



Romani - loss and preservation of the language in Austria

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HEINSCHINK, Mozes Friedrich. Romani - loss and preservation of the language in Austria. Individual and Society, 2000, Vol. 3, No. 1.

The acknowledgement of some of the Austrian Roma and Sinti as an ethnic minority in 1993 seems to indicate a growing tolerance of the majority towards Roma and Sinti. Reality proves that, on the contrary, hostility towards foreigners and ethnic groups in general has increased since the fall of communism in the eastern states of Europe. There is a strong pressure towards assimilation upon Roma in Austria. Language traditions and social structures are threatened by the monolingual school system and the dominance of the majority's mass media, although language instruction in the Roma's L1 has been established with the Burgenland Roma in Oberwart. Further activities include radio programs in Roman, that is 15 minutes of daily news as well a youth program on Wednesdays. There also exist two bilingual magazines in Austria, one edited by Romano Centro Vienna in Kalderash-German, one by the Roma Association Oberwart in Roman-German.

Austrian Roma. Language. Ethnic minority.

Introduction

After forty years of relatively rigid political systems following the Nazi Holocaust, Europe has of late experienced grave political changes which altered the social structures of many population groups considerably. In the states of the Eastern Bloc communisms broke down. The opening of the boarders triggered waves of migration into the western states. In the whole of Europa hostility towards foreigners and a right-wing extremism have grown stronger. Thus the unstable existence of ethnic groups is endangered, especially that of the Roma who, after the end of the war, found economic niches and were able to exist somewhat unmolested. Political successes, such as the acknowledgement of the Austrian Roma and Sinti as an ethnic group in December 1993, seemed to indicate a growing tolerance by the majority of the population and the government toward ethnic groups. Nonetheless the question of identity, assimilation or return to their own traditions has become more relevant than ever for the Roma. Many believe that giving up their consealed lives and going public with information and concern might cause the rekindling of xenophobia. Thus the problem of identity has become a question of survival for the Roma, regardless of the actual maintenance of their social structures.

Language and identity

Apart from the political situation allowing the Roma and Sinti of Austria to regard themselves as an ethnic minority, several social factors play an essential role in constituting their identity. In Austria a feeling of identity seems to develop with those groups whose traditional social structure was destroyed by the elimination of a whole generation in the concentration camps of the Nazis. On the other hand special groups, such as Kalderash, whose social structure is largely intact, need not stress their identity. A revival of cultural values, such as music and language, took place with the Roma of the Burgenland, or was initiated from outside, partly through scientific interest, as these values were already disappearing. Factors, such as the deliberate cultivation of the language, are only of little importance to those Roma

who have immigrated into Austria during the past decades: their social structure and language use are more or less unchanged. Thus passing on the cultural traditions of these groups is endangered as well, not by a program of genocide, but because of the interplay of various factors.

One of these factors is the loss of discrete areas of settlements, caused by the scattered gradual immigration of small social groups (families) into the host country. A uniform settlement of several thousand inhabitants would further the communication within the group and would guarantee a certain stability of social and linguistic structures. The Kalderash manage to compensate the disadvantages of scattered settlements by having regular feasts, guest celebrations (*paciva*), where up to a hundred Roma of their own group come together in order to honor and entertain guests. With other groups living dispersed in Austria, the effects of the lack of group communication are obvious. In contact with non-Roma the native group language cannot be used and thus loses importance.

Use of language, educational institutions and media

The second, most important factor threatening language preservation is the dominance of the majority language, as the children are not instructed in their native language (L1) in elementary school. Their L1 is limited to the most intimate private domain, and thus loses its competence in general public communication. Young people use German, which is their L2, for complicated topics. This results in an estrangement from their L1 and the specific way of thinking in their own language. The tradition of story telling which generates from the Romani way of expression, rich in metaphors and symbols, is irretrievably lost within one generation, even if the group's dialect is reactivated afterwards by heavy measures. Especially the basic schooling in analytical thinking and a matter-of-fact and precise way of expression are opposed to the Romani symbolic language and a tradition of speech without abstraction. Some functions of Romani language are losing their importance, such as influencing the auditor by stereotype phrases of an almost magic character, or by the highly emotional rating of curses and vows. This loss is due to the different mental schooling in the language of the majority, which is directed toward informative communication. Therefore the efforts for the preservation of ethnic languages in general must focus on an early promotion of the basic language in elementary schools.

Schooling and mass media, both in the majority language only, have reduced the native language of many young Roma to a purely passive competence. The loss of language traditions using puns, fairy tales and tongue twisters illustrates this negative development. These characteristic qualities of language use represent a form of identity, of which the speaker is mostly unaware. It comes to mind only when it is about to disappear.

The main function of school in the acculturation of the children, the omnipresence of the mass media, and the dominance of the school language are facts that cannot be ignored. In our effort to preserve Romani we must take these facts into consideration, incorporating instead of condemning them. It is up to the school not to offer subject matter of the majority translated 1:1 into the ethnic language, but to convey ideas and use of L1 in accordance with the group's own philosophy of life. As this requires excellent education of teachers, it has been repeatedly demanded to train members of the ethnic groups as teachers.

It is also important to use those media in school that are appreciated by the members of the ethnic groups, although this may mean breaking with the usual written way of instruction. It is characteristic of our culture that the preservation of our knowledge and the instruction therein are based typically on written documents, on transmission and learning by reading. Our society of non-Gypsies takes this for granted. The culture of the Roma, however, has been formed by oral tradition for centuries, a form in accordance with their way of life, relating to the present rather than the future. Media Roma children are interested in include music cassettes, videos, computers, rather than written means of communication. Music, both in production and perception, rates higher with the Roma than with non-Gypsies; even little children are motivated to dance and make music and show an enormous feeling for rhythm. Therefore music should be used to transmit knowledge, as the strong and positive emotions connected with music ease the process of learning for Roma children and deepen the understanding of their own culture and that of similar ethnic groups. It was music that made the young Burgenland-Roma interested in their own identity.

