
REGARDING THE BILINGUALISM OF ROMA MINORITY IN THE BALKANS AND EUROPE

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Abstract: In this article, differently from the problems analyzed in the previous articles regarding the Roma issue, which has a linguistic and cultural minority with undisputed values and traditions, there will be treated another matter: the bilingual nature of this ethnicity, in the Balkans and in Europe.

The analysis and the interpretation of the facts, of the phenomenon of historic-linguistic problems is supported on a very rich material and documented from Albanian and foreign researchers, and even from the documentation of field materials.

The studies in the field of linguistics and more specifically in the field of sociolinguistics prove that the idea that language has its own history is not a new one. Our article will submit two aspects of the study:

- ✓ Roma language, its formation and structure;
- ✓ Its field of usage extended in all the aspects of the speaking minority, under the conditions of bilingualism and biculturalism.

According to Father Justin Rrota “*Language is constituted by people*” and from this expression we derive the affiliation of the Roma minority. It is true that language is one of the main indicators, however it is not decisive. Even the Roma language, as a descriptive element of this minority for which we are talking about, is presented as a changing dialectal variation of speech. Roma people, wherever they might be situated and even though speaking with dialectal changes, speak their own language.

Keywords: bilingualism, Roma minority, Balkan, Europe

Roma language, which is spoken in 50 countries, as it would have faced a migration of thousand and of km from Northern India to Europe 1000 years ago, then in other continents, is a case which represents a particular interest, as it summarizes, the following features:

- The detachment in the 11th century of the minority which spoke Roma language from its territory of origin.
- The long period of transition of its speakers that was caused by persecution and consecutive expulsions.
- The preservation of an ancient language during almost a century in a minority position wherever it was spoken.
- The contact with a large number of local languages in the majority of cases under the form of very outdated local variants of speaking.

The Roma people are heirs of a language called the Roma language, practiced from the majority of them, but which still remains in the rang of a distant past, especially for those who have come from the west of Europe, Gypsies (gypsies from Spain) in the Iberian Peninsula and Gypsies in England. (Courthiade, 2002)

According to their distribution in different places of the world there can be distinguished:

- The Roma group: eastern Roma people, is especially live in the central Eastern Europe and also in the Balkans and in the central USA, speak a Roma language that is nearer to the Indian prototype.
- The Sinto group: also known as Manush in France, is especially found in the Germanic Europe and in France and speak a Germanized form of Roma language.
- The Kalo group: is especially found in the Iberian Peninsula and in the Latin America, have now lost the usage of Roma language and have only preserved some dozens of words used in the local language, especially in the catalane and Spanish of Andalusia, as a form of allegoric register. Of course they all have an Indian origin and have come from Europe and Minor Asia and the Balkans. (Courthiade, 2002)

This language originates from a number of known idioms that are near with Sanskrit language and as a result it possesses many basic elements in common with Hindu, Nepalese, and Punjabi etc, which are sister languages from northern India. With the arrival of Roma from Europe and in other places of Balkan the local population of these places faced the dilemma of what this language was. Even though it wasn't given much attention it was arrived to a conclusion. The fact that these nomads came and went without a home or a country it was thought that they didn't speak their own 'real' language. The origin of the India language was discovered only in the 18th century. In relation to this fact there was treated another article for the analysis of this origin. Throughout all the long coexistence of Roma language with other languages there were indirect influences on changes. The borrowings have been

expressed through daily conversations that later have become even part of their spoken language in a broad way. Nevertheless, this language has preserved numerous grammatical features of average and modern Indian languages, and also around one thousand stems, to which there were added 70 Persian stems, 40 Armenian, 220 Greek and a number of local European borrowings of different countries. Separated for more than five centuries from its trunk (from Kanauxhi, the northern part of India), as a result of Roma parting to Europe and mainly in the south-eastern part, the Roma language has not progressed in parallel with its trunk and with the languages of surrounding countries where they settles, regarding lexical enrichment, and linguistic norm development. (Courthiade, 2002)

