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41

ARTICLES:

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Promotion and Preservation of Gurbet Romani in Eastern Serbia

MIRJANA MIRIĆ

Learning to Speak Indigenous Languages with Compassionate Listening Practices

MADOKA HAMMINE

Ionkwahronkha'ohátie' (We are Becoming Fluent): Child Perspectives on Adult Second Language Learning within Mohawk Communities

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Journal of the Hugo Valentin Centre

<i>Guest Editor's Note</i>	7
CONSTANZE ACKERMAN-BOSTRÖM	
<i>Giellariššu: Indigenous language revitalisation in the city</i>	11
HANNA-MÁRET OUTAKOSKI	
ØYSTEIN A.VANGSNES	
<i>Promotion and Preservation of Gurbet Romani in Eastern Serbia</i>	31
MIRJANA MIRIĆ	
<i>Learning to Speak Indigenous Languages with Compassionate Listening Practices</i>	52
MADOKA HAMMINE	
<i>lonkwahronkha'onhátie' (We are Becoming Fluent): Child Perspectives on Adult Second Language Learning within Mohawk Communities</i>	69
JASMINE JIMERSON	
<i>The Effect of Covid-19 on Livonian Language Learning Opportunities</i>	89
GUNTA KĻAVA	
<i>Book Review</i>	102

Promotion and Preservation of Gurbet Romani in Eastern Serbia: Actions Targeting Children and Youth*

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This paper deals with the Gurbet Romani variety spoken in Eastern Serbia, an area with an extensive language contact between Serbian as the dominant language and Romani as a minority language. The paper focuses on the Romani language classes in one of the schools in the town of Knjaževac (Eastern Serbia), as well as on the workshops and publishing activities organised by the local library with the purpose of promoting and preserving Romani varieties through activities targeted at primary-school pupils, but also through publishing the work of young local Roma authors. The aim of the paper is to investigate the ongoing participatory measures taken by the local community in Knjaževac, focusing on those targeting children and youth. I recorded a workshop and several semi-structured interviews with the school's principal, first to fourth grade teachers, pedagogical assistant, Romani language teacher, librarian and pupils. The qualitative analysis suggests that the activities organised by the library in Knjaževac represent significant affirmative measures for the promotion of Romani, which are crucial in the context of marginalization and restricted domains of language usage as indicated by my informants.

In the domain of minority language protection, as well as language policy and planning, government institutions in the Western world typically serve as law- and policy-makers, whose activities are oriented towards developing strategies for the implementation of the relevant legislation. However, local communities and activists are the ones who put these policies into practice and ensure that they are not only followed, but also used as a potential tool to develop various sorts of measures for the promotion and preservation of linguistic varieties. One of the possible roads to take in this endeavour is to target such activities towards youth and children. Keeping in mind the crucial importance of the intergenerational language transmission in the process of language maintenance (Fishman 1991; Kubaník, Sadílková, and Červenka 2013; Lee and van Way 2016; Soehl 2016), uninterrupted language acquisition and language use at home and within the local community are the first steps in safeguarding minority varieties, without which any other measures would be futile. In addition, young minority people encounter various social and economic challenges in the modern world, causing some of them to become indifferent “to-

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wards belonging to a minority group and speaking its language”, which along with “increasing cultural assimilation, globalization processes, economic conditions and lifestyle change, is one of the major threats faced by minority languages” (Dołowy-Rybińska 2020, 14). These threats especially affect the languages which are considered endangered or vulnerable, but also the ones which might still be vital, but have a restricted domain of usage.

Although Romani is an officially recognized minority language in many European countries, it has been characterized as a “functionally restricted, dominated language”, with a functional distribution of speakers’ linguistic repertoires between Romani and dominant majority languages: while the latter cover the public domain of language usage, Romani varieties are typically restricted to informal domains (Halwachs 2020, 430). The same observation holds true for the sociolinguistic situation in Serbia, as there exists an extensive language contact between Serbian as the dominant, official language of the state, and different varieties of Romani. Although the legislative framework of the Republic of Serbia appears to provide an adequate scope for minority language protection and promotion, the reality indicates that more work is needed, and significant improvement can be achieved only if local communities become more engaged.

This paper discusses the activities of the local community in the town of Knjaževac—one of the administrative, cultural and educational centres of Eastern Serbia—with a substantial Roma community residing in the town and the surrounding villages. As of 2013, the local library in Knjaževac has been organizing various projects which encompass young people and children of Romani origin. The staff put a lot of effort into promoting the Romani language and culture through workshops targeted at children and activities which include young Roma people as authors or collaborators in projects. By doing so, the library tends to promote the use of Romani beyond the intergroup communication in private and everyday life, aiming at increasing the motivation of Romani speakers to speak their mother tongue, but also making the language visible to the majority group.

The paper is organised as follows. First, I present information on the Romani language, focusing on the number of speakers provided by the last census in Serbia, and briefly describing the linguistic situation in the town of Knjaževac. The assessed levels of endangerment of Romani are then described, followed by the section on the legislation of the Republic of Serbia which provided the framework for the introduction of Romani language classes in primary schools. I proceed with the research aims and data collection methodology, and then focus on Romani language classes in one of the schools in Knjaževac, as well as activities organised by the local library in the sphere of promoting the Romani language, before rounding off with some concluding remarks.

Romani: (Eastern) Serbia and beyond

Romani is an Indo-Aryan language spoken worldwide. It has been primarily used within the family and local community as an oral language, without a widely accepted standard. Due to extensive language contacts with speakers of dominant or majority languages, as well as the low social prestige of Romani, its speakers are mostly bilingual or multilingual (Friedman 2001, 149; Halwachs 2020, 430; Matras and Adamou 2020, 329).

Based on linguistic criteria, Viktor Elšík and Michael Beníšek (2020) distinguish twelve Romani dialect groups: South Balkan, North Balkan, Apennine,

Slovene, South Central, North Central, Transylvanian, Vlax (North and South), Ukrainian, Northeastern, Northwestern, and Iberian Romani (see Matras 2002 for an earlier classification). The Vlax and Balkan groups are widely spoken in the Balkans, including Serbia. The Gurbet variety which is the focus of this paper belongs to the South Vlax group of dialects. It is mostly spoken in the southwest of Balkans, that is to say, in parts of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Albania (Bakker and Matras 1997, xxv; Matras 2002, 7–8; ROMLEX).