The young Roma who attend school also largely prefer videos to books. The medium "film" would be an ideal transmitter of culture. Films about Gypsies have so far been made mostly for non-Gypsies, to present life and the problems of the Roma and to create understanding. We still lack films for Roma on special themes which offer possibilities of identification to the various groups in their own language.

These films need not necessarily be understood by non-Gypsies. In central Europe there are hardly any programs in Romani, or features, serials or films dealing with the Roma's history of migration, which might be broadcast and synchronized into Romani - like the movie "Roots" for the Afro-Americans.

With groups whose dialect is still in use, but endangered, attractive programs in Romani could counteract the dominant media of the majority. For groups whose dialect is disappearing, L1-instruction as well as general language education in elementary schools could be made much more effective with audio-visual media instead of books alone. Visual media could also be helpful for children with learning difficulties, and they motivate the Roma to use their native language. Playful learning programs demanding active participation of the student might use the computer screen as a bridge to reading and writing even for non book-worms. Programs of this type are rare so far.

Standardization and codification of Romani

In any attempt to codify a language the problem of standardization arises. Fundamentalists ask for a world wide standard of Romani, but in reality the language is split up into numerous dialects. The result of any codification must be accepted by the group members, otherwise it will not be used by them. That means that it is not favorable for the international Tsiganology, but extremely practical for the speakers to use the orthography of their current majority language for their own dialect. It lowers the threshold of inhibition towards codification of the group language for users, if the orthography corresponds to that of the majority language they know from school. Therefore it is advisable to work out a spelling system with the groups in question in order to ensure a general acceptance. If the speakers cannot be motivated to write their language because they reject a spelling system forced upon them, a standardization may be considered an illusion. Furtheron it might be reasonable arrange related dialects in groups and elaborate one standard for each major group. At present we have not even assessed all Romni dialects in their characteristics. That means that the idiomatic and poetical richness of the various dialects is lost in the process of standardization before it is known. This loss would by far exceed the advantage brought about by a poor construction of a Romani standard.

Tendencies as described above are already being noticed. Looking through some Romani magazines, the competent reader finds a functionalism of Romani that ignores its peculiar aesthetics as well as basic grammatical structures. The editors should be advised to draw upon the competence of those speakers who grew up in the tradition of the group and did usually not go through the educational institutions. The richness of Romani in metaphors and phrases enables the speakers to explain even complicated matters.

Suggestions to avoid the loss of language

In order to counteract the threatening loss of the language - especially with the young generation - the following measures may be suggested:

- Instruction in Romani at least in elementary schools: A basic competence in the language of the group in question should be conveyed. Also general tutoring of the pupils would be possible in Romani.
- In language education the speech and social traditions of the Roma should be considered; the analytical, precise way of expression of the majority language should not be forced upon them.
- The teaching material should be adjusted to the media favored by the Roma, such as music, dance, videos and computer games as opposed to the dominance of purely written material.
- As a further project we suggest the production of a film for Roma about their history from the beginning to the present, not as a documentary but in the tradition of the Roma's own story telling.

Some of these proposals have been realized in Austria within the past years. Acknowledged ethnic groups (minorities) are offered schooling in their own language, if at least five pupils in one class are interested in it. At Oberwart in Burgenland, the language of the Burgenland-Roma ("Roman"), has been taught since September 1998, not only in the Roma Association Oberwart, but also in elementary school. This might not have happened, if Oberwart had not become ill-famed for the murder of four Roma in the settlement.

There also exists a daily news program of a quarter of an hour in the language of the Roma, and a youth program on Wednesdays from 6 to 10 p.m. (frequency 105.5 for the southern, and 106.3 for the northern part of Burgenland). Both programs were introduced in the spring of 1999. Roman is spoken from 8 to 10 p.m. These activities, elaborated in cooperation with the Linguistic Institute of the University Graz, have improved the speech competence of the Roma. The young people had only had a passive command of speech. Through these programs they have not only learnt Roman, but have also gained self assurance. The Roma Association Oberwart as well as Romano Centro in Vienna are publishing a quarterly bilingual

magazine.

In Vienna there live several different groups of Roma spread all over the city, so that keeping up the language is much more difficult. There is a bilingual program on MW 1476 on the first Sunday each month from 8 to 8.30 p.m., but is hardly listened to by the Roma. This program may be received also beyond the Austrian borders.

We are aware that all these measures are, however, a drop in the bucket, and there is still a long way to go.

Summary

The acknowledgement of some of the Austrian Roma and Sinti as an ethnic minority in 1993 seems to indicate a growing tolerance of the majority towards Roma and Sinti. Reality proves that, on the contrary, hostility towards foreigners and ethnic groups in general has increased since the fall of communism in the eastern states of Europe. There is a strong pressure towards assimilation upon Roma in Austria. Language traditions and social structures are threatened by the monolingual school system and the dominance of the majority's mass media, although language instruction in the Roma's L1 has been established with the Burgenland Roma in Oberwart. Further activities include radio programs in Roman, that is 15 minutes of daily news as well a youth program on Wednesdays. There also exist two bilingual magazines in Austria, one edited by Romano Centro Vienna in Kalderash-German, one by the Roma Association Oberwart in Roman-German.