However, stronger influence on Roma language was placed by the languages surrounding it. The division of the language into variants of local varieties is connected with the years of migration among different routes and different epochs. These varieties change from each other more in the context of what has been forgotten from the belonging groups of Roma speakers, rather than in the context of their basic features. In the last years the international contact has become more common and tendencies have been born toward the fusion of an only variety. But which are the functions of this language that until present days has been preserved from this minority with a fanaticism that rarely happens under the condition of persecution and contempt in every corner of the Earth? The usage of language and its shades in the way which is spoken has many functions:

- Communication and understanding of language spoken by others;
- Signals given for what is common with the speaker;
- The differences, by drawing out in the same time the respective peculiarities;

For Roma people there is a strong connection between social positions, the membership in a specific group or sector of the society from one side and the linguistic behaviors from the other side. When a Roma is talking to another Roma, they will use and manipulate language with the purpose of overcoming diversities, by preserving in the same time the differences within the common frame that are known through the expressions reciprocally used. Language, by being adjusted to the needs of each speaker, constitutes an indicator of the level of: social capability they might have or they might want from the interlocutor; and of the social distance that they would want or they need to have with each-other. In the wandering world of Roma with their accumulation and separation that were dictated from the circumstances, *language* takes a major importance even as an element of personal identity, and as a factor known by others. The language used is part of the linguistic communication and in this same way it is very important how is it used. Therefore, on one side language is a container, an appropriate form and above all a means to transmit social importance. Speaking a language is an aspect: the way we speak is another thing. Another function of language for the Roma is to be distinguishes from a foreign environment, by making them unsuitable in that environment. In this situation the usage of a 'secret' language can also become the mechanism for social protection, but we can say that this can be a matter of pride or a feeling of superiority.

As it was cited in the previous paragraphs, Roma people were dispersed in all the places around the world, and settled even in the Balkans, and specifically they found shelter in Albania. According to different national changes, in the population of national minorities there is included even the Greek one, which is concentrated in the south of the state, the Macedonian is concentrated in the southeast of the state, and also the Malaysian minority which is mainly concentrated in the region of Shkodra. These groups are regarded as national minorities. Whereas other ethnical groups such as Aromanians and Roma, which have lost the connections with their country of origin, are considered in Albania as cultural or linguistic groups. (Geographical Atlas of the population of Albania)

These groups, according to the rule, are assimilated with the majority of the local population. Independently from their ethnical belonging, all these groups of the population have the administrative right of Albanian citizenship. They are linguistic communions that enter into the composition of the Albanian nation. This is written in the "Minorities and the protection of their rights in Albania". During a 50 year period, the Roma people couldn't get out or the regime's control, and migrate into another region, they were urbanized and brought into the cities or in agricultural enterprises. With democratic changes, many Roma families have come from other cities and districts of Albania and are concentrated mainly in the suburbs of the city of Tirana. Tirana, as the capital city of Albania, offers greater chances especially in trading, which has been and still is the main commitment of Roma people. However, their settlements are different, according to the registrations performed by the Society of Democratic Union of Roma in Albania. The three main tribes: *Kabuxhinj*, *Meçkarë*, *Cergarë*, are concentrated in the main cities of Albania. This last concern along with the nomination of tribes was treated in another article.

There is something that must be made clear, and that is the fact that Roma people are not equal to Egyptians, which are integrated into the Albanian population and are fully assimilated from it. Whereas Roma people have jargons and speak in dialects.

"*Our language has wandered like we have done in many routes*" (Courthiade, 1992), is an expression found in a Roma primer.

It has come along with Roma people from India and since there is spread throughout the world with them. All Roma people are recognized from far or near due to Roma language. Millions and millions of Roma people in Europe speak a very clear and correct Roma language. Even those who do not speak it any more have different Roma words which old people still use in this language.

As any other language, even this language presents a diversity of dialectal varieties and idioms. The term “*dialectal variety*” and “*idiom*” was used in order to show the specific way of speech of a small Roma group, whereas the term “*dialect*” is reserved to the main dialectal divisions of the Roma language. We have treated another article related with this matter, especially related with the structure of this language.

Modern linguistics has proved that a total unification is not reachable; especially under the condition of the distribution of this language’s speakers in some different states. It is sufficient that dialects get near with each other in a way for not having difficulty in the communication. In this way dialects preserve their character, by gradually eliminating just the elements which obstacle inter-comprehension inside the linguistic Roma space.

