

Language in the British Isles

Edited by

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Peter Bakker and Donald Kenrick

Introduction

In 1547 Andrew Borde published some sentences in a strange language, learned from people in a tavern who clearly had come from far away, under the heading 'Egipt speche'. The sentences are still understandable today to the majority of Gypsies (from 'Egyptians') or Roma in the world. It is the oldest specimen of the Romani language that has been written down (Borde's text is reproduced in Hancock (1978) and Acton & Kenrick (1984:118)).

Romani is the language spoken by the people called 'Gypsies' by outsiders. Most speakers call themselves 'Rom', plural 'Roma', which means 'human, man, husband'. The speakers call their language *Romanes*, an adverb meaning 'in the manner of a Rom', or *Romani čhib*, 'Rom tongue'. In western Europe, all Gypsies use the term *Romanes*, but not all use the term 'Roma' for their group. In Britain two names have been documented. *Kalo* was used by the Gypsies in Wales, whose language became extinct in the twentieth century, and *Romanichal* is still being used in England.

The first Roma had arrived in south-eastern Europe around the year 1200. In the following centuries they spread over Europe. By the sixteenth century virtually all countries had a population of Roma, including Great Britain. Romani finds its origins in India. Linguistic evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Romani speakers must have left India around the year 1000. They travelled as one community through Asia to south-eastern Europe, from where they spread. Most of the basic vocabulary is Indic, and so are many function words (lower numerals, prepositions, demonstratives), virtually all of the morphology (almost all of its eight case endings, person and tense marking on the verb, etc.), as well as some sounds and semantic distinctions.

The indigenous British variety of Romani with Indic grammar is now extinct in Great Britain. It was longest preserved in Wales, where it died out in the second half of the twentieth century (see Tipler 1957). It has been magnificently documented by the Liverpool librarian John Sampson

(1926). In the twentieth century immigrants from the continent have brought similar forms of Romani to Britain, such as coppersmiths speaking the Kalderash variety of Romani before World War II, and most recently immigrants from Poland, the Czech Republic and the former Soviet Union to Britain, all in all several thousand speakers.

The indigenous variety, however, does survive, but in a rather different form, called Angloromani here. It no longer uses the indigenous grammatical system but the system of local colloquial forms of English, in which Romani and some other words are embedded. The everyday language of Romanichals in England and Wales is that of the majority rural or urban community in which they live and work, i.e. English. In addition they possess a special lexis of between 200 and 1,000 words which they can use to replace the English lexemes when they want to. It no longer functions as a language of everyday communication, but it is used as a means of identification (an oral passport), and as a secret language to bypass outsiders who are listening. It is not spoken by parents to their children from birth but learnt as older children take on the work and household roles of adults.

Counting Gypsies is notoriously difficult: using a linguistic definition (Romani speakers and their descendants) or a definition based on a supposedly typical cultural trait (nomadism) will lead to widely diverging figures. It has been estimated that some 30,000 to 50,000 people lived in caravans in 2000. There are no official census data in the UK, and many Gypsies avoid discrimination by hiding their identity. There may be as many as 150,000 Travellers in the UK, more than half of them Romanichals. Romanichals fare worse in health, educational and employment statistics than the general population.

Knowledge of the Angloromani vocabulary differs from individual to individual. The language is known under several names. Speakers call it *Romnis* (= Romanes; attested in eighteenth-century Britain), *Romani*, *Pogadi Chib* (literally 'broken language'), *posh-ta-posh* 'half-and-half' or pejoratively *Pikey talk* (meaning 'tramps' talk'). Outsiders call it *Gypsy*, *Romany*/*Romani*, *Angloromani* (Hancock 1971), *Romani English* (Kenrick 1979) or *English Romani*/*Romanes*. The terms *Deep Romani* and *Puri Jib* (literally 'old language') refer to varieties with mainly non-English words/lexemes.

One could describe the language as a mixed language combining Romani vocabulary with the grammatical system of English. This type of language is not common, but it is also found among some Gypsy groups in other parts of Europe. Linguists have coined the terms 'Para-Romani' (Cortiade 1991), 'Romani mixed dialects' (Boretzky & Iglá 1994) and 'intertwined Romani' (Bakker & Mous 1994) for this type of language.

Nature of the language

Angloromani is a combination of two languages that can be combined to different extents, with a range of lexical choices. When talking to a house dweller, Romanichals have only one way of expressing themselves – English, e.g. (1) *The TV is broken*. If they are talking to other Gypsies they have two additional choices: (2) the TV is *poggerdi*; (3) the *dikkin' mokta* is *poggerdi*. Whichever one uses, the Gypsy hearer will understand, so the choice of the language or register depends on the social setting.

