

# Romani English

## ABSTRACT

Gypsies are first recorded as having entered the British Isles in 1505, and the first written samples of their inflected speech known to us date from 1542. Today, while Romanès is still widely spoken in Britain, for the vast majority of Gypsies it is a variety which might better be classified as a dialect of English than of Romanès, since it consists of a vocabulary of items of Romanès origin adapted to English phonology and a grammar derived almost wholly from the host language. In this paper, Kenrick discusses the factors which appear to have brought about the loss of native morpho-syntax and phonology and describes the sociolinguistic aspects of how the language is transmitted from generation to generation, and in which situations it is used.

When the Romani (Gypsy) people left India around the seventh century A.D. they took with them their language, and this language is still used by over five million persons, ranging from the settled Gypsies of Eastern Europe to the nomadic Kalderash of Western Europe and the Americas. In a few instances the spoken Romani language itself has died out, as with the Boyash in Romania – in others, it survives only as lexis, using the syntax, morphology and phonology of the host language.

Such is the case in Armenia (Finck, 1907; *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society, passim*) and in England. The language that is spoken by one English Rom to another today is really a register of English rather than a dialect of Romani. For this reason I have chosen to call it Romani English (parallel to Jewish English) rather than English Romani. An example will illustrate.

RE The *rackli* chored the *luvva*

ENG The girl stole the money

The lexical morphemes are Romani (indeed all three date back to the Indian period), but everything else is English, and the sentence could be paralleled in other variants of English:

Jewish Eng. The *shicksa* ganav'd the *gelt*

Rhyming slang The gooseberry half-inched the bread

Army English The *bint* kliftied the *feh*s (the lexis is Arabic)

Apart from the lexis, Romani English does not differ from the language spoken by Gajo (non-Gypsy) people of similar class and education. Because the Romanies travel from place to place they have less local dialect influences in their speech than sedentary Gajé of the same class and education. Nevertheless, there is enough dialect interference to mislead the librarian or teacher who tries to record their speech, and this has perhaps tempted Romanologues in the past to see vestiges of older syntax and phonology. For example, the form *yurr* 'ear' in John Brune's vocabulary (Wood, 1973:122-130) is Surrey dialect, while *dunnick* 'cow' is still common amongst country dwellers in both Surrey and Kent. So too, 'be lucky', as a term of farewell, is not confined to Gypsies but is common in East London and is probably a calque on Yiddish זַיט געזינט (zayt gezint) rather than any Romani phrase.

There has been much debate on the origin of Romani English, and several theories have been postulated; two of these must be considered possible. The first is that the language began as a pidgin (later creole) in use between the Romanies and the large numbers of Englishmen who joined their bands during the sixteenth century. It is true that many Gajé did join the nomadic Romanies, to the extent that Queen Elizabeth I imposed the death penalty for consorting with 'Egyptians' as they were then called. However, we only have one recording of the speech of that time (Crofton, 1907). This was probably taken down in England's French colonies at the time, and in any case it was in standard Romani with Romani morphology. The next written record of Romani in England containing sentences is in the nineteenth century (Smart and Crofton, 1875:1-5) so, without proof, this theory must remain a hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> In modern times intermarriage is rare and few Gajé live alongside Roms, so we cannot make a comparison. In one Kalderash family known to me, the grandmother is of Maltese-Welsh origin and knew no Romani until her teens, yet she keeps the distinction between voiced and unvoiced phonemes (*kher* 'house'/*ker* 'do') more than her offspring. This may suggest that it is mixing daily with Gajé that changes the language rather than intermarriage. On the other hand, she does not correct their speech, as did her husband.

The second theory is that Romani gradually lost its distinctive syntax, phonology and morphology, — in that order — during five hundred years of contact with the host language. This, too, is a form of creolization, but it is different from the emergence of a new tongue through its use as a bridge language between speakers of two different languages. English Romani never had this role. In order to trade, the Romanies had to learn

English quickly, as, in addition to the linguistic handicap, they had to overcome the reluctance of the Gajé to purchase from dark-skinned strangers who perhaps brought the evil eye with their goods. We find in Western Europe the nomad Kalderash and other groups speaking ten or more languages for trading purposes, while there is no sign of their developing a 'pidgin' for communication with the local population.

