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Romani language as a „heart“ of the Romani studies program at the Charles University

The Romani studies program at the Charles university was established in 1991, by Milena Hübschmannová (1933-2005), and I had a honour to be one of its first students. For sll this 30 years the University has been offering complex education on MA level (since 2002 also separate BA program) including Romani language, culture, history and arts. The main dialect taught is North-Central Romani as the major dialect spoken by Roma in Czech and Slovak republics. The second one is Lovari dialect.

Since the early beginning language education is not just a steady supplement in our program and it does not cover just a language course. All our students even in the BA program have to learn to speak Romani very fluently (they have Romani courses 8 hours a week the first year and 6 hours the next years) and although the main teaching language is Czech, Romani is necessary in most of the subjects:

- 1) In ethnology and social anthropology we use field recordings in Romani.
- 2) In Romani history oral history in Romani language is used as one of the main sources of knowledge.
- 3) We read and discuss Romani language literature in original, and of course we listen to songs in Romani and we pay attention also to the texts. Also Romani theatre plays in Romani are recommended to the students.
- 4) And – last but not least - within the subject „field research“ the students are supposed to contact Roma (mostly in the Romani settlements in Slovakia) using their mother language.
- 5) Also, in the lessons of Romani linguistics and Romani in traditional and non-traditional domains (in the BA program) and Romani translatology and editology (in the MA program) help the students (both native – and non-native speakers) understand Romani at a deeper theoretical level.

Maybe this is one of the reasons of popularity of the program among Romani students. Quite many of our students have been Roma and they have had different experience with Romanihood and Romani language. Native speakers receive deeper lingusitic knowledge about their mother tongue and mother culture. But also lot of our Romani students have not been native speakers of Romani. These people were happy to learn Romani in our program, some of them also claimed that they attended our program because they felt certain lack of identity and shame among other Roma - and Romani studies help them get closer to Romani identity.

One of our students who worked as a social worker and whose mother tongue was Czech learned Romani in our program in the age of 55! She was already grandmother when she started to learn and she felt very happy in the third year when she found out that she was already able to conversate in Romani fluently. She also started to send me sms and emails in Romani and when she met me outside the classroom she started Romani conversation anyway. Another Romani student, native speaker of Slovak, who now studies Ph.D. program, even started to write poems in Romani.

Native speakers are not just among of our students but they have helped to teach as lectors since the very beginning. For Milena Hübschmannová (and of course for us, her students) no Rom was just an object, an informer or something like that. Hübschmannová introduced all the people who came to our classes as partners, as subjects of their knowledge, of their own world. That is also why in most of Hübschmannová`s publications the Roma cited have their own names – she understood anonymization of the responders as a colonial approach. She could deserve it also because her information about these partners was always positive.

In last several years the impact of native speakers to teaching Romani in our department reached new level: Just in September 2021 we presented pilot lessons of Romani – both North-Central and Lovari. All these materials are now available on the web page of Södertörn university from Sweden, which was our partner in the project and which added lessons for Kalderash dialect. Each of our lessons is based on a videodialogue which contains either new grammar or new vocabulary. None of the videos (except for one) had a completely prepared text, and the Romani actors created or improvised the dialogues to be more natural. One of them, Iveta Kokyová, who almost finished her BA classes, became also lector or it is better to say teaching partner in my lessons for advanced students in the last semester of BA program. Whole lessons are held in Romani only, even the teacher(s) do not use a single word in majority language. The teaching materials we prepared are called *Romani romanes* and one of the aims are to help native speakers of Romani to teach other people (non-Roma or Romani non-speakers of Romani).

What we also find important is joining teaching with academic research. All of the teachers have participated (some of them as key investigators) in linguistic research projects on Romani language, either sociolinguistical ones or dialectological ones. Many of our students and also Romani friends outside the University have been involved in our projects as investigators. The teachers regularly present their work on international conferences as Intenational conferences od Romani linguistics (ICRL, we hosted two of so far 14 conferences, in 1996 and 2006) and Gypsy Lore Society annual meetings (we hosted the meeting in 2021).

When I look back over the thirty years I have been involved in Romani studies, as a student and then teacher and researcher, I can hardly imagine that I would absolve this without knowledge of Romani language and without strong contacts and friendship with many Roma. And I must thank again Milena Hübschmannová that she lead us this way.