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DIALECT, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY OF THE GYPSIES (IN THE CASE OF BULGARIA)

The Gypsies are a specific community with a complex hierarchical internal ethnic and social structure, whose subdivisions are distinguished by their more or less different cultural parameters. One of the most important and essential characteristics of the Gypsy community is the dialect of their shared language (*Romanes*).

No doubt there is a certain interrelation between the internal subdivisions of the Gypsy community and the dialects they use. Moreover, it would be logical to expect them to be completely correlative and mutually overlapping, i.e. at least theoretically all subdivisions of the Gypsy community (differentiated on various levels) should be characterised (and differ from the other similar subdivisions) by their dialect (or dialect group). Hence, we can expect a full coincidence in the results of all linguistic, historical and ethnological studies aiming at outlining the different Gypsy groups, subdivisions and respective dialects and dialect groups. However, the reality is much different and we will try to give reasons for this fact in the following lines.

As is often the case, any specific reality is more or less different from theoretical schemes. That is why we can discover a number of discrepancies between the declared (mostly by the Gypsies themselves) rule that each subdivision of the Gypsy community in Bulgaria has its own 'language' (by 'language' the informants usually mean the specific dialect of *Romanes*). Here we also have to include the instances of the loss of *Romanes* and its replacement by another 'own' language. The explanation of the reasons for these discrepancies between community differentiation and the dialects/languages used can be sought in two major directions.

The first line which we have to follow in order to explain the interrelations and ratio between identity and dialect / language is the 'Gypsy own' line, i.e. this is the point of view of the internal evolution of the Gypsy community. The Gypsy community is a community of complex segments and structures, the so called 'intergroup ethnic community' which can have different levels (ascending and descending) of 'Gypsy own'

identity (group, subgroup, metagroup unit and others). One of these levels may be more prominent as the leading one and overlap all the others (or be demonstrated before the 'aliens') according to various contextual factors.

However, the Gypsy community is not frozen in time with a strictly defined and fixed structure and unchanging internal subdivisions on different levels. On the contrary, its overall structure is undergoing a constant process of internal dynamic development, which reflects on the different levels of identity and the dialects/languages used. This development can follow two major trends (often in dialectical interrelation) according to the influence of different factors - towards segmentation and towards consolidation.

The inherently 'own language' (though in reality we are talking about different dialects of *Romanes*) is always a determining feature of the establishment and especially of the explanation of Gypsy community identity (of various order) and the distinction from the 'other' Gypsy communities.

Gypsies in Bulgaria, like Gypsies in many other parts of the world, as a rule (with very few exceptions) adamantly refuse to accept the fact that someone who is not a Gypsy by birth can learn to speak their language. Even when people who know *Romanes* deny having Gypsy origins, they are suspected of hiding their 'true' origin and if these are foreigners only a few phrases or words in *Romanes* is enough to proclaim them as 'perfectly' fluent in the language. The good knowledge of *Romanes* is the decisive factor in the relatively quite rare instances of accepting Bulgarians who marry Gypsies and are integrated in the Gypsy community, including in the most closed traditionally endogamous groups.

Another steadfast rule (with a very few exceptions as well) is that each Gypsy community thinks that its dialect is the 'purest', the 'most correct' one, the 'real Gypsy language', while the dialect of the 'other' Gypsies is almost always the 'broken', 'impure', 'not the real' language, or in the best case scenario the 'others' do not speak properly (they 'slur', 'drawl', 'speak with a throaty accent', etc.).

This distinction from the 'other' Gypsies can be found in many and different variants. In some instances it is rather an imaginary one, a presumption, such as in the *Erlii* community in Sofia and Kyustendil. The representatives of one and the same community who have preserved the memories of kinship and still marry within the community, adamantly and stubbornly claim that there are differences between their dialects. Actually, these differences are rather minute even for the language speakers themselves who find it hard to point out more than a few different words on the lexical

level or very weak phonetic nuances (in our example this is mostly the influence of Gypsy dialects in neighbouring Macedonia and former Yugoslavia on the Kyustendil dialect). Nevertheless, the regional detachment of Gypsies in the two towns has led to some distinctions in the group identity (without coming to a juxtaposition), which are justified by the emphasis on the differences between the dialects used.

