

Language Problems from the Perspective of the Roma in the School Environment

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Abstract

The paper characterises the language problems of the Roma in the Slovak Republic in the school environment. The aim of the paper is to open up a space for discussing the language problems in the Roma, a space for extracting the current Romani language problems with an emphasis on the school environment and the implementation of the Romani language in the educational practice. The research question is what the Roma consider to be a language problem in the school environment and what solutions they propose. To obtain the empirical material, we used a qualitative methodology tool, a semi-structured interview conducted in the Romani language. The paper presents and characterises language problems in the school environment from the perspective of the Roma and proposes measures to solve the problems.

Keywords: Romani language, language problem, school environment of the Roma

In the language communication environment of the Roma², the Romani language is functionally dominant and is used in a broad generational and linguistic contact circuit in various communication situations (with some limitations given the width of its linguistic network, social impact and space) (Ráčová, Samko, 2017). One of the signs of settlements and poverty of the Roma is the interconnectedness with the social exclusion, including its spatial expression, and a part of the Roma living in segregated communities is considered to be the most at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Rusnáková, Rochovská, 2016). “The pupil’s ethnicity has no place in formal education” (Rusnáková, 2013, p. 227; translated by the study author); the author justifies her statement by multiple research studies carried out in the Slovak elementary school. Rusnáková (2013) further states that the school applies a “civic” approach to Romani pupils and the teacher is only slightly, or not at all, interested in their ethnicity (including everything else associated with it, including the language). The above-mentioned facts, as well as the fact that the intergenerational transmission of the Romani language in Roma communities takes place on a daily basis, in relation to the Romani language as a language of the Roma nation appear to be excellent, but we also encounter the ignorance of the Slovak language in Romani children, which influences their success in the education system and subsequently in the labour market.

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² In the Population and Housing Census in 2011 in the Slovak Republic, 105,738 officially claimed to be of the Romani nationality (Štat. Úrad., Tab. 115). Related to the mother tongue, 122,518 officially claimed to have Romani mother tongue (Štat. Úrad., Tab. 156). Thus, there were more inhabitants who claimed the Romani as a mother tongue than those who claimed to be of the Romani nationality by 19,780. However, the unofficial estimates on the number of the Roma in the SR are significantly higher, e.g. The Atlas of Roma Communities 2013 states the number of Roma in Slovakia 402,840 Roma (Mušíňka et al., 2014) on the basis of socio-graphic mapping and a qualified estimate. The publication states “four types of housing of the Romani population in terms of spatial relation to the majority: scattered (Romani inhabitants live in the municipality scattered among the majority), concentrated in the municipality (Roma inhabitants live within the municipality, but concentrated in one or more parts), concentrated on the periphery of the municipality (Roma inhabitants live concentrated in the marginal part of the municipality), and concentrated outside the municipality (Roma inhabitants live in a settlement distant from the municipality or separated from the municipality by a barrier)” (Mušíňka et al. 2014, p. 6; translated by the study author). In the cities and villages there are 803 settlements, including the settlements on the outskirts of the municipality 324, settlements within the municipalities 246, and segregated settlements 233. Scattered among the majority population there are 187,305 Roma; in the Roma settlements on the outskirts of the municipality there are 95,020; in the segregated settlements there are 73,920; in the Roma settlements within the municipality there are 46,496 Roma (Mušíňka et al. 2014).

The traditional school perceives bilingual Romani speakers as a connection of the monolingual bilinguals and thus accedes to them. Thus, the Romani speakers are required to meet the criteria as a monolingual pupil, or a bilingual pupil with the Slovak mother tongue, or to be perfectly equal in one of the languages as a monolingual. Štefánik compares a similar situation “to hurdle runners that combine sprint and high jump. If such an athlete were compared individually with a sprinter or a high jumper, only rarely he would reach their level in the individual disciplines, but in his discipline he is a whole, specific athlete that can achieve top performances, while no one would compare him with the previously mentioned athletes. A bilingual is like such a hurdle runner – a specific speaker and listener, one whole, and not a simple sum of two monolinguals” (Štefánik, 2005, p. 101; translated by the study author). Thus, we perceive the bilingualism of Roma pupils, the Romani language not as a negative, but as a positive, a common denominator of the knowledge of all the pupils which educational goals can be built on.

Methods

The research question is *what the Roma consider to be a language problem in the school environment and what solutions they propose*. Furthermore, we want to clarify the language problems of the Roma in this context and contribute to broader knowledge of the strategies the Roma use in dealing with these problems. The aim is to present and characterise the language issues from the perspective of the Roma, to propose measures to solve the problems, and to outline the direction and perspectives of the Romani language³.