The estimated number of Romani speakers worldwide ranges between five and ten million (Bakker and Matras 1997, vii), but according to Yaron Matras (2002, 238), even the most conservative estimates agree that Romani is spoken by more than 3.5 million people. As for Serbia, according to the 2011 Census (cf. Table 1), there are 147,604 people (2.05% of the overall population) who declare themselves as Roma, but significantly fewer who declare themselves as Romani speakers (100,668, i.e. 1.4% of the population). The official census figures for the town of Knjaževac and its surroundings display the same discrepancy between the number of Roma and the number of Romani speakers: 789 (2.5%) vs. 673 (2.14%). It is noteworthy that the data from 2011 differ from the previous 2002 Census (cf. Table 1), which indicates that the number of Roma and Romani speakers increased between 2002 and 2011, in Serbia as a whole and in the area of Knjaževac, even though the overall number of citizens decreased. The increase in the number of Roma is probably due to the process of readmission and repatriation of Roma from Western European countries during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković 2020, 85–86), which clearly affected the area of Eastern Serbia. Another reason worth exploring might be an increase in the number of Roma who are willing to admit their ethnicity.

Table I. The Number of Roma and Romani Speakers in the Republic of Serbia and Knjaževac Area, 2002–2011.

	POPULATION		ROMA				ROMANI SPEAKERS			
	2002	2011	2002	in %	2011	in %	2002	in %	2011	in %
Serbia	7,498,001	7,186,862	108,193	1.4	147,604	2.05	82,242	1.1	100,668	1.4
Knjaževac area	37,172	31,491	452	1.21	789	2.5	366	0.98	673	2.14

In the town of Knjaževac and its surroundings three groups of Roma reside, namely Gurbet, Leyash and Kovachi ‘Blacksmiths’ (Ćirković and Mirić 2017; Sikimić 2017, 2018). The first two speak their varieties at home and within the local community—the Gurbet (South Vlax) and the Leyash variety (North Vlax). However, the Gurbet variety is the dominant Romani variety in this area owing to the higher number of speakers and the fact that Leyash speakers are often multilingual in both Romani varieties (and Serbian) due to mixed-marriages (Ćirković 2018, 239). The group typically known as Kovachi ‘Blacksmiths’ used to speak the Arli (Balkan) variety of Romani, but witnessed a complete language shift to Serbian in the 20th century (Sikimić 2017, 2018).

The Vitality of Romani in (Eastern) Serbia

The official figures provided by the 2011 Census, which indicate differences between the number of Romani speakers and the number of Roma, cannot be taken as the absolute measure of language endangerment, especially as they fail to provide information regarding the distribution of speakers across particular varieties or ages. However, they might be considered an indicator that certain varieties of Romani spoken in some parts of Serbia might be vulnerable to some extent. Additionally, the stigmatization and negative attitudes towards Romani and its speakers (Đurović 2002; Baucal 2012; Mirić 2019), as well as the absence of Romani in the linguistic landscape of Serbia as the language is not seen in the public spaces, may influence the vitality of Romani and need to be taken into account when assessing its endangerment (Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković 2020, 88).

The official estimates of the endangerment of Romani varieties in Serbia differ among databases which offer an assessment of Romani varieties, e.g., UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010), *Ethnologue* (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013) or the *Endangered Languages Project* (ELP) (Lee and van Way 2016). Numerous evaluations of these assessments have signalled that the estimated levels of endangerment of Romani varieties worldwide, but also in Serbia, are not reliable as regards the dialects spoken in a particular country, the estimated number of speakers, the assessed levels of endangerment, but also regarding the applied scientific methodology and terminology (Leggio and Matras 2017, Halwachs 2020, Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković 2020). According to the evaluation provided in Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković (2020), different Romani varieties spoken in Serbia have been assessed at different levels of endangerment, ranging from "definitely endangered" as estimated by the UNESCO *Atlas* and applied to Romani as a whole, not taking into account dialectal variation, to more positive assessments across different dialects provided by other databases. For instance, *Ethnologue* estimates Vlax Romani as "vigorous", i.e., "used orally by all generations of speakers and transmitted to children as their first language", inaccurately placing Vlax Romani only in Romania; the ELP database assesses Vlax Romani as being "at risk", whereas additional information in this database taken from other sources (e.g., Hancock 1995) estimates this variety as being "safe" (Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković 2020).

The presented discrepancy among databases suggests an urgent need for a more precise assessment of the endangerment of different Romani varieties. According to Dieter Halwachs (2020, 432), the evidence on the development and vitality of Romani ought to be collected for individual Romani varieties, taking into consideration its heterogeneity, as well as the multiplicity of speech communities and a high diversity of particular sociolinguistic situations. These observations are corroborated by the sociolinguistic situation in Knjaževac, which shows that the Gurbet Romani in this area is a vital variety, as it is being transmitted to younger generations of speakers and used as a primary means of family and intergroup communication in private and everyday life (Mirić 2019), the latter being mentioned as a criterion for language vitality (Halwachs 2020, 432).

The main issue as regards the Gurbet variety seems to be its restricted domain of usage and its low social prestige, as indicated by both the majority population and the Roma themselves. Previous fieldwork studies carried out in the town of Knjaževac and the nearby villages (Sikimić 2018; Mirić 2019) have shown that Gurbet Romani speakers are at least bilingual, and that Gurbet Romani is actively

used in this area. However, language usage is limited to informal domains, such as (private) communication with family members, kin and members of the local community, while children also speak the language with their Romani-speaking peers in the neighbourhood and occasionally at school (Mirić 2019). Conversely, Serbian completely dominates language usage in formal domains, as it is the majority language and the official language of the state. This domination of Serbian is also characteristic of the everyday, informal communication between Romani-speaking children who tend to switch to Serbian in the presence of their Serbian-speaking peers, and in public places, such as school (Mirić 2019). These observations are in line with the notion of “unidirectional multilingualism” which generally characterizes Romani speakers, who are competent speakers of the local, dominant language of the area where they reside, but whose speakers, in turn, do not speak Romani (Friedman 2001, 148). The exceptions are rather rare and represent only individual initiatives of local Serbian people to learn the language of their neighbours residing in Knjaževac and the surrounding villages, as pointed out by D. I., a native speaker of Romani from Knjaževac in a personal communication (March 2021), but also indicated in my interviews with Serbian-speaking pupils in the village of Minićevo near the town Knjaževac.

