Interdialect contact of Czech (and Slovak) Romani varieties

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Abstract
Diaspora and co-existence of various dialect layers within an area are general features of Romani dialect situation. Focusing on aspects of interdialect contact, the paper describes the dialect situation of Romani in Czechia and Slovakia. A basic survey is presented of historical, demographic, socio-cultural, and linguistic data about different subethnic Rom groups (the ‘Central’ Roms, the Vlax Roms, and the Sinti) in the two countries. After an analysis of the role of subethnic, kin and status particularism for linguistic contact, the determinants for various contact strategies (accommodation, bidialectism, common contact language) are identified. The difference between the basically areal patterns of Slovak Central Romani and the prevalently transplanted character of Czech Romani dialects is highlighted, and mixed varieties are briefly discussed. Finally, two types of contact between subethnic dialects with differing consequences for linguistic interference are distinguished.

Introduction
Gypsies or Roms have lived scattered in relatively small groups among the non-Rom population of Europe. In no country and no region they have formed a majority, and nowhere they have inhabited a geographically compact area, being a typical diaspora – or, according to Edwards (1988:40), non-unique, non-adjoining, and non-cohesive – ethnic minority. The maximum unit of a compact Rom speech community is constituted by a Gypsy campsite, country settlement, town quarter, street, or block. These Rom communities are embedded in geographical and socio-economic structure of the surrounding non-Rom population, which may thus be metaphorically termed the ‘matrix’ population (Hübschmannová and Neustupný 1996:90). The matrix population itself may be ethnically heterogeneous as well as homogeneous. Irrespective of the majority or minority status of the matrix ethnic group(s) within a state or region, the matrix population represents a majority in relation to Roms in terms of socio-economic and symbolic (including sociolinguistic) dominance.

Today’s distribution of Romani throughout Europe is not a result of a single migration of Rom population. Following the Roms’ arrival in Europe around the beginning of the 2nd millenium, there has been a number of migration waves from the Greek linguistic territory to the north from the 13th century on, as well as of later, including recent, re-emigrations of Roms from one country or region to another. It has been noted that due to social factors migration to a different country has often been a preferred option even for those Roms who had been settled for generations (for an explanation see Matras 2000a:32-39). The wave-like character of Rom migrations resulted in a number of layers of different subethnic Rom groups cohabiting within a country, though not necessarily within all of its regions or localities. Most of the migrations brought speakers of a new dialect, thus contributing to a formation of a diastirical dimension of Romani dialect structure in a given area (country, region, locality) as opposed to the geographical dimension. The term ‘dialect structure’ emphasizes these two
dimension of a dialect situation. It is not used here to refer to the internal linguistic structure of a variety.

The diaspora pattern and the wave-like character of Rom migrations have created a specific dialectological situation of Romani with regard to that of most other European languages. The current contribution aims at surveying the dialectological situation of Czech Romani. Since, however, a great majority of today’s Czech Roms are relatively recent immigrants from Slovakia who still maintain close social and linguistic ties with Slovak Roms, any discussion of Czech Romani must be carried out with regard to, and in comparison with, Slovak Romani.

Rom groups and Romani dialects in Czechia and Slovakia

In the area of the Czech Republic (Czechia), Romani has been spoken for at least 600 years, although it is likely that there were a number of Rom migrations through the country which have not left any trace in the current dialect stratification of Czech Romani. The number of dialect layers, of course, depends on geographical scope as well as on detail of classification. Nevertheless, it is useful to operate with four major dialect groupings: Northern Central (NC), Southern Central (SC), Vlax, and Sinti. Although identical dialect layers are nowadays represented in both countries of the former Czechoslovakia, there are significant differences in the dialect structure of Romani between Czechia and Slovakia, as well as diachronically within a country. A crucial moment was the 1942-1944 genocide of Czech Roms and the following migration of Slovak Roms into Czech borderlands (depopulated after the expulsion of Czech Germans) and industrial towns. This latest migration wave differs from the older ones in that the subethnic and dialect background of the immigrants is not uniform.

There are about 200 thousand Roms in Czechia, and about half a million Roms in Slovakia. While most Czech Roms live in towns, Slovak Roms are to a large extent rural population. In the current section, a brief description is presented of basic historical, demographic, socio-cultural, and linguistic facts about individual subethnic Rom groups in Czechia and Slovakia. The order of presentation – the ‘Central’ Roms, the Vlax Roms, and the Sinti – reflects the size of each subethnicity.

