

“Molisarav tut, de man...” Asking for Favor in Two Romani Dialects

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Abstract

The paper aims to present the polite ways of “asking for favor” in two Roma communities – in the in Bulgaria and in Czech Republic. Different Romani forms of “asking” are introduced and compared with Hindi. Linguistic evidence of “asking” in formal and informal settings are presented and compared according to the religion of the Roma in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria - Christian and Muslim Roma. Forms of politeness between adults and children are also presented and these are compared with publications in the area of pragmatics and child language development.

Key words: Romani, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, politeness

Introduction

The topic of the specific way of asking for favor in the traditional Roma community provoked my attention. Often it brings misunderstanding in the communication between Roma and non-Roma (*Gadže*), whose models of politeness are very different. I decided to study the Romani linguistic strategies of asking for a favor in more detail, because still the Romani pragmatics is an area where there are very few studies and also I hope that in this way we will bring new information to the area of linguistic science. Asking for a favor falls into the category of politeness. Politeness is a very complex cultural phenomenon, which plays a crucial role in interpersonal communication and interaction among people. According to S. Fukushima (2004, p. 371) “there are cross-cultural differences in politeness strategies, or the politeness strategies are influenced by culture, but culture was not found explicitly in the studies of politeness”

Politeness facilitates communication, prevents conflicts, and helps to establish harmony and cooperation among people. Since cooperation and interaction is a *conditio sine qua non* of human social existence, politeness may be considered a cultural generality. The value of politeness is reflected in proverbs and sayings of probably all nations. Also Romani folklore indicates how politeness is appreciated. I give examples from the *Xoraxano dialect* from Bulgaria (dialect spoken by Muslim Roma) and *Servika dialect* from Slovakia (spoken by Catholic Roma)

1) *Lači дума саstrуni vudar phutrel (x)*

The good word (politeness) opens the iron door.

2) *Lače laveha dureder dodžaha (s)*

With a good (polite) word you will go farther.

3) *Pat'iv des, pat'iv xudes - čhuri des, čhuri xudes (s)*

You give respect, you get respect - you give a blow with a knife, you will get a blow with a knife.

4) *Te našť'i des maro, de xoča lačo lav (s)*

If you are not able to give bread, give at least a good word (be at least polite).

5) *I chib kokalo naj, no kokalo pagel. (x)*

There is no bone in the tongue but the tongue can break a bone.

6) *O lafi naj čhuri, no ko vogi džal. (x)*

The word is not a knife, but it goes straight to your heart.

7) *Te mares čuraha, xev sastjol. Te mares laveha sa jekh dukal. (s)*

If you hurt with a knife the wound gets cured. If you hurt with a word the pain remains.

These proverbs either advocate the positive value of politeness or warn about the negative effect if politeness is not observed.

In „vitezika paramisa“ (hero tales) which among various genres of Romani folklore are the most important transmitters of ethical values, the „čhavo“ (Roma boy) - who usually is the hero - saves his life by being polite and knowing how to greet or address the monster (witch).

8) *Mi del tut o Del lačo d'ives, mri kedvešno phuri daje. (s)*

May God give you a good day, my dear old mother? (Standard formula of the „čhavo“)

9) *Imar pal e zel'eno čar na pird'alas, te mange na džan'alas lačo lav te phenel. (x)*

You would no more walk on the green grass, if you had known to tell me the proper word. (Standard formula of the witch, whose help is often, gained thanks to politeness).

Though politeness is a cultural generality, the specific manifestation of politeness is variable: it differs from culture to culture. If representatives of two different cultures have to communicate with each other, misunderstanding or even conflict often occurs just because one feels that the other is not polite enough. In fact, both may be polite, but their respective „politeness“ differs in form and expression. I have noticed that this is also the case in communication between Roma and non-Roma: one blames the other for not being polite enough, or for being hypercorrectly polite - which is another manifestation of not knowing the „proper“ way. Before proceeding to delimitation/outline the parameters of the paper, I want to discuss very briefly the type of Romani culture which is the framework for politeness.

Types of culture and communication - politeness as cultural variability

I find it suitable for the purpose of the article to consider two conceptual dichotomizations concerning culture and communication: collectivistic-individualistic culture. In individualistic cultures emphasis is placed on individual goals, people are „supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only“ while in collectivistic cultures emphasis is placed on group goals and the collectivity to which they belong „is supposed to look after them for their loyalty“ (G. Hofstede and M. Bond, 1984, p. 419).

