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The linguistic situation of the Boyash language in Hungary

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This paper provides insight into the current situation of the Boyash language in Hungary. The paper introduces the language policy regarding Boyash language teaching in the country and summarises some of the most important issues that should be addressed to improve the situation and status of this language.

Keywords: Boyash, Boyash language, linguistic situation, language shift, minority language teaching

Introduction

This study introduces the current situation of the Boyash language and population in Hungary. Despite developing Boyash literacy over the past 25 years, there are fewer people who speak this language as a mother tongue, and among Boyash communities there has been an increasing tendency of switching from Boyash to Hungarian. This contradiction makes the topic of this paper very relevant. The process of switching from Boyash to Hungarian shows some variations in different communities. In some of the communities it is a closed process because only Hungarian is spoken (Orsós – Varga 2001).

There are several publications on Hungarian Boyash, but only a few of these studies are based on scientific research. During research on Hungarian Boyash communities, in most of the cases the majority is unable to distinguish the different languages of Roma, and so they define them as one language – the “Roma” or “Gypsy language”. Research on Hungarian Roma usually mentions the classification (Kemény & colleagues 1976) that defines three main language groups of Roma. These include the mostly Hungarian-speaking largest group, called “romungró”, who also refer to themselves as Hungarian Gypsies or “musician Gypsies”; the Hungarian and Romani speaking Vlach Roma, spelled as “oláh”; and the smallest group called the Boyash Gypsies who speak Hungarian and an archaic dialect of Romanian. Despite the above classification, the majority is

still homogenizing the Roma and their languages. This is the reason why there is very little information about Boyash Roma and most of the existing resources on Roma are usually unreliable. Hungarian Roma people generally agree that the “Gypsy language” includes two languages – Boyash and Romani. Hungarian Roma communities mostly accept the “Gypsy” group name. However, the two primary groups distinguish themselves from each other. This is why the Oláh Gypsy group call themselves “Roma”, but the Romungro and Boyash refer to themselves as “Gypsy”. Roma is the officially accepted name for Hungarian Roma, but this word has origins in the Romani language and means “Roma man or husband”. (The feminine counterpart is “romnji”, which means “Roma woman or wife”).

Even though there are still different opinions on the usage of these terms, nowadays usage of both Roma and Gypsy is more and more common in Hungary, which could become an acceptable practice for all Roma groups.

The Boyash population in Hungary

The estimated number of Roma in Hungary is 400,000 – 600,000, while the official number is 308,957 (Central Statistical Office, 2011). According to the above-mentioned research of István Kemény, approximately 8% belong to the Boyash group. They mostly live in the south of Transdanubia region. In this region the Boyash population is 30% of the total Roma population and in two counties (Baranya and Somogy) there is a higher Boyash population than the other Roma groups. In other regions there are only a few Boyash speaking Gypsies.

This paper will not give a complex introduction about the situation of Hungarian Boyash. However, many books and papers (Kahl-Nechiti: 2019; Boros-Gergye: 2019) about Hungarian Roma are available in English.

Circumstances of the Boyash language

According to dialectic research, the Boyash speak a “temporary dialect” that is similar to Romanian dialects spoken in south-eastern Crişana, north-eastern Banat and south-western Transylvania (Saramandu 1997: 7). The origin and changing dialect of the Boyash language are still unknown.

The written form of the language started in the 1990s in Hungary and it is still developing today: “An important question is why do the Boyash speak Romanian. A possible cause could be that Boyash went through a language shift while living in Transylvania and the region of Crişana and Banat. So, they changed their original language to the majority’s language. The same language shift is happening in Hungary” (Borbély 2001:80). This “temporary” language – considered an independent language – has three dialects in Hungary: *Argyelán*, *Muncsán*, and *Ticsán*. Among these three dialects, *Argyelán* is spoken the most by Boyash. It is a dialect of

Romanian spoken in Banat before the neologism of Romanian. Árgyelán Boyash speak this language in Baranya, Somogy, Tolna, Vas, Veszprém and Zala counties.

The Boyash language in Hungary

There is no doubt that the Romanian language spoken in Banat is the foundation of the language spoken by Boyash communities. These languages are not in contact anymore, and they are changing independently. Boyash was an oral language until the 1980s, and then in the early 1990s its written form began with the establishment of Gandhi High School. At the beginning of the 1980s, Gyula Papp, a French and Romanian language teacher, tried to write down the language based on data collected in Pécs, Hungary. He conducted a very important study; however, it did not lead to a breakthrough in the history of written Boyash. Boyash-speaking communities did not really accept Papp's version of written Boyash because they did not feel it belonged to them. This is why this written form did not become more widely known and why communities are not using it today.

The beginning of the 1990s was important not just from a linguistic point of view but also for education policy. A group of young intellectuals established the Roma high school mentioned earlier called Gandhi High school. It became clear that there were no books or resources for teaching Boyash language and culture. The written form of the language was required to develop these types of materials.

Along with identifying tasks, ethnographic research started as well. The research focused on the Boyash language corpus by collecting Boyash songs and folk stories. Katalin Kovalcsik and Anna Orsós conducted this research. There was a great need for establishing the standard written form of the language. The first collections of songs and stories were written according to Hungarian grammar along with a detailed description of pronunciation (Kovalcsik – Orsós 1994). These very first volumes from 1994 are the real beginning of written Boyash literacy. After them, the first Boyash language book was published as the first volume that systematized the language (Orsós 1994). Today this language book includes Boyash-Hungarian and Hungarian-Boyash dictionaries as well, and other volumes have been published with song and story collections (Orsós 1997, Orsós 1998, Orsós 1999).

