

# Roma perspectives on their language problems in the context of language ideologies

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## Abstract

This paper is part of research focusing on society-wide language problems of the Roma community in the context of language ideologies of the Roma in the Slovak Republic. The purpose of the paper is to identify current language problems from the perspective of the Roma community and to open space for discussion in the process of managing their language problems. The research question is as follows: *What do the Roma people consider a language problem in terms of the scale and reach of the Romani language network, and what solutions do they propose.* To obtain empirical material, we used a qualitative methodology tool, specifically a semi-structured interview conducted in the Romani language. At the same time, the paper further clarifies the language problems of the Roma community and contributes to a wider understanding of the Roma strategies in addressing these problems. The aim is to present and characterize language problems from the Roma perspective, to propose measures addressing the problems, and to contribute to their solution.

**Key words:** Romani language, language problem, language ideology, Romani language perspectives

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The Language Management Theory as a theoretical approach to language and communication as well as language problems have been developed since the 1970s (Neustupny, 1968; 1970; Neustupny, Nekvapil, 2003; Nekvapil 2001; Nekvapil, Sherman 2009; 2013; 2015). One of the main missions of language management and language planning theory as a form of organized language management is the research of language problems, their characteristics and management, and the actual solutions to these problems. Research on language problems in the context of the Romani language ideologies<sup>1</sup> is based on the hypothesis that *the effectiveness of language*

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2011 population and housing census in the Slovak Republic, 105,738 inhabitants officially declared their Roma nationality (Stat. Office., Tab. 115). 122,518 inhabitants officially declared the Romani language as their native language (Stat. Office., Tab. 156). This means that 19,780 more inhabitants declared the Romani as their native language compared to the inhabitants who declared to be of Roma nationality. However, unofficial estimates of the number of Roma in Slovakia are significantly higher, for example, based on sociographic mapping and a qualified estimate, the 2013 Atlas of Roma Communities states that there are 402,840 Roma living in Slovakia (Mušinka et al. 2014). The publication mentions “four types of housing of the Roma population in terms of spatial relation to the majority: dispersed (Roma inhabitants living inside a municipality dispersed among the majority), concentrated inside a municipality (Roma inhabitants living inside a municipality but concentrated in some part or parts thereof), concentrated on the outskirts of a municipality (Roma inhabitants living concentrated in the peripheral part of a municipality) and concentrated outside a municipality (Roma inhabitants living in a settlement remote from a municipality or separated from a municipality by some kind of barrier)” (Mušinka et al. 2014, p. 6). There is a total of 803 settlements in towns and villages in Slovakia, including 324 settlements on the outskirts of municipalities, 246 settlements inside municipalities and 233 segregated settlements. 187,305 Roma people live dispersed among the