In collectivistic cultures people usually live closer together in larger (kinship) communities, where during the frequent contacts of their members, common experience and values are transmitted and shared. Communication in collectivistic cultures is mostly high context. E. Hall (1976) defines the difference between high- and low-context communication in the following way: A high- context communication or message is one in which „most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message“, while the low-context communication „the mass information is vested in the explicit code.“ (p.79). A member of a collectivistic culture, a high-context individual „will expect his/her interlocutor to know what is bothering him/her, so that he/she doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he/she will talk round and round the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one.“ (E. Hall 1976, p. 98). D. Levine (1985) describing the low-context communication of the USA, whose culture is highly individualistic, states that the North American way of life affords little room for the cultivation of ambiguity. The dominant American temper calls for clear and direct communication. It expresses itself in such common interjections as „Say what you mean?”, „Don't beat around the bush, get to the point“. While generally the so-called Western countries belong to the range of individualistic-culture and exercise low-context communication, the Eastern cultures are more collectivistic and communication among their representatives is rather high-context.

Traditional Roma societies belong to the second group: their culture is collectivistic and communication within the community is high-context. I hope that the paper, though limited to a very partial theme, may give some evidence for this statement.

Delimitation of the subject, the target groups and methodology of collecting data

Communication in the traditional Romani community was interpersonal. The interlocutors were personally present and could perceive each other with all their senses. That is why the verbal form of the message was accompanied by intonation, facial expression, and gestures - and also by information transmitted by indescribable extra sensual channels. Only strong common empathy enabled the interlocutors to decipher the message. This sort of message-transmission is typical for high-context communication in collectivistic cultures. The multi-form and multi-channel way of expressing and conveying information may make it more precise but also more ambiguous. The ambiguity allows the partner to depict that part of the information, which brings both the interlocutors to mutual understanding at a level of collectively shared values, and forget the personal wish, intention or aim, in case the message is too individualistic and differs from the collective norm. This saves the communicational partners from „*ladž*“ (shame) or conflict.

The extra lingual codes - intonation, facial expression, and body gestures - contain specific formalized „phrases“ and „metaphors“ which are commonly used and understood. Modern types of communication are less interpersonal and more intermediate by written word, telephone, e-mail, etc. All this and also more frequent contacts with the „*Gadže*“ brings the body and facial metaphors into oblivion.

Though it would be highly interesting to study the issue of „asking for favor“ in its complex form, I will concentrate only on its verbal part.

The data was collected in two Romani communities: among the Xoraxane Roma (*Džambaz*)-Muslim Roma community in Bulgaria and among the Servika Roma - Christian Roma in Slovak and Czech Republics.

Xoraxani Romani is the dialect spoken by Muslim Roma in the Northeast part of Bulgaria. The Muslim Roma could be from both the Vlax and non-Vlax groups but in the paper the examples are taken from Vlax Xoraxani variety from the *Džambaz* group and one of the characteristics of this dialect is the influence of Turkish.

Servika Romani is a non-Vlax dialect (called by many other names such *Carpathian*, *rumungricko*, *slovačiko*, etc.) spoken by Roma who have been settled for more than three centuries in Slovak villages. One third of this Roma group migrated to the present Czech Republic after the Second World War. The influence of Slovak is apparent not only in the structure of the language but also in the culture.

Within the last decades the social contacts between Roma and non-Roma have multiplied not only in frequency but also in type. Roma are highly affected by the mass media, TV. All this influences the traditional culture and brings changes into the models of politeness. I focus on politeness amongst Roma in traditional communities, because there still are the bases for "politeness in transition" among the young Roma.

The methods of data collection are based on *participant observation* and follow up interviews.

Asking and Thanking both depend on

Who----- (asks from/thanks to)-----whom-----for what

Age: older → younger peer

Relation: close-distant

Sex: man-woman/child

Situations of asking for a favor

The situation in which a favor is asked for can be expressed in a very simple model, which becomes complicated when the agents and subjects of the situation are specified. Who asks what from whom (under what circumstances)? In the traditional Roma community, there was a salient hierarchy in the status of distinct members of the extended family. The status distinction was dependent mainly on age, sex and proximity distance in relationship. We will not go into details, but we will give an example. The oldest brother (*baro phral* lit. great brother) had much higher respect than the eldest brother in the western individualistic culture. The younger siblings have to obey him without a single objection. He had the right to criticize the younger but not the other way around. In certain respects, he had more authority in the family

