

Language Problems from the Perspective of the Roma in the Context of the Romani Language Network

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Abstract

The paper is a probe to the language problems from the perspective of the Roma in the Slovak Republic in the context of the width and reach of the Romani language network. The aim of the paper is to open up a space for discussing the language problems in the Roma, an extraction of the current Romani language problems with an emphasis on the language policy and the implementation of the linguistic rights in practice. The research question is what the Roma consider to be a language problem in the context of the width and reach of the language network of the Romani language and what solutions they propose. To obtain the empirical material, we used a qualitative methodology tool, a semi-structured interview conducted in the Romani language. Furthermore, the paper more clarifies the language problems of the Roma in this context and contributes to broader knowledge of the strategies the Roma use in dealing with these problems. The aim is to present and characterise language problems from the perspective of the Roma, to propose measures to solve the problems, and to outline the direction and perspectives of the Romani language.

Keywords: Romani language, language problem, perspectives of the Romani language

The Romani language is not an official language in any country, i.e. Romani is not protected and supported as an official language in any country². This moment causes a disadvantage for the Roma language in comparison with

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² In the Population and Housing Census in 2011 in the Slovak Republic, 105,738 officially claimed to be of the Romani nationality (Štat. Úrad., Tab. 115). Related to the mother tongue, 122,518 officially claimed to have Romani mother tongue (Štat. Úrad., Tab. 156). Thus, there were more inhabitants who claimed the Romani as a mother tongue than those who claimed to be of the Romani nationality by 19,780. However, the unofficial estimates on the number of the Roma in the SR are significantly higher, e.g. The Atlas of Roma Communities 2013 states the number of Roma in Slovakia 402,840 Roma (Mušinka et al., 2014) on the basis of socio-graphic mapping and a qualified estimate. The publication states “four types of housing of the Romani population in terms of spatial relation to the majority: scattered (Romani inhabitants live in the municipality scattered among the majority), concentrated in the municipality (Roma inhabitants live within the municipality, but concentrated in one or more parts), concentrated on the periphery of the municipality (Roma inhabitants live concentrated in the marginal part of the municipality), and concentrated outside the municipality (Roma inhabitants live in a settlement distant from the municipality or separated from the municipality by a barrier)” (Mušinka et al. 2014, p. 6; translated by the study author). In the cities and villages there are 803 settlements, including the settlements on the outskirts of the municipality 324, settlements within the municipalities 246, and segregated settlements 233. Scattered among the majority population there are 187,305 Roma; in the Roma settlements on the outskirts of the municipality there are 95,020; in the segregated settlements there are 73,920; in the Roma settlements within the municipality there are 46,496 Roma (Mušinka et al. 2014).

the languages that are official and at the same time minority languages in another country. However, on the other hand, Romani is protected by the act on the use of the minority languages; the language of a minority for the purposes of this act is the language of a national minority which has been standardised. Although the standardisation of the Roma language in 2008 was an act essentially political, it placed the Romani language into the framework of the act in question.

