

Grassroots literacy in educational context – a local Romani vernacular in Hungary

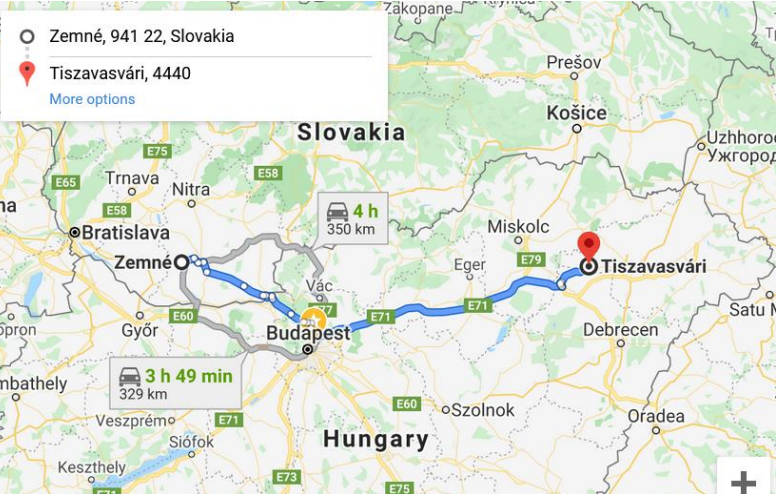
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• 2016: „Translanguaging practices and classrooms in Tiszavasvári”

- An extensive linguistic ethnographic research in one of the biggest bilingual Roma communities in Hungary
- Language pedagogical activities -- with Participation of students, researchers, practicing teachers and other citizens on the site
- <http://translanguedu.hu/>

• 2019: “Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities: Speaking Romani at School” (2019-1-HU-1-KA203-060919), **Tiszavasvári and Zemné**

- a video repository and a handbook to support bilingual Roma students at school
- <http://www.kre.hu/romanitranslanguaging/>

• 2020: „Linguistic practices and ideologies of Roma and non-Roma” (**Tiszavasvári**)

- Linguistic ethnography with participatory approaches



Romani in Europe

- Present in Europe for centuries
- Scattered and speaking in different ways.
- The Standardization of a language is regarded as a precondition for its use in education
- The need for standardization of Romani arose.



Controversies of standardisation

- No Roma nation state or power centre exists in Europe, and in the absence of a power centre with a standard language ideology standardisation in the classical sense cannot be achieved (Busch 2012: 71).
 - Attempts of standardisation in a *transnational* situation (Matras 2005).
 - A decentralized and pluralistic process
- Recently, Abercrombie (2018) showed an example of coeval standardisation activities among Roma in Prizren, Kosovo
 - Attempts at standardisation have a local value and convey primarily a standard language ideology instead of standardized resources.
- There have been similar attempts at standardisation in recent decades in Hungary, too,
 - To some extent (on the codification level), successful: several dictionaries and textbooks



Standardisation attempts in Hungary

- Items based on “international words” are preferred to those that are recognisably “words of Hungarian origin”
- Individual authorial modifications of meanings
- attempts at word creation, inspired by purist postures
- In the recommended alphabet, there are several letters which are different from the ones used in the Hungarian alphabet but they represent the same sound.

Roma children and adults who are less experienced in everyday standard literacy activities, “cannot surmount the barrier of an orthography different from what they learned at school” (Réger 1995: 86).

Our answer is translanguaging

- Hundreds of thousands of speakers in Eastern European localities never come into contact with a transnational community and its "bottom-up and decentralised initiatives" (Matras 2015: 297) for codification
- Ways of languaging linked to Romani appear to speakers (both Roma and non-Roma) as non-standardized and interpretable only in the locality
- Using a standardized Romani in schools attended by Roma students remains an elusive goal.
- At the same time, there is a burning need to do something to diminish the handicaps of these students and to increase their chances of success.