than the mother. Such a relationship of course influences the way of asking for between the *baro phral* and his young siblings. Another example is the specific avoidance relationship between the father-in-law (*sastro*) and the daughter-in-law (*bori*). The *bori* is not supposed to address her *sastro* directly. If she wanted a favor from him, she had to ask through an intermediary. Because my interest is in the linguistic aspect of the asking for, I cannot go into further details analyzing the relationship between all the members of the traditional Roma family and Roma community. However, to put it shortly the formulation of the request is different if an older person asks a favor from a younger one, or if it is asked among peers. The favor would be asked for in a different way from a close relative than from a distant one or a foreigner. As far as the “what” is concerned the quantity (amount) and the quality of the favor/subject influences the form of the asking. The agents of the situation would ask in a different way for a little thing like a cigarette or a small amount of money than for a large amount of money. Asking for an item of food is a very specific issue in a traditional Roma community to which we will refer in its proper place.

The linguistic patterns of asking for favor

The linguistic patterns are manifested in grammatical forms/categories of specific words of politeness. The Romani verb, which corresponds to the expression **ask** (in the sense of request is: in Xoraxani Romani (XR) and in Servika Romani (SR): **mangav**- I ask for, I request). The Czech translation "*prosim te*" and the Bulgarian translation "*molya te*" ("I ask you for) is a lexical but not a cultural equivalent of *mangav*. While in Czech *prosim te* and in Bulgarian *molya te* is obligatory to use if we ask for any trifle of insignificant importance. *Mangav tut* in both societies is used under very specific circumstances. Czech/Bulgarian loan-words *prosinav tut/molisarav tut* are used as sociolinguistics markers of “over politeness” and /or “higher culture” (similarly to the Russian nobility during the XIX c. when they used French words in Russian conversation).

The core of a phrase/sentence by which we ask for a favor is a verb. The grammatical forms in which the verb may stand are:

1. Imperative
2. Indicative (question, negative)
3. Present conditional
4. Conditional irrealis

There is a deferens in *Xoraxani* and *Slovak* Romani. In *Xoraxani Romani* only the 2 pers. sg. combines the familiar and honorific addressing. In *Slovak Romani* the 2 pers. sg. is used by all people, addressing the younger even if they do not know each other, while the younger addressing the older use the honorific form which equals the 2 pers. pl. Peers use the 2 pers. sg. even if they do not know each other. Most often the verb is complemented by other specific markers of politeness, which express different grades of it. This will be specified further.

Imperative

Simple imperative (+intonation)

The simple imperative is used when small things and little services are asked for. For example:

1) *De man džigara (XR) / cigaretl'a (SR)*

2) *Phand(e) o vudar (XR; SR)*

3) *vičín les, mi avel te xal (SR)*

Simple imperatives are used mostly among peers. In the follow-up interviews the informants stress the importance of intonation, which changes the degree of politeness. Different linguistic strategies are used in communication between older and younger Roma. Even if small things/services are asked for the partners will address each other with specific expressions showing more politeness. The discourse strategies are different when the older addresses the younger than vice versa. When the older is addressing the younger the distinction between close-distant is important. The older would call any young boy or girl “*miro čho*” (my son); “*miri čhaj*” (my daughter). If his/her relationship to the addressee are close, he would use very specific Romani expressions of familiarity and tenderness:

1) *xav ti(ro) muj (XR; SR)*

I eat your mouth/face.

2) *xav tiro iloro (XR; SR)*

I eat your heart

3) *xav te(re) pele (XR ;SR)*

I eat your testicles

4) *xav te(ri) mindžori (XR; SR)*

I eat your pussy.

Linguistic forms as shown in examples 3 and 4 can be used only by an older person addressing children and only to family members. Together with politeness these forms also are used for expression of love to young family members. In *Slovak Romani* beside the *xav* (to eat) verb also *čarav* (to lick) is used. However, younger people addressing elders never use these expressions. In both dialects there is also a sex distinction in using the above forms of address. An older man cannot use *xav ti minžori* (example 4), in communication with a girl, but he can say to a young boy

the *xav te pele* (example 3)¹. However interestingly enough the older woman can use these most intimate expressions addressing both – boys and girls, if they are close to her.

Imperative + interjection

Among the *Xoraxane Roma*, addressing a young male an older man can use the expression “*mo*” formally a substantive, which lost its status and became an interjection. Addressing a female the interjection “*che/ache*” (formally a substantive) is applied. In *Slovak Romani* a general interjection “*oča*-sg. / *očan*-pl. (honorific) is used without any distinction. It stands at the beginning of the sentence.