Legislative Framework and Language Policies in the Republic of Serbia

The important role of the exposure to one’s mother tongue in the early years of education is emphasized in The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities & Explanatory Notes, which were translated into many languages, including Serbian (OSCE, 1996). In the Republic of Serbia there are several legal documents which regulate the right to use minority languages, among them Romani.

As of 2006, the Romani language has officially been recognized as a minority language in Serbia, when The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992) came into force, previously ratified in 2005 by the Parliament of Serbia and Montenegro and subsequently applied to the Republic of Serbia as its successor. As one of the objectives and principles, Article 7 of the Charter specifies “the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life”, while Article 8 encourages the states to make available or provide education in the relevant regional or minority languages at different levels of the education system.

In addition, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia joined the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995) in 2001, which subsequently applied to the Republic of Serbia as its successor. In Article 14 of the Convention, “the Parties undertake to recognise that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to learn his or her minority language”, and “shall endeavour to ensure, as far as possible and within the framework of their education systems, that persons belonging to those minorities have adequate opportunities for being taught the minority language or for receiving instruction in this language.”

Furthermore, the right to use minority languages in Serbia is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and regulated by the Law on the Official Use of Languages and Scripts and the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. In the domain of education in particular, the Law on Primary Education allows national minority students in primary schools to attend elective

classes of language with elements of national culture when the language of education is Serbian. However, this option is only possible if a sufficient number of students have registered, at least fifteen per school.

Despite the well-established legislative framework, the actual situation across the country signals that further efforts are required in order to implement language policies. Romani has not been introduced into official use in any of the local communities in Serbia due to the spatial dispersion of Roma, ethnic mimicry as a consequence of discrimination of the Roma, and the fact that the state has required a relatively high minimum number of minority students to introduce language classes (Bašić 2018; see also Filipović and Vučo 2018 for the lack of bilingual education in Romani).

The situation with Romani is further complicated by the fact that the long-term process of the standardisation of Romani varieties in different countries is still ongoing (for the situation in Serbia, see Bašić 2018, 25; Lukin Saitović 2018, 32–33). Unlike some of the minority languages which are already standardised in Serbia, such as Romanian, for which the official standard (“Romania Romanian”) is used in formal contexts and learned in school, standing in a diglossic relation to the non-dominant Romanian varieties used at home and in everyday communication (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018, 16), a different situation is encountered in the case of Romani, whose standardisation has been facing numerous difficulties at both international, as well as regional and local levels (Halwachs 2020). The heterogeneity of Romani is one of the factors which make the process of Romani language policy and planning (LPP) complex. According to Halwachs (2020), some European countries, including Serbia, pursue a “top-down” LPP strategy, usually standardising the variety of a numerically and/or politically strong Romani speech community, as is the case with the Gurbet variety in Serbia (Halwachs 2020, 437), whereas other countries, such as Austria, adopt a “bottom-up” strategy, standardising and introducing several Romani varieties in schools (Halwachs 2020, 443–44). Contrary to the “top-down” approach, which may negatively affect the process of preserving non-dominant minority varieties of Romani, the “bottom-up” approach, being focused on “plurality” and language maintenance, turns out to be more effective in education and extra-curricular activities (Halwachs 2020).

All these factors impede the implementation of the language policies and thus make the initiatives of local communities and individual activists much more important.

Aims and Methodology

Bearing in mind the aforementioned challenges posed by the implementation of the legislation regarding Romani, as well as the growing responsibilities of local communities, the aim of this paper is to investigate the ongoing participatory measures taken by the local community in the town of Knjaževac in Eastern Serbia, focusing on those that target children and youth.

The research is based on material collected between 2017 and 2019 during several fieldtrips to Knjaževac and the nearby village of Minićevo. The fieldwork was carried out within the project “Language, Folklore and Migrations in the Balkans” of the Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade (Serbia). The material was collected in cooperation with the Njegoš National Library in Knjaževac and two primary schools: Dimitrije Todorović Kaplar in Knjaževac and Dubrava in Minićevo. The overall collected material comprises:

- (a) recorded narratives of primary-school pupils (age 7–14), collected with the purpose of creating a corpus of children's narratives in Gurbet Romani. The narratives are based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Romani and Serbian, with questions focusing on traditional culture and autobiographic stories (Mirić, forthcoming). All recorded children are bilingual in Romani and Serbian;
- (b) recorded experiments with primary-school pupils (age 7–10), in which pupils retold the content of cartoons in Romani with the purpose of investigating verbal aspect in Gurbet Romani (Mirić 2019a);
- (c) recorded conversations with primary-school pupils (age 7–14), based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Romani and Serbian, with questions addressing domains of Romani language usage and pupils' attitudes towards Romani (Mirić 2019);
- (d) recorded conversations with parents of the Romani-speaking pupils, conducted in Romani and Serbian, addressing the issues of education, as well as social and financial problems they encounter;
- (e) a recorded session of a Romani language class with elements of national culture in one of the schools in Knjaževac (Mirić 2019);
- (f) a recording of a workshop which the local library organises in cooperation with the abovementioned primary schools;
- (g) recorded interviews with the librarian and the Romani language teacher in one of the schools in Knjaževac, as well as pedagogical assistants, principals, and school teachers from both schools. The interviews were conducted in Serbian according to a semi-structured interview method. The questions mainly addressed the issues of Romani language usage, the difficulties children face when it comes to language use, and the activities organised by schools and the local library aimed at overcoming these difficulties and encouraging children to speak and write in their mother tongue. Additionally, the attitudes towards Romani among the members of the Romani community, especially pupils, and their reactions and impressions regarding the classes and workshops also emerged as topics in the interviews.