The English component differs from Standard English. English dialect words or obsolete forms are used. For example *I was found panj bar*, which in rural Kent dialect would be 'I was found five pound' and in Standard English 'I was fined five pounds'.

The phonology, morphology and syntax are close to rural English dialects, whereas the vocabulary is non-English. There are a few exceptions, in that some speakers preserve the Romani phoneme /x/, and some pronouns, prepositions and demonstratives from Romani are used, as well as a few bound morphemes (see Hancock 1978, 1984a).

Rather typical for Angloromani and other Romani varieties of western Europe is the formation of new words using the original genitive suffixes which agree with the following noun (the item possessed): singular in *-eskro* (masc.) or *-eskri* (fem.), e.g. *thagareskri chai* 'King's daughter'. In Angloromani these suffixes are used to create new nouns. For example *muskro* 'policeman' from *mui* 'mouth' and *rukasamengri* 'squirrel' from *rukh* 'tree'.

Trawling through books and articles one might find two to three thousand distinct words recorded in all, but the average vocabulary of a middle-aged Romanichal would be in the region of 300. The two vocabularies which Tom Wilson compiled for his children contain some 500 words, but they include some loans from Welsh, and others which clearly came from a book. It was the source for the vocabulary in Acton & Kenrick (1984).

Most of the words in Angloromani are of Indian origin through Romani, like *mush* 'man', *chavvi* 'boy', *rakli* 'girl', *thud* 'milk', *pani* 'water'. Some words come from Persian, Greek and the other shared Asian borrowings of Romani. In addition there are Romani words from European languages, for instance from Slavic languages, e.g. *pushka* 'shotgun'. Most of those are also found in other western European Romani varieties. A few words from Gammon, the language of the Irish Travellers, are used, e.g. *lemmish* 'sugar'. There are also words from the slang used by those living on the edge of society in earlier centuries, such as *kenner* 'house' (other Romani varieties have *kher*) and *kennik* 'housedweller'.

The sociologist Thomas Acton (in Acton & Kenrick 1984) has pointed out it is not just a case of replacing Romani English words by Romani words in an English sentence. There are many other ethnolectal differences in intonation and type of English involved.

Origin and history

Gypsies have been present in Britain at least since 1505. Until very recently the Romanichals have generally not been interested in putting their language on paper. Scientific interest in Britain and elsewhere dates from the late eighteenth century (Rüdiger and Grellmann in Germany, Marsden and Bryant in Britain), and that is when written records start to appear. Except for Borde in 1547, there are no publications in or on British Romani until the 1780s. A recently discovered manuscript of 1616 fills a gap. Bakker (2002) shows that already at the time that this word list was compiled, the original Romani grammatical system had been replaced by an English system. Three books on Angloromani (with some Indic Romani) appeared in the 1870s: Borrow (1874), Smart & Crofton (1875) and the controversial Leland (1874). The Gypsy Lore Society was founded in 1888. Its members collected a considerable number of vocabularies, sentences and texts in Britain and published them in their journal. These, combined with Sampson's grammar, texts and dictionary (1926) make the varieties of British Romani among the best documented of the world.

Linguists have been discussing the origin of Angloromani since the 1970s, when it was first debated at a conference in Oxford. Ian Hancock believed that the language was a conscious creation, agreed upon by representatives of English-speaking vagrants and Romani-speaking Romanichals, and he pointed to early documents describing such events. Donald Kenrick believed the language was the result of gradual disappearance of the original Indic inflection and its replacement with the English system, presumably in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century sources usually show more traces of Indic grammar, he argued, and he pointed to similar processes currently going on in Finland. Later Boretzky (1985) suggested that Angloromani and similar languages were formed when young people no longer had access to the full system of the language, and were only able to insert the most conspicuous elements (words) from the language of their parents or grandparents into the local language (English) that had become their mother tongue. This seems to be an idea that is shared by several others now, even though there is still disagreement. For discussion, see the papers in Acton & Kenrick (1984) and Bakker (2000) for the British situation, and Bakker & Cortiade (1991),

Boretzky & Igla (1994), Bakker & Mous (1994), Matras (1998) and Matras & Bakker (2003) for comparative perspectives.

Even though Angloromani has been compared with pidgins and creoles (e.g. Hancock 1970, 1976, Acton 1989), neither the social circumstances nor the structural properties of Angloromani justify this.

