Introduction

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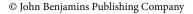
INTRODUCTION

Language contact has been a central issue in Romani linguistics ever since its very early beginnings. The fact that a language existed with no coherent geographical area, and that bits and pieces of that language most obviously paralleled some of Europe's best known idioms, while others remained obscure in their structure and origin, had led scholars and other spectators to many speculations regarding the classification and definition of the Gypsy varieties.

It was Johann Rüdiger who, drawing on clues provided by some of his colleagues, was the first to provide a solid explanation for the origin of the Romani language, tracing it back to the Indo-Aryan varieties of India (Rüdiger 1782). Rüdiger was an empiricist, who collected Romani data via fieldwork and compared them to descriptions of Hindostani (Hindi) available in the literature. He concluded that Romani was in essence Indic, and that it differed from its modern genetic relations in a similar fashion as do related languages in Europe, such as German, English, and Danish, or Italian and French, from one another (Rüdiger 1782: 70). Furthermore, he pointed to the fact that Romani "copied" the structures of the surrounding languages, reproducing them by using elements of the inherited Indic stock, as exemplified by the emergence of definite and indefinite articles, or by a general syntactic re-arrangement (p. 71, 77). A critic of his times and a hardly acknowledged explorer of new methodological paths, Rüdiger not only provided the proof for the real genetic affiliation of Romani, but he also taught us that appreciating the impact of language contact is crucial for understanding the typology of the language.

Nearly a century after the appearance of Rüdiger's article, Franz Miklosich published his first contribution in a series surveying the Romani dialects of Europe (Miklosich 1872-1880; 1874-1878). Miklosich relied on the borrowed lexical component of the various dialects in order to trace the migration routes of the Roma through Europe, and established their European origin in a Greek-speaking community, basing his arguments on the Greek element in the lexicon and morphology which all varieties of the language share (Miklosich 1872-1880, III).

Discussions of the Indic component of Romani and its position in relation to the genetically affiliated languages of India flourished in the late 1800's and in the early decades of this century. Here too, scholars pointed to

the hybrid character of Romani, some arguing that contact was responsible for the fact that Romani shared distinct features with different varieties of subcontinental Indo-Aryan. While Turner (1926) advocated a historical layer-solution, arguing for the emergence of Romani in Central India and a subsequent migration to the Northwest, where it remained unaffected by later developments within the Central languages, Sampson (1926: 29) suggested a merger of various dialects as a possible solution.

        Since Gilliat-Smith (1915-1916), dialect classification in Romani has relied heavily on the distinction between *Vlach* and *non-Vlach* varieties, the Romanian influence upon the former being one of the significant criteria. Besides reviving this latter distinction (Kochanowski 1963), modern Romani linguistics has directed much of its efforts toward investigating the structural and sociological background for the emergence of those Gypsy varieties which are based on the surrounding so-called host-languages, but retain, at least in part, a Romani vocabulary (see Bakker & Van der Voort 1991 for an overview). Growing interest in these varieties during recent years (cf. Bakker & Cortiade 1991) has partly to do with the fact that their structures are more easily accessible to non-Romanologues than are those of 'inflected Romani' (so the term for Romani proper), but it is also connected to the theoretical questions which they pose. Much discussion has been dedicated to seeming similarities between such idioms and Creoles (e.g. Hancock 1970; Boretzky 1985; Acton 1989), before the term *Para-Romani* (Cortiade 1991) was suggested. Romani 'mixed' varieties have been presented as further evidence for the existence of a 'mixed language' type which owes its genesis to a process of 'broken transmission' across generations - evidence put forth in order to challenge the conventional notion of gradual genetic development as the primary course of linguistic evolution (Thomason & Kaufman 1988).

        But inflected Romani, a genuine genetic relation of Modern Indo-Aryan, also possesses structural features which confront descriptivists with a challenge. It has been shown that apart from borrowing lexical items, Romani also treats borrowed morphological material systematically, assigning much of it selectively to the borrowed lexicon, a phenomenon referred to as *thematic* vs. *athematic* grammar (Hancock 1993). While this is generally characteristic of the language as a whole (cf. Kostov 1973; Boretzky 1989), specific dialects also show their own typical patterns of adoption (Kostov 1973; Igla 1989; Boretzky & Igla 1991). Besides selective integration of borrowed morphology, Romani dialects have incorporated

phonemes and, in some cases, phonological distinctions based on those of the surrounding languages (Boretzky 1991; Boretzky & Igla 1993). Although areal typology in the context of Balkan studies has largely ignored the language, investigations into single grammatical constructions have pointed out Balkan features in Romani (Kostov 1962; Friedman 1985, 1991; Boretzky 1986, 1993), and recently an attempt has been made to classify the core syntactic structure of Romani as a case of typological shift stimulated heavily, perhaps even triggered by the dynamics of language convergence in the Balkans, rendering a *balkanized* Indic language (Matras 1994).