The priority is that the aforementioned legislative states the Romani language in an equal position with the other eight languages of national minorities in the SR and allows also the implementation of the minority languages in schools under the conditions given by the School Act. The language rights of the Roma and the national minorities are anchored by the EU legislative language standards, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, or the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Furthermore, they are anchored by the legislative language standards of the SR, such as the Act on the Use of Minority Languages, but also the documents of a non-legislative nature, such as the Programme Declaration by the Government of the SR for 2016 – 2020, in which the Government has committed itself to establish the conditions for harmonisation of practice with the valid Act No 184/1999 Coll. Despite the stated numbers and legislatively defined language rights, but also the pressure, recommendations and monitoring by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the Committee of Experts of the Language Charter, the language rights of the Roma are not unified with the real practice. Specifically, for example in the areas such as designations, official communication, bilingual documents, local authority meetings, informing the public, public relations, and education. The concepts of the Government of the SR in relation to language education for national minorities, including secondary and university studies, and also, for example, the Strategy of the SR for the Integration of the Roma up to 2020, adopted in 2012, emphasise the pre-primary education of children from three years of age and education of children from marginalised Roma communities to improve their readiness to start the first year of primary school; to reduce the number of children attending a special elementary school; to use the mother tongue of the Romani children when working with them. In 2004, the Ministry of Education of the SR approved the Provisional Countervailing Measures in order to prepare the sufficient number of teachers teaching in the Romani language. Today, we can conclude that the Measure was effective, but despite that, we have still failed to prepare the sufficient number of Romani teachers. Nowadays, it is the right time to reopen the question of the temporary countervailing measure, and consider it to be updated mainly in relation to: the mother tongue phenomenon in education of pupils, a unique instrument of Roma pupils to achieve better educational outcomes, and thus, to attain higher education; an activator to shape the national pride of Roma pupils and their parents, questions of self-identification; a trigger to preserve, consolidate and actively use Romani in various social areas; the determinant of the inclusion of Romani in the spheres of demand for professional profiling and the use of Romani – a social and academic value in various spheres – especially Romani language teachers. Romani is standardised in the SR, has the status of the minority language, and is under the language legislation of the SR. Thus, Romani is under the act on the use of minority languages and allows also the implementation of minority languages under the conditions given by the School Act. In 2011, the National Institute for Education approved the National Education Programme: Romani Language and Literature (Vzdelávaciaoblast': Jazyk a komunikácia) – the attachment ISCED 1. Its content and performance standard focuses on the language, literature, history and culture of the Roma pupils. In the first and second years, pupils acquire basic information, and in the third and fourth years, they improve their knowledge. In 2011, the National Institute for Education approved the National Education Programme: Romani Language and Literature (Vzdelávaciaoblast': Jazyk a komunikácia) – the attachment ISCED 2. The aforementioned National Education Programme on the objectives of the content and performance standards for lower secondary education defines the framework requirements for language competences of pupils in the level A2. Teaching this subject is possible from the fifth to ninth year of elementary school and from the first to fifth year of the eight-year grammar school (gymnasium in the SR). With effect from 1 September 2013, the Ministry of Education of the SR approved the target requirements for the knowledge and skills of secondary school leavers in the Romani language and literature which are in accordance with the content and performance standards of the Romani language and the literature for higher secondary education. Despite that, the Roma in the SR have no real opportunity to study in their mother tongue, or in the natural selection of schools to choose a school in which the language of instruction is Romani. Currently in the SR, there is no school with the Romani language of instruction, a school in which all subjects would be taught in the Romani language. However, Romani is taught in several private schools (six schools). These schools are rare and there is a lack of them. The learning materials in the Romani language, such as a set of textbooks in the Romani language for all individual subjects and years, have not been developed so far.

However, partial materials and publications for education in the Romani language have been developed, for example in recent years, the National Institute for Education has prepared a limited edition of publications that schools can order as part of a project. Thus, publications that are not automatically available to every Roma pupil or a person who is interested. Working with such a publication in school depends on ordering it and teacher's knowledge of the Romani language. Thus, the Roma are not taught to read and write in Romani, and most Roma have absolutely no experience with texts in the Romani language.

Methods

The research question is *what the Roma consider to be a language problem in the context of the width and reach of the language network of the Romani language and what solutions they propose*. Furthermore, we want to more clarify the language problems of the Roma in this context and contribute to broader knowledge of the strategies the Roma use in dealing with these problems. The aim is to present and characterise the language problems from the perspective of the Roma, to propose measures to solve the problems, and to outline the direction and perspectives of the Romani language³.

To obtain the empirical material, we used a qualitative methodology tool, a semi-structured interview. The individual interviews of the researcher with the respondents were conducted in the Romani language in order to achieve the maximum freedom and openness of the respondents in the interviews and the sufficient interaction between the respondents and the researcher necessary to gain deep knowledge of the topics included in the interview scenario. The semi-structured interview scenario was constructed according to the main topics of the interviews with the respondents in order to obtain information to meet the objective of the qualitative research study. The researcher had a list of topics and additional questions that could be adapted to the topics, their order and the content of the interview.

We conducted the semi-structured interviews in the home or familiar environments of the respondents. We recorded the interviews, transcribed them in the Romani language and anonymised them; each respondent was given a pseudonym. In total, we obtained the corpus, the recordings in the duration of 4 hours and 32 minutes. The main topics of the interview were the framework according to which we coded the respondents' statements. We paraphrased the statements and translated them into Slovak in order to use as many statements as possible. Subsequently, we processed the respondents' statements synthetically (by synthesis) according to the main topics. For each citation, paraphrase, we state a pseudonym of the respondent. All cited statements in the paper were translated into English by the study author.