Much more interesting are the cases when, as a result of historical turns of fortune, Gypsies using one and the same dialect (or a group of dialects) acquire a clear-cut confronting identity. For example, in the town of Sliven there are two separate Gypsy *mahala* (neighbourhoods) in the two ends of town, a few kilometres apart. The Upper mahala is inhabited by Orthodox Christian Gypsies who have forgotten their group identity and define themselves only as *Dasikane Roma* or 'Bulgarian Gypsies', i.e. as a part of a big metagroup community within Bulgaria differentiated according to its religion ('Bulgarian' has the meaning of 'Orthodox Christian'). The Gypsies living in the Lower mahala, mostly newcomers from the surrounding regions, are Muslims. Though they have preserved the memory of their previous group identity and to a certain extent also of the distinction from the others, such as *Čalgadži / Muzikanti* (i.e. the musicians) and *Gradeški Cigani* (i.e. Gypsies who have come from the nearby village of Gradets), they prefer to define themselves as *Xoraxane Roma* or 'Turski Cigani' (i.e. 'Turkish Gypsies' - 'Turkish' meaning 'Muslim') and some of them define themselves as 'Turks' (i.e. they prefer to demonstrate Turkish ethnic identity especially in front the strangers). The two communities in Sliven ('Bulgarian' and 'Turkish' Gypsies) keep strictly apart, never intermarry and use every available opportunity to emphasize their differences from the 'others' (whom they almost do not know) and their superiority over them. However, from a linguistic point of view the differences are insignificant and the two communities speak variants of the big group of the so-called 'Drândari' dialects (or East Balkan dialect group, according to a others autors). It is only in the dialect of Gypsies with Turkish self-awareness that we can observe tendencies for more contemporary Turkish borrowings and sometimes even an attempt to speak Turkish (to a great extent unsuccessful), which is considered to be more prestigious. The dialect unity (or at least kinship) does not contribute to bringing the two communities closer together.

Moreover, there are enough examples showing that identity (the real or merely the desired one) can be an important factor for the contacts of Lower mahala residents with other Gypsy communities in the surrounding region compared to the relations with the Upper mahala residents (who have the same dialect). Based on their common self-

identification as ‘Turkish Gypsies’, the Lower mahala residents manifest a relatively greater kinship with the *Fičiri* of the nearby town of Stara Zagora whose dialect is different from theirs. The *Fičiri* use their own specific variant of the *Erlji / Arli* dialect group (or West Balkan dialect group, according to a others autors), common mostly for Gypsy groups in Western Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia. Together with the ‘Drândari’ group of dialects it is a part of the big group of ‘Balkan’ (or ‘non-Vlax’, according to a different terminology) dialects of *Romanes*. Similarly, due to their shared aspirations towards a new Turkish identity, some Lower mahala Gypsies have close relations with the Turkish speaking Gypsies of another nearby town, Nova Zagora, though they communicate mostly in Bulgarian.

As we have already mentioned, the self-identity on the level of ‘Turkish Gypsy’ metagroup community (or on the level of ‘Bulgarian Gypsy’) does not exclude the existence of lower levels of group identity which can be closely interrelated with the dialectal distinction. In the example of the Lower mahala in Sliven, there is the community of the so called ‘Goli Cigani’ (i.e. ‘naked Gypsies’ a derisive, pejorative appellation used by the other Gypsies in the mahala) besides the already mentioned more or less preserved and differentiated Gypsy groups. To a great extent they are marginalised within the Gypsy community itself, they live in a separate part of the mahala, their lifestyle is considerably different from the one of the other Gypsies and they avoid any closer contacts with them (including marriages). Their dialect belongs to the community of the so- called ‘Old Vlax dialects’ (or ‘South Vlax dialects’ according to a others autors) of *Romanes*, i.e. there is not only a certain social distance but also a considerable discrepancy of dialects within the big community of the ‘Turkish Gypsies’.

This model of distinction (in identity as well as in real life) between Gypsies using the ‘Balkan’ dialects of *Romanes* on the one hand and Gypsies using ‘Old Vlax’ dialects on the other hand, may be found in many other big urban Gypsy mahalas in Bulgaria. However, this distinction is not such a drastic discrepancy between the two dialect communities everywhere it occurs. In Sofia the *Erlji* have already accepted the ‘Vlax Gypsies’ (who settled in the capital in the 20's and 30's of this century), they have lived together for a few generations, there are many intermarriages between them and a mixture of dialects, but a certain cultural specifics has nevertheless been preserved, and the ‘Vlaxs’ are still considered as being on a lower level than the *Erlji*. An interesting nuance has emerged in the last few years as a result of the international contacts with Gypsies from different countries. Some *Erlji* are inclined to admit that the dialect of the

‘Vlax Gypsies’ is ‘pure’, ‘more real Gypsy language’, but this does not change their overall attitude towards them.