The importance of this work is indisputable, even if it was not completed with sound linguistic principles. The past 25 years illustrate the durability and usability of this written form as several linguistic volumes were published based on it. This written form seems suitable and acceptable not just by most of the Boyash intellectuals, but also for others studying the language based on the written form. Since 2002 the The Roma Language Group of the Research

Institute for Linguistics at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has had the goal of descriptive linguistic, anthropological linguistic and sociolinguistic research on Boyash and Romani languages. This research could serve the pluralistic description of Romani and Boyash languages complementing the previous results of the disciplines mentioned above.

A volume titled *Boyash Grammar* was published in the spring of 2009 by the Hungarian Academy of Science Linguistic Department. This volume functions as a systematic grammar book that describes the grammatical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic changes of Boyash.

Education policy

Despite the fact that the Roma have the same rights as other officially accepted nationalities in Hungary, the personal and material conditions required for teaching their mother tongue are still inadequate. Roma/Gypsy languages are only school subjects and not languages of instruction in education, and there are limited Romani and Boyash language classes. This fact strengthens the subordinate status of these languages and native speakers of Roma/Gypsy languages. These individuals often feel that the value of their languages is decreased.

Among Hungarian Roma/Gypsies, there are only a few Romani or Boyash speaking teachers and there is no real Romani or Boyash language teacher education system. There is also a lack of suitable teaching materials such as language books and dictionaries. According to European expectations, it is the government's responsibility to produce suitable teaching materials and organize language teacher training programs.

The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities states the following: *"The maintenance of the primary and secondary levels of minority language education depends a great deal on the availability of teachers trained in all disciplines in the mother tongue. Therefore, ensuing from their obligation to provide adequate opportunities for minority language education, States should provide adequate facilities for the appropriate training of teachers and should facilitate access to such training"* (The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities 1996: 7).

Hungarian laws on the public and higher education system have changed a lot during the past few years. These changes have also had a great effect on Roma/Gypsy nationality education. However, there is not much information about how and to what extent these changes have shaped the development of Roma/Gypsy languages and ethnographic subjects. In Hungary, language and ethnography are core subjects in nationality education. (In Hungary the official term is not "minority" but "nationality".) Teaching of Romani and Boyash languages

provides an opportunity for students to learn about minority languages. In addition, it provides a chance for Roma/Gypsy students to learn or relearn these languages. Roma/Gypsy communities are using their languages less frequently, which is accelerating the process of language shift. This is why the possibility of learning these languages in schools plays a significant role in maintaining these languages. However, teaching these languages could increase prestige and value if it occurred under suitable conditions needed for language teaching.

In 2015, research on Roma/Gypsy nationality education (Orsós, 2015) examined schools teaching Roma/Gypsy ethnography and/or languages in the framework of the National Core Curriculum in 2014 and 2015. The results of this research show there are several problems on the level of the education system that causes difficulties for the schools. Unsuitable or insufficient nationality teacher education as well as unequal personal and material conditions are proving that in Hungary students do not have access to high quality Roma/Gypsy nationality education.

Methods for maintaining the language

There are different methods for strengthening minority languages and enhancing the process of *language shift*. First, speakers of Roma languages must have a positive attitude about their language. They have to be aware that their languages have the same value as other languages. The appearance of their language must be promoted with the help of the Press, media appearances and by language courses at all school levels. This is a language revitalizing process at the same time because increasing language usage requires new functions. If there are a sufficient number of native speakers, they must be empowered by the revitalisation process to feel interested in teaching new generations. Well-prepared and trained bilingual teachers are needed to teach students how to build on their first language and encourage bilingualism. Improving the adult population's mother tongue usage on institutional levels could also help enhance the value of the language by using minority languages in different TV, radio and online media outlets. Additional strategies include improving reading and writing literacy. Minority language teaching as first or second language teaching could also help create a wider population that is capable of using the language.

Language shift is a process in which a minority language becomes primary in language usage. However, until this process is stagnating, the education system must provide the required resources and help increase overall respect people have for the minority language. It is well known that if a language is not used regularly in education, then unfortunately the language will be in jeopardy.

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The linguistic situation of the Boyash language in Hungary

This paper provides insight into the current situation of the Boyash language in Hungary. The paper introduces language policy regarding Boyash language teaching in the country and summarises some of the most important issues that should be addressed to improve the situation and status of this language.

Until the end of the 1980s, the Boyash language only had an oral version in Hungary. The actual beginning of Boyash literacy dates back to the end of the 1990s, when the Gandhi Secondary Grammar School of Pécs was established. This unique educational institution taught both of the Gypsy languages spoken in Hungary: Romani (Lovari dialect) and Boyash. The written versions of these languages were needed for this purpose. A small group of researchers and linguists started to build up the components of literacy in the Boyash language.

As a result of the past 25 years of work, the Boyash population that used to exclusively nourish an oral culture has just started to have its language described. However, the shift of Boyash to Hungarian language had started long before among the Boyash language users living as minorities. This tendency shows a varied picture among the different communities.

Although their commitment to the Boyash mother tongue is very strong and they feel the necessity of passing on the language to younger generations, they do not consider this task to be theirs but rather delegate it to others outside the family.

The thesis of this paper focuses on the current linguistic status language teaching development opportunities of the Boyash language in public higher education in Hungary.

Keywords: Boyash, Boyash language, linguistic situation, language shift, minority language teaching