For the purpose of this paper, I analysed the transcripts of the interviews with the school and library staff (following the interview topics) (g), and the recorded workshop (f). A few short follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with the Romani language teacher and the director of the library in March 2021 so as to obtain updated information on the classes and the workshop, given the current pandemic situation and the measures introduced by the Serbian government.

Several ethical issues should be mentioned with regard to the overall data collection, storage and accessibility. First, the interviews, experiments and the class and workshop recordings, mentioned in (a) to (g), were all conducted by the author of this article so as to ensure that the interviews would be conducted in the same manner and that all relevant aspects of the study would be controlled for, ethical issues included. All recorded material is stored in the Digital Archive of the Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade. The audio recordings and transcripts are available to researchers upon request after signing a usage protocol which guarantees that the material will be used for scientific purposes only. The recorded informants can also have access to their own recordings and

transcripts upon request. In order to maintain the anonymity of the informants, personal data, such as names or date of birth, are neither stored nor made available.

Although the study deals with a community that is vulnerable to a certain extent, disclosing the name of the schools, the town and the village which are the focus of the study does not present any risk of identifying children who participated in the research, nor their parents, given the overall high number of Roma pupils who attend the schools in question. When it comes to the school and library staff, whose recordings were used for the purpose of this study, their work dedicated to the local Roma community is already recognized and appreciated by both the minority and the majority community. Disclosing the names of places was necessary to present them as examples of good practice. Overall, the data published in this study are not sensitive and present no risk for identifying participants.

Secondly, all of the informants consented to the participation and recording, as well as for the material to be used for scientific purposes. There was no compensation for their participation. The adult informants, the school and library staff and parents, gave their oral informed consent. They were informed about the research aims prior to the interviews or the class and workshop recording and their participation in the study was voluntary, with the possibility to withdraw at any time. As for the children's participation, parents consented to their children's participation, recording and for the material to be used for scientific purposes. The study was also approved by the schools' management. The children were recorded in their school premises or the premises of the local library during one of their Romani language workshops. Children's participation in the study was voluntary: all children who participated in the interviews, the class and the workshop were asked if they would like to participate and be recorded and they were informed that they were not required to do so, that this will not affect their school success, and that they could withdraw at any time. Only those children who willingly accepted the participation were recorded and their speech was transcribed. They enjoyed in speaking their first language and were quite enthusiastic during the interviews, the class and the workshop, often volunteering to be the next person to speak. Only a few children who had said that they would like to be included in the study, appeared to be reluctant when it was their turn to speak, saying that they were shy, so they were not recorded.

It is noteworthy that in the case of illiterate parents, the teacher or the pedagogical assistant was the one to read the consent form and a parent marked it. This does not change the already established relation parent(s) – teacher(s)/assistant(s), nor child(ren) – teacher(s)/assistant(s), as according to the school staff and parents, parents often address teachers and/or assistants if they need help with any kind of written material which they are not able to read. In turn, parents emphasize the importance of literacy to children, thus providing valuable help to the teachers. The relationship is considered by both parents and teachers as cooperation, rather than an imbalanced power relation.

Prior to the recording of children, the interviewer (i.e. the author of this article) presented herself in Romani and explained to children what the goal of the research was. Given that the interviewer was a researcher and Serbian L1 speaker has surely affected the relation between Romani-speaking children and the interviewer, but throughout the class, the workshop and the interviews, the interviewer emphasized the importance of speaking and studying Romani, making it clear that their language is valuable and worth exploring, showing her own interest in and knowledge of the language. When it comes to the relation between the interviewer and

the adult informants, i.e. the school and library staff, their cooperation had started in 2017, during the work on the Gurbet Romani dictionary and has been seen as necessary institutional cooperation which serves to promote the Romani language within the local community and beyond (see the section on Publishing Activities).

The interviews with the school and library staff were conducted in Serbian, given that it is the first language of all teachers and staff members except for the Romani language teacher, who is bilingual in Serbian and the Arli Romani variety which the interviewer (i.e. the author of this article) does not speak. This has not affected the content of the collected data. Interviews with children, and their parents, were conducted primarily in Romani and to a certain extent in Serbian, depending on the Romani language proficiency of the interviewer at the time of the recording, which significantly improved between the two fieldtrips, resulting in the increase in Romani language usage during the interviews. The use of Serbian might have affected the rate of the code-switching and borrowing in the speech of Romani-speaking children, which are unrelated to the topic of this paper.

The author of this article transcribed the recorded interviews and is responsible for any mistakes. The illustrative examples excerpted from the transcripts will be provided in a slightly adapted English translation, followed by the Serbian original.

Before I proceed with the analysis regarding the workshop and publishing activities of the library—which are in the focus of the paper—I will present the successful attempt of introducing the Romani language classes in the school in Knjaževac, which has a particular relevance for understanding the context and the potential impact of the workshops and publishing activities.

The Romani Language Classes in the Town of Knjaževac (Eastern Serbia)

Introducing a minority language into the education system may have a tremendous impact on the process of language maintenance and revitalization, as shown by numerous studies on indigenous or minority languages (see, for example, Sallabank 2005; Paccioto 2014; Siragusa 2018). As for endangered varieties, the education system plays an important role in this process, as it can affect language prestige, image and status, as well as increase the motivation of younger speakers to use the language, whereas in the case of vital minority languages, learning the mother tongue in school is meant to expand the domains of language usage (Sorescu-Marinković 2021, 212). Additionally, this may eventually reverse the negative attitudes towards its speakers when it comes to languages which are affected by marginalization, as is the case with Romani.

The primary school Dimitrije Todorović Kaplar in Knjaževac has organised elective classes of Romani as of September 2017. In the school year 2017/2018, classes were attended by 35 out of approximately 100 Roma pupils, but the number has slowly increased, to 45 pupils registered in 2018/2019 (Mirić 2019, 165–66), and then to 50 pupils who applied for the classes in 2020/2021 (follow-up interview with the Romani teacher, March 2021). As the overall number of Roma pupils did not increase significantly, the increase in the number of pupils attending classes might be taken as an indicator of the successful motivation of both pupils and their parents to register for the classes (Mirić 2019, 166).