To obtain the empirical material, we used a qualitative methodology tool, a semi-structured interview. The individual interviews of the researcher with the respondents were conducted in the Romani language in order to achieve the maximum freedom and openness of the respondents in the interviews and the sufficient interaction between the respondents and the researcher necessary to gain deep knowledge of the topics included in the interview scenario. The semi-structured interview scenario was constructed according to the main topics of the interviews with the respondents in order to obtain information to meet the objective of the qualitative research study. The researcher had a list of topics and additional questions that could be adapted to the topics, their order and the content of the interview.

We conducted the semi-structured interviews in the home or familiar environments of the respondents. We recorded the interviews, transcribed them in the Romani language and anonymised them; each respondent was given a pseudonym. In total, we obtained the corpus, the recordings in the duration of 4 hours and 32 minutes. The main topics of the interview were the framework according to which we coded the respondents' statements. We paraphrased the statements and translated them into Slovak in order to use as many statements as possible. Subsequently, we processed the respondents' statements synthetically (by synthesis) according to the main topics. For each citation, paraphrase, we state a pseudonym of the respondent. All cited statements in the paper were translated into English by the study author.

The respondents in the number $N = 5$ were included in the sample according to the criterion of purposeful sampling of typical characteristics in qualitative research, with an emphasis on university education⁴ and work with the Romani language in practice. In relation to the sample size, we followed the saturation, i.e. we finished the sampling process when we found out that the information from other respondents was repeated. Thus, the respondents were selected so that we could obtain the greatest possible variability of their views. Furthermore, in this study, I use my personal participation in the observation of the linguistic behaviour in the Roma which, as a member of the Romani community with the Romani mother tongue, I conduct almost continuously.

Findings

Based on the findings, we formulate the language problems in the school environment from the perspective of the Roma and their recommendations leading to their solution:

- 1 The current situation is characterised by a problem of the absence of the Romani national education. Education in the Romani language as a free choice for the Roma is an essential attribute for the implementation of the language rights of the Roma.
- 2 The current situation is characterised by the problem of the absence of independent departments focusing on the Romani languages at universities. Also, there is no scientific and research office at the Slovak Academy of

³ In this paper, we state a part of the findings from the research study. Further findings from this and broader research by the author on the language problems from the perspective of the Roma will be published in other papers by the author.

⁴ For the methods of empirical research on language problems, types of language problems, and language problems, see (Lanstyák, 2010; 2012).

Sciences which would address the minority languages, including the Romani language, or a department which would address "multilingualism" in the context of the minority languages, including the Romani language.

- 3 A lack of the sufficient number of Romani teachers characterises the current status and the problem in the form of the implementation of the Romani language in the school practice. The studies for the Romani language teaching and then employing them are a guaranty of the elimination of the problem.
- 4 The current situation is characterised by the problem of pedagogical teacher's assistants in schools not speaking the Romani language, which eliminates the aim and purpose of pedagogical assistants in practice. A solution to the problem is the strict introduction of the criterion of the knowledge of the Romani language by pedagogical assistants.
- 5 The universities in the teaching study programmes do not sufficiently prepare future teachers to work with children with mother tongues different from a language of instruction. One possible solution is to introduce the topic of languages and cultures of national minorities in the descriptions of the study fields.
- 6 The traditional school is not sufficiently prepared to educate pupils with a mother tongue different from the language of instruction. This problem is also in the pupils with Slovak as a foreign language.

Several cited statements from the study:

Once I was at the Ministry of Education, at the national, and I asked there why we did not have [Romani] national education as a nationality? And there they told me it was because the Roma did not want that. There is a law, everything is but that requirement from fathers and I have and what now? I have a child and he is now going to start school and I will say that I want my child to be taught in the Romani language and they will say that we need this. When the fathers and mothers will ask for it, then it can be. I think that this will not be soon because our Roma have social problems and do not think of these things. Well, and what do we need, what do we need? I say. Much has been said about the integration. I don't know when this will be because I don't want to say that we, the Roma, are a special nationality, we don't have our country where we came from. They say that from India, but this is different than that of other nationalities, such as the Hungarians have their own. There are some money for them from there or other help and there are those standards already. But when it comes to the Romani language, those standards are not there and we always just look for; as many Roma as many languages, what a country, it's always different. I have a granddaughter, I will say an example. I've brought her a book for kids about what is good and what is wrong and how to behave, hey. And simply, there were drawings of what is good and what is wrong. So that it could be understood by a small child who goes only to kindergarten, when the child is still at home; and my granddaughter did not speak Romani when she came because my daughter has such a man who doesn't speak Romani, but now we have already taught him because I shouted at him: how is it possible that you do not know Roma? And they spoke with their children more in Slovak than Romani. So I speak Romani, let them learn. I brought her these books every time I went there and I also sat with her and she learned Romani words from the books. A child can absorb a lot. We won't have national education so soon, nor there is a chance now to fight for it, it's not the right time now for this. It's possible it will be in 20 years. Now we need to do the inclusion and integration together, not just one, to join it somehow. We need to eliminate segregation most of all [BD].