Consequently, in the analysis of the scientific linguistic studies in the affiliation of this population, language is one of the major indicators, but not a decisive one. Nonetheless, as we saw in this minority which we are treating, this element is damaged and to be more accurate this ethnic minority does not have its special language in the Balkan Peninsula. According to the place they live the members of this population speak the language of the hosting country or the language of the country they have migrated from, in a near past with Balkan. Hence, for instance, in the following cities in Macedonia: Ohrid, Struga and Resnje people speak Albanian language in a Tosk dialect, whereas in the region of Dibra and in Shkodra people speak the Geg dialect. The same thing happens in Elbasan. In Kërcovë, in Prelep and in a part of the region of Manastir people speak the Macedonian language, whereas the rest and the majority of people in eastern Macedonia speak the Turkish language. In Serbia people prefer to speak Serbian language, however in the region of Kosovo and in Metohi the mother language for people is Albanian language. In all these countries the members of this minority are bilinguals, therefore they live under the conditions of bilingualism or a part of them is polyglot.

Let’s remember that Roma language has been affronting for many years a new environment with all the ‘lexical shock’ that this environment provided. We can say that every renovation or discovery of an object can be a case of borrowing of a foreign word. For instance the word “*çhuri*” that indicates a *pocket knife*, traditional item of a Roma male, but which has also taken the meaning of *table knife*, it is almost used in all the strata of Roma dialect.

Nevertheless, the Meçkar Roma of Albanian, use the word “*çhuri*” only when they are referring to the original object (i.e. a man’s pocket knife), by borrowing for the second meaning the word ‘*pika*’ (which means ‘knife’ in Albanian), in this stratum of the Roma dialect. Moreover, the word ‘*çaro*’ that means *plate*, is an old Indian word, not known anymore, but only among old Meçkars, because this word has left its place to the word *plate* in the meaning of the *plate* in western language, *platter*, from Albanian *plate* (which derives from Italian language).

If both objects and words would survive near each other we could speak of lexical enrichment. If the ancient means disappears and it takes with it the lexis that labels it, indisputably we deal with linguistic and cultural loss.

The language of Roma people is influenced everywhere from the language of the population of the environment in which they live or have lived. However, due to dialectal peculiarities, the different borrowings from special groups of languages that determine the division among them, cannot escape bilingual influence. But language does not constitute an obstacle for communication. It can be verified that every Roma group is defined by the language or dialect and this language characterizes it as a group. *Meçkarë*, *Kabuxhinj*, and *Cergarë* have their own dialect. In the same way people change a profession or manner of living, Roma people can even change the language of a Roma group with another one. This change can happen not only with the language of the population surrounding it, but even with another Roma dialect. Studies until present days have reached similar conclusions that Roma people can exploit their language even as a means of self isolation during the contact with other surrounding communities, when they do not want to be understood. In the meetings we have conducted with Roma merchants in the cities where they are concentrated such as in Elbasan, Tirana, Pogradec, Bilisht, Berat and in Peqin, during specific discussions it was discovered that they can adapt very easily with the environment where they work and live by using Albanian language. However, when they do not want to be understood they use Roma language.

Here is a claim of the owner of the house Xhemal Mustafa, in a Roma family, born in Pogradec, and concentrated in Elbasan where among claims he states:

“...*the merchant of the neighborhood, in this case a Roma in a young age, can understand everything, but there are cases when she does not understand people, uses signs, according to respective labeling*”.

Hence, Roma people have learnt Albanian language naturally, only just as a necessity in the process of daily communication and as a result of contact with the members on non Roma communities.

Therefore this situation is not general, because there are cases that a part of them has learned Albanian language at school, especially after a 50 year period of our country’s development. Xhemal is one of those people who possess a

good Albanian, but at the same time he speaks Greek, Turkish, Yugoslavian and a little Arabic. However, inside the family they only speak Roma language.

Nevertheless, Roma language, differently from the Egyptian's language, has been preserved with fanaticism under the conditions of discrimination and persecution that have followed through the years this population from one place of the world to the other. The story of Roma is more made of routes that they have travelled, rather than imprints that they have left behind. They have always been able to face with the language, the lifestyle, the traditions and the culture of societies that they have found during their journey.

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