The respondents in the number $N = 5$ were included in the sample according to the criterion of purposeful sampling of typical characteristics in qualitative research, with an emphasis on university education⁴ and work with the Romani language in practice. In relation to the sample size, we followed the saturation, i.e. we finished the sampling process when we found out that the information from other respondents was repeated. Thus, the respondents were selected so that we could obtain the greatest possible variability of their views. Furthermore, in this study, I use my personal participation in the observation of the linguistic behaviour in the Roma which, as a member of the Romani community with the Romani mother tongue, I conduct almost continuously.

Findings

Based on our findings, we formulate the following problems and measures leading to their solutions:

- 1 The current situation is characterised by a problem of inadequate implementation of language rights of the Romani speakers in practice. An establishment of an institution for minority languages will clearly define responsibility for their protection and development, in particular in the area of language policy, language rights and language management.
- 2 The current situation is characterised by the problem of the absence of scientific and research, academic and professional departments of the Romani language. The recommendation to adopt a measurement of doctoral studies results in the creation of a scientific personnel platform in the field of the Romani language which it is

³ In this paper, we state a part of the findings from the research study. Further findings from this and broader research by the author on the language problems from the perspective of the Roma will be published in other papers by the author.

⁴ For the methods of empirical research on language problems, types of language problems, and language problems, see (Lanstyák, 2010; 2012).

- possible to build on and meet the subsequent strategic objectives and the stabilisation anchoring of the scientific and general development of the Romani language in the SR.
- 3 A lack of a direct financial mechanism for the promotion of science and research of the Romani language characterises the current situation and the problem in the form of absence of findings from long-term studies acutely necessary for practice. By setting up a financial mechanism, stable support, for example, a call for the minority languages by the APVV agency (for example: one call per four years), the VEGA agency (For example: one call per three years), or a national order, a broader contribution to the practice from research on the Romani and minority languages is assumed.
 - 4 The current situation is characterised by the absence of professional language counselling for the general public and personnel in practice working with the Romani language. The Language Counselling Institution for Minority Languages as an agenda of the institution for minority languages can be assumed to be an effective part of its own profile to ensure and provide professional language counselling.
 - 5 Language schools in the SR currently do not provide the courses of the Romani language, nor the general state examination on the Romani language. The state examination on the Romani language is a legislative warrant, for example to start up a business in the field of foreign languages and cultures – the Romani language, to establish a language school, and other opportunities that will contribute to the saturation of the Romani language into practice.
 - 6 The platform for the Romani studies will contribute to the creation and formation of a coalition and micro-coalitions of actors of various processes related to the Romani language. It will also contribute to the coordination and transfer of information mainly in the area of social demand in the context of the Romani language.

Several cited statements from the study:

There are people who deal with the Romani language, who care about the Roma identity, who elevate romipen and our nationality, culture, traditions. There can't be a nationality without its language. When a nationality doesn't have its language, then we lose it or it is somehow deformed, bad, then we can't say that it is such a true proud nationality [BD].

What is needed? That language [Romani] if we want it to be enacted, some experts are needed who understand and know what is necessary, and that it is necessary to meet people and ask them what and how. We can't do this by gathering the whole settlement, we can't. Therefore, qualified people who will fight for that language [Romani] when we want it to be enacted. May there be books, may there be teachers, and may children learn in the Romani language [BD].

The standardisation allows us that we can claim as one largest nationality in Slovakia that we want our laws when it comes to the [Romani] language. We can say that I want to speak in my language even if I go to some authorities, also when I go to the official places, also when we write books, when we work in the media, when we have poets, when we want to develop culture in our language. All this should be [BD].

But in some villages where there are those tables there, but we do not have such people, experts, everyone is an expert. The Non-Roma says that it is necessary for the Roma to do something and they will find any Roma, they do not care if he can or can't and he says that I can. This is our big problem because the Non-Roma think so that it is sufficient to be a Roma. It must be a linguist, it is necessary for a person to go to the field to understand this language. I do believe that a lot of money was invested by our country into this, but we threw this money into the air. Because no one is doing his job, no one, no one asked us, did not give such a question to people who did this, so tell us that the name of this village, but I did not hear anything [CA].

In my opinion, it is such that it is not a bad decision (reasoning, the result of good reasoning), just it is necessary to grasp the language and work with the Romani language. It matters that they want to speak Romani, hey, so they speak, but they don't have one book to show children that this is this way and this is that way. Only when talking about that, what it is or how it is, it is very little. They would need some books to learn the Romani language, if it were so [CA].