A heart language, a person who has used the Romani language wants those books to be in the Romani too. I have only Slovak books, I don't have Romani books. There is nothing in Romani, there are no books for children, so what should a person read, he reads only in Slovak [CA].

It is necessary, of course, that books should be in Romani. Some children can't speak Slovak and those teachers need to understand them, I need it, or I need it so that they are able to say that I need a toilet or I don't know what. It is good when there is a Roma teacher [CA].

In my yes, we need such teachers of the Romani language. I fight a lot for the Romani language; it can happen that they will say about me that I am so radical in this area, but I'm glad to be radical because I see that much work is not done with our language. Our language is proud, it can be nicely spoken, we just need people who learn in this area, who will go on and teach others [BD].

But now there are not such people yet, there are not, but they are needed. When the Hungarians teach the Hungarian language and also learn Slovak, why would not be a Romani teacher to teach? Then they would be able to speak our language; I don't speak well either, you see that I struggle with the language, hey, I have to think how to speak Romani because a lot of Hungarian is there. At home they already speak more Hungarian. So, it would be necessary they could learn Romani at school, those children [BD].

In my opinion, there are enough children at school, so as I said, as the Hungarians learn in Hungarian and have Slovak lessons, also the Roma could have so. They would learn in Romani and would also have a Slovak lesson [AO].

Yes, sure. They may learn all the subjects in Romani, and Slovak, how to say it, they could have one or two lessons of Slovak. They can speak Slovak, but they forget that they are Romani, the Romani language is their language. There is a lack of Romani, just a little bit on the radio and just a little bit on TV. It would be a good thing if there was something like that, more people see it like that, so let us also have too [AO].

They don't have to learn every subject in Romani. To begin with, just when they get the basic standard. When they go to school and don't understand Slovak. Also in the first level, if they used such bilingual teaching with our children, so that there was a person who speaks Romani and knows the background which a child comes from. We have communities in which Slovak is not spoken, only Romani [GL].

Discussion

In the interviews, the respondents expressed their distrust of the school education system, discontent with the current status of the use of Romani in schools as a mother tongue; helplessness to influence and change the current situation in schools in relation to Romani; they express their views and ideas about changes in schools in relation to resolving language problems; they express the feeling of injustice that they are wronged in schools; they declare that Roma children can partially speak Slovak but also that they almost do not speak Slovak; as the most frequent indirect language input in Roma children, they suggest watching television in the Slovak language; they state that the Roma do not realise that knowledge of the language of instruction in school will increase their chances to achieve success. The respondents agree that their mother tongue is Romani, their rate of communication contacts in Romani is greater than in Slovak; they prefer Romani to Slovak. As for their subjective assessment of their knowledge of languages, they state they can speak Romani excellently, much better than Slovak. The use of the Romani language according to the communication situations according to the social impact – the respondents stated that most often their children used the Romani language at home, then out of home, and partially at school during breaks. Linguistic ideologies of bilingual speakers significantly influence knowledge and language competence in Slovak and perfectly copy the current status. Their language ideologies as ideas that interpret the relationship of Romani as a mother tongue and the Slovak language as an official language and the language of instruction in schools clearly mirror the current “unfavourable” language situation in the area of the Romani language. The respondents are aware of the socioeconomic value of Slovak as the official language and the language of instruction in schools, but at the same time they consider the process of increasing the socioeconomic value of Romani to be necessary.

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Documents

Tab. 115 Obyvateľstvo podľa pohlavia a národnosti

<https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

Tab. 156 Obyvateľstvo podľa pohlavia a materinského jazyka

<https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

Správa o stave používania jazykov národnostných menšín na území SR. Za obdobia rokov 2017 – 2018. Úrad vlády SR, 2018. Dostupná na: https://www.narodnostnemensiny.gov.sk/data/files/7462_sprava-o-stave-pouzivania-jazykov-narodnostnych-mensin-na-uzemi-slovensk.pdf