

Non-traditional methods in teaching Romani as a University subject

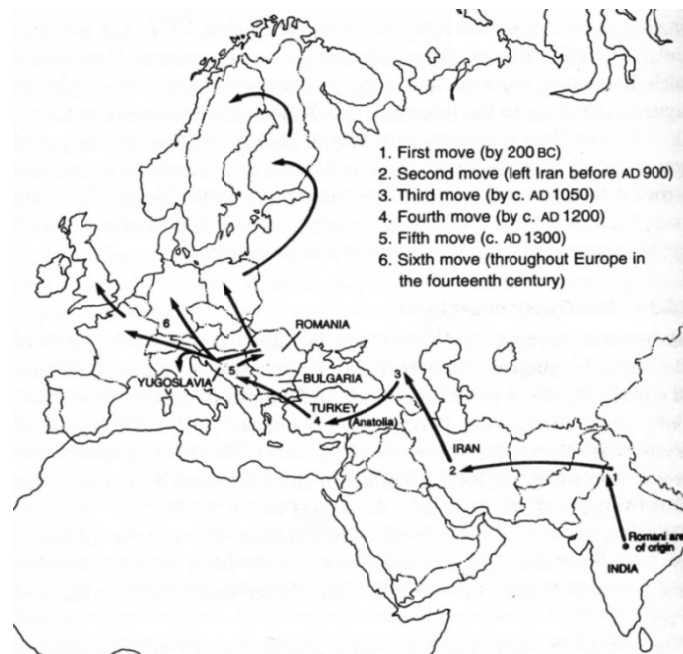
1. Roma and Romani language

Roma have Indian background. They left India some 1000 years ago because of attacks of the Muslims (nowadays Pakistan) to the Northwest parts of India.¹ They did not leave India at once but on waves. In India they belonged to different juts². Romani language was formed outside of India being in contact with many different languages, and the once which have much influence on it are Armenian and Greek. Romani belongs to the group of New Indo-Arian languages and particularly to the Central group of Indian languages which has developed from languages such as Hindi, Panjabi, Gujurati, Marwari, Banjari and etc. (M. Hübschmanová, 1998). Actually Romani spoken nowadays in Europe does not exist in India, because it was formed outside of India. For last 10 c. it has been an oral language but last century there are attempts to develop alphabets of Romani and to introduce it as subject at Schools and Universities, to publish books, news papers and journals using some of the existing dialects in a particular country. The Map below presents the Roma migrations form that period.

¹ According to most historians and linguists having different hypothesis on Roma and Romani language, authors such as D. Kenrick, E. Marushiakova, and V. Popov, J. Hancock, V. de Gilla Kochanovski, M. Hübschmanová, N. Demeter, belonging to different schools the most supported theory is the one about Indian background of Roma and the reason why they left India is the war between Muslims and Indians.

² The casts and jātis are still existing in the Indian society. The casts are bigger organizations of people with the same socio-economic status and professions, and the jātis are smaller groups in casts. Hübschmanová 1998.

Non-traditional methods in teaching Romani



Map 1: Romani Migrations
(based on L. Campbell and T. Kaufman, 1973)

Romani is different from other European languages also because of some other characteristics such as:

- there is no one particular country in Europe or around the world to be the homeland of Romani.
- It is spoken in many countries around the world. It is a non-territorial language.
- It has long traditions related to the Indian traditions.

Last 300 years there is an interest in Romani and the number of publications (grammars, dictionaries and textbooks) is increasing. Still it is not a codified language and it has many varieties but all of them are comprehensive to the speakers of Romani. All the dialects though can be grouped on two main groups - Romani varieties influenced by Romanian language and varieties which never been in contact with Romanian.

