literacy enterprise. Their contributions depend on the availability of sponsorship, but less so on dissemination, since Romani printed materials are rarely if ever commercially viable products. It is noteworthy that two of the most prolific producers of Romani texts are not of Romani background: Georghe Sarău, initiator and coordinator of the Romani language school curriculum and teacher training scheme in Romania, and Friedrich ('Mozes') Heinschink, an Austrian language enthusiast who carries out translations of texts into Kelderash Romani on behalf of official organisations and NGOs. The author of the so-called 'standard Romani', Marcel Cortiade, is not of Romani origin, either. The involvement of these participants in the process shows that Romani literacy is a project that potentially offers career opportunities to outsiders who are able to capitalise on the links that they can establish with 'facilitators' and with the community of fellow 'agents'.

The sponsors or 'facilitators' of Romani literacy are sometimes government agencies, who award grants for Romani language materials via NGOs or through established academic institutions (as in the case of the Romani Studies department at Charles University, Prague; the Romani Project at Karl-Franz-University in Graz; and the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland in Helsinki). Two of the largest contributors to the work of Romani NGOs have the European Union's PHARE programme and George Soros's Open Society Institute. A spin-off project of the Open Society Institute's Information Program, the Next Page Foundation, awarded grants specifically for the promotion of Romani literacy. Between 2002-2007 it funded the production of 31 Romani language print publications and 4 web publications produced by altogether 30 organisations in 12 central and eastern European countries. The texts included collections of folk tales, biographies, and educational material.¹² The foundation's explicit policy was not to impose any codification standards but to take a pluralistic approach to the choice of dialect and orthographic variants. Between 2001-2007, Next Page and the Open Society Institute also supported work carried out at the universities of Graz and Manchester toward the production of an online, multi-dialectal Romani language dictionary 'Romlex'.¹³ This resource, too, reflects the pluralism approach by taking into consideration dialect variants representing more than twenty-five different Romani varieties.

If the emergence of Romani printed publications served to set a signal that Romani-language literacy is possible, then the spread of online electronic communication in the language constitutes the actual realisation of Romani literacy as a widespread practice. Romani presence on the internet began in the mid-1990s when Romani NGOs received funding to create websites, when email correspondence among Romani activists proliferated, and when the first email discussion lists devoted to Romani issues emerged. Apart from the technical prerequisites the expansion of Romani into the virtual world drew on the reality that Romani had become the principal practical and symbolic communication

¹² See <http://www.npage.org/article40.html> (accessed 20.10.2013).

¹³ <http://romani.uni-graz.at/romlex/>

vehicle among the growing international networks of Romani activists. Regular international meeting forums, many of them sponsored by multi-lateral organisations such as the Council of Europe and the CSCE in the early 1990s, offered a platform for political exchange. Romani was the natural lingua franca among the delegates who originated in different countries, mainly from central and eastern Europe. Further support for the use of Romani in public and institutional settings has been provided by the growing Romani Pentecostal movement, which has been expanding since the early 1990s not just in central and eastern Europe but in the West as well. Religious gatherings held in Romani and the publication of Romani-language CD's and websites have introduced new domains into the repertoire of Romani language practices of thousands of users. Both the political movement and the Pentecostal movement have created incentives to many Roms who were not brought up in Romani to acquire the language in order to assert their overall sense of belonging but also in order to take advantage of career opportunities offered with the framework of Romani NGOs and evangelical missionary networks, respectively (cf. Matras 2010: 162-165).

The practice of pluri-centric or country-bound codification continued, as did in many cases that of pluralism of form – in choice of both dialect features and orthography – even within one and same platform, as illustrated by the following example from one of the Romani online news portals, *Romano Vod'i*, launched in the Czech Republic around 2001. Here we see two separate news headlines from the same page, both relating to events in the Czech Republic. The first appears in the Lovara Romani dialect, using the grapheme {sh}, while the second is in the East Slovak Romani dialects, and employs the grapheme {š} for the same sound:

- 1) Romano Vod'i <http://www.romea.cz/cz/romano-vodi>, accessed 6 July 2004:
Ande Praga alosarde la legmajshukara romane sha
 'The prettiest Romani girl was elected in Prague'
Ňilaje ela kurzi vaš perše romane mentori
 'In the summer the first courses for Romani mentors will open'

Such flexibility in the form of linguistic variants and their orthographic representation continues even in state-sponsored online media. Swedish state radio (Sveriges Radio), for example, maintains a Romani language website (Radio Romano), with daily updates of Romani language news reports, available both in written form and as audio streaming. The explicit policy is to mix dialects and orthographic variants and one consequently finds side by side on the same page phonological variants such as *adjes* and *avdive* 'today', *shunen* and *ashunen* 'they hear', grammatical-morphological variants such as *kado* and *akava* 'this', and orthographic variants such as *jekh* /jek/ 'one' but *juvlia* /dzuvlja/ 'women', *politsia* 'police' but *procento* /protsento/ 'percent', *aratchi* /aratši/ 'yesterday' but *chavore* /třavore/ 'children'.¹⁴

Romani language websites actually tend toward greater consistency in form by comparison to other online media, since they are usually run by a small

¹⁴ <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/default.aspx?programid=2122> accessed 29.10.2013.

group of authors. On Wikipedia, Romani ranks 238th among the official list of 287 languages of the site, with 541 articles.¹⁵ The Romani section of the site has 7,451 registered users who have contributed to the editing of the page, but stands out in an exceptional ratio of just 7 'active' users (users who edited within the last 30 days) compared to a rather high 'depth' score of 238 (representing the frequency with which articles are updated). By comparison, English has a Wikipedia depth score of 809 with over 127,156 active users, while German has a score of 90 with 20,298 active users and Dutch has a score of 10 with 4,070 active users. Clearly, then, Romani presence on Wikipedia represents an intensive effort by a very small circle of individuals.

