

IAN HANCOCK



Romani
TEXTS

We are the
Romani people

Ame sam e Rromane džene

First published in Great Britain in 2002 by
University of Hertfordshire Press
College Lane
Hatfield
AL10 9AB

Reprinted 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012 and 2013

ISBN 978-1-902806-19-8

© Ian Hancock

The right of Ian Hancock to be identified as author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Copyright in the illustrations accompanying the text belongs to the
Romani Archives and Documentation Center (RADOC) unless otherwise credited

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any
means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information
storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Design by Geoff Green, Cambridge CB4 5RA
Printed in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe Ltd, SN14 6LH

Frontispiece: The author standing next to a Reading waggon (photograph by Thomas Acton)

Amari Čhib: Our language

Amara čhibasa, varekajgodi šaj tradas and'e ljumja
 "With our language, we can travel anywhere in the world"

Romani is a powerful factor of our identity. A saying exists that *Amari čhib s'amari zor* "our language is our strength", and it was believed for a long time that no one except Romanies could speak it – if you knew Romani, you must *be* Romani, because what outsider would ever want to learn it or even have the opportunity to do so? That is not the case any longer, and there are now summer schools offering courses in the language to anybody who is interested. It is also believed by many Romanies that if you *don't* speak it, you have lost your identity: the late Matéo Maximoff said in a 1994 interview in *Jekh Čhib* that "Wer kein Romanes mehr spricht, ist kein Rom mehr" ("whoever no longer speaks Romani, is no longer a Romani"). This is not true nor is it really fair since some populations, e.g. in Spain and Hungary, have lost the language through legislation and not by choice. But it demonstrates the depth of feeling that can exist.

Something should be said concerning two common misassumptions about Romani; first that it is not a written language, and second that great efforts are made to prevent outsiders from learning it.

Not counting early word-lists and grammars written by non-Romanies that date as far back as the 1500s, Romani has been written by Romanies for about a century in different periodicals. Not all in the same dialect or orthography of course, but taken together, the corpus of the written language from the early 1900s onward is considerable. Romani families in the USA have kept letters in Romani, written in the Cyrillic

alphabet, sent by relatives left behind in Russia a hundred years ago, and bibles and portions of the gospels have been published in it for nearly as long. But the past decade especially has seen a virtual outpouring of publications in our language, not only in the dozens of magazines and newspapers which exist but in translations of various literary works, books of original poetry, formal documents relating to human rights and other organisations, and so on.

The withholding of our language from non-Romanies is truer for some groups than for others. Speakers of Sintitska for example are much more protective of it than speakers of, say, Kalderashitska, and they have been successful in getting books on the language removed from libraries. This attitude is understandable, since in the Sintis' experience in Germany especially, outsiders have tried to learn it for entirely the wrong reasons. But confusing even well intentioned investigators has a long tradition, as some of the first word lists, which contain innocently collected false and vulgar Romani equivalents, show. The fact remains that there are now hundreds of grammars and dictionaries of Romani – including Sintitska – and these are accessible for anyone really wanting to find them. There are even language-learning tapes available for purchase. It is also the case that with our increased participation in world affairs, with Romani NGO representation at the United Nations, and with the Internet linking us as never before, we *need* a modern, efficient language. Keeping it hidden isn't possible, nor does doing so help us interact with each other globally.

For centuries, our Romani language puzzled Europeans. It sounded like nothing they were familiar with, and yet it contained words they recognised from their own languages. This led some to speculate that it was an invented, secret jargon and not a real language at all. But of course it is a real language, and a rich and complex one, descending from Sanskrit, just as Italian and French descend from Latin.