Grassroots traditions in Tiszavasvári

- We encountered local literacy practices from the very beginning of our work in Tiszavasvári in social media activities.
 - Entries and comments in Romani are much rarer than in Hungarian
 - Most of the Romani entries are short comments, but longer texts also occur regularly
- In Summer 2020, student participants approached in Tiszavasvári at least 20 Roma inhabitants to talk to them about the role of Romani literacy in their lives.
 - local Roma also showed researchers examples of private notes in Romani.
 - These are mostly connected to religious activities, for example Romani translations of songs sung in worship.
- These grassroots Romani writings are characterized by heterography (cf. Blommaert 2008) and transparency.

Sources of heterography

- Speech sounds of Romani and Hungarian are broadly similar
- The Hungarian spelling system is relatively transparent (phonemic), with most letters corresponding to phonemes.
- There are a few additional consonants in Romani compared to Hungarian. Using Hungarian spelling conventions results in heterography regarding the lettering of these sounds.
 - the Romani voiceless velar fricative [x]
 - aspirated consonants [p^h, t^h, k^h].
- Another source of heterography is linked to the use of diacritics on some vowel symbols.
- Speakers do not necessarily adhere to the word boundaries maintained by standardized writing
- Punctuation separating clauses and sentences also varies.

The storybook project

- Produced in the summer of 2020, written according to local ways of speaking – and writing
- The book contains
 - Romani short stories written by the participants
 - tales from Roma folk tale collections, translated simultaneously by several participants
- This process resulted in up to four translated versions of certain tales.
 - The texts of the parallel translations differed not only in their compositional features but also in their spelling choices.
 - We wanted to maintain a sense of this diversity, so, four parallel volumes were published to include all four versions of the translated texts.
- A total of five hundred and sixty copies, of which one hundred and forty volumes of each were printed (Tiszavasvári Transzlingváló Műhely [‘Translanguaging Working Group of Tiszavasvári’] ed. 2020).

Heterography at school

- Romani heterography led to a degree of confusion among teachers, and to initial disagreements among project participants.
- Most teachers, driven by monolingual standard ideologies and accustomed to spelling being shaped by strict rules, kept looking for “the correct solution” when students wrote Romani in the classroom.
- However, there was no point of alignment (a “standard”) to decide what was correct and incorrect.
- This often led to disruption in the flow of the class and was an unpleasant experience for teachers.
- In the workshops reviewing our initial experience, teachers, students, and researchers discussed and deconstructed the notions of propriety in speech and linguistic correctness.
 - This was a reflective activity, whose aim was to raise critical language awareness concerning ideologies related to standards, which are responsible for the opposition between linguistic correctness and incorrectness.

Changing roles

- The teacher often becomes a learner in such situations instead of being a representative of absolute knowledge.
- The right to decide whether something is appropriate or not is ceded to the community of learners
- This is a long, complex, and exciting process, which several teachers have gone through and reflected on
 - Zita, for example, described her recent experience in a television report about our program, produced by the local channel in Tiszavasvári in February 2022:
- ‘I mentioned that I have been teaching here for 18 years, and I didn't know a word of Romani until four years ago. Interestingly enough, the project does not require us to learn Romani, but, wittingly or unwittingly, I have retained many words and phrases, which the children appreciated all the more, especially because, often, they didn't even need to translate for me anymore, or they understood that what[ever] they were saying to me, I was able to join in with one or two of the words they were using in class. (...) From a teacher, I became a learner. Because they liked to teach the language, I was happy to learn it, and there were situations when the students were more competent, so they knew something better than I did, as a result of their language skills. These are all motivating forces, they have an impact on learning, on the entire process of learning’ (17:38–18:50).

Participation-based projects

The involvement and engagement of all interested parties in all research activities
Eliminating the inequality of researcher and the researched

- Theatre with a translingual screenplay
- Movies about local life and culture
- Romani storybook from local parents to local children
- Heltai, János Imre and Tarsoly, Eszter (eds.). Forthcoming. *Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities: Speaking Romani at School*, De Gruyter Mouton
- Workshops with Roma and non-Roma participants to produce both cultural (local magazine) and scientific outputs (jointly written papers)