The negative attitudes towards the speakers of ‘Old Vlax’ dialects within the bigger urban mahalas in Bulgaria is a frequent phenomenon. Often they are like ‘pariahs among the Gypsies’ in their social status and way of life. To a great extent this situation is historically determined - most of these urban mahalas emerged centuries ago, during the time of the Ottoman Empire, while the groups speaking ‘Old Vlax’ dialects (called ‘Vlaxički Cigani’ [Vlax Gypsies], ‘Vlaxs’, ‘Vlaxoria’, ‘Laxorii’, ‘Laxo’ or other similar names, usually with negative connotations) settled there mostly in the 20's and 30's of this century. The last and weakest wave of new settlers in the mahalas was in the 50's. The new settlers, speakers of ‘Old Vlax’ dialects, are much poorer and more ‘backward’ according to the norms of the long-time mahala residents, and are not well received by them. This attitude has persisted until today in more or less clear-cut forms.

However, we should not think that in this instance the dialect distinction is the decisive one for the existing attitude towards ‘Old Vlax’ dialect speakers. Though relatively less often, there are some instances, such as in the mahala in the town of Vidin (Bulgaria), where the hierarchy of intergroup relations is in another correlation - the *Džambaši* (speaking an ‘Old Vlax’ dialect) are of highest standing, followed by *Kalajdži* (speaking a ‘Balkan’ dialect of the ‘Drândari’ group) and the *Rešetari* (i.e. sieve-makers), mostly addressed with the derogatory ‘Cucumani’ (using an ‘Old Vlax’ dialect). These are the ‘normal’ Gypsy communities, which gradually integrate with each other (but this does not lead to the disappearance of distinctions and group identity). Quite apart from them are the scorned by all *Košničari* (i.e. basket-makers), using a ‘Balkan’ dialect of the *Erlji / Arli* group, who were the last ones to settle in the mahala in the 50's.

The use of a common (or similar) dialect quite often may be a significant factor for the gradual integration of the different Gypsy groups in one community, especially in the big urban mahalas. Not only the community identity but also the dialect used change in the process. During the first half of this century there were more or less differentiated subgroups in Sofia who used different variants of the *Erlji* dialects. They were gradually jointed by Gypsies who had moved there from the villages of the vast Sofia region. At present the identity of their descendants is only the *Erlji* identity, the memory of a past differentiation has been preserved on the level of families, and we can discover traces of inter-dialectal variety mainly on the individual level.

Similar processes occur in many places. It is mostly in Eastern Bulgaria that the changes of identity and the dialects used are influenced by the penetration of the Turkish language (sometimes related to changes towards preferred Turkish identity). For instance, the 'White Soil' mahala in the town of Shumen, which has existed since the 70's of last century, used to be identified as a 'Košnicarska mahala' (i.e. the *Sepedži / Košničari* were the predominant population in it). At present however, its residents, descendants of the people who have come to the mahala from other parts of the town and nearby villages at various times, define themselves only as 'Turkish Gypsies'. The *Romanes* they use is a mixture of different related dialects of the 'Drândari'. It is gradually being replaced by the Turkish language. The other Gypsy mahala in the town is relatively more homogeneous, inhabited mostly by *Muzikanti* (i.e. musicians) who speak a dialect of the 'Drândari' group. The Turkish language is predominant there as well (combined with lasting tendencies for change of ethnic identity).

The kinship of dialects, however, not always leads to integration and mixing of different groups. The way of life and ethnocultural characteristics of the groups can have a very important role here. In the villages of South-Eastern Bulgaria there live scattered (one-two families in a village) the nomadic 'Thracean' *Kalajdži* (i.e. tinsmiths) with self-appellation *Vlaxurja*, using an 'Old Vlax' dialect and different groups of long-settled Gypsies. Most often the settled Gypsies belong to the 'Balkan' dialect group. The 'Thracean' *Kalajdži* call them with the general name 'Fičiri' which has in their eyes negative connotations ('Ficiri' is used there as a general definition of all 'not ours, alien' Gypsy groups which are always on a lower level). However, in a number of villages we can meet settled Gypsies (or at least some of them) using 'Old Vlax' dialects to the sincere amazement of the 'Thracean' *Kalajdži* – "they call themselves *Vlaxorja*, but we are *Vlaxurja* and they are 'Fičiri'... never mind that they talk almost like us, there is still a difference, this is not our language".