The reason that it contains words from European languages is because it began in India as a military lingua franca, which has been given the name *Rajputic* (see Chapter 1). Everyone who spoke it had his own mother tongue and there were dozens of those; they only used 'Rajputic' as a common means of communication while in the army camps. As the migration moved further away from India, this military lingua franca continued to be used, because the soldiers and their camp followers remained together and were obliged to continue speaking it as

the only language they had in common. It was composed of Indian and Dardic and Persian and Kurdish words, and was taken through Armenia into the Byzantine Empire, where Greek was the main language, and where Armenian and Greek and Georgian and Ossetic words were added to the vocabulary. Its originally Indian grammar was also being supplemented by grammar from these other languages, but most especially from mediaeval Greek. By this time, new generations were learning it as a first language, and so Romani was born. But the subsequent move into Europe took place over seven centuries ago, before even the Europeans knew about physics or chemistry or capitalism or computers; like German or Bulgarian or Hungarian at that time, Romani had no words for these concepts, which did not yet exist. As Romanies encountered aspects of European culture that were new to them, they used the words they heard and incorporated them into Romani. Just as English and French people first learned about science from contact with the Islamic world, and adopted words from Arabic such as 'chemistry', 'algebra', 'zero', 'alkali', 'alcohol', 'zenith' and so on, Romanies too acquired the words we needed and added them to our language. The Rajputs didn't leave India with words for 'television' or 'automobile'! Less than a third of the entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are original English words but come instead from Latin and French and a host of other languages; Romani actually has a higher proportion of its own native vocabulary than has English.

Sociologists recognise that people's attitudes to a particular language or dialect are really a reflection of how they feel about the people who speak it. And if Romanies are not held in high esteem, then our language cannot possibly be. It has been said very often that Romani is a poor language, with few words and even fewer of them able to express abstract or philosophical notions. This is not true and is a statement usually originating with people who cannot speak it.

Romani took shape and came together in Anatolia, where the Romani population stayed for two centuries or more. There is some evidence that the journey from there into Europe didn't happen all at once, but that there were different movements up into the Balkans and beyond at different times. For example the Istriani Romanies in Slovenia have very little Greek influence in their speech, suggesting that their ancestors went into Europe not long after their arrival in Byzantine lands. As Fraser's work has demonstrated (in Chapter 1), it was here that we find the beginnings

of the distinct dialect divisions; the ancestors of the speakers of those found across the north of Europe, which include Sinti Romani, seem to have left Anatolia at a different time, and perhaps under different circumstances, from those whose descendants speak Vlax Romani today. Baltic and other northern dialects lack the extensive West Slavic, Romanian and Hungarian influences which are so typical of Vlax.

There are four main dialect groups: Southern (or Balkan), Vlax (or Danubian), Central and Northern. One example of a Southern dialect is Drindari, spoken in Bulgaria. Vlax dialects, such as Kalderash or Lovari Romani, are spoken by people descended from the slaves freed from the Romanian estates in the nineteenth century (Chapter 2); the Central dialects include some of those spoken in Slovakia, Hungary and elsewhere, such as Bashaldo, while the Northern dialects include Sinti, Baltic, Finnish Kaalo Romani and the now-extinct dialects of Britain and the Iberian Peninsula. In some places in Europe, particularly in Britain, Spain, Scandinavia and parts of the Balkans, the original Romani has blended to such an extent with the surrounding European language that all it retains is the vocabulary, used in the grammatical framework of the local non-Romani language.

As with other languages, Romani must be cultivated if we are going to be able to use it in international situations. Where there are national standards for, say, Czech or Polish or Macedonian, which are monitored by governmental bodies expressly created as 'guardians of the language', the equivalent is only now becoming a reality for Romani.

An especial problem is that Romani exists in many dialects – sixty or more – and creating a standardized variety which most of their speakers will understand and support, is a huge task. There are two possibilities: to create an entirely new, composite written form with features from all of the dialect groups, or to take a dialect which already exists and which already has many speakers, and teach it everywhere once we have schools to make that possible. The dialects of those groups whose ancestors were slaves in Wallachia and Moldavia (the Vlax dialects) meet both these criteria; they have the greatest number of speakers – perhaps half of all Romani spoken – and they are found all over the world. At our international meetings, those present whose native Romani is not Vlax will often adjust to Vlax as the common dialect; prominent individuals from non-Vlax families such as Orhan Galjuš or Hristo Kjučukov or Horvath Aládár nevertheless use Vlax in public discourse. The present writer began

learning Vlax only as a young adult. But already there are objections from representatives speaking other kinds of Romani, more often on subjective rather than objective grounds; from spokesmen from the Baltic group, for instance. Until a consensus is reached, publications will continue to appear in a variety of dialects and a variety of different spellings.