With this second theory, that of gradual change through contact, we do have parallels today, in particular in the Finnish dialect of Romani. The younger Finnish Romanies use the Finnish phonological system, unlike their grandparents. I have myself noticed the unvoicing of 'but' to 'put' (many), in conformity with Finnish, and Valtonen (1970) notes that Finnish vowel harmony is now adapted to what is called the 'low' style of speech: The genitive suffix -ko has an alternative form -kö (used after certain vowels, following the Finnish system) (see also Valtonen, this volume, pp. 121-124).

There is, however, little intermarriage but much social intercourse with Gajé, as there are not large numbers of Gypsies living in any one town. Apart from using Finnish in work relationships, much of the leisure time is spent with Finnish speakers, and in these circumstances the majority language begins to influence the mother tongue.

It is my belief that Romani English emerged in the same way, and the extensive records of Gypsy speech in England in the nineteenth century show that the middle-aged informants spoke a mixture of English and Romani in the way that many young Finnish Roms mix Finnish and Romani today. Some informants still spoke the inflected language:

(1874) *bori shil se mande* 'I am very cold' *lit.* 'great cold is on me'  
(Borrow, 1919).

but the same writer also quotes many sentences which have English syntax and morphology, and I would class them as Romani English.

*It's my Dovvel's kerimus* 'It's my Lord's doing' (*ib.*)

Leland, in 1873, with a different group of Gypsies (Leland, 1874), found grammatical flexions surviving only in the personal pronouns, and, as these were not used consistently, it seems that the distinction between cases was almost gone. So we find the dative case in

*The chillico pukkered lesco* 'The bird spoke to him'

but the locative in

*She pukkered lester* 'She spoke to him'

Leland's informants had already lost the distinction between masculine and feminine adjective endings, something that Valtonen (1970) points out for Finnish Romani.

Smart and Crofton (1875) in 1863 found the same state of affairs, although with the aid of one old man they were able to reconstruct much, though not all, of the earlier grammatical structure of the language. This old man stated

*Kanna sas mandi a tickno, sar o pooro folki rokerde tacho pooro Romani lava*

(‘When I was a young man, all the old people spoke real old Romani words’) He, at least, thought that the last speakers to use Romani morphology in England (apart from later immigrants) died at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He was probably a hundred years or more, as we find in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* this century many sentences in inflected Romani remembered by informants.

One still hears talk of people who know ‘deep’ Romani but on investigation this means they simply use more Romani lexis in their English speech. The Romani language still survives in Wales, but those families there who no longer use it do not speak Romani English among themselves – only English or Welsh. They are aware of the existence of Romani English but use it only mockingly.

It seems that in Spain, too, the Caló dialect of Romani is disappearing and being replaced by a Spanish spoken with Romani words instead of Castillian. We may wonder why it is only in Spain and England that this has happened and why the change took place earlier in England. It is probably because there has been only limited new immigration since the first groups arrived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This has meant that in any marriage both partners had a common language other than Romani – a language which they used in trading with the host community. The English Gypsies moved around generally in groups of only two or three families and would mix more with Gajé in leisure as well as at work. There were few large settled communities as in Spain, where Romani was the language of the street and of the children – one factor in its preservation.

Elsewhere in Europe, two factors kept Romani alive – the commonness of marriage between different branches of nomadic tribes where the new couples had only Romani as their common language and the existence of settled communities of Rom who created their own social life in villages and quarters separate from the Gajé who spurned their company outside the necessities of economic relationships.