As reported by Mirić (2019, 165–70), classes are taught twice a week. They are regularly attended by at least half of the registered pupils, who are divided into two groups: the younger group encompasses second- to fourth-graders, while the older one includes fifth- to seventh-graders. Classes include neither first-graders, as parents

are required to apply for the classes in the previous school year, nor eighth-graders, due to their numerous obligations in preparing for the graduation exam. According to the teacher (the follow-up interview, March 2021), the classes are optional and the pupils do not get final marks for the subject; however, there is a plan for the following school year to issue Romani language class attendance certificates, which is another means of increasing pupils' motivation to apply for the classes again, thus maintaining continuity, and providing a way to reward their regular attendance.

The curriculum of the Romani classes in Serbian schools like that in Knjaževac follows the national curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development for the classes of all languages of the national minorities with elements of national culture (Mirić 2019, 167). However, ever since the classes were initiated, the school has not received the official textbooks for the classes of Romani, and so the teacher prepares the material on her own or relies on the literature available in the school library (follow-up interview, March 2021). The Romani language textbooks for the first- to the fourth-graders were published in 2018 by the national Institute for Textbook Publishing and Teaching Aids (authors Rajko Đurić and Ljuan Koko), but the information is not available on the scope of their use at schools across Serbia (Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković 2020, 86).

The use of official textbooks and the presence of a minority language in education are issues closely related to language standardisation. When it comes to Knjaževac, the variety taught in school is Gurbet, the dominant Romani variety of the area, which fortunately coincides with the variety which has served as the basis for the standardisation process in Serbia. Although the choice of a variety does not represent a problematic issue for the speakers in the area with which we are dealing in the paper, as illustrated by the teacher's answer below, it certainly can be problematic for the speakers residing in the areas where other varieties or even different dialect groups predominate in terms of the number of speakers, e.g., Arli group in some parts of Serbia. This is also problematic in the areas where several varieties of Romani are spoken by pupils going to the same school.

Researcher: And how do you solve the issue of different speeches, dialects, varieties? Well we are lucky here, Gurbet [Romani] is here [spoken]. Here. And now we'll see when the literature comes, we'll see what we'll do. (Researcher: Are all the children here Gurbet?) Yes. We also have the 'mixed ones'. I have a few 'mixed ones'. I have Arli-Gurbet [pupils]. But they understand the Arli dialect. And now, I understand them, they understand me [...] It's fine. We are coping. (Interview with Romani language teacher, Knjaževac, November 2017)

[Istraživač: A ovaj, kako se rešava pitanje različitih govora, dijalekata, varijeteta? E ovde imamo sreće, ovde je gurbetski. Ovde. E sad ćemo videti kad dođe, jel, literatura, videćemo šta ćemo. Istraživač: Jesu ovde sva deca Gurbeti? Da. Imamo i mešance. Imam i malo mešance. Imam i arlijsko-gurbetske. Ali razumeju arlijski dijalekat. A sad i ja njih razumem, sad i oni mene [...] Dobro je. Snalazimo se.]

As the class recorded in May 2018 showed, one of the problems the pupils encounter in the class is the difference between the vocabulary of their local variety and the vocabulary of the varieties exemplified in the official dictionaries and other resources the teacher uses (Mirić 2019, 169). Even though the teacher attempts to make adjustments, taking different lexical variants into account during classes, children still experience difficulties in memorizing novel vocabulary. Therefore, it seems that imposing a different variety in school may severely diminish the motiva-

tion of the pupils for speaking their mother tongue, as Romani varieties may differ considerably, especially in their phonology and lexicon. These issues must be more seriously considered and dialectal variation should be taken into account when introducing Romani into the education system.

Furthermore, the classes are held in Gurbet Romani, but the teacher herself is a native speaker of the Arli variety, born in a town in Southern Serbia. Although she speaks Gurbet Romani, at the beginning the pupils had a valuable role in translating from Serbian to the Gurbet variety, which the teacher highly appreciated (Mirić 2019, 166). The opposite was reported in the case of Roma pupils attending a Roma-only school in Slovakia: “Child agency was overlooked also in cases when children were practically helping the teachers for example when more competent children served as interpreters between the teacher and the children who were not able to understand Slovak.” (Kubaník 2021, 61).

As regards the organisation of classes in the school in Knjaževac, several other challenges are reported, such as a low attendance rate of the classes, as well as difficulties with mastering the writing system. The recorded class was attended by a small number of pupils (only 5 out of 35), which reflects the general tendency of Roma pupils not to attend school regularly (Mirić 2019, 168; Hemelsoet 2015, 7). However, during the current school year (2020/2021), when the Romani classes are organised online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pupils have been more willing to participate, often sending the audio recordings of their own speech to the teacher, and regularly doing their weekly homework oriented towards writing in their mother tongue (the follow-up interview, March 2021). The fact that they were using technology (mostly mobile phones) for their homework might be one of the possible reasons for the pupils’ increased interest in homework.

Also worth mentioning is the observation that Romani-speaking pupils face difficulties when writing in Romani (Mirić 2019, 169), as they are not used to reading and writing in their mother tongue and also due to the tendency to mix the Cyrillic script, which is the prevalent script in the Serbian education system especially at younger school ages, and the Latin script, which is used to write Romani in Serbia. The main reasons behind illiteracy in Romani will be elaborated in the following sections.

Actions Targeted at Children and Youth

The Njegoš National Library in Knjaževac initiated several activities oriented towards children and youth. In the following sections I will discuss the workshops and publishing activities organised by the library, emphasizing their role in language preservation and promotion.