The true popularisation of Romani language literacy and public communication is connected to the expansion of social media from around 2003-2004 onwards. As far as users' online profiles allow us an assessment, participants stem from a wide range of backgrounds and are not necessarily part of Romani political networks. Indeed, online Romani chats even extend to Romani communities such as that of the Sinti in Germany and neighbouring regions, where political activists are generally reluctant to promote the use of Romani in public. The 'Sinti Chat' portal contains welcoming phrases in both German and Sinti Romani, and participants code-switch both within and across turns, resorting to an improvised writing system for Romani (and for colloquial German) based by and large on German orthographic conventions:

2) Sinti Chat <http://www.zigeuner.de/01_sinti-chat.htm>

22.02.2010 06.46am:

Moreno: Marcellino bis du nicht der bruder von im?

Moreno: [German] Marcellino aren't you his brother?

22.02.2010 09.56am:

Marcellino: Hallo Moreno. Na a me hum gar leskro Pral ...!

Marcellino: [Sinti Romani] Hello Moreno. No, I'm not his brother ...!

Such virtual spaces serve to connect people around their Romani cultural and family identity without explicitly rallying around shared political-ideological content. The use of Romani is not prescribed and is often not required to support communication among participants, yet it allows them to flag a sense of common heritage and destiny and thus create an emotional attachment to one another. Leggio (2013) describes how users in an online Romani chat forum make use of 'cosmopolitan practices': Centred around Romani Balkan music, Radio Mahalla¹⁶ is operated by a group of DJs and attracts primarily young Roma based in various western European countries (Germany, France, Italy) whose families originate in the Romani community of Mitrovica in Kosovo. Users employ a mixture of languages but the use of Romani is what flags and indeed constructs a shared diasporic identity.

There is no doubt that the use of Romani in online media represents the most significant extension of its usage domains, and furthermore, that this expansion is directly connected to attempts to re-define and re-negotiate Romani identity. Between November 2010 and November 2011, the RomIdent project

¹⁵ Statistics obtained on 02 November 2013.

¹⁶ <http://radio-romani-mahalla.weebly.com/>

archived a sample of computer-mediated communication in Romani. The corpus included Romani-language websites, contributions to online newsletters, and viewers' comments in Romani on YouTube video.¹⁷ Online newsletters were monitored via the *Roma Virtual Network*, which also incorporates the lists *Romane Nevipena*, *Romano Liloru*, and *Roma Ex-Yugoslavia*. Contributions included announcements about cultural and political lobbying activities, reports on publications and meetings, greetings, eulogies, and occasionally poems. Most announcements were posted in English or one of the national languages, especially Serbian, often accompanied by a Romani translation. Announcements rarely triggered replies. They tended to be linguistically coherent, each reflecting a single author's dialect and choice of orthography, while the assembled corpus as a whole gives a mixed picture of dialectal and orthographic pluralism. Users often exchange greetings around holiday times such as Christmas, New Year, Easter, Herdelezi (St George's Day), and Ramadan, and these provide a nice illustration of variation in spelling and structure as different users repeat similar phrases in a dense sequence. Discussions on the newsletters during the monitoring period centered mainly around political initiatives by Romani NGOs and pertinent issues in Romani culture and political life such as migration, language standardization, and access to education. Multi-author contributions to these discussions illustrate how variation in both structure and choice of orthography does not constitute an obstacle to communication. Nor is there any overt pressure on participants to adhere to any particular norm. The corpus thus represents a pluralism of Romani dialect features in a range of spelling conventions.

The corpus of Romani-language comments posted on YouTube videos lends itself to an interesting evaluation of user networks and their correlation with choices of dialectal and orthographic variants (see Leggio and Matras, forthcoming). The three dominant themes of videos that attract Romani-language comments are Romani-language music videos, family events such as weddings, and religious activities (Muslim and Christian ceremonies and celebrations). Videos with religious content often attract comments by users of a variety of backgrounds, as seen in the pluralism of choices of dialect forms and spelling. By contrast, music and family events show a strong tendency toward dialect coherence. They represent user networks that tend to belong to the same Romani community, speaking the same or a very similar dialect and usually originating in the same region. Nonetheless, even among these groups users appear to be geographically dispersed, as suggested by the choice of different spelling conventions triggered by exposure to different contact languages:

¹⁷ The data was collected together with Daniele Viktor Leggio, who contributed to the initial assessment. The total length of the sample is about 118,000 words. It consists of Romani-language websites (around 18,500 words), Romani-language contributions to online newsletters (a total of around 53,000 words, of which 21,000 are single-author edited texts and 32,000 are multi-author contributions to discussions), viewers' comments in Romani on YouTube videos (ca. 13,500 words), Romani-language entries on Vikipiya, the Romani Wikipedia (ca. 32,500 words), and some private correspondence in Romani.

3) YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4g1x_Pjwr0>
wedding milordo&silva.gipsy lovara.shokeshi russia.rom, 3:21 mins., Views:
9,909; 13 likes, 1 dislike; Uploaded by loyza006 on 22 Oct 2009

majkel29194 2 years ago

schukar abiaiv de trajin ande jek 100 bersch o terno ei e terni [...]