Much of the attention which Romani has increasingly received in recent years is thus connected to the fact that contact has played such a central role in shaping its grammatical structure, there being virtually not a single unilingual Romani community. Such interest in turn reflects growing awareness that language contact has its impact upon numerous domains of everyday communication in modern society, with linguistic manifestations ranging from individual code switching and institutionalized bilingualism to grammatical interference and structural change. Apart from the interest in structural aspects of language contact, however, general appreciation of Romani is on the rise as, following the political transition in eastern Europe and an ongoing cultural and political re-unification process among the Romani communities in Europe, the presence of a Romani-speaking population of a significant size is acknowledged, and new ways of incorporating its cultural needs, interests, and demands into existing institutional and societal frameworks are being explored. Much activity has therefore centered lately around efforts at conventionalizing Romani for use as a vehicle of literary communication. But here too, contact proves to be a primary consideration since every written variety of Romani coexists alongside a national literary language, with which it shares a variety of functions.

Approaching the language via this unique aspect - its ever-surfacing character as a language in contact - this volume seeks to give expression to part of the wide range of research represented in today's field of Romani linguistics. It reflects both traditional and most recent domains of interest, dealing with issues of Romani origin, dialect diversity, mixed varieties, and Romani loans, as well as grammatical categories, discourse-pragmatics, standardization and literacy, and a critical assessment of the discipline itself.

It is rather striking that interest in Romani among Indologists seems to have decreased since the first part of this century, when scholars of older

and modern Indo-Aryan made significant contributions to the study of
Romani structure and origin. This old tradition in Romani studies is revived
by Vit Bubenik (St John's), who looks at a number of areas in Romani
morphosyntax from the perspective of Middle and Modern Indo-Aryan
languages and dialects. Bubenik shows that, while preserving some basic
Indo-Aryan formation patterns at the morphosyntactic level, Romani also
adheres to the 'average European' SVO, prepositional, analytic type. This
results in a typological competition of structures within the language,
which, as Bubenik points out, renders a genuine case of overall systemic
complication. This observation based on empirical evidence from Romani
dialects merits special attention, as contact is often believed to lead
necessarily to structural simplification.

      As mentioned above, conjectures regarding the origin of the Romani
people and their language, and subsequently concerning the time, the
nature, and the circumstances of their exodus from India are at least as old
as Romani studies itself. Ian Hancock (Austin) attempts to illuminate some
aspects of a puzzle which is yet to be solved by examining lexical elements
of Iranian origin in three Gypsy languages: European Romani, Near-Eastern
Domari with its varieties, and Armenian Lomavren. Hancock compiles the
relevant items from scattered sources, and concludes on the basis of a
comparative analysis that the loan vocabulary of Iranian origin shared by
any of the languages is so scarce (that shared by all three, in fact, non-
existent), that it is highly unlikely that the three groups crossed Iranian-
speaking territory together.

      Lexical issues are also the focus of Anthony Grant's (Bradford)
contribution. Grant discusses the problem of 'lexical orphans', that is to say,
words which are attested only in one dialect of the language, and their
importance for reconstructing the common lexical core of early Romani, a
task which, beyond its descriptive achievement, could bear significance
with respect to standardization efforts. But he also approaches Romani
studies itself in a critical manner, tracing plagiarism and dissemination of
spurious data across the pages of some of the discipline's most prominent
early representatives. In doing so, the author calls our attention to a delicate
but crucial matter which touches on the credibility of work considered basic
in Romani philology, and entails a special challenge to those involved in
contemporary Romani studies.