Romani Language Workshops

In cooperation with the aforementioned school, the Njegoš National Library in Knjaževac organises language workshops, entitled “Mačke peru veš/E mačke parin e gada” [The cats wash the laundry]. The workshops take place in the library, approximately ten times a year, and each lasts for about an hour. They gather Romani-speaking pupils who aspire to speak Romani or learn about Romani language and culture. One of the librarians, a Serbian native speaker, is the main initiator and the organiser of each workshop. Although she does not speak Romani, she did learn some vocabulary and simple phrases in order to motivate Roma pupils to speak the language themselves. The pedagogical assistant from the school, whose task is to fa-

cilitate the communication between Roma families and the school, between Roma pupils and their teachers, to follow their school progress and graduation rates, and help them with homework or during the classes (cf. Rus 2006), informs the pupils when a workshop is going to be held and decides which children are going to participate at a particular workshop, making sure that various children are included throughout the school year, as only ten to fifteen pupils can attend each of the workshops due to space limitations. The workshops represent an optional activity for the pupils and they are not obliged to attend them. The workshops were temporarily suspended during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (the follow-up interview with the director of the library, March 2021).

The main goals of the workshops are “for children to understand the importance of the book, reading, education and, above all, regular school attendance; to follow contents in Romani and Serbian in parallel, to develop a positive attitude towards themselves, their language and culture, the culture and the tradition of the environment in which they live and the national cultural heritage” (The Njegoš National Library website).¹ In the domain of language, the librarian emphasizes the opportunity of Romani-speaking pupils to use their language without stigmatization, in a formal context such as at a library, to freely speak their mother tongue in front of Serbian-speaking persons, and that pupils should not feel ashamed of speaking their mother tongue (the interview, July 2017).

According to the librarian, only the first encounter seemed difficult at the beginning, as pupils were reluctant to show that they could speak Romani, but later changed their attitude:

When we started, that was the first time, the first encounter with the fairy-tale [...] “Who speaks Romani?” Nobody. All right. And very cautiously I [...] I wouldn’t want to hurt any child, God forbid [...] They followed the fairy-tale, and afterwards [...] the youngest one said: Well then, they speak the same (language as we do)! [laughter] And then everybody agreed and then they started (speaking). (Interview with the librarian, Knjaževac, July 2017)

[Kad smo počeli, to je bilo prvi put, prvi susret sa bajkom [...] “Ko zna romski?” Ne zna niko. Dobro. A ja onako, vrlo oprezno [...] ne bi htela dete da bilo koje dete taman posla, povredim [...] Prate oni bajku, i posle [...] jedan najmlađi kaže: A bre, pa ove pričaju isto! /smeh/ I onda se svi slože i onda krenu.]

In addition to fostering the use of Romani, the workshops aim to promote Romani culture and tradition, which is another way of raising children’s awareness of their cultural and ethnical identity and encouragement to speak about their tradition in Romani:

We celebrate the International Day of the Roma [...] International Children’s Book Day and we adapt these programmes for them [...] Right before the New Year we have one encounter which is more like socializing, so we talk about holidays [...] and they talk about their holidays, and how they celebrate them at home. (Interview with the librarian, Knjaževac, July 2017)

[Obeležimo Međunarodni dan Roma [...] Međunarodni dan dečije knjige i prilagodimo te ovaj programe njima [...] Pred Novu godinu imamo jedan susret koji je više druženje, onako pričamo i o praznicima [...] pa oni pričaju o svojim praznicima, i kako slave kod kuće.]

One of the workshops was video recorded on 28 November 2017 in the presence of the Romani language teacher, the pedagogical assistant, and the librarian. It was attended by 11 primary-school pupils. The workshop was bilingual. The pupils were constantly encouraged to speak Romani, but they sometimes switched to Serbian in the conversation with the pedagogical assistant and the librarian.

During the workshop, a short discussion was initiated by the librarian about the domain of Romani language use. The children emphasized that they do not encounter problems when speaking Romani at school, but they prefer to speak Serbian in front of their Serbian-speaking peers who do not speak Romani and do not understand them (see also the narratives in Mirić 2019, 172–73). Unlike the librarian, who pointed out that Serbian-speaking children should make an effort to learn at least some Romani, the Romani language teacher and the pedagogical assistant placed emphasis on the importance of speaking Serbian at school in order for all children to understand each other, and as a means of integration into the society, as previously observed (Mirić 2019, 171), indicating that Romani-speaking pupils are still restricted in their language usage. (For pupils' attitudes towards their language usage and their narratives on how their Serbian-speaking peers perceive their language as being 'secretive' and 'aimed at gossiping', see Mirić 2019, 171–73):

Librarian: Do you speak Romani during the school breaks? Children [at the same time]: Yeeees. Child 1: No. Child 2: Yes. But not loudly. Not loudly. Librarian: Tell me, why not loudly, but tell me in Romani why not loudly. Child 2 [in Serbian]: Because afterwards, our friends don't want to talk to us afterwards. Librarian: All of them? Child 2: Yes. Not all of them. Librarian: Not all of them. And you wouldn't like this to be? Child 2: No. [...] Child 1: I don't want to speak Romani at school because I'm with my friends and I don't want to. Teacher: Because they don't understand what you are saying. Child 1: Yes. Teacher: That is that problem in communication. [...] Librarian: I just wanted to hear that you don't have problems because of that and that you are not isolated from your peers. Children: No. (Interview with the librarian, Knjaževac, July 2017)

[Bibliotekarka: Jel govorite na odmoru romski? Deca /istovremeno/: Daaaa. Dete 1: Ne. Dete 2: Da, al ne glasno. Ne glasno. Bibliotekarka: Kaži mi, zašto ne glasno, al na romskom mi to kaži. Dete 2: Zato posle naši drugari posle neće da pričaju sas nama. Bibliotekarka: Svi baš? Dete 2: Da. Ne baš svi. Bibliotekarka: Ne baš svi. A ti ne bi želeo da to bude? Dete 2: Ne. [...] Dete 1: Ja ne volim da pričam (na) romskom u školi zato što sam sa drugaricama i ne želim. Nastavnica: Jer one tebe ne razumeju šta ti govoriš. Dete 1: Da. Nastavnica: To je taj problem u komunikaciji. [...] Bibliotekarka: Ja sam tela samo da čujem da nemate probleme zbog toga i da niste izolovani od društva. Deca: Ne.]