'Nice wedding, may the groom and the bride live for 100 years [...]

mrnadi93 2 years ago

szukar tas bahtalo mo cire romniasa super

'Nice, greetings to you and your wife super'

The user statistics give an indication of the popularity of the medium and the comments posted in Romani show how the language has become a frequent and often default choice for users reacting to Romani content uploaded by private individuals. In the above examples, both users employ the Lovari dialect, but the graphemes [sch] vs. {sz} in the same word 'nice' (*schukar*, *szukar*) suggest that their main languages of literacy are German and Polish respectively, thus indicating how the virtual space serves as an organic trans-national network through which a shared Romani cultural identity is celebrated via the medium of a shared language.

We can thus recognise a Romani 'virtual community' (in the sense of Rheingold 1993 and Herring 2008). It is a community that tends to make use of the flexibility offered by the informal character of social media to transpose everyday multilingual practices such as codeswitching from face-to-face, private and oral communication into remotely relayed, public communication in writing (cf. Androutsopoulos 2013) and one that at the same time uses the opportunities offered by the electronically mediated communication to promote a codified form of a speech variety that has so far been limited to vernacular use (cf. Rajah-Carrim 2009). Online social media represent a new domain of language use, one that relies on basic literacy skills and so on a bottom-up and organic codification of language without either a regulatory norm or any form of territorialisation. They show how pluralism of form can exist side-by-side with community-specific dialect choices. In social media and online newsletters, agents do not require facilitators for individual contributions as long as they have access to the technical facilities such as Yahoo lists, chat platforms, and open forums like YouTube, while dissemination to audiences is not an issue thanks to the blurring of any clear-cut distinctions between agents and audiences.

4. Language planning at transnational level

European institutions began to take an interest in the status of the Romani people in the late 1960s, when the Council of Europe first took initiatives to regulate caravan sites and education provisions for travelling populations. The Council of Europe's first statement on the Romani language dates back to 1981, when its Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities adopted Resolution 125 on the 'Role and responsibility of local and regional authorities in regard to the cultural and social problems of populations of nomadic origin', calling on member states to grant them "the same status and advantages as other

minorities enjoy, in particular concerning respect and support for their own culture and language". In 1983, the Council of Cultural Co-operation recommended that "the Romany language and culture be used and accorded the same respect as regional languages and cultures and those of other minorities", speaking explicitly of "Romani", but in 1989, the Council of Ministers of Education voted to promote teaching materials that "give consideration for the history, culture and language of Gypsies and Travellers". These declarations were the product of lobbying activities by Romani intellectuals and their supporters, often academics with an interest in Romani studies.

The protection and promotion of Romani identity and culture became a highly pertinent issue on the agenda of European institutions after 1990, with the realisation that immigration of Roma into western Europe was triggered in part at least by racial discrimination and marginalisation in the post-communist countries and the pressure to secure a level of human rights standards in those countries in preparation of their accession as part an enlargement of the European Union. Arguably, then, interest in protecting Romani culture was driven by an interest among western European governments to prevent large-scale migration of eastern European Roma to the West (cf. Matras 2013). In 1992, Josephine Verspaget, a member of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, tabled a report that formed the basis of the Parliamentary Assembly's Recommendation 1203 'On Gypsies in Europe' (February 1993). The report followed media attention to a rise in violent mob attacks and police brutality against Romani settlements and individuals in central and eastern Europe and public campaigns against the expulsion of Romani asylum seekers from those countries where they sought refuge, such as Germany and the Netherlands. Verspaget was advised by the Dutch Lau Mazirel Foundation, which had close links to the Romani community in the Netherlands as well as to the Roma National Congress, an NGO based in Hamburg, Germany, which led many of those campaigns. Recommendation 1203 was considered a significant breakthrough in that it called for the first time for a permanent Romani political representation at the European level. It also acknowledged language as a key element of Romani culture and thus a key to the protection of Romani identity, calling for the establishment of "a European programme for the study of Romanes and a translation bureau specialising in the language", and recommending that "the provisions for non-territorial languages as set out in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages should be applied to Gypsy minorities".

Subsequent resolutions on the Romani language continued to emphasise the link between political participation, social inclusion, and promotion of the Romani language. In February 2000, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation 2000/4 'On the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe' stated that "in countries where the Romani language is spoken, opportunities to learn in the mother tongue should be offered at school to Roma/Gypsy children", and that "the participation of representatives of the Roma/Gypsy community should be encouraged in the development of teaching material on the history, culture or language of the Roma/Gypsies". Thus, by 2000 at the latest, a consistent position had been established within the Council of Europe, recognising a coherent language (called variably "Romani", "Romany", or "Romanes"), and recognising the need to give it consideration especially within the education system. Implicitly, despite continuing resolutions that address the

needs of “Gypsies and Travellers” or of “people of nomadic origin”, this direction of statements also granted recognition to the Romani minority as a linguistic minority in Europe and so to Romani as the symbolic and emotional expression of collective identity.

