Adaptation strategies of Romani-origin words in the ethnolinguistic repertoire of the Romungros

Keywords: non-standard Hungarian; Romani; language contact; adaptation strategies; linguistic creativity

The language shift from Romani to local majority languages has resulted in the emergence of several contact varieties across Europe. These varieties, based on majority languages but incorporating elements of Romani lexicon and, occasionally, grammatical features, include Angloromani, Caló, Basque Romani, Dortika, Finikas, and Scandinavian Romani (Bakker 2020), along with Romani ethnolects found in the Czech (Bořkovcová 2006) and Finnish (Salo 2017) contexts. These varieties have been given various names such as creoles, Romani mixed dialects, Para-Romani varieties, ethnolects, or secret languages (see Matras et al. 2007, 144) and have more recently been described as registers or styles of the respective majority language (Matras 2002, 246). In the Hungarian context, a similar linguistic phenomenon occurs among the Romungros, descendants of South Central Romani speakers (see some earlier allusions to this speech form in Hutterer 1963 and Réger 1995, for example). This group employs an ethnolinguistic repertoire—a concept defined by Benor (2010)—, which, in their case, is characterised by the integration of Romani lexicon into Hungarian.

Drawing on a dataset of 2143 sentences compiled from written and oral sources (both primary and secondary, published and unpublished), we will examine key strategies for adapting Romani-origin roots in the ethnolinguistic repertoire of the Romungros (hereafter referred to as ERR). These include the reinterpretation of the Romani indicative present tense third-person singular marker *-el* as an invariant, all-purpose adaptation marker, which aligns with the Hungarian deverbal adaptation marker *-(V)l* while violating vowel harmony and attaching to unexpected stems (e.g. ERR *penel* ‘say’ < Romani *phen-* ‘say’, ERR *sunel* ‘hear, listen’ < Romani *šun-* ‘hear’, as well as ERR *hájel/kajel* ‘eat’ < Romani *hāj-/xaj-* ‘eat PFV’, ERR *kulel* ‘shit V’ < Romani *khul* ‘shit N’; cf. Hungarian *csetel* ‘chat V’ < English *chat* V). Another strategy involves the Hungarian denominal suffix *-(V)z(ik)*, reinterpreted in ERR as a deverbal adaptation marker, and most frequently containing the vowel component [aː], which never appears after consonant-final stems in standard Hungarian (e.g. ERR *bes-ázik* < Romani *beš-* ‘sit’).

ERR also uses the Romani adaptation suffixes *-o*, *-ó*, *-a*, and *-i*, ultimately of Greek origin, which are added to non-Romani nouns when borrowing them into Romani, but in ERR, they are exclusively used with Romani-origin words (e.g. ERR *dajó* < Romani *daj* ‘mother’). We will briefly discuss the functional and pragmatic aspects of using this kind of Romani morphology in ERR. For instance, these denominal adaptation suffixes, as they attach to monosyllabic nouns, may not only add a ‘Romani flavour’ to the speech and mark these items out as distinct vocabulary within ERR, but also serve a pragmatic role by facilitating the recognition of monosyllabic Romani-origin words within Hungarian speech.

Finally, we will highlight that the innovative features of ERR, such as its flexibility in incorporating Romani roots, the use and the reinterpretation of Romani linguistic features and the violations of the grammatical rules of standard Hungarian are rooted in linguistic creativity and serve to mark group identity.

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