It is difficult to date the transition from Indic Romani to English Romani in Britain. This is partly due to lack of adequate documentation and partly due to regional variation, as most families travel only in certain regions and they may not be in contact with other families. The supposition that Indic Romani became English Romani in the eighteenth or nineteenth century is motivated by the fact that some of the speakers that Smart and Crofton worked with were able to speak both Indic and English Romani. In addition, a few rare sentences from the late 1800s (quoted in Matras (2000), who thinks they witness the transition) show both Indic and English inflections. The discovery of an early seventeenth-century document (McGowan 1996), however, shows that English Romani was already spoken in 1619, a century after the arrival of the Romanichals in Britain.

Language use

In a sense Angloromani today has the function of a register of English rather than a language acquired from birth (although it may have been a mother tongue in the past; Bakker 1998). We enumerate some of the circumstances in which it is used today in preference to English.

TRADING A small number of Romani words are used in a few trades such as horse-dealing where the professionals understand them but not the casual customer. Market traders use an exotic vocabulary which contains items derived from both Romani and Yiddish. An example is: *It's a maazel it didn't pani* 'It's lucky it didn't rain', where *maazel* 'luck' is from Yiddish and *pani* 'water' from Romani.

TEST OF IDENTITY/SELF IDENTIFICATION To say to a stranger 'I am a Romany, are you?' may get a negative or even aggressive reaction. If a Gypsy is in a café or at a car auction and wonders whether someone who looks like a Romanichal is one, then the best way to check is to slip a Romani word into the conversation. The same method can be used to test whether a stranger is likely to be friendly or hostile. Most people who mix with Romanichals have picked up a few words of the lexicon. A common word like *chavvi* 'boy' can be slipped into the conversation and the effect monitored.

The use of a Romani word can be taken a step further to mean: 'You are a Gorgio [a non-Gypsy] but I know you are friendly to Gypsies'. A caravan

dwelling Romanichal recently said to one of the present authors: *I was in a kenner but it didn't jel*, meaning: 'I was in a house but it didn't work (lit. go)'. Most likely the speaker's use of Angloromani was merely an expression of closeness and acknowledgement or recognition that the Gorgio was likely to know some basic words.

SECRECY Angloromani is not a criminal slang, although it does have the necessary words, e.g. *chor* 'to steal' and *gavver* 'policeman'. However, the vocabulary contains words – unique to Angloromani and not found in continental Romani – such as *rukasamengri* 'squirrel' or *bori bila-vangusta* 'elephant'. One cannot imagine any circumstances in which a Romanichal might want to talk secretly about either squirrels or elephants. Yet these are comparatively recent formations, not inherited from the Indian stock.

Nevertheless, some families have developed code usages of some words. Individual families use special counting systems which are different from other Gypsy families. This is especially useful when trading within the community. Possibly the word *vonger* 'money' (lit. 'coals') began as a secret word within one family, which then spread and replaced the earlier *luvva*. It is now common in English slang, like some other Romani words.

OATHS AND THREATS For example, *I'll more you* 'I'll beat you'.

SONGS There are a fair number of songs in Romany English (see Coughlain 2001), many of which are still known by Romanichals who otherwise have lost the language. This is in contrast to Gammon (see below) and Scottish Highland Travellers' Cant, which are not commonly used in songs.

WORD GAMES The use of the language as a word game is rare now. Romanichals challenge others to come up with Romani words for items not normally discussed in the language, e.g. Parliament, telephone or a signpost. For the latter, the most common answer is *pukering kosh* 'talking wood'.

EMOTION Thomas Acton (in Acton & Kenrick 1984) has reported that at wakes and wedding parties, there seemed to be a greater use of Angloromani than in normal everyday life. This is due to the emotional circumstance when members of the same family come together, so that there is again a time for Angloromani to take a foremost place.

Other forms of Traveller speech

Apart from the Pogadi Chib of the Romanichals, there are at least four other exotic vocabularies used by nomadic groups in the UK. *Gammon* is the home language of Irish Travellers (Kirk & Ó Baoill 2002). This differs in use from Angloromani in that it is used from birth with the youngest children. In the past the vocabulary was used in an Irish Gaelic framework

but now it is only used in an English framework, as few Travellers even in the Republic speak Irish fluently, if at all (Hancock 1984b). The vocabulary is partly disguised Irish, partly of unknown origin. Further there is *Lowland Cant*, used in a framework of Scots English by Scottish Travellers, and *Highland Cant*, used in a framework of Gaelic. Polari is an Italian lexicon used by circus people, and nowadays also in gay circles (Hancock 1984b, Baker 2002). Only two of these have the status of a distinct language for their speakers, Gammon and Angloromani.¹

¹ The University of Manchester has started a documentation project on Angloromani. Some speech samples can be found on the following website: http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/Research/Projects/romani/files/21_angloromani.shtml

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