Other European texts have at times taken a much more practical approach to Romani, viewing it as an instrument that can facilitate access to services and so a key to integration rather than a token of political particularity. Thus the European Commission’s European Anti-Discrimination Law Review, 6/7 2008 states that “Measures aimed at women from majority groups do not service Roma women, because they do not take into account Roma language and culture”.¹⁸ The Council of Europe’s European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia states in a text on health care for women, published in 2003: “Provision should be made for use of the Romani language to improve prevention and attain optimal care”.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the Romani experience provides a rather unique example of an emerging language planning and language policy process at the transnational level. The Council of Europe continued to take a direct interest in the practical promotion of Romani language teaching. It initiated a series of expert consultations and in publications arising from these meetings it called on state governments to increase awareness of the Romani language in the school context²⁰ and to help Roma pupils overcome social barriers by communicating with them in Romani.²¹ After being lobbied for over a decade and a half by activists close to the IRU to lend its support for a project on the standardisation of Romani, the Council of Europe changed direction in 2005, handing over the issue from the Directorate of Education to the Language Policy Division. A report commissioned by the Language Policy Division (Matras 2005a) recommended support for the prevailing trend toward pluralism of form and structure in Romani language publications and teaching. The Language Policy Division carried this approach forward to another Council of Europe body, the Committee of Experts that oversees the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. A document arising from a joint hearing with the Committee in late 2005 mentions the role of European institutions in helping produce teaching and learning materials that could then be adapted to local needs and local dialects.²² It also states that standardisation is not a demand and that the absence of a standard should not be a reason not to improve Romani language educational

¹⁸ European Commission: Anti-Discrimination Law Review, 6/7(2008), p.44, at <http://www.migpolgroup.com/public/docs/145.EuropeanAnti-discLawReview_6_7_en_11.08.pdf>.

¹⁹ ‘Breaking barriers. Romani women and access t public health care’, 2003, p. 10.

²⁰ Council of Europe. Training Modules for Teachers in the History, Culture and Language of the Roma. Strasbourg. 2003.

²¹ Rus, Calin. 2004. Report on ‘The training of Roma school mediators and assistants’. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

²² Council of Europe, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Committee of Experts, MIN-LANG (2006) 3, Strasbourg, 6 March 2006. Report on Hearing with the Language Policy Division (Council of Europe), 5 October 2005, p 8.

facilities.²³ Representatives of the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF), a Romani NGO with observer status at the Council of Europe, also attended the hearing. In the aftermath, the ERTF published a policy paper on the Romani language, in which it stated:

“The Romani language must be recognized as a language, according to the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, in every member state. It must be allocated a position in the national curriculum and afforded an appropriate budget. The lack of an internationally recognized ‘standard dialect’ is not a barrier to a state’s implementation of rights related to language use and learning. [...] The goal of teaching Romani language is not only to enable a student to speak one dialect well but also to understand and have some knowledge of the Romani used by others across Europe. While a Standard Dialect is not needed, mutual comprehension and ‘linguistic pluralism’ are essential.”²⁴

Taking the process further, the Language Policy Division invited an expert group to consult on the creation of a European Curriculum Framework for Romani (CFR), modelled on previous documents created for a number of other languages. The CFR²⁵ was published in 2008 and contains an outline of culture-specific communicative tasks to be considered in the development of teaching and learning materials, including ‘the home/caravan’, ‘Roma crafts and occupations’, ‘festivals and celebrations’, ‘food and clothes’, ‘transport and travel’, and more. Two implementation projects, both funded by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme in the form of a consortium of partner institutions from different countries, have since worked toward the creation of online teaching and learning materials for Romani based on the CFR: RomaniNet (2009-2012),²⁶ which produced an online animated integral Romani language course, and QualiRom (2011-2013), which produced teaching materials and teacher training packs in six different dialects of Romani for use in primary and secondary schools.²⁷

These efforts, coordinated and funded at European level, are laying important foundations for states to be able to implement calls for the promotion of Romani. In the years since the Council of Europe’s interest in the topic began, recognition of Romani has been elevated from the level of reports and recommendations to the policy level. The European Parliament has called for practical measures such as “increasing the number of Roma teachers and ensuring the protection of the language and identity of Roma children by making

²³ *ibid.*,

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/publications/ReportERTFHearing_en.pdf, p. 10.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p 13-14.

²⁵ Council of Europe, Language Policy Division, A Curriculum Framework for Romani, developed in co-operation with the European Roma and Travellers Forum, 2008.

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Rom_CuFrRomani2008_EN.pdf

²⁶ www.romaninet.com

²⁷ <http://qualirom.uni-graz.at>

education available in their own language”,²⁸ and other European bodies have called on member states to “offer Roma pupils instruction in their mother tongue, upon parents’ request”.²⁹ In the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) of 1992, Romani (‘Romany’) is mentioned explicitly as an example of a non-territorial language, to which some parts of the Charter may be applied. Since then, some fifteen states have recognised Romani as a minority language within the Framework of the Charter. The Charter divides its catalogue of provisions into two categories. States undertake to apply Part II provisions to languages that they list under the Charter. Part II covers general principles such as raising awareness including the promotion of research and teaching and learning opportunities and the elimination of any restrictions on the language. Part III covers specific measures to promote the minority language in public life. States are obliged to select a certain number of provisions from Part III, some of those from designated sections.

Most states limit the recognition granted to Romani to Part II and a minimum of measures under Part III. These usually include the provision of adult education opportunities, measures to ensure the teaching of the history of the community of speakers, and provisions to train teachers to deliver the first two (cf. Halwachs, Schrammel-Leber & Klinger 2013: 42). (Similar statements are made in many of the documents submitted by states in late 2011 in response to the European Commission’s call for ‘National Strategies for Roma Inclusion 2011-2020’.³⁰ To the extent that the Romani language is mentioned, this is usually in connection with affirming the principle of recognition and assuring support for research and the development of teaching materials.) Even where there is a notional commitment within the framework of the Charter to guarantee education in Romani, implementation is usually found to be lacking, as evidenced by reports issued by the Committee of Experts that oversees the Charter between 2001-2011 (cf. Halwachs, Schrammel-Leber & Klinger 2013: 44-50). If Romani language classes are offered at all, this is invariably limited to a small number of schools, and offered as an option, often outside of the normal curriculum and with no regular supervision. Some reports even criticise a “lack of interest” on the part of the authorities and “poor communication” with the Romani-speaking community.

