

Towards a better understanding of the relations of spoken and written Romani

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Spoken and written forms of a language are never identical, and a substantial body of research investigates the relation of spoken and written language. The PhD project presented in this talk contributes to this research by focusing on a language without a long-known tradition of writing, aiming to gain a better understanding of the relations of spoken and written language in Romani.

Romani is a traditionally oral language (cf. e.g. Matras & Elšík 2006: 53) of Indo-Aryan origin spoken in areas which are characterised by a literacy-based culture. Bakker and Matras (1997: vii) state that “Romani is a minority language in all societies where it is spoken, but in terms of numbers of speakers Romani actually ranks among the more widely spoken languages of the world.” Historical written material in Romani is rather rare compared to its long-attested history and size of the speaker group. Matras and Elšík (2006: 53) point out that also nowadays

there is no form of standard Romani, even though written publications and internet correspondence in individual dialects of the language have been expanding rapidly since the early 1990s. There is not even a globally accepted prestige dialect. Every form of Romani is therefore a ‘dialect’.

In fact, speakers often employ an orthography resembling the notation conventions of their L2 or contact language(s). Identity-establishing functions and the question of representation of the language itself intertwine in the complex relations of spoken and written usage of Romani. To account for this plurality, the PhD project will examine multiple aspects of these relations, including:

- Investigations of attitudes of speakers towards oral and written language and their practice of using these modes with suitable methods such as sociolinguistic interviews and questionnaires.
- Based on the results of these investigations, an informed analysis of similarities and differences between the two modes drawing on a method used in previous research (e.g. Maas 2010): recording oral language use, afterwards asking speakers to write down what they said.

While presenting initial findings, this talk also discusses challenges attributed to the project laying special emphasis on a collaborative approach.

References

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- MATRAS, YARON & VIKTOR ELŠÍK. 2006. *Markedness and Language Change. The Romani Sample*. (Empirical Approaches to Language Typology 32.) Berlin et al.: de Gruyter.