- 1) *de man pay, mo (XR)*
- 2) *de man pay ače (XR)*
- 3) *oča de man pani (SR)*
- 4) *očan den man pani (SR)*

The different word order in *Xoraxani* and *Servika Romani* indicates the original status of the interjectionalized words.

Imperative followed by the adverb / particle ča

This pattern exists only in SR and it is not used in XR. The primary meaning of *ča* is “only, just”. In some cases, however it means also “a little”. For example:

Pand ča o vudar, correspond to (lit. Close “only” the door) Close the door, please.

De ča man pani, means (litt. Give me only/ just a water) Please give me water.

The imperatives with *ča* make the request more polite.² In the construction *imperative+ ča* the word order is important. If the *ča* follows the imperative it makes the request more polite. On the contrary where *ča* precedes the imperative the addressee is rather being given an order. The sentence *Ča de man pani* would mean something like *Did not you hear that I asked you for a water*.

The diminutivisation of the object which is asked for

¹ The sex distinction in politeness is apparent also in the individualistic culture of USA where an older male University Professor can address a young female student with “my dear”, but he cannot address with the same words young male students. Opposite to it older female University Professor cannot address young male students with the words “my dear”.

² The same type of construction can be find in Hindi. For example: The sentence *Zara pani de* is more polite than the sentence *Pani de*.

This strategy of enhancing the degree of politeness is used in both dialects- XR and SR.

De man panjori is more polite than *De man pani*.

Give me water-DIMUN.

Pande o vudaroro is more polite than *Pande o vudar*.

Close the door-DIMUN

Papu, pen mange paramisori is more polite than *Papu, pen mange paramisi*.

Grandpa tell me a fairy tale- DIMUN

In all these cases an older person asks a younger one for small things. But there are some special cases, when the interlocutors are women only. Those women are known to each other and usually they are neighbors. The first case, which is observed in other traditional cultures as well, when a woman asks her neighbor for something which she needs for cooking. Usually, she would address her female neighbor with the words *De man lonoro kana cinava/ kinav dav tut pale* (XR; SR). (Give me please some salt, when I buy, I will give it back to you) Both the partners know that this promise is only a sort of politeness, which is not meant seriously. Underlying ideology is expressed in SR saying, “*Te la nane, me la dava, te man nane, joj man dela*”. (If she does not have (something) I will give her and if I do not have (something) she will give me). In other cases asking for a favor goes without any verbal communication at all. A typical situation is asking for *umblav* (the remains of burning wood in the oven / embers) to make a fire in the oven of the neighbor. The communication usually goes like this:

A (entering the house of the neighbor): *Hin/Si tut jag?* (Do you have a fire?)

B: *Le!* (Take!)

The neighbor A takes the fire and goes away without saying anything.

Indicative +intonation

Present Tense of Indicative

If little things or services are asked for, from a younger person, or more respected one the imperative is respected by indicative. All the additional strategies described above (čá, diminutive, etc.) are used to make the request more polite. For example:

- 1) *Pandes o vudar, mamó?* (XR; SR) (lit. Would you close the door mother?) (Can you kindly close the door mother?)

The request (indicative) is always in the form of question.

Future Tense of Indicative

The Future Tense in *Slovak Romani* and in *Xoraxani Romani* has not the same cultural meaning.

In Slovak Romani

In *Slovak Romani* it increases the degree of politeness.

Deha man cigaretl'a papu? is more polite than *Des man cigaret'la papu* (lit. Could you give a cigarette, grandpa?)

In Xoraxani Romani

In *Xoraxani Romani* the usage of the future tense indicates the much lower status of the person who asks for a favor. It sounds like begging:

Kan des man dzigara papu? (lit. Will you give me a cigarette?)
Though the cultural meaning is "Why you do not give me a cigarette?"

Negative form of Present and Future Tense indicative

This strategy increases the politeness of the request.

Na des (deha) man love te dzav andro/ko kinos, papu? (lit. Want you give me money to go to cinema, grandpa?) Could you please give me money for cinema grandpa?

Present conditional

The present conditional is used as a polite form of request probably under the influence of Czech/Slovak strategies of politeness.

Avehas mansa andro kinos? (Would you come to cinema with me? Please come to the cinema with me).