Romani spoken in Hungary belongs to the group of dialects who have been in contact with Romanian language and it is called »Lovara«. Till recently there was little knowledge about Romani language spoken in Hungary, but thanks to the publications of Z. Reger (1999); and Z. Reger and J. Berko Gleason (1991) and K. Erdős (1960) nowadays the knowledge about Hungarian Romani is much higher. From other side the Roma activist in Hungary for last 20 years did a lot of work in the field of translation – many classical works were translated into Lovara dialect, Romani was introduced in primary classes as a mother tongue and many textbooks were published. It was introduced also as a University subject at the University of Pecs. All the activities, research and publications put Romani on the same level as the other minority languages in the Hungarian society.

My experiences with teaching Romani as a minority language in Bulgaria, at the University of Veliko Tarnovo (during the period 2003–2010), can be used in two directions: first it can be used as an example for the methodological issue of teaching Romani at University level in Hungary, but at the same time it may be used as an example for teaching Hungarian language in a context where Hungarian is serving as a minority language.

At the beginning I will give a bit information about where Romani is taught as a university subject.

2. Romani as a University subject

Romani is taught in different parts of Europe and in the world. Short Romani linguistic courses for a semester are offered at linguistic departments of University of Aarhus, Denmark, Graz, Austria, Manchester, England; in the USA at the University of Chicago and at the University of Texas, Austin.

At the same time in some Universities BA and MA programs are offered: Romani language for teachers and social workers – University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, University of Nitra, Slovakia, University of Pecs, Hungary. In some Universities there are BA and MA programs in Romology/Romistics – University of Bucharest, Romania; Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic.

The present paper is based on my experiences teaching Romani language to Roma students who are involved in BA study programs to become teachers or social workers. Last 10 years I was teaching Romani to Roma students in Bulgaria and in Slovakia using different approaches. The shared approaches can give some ideas to colleagues teaching Hungarian what they can do to make the educational process more interesting and attractive.

3. Theoretical background

As a base of teaching Romani I take the ideas of R. Lado (1957), who says that the language and culture are interconnected. In the process of language education the language and culture have to be presented together. In this way students understand all linguistic patterns much better.

Romani language having mainly an oral tradition does not have so much experiences to be taught in classroom. Often not only the outside world but also the representatives of the Roma community can not accept that Romani can be taught in class, using modern methods and different interactive approaches to present the complex structure of Romani grammar. However it is extremely important that the students (both Roma and non-Roma – sometimes in the groups there are also non-Roma students) to understand the important role which the Roma oral tradition is playing in the formation of the language.

The Roma students coming from communities where the illiteracy rate is very high and having in mind that the discrimination towards Roma and their language in Bulgaria and Slovakia is open, very often they come with negative attitudes to their own language and culture. They do not believe that this is a real language and that the Roma culture has a value. A second problem, which is faced is the fact that Romani is not a unified language and the students speak different dialects. The students do not have knowledge in general linguistics and the work of one teaching Romani to Roma is to convince them in the importance of their mother tongue and to give them basic information about their culture.

Another problem is that often the students refuse to speak in Romani, because they are shy – they think that their Romani is not »clean« (*šučžo*) or good enough and often they ask me to teach them the »real« Romani.

In the last 20 years thanks to the international meetings on Roma issues in Europe an international »unified« oral variety of Romani is developed. One of the most spread Romani dialects is taken as a base – the Kalderash dialect and it serves as »Lingua Franca«. In the classes usually the dialects of the students are used in order to introduce the international Romani variety.

4. Romani language teaching methods

The methods shared here are used mainly with students – speakers of any varieties of Romani.

4.1 Exercising the pronunciation

In order to get a good pronunciation in Romani I created a theater group, which has the task to learn different fairy-tails, or parts of classical plays of Shakespeare or other well known writers and to present them on a »stage« for other students. The students are divided into small groups of 3–4 and each group has a task to make a choice what they have to present. The only requirement to the students is to have a good pronunciation speaking Romani. The audience (rest of the students) can analyze the play and the way how the artists were speaking/ pronouncing. The exercises were very important for the students because they were studying to become teachers in primary classes in all subjects and in Romani language and they need to have good pronunciation. The theater group helped them very much because the last year of their study when they had to have a practice in the schools they did not have any problems working with young children.