The recorded workshop encompassed several activities. It started with the activity pupils frequently practice with the librarian—naming in Romani the objects displayed on a screen in the form of a presentation. They proceeded with another common activity of reading poems, also displayed on the screen. The poems are taken from the book of Serbian poet Ljubivoje Ršumović, entitled *Bukvar dečjih prava* [The Book of Children's Rights], translated into Romani as *Fundo pe čavorikane ortura* (by Desanka Ranđelović). The librarian read in Serbian one of the poems

from the book, devoted to Roma people, and then the children read the passages from the poem in Romani. As the book title in Romani puzzled the children, as well as the overall language of the book, the librarian explained that the variety to which the book is translated is different from Gurbet Romani they speak at home. Afterwards, the children were retelling in Gurbet Romani the content of cartoons previously displayed on the screen. As a final activity, the librarian prepared sheets of paper with a Serbian word for pupils to illustrate and write a sentence in Romani containing that word. After the workshop, the illustrated Romani sentences and words were exhibited in the library for the visitors to see them, which is a common activity according to the librarian:

We exhibit those works, we publish it on our Facebook page, we talk about it. They can come to see. They bring parents over to see what they did here. (Interview with the librarian, Knjaževac, July 2017)

[Mi izložimo te radove, objavimo to na našem Fejzbuku, pričamo o tome. Mogu da dođu da vide. Dovode roditelje da vide šta su tu radili.]

As the most important workshop objective, the library and the school staff emphasize teaching children to read and write in Romani and Serbian, as they are usually illiterate in their mother tongue and often manifest difficulties in writing both Romani and Serbian:

You have observed here in the workshops that most of the children still can't read, they can't write and that represents the biggest problem for their further education. (Interview with the pedagogical assistant, Knjaževac, November 2017)

[Vi ste i ovde sami na radionicima primetili da većina dece još uvek ne zna da čita, ne znaju da pišu i to im za dalje školovanje predstavlja najveći problem.]

There are several reasons for the pupils' low literacy in Romani. Firstly, the pupils are not used to writing in their mother tongue, as they are completely educated in Serbian as the country's dominant language. Secondly, literature written in Romani or translated into Romani is rather scarce and frequently not readily available, not just in Serbia, but also worldwide (Zahova 2020), which makes it difficult for pupils and adults to find literary works and become accustomed to routinely read in Romani. The librarian also emphasized that there are not enough books available in Romani in the library, and they use only a few publications for the workshops. Thirdly, inscriptions in Romani are not found anywhere in the linguistic landscape of Knjaževac, nor in the surrounding area, as the fieldwork has shown, which is also typical for Serbia as a whole (Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković 2020, 88). The absence of a minority language from the linguistic landscape may serve as an indicator of the level of marginalization and discrimination of the language, and reveals the reluctance of speakers to use their language in public. Reading different types of inscriptions may positively affect reading skills, especially at the school age, as this would be one of the opportunities for pupils to get informally engaged in reading practice, in a playful manner, and therefore be motivated to use Romani in writing. It may also show them that their language is valuable enough to be written in public spaces, that it is not socially and politically discriminated against. In addition, as the pupils also manifest difficulties when writing Serbian, acquiring writing skills in their mother tongue can be beneficial for their easier acquisition of writing skills in the official state

language (Sorescu-Marinković 2021, 216, see also Bialystok 2001 for a broader picture on the influence of bilingualism on children's literacy skills).

Furthermore, the fieldwork has shown that many parents are illiterate themselves, in both Romani and Serbian, which may prevent them from encouraging their children to read and write (in Romani), but also hinder them from helping their children to master these skills. The pedagogical assistant makes a similar observation:

Most of the parents are illiterate, they don't know how to provide help and, in my opinion, they are still not aware of the importance of education. (Interview with the pedagogical assistant, Knjaževac, November 2017)

[Većina roditelja su nepismena, ne znaju da pruže pomoć i po meni još uvek nisu svesni značaja obrazovanja.]

All obstacles in acquiring reading and writing skills in Romani make the workshop, along with the Romani classes, a highly valuable opportunity for pupils to learn to write in their mother tongue, to regularly practice these skills and to be encouraged to master them.

As the recorded workshop has shown, the pupils are enthusiastic about using their mother tongue during the workshop, and actively participate in all of the activities, using their language spontaneously. Their impressions are positive as reported by the pedagogical assistant:

Researcher: And what is their relationship to these workshops? Are they looking forward ... [to them]? They are looking forward, yes. They like [them]. They like to attend, they like to be in their environment, and they like to speak in their language. Then they are very free and they say everything they mean. (Interview with the pedagogical assistant, Knjaževac, November 2017)

[Istraživač: A kakav, kakav je njihov odnos prema ovim radionicama, jel se raduju? Raduju /se/ da. Vole. Vole da idu i vole da su u svom okruženju i vole da pričaju na svom jeziku. Tada su jako slobodni i kažu ono sve što misle.]

Publishing Activities

Given the abovementioned facts, but especially the issues of literacy, the publishing activities of the Njegoš National Library oriented towards publishing works in Romani or related to Romani seem invaluable. A substantial part of these activities has been focused on the promotion of Romani language and culture among the younger generation of speakers.

The project "Exploring the Language and Folklore of Roma in Knjaževac" was carried out in 2016 and 2017 under the patronage of the library, and received financial support from the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia. The project resulted in the publication of several books pertaining to the Romani language and culture in Knjaževac and its surroundings, namely, *Miklošičeva zbirka reči "iz Timoka"* [Miklosich's Collection of Words "From Timok"] (Sikimić 2017), *Romsko-srpski rečnik knjaževačkog gurbetskog govora* [The Romani-Serbian Dictionary of the Knjaževac Gurbet Variety] (Ćirković and Mirić 2017), and *Jezik i tradicija knjaževačkih Roma* [Language and Tradition of the Knjaževac Roma] (Sikimić 2018). The publications abound in Romani texts; each lexeme in the dictionary is illustrated by Romani examples, while the book on the Romani tradition encompasses numerous transcripts of Gurbet variety recordings from native speakers.