Rather different are the processes of change in identity with the speakers of the third main dialect group of *Romanes*, the 'New Vlax' (or 'North Vlax' according to a others authors) group of dialects - the so called *Kardaraši / Kaldaraši* (with generalising self-appellation *Rrom Cigâniaka*, in the sense 'true Roma'). They are undergoing active processes in two seemingly contradictory directions, which actually do not change the common trend of development. There is a leading tendency of consolidating groups and subgroups in a metagroup community, which is endogamously closed and sharply differentiated from all other Gypsies (defined by them as 'Cucumani' - a name with

strongly negative connotations). On the other hand, there is a constant process in the opposite direction where individual growing clans (*džins*) begin to close themselves (exogamically among two or three *džins* and even endogamically in frames of one and the same *džins*) with the perspective of forming separate subgroups without destroying the unity of the metagroup community. On the level of language, however, the processes are in one direction only - the existing differences in dialects (mostly quite insignificant) are still preserved and are always pointed out as being one of the most important factors for the distinction of the subdivisions within the metagroup community.

The second direction which we have to follow in order to explain the interrelations and ratio between identity and dialect / language is related to the place of Gypsies in the specific (historical or contemporary) social environment they live in. We have to consider the fact that Gypsies are not a 'community in themselves', they always live as an inseparable part of an 'alien' macrosociety. Often Gypsies may change the specific macrosociety during their migrations, but social context always has an influence on them - both in terms of language and identity. These influences may vary in nature and have quite different dimensions.

In modern times the Gypsies living in a certain country over a longer period of time acquire a new aspect of their complex identity - the aspect of belonging to the country they live in and of being a part of the respective state-nation.

This phenomenon has become especially obvious in the last few years when the borders were opened after the changes in Eastern Europe. Bulgarian Gypsies were then able to communicate with their fellow Gypsies living in other countries. However paradoxical this situation may seem at first glance, it were these changes which have dealt one of the most serious blows on the attempt to achieve universal Gypsy unity global and define the Gypsies as a transborder national minority (at least for this historical moment). The international contacts of Bulgarian Gypsies with Gypsies from other countries have outlined a clear-cut tendency of their common identity (on the level of 'Gypsies from Bulgaria') and their distinction from other Gypsies. The similarity or difference in dialects is not a significant factor and some curious situations have occurred - a *Kardaraš* (speaking the 'New Vlax' dialect) from Bulgaria considers Bulgarian Gypsies who speak 'Balkan' dialects (from which he has always differentiated himself in Bulgaria) closer to him than *Kaldaraša* from former Yugoslavia, immigrants to Western Europe, to whom he is much closely related (including in terms of dialects). This type of 'new identity' and the relations arising from it can also be active on the level of the

cultural and historical region. For example, *Kardaraša* from Bulgaria feel greater closeness to Macedonian Gypsies who speak *Arli* dialect than the *Lovara* of Central Europe who are linguistically much closer to the *Kardaraša*.

The international contacts with Gypsies from abroad (mostly from Eastern Europe) in the rapidly developing NGO sector have led to the emergence of a random process of practical standardisation of *Romanes* within the relatively limited circle of Gypsy activists. This practical standardisation bears no relation to the attempts to standardise *Romanes* by the international Roma movement (International Romani Union – Marcel Korthiade’s variant). It is based on the use of mutually intelligible words and expressions from the various dialects. Thus, a modern Gypsy lingua franca gradually comes into existence. It is used during organised meetings of Gypsies from different countries. Sometimes Bulgarian Gypsies who had insufficient or no knowledge of *Romanes* gradually learn the ‘international Gypsy’ language and begin to use it.

A specific and rather frequent phenomenon of the ratio identity-language are the numerous instances and variants of preferred ethnic identity, some of which we have already mentioned above. On the Balkans we can meet Gypsies whose ‘mother’ tongue is Turkish, Rumanian, Albanian, Tatar, Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek (or different forms of bilingualism combining *Romanes* remnants with these languages).

In Bulgaria in particular the most widely spread processes are those of preferred Turkish identity, predominant among the Gypsies of Eastern Bulgaria. They have a very clear (but in no way completed) correlation with the changes in the language used. The changes in identity run parallel to the changes in language. The gradual loss of *Romanes*, its substitution with different forms of bilingualism and the transition to fluency in Turkish only is a process which seems to have existed for centuries. Nevertheless, it is not over and in some places the ratio identity-language can acquire various dimensions, including a clearly expressed Roma identity and full loss of *Romanes*, as is the case of some Gypsy communities in the Dobritch region.

The various examples of different relations between identity and the dialect/language used, which we have cited here, could easily be multiplied since each specific case brings a new dimension to the relationship. This demonstrates the need for and potential of an interdisciplinary approach to Gypsy studies, combining the achievements and methodology of history, ethnology and linguistics. It will open new horizons in the historical research and studies of the modern aspects of the development of the Romani communities, their language and identity.

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