Conditional irrealis

Conditional irrealis is only used in *Slovak Romani*, though not under the influence of the environmental languages. It is used seldom. The request expressed by conditional irrealis is very polite and gives the addressee the opportunity not to fulfil it and at the same time not to offend the one asking the favor.

Geljamas te piel lovina (lit. We should have gone to drink beer! The cultural meaning is Please, let us go and have some beer!)

Culturally specific situations of asking for a favor

Asking for food

Food in Romani as well as in Indian culture has a very significant ritual value. The consumption of pure / polluted food, the way in which the food is prepared etc. make sharp distinctions among the various social groups “castes” within the society of Roma. *Žuže Roma*- ritually clean Roma will never eat in the house of *degeša* (Roma who consume polluted food for instance horse meat, leftovers from the previous day etc.). The utensils which the “*degešis*” have eaten from are thrown away. The same rules govern the relations between higher (more pure) and lower (less pure) castes in India.

Asking for food in Roma communities is also regulated by specific prohibitions. Food can be asked from *Gadžos* but cannot be asked from Roma. Among Roma food can be asked for only among the members of a nuclear family within one household. To ask for food even from close relatives, who do not live in the same house is a *ladž* - shame. It is expected that food will be offered to a guest without his asking. I will give three examples, which demonstrate these rules.

Example 1 Personal experience

As a boy of 10 together with my mother I went to visit my father’s brother. After the long journey I felt hungry. I told this to my mother. My mother forbade me very strictly to ask my aunt for food. When we came to the house of my relatives, and my aunt offered us food we had to refuse it 2-3 times saying “*Naj sem bokhalo!*”- I am not hungry! and only after that the traditional norm of politeness allowed us to accept the food and to satisfy our hunger.

Example 2 Traditional Slovak Romani song shows the incorrectness of asking for food:

<i>Mek čak dural avav</i> from far	As soon I am coming
<i>o Roma pal ma vakeren</i>	the Roma will gossip about me
<i>hoj lendar mangav maro</i>	that I beg food from them
<i>sa man prekoškeren.</i>	and all of them curse me.

Example 3 Popular funny story about a hungry Rom:

An old Roma man who is always hungry comes to visit a family. Not to expose himself to *ladž* by asking for food directly he pretends to be deaf. He sits so closely to an oven that his coat starts to smoulder. The hostess says: *Kako kliginel tunenge o gerekos.* (Uncle your coat is smouldering) The old man answers: *Me na xav me na som bokhalo.* (I will not eat I am not hungry). This dialog is repeated several times. After the last warning that his coat may catch fire he comes to the table and says: *Te imar man ajci keren ta xava.* (If you force me so much I will eat)

All the examples show in different ways that it is a great shame in the Roma culture to ask Roma for food directly. If a Rom asks for food he puts himself in a position of a begger and it changes his status and the status of all his relatives in the Roma community. It is not polite to say thank you for the food.

Asking for money

Asking for a small amount of money can be made directly and it is not supposed that the money will be given back. Asking for a large sum of money should be made in an elaborate ceremonial way. The person in need starts the conversation describing in detail all the problems that have afflicted him and his whole family. The conversation may continue for hours. Usually, he does not come to the point. Because this ceremonial it is standard strategy the addressee understands what this “Beating around the bush” aims at. If he can and wants to lend the money he will offer it. If he cannot or does not want to lend the money than he will start the same ceremony full of complaints about his own life. And his partner understands that his hidden request cannot be fulfilled. In this beautiful conversation full of metaphors, and compliments, assuring how one respects the other, the money is never mentioned. The most important thing is that when they part none of them have a *ladž*.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, it is impossible able to cover all the possible situations when things and services may be asked for. However, I think that the most important situations were mentioned and analyzed. The study presented here shows that strategies for polite asking for favors are in most cases the same as in the Bulgarian and Slovak Romani communities, though both of them live in different ethnic, cultural and religious environments. The strategy contains not only cultural patterns but also linguistic expressions. In some cases though the impact of the *Gadžo* environment can be traced in the distinct models of *Xoraxani* Romani and *Servika Romani* dialects.

Asking for favors in both Romani communities (XR and SR) indicates that traditional Roma communities are collectivistic and the communication within them is high context. There are certain rules of politeness which are preserved from Indian languages, i.e. addressing younger people or asking for a favor from children. In the literature on child language and politeness there is evidence showing that culturally specific linguistic forms are acquired by children (K. Nakamura, 2001) from a very early age. In traditional Roma families the children learn the polite forms of asking and know very well the ways of behaving and responding to requests.

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