Interestingly, the Committee of Experts’ view on the issues of standardisation underwent a significant paradigm shift. In its 2004 report on Hungary, the Committee recommended that standardisation should be pursued at the European level in order to “avoid a purely ‘national’ standardisation which would risk cutting ties with other Roma communities throughout Europe”. However, in its report on Slovenia from 2007 the Committee stated that it has decided to use the term ‘codification’ rather than ‘standardisation’ “in accordance with the suggestion of the European Roma and Traveller Forum”;

²⁸ European Parliament, Resolution of 9 March 2011 on the EU Strategy on Roma Inclusion, par. 4.

²⁹ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, General Policy Recommendation No. 13 ‘On combatting anti-Gypsyism and discrimination against Roma’, 24 June 2011, section 4(n).

³⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/national-strategies/> accessed February 2012

and in its report on Slovenia, also from 2007, the Committee expressed its support for 'linguistic pluralism' in accordance with the best available expertise on the Romany language".³¹ In fact, the distinction between 'codification' and 'standardisation' was not introduced by the ERTF but, at the same hearing at the Council of Europe in October 2005, by the present author, as was the notion of 'linguistic pluralism' in connection with Romani.³² The joint hearing of the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division, the Charter's Expert Committee, and the ERTF thus led to a fundamental change in policy in regard to standardisation and the adoption of an approach which, as Halwachs, Schrammel-Leber & Klinger (2013: 50) note, parts with common notions of language planning and instead accommodates to the specific sociolinguistic reality of Romani.

Three themes thus emerge from the experience of Romani language policy. First, we witness how the Romani language is acknowledged as a key feature of the culture of the population referred to in the political discourse as 'Roma/Gypsies'. Indeed, in many resolutions language is regarded as a defining feature of this population and there is explicit recognition of the Romani minority as a linguistic minority, a move away from popular and political conceptualisations of the Romani people as a social grouping or lifestyle. Second, the initiative to grant recognition is taken at the European level. States follow the lead of European policy bodies by adopting similar statements of aims, but they are slow in delivering action and their support is more readily given to research rather than to practical work to extend the use of Romani into the public domain. Arguably, European bodies play a key role in the implementation strategies, too, by delivering a model for a curriculum framework and by providing grants to produce teaching and learning materials and to train teachers. This seems to offer a rather unique opportunity for practical initiatives at the European level to enrich national and local provisions for the protection of a minority language. Third, we witness the emergence of a different kind of language policy discourse that departs from conventional language planning strategies and views pluralism of form as enabling domain expansion. This position seeks to override the view put forward by some states, which see the absence of a standard as hindering the promotion of Romani. This change in policy thinking took place at the level of European bodies, in direct response to interaction with researchers and lobbyists. The Romani case may indeed constitute the very first time that policy acknowledges pluralism of dialect and orthography variants in such a way. The background for this paradigm shift is no doubt the absence of territoriality and the proliferation of bottom-up practices of domain expansion, as outlined in the previous section. Altogether, then, we see the gradual emergence of a language policy that may be characterised as non-territorial in its outreach, transnational in its strategic approach, and pluralistic in its practical implementation.

³¹ All quotes and citations from the Committee reports are from Halwachs, Schrammel-Leber & Klinger (2013: 50).

³² see

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/publications/ReportERTFHearing_en.pdf, and Matras 2005a, 2005b.

5. Language as empowerment discourse

The importance that Romani political associations attribute to the symbolism of language as a token of Romani identity can be witnessed already in the activities of the International Romani Union, going back to the early 1970s, and its continuous pre-occupation with the theme of language standardization (cf. Hancock 1991, Courthiade 1992, Kenrick 1996; see also Matras 1999, 2013). A more recent illustration is provided by the European Roma and Traveller Forum's (ERTF) draft 'Charter', first released in 2009. In the document, the ERTF defines 'Roma' as follows:

"Roma is; who avows oneself to the common historical Indo-Greek origin, who avows oneself to the common language of Romanes, who avows oneself to the common cultural heritage of the Romanipe."³³

"Indo-Greek origin" appears to refer to the recognition that the core of the Romani language contains, alongside a majority of Indic lexical roots and grammatical inflections, also a strong element of Byzantine Greek origin. This element is shared by all present-day dialects of Romani, and so it points to a common phase in the early history of the Roma before their dispersion across Europe. Unlike the IRU, the ERTF has not been engaged in standardization activities and has instead supported a policy of 'pluralism' (see above), but on 5 November 2013 it publicly celebrated, for the first time, a 'Romani Language Day' at the Council of Europe's headquarters in Strasbourg.

A nice illustration of the importance attributed to the Romani language in the circles of political activists is provided by statements of support that accompanied the publication of a Romani-Serbian dictionary, based on Cortiade's 'standard orthography' (see above), by Serbian Romani activist and author Bajram Haliti in August 2011. The quotes were posted online by Haliti himself and circulated widely on Romani electronic mailing lists such as *Romani Liloro* and *Romani Virtual Network*. They included a proclamation by former Member of the European Parliament Juan de Dios Ramirez Heredia from Spain, who is quoted as saying that "one of our most significant signs is our language, the rromanò. .. [it] also serves as a connecting element and as a link between the Roma communities from around the world", and one by author and academic Ian Hancock from the United States, who said that "the need to unite our diasporic people has never been greater, and the single most powerful tool we have in order to achieve that, is our language."³⁴

In addition to affirming the importance of the publication, most of the supporting statements also emphasise the 'authenticity' of Haliti's enterprise. Gheorghe Sarău, coordinator of the Romani language curriculum at the Romanian Education Ministry, writes that Bajram Haliti's dictionary "contains

³³ Charter of the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF), Art. 1, at <http://www.ertf.org/images/stories/documents/ERTF_Charter_EN.pdf>.