Romani vocabulary

No single dialect has retained every original word or grammatical feature. Some dialects have lost useful words along the way and either use another Romani word to make up for it or have taken in a new word from outside. Thus while many dialects have kept separate words for 'tree' and 'wood' (*ruk* and *kašt*), and for 'say' and 'tell' (*phen-* and *phuker-*), the words for 'tree' and 'tell' have been lost in the Vlax dialects, which have now generalized *kašt* and *phen-* respectively for both words. The original grammatical rule for creating comparative adjectives with the ending *-eder* (*cikno* 'small', *cikneder* 'smaller') has been lost altogether in some dialects, which instead express this with words adopted from European languages: *maj cikno*, *meg cikno*. Nevertheless, if a list were made of all the thematic words in all of the sixty or more dialects, the native vocabulary would be a rich one, and this is something that will have to be done in creating a common Romani, which will have separate words for 'say' and 'tell' and 'wood' and 'tree', and for many other concepts often expressed using non-Romani vocabulary. Romani also has many productive endings that can be used to create new words. Thus the suffixes *-pen* (which is Indian) and *-mos* (which is Greek) can make nouns out of other parts of speech; from the word *šaj*, used with verbs to express 'can' or 'able' might come the new words *šajipen* 'ability' and *šajimos* 'possibility'. The word for 'impossible' could be similarly derived from *šaj*: *bišajutno*. From *našti* 'cannot' could be made *naštipen* 'impossibility' and *naštivalo* 'incapable'. From *pes* and *pen* 'himself', 'themselves' can be made *peskerimasko* 'selfish' or *pengeripen* 'self-determination'. The word-building potential of Romani is tremendous, and it is fair to say that there is no concept that potentially cannot be adequately expressed in the language. But it requires cultivation and this can only come with the support and interest not only of our own people, whose priorities too often involve food, housing and employment rather than grammars and alphabets, but of the societies among whom we live.

Samples of the language: some useful phrases

How are you?	<i>Sar san? Sar maj san?</i> <i>So keres? So maj keres?</i>
Fine, thanks	<i>Mišto, najis Devleske!</i>
Congratulations! (to a male)	<i>T'aves baxtalo!</i>
(to a female)	<i>T'aves baxtali!</i>
(to a group)	<i>T'aven baxtale!</i>
Thank you! (to one person)	<i>Najis tuke!</i> <i>Parikerav tut!</i>
(to more than one)	<i>Najis tumenge!</i> <i>Parikerav tumen!</i>
You're welcome!	<i>Naj pala soste!</i> <i>Khančeske!</i>
Goodbye (to one leaving)	<i>Dža Devlesa!</i>
(to one staying)	<i>Ačh Devlesa!</i> <i>Mukhav tut e Devlesa!</i>
What's your name?	<i>Sar bučhos? Sar bučhos tuke?</i>
My name is _____ (man)	<i>Me bučhov (man) o _____</i>
(woman)	<i>Me bučhov (man) e _____</i>
Where do you live?	<i>Kaj bešes?</i>
Where are you from?	<i>Katar aves?</i>
What country are you from?	<i>Anda savo them aves?</i>
Is your family with you?	<i>Tjiri familija si vi tusa?</i>
Where are you going?	<i>Kaj džas?</i>
Can I help you?	<i>Šaj žutiv tut?</i>
What kind of work do you do?	<i>Savatar butji keres?</i> <i>Soski butji keres?</i> <i>Če fjalo butji keres?</i>
I don't understand you.	<i>Či hatjerav tut. Či haljerav tut.</i>
Do you understand me?	<i>Hatjeres man? Haljeres man?</i>