Nowadays, the everyday language in use among Gypsies in England is that of the surrounding urban or rural community in which they live and work. English. In addition, they possess a special lexis of between 100 and 1000 words which they can use to replace the English equivalents when

they want or need to. Thus a Gypsy talking to a Gajo has only one way to express:

'give me the water'

but if he is talking to another Gypsy he has two choices

'give me the water'/*del mandi the pani*

Whichever one he uses, the hearer will understand; so, unlike normal language usage, the choice of language (or rather, register) does not depend upon the speaker's knowledge or assumption about the languages known by the hearer. A Welshman, for example, is more likely to address an unknown person in English than Welsh, assuming firstly that there is a 60% chance that the hearer will be monoglot English-speaking and, secondly, that even if he is a Welsh-speaker, he will understand English and carry out the request.

I feel that if we henceforth look upon Romani English (what the Gypsies call *pogadi chib* 'broken language') as a register of English this will begin to illuminate many problems. Treating it then as a register of English, I will enumerate some of the circumstances in which it is used.

(1) For identification purposes: If a Gypsy is in, e.g. a cafe and thinks that someone at the table is also a Romani, he will slip a word of Romani into the conversation. For this purpose, he will often use a Romani word that is identical with an English word so that if the other person is a Gajo, he can rephrase the remark as an English sentence and not give away that *he* is a Gypsy. For example, he can say

*Mandy'll pester for you* 'I'll pay for you'

which could be rephrased, if the other man says 'what?', as

'Is that man pestering you?'

Occasionally, Gypsies will slip a Romani word into a conversation when there is no doubt that the stranger is a Gajo and when the latter knows that they are Romanies. This is a test to see whether the stranger is likely to be friendly or hostile, since, if he knows a few common words like *kritchma* 'public house', it is likely that he has Gypsy friends. In this way one can identify a friendly vicar or garage mechanic before asking for help or explaining one's problems.

(2) Romani English is used as a register in a few trades or professions by both Rom and Gajo: Thus the register of English used by horse-dealers contains Romani lexical items understood by the professionals but not by the casual buyer. The register used also contains English words used with special meaning, e.g., 'two and a half' signifies 'two hundred and fifty pounds'. It is via these trade registers that Romani words have spread into market traders' jargon (and thence into ordinary English slang):

*It's a mazel it didn't pani* 'It's luck it didn't rain'  
*mazel* (Yiddish), *pani* (Romani)

(3) In songs: There are a few songs which seem to have been composed originally in Romani English – at least they are never sung in standard English. These include *I'm a Romani Rai* 'I'm a Romani lord' and *Can you rocker Romani?* 'Can you speak Romani?' The majority of songs in English Romani, however, are translations of common English folk-songs or music-hall songs of the nineteenth century. Here is one recorded a few years ago in Barking (East London) with an English version (Kennedy, 1975: Song 249).

<i>Mandy had a juk</i>	'I keep my dogs and my ferrets too
<i>and a kushti juk</i>	O, I have them in my keeping.
<i>He kept him in his keeping</i>	To catch good hares – all in the night
<i>One Sunday night they went out</i>	While the gamekeeper lies sleeping.
<i>walking</i>	
<i>while the gavver mush was</i>	My dogs and I went out one night . . .'
<i>sleeping . . .</i>	

The singer, a young girl, apparently thought *Mandy* was someone's name (in fact, it is the Romani English word for 'I') and follows this thought in the third line.

(4) In word-play: Comparing words and inventing new words in Romani was a common pastime in the evenings before television sets began to enter every trailer. Indeed, one has heard of competitions to see who knew the most words (a unique phenomenon perhaps). There seems to be a paradox here that, while fundamental words like 'us' and 'am' have been borrowed from English, a lot of energy is expended in coining new words such as *dickin' mokta* 'television – lit. 'looking box' while European Rom are quite happy to use the loan word *television*. One reason may be the need for these words when Romani is used as a secret language (see below) but many are formed as a pastime. One can only with difficulty visualize a situation when a Gypsy might want to talk secretly about an elephant (given by one informant as *bori vangusta* 'big finger').

(5) For self-identification as a group member: It has been observed by Acton (1971) that at a wake, where the relatives and friends watch over the body, the discussions of the good life and qualities of the deceased were carried on entirely in Romani English. Here we have a large number of Rom coming together, meeting their relatives perhaps for the first time

in months and in emotional circumstances feeling that they are again part of a large warm family. One can observe a similar phenomenon at a Jewish wedding where, as the evening draws on, the waltz gives way to the hora and Jewish English and Yiddish replace English as the most heard languages.