³⁴ <http://www.romabuzzmonitor.net/first-orthographic-dictionary-of-roma-language-with-grammar-and-orthographic-adviser-by-author-bajram-haliti/> accessed on 01.08.2011

his personal Roma lingual experience as a journalist, editor from TV and radio, and his great knowledge of Romology". Romani activist and academic Hristo Kyuchukov from Bulgaria comments how "the view which B. Haliti presents is the insider view and very few Roma in the world are authors of Romani dictionaries and grammars", and Ian Hancock states that "Much has been written about our Rromani chib, but almost entirely by outsiders. [...] native speakers who have compiled dictionaries can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Now Bajram Haliti joins that small but growing number."³⁵

The pre-occupation with language is regarded in these statements as an emancipatory political act. 'Authenticity', understood to be a claim to Romani ancestry, is flagged as an indication of the credibility and reliability of an academic enterprise. Language is also adopted as a political identity badge by individuals engaged in campaigns to promote Romani political participation. Influential Romani political activists such as Ian Hancock in the United States, Nicolae Gheorghe in Romania and Karl Holomek in the Czech Republic³⁶ acquired Romani as a foreign language in adulthood after joining activist networks in the 1970s and later. Among the younger generation of activists there are many dozens and perhaps hundreds of individuals who have learned Romani as adults. Examples of prominent activists of Romani background who learned Romani as an additional language are Nicolás Jiménez of the organization 'Presencia Gitana' in Spain, Ciprian Necula, in Romania, and Daniel Stanko of the Roma Education Fund, from Slovakia.³⁷ One might therefore speak cautiously of a Romani language 'revivalist' trend among activists. This has even more far-reaching implications in countries such as Spain, Britain, and Norway, where political activists as well as Pentecostal missionaries of Romani background acquire the language in a setting where Romani is felt to be a heritage language but is no longer spoken by the Romani community (cf. Matras 2010: 162-165).

Linguist and Romani activist Ian Hancock has been a leading figure in shaping the political discourse that lays a claim to authenticity while at the same time aiming to diminish confidence in mainstream scholarship by putting forward an alternative, some say 'revisionist' narrative of Romani history. Hancock opens his manifesto publication 'We are the Romani people' (Hancock 2002) by emphasizing ownership of Romani culture and history (my emphasis, Y.M.):

"Although *we* Romanies have lived in Europe for hundreds of years, almost all popular knowledge about *us* comes not from socializing with *our* people at first hand, for *we* generally live apart from the rest of the population, but from the way *we* are depicted in stories and songs and in the media."
(Hancock 2002:xvii).

Language then plays a key role in an attempt to deliver a critique not just of prevailing popular attitudes to Gypsies, but also of mainstream historiographical accounts, which bring the Roms in connection with the emigration from India of caste-like groups specializing in itinerant trades and related to the itinerant

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ On the latter, information obtained from Jana Horváthová, p.c. 03.10.2013

³⁷ p.c. 02.10.2013

artisan populations of the *dom* in India both by name and by social-economic background. Capitalising on the accepted realisation that language provides the principal key to the reconstruction of Romani origins in India, Hancock argues that vocabulary offers an insight into ancient culture and that it allows us not just to refute the hypothesis of a Romani origin in the Indian castes of itinerant artisans, but to replace it by a theory of a supposedly more 'honourable' origin in a military population. Hancock writes:

"... almost all of the words [in Romani] having to do with metalwork are Greek, and this leads us to believe that blacksmithing was not a particular skill brought from India, because the basic vocabulary would otherwise be Indian; and so it also tells us that metalworking as a profession was acquired in the Byzantine Empire or in Greece. [...] Romani does have a set of words having to do with warfare, and those are of Indian origin. The words for 'fight', and 'soldier', and 'sword', and 'spear', and 'plunder' and 'battle-cry' as well as several others have been a part of the language from the very beginning." (Hancock 2002: 10).

"... the presence of native Indian words in Romani for such concepts as 'king', 'house', 'door', 'sheep', 'pig', 'chicken', 'landowner' (thagar, kher, vudar, bakro, balo, khaxni, raj) and so on point to settled, rather than nomadic, peoples." (Hancock 2002: 14)

In this and other publications (Hancock 2000, 2006, 2010a: 54-94, 2010b)³⁸, Hancock puts forward the claim that an analysis of Romani vocabulary points to an origin in a population of military personnel that was assembled in order to resist the Muslim invasions of India in the eleventh century, and that the Romani language emerged as what Hancock calls a 'military koïné' (for a critique of this idea see Matras 2004). Several of these contributions are part of a discussion context that carries the explicit message – inter alia through titles such as 'Danger! Educated Gypsy' (Hancock 2010b) and 'Romani studies through Romani eyes' ((Le Bas and Acton 2010) – that individuals of Romani background can and should put forward their own critical perspective on Romani historiography. A crucial element of the argument is thus the 'authenticity' of the authors themselves. In an online publication, Hancock emphasizes this point very directly:

"Surely if groups of individuals who identify themselves as Romanies seek to assert their ethnicity, and to ally themselves with other such groups similarly motivated, then this is entirely their own business, and the non-Romani anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, folklorists and others who have taken upon themselves the role of ethnic police are interfering and presumptuous at best, and are perpetuating paternalistic attitudes."³⁹

³⁸ The University of Hertfordshire Press has played a key role in the dissemination of texts on Romani issues written by activist-scholars such as Ian Hancock, Thomas Acton, and Ronald Lee.