Come with me	<i>T'aves mansa; hajde mansa</i>
Let's go together	<i>Kethanes džastar</i>
Let's get a cup of coffee	<i>Te pjas kafa</i>
How? Why? Where? When?	<i>Sar? Anda soste? Kaj? Kana?</i>
Here. There.	<i>Kathe. Kothe.</i>
Yes. No.	<i>Va. Na.</i>

Samples of the language: some proverbs

While Romani has only been written to any great extent since the twentieth century, it is very rich in oral tradition, and the first Romani-language publication in fact appeared about a hundred years ago. There are many volumes of Romani folktales (see for example Mode, 1984 and Tong, 1989). Proverbs and maxims also abound – it is through these that wisdom is codified, and the rules of social behaviour are passed from generation to generation. They are called *garade lava* or 'hidden words' in Romani because their meaning is not always apparent. The following are in the Vlax Romani dialect:

Na le tjiri kher te ličhares e pori la sapnjaki; punrranges si te ličhares lako šero

"Don't use your boot to crush a snake's tail; you can crush its head with your bare foot" (If you don't do a job properly, no amount of preparation will make it succeed).

Kon phenela o čačipe, musaj leske te thol pesko punrro and'e kakali

"Whoever (is about to) tell the truth should have his foot in the stirrup" (The truth can hurt people and make them angry; get ready to run).

So arakhes tu and'o dorjavo telal, musaj sas t'avilo and'o dorjavo opral

"What you find downstream must have come from upstream" (You don't know what someone has done before you knew him; be careful, the past has consequences).

Našti garaves muca ande gono, lake vundžja ka-sitjaren-pe

"You can't hide a cat in a sack, its claws will show themselves (through it)" (The truth will eventually reveal itself).

Maj kuč ekh šošoj ande tigaja de sar šov and' o veš

“A rabbit in the pot is better than six in the woods” (Certainty is better than speculation).

Le sama e gavestar kaj či bešen džukle

“Be careful in the village where there are no dogs” (All villages have dogs, so if there is a village where there aren't any, something must be very wrong. A cautionary saying).

Te manges te dikhes e mačhen, na hamosar o pani

“If you want to see the fish, don't stir up the water” (Approach the situation carefully, don't be rough or hasty).

Te ala mangel o Del, vi daži del puške ekh matora

“If God wished it, even a broomstick could shoot bullets” (All things are possible with God).

Dorango džukel merela bokhatar

“A dog with two masters will die from hunger” (You can't divide your loyalty; each master will assume that the other one has fed the dog).

Maj kali e mura, maj gulo a' l o soko

“The blacker the berry is, the sweeter its juice” (A comment on someone's physical complexion, olive (*melaxni*) skin being a sign of beauty. This traditional attitude is sadly beginning to change, partly due to ideas about 'whiteness' being so central to modern racism but also because of the emphasis on fair skin in advertising and mainstream ideas of beauty).

O manuš o lačo and' o čorripe kerel mandjin, thaj o dilo daži and' e khangeri mardjol

“A good man can find treasure in poverty, while the fool will perish even in church” (We make our own luck, by living according to *Rromanipen*).

Na le tu but pala tj'e punrre, le tu pala tj'e godja

“Don't rely on your feet, rely on your mind” (Use your wits to get out of a situation, you might be able to benefit from it a second time. Run away and you won't get another chance).

Patjival o manuš an' la vi anda gav xaljardo

“A righteous man will profit even in a poor town” (We make our own luck).

O čorro rodel čoripe, ke našavel peski baxt vov korkorro
 “The poor man seeks out poverty, because he makes his own luck” (We make our own luck, and failures find other failures to be with).

So či del o berš, del o časo
 “What a year may not bring, an hour might” (We never know when something wished for could materialize, it is all up to fate).

And'e čhib naj kokalo
 “There are no bones in the tongue” (Yet the tongue can speak hard words).

Tehara brišind dela, numa e balval šukjarela
 “The rain may come tomorrow, but the wind will dry it” (Behind every cloud is a silver lining).