*problem tackling could be increased by mapping the real needs of language users and by identifying strategies to address them within the frame of simple management.* We assume that research on language problems in the context of the Roma language ideologies will contribute to a deeper understanding of language problems from the Roma perspective and consequently to proposals leading to their solutions. Research in this area forms and saturates the database of Romani language problems, mapping the real language problems from the Roma perspective and identifying strategies for addressing them in accordance with the management intended to solve the language problems of the Roma community. It is also intended to map the language ideologies as a source of language problems leading to their solution. The recency of the examination of language problems and language ideologies related to the Romani language is mainly determined by the number of language problems that are not addressed at all, as well as by the overall situation, status, and position of the Romani language in Slovakia. Despite the fact that the Roma live in different countries, the research on their language problems in foreign and Slovak linguistics is rather rare (Hubschmannovy, 1979; 2000; Hubschmannova, Neustupny, 1996; 2004; Neustupny, 1993; Kyuchukov, 1994; 1995; 2014) and domestic authors (Racova 2010; 2015; 2017; Racova, Samko 2017; Samko 2010; 2017). In addition to the standard language variety, the language management theory, in its broader focus, also deals with problems in the context of bilingualism, which give rise to the language problems of the Roma, in our case, in the context of Roma-Slovak bilingualism. While there are international organizations such as the GLS (Gypsy Lore Society) and the NAIRS (Network of Academic Institutions in Romani Studies) operating abroad, a specialized institution is still missing that would use a standardized research tool to assess and address language problems of the Roma in the context of bilingualism. A wide range of Roma problems is still unknown, also in relation to their bilingualism. Verbal manifestations affecting Roma children in both languages, mothers' language directed at Roma children, direct and indirect language input when acquiring the second language (SLA - Second Language Acquisition) by Roma children, which does not only affect preschool-aged children. Of course, not only language input plays an important role in language acquisition (Clark, 2009), but also the language ideologies of the Roma mothers and the approach and attitudes of Roma mothers, families, and Roma communities towards languages. The language situation in Roma segregated communities also varies and requires different ways of survey: "Multilingual situations differ in so many ways that each researcher has to decide for himself/herself how to best systematize or organize many obvious differences" (Fishman, 2004, p. 114). The idiolect as a single-speaker language, individual language competence in Romani and Slovak, can show the context of L1 and L2 acquisition and processes that may not be more visible when analyzing a larger language corpus. "An analysis of the development of two linguistic competencies in one person may help us to understand to what extent the depth logic of development is determined by the specific grammatical system or the specific way of processing the human language", [...] (Meisel, 2004, p. 260). In the area of second language acquisition in international

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majority population, 95,020 in settlements on the outskirts of municipalities, 73,920 in segregated settlements and 46,496 in settlements inside municipalities (Mušinka et al. 2014).

linguistics, there has been a lot of research in the L1 and L2 language pairs of different languages. There is no standardized tool for assessing bilingualism and second language acquisition in the language pairs of L1 - Romani and L2 - different languages, specifically where L1 is the Romani language, and L2 is the Slovak language. The key issues in the area of Romani-Slovak bilingualism especially include linguistic aspects of bilingualism such as linguistic contact intensity, linguistic borrowing, interference, code-switching, lexical diversity, socio-linguistic aspects of bilingualism (who speaks, who with, when and in what language, the length of exposition, beginning of L2 exposition, diglossia), psycholinguistic aspects of bilingualism (cognitive aspects of bilingualism, differentiation of languages in Roma children) with output for education. Indirect and, at the same time, direct linguistic input in the second language also occurs to a minimum extent in the Roma communities. At present, we recognize this phenomenon and can describe it partially, but we do not know anything more about the key issues. The assessment of the narrative abilities of bilingual children is one of the complex ways of assessing the level of communication ability and can significantly contribute to the assessment of school maturity and readiness of Roma children for education in the Slovak language. One of the signs of Roma settlements and poverty is the link with social exclusion, including its spatial expression, where part of the Roma living in segregated communities is considered to be the most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion (Rusnakova, Rochovska, 2016). "Pupil's ethnicity has no place in formal education." (Rusnakova, 2013, p. 227). The author supports her statement by several kinds of research, which were carried out in a Slovak elementary school. Rusnakova (2013) further states that the school applies a "civic" approach to Roma pupils, and their ethnicity (and everything connected with it, including language) is of little or no interest to the teacher.

## Methods

The research question is as follows: *What do the Roma people consider a language problem in terms of the scale and reach of the Romani language network, and what solutions do they propose.* At the same time, the paper further clarifies the language problems of the Roma community in the respective context and contributes to a wider understanding of the Roma strategies for addressing these problems. The aim is to present and characterize language problems from the Roma perspective, to propose measures addressing the problems and, at the same time, to indicate the direction and perspectives of the Romani language<sup>2</sup>.