      Romani dialectology, much like the investigation of dialects in other
languages, has traditionally been rather strict in drawing isoglosses to mark

interdialectal boundaries. Norbert Boretzky (Bochum) demonstrates that this is, in reality, a rather difficult endeavor. Although there are strict social boundaries between Romani communities, mixing takes place at the phonological, morphological and probably also lexical levels. Concentrating on Romani dialects of former Yugoslavia, Boretzky examines oral data and data gathered from informants, but also written Romani prose. This demonstrates how literary Romani is gaining territory, and how (beyond its primary tasks) it also furnishes, like any other literary language does, material for descriptive analyses.

Nevertheless, our main source for Romani narration remains the oral tradition of the language, whether in the institutionalized form of story-telling, or simply in the way of reconstructing one's own experiences. Yaron Matras (Hamburg) introduces discourse-pragmatics into Romani studies in an attempt to shed new light on the function of a particular grammatical category in the language, namely the split in past tense formation. Here, Romani occupies a unique position among those subcontinental Indic languages believed to be more closely akin to it due to its lack of ergativity. On the other hand, the function of the structure in question is interpreted by Matras as a coding of evidentiality, a typical feature of the Balkan languages. We thus have a further case illustrating the hybrid character of the typological formation of the language.

Hypotheses concerning the genesis of Para-Romani languages vary, some scholars arguing for the conscious creation of a secret language common to Gypsies and other marginalized groups, others assuming a gradual integration of material from the 'host-language' into Romani, and yet another view explaining their emergence as a case of language shift. Peter Bakker (Amsterdam) discusses sources on Caló, a Para-Romani variety of the Iberian peninsula. On the basis of the apparent functions of some retained morphological elements of Romani origin, and especially the nature of the Spanish components, Bakker remarks that an early genesis of Caló, that is, its emergence shortly after the arrival of the Roma in the peninsula is most probable.

From the point of view of language-contact studies, Romani is generally treated as the recipient language for borrowed grammar and lexical elements. Especially Romanian influence on Romani has been given much attention, having played an important role in shaping what we now designate as the Vlach Romani dialects. Corinna Leschber (Berlin) confronts us with the opposite perspective, surveying evidence for the

impact of Romani on colloquial Romanian. Checking published sources against empirical fieldwork with various control groups, she compares the status Romani words have acquired in the speech of ethnic Romanians with that of similar items among Romanian-speakers of Romani origin. While semantic shift, explained by the need to fill slots in taboo-domains, is characteristic of the first, semantic consistency, that is, strong affinity with the Romani source is typical of the second. We thus gain a valuable insight into the mechanisms of language loss and the emergence, instead, of a community form of speech, bearing perhaps some significance for a general understanding of the genesis of Para-Romani varieties as well.

The process of assisting an oral language to become a vehicle of written communication is often referred to as 'standardization', but in fact it is much more complex than selecting or defining a standard norm. The last two papers of this volume present contrasting case studies on the emergence of an orthographic norm and, more generally, of a literary variety of Romani. Victor A. Friedman (Chicago) discusses officially-backed efforts to design a standard Romani alphabet in the Republic of Macedonia. Friedman emphasizes the fact that normativization can also be seen as a contact process, just like lexical or structural borrowing, since the development of a Romani alphabet is taking place in contact with the elaboration processes of other standard languages. He illustrates how decisions take into account these contact factors when selecting and codifying a norm. Milena Hübschmannová (Prague), on the other hand, shows how in the Czech Republic written, normative Romani is developing gradually and almost spontaneously through trial and error. She surveys some of the features of these literary varieties, tracing many of them back to the merger with structures of the contact language Czech, and makes special reference to the comparatively large inventory of Romani publications in this country. Each of the two papers by Friedman and Hübschmannová provides an analysis of a specific context of standardization, but a comparative examination of some of the data on orthographic problems reveals that while contact with the respective national languages is indeed crucial, an orientation toward an international Romani variety can also be detected, both in the way phonemes are recognized and in the manner in which their graphemic representation is established.

All the authors in this volume assume a primarily descriptive point of view. However, those actively engaged in promoting the use, study, recognition and standardization of the Romani language in order to fill

whatever social, cultural and political needs are felt necessary to be covered by it, might feel encouraged by the fact that this collection also aims at stimulating further discussion and involvement in Romani studies and its applied domains. By emphasizing the importance of curiosity and discovery, as opposed to prejudice and ignorance, this book can constitute but a very modest contribution to normalizing the difficult position still assigned to the Roma by the majority in our society.

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