(6) As a secret language: One can imagine the usefulness of a secret language in circumstances such as when a policeman approaches a group of caravans and asks to see someone's driving licence. A whispered word in Romani can send one of the youths scurrying away to borrow a valid licence. Of course, now that Gypsies are more integrated into society the uses of the language change. When I first wrote on this topic (1971) I cited a court scene where a lad accused of theft, was asked where he was living and his mother shouted: *Don't forget you got to 'ave a kenner* ('house').

meaning that he should say he lived in the house of a relative as, if the magistrate found out that he lived in a trailer, bail might be refused. A week or so before writing this article a similar, but different, scene took place, but here the Gypsy concerned was in the town hall applying for planning permission to place his trailer on some land he had bought. Stumped by a question from the council solicitor, he turned to his wife for prompting. She said just one word, *ker* and her husband spoke out:

'I want to settle down and build a bungalow!'

Even those who heard the prompt, probably thought the woman was saying 'care' and not the Romani word for a house.<sup>2</sup>

For many Gypsies it is important that even the *fact* that they have a secret language should be concealed. Here is another paradox: for them the language is so secret that they cannot use it in public to say something that they do not want the Gajé present to understand. A leading Gypsy Council member has been criticized on several occasions vehemently for speaking to other Gypsies in Romani while they were on delegations to government and local bodies. By speaking Romani he was giving away the fact that they had a secret language and – of course – the fact that he made remarks to them in Romani after council officials had made certain propositions meant that the Gajé could deduce what he was saying even without knowing the language. The secretness of the language is such that young children are discouraged from giving words even to such friendly persons as volunteer teachers on the trailer sites. Many debates have taken place in Gypsy political circles on whether Romani publications should be encouraged and the circulation of a bilingual reading book was a prime factor in causing a split in the largest educational welfare organization working with Gypsies.

Nevertheless there are books from which the language can be learnt, and a prison officer was able to provide a translation of a letter in a recent murder case where threats to *muller* someone were used to try and get a verdict of (premeditated) murder rather than manslaughter.<sup>3</sup>

Brune (1975:753) has pointed out that English Romani can be used as a secret language by Rom to conceal what they are saying from other Gypsies. Thus,

*you chopped the grai, mush?*

which literally means 'did you exchange the horse, mate?' is used, by previous agreement, to mean 'did you steal the chickens?'

Other families have built up secret languages in different ways. The Gilligoolie Smiths have composed a dialect based on a mixture of Romani and the two secret languages of the Irish Travelers, Gammon and Shelta.<sup>4</sup> The syntax and morphology are English, not Gaelic.<sup>5</sup> The Wilsons (Boswells) on the other hand have learnt new words from books and visiting continental Romanies, to make phrases which no one but themselves and a few widely traveled Romanologs can understand:

*espiba yeref'd gry* 'chestnut-colored horse' (underlined words are from Borrow's Spanish Caló vocabulary)

*trin tawnie bauloes ta o boro dosch lobo* 'three little pigs and the big bad wolf' (Tom Wilson [Boswell], unpub. ms.)

The secretness of the language is one reason why it is not taught to young children. If they don't know it, then they can't reveal its secrets. Another reason is that they don't need it for any of the purposes mentioned above. They do not go to work or attend wakes or sing in public. In fact they are hardly permitted to talk at all when adults are around. It is significant that, in a Romani-English word list compiled by a Gypsy (Wilson, forthcoming), 'behave' is translated as *kakka* 'don't'.

(7) Other uses: Romani English is common in oaths and terms of endearment:

*I'll more you* 'I'll beat you'

and the register here does contain calques on Romani:

*my daughter's life* i.e., 'may my daughter die if I'm not telling the truth'

In tattoos, I have only seen one example

*Devel kuska doika* 'May God bless mother'

where the use of the dative ending *-ka* suggests it was copied from the arm of an older man.