Although the publications were not strictly aimed at the younger population itself, it is important to emphasize that several young Roma people were engaged in the project in various activities. As reported in Mirić and Ćirković 2018, they first took part in the workshops whose aim was to provide training for the young Roma in the field research and transcription of audio recorded material. Afterwards, they actively participated in the fieldwork as interviewers and helped the linguistic team collect about 14 hours of audio and video material in Gurbet and Leyash Romani. Following the fieldwork, some of them were trained by the linguists in the lexicographical processing of the documented language material, so that they could be able to collaborate on publications as native speakers and provide valuable linguistic judgments and information on the linguistic forms, meanings and usage.

Another aspect of the project in question ought to be mentioned. By obtaining institutional financial support, together with organizing the project activities within the library and engaging scholars as the authors working on the Romani language and culture, the project aimed at raising the prestige and status of the language, in the eyes of its speakers and the members of the majority group. After publishing the abovementioned works, their promotion was organised in the library, gathering numerous members of the Romani minority, but also the members of the Serbian majority community. Parts of the promotional and other activities within the project were broadcasted on the local TV station.

Apart from the publishing activities that include young Roma collaborators, part of the activities is oriented towards children. The library has published three picture books in Romani, written in the Gurbet and Arli varieties, with Serbian translation. The books are entitled (in Serbian, Gurbet Romani and Arli Romani respectively): *Kuća od voska i kuća od soli/O čer katar o mom thaj o čer katar o lon/O čer taro momelja o čer taro lon* [The House of Salt and the House of Wax] (Ibrić, Simić, and Stojadinović 2018), *Siromašni momak nadmudrio kralja/Čoro čhavro xoxada e thagare/Čororo čhavo xoxavđa e thagare* [A Poor Boy Outwitted the King] (Ibrić, Simić, and Stojadinović 2019), *Lisica i medved/E vošeski bibi thaj o riči* [The Fox and the Bear] (Simić and Stojadinović 2020). The stories in all three picture books were originally written by the aforementioned Romani language teacher, in her native Arli variety, based on her memory of old Romani folktales she had heard in her childhood. The first two were then translated into the Gurbet variety by one of the young Roma, while the last book was translated into Gurbet Romani by the pupils themselves during their Romani language classes at school. In addition to being written for the children, the picture books were illustrated by Roma pupils during the workshops.

By providing the young Roma with the opportunity to be engaged as collaborators on these publications, the library attempts to preserve and promote the local Romani varieties spoken in the town of Knjaževac and its surroundings, but also to raise the awareness of its speakers of their identity, as well as to motivate young Roma to use their mother tongue. As it was suggested by Laura Siragusa in her research on Vepsian as a heritage language spoken in Northwest Russia, despite the predominant focus of the revival movements on the written language and the neglect of important oral practices, “the promotion of writing has provided other positive outcomes”, such as pride in being able to write in the heritage language, and the creation of new domains of use for the youth (Siragusa 2018, 196–99). The role that written-language forms can have in revitalizing endangered lan-

guages is also emphasized in the case of Wymysorys, a West Germanic language spoken in a town in Poland, in an overview of the youth theatre group (Borges and Król 2019).

What's more, by publishing the literature in Romani and about Romani language, culture and tradition, the library makes the Roma and their language visible to the broader community, not just in Knjaževac, as the publications were distributed to libraries across the country and made accessible on the library's website. These publications are now available to the majority community who might become more interested in the life and customs of the Roma and their language. Eventually, this may diminish the marginalization of this minority group.

Concluding Remarks

The focal point of this paper has been the Romani language classes and the activities pursued by the local library in the town of Knjaževac in Eastern Serbia, where a large Roma community resides. In cooperation with the local schools, the library has initiated Romani language workshops and prolific publication activities oriented towards children and youths. While the workshops are primarily aimed at preserving the Romani language by motivating children to freely speak their mother tongue in formal settings, the publishing activities are mainly oriented towards promoting Romani, and include children and youths as both recipients of the published works, but also as the authors and collaborators in projects. Targeting different Roma groups, including children and youths, is recognized as important by Nikola Rašić and his colleagues in one of their proposals for overcoming the marginalization of Roma in Croatian society:

[...] the expansion of programs and investment in multidirectional development projects targeting different sociodemographic groups of the Roma population (youth, women, children) will reduce the risk of their failure and complement the specificities aimed at raising awareness about the importance of the identity of one's own community by preserving the language, culture and customs of the Roma people. The design and (co)creation of targeted content and activities that will be more accessible to a heterogeneous population such as the Roma should therefore be emphasized. This especially refers to Roma youth and those who live dispersed among the majority population. (Rašić et al. 2020, 172)

Given that Romani has been a primarily oral language, the efforts of publishing diverse written material in Romani may positively impact the prestige, image and status of the language and motivate the younger generation to use their mother tongue. The overall Romani-speaking community can highly benefit from the workshops, given that children and youths are encouraged to use the language outside of their inner community, to discuss their customs and tradition, to develop positive attitudes towards the language use and to be aware that their language is equally apt as the dominant language to be used in all domains. What has been written about the introduction of the language spoken by the Bayash (Boyash) Roma in school in relation to formal settings may be applied to all Roma communities: it would make "pupils proud and aware of their cultural and linguistic heritage, and at the same time remove the stigma of a non-standardized language, unfit for writing, teaching or official communication." (Sorescu-Marinković 2021, 227). Although the change of image and status is usually associated with introducing native languages into the education system (Sallabank 2005), the activities of the library show that this can also be achieved by engaging other actors.

Although the legislation of the Republic of Serbia provides a suitable framework for various strategies and programs, the reality indicates that the institutional and financial support, although invaluable, is not sufficient in language preservation and promotion. Although Serbia follows the “top-down” approach in implementing relevant laws and policies, it is clear that local initiatives, based on the good will of individuals and quality cooperation of institutions, such as schools and libraries, are indispensable in preserving a minority language and increasing its domains of usage. In the future, serious commitment of all the actors and their close cooperation is necessary in order to achieve genuine linguistic and cultural pluralism.

Endnotes

¹ Available at: <http://biblio-knjazevac.org/programi-za-decu-i-mlade/macke-peru-ves-e-muce-thoven-gada> (accessed 30 March 2021).

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