³⁹ <http://radoc.net:8088/RADOC-9-IDENT-1.htm>, accessed 01.08.2004

Hancock's narrative of a Romani military origin has inspired a number of Romani activists, who have been elaborating on the idea in various forums. In a doctoral thesis supervised by sociologist Thomas Acton and submitted to the University of Greenwich in London in 2008, Adrian Marsh, who self-identifies as a Rom, puts forward an argument that draws heavily on Hancock's work. He argues that Hancock's idea that Romani emerged as a 'military koīné' is plausible since the related Indic language Urdu obtained its name by association with the Muslim-Turkic military garnisons (Turkish *ordu* 'military') (Marsh 2008: 150), and that on that basis the ancestors of today's Romani population can be traced to a population of medieval warriors. Marsh, too, 'essentialises' his argument by relating its content to his own self-proclaimed ancestry:

"As a Romanī historian, it is my intention to outline in this section the historical material that I argue supports the contention that Gypsies can in part be said to stem from ancestors who fought as warriors with differing military statuses." (Marsh 2008: 137)

Marsh goes on to describe a scenario according to which troops who were defeated by the invading Ghaznavid armies in medieval India were split into several groups, some of whom – "the ancestors of the Romanī peoples" (Marsh 2008: 150) – were displaced and ended up in Europe.

This theme of a straying population of defeated warriors escaping the Ghaznavid invasions has become widespread in historiographical narratives of Romani activists, many of them posted online but also presented in print and at public conferences and seminars. The following text is attributed to Marcel Cortiade and has been circulating since 2007:

"They are today 985 year since Mahmud of Ghazni arrived in the Rromani city of Kannauj in India, in 1018 a.D. and meeting no resistance caught all 53,000 inhabitants of the town, in order to lead them as slaves to Kabul and Ghazni where he sold them. He looted all the gold which was in the 10,000 shrines of the city and took also 385 elephants."⁴⁰

Note that the depiction includes a rather detailed narrative that names specific events, dates, and places. This account, too, is 'authenticated' both by Cortiade's self-proclamation of Romani ancestry (documented only since 1995, not earlier) and his credentials as a language enthusiast and linguist. Language plays a role here too. The same narrative is propagated by Sarah Carmona, self-proclaimed Romani activist and historian from Spain. Attributing her insights to Marcel Courthiade as well as to work by Romani authors and activists Rajko Djuric and Ian Hancock, Carmona reports that structural features of the Romani language prove an origin in the city of Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh. She suggests that Romani shares its pronominal forms, adjectival endings, and its possessive postposition specifically with the Indian dialect of Kannauj (though no actual comparative analysis is provided). She then repeats the claim that the Roms originated in

⁴⁰ Posting by Saimir Mile on Roma_India@yahoogroups.com, 20.12.2007

warriors who were captured and expelled in December of 1018 by the invading Muslim armies of Mahmud of Ghazni.⁴¹

Ronald Lee, a Canadian Romani activist and author of a Romani textbook and dictionary (Lee 2005, 2010), provides a detailed historiographical narrative that tells of conquests, migrations, and captivity, and which relies heavily, much like Hancock's work, on an interpretation of Romani vocabulary. In relation to the formation of the Romani language, Lee concludes:

“In the Sultanate of Roum, the language of the group became the military koïné, the only “native” language they had in common which their parents had spoken under the Ghaznavids plus a gradually adopted battery of Byzantine Greek added to the existing Persian and Armenian borrowings which then became our native language or *Romani shib*.”⁴²

Yvonne Slee, a German-born Australian who portrays herself as a Romani leader and maintains close ties with Romani activists, reports on a “new theory on Romani history” that is based on ongoing research by Romani activists Ronald Lee and others, including Ian Hancock, Marcel Cortiade and Adrian Marsh. The “theory”, according to her, suggests this:

“A group of Indians numbering in the thousands were taken out of India by Mahmud Ghazni in the early 11th century. [...] They ended up in Armenia and later in the Seljuk Sultanate of Rom. These proto-Romanies remained in Anatolia for two to three hundred years and during that time they abandoned their military way of life and took up a nomadic lifestyle based on artisan work, trading, animal dealing and entertainment.”⁴³

Another Romani activist, Marko Knudsen, based in Germany, repeats what is essentially the same story on an interactive, animated website, accompanied by a printed brochure, in which he argues that the Roms descend from former prisoners-of-war who escaped slavery.⁴⁴

This ‘alternative’ or seemingly ‘revisionist’ narrative put forward by a number of Romani activists has thus received wide circulation. Indirectly, it has even received some degree of institutional acknowledgement through the fact that some of its authors have published their work in a series that claims academic credentials (University of Hertfordshire Press) and that many have been invited on several occasions to lecture their theories at training seminars on Romani history hosted and funded by the Council of Europe. The narrative emphasises the victim role in Romani history. It portrays the Romani people as victims of medieval military campaigns, and turns this into an explanatory

⁴¹ <http://baxtalo.wordpress.com/nuevas-perspectivas-sobre-historia-gitana>. Accessed 03.03.2013.

⁴² A new look at our romani origins and diaspora, by Ronald Lee, dated 2009. <http://kopachi.com/articles/a-new-look-at-our-romani-origins-and-diaspora-by-ronald-lee/>. Accessed 10.11.2013.