To obtain empirical material, we used a qualitative methodology tool, specifically a semi-structured interview. Individual interviews between the researcher and the respondents were conducted in the Romani language in order to achieve maximum freedom and openness of the respondents in the interview and sufficient interaction

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we present some of the research findings. Further findings from this and broader research of the author of language problems from the perspective of the Roma and the language ideologies of the Roma will be published in other author's papers.

between the respondents and the researcher needed to gain a deep understanding of the topics of the interview scenario. The semi-structured interview scenario was constructed according to the main topics of interviews with the respondent in order to obtain information to meet the objective of qualitative research. The researcher was allowed to choose from a range of topics and additional questions that he/she could adapt to the topics, their order, and the content of the interview during individual interviews.

We implemented the semi-structured interviews in the home or familiar environment of the respondents. We recorded anonymous interviews, transcribed them in the Romani language, using a pseudonym for each respondent. Together we got a corpus, recordings of 4 hours, and 32 minutes. The main topics of the interview formed the skeleton according to which we coded the answers given by the respondents. We paraphrased the answers, translated them into the Slovak language in order to use as many quotations as possible. Subsequently, we synthetically processed the answers of respondents according to the main topics. For each quotation, paraphrase, we stated the respondent's pseudonym.

5 respondents (N=5) were selected as the research set according to the criterion of deliberate selection of typical features in qualitative research with emphasis on university education<sup>3</sup> and working with the Romani language in practice. With respect to the size of the research set, we were guided by saturation, so we ended the expansion of the selection when the information from other respondents began to repeat itself. The respondents were, therefore, selected to obtain the greatest possible variability in their opinions. Furthermore, I based this research on my own personal, participatory observation of the linguistic behavior of the Roma, which I, as a member of the Roma-speaking community, carry out almost continuously.

## Results

Based on the findings, we can formulate the society-wide language problems of the Roma in the context of language ideologies and the measures addressing these problems:

1. The Romani language is not an official language in any country, and as such, it is not protected nor promoted as a state language in any country. This fact puts Romani at a disadvantage compared to other languages that are both official and non-minority. This leads to language problems, the solutions of which are difficult to find.
2. The respondents consider non-compliance of the practice with the language rights of the Roma people speaking the Romani language as a problem, which arises from the Act on the Use of Languages of National Minorities in the Slovak Republic. Emphasizing the rights and obligations arising from

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<sup>3</sup> About the methods of empirical research on language problems and the types of language problems, see (Lanstyak, 2010; 2012).

the Act on the Use of Languages of National Minorities by public institutions is a fundamental measure of solving the language problems of the Roma in the context of their language rights. The establishment of an institution for languages of national minorities, having responsibility for their protection and development, especially in terms of language policy, language rights, and language management, will contribute to the solution of problems arising from non-compliance with the practice with the language rights of Roma people.

3. Roma has many language problems that are not addressed at all. However, many of these problems are unknown. Research on the language problems and language ideologies of the Roma and, consequently, the database of language problems will contribute to their identification and characterization. The formation, structure, and saturation of the database in the context of research on language problems and language ideologies of the Roma will contribute to the solution of these problems.
4. In the communication environment of the Roma, the Romani language is functionally dominant and, at the same time, it is used in the generation and language contact circle in various communication situations. Respondents consider restrictions with regard to the extent of the Romani language network, its social impact, and space as a problem. The solution is to use the Romani language in a wider contact circle in an available language network, speaking Romani.
5. Respondents consider the absence of scientific, research, academic, and professional institutions of the Roma language as a problem. They expect such institutions to fulfill the strategic objectives of the Romani language and to stabilize the scientific and general development of the Romani language in the Slovak Republic. The solution involves the establishment and formation of institutions that will deal with the Romani language at various levels.
6. Lack of experts and scientific personnel platform in the area of the Romani language. Possibilities of studying the Romani language at universities. The solution is also a doctoral study of the Romani language.
7. Support for science and research in the Romani language determines the current situation and problem in the absence of findings from long-term research urgently needed for practice. An effective financial mechanism with stable support would mean a greater contribution to the practice of Romani language research as the language of a national minority.
8. Respondents also consider the lack of professional language advice to the general public and personnel working with Roma in practice to be a problem. It is envisaged that a language advice center for national minority languages as an agenda of the institution for national minority languages

can be an effective part of its profile in order to ensure and provide professional language advice.