4.2 Teaching morphology and syntax of Romani

For teaching the morphology and the syntax of Romani I use a method which is learning Romani songs. Usually the students learn traditional Roma songs, and the task which they have is to learn the text of the song. For example I give a text of a Roma song which was known among the Serbian Roma from the 19 c. and after learning the song we do grammatical analyses of the text.

Talaj phruna,
ande kuna
o bakrja brej,
o čhavo rovel,
pe dajake ov phučel.
Buzni nakel čučiči del les,
balval phurdel sovljarel les,
Devla, Devla o čhavo barvalo,
bakrja naken čučiči den les,
bryšind del najarel les.
Ah mo čhavo o barvalo!
Talaj phruna,
ande kuna,
si man čhavo Devlester,
o Devel les mange bičaldja.
Bakre nakhen čučiči den les,
balval phurdel sovljarel les,
Devla, Devla mo čhavo barvalo.
Buzni nakhel čučiči del les,
bryšind del najarel les,
ah mo čhavo o barvalo,
ah mo čhavo o barvalo!

Here the students can have the task to find the definite articles in Romani or to look for the nouns with masculine and feminine gender. In other songs we look other categories: the adjectives, the case endings or the tenses of the verbs. In this way the learning process is not boring for the students because they can sing the song in the class and they enjoy doing that.

4.3 Teaching Romani Dialectology

Each summer in different Roma communities short Expeditions are organized and the students collect oral history (personal biographies, songs, fairy tails, stories which happened to them during the Nazi period or during the communism in Bulgaria). All the interviews are done in Romani in the local dialect of the Roma and the interviews are recorded by tape recorders or video cameras and then the student have the task to transcribe the interviews and to bring the transcripts in the class when we have seminars in Dialectology. The collected information is also used as a source of historical and cultural information. Together with analyzes of morphology and syntax of particular dialect spoken by a Roma community in a particular region the students can also analyze the cultural and historical information. This goes hand in hand with the theory of Robert Lado who promotes the idea that a language should be learned together with the culture.

4.4 Teaching Romani stylistics

The lectures of Romani stylistics are some of the most difficult for the students because it requires use of different styles in oral and written form. In order to help the students a journalistic club is established. A professional journalist usually visits the students for few days and teaches them about the journalistic styles. During the training the students have the task to write texts in Bulgarian in some of the styles which are acquired. Later in the classes of Romani stylistics the student have the task to write stories using some of the learned journalistic styles. This approach is used particularly when the neologisms in Romani are introduced and it is a good way to show the students how terminology which does not exist in Romani can be created. This particular methodology is used for the lessons of Romani stylistics. In this way the students exercise writing in Romani using different styles.

4.5 Teaching literature

Last 20 years different Roma authors started to publish more fiction or poetry in Romani. However there are many translations as well. The work in the Romani literature classes with different types of Romani texts: originally written in Romani or translated into different Romani dialects help the students to learn about different Roma dialects. For example the translation of »The little prince« into Romani, to the Lovara dialect from Hungary, »Romeo and Juliet« into Russian Roma dialect, the poems of different authors from different parts of Europe are sources for new knowledge about different dialects. In the classes of Romani literature the students are also encouraged to write fiction texts in order to get familiar with the process of producing fiction literature.

5. Conclusions

The shared ideas are just a part from the used diverse methods in the classes with Roma students and they are a step towards improving the Romani language educational process at university level. The methods described here are used for teaching the following subjects:

- Romani phonology
- Romani morphology
- Romani syntax
- Dialectology
- Romani Stylistics
- Romani psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics
- Methodology of teaching of Romani
- Children Literature in Romani
- Practicum in Romani language

However, still there is a need of new research in the field of methodology of teaching Romani language and culture in such a way that it could be interesting not only for Roma but also for non-Roma students, willing to study Romani. There is a need of new methodological books for teaching Romani. In this way Romani language

education will meet the criteria of the Council of Europe - Romani language teaching to be on such a level as the other modern European languages.

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Appendix

Pictures of Roma students from the Theater group