Na dža butivar gusto, ka-xasares tj'o skamin
 “Don't be a guest too often or you'll lose your seat (at the table)” (Don't overstay your welcome).

O džukel kaj piravel arakhel kokalo
 “A dog that wanders will find a bone” (Take some initiative).

Te kheles ekhe rikonesa desa but, čharrela tut and'o muj
 “If you play with a puppy too much, it will lick your mouth” (Familiarity breeds contempt).

Makh či hurjal ande muj phanglo
 “A fly won't fly into a mouth that's shut” (Keep your mouth shut and you won't get into trouble).

Purani jaska strazo phabjol
 “Old firewood catches alight quickly” (Old friendships are easily rekindled).

Cikne čhavorre, cine bede; bare čhavorre, bare bede
 “Small children, small troubles, big children, big troubles” (Rich people have problems and worries just like poor people).

E balval či prindžarel kasko vurdon phurdel voj tele
 “The wind doesn't recognise whose waggon it blows over” (Misfortunes affect everyone regardless of their wealth or status).

Love and'o vast, bori p'o grast
 “Money in the hand and a daughter-in-law on the horse” (The best of all worlds).

Kon del tut o naj ka-del tut o vast

“(He) who gives you a finger will give you a whole hand” (Someone who has given once will give even more a second time).

Rode tj'a borja e kanensa, nič' e jakhensa

“Look for a daughter-in-law with your ears, not with your eyes” (Learn about her reputation, don't be persuaded only by her beauty).

And'o bidžuklesko gav phirel o birovljako Rrom

“Only in the village with no dogs will walk the man with no stick” (There are no villages without any dogs, so always carry a stick. Be prepared).

Khanči či cirdel sumunci sar bidandengi čirikli

“Nothing succeeds like a toothless bird” (It is natural that you will succeed, since all birds are toothless).

Na xanrrunde kaj či xal tut

“Don't scratch where you don't itch” (Don't make trouble. Let sleeping dogs lie).

O korro kaj phenel ke čhudela barr pe tute, lesko punrro musaj vuže t'azbal barr

“The blind man who threatens to stone you, his foot must already be touching a stone” (If someone has made a threat, he must be confident that he can carry it out; be careful).

Gadžo čorel grastes, Rrom čorel petalo

“The non-Romani steals a horse, the Romani steals a horseshoe” (like the differences in society, Romani theft is correspondingly minor when compared with non-Romani theft).

Rrom čorel khajnja, gadžo čorel farma

“The Romani steals a chicken, the non-Romani steals the farm” (variant of the above).

Samples of the language: a joke

Ekh Rrom sas kaj čokajilas petalo p'e kovanica ande pesko raxciri. Sar pirosardas les, lolo strefjalas.

Atunči nakhlo gadžo kaj terdilo-pe paša leste. “Čuda” phendas; “Naj desa tato kodo petalo te keres butji lesa? Sar šaj rrevdis?”

“Na, grofone, vušoro šaj rrevdiv o tatipe; ašun – te des ma biš teljarja, čarrava les”.

O gadžo anzardja lesk' e love. O Rrom ankerdjas o lil and'o vast, čarradas les, thaj thodja les and'e poseči.

“There was a Rom who was hammering a horseshoe on the anvil in his blacksmith shop. As it grew hot it glowed red.

Then a man passed by, and stopped near to him. ‘Goodness’, he said, ‘Isn’t that horseshoe far too hot for you to work with? How can you stand (the heat)?’.

‘Oh no, squire, I can easily stand the heat. Listen, if you give me twenty dollars, I’ll lick it’. The man passed him the money. The Rom held the note in his hand, licked it, and put it in his pocket”.

Questions

- 1 It is frequently said that Romani is a ‘poor’ language, and sometimes it has even been said that it is not a proper language at all, but a jargon. Why – and is it true?
- 2 It is frequently said that Romani is not a written language. Why – and is it true?
- 3 When and how do languages get new words? Give five examples from your own language.
- 4 How do proverbs reflect the Romani worldview? What is their purpose?
- 5 Why is creating a common written dialect of Romani such a difficult job?