⁴³ <http://www.rromaniconnect.org/Romanihistory.html>. Accessed 28.10.2013

⁴⁴ <http://www.romahistory.com/en/1-1.htm>. Accessed 28.10.2013

account of their presence in the European diaspora and so of their marginalized status in European society. In attributing a military origin to the Romani population, it challenges the hypothesis of an origin in castes that specialized in mobile services, and in this way it depicts the traditional niche that Romani people occupy in European society and the stigmatization that is associated with it as an historical anomaly, one that was brought about through social injustice.

In the absence of any historical documentation that can be brought in connection specifically with the Roms to support these ideas, the narrative is presented as anchored in an interpretation of language and especially vocabulary. The plausibility of a linguistic argument is taken for granted in light of the fact that the accepted, mainstream theory of Romani origins in India similarly relies on a historical linguistic analysis. In this way, activists engage in mimicry of historical linguistic analysis in order to make a political statement. This statement is multi-faceted. It firstly aims at challenging popular stereotypes of the Romani people as a loose assembly of rootless wanderers, who are work-shy and have no sense of history or destiny, and to replace it with an image of a well-defined and proud nation that has been forcefully subjugated. Next, it aims at gaining ground from mainstream scholarship by claiming an 'authentic' Romani voice whose descent-based credentials are sufficient in order to override claims and analyses that are put forward by specialist researchers in the field. And finally, the construction of an alternative narrative and the exchanges within an emerging community of activist-historiographers are perceived as an act of empowerment, where the players assume a collective identity for strategic purposes in the hope that it would lend them authority in the public discourse on Romani politics.

7. Conclusions

The past two decades have seen a strengthening of the political discourse in search of strategies for the social inclusion and increasingly also political participation of Romani minorities both at the European level and at the level of individual states. Key issues in the discussion, as highlighted especially by the European Union's call for National Strategies for Roma Inclusion in 2011, are education, housing, health, and employment, as well as political representation. The latter is often seen as a key instrument toward achieving the other goals. In this context, language plays a key role at several different levels.

Firstly, language has an argumentative value. Social inclusion is seen by many especially in the activist scene, but also among officials especially in European institutions, as predicated on protection from discrimination and on some form of political participation and self-representation. This in turn requires a change in attitudes toward the target population. Flagging the linguistic coherence of the Romani populations is a key argumentative tool toward revising traditional images of 'Gypsies' as a lifestyle or a social grouping and replacing them with an acknowledgement that the Romani population constitutes an ethnic minority. Political resolutions that recognise the right for education in Romani and the need to make provisions to safeguard and promote the language are regarded as recognition of Romani ethnicity and by inference of the legitimacy of structured Romani political participation. The historical

narrative that surrounds the Romani language also offers a way to overcome the problem of recognising the dispersed Romani populations as a single ethnic minority, by relating Romani identity to an historical territory of origin in India. However void this historical relationship is of any practical implications in terms of present-day policy, it lends plausibility to the concept of Romani ethnicity and hence legitimacy to the demand for political representation and protection from racism and discrimination.

Based on this link between language and the discourse of emancipation, the pre-occupation with the Romani language becomes in itself an act of empowerment at various different levels. The demand for formal recognition of the Romani language constitutes effectively a demand for political recognition. The act of publishing in Romani, of codifying and standardising the language and promoting its use in new domains, especially in public and institutional settings, constitutes a political act that symbolises aspirations for political recognition and participation. Many activists see networking and rallying around language as an integral part of the process of nation building. This is also true for the construction of historiographical narratives that draw on the symbolism of language and purportedly also on linguistic evidence and which aim to promote self-confidence among Romani activists to claim ownership over the dissemination of images and interpretation of Romani history. The availability of resources to support Romani language print and websites has provided activists with both opportunities and even with a material motivation to engage in language promotion activities. Language is thus a platform for debate on images, perception, and the status of the Romani people, and one through which roles and relationships among agents/players, facilitators, and audiences can be negotiated.

Alongside its value in negotiating images, roles, and power relationships, the Romani language has undergone some very practical changes in relation to its domain distribution and consequently in the shapes and forms that communication in Romani can assume. In the past two decades use of Romani has shifted from being largely confined to oral, face-to-face communication in familiar settings, toward increasingly frequent use in written, public, and remote-relay communication. This is supported by new technologies and especially social media, and partly also by institutions that provide infrastructure, expertise and funding for the creation of printed materials and other media. Here too, language plays a role as an expression of a shared identity, but this is not bound to either territorialisation or the construction of a unified standard. Instead, domain expansion is reconciled with pluralism of structural variants and orthographic representation as well as with personal, individual ownership of form. This is characteristic not just of spontaneous communication in online media, but it also receives institutional acknowledgement in the form of a willingness on the part of facilitators such as the Next Page Foundation and the Council of Europe not just to tolerate but also to actively support a policy of pluralism in codification.

To some extent, the Romani experience can be considered to be unique. It involves a people with no tradition of literacy, and with no geographical territory or form of government, yet surrounded by clear social demarcation boundaries that segregate them from the majority population in most if not all regions in which they reside. However, the advances of domain expansion in Romani

during the past two decades draw on a series of key developments that are of a global nature, and indeed that are associated with globalisation itself: increased networking and mobility opportunities, the rise of digital communication technology, the role of social media in facilitating virtual communities, the strengthening of trans-national forms of governance especially in connection with safeguarding regional and minority rights, and the growing acceptance of multiple identities or 'scapes' in the sense of Appadurai (1992). With this background, the Romani experience might well set a benchmark for the future development of non-standard, regional and minority languages in a globalised world.

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