9. At present, language schools in the Slovak Republic do not provide Romani language courses, including the general state exam in the Romani language. The state exam in the Romani language legally authorizes, for example, the establishment of trade in the field of foreign languages and culture - the Romani language, establishment of a language school, and other possibilities that would contribute to the saturation of Romani language into practice.
10. The respondents consider the formation and building of the Roma national education system and its current absence to be an urgent problem. Education in the Romani language as a native language in the context of freedom of choice for the Roma is an essential attribute of the implementation of Roma language rights in practice.
11. The absence of teachers of the Romani language in schools and the subsequent implementation of the Romani language in school practice. The solution to the problem is the study for teachers of the Romani language and their acceptance into practice.
12. Teaching assistants in schools who do not speak the Romani language eliminate the aim and purpose of teaching assistants in practice. The solution to the problem is the strict introduction of the criterion of knowledge of Romani by the teaching assistant.
13. In their fields of study, pedagogical universities do not adequately prepare future teachers for working with children with native languages other than the tuition language. One possible solution is to introduce the languages and cultures of national minorities into the descriptions of study fields.
14. A traditional school is not sufficiently prepared to educate pupils with native languages other than the tuition language. This problem also refers to pupils for whom Slovak is a foreign language.

In this context, we include some answers from respondents:

- (1) *We learned Slovak together with Romani. We were not living in a place with the Roma community, where we would only hear Romani. We were living within a non-Roma community. We also heard Slovak, non-Roma friends used to visit us every day; we went to kindergarten with non-Roma children, we had non-Roma friends. We used to go out, it was very normal for us to speak two languages. I don't remember having problems with it, with the Slovak or Romani. Everything was easy with two languages.*
- (2) *I'm not an expert on the Romani language, but I speak Romani so that there are as few Slovak words as possible. It is not good when we take a lot from the non-Roma, words from Slovak. I look for ancient words. When I can't*

*find the correct Roma word, I remember what my grandmother used to say and how my grandfather would say it, and then I realize how they used to know the old words, and we have forgotten them already.*

- (3) *There are people who deal with the Romani language, who fight for the Roma identity, and who promote “romipen” [the Roma culture] and our nationality and traditions. No nationality can exist without its own language. If nationality is missing its own language, we lose it, or it is somehow distorted, bad, then we cannot say that it is a proud nationality.*
- (4) *Standardization allows us to demand as one of the largest nationalities in Slovakia that we want our laws when it comes to language. We can say that we want to speak in our language even when going to an office or an official place, when writing books, when working in the media, when having poets, when wanting to develop a culture in our own language. All this should be a reality. I read a lot of Roma books written by our writers, poets, and I don't look at the language well, but I can say that they are doing a good job, and even if there is a lot of faults in the language, their work is appreciated. So, it needs to be cleaned up a little, put it aside a little bit, clean the language and give it a standardized form. Without mentioning much in their dialect, they say it's my dialect, and I do everything in my dialect, but then only a small group that lives in that region understands, and others do not understand so it is necessary that as many Roma as possible understand what we write about ourselves and what we leave behind.*
- (5) *In some villages that have the tables, but we don't have such expert people, everyone is an expert. A non-Roma will say that something needs to be done for the Roma and then they find any Roma, they don't care if that person is an expert or not, it is enough if he/she says that he can do it. This is our big problem as the non-Roma people think that appointing a person of Roma nationality is enough. It must be a linguist, a person who goes to the field to understand this language. I believe that a lot of money from the state was allocated to this job, but it was all wasted. Because no one is doing their own job, no one has asked us, no one has asked the people who did it what the name of this village was, I haven't heard anything about it.*
- (6) *Anything that can be done in Romani is good, they should think about us and that we're here. This is one big signal that we are told by non-Roma that we are here. The quality of the translations is another question, there are frequent mistakes. Translation must be done so that one understands it and not just the one who translated it because he could read the text in Slovak. Even simple people who can read must be able to understand what they are reading.*
- (7) *Roma are not used to read in Romani. We do not have many publications; we have not done such a great job in this area. Our culture is degraded only*

