

Romani in the UK

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The language-name 'Romani' refers to two separate, albeit related phenomena. The Romani language proper, which has its own vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical rules, is now spoken in Britain almost exclusively by families who emigrated from central or eastern Europe in recent years. Some, originating in Russia, came already via France in the 1950s. Others, probably several thousand, arrived during the 1990s directly from Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bosnia, and other countries. Most of them live in the London area. However, some are dispersed in other urban areas throughout the country. Members of this immigrant minority usually refer to themselves in their language as *Roma*, though in their countries of origin they are often called 'Gypsies' by the majority population. They call their language *Romanes* or *Romani Chib* 'the Romani language' – hence our term 'Romani' (sometimes spelled 'Romany' in older publications). In central and eastern Europe, there are now anywhere between 3-5 million speakers of Romani, dispersed throughout different countries and different regions. Romani is now probably the second-largest minority language in the EU since the enlargement in 2004. Unlike the British Romani population that has lived in the country for many centuries, the eastern European Romani immigrants

are not travellers, they do not live in caravans, and they do not specialise in mobile trades, but have a variety of different occupations.

The second phenomenon that is referred to as 'Romani' involves the occasional use of Romani words in English conversation. This is common among the families of British Travellers of Romani origin (others, like the Irish or Scottish Travellers, do not use Romani, but have their own special vocabularies). It is difficult to estimate the number of users of Romani vocabulary, but it may be as high as 40,000. Many of the British Romanies live in caravans. Each family or clan tends to favour a particular caravan site, and is usually based in a particular region. There are British Romanies all over the country. It is reported that the older generations used to use many more Romani words in everyday conversation, but that use of the Romani vocabulary has now declined. Speakers may insert a Romani word occasionally when welcoming Romani guests or when meeting with other family members. Sometimes the use of Romani is for humour, and sometimes British Romanies will use Romani words among themselves in public places in order to prevent *Gaujos* (non-Gypsies) from understanding what they are saying. Thus, someone might say: 'the *moosh* is *dikkin* us!' meaning 'the man is watching us!' Insertion of the odd Romani word into English conversation is often referred to by scholars as 'Angloromani'.

Neither Romani proper, nor Angloromani, are written languages, and they are not usually used in schools or the media. (However, in central and eastern Europe, use of Romani in the media, especially on the internet, is growing, and there are even periodicals in the language). But in the past few years there have been private initiatives

to introduce Romani as a medium of instruction. In London, a small charity offers afternoon and weekend classes for Romani children, where they learn to read and write in Romani, as does a church operated by British Romanies in the Birmingham area. A London-based immigrant from Belarus, Valdemar Kalinin, recently received an international prize for writing Romani poetry. In churches that bring together British Romanies and recent Romani immigrants, services are sometimes held in Romani. Many British Romanies are now trying to learn and revive the language of their ancestors.

Romani was once spoken by most British Romanies. It was the language of a travelling population ('Gypsies') that immigrated into Britain from the early sixteenth century onwards, spoken by various clans who appear to have entered the country independently, coming from France, Germany, and Scandinavia. They settled all over the country, continuing to specialise in trades that made them mobile. Quite often, they were evicted from the places they occupied, and so continued to travel. For a while, the border area between Scotland and England was a favourite area of settlement. Although Romani is no longer spoken there, many local dialects in Northumbria have incorporated words of Romani origin into the local slang. Examples are *gaji* 'woman', *chavvy* 'boy', *to nash* 'to run', *peeve* 'drink', *yag* 'fire', and many more. Edinburgh slang also contains a large number of Romani-derived words. A few words, like *pal* (originally 'brother'), have entered common English slang.

Romani was used exclusively as a language of the family or clan, or as a language of conversation in occasional encounters with members of other Romani clans. It was not written down, and was often

used to keep conversations among family members in public places such as markets or fairs unintelligible to outsiders. Romani was not used as a language of school, administration, or technology, and so it lacked everyday vocabulary that is associated with these domains. Generally, such terms were simply taken over from English. But in order to keep their language unintelligible to outsiders, Romani speakers often coined new terms by combining, altering, or extending simple Romani words. For example, a 'forester' is called *veshengro*, from the Romani word for 'forest', *vesh*; a 'restaurant' is a *habbinkerr* from the words *habbin* 'food' and *kerr* 'house', thus literally 'food-house'; and a 'mayor' is a *gavmoosh*, from the words *gav* 'village, town' and *moosh* 'man', literally 'town-man'. Gradually, British Romanies began to give up their language in favour of English, though they retained much of the vocabulary, which they now use occasionally in English conversation – as Angloromani. This had partly to do with increasing intermarriage between Romanies and other Travellers of non-Romani origin, as a result of which Romani declined as the main language of the family. Romani proper appears to have survived as an everyday language until the end of the nineteenth century, in regions like Cheshire or Lancashire, and even later among some clans in Wales.

Although it has been spoken in eastern Europe for many centuries now, especially in the Balkans, Romani is not originally a European language. Its origins are in India, and the core of the vocabulary and grammar still resemble modern Indian languages like Urdu, Kashmiri, or Punjabi. Linguists have been investigating the dialects of Romani since the second half of the eighteenth century, and although there are no ancient written records of the language, it has

been possible to reconstruct the development of Romani from the medieval languages of India to its present forms as spoken in Europe. Because the language is Indian, it is assumed that the ancestors of the Roma migrated from India to Europe. They appear to have settled in Asia Minor (now Turkey, then part of the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire) sometime before the tenth century. The language absorbed many Greek influences in grammar and vocabulary, which are still recognisable today. Romani populations gradually moved into the Balkans, and from there, from the late fourteenth century onwards, into central and northern Europe. With the dispersion of Romani populations throughout the continent, different dialects of the language were formed. Although the language remains similar at its core, it is sometimes quite difficult for Roma from different regions to understand one another if they have not had any exposure to other dialects before. Alongside the different pronunciations of words, many loanwords from different European languages create an additional hurdle toward mutual intelligibility.