Well, what should be done is a difficult question. We know that there are Slovak, or eastern Slovak teachers, or such, or such. But when we went to school, we didn't learn a dialect but they chose one language, they call it the pure Slovak language, that centre, hey, I would say, so why can't we take it and do so with the Romani language. So, they could do that, they would learn in the centre (Romani from central Slovakia) as in Slovak or Hungarian, and they don't speak Hungarian in dialects either, that is, like the Slovaks, the Hungarians, this could also be with the Romani language [CA].

However, there are such films, we also watch them, where they speak the English language, speak the German language, and there are subtitles there, so why couldn't there be films in Romani. Good Romani and Slovak subtitles. There is no problem [BB].

Well, there is the law, or there isn't, I don't know, I don't know. Well, there is, of course, I saw Slovak or Hungarian. It's down, also in Plešivec it is written there Plešivec – Pešíc, or Gica – Hucín [BB].

I know there is a law that if I don't understand that form to fill in. That's, how to say it, the worker sitting in the office should call some assistant, a Roma assistant, who would translate him to understand when it is not written in Romani, so it is quite problematic, but we are living in 2016 and some people can't write and can't read. When he goes to school only four elementary, five elementary years, so it isn't enough [AA].

It's very difficult. If that were the case that children would learn Romani in school, then I say yes. Also when those children see on that shop or school the writing in Romani so maybe they would have a better relationship with Romani, because when they see only in Slovak and in Hungarian they will say to themselves why I would need the Romani language, what I'm going to learn it for when it is absolutely enough when it is in Slovak and also in Hungarian, so that. A difficult question, a difficult question. I always say – if they don't teach our children Romani at school, then it's useless [ES].

Discussion

The aim of the paper is to open up a space for discussing the language problems of the Romani language with an emphasis on the language policy and the implementation of the language rights in practice. In their study, Rácová and Samko state an assumption of linguists that during this century 90 – 95 % of the 6,000 – 7,000 languages spoken worldwide can extinct or can be severely threatened, which can also result in the loss of the unique identity, culture and tradition represented by those languages. As no community can remain without a means of communication, they (gradually) replace their traditional language by another language – a contact (dominant) language. If the traditional language is lost, the importance of the contact language is suggested by a number of linguists; they also say that the contact language itself cannot be a cause or an indicator of the extinction of the language. However, it is one of the conditions that allow the extinction of the language, especially if it is in a dominant position, whether socioeconomic or political, as it is in the case of Slovak in relation to Romani. A language community or an individual can be forced to use another (dominant) language, for example, if they are in a situation in which their traditional language does not allow them to get employed, to acquire education, to communicate in various institutions, to get rid of the stigma of a member of a despised minority, etc. If a national minority lives in a country where the official language is dominant, it is necessary for people to speak that language if they want to find employment in a majority society (Rácová, Samko, 2017). The Romani language in the context of the situation in the SR is characterised by a problem in the language policy and the implementation of language rights in practice. Problem: 1 A lack of experts in the field of the Romani language; 2 The absence of scientific and research, academic and professional institutions and workplaces; 3 The Romani (national) corpus of the Romani language, the various corpuses of the Romani language – an archive of audio recordings of the dialect interviews in Romani; 4 The absence of a direct financial mechanism for the promotion of science and research on the Romani language; 5 Language schools do not provide a general state examination on the Romani language; 6 The absence of university studies of the Romani language study programmes; 7 The Romani language as a language of instruction and a language taught in schools. The clear identification of the language problems of the Roma and proposed solutions from the perspective of the Roma leads to a solution to the problems which the subsequent strategic objectives and stabilisation anchors of the scientific and general development of the Romani language and the growth of the socioeconomic value of the Romani language can be based and developed on.

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Documents

Tab. 115 Obyvateľstvo podľa pohlavia a národnosti <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

Tab. 156 Obyvateľstvo podľa pohlavia a materinského jazyka <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

Správa o stave používania jazykov národnostných menšín na území SR. Za obdobia rokov 2017 – 2018. Úrad vlády SR, 2018. Dostupná na: https://www.narodnostnemensiny.gov.sk/data/files/7462_sprava-o-stave-pouzivania-jazykov-narodnostnych-mensin-na-uzemi-slovensk.pdf