The significant aspect of Romani English is that it is not transmitted from parent to child as languages generally are. The average six-year-old hardly

knows ten words of the lexis, and his knowledge does not exceed 50 before puberty. At this point the girls learn the language from the younger women and the boys from the younger men. During the long drives looking for work a boy can learn as many as thirty or forty words in a day, and as he learns them he gets into situations where he needs to use them and is allowed to do so. There is of course a parallel to this transmission of the language by older siblings and members of a slightly higher age-peer group in the way in which, in many communities, singing games, standard riddles, words for excretory and sexual functions are passed on not from parent to child but by children and adolescents to younger children and adolescents. To this extent the acquisition of the Romani register of English by a young Gypsy boy or girl may be classed as a 'rite de passage'.<sup>6</sup>

*Romani Institute  
London, England*

#### NOTES

1. For a detailed account of this theory, see Hancock (1970) and Acton (1971:15).
2. *ker* 'Indian origin' and *kenner* 'Tinker's cant' both mean 'house'.
3. Regina versus Willmont, Young and Harmsworth. Chelmsford, July 1975.
4. These are both formed by making phonetic changes to Irish words in a way to which their name gives the key (like 'egg-language' and 'back-slang'). Gammon (itself a reversal of 'Ogam') mainly has reversal of consonants, and Shelta (from Bearla-language) makes changes in the first syllable.
5. Edward Gentle told me about the Gilligoolie Smiths.
6. Peer-to-peer language transmission ('age-grading') was first discussed by Stewart (1964).

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The only other two books on the English Romani dialect were published over one hundred years ago (Borrow, Smart and Crofton), and the conventional wisdom is that the language has declined ever since; and indeed, even in the 1870s people were complaining that fluency was fast disappearing.

Obstinately and persistently, however, the language survives, in a country where so many other immigrant tongues have faded and disappeared within a generation or two. It has been primarily an oral language; it lacks a written tradition; indeed, until recently some 90% of Romanichals have been unable to read and write. Individual Romanichals have used their language in private correspondence, or have written down items to gratify the whims of scholars or evangelists, but they have not hitherto established a literary tradition in Romanes, although Gypsy writers like Wood, Odley and "Lavengro" have referred to their language in books written primarily in English.

Today, however, around half of the Travelling children of primary school age in England and Wales are being educated (D.E.S. 1983); the foundations of mass literacy are being laid. Many older primary school children and secondary school children want to use their own language in school, but do not know where to start. An abundance of written English is presented to them by way of example, but Romanes - well, how should it be written? - how should it be spelled? - has anyone else ever done such a thing?

This book is aimed first of all at such young people. It brings together examples of texts which have been written in English Romanes, and provides a working standardization for the spelling. And because different Gypsies in different parts of the country know words that others do not, we provide a vocabulary which can help young people to read each other's writing.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Since this book will be used in schools we wished to make it as complete in scope as possible by including four of the most useful recent articles that have been written about English Romanes.

There remains controversy over the date at which the English Romani dialect was formed, and as to what kind of language it is. In a debate at the National Gypsy Education Council conference at Oxford (Acton 1971), Professor Ian Hancock, himself a Gypsy, argued that it was formed in a fairly rapid process, similar to creolization, at the time of first language contact in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Against this Dr. Donald Kenrick argued that there was a slow process of deterioration of inflected Romanes until by the 19th century we are left with Romani English, a dialect of English rather than of Romanes. Hancock asserts, however, that we are still dealing with a dialect of Romanes, albeit one with massive interference from English. This debate has continued for over a decade, and we have included two recent statements by Kenrick and Hancock which together present the present state of knowledge about the history and grammar of the dialect in definitive technical detail.

Romanestan Publications

**R O M A N I  
R O K K E R I P E N  
T O - D I V V U S**

The English Romani dialect and its  
contemporary social, educational  
and linguistic standing.

**EDITED BY THOMAS ACTON AND DONALD KENRICK**

Romanestan Publications

First published 1984

London

ISBN 0 947803 00 0