*to dance and music. It is normal and a standard that we can all sing, dance and everything, but that's just not enough. It's very little. Now look at how non-Roma take us among themselves, they just say what a good and nice culture. Culture is not just dance and music. Culture is also written papers, poetry, films, dress code, that is all our culture. Culture is life and we also need reason in life. This is also what people don't understand, they can't read in Romani and have great difficulties in doing so. And we can't let them say that we don't know, we have to learn, we can't leave it halfway. What has been done since the standardization started? What has been done in the field, in my opinion, nothing. Nothing was done, everything was left as before. We did well, we dressed like gentlemen, we went to Bratislava and we were told that we have standardization in Slovakia. But what next? After that nobody did anything. I don't know what I would read, I don't get to books in Romani, only books by Roma people who write in Slovak. That's nice if I want to publish something for non-Roma so that they understand our life and get to know us. This was nicely done by Banga when he began translating into Romani. That's a nice way how it can be done. But it is not done because it's difficult. We only want to do fast projects, we want money fast, we want to get money fast, we want to live fast, but this is not a process which, if done today, shows results tomorrow.*

## Discussion

The language problems of the Roma affect language ideologies and have an impact on solving language problems. When solving the language problems of the Roma, the understanding of the language ideologies of the Roma is essential in the process of their solution, and the solution itself. The language situation of Roma in the area of their self-reflection on languages presupposes parallel connections between knowledge and use of Slovak and Romani languages. Acceptance, preferences, the orientation of speakers within the frame of the Roma-Slovak bilingualism, knowledge, and use of Romani and Slovak languages are variables determining the knowledge and use of Slovak language by respondents. The summary of information that we perceive as basic variables includes a subjective assessment of the level of knowledge and use of both languages; knowledge and use of the Slovak and Romani languages by relatives, friends, classmates; use of the Slovak and Romani languages according to communication situations, especially at home, outside the home and at school; the extent and frequency of use of each language; the frequency of communication situations in the Slovak and Romani languages; the perception of the communication barrier in the Slovak language; willingness and development tendency of communication of Roma pupils in the Slovak and Romani languages. Such a summary of language ideologies on the above-mentioned aspects reflects their approach and attitude towards languages and thus to the Slovak language as the state and educational language, but also as the second language. In the language communication environment in which the respondents are located, the Romani language is functionally dominant and used in a wide generation and language contact circle. The use of the Romani language according to communication situations, such as the extent of the Romani language network, space restrictions, use in frequent

social areas according to the social impact of respondents, indicate that they tend to most often use the Romani language at home, outside of home and partially also at school. In respect of the Romani-Slovak bilingualism, we can mention the subjective assessment of the extent and frequency of language use and the use of languages at home and conclude that they speak more Romani than Slovak, personally prefer Romani, and only speak Romani at home, rarely in Slovak. The frequency of communication situations and contacts is frequent among children, both at and outside the school, on a daily basis. In respect of children, it would be very interesting to perform a separate survey focused on the Roma ethnolect of the Slovak language and the contact of dialects, as well as linguistic borrowing, code-switching, interference, language mixing, and more research. Their language ideologies and behavior in Roma communities do not indicate any change in the attitude towards Slovak, but in any case, long-term observation in Roma families focusing on the language problems and language ideologies of Roma in the context of Roma-Slovak bilingualism remains a task for further research. Based on the knowledge of language problems in the context of bilingualism from the perspective of the Roma and their language ideologies, we can get to know the process and context in the process of acquiring the Slovak language by Roma pupils, which could contribute to the development of Slovak didactics for the respective group of Roma pupils and the system of language education of bilingual Roma pupils.

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Available online

Tab. 115 Population by sex and nationality,  
<https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

Tab. 156 Population by sex and native language,  
<https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

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