The term ‘Central Roms’ is a convenience term, which is not used by Roms themselves, and which has not been used by Romani scholars. It will be emloyed here for those Rom groups who speak, or whose ancestors spoke, the so-called Central dialects of Romani. The name of this dialect division, an established term in Romani studies, in turn derives from its geographical position with respect to other Romani dialects, i.e. it is only indirectly connected to the fact that Central Romani is spoken in Central Europe.

Coming from Slovakia, the first groups of Central Roms possibly arrived in Czechia by the end of the 16th century. Early migrations from the east are documented e.g. in Nečas (1995). Some of the Gypsies’ specific surnames suggest their ancestry to the Central Roms of pre-war Czechia. It cannot be excluded that the first attested Gypsy groups in Slovakia were direct ancestors of today’s Central Roms. Rom migrations between western Slovakia and Moravia, both voluntary and forced, were common until the end of the 19th century (e.g.
Nečas 1995:15-27, v. Sowa 1890b). Before WW2 Roms of this subethnic group considerably differed in their way of life. While itinerancy prevailed in Czechia (there were only a few stable Rom settlements in southern Moravia before WW2), the Central Roms of the former Hungarian Empire have been fully sedentary, in parts of Slovakia even for centuries.\(^1\) Blacksmithy and music-performing were their commonest traditional professions; in Czechia there were also various traders, especially horse-dealers. Today, all Central Roms are sedentary in both countries.

The way of life correlates quite well with demographic figures: The pre-war Czech Roms formed a numerically insignificant minority in Czechia, comprising only a few thousand people before their extermination; a greater part of them lived in Moravia. On the other hand, the highest concentrations of Roms are to be found in parts of eastern and southern Slovakia (the regions of Spiš, Šariš, Abov, and Gemer), where they now constitute 10 to 15% of local population. Eastern Slovakia has also been an important radiation center for Rom migrations to Northern America in the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century (cf. Hancock 1990), simultaneously with Slovak and Ruthene migrations, and especially to the more western parts of Czechoslovakia from the 1950’s on. In the 1990’s there has been a wave of small-scale Rom migrations from both Czechia and Slovakia to various Western countries (e.g. Belgium, Canada, England, or Finland). Nowadays, East Slovak Roms may be met not only in Czechia, where they constitute up to 80% of all Gypsies, but also in many towns and villages of central and western Slovakia. Only about a tenth of Central Roms in Czechia originate in the latter Slovak regions.

In some Slovak localities the ‘Easterners’ (cf. Slovak východniary, Romani vixodňára) – as the East Slovak Roms are called both by local Rom and non-Rom population – are actually the only Roms to speak Romani (e.g. in Gemerská Ves). A significant – but unknown – part of Central Roms have now completely shifted to languages of their matrix nationalities, i.e. especially Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian. Linguistic assimilation is more common in today’s Czechia and parts of southern and western Slovakia. In the early 20\(^{th}\) century, Central Romani as spoken in western parts of Czechia was gradually becoming a non-native ethnic language, acquired in late childhood and used mostly for secretive purposes (cf. Lesný 1916:214-216, Lípa 1960:50). Clearly, a development had started towards a Para-Romani variety, i.e. a specialized non-native variety spoken by Roms, which has the grammar of a matrix language as well as an access to Romani-derived lexicon (e.g. Matras 1998). The Nazi genocide in the 1940’s brought about radical death (cf. Campbell & Muntzen 1989:183) of all Romani dialects of pre-war Czechia, including Central Romani.

Although the culture of sedentary Central Roms is very similar in all regions of the former Hungarian Empire, there are two distinct dialect groups. The NC group is a dialect continuum that covers much of Slovakia (western, north-central, and eastern regions), southeastern Poland, and western Ukraine. Significantly, the dialects of the Central Roms in pre-war Czechia also belonged to this group. The SC dialects occupy the area of southwestern and south-central Slovakia, northern and western parts of Hungary, eastern Austria, and northeastern Slovenia. Speakers of SC – or, more accurately, of its non-Vendic or Northern subbranch (Elšík et al. 1999) – must have reached Slovakia later, perhaps even centuries later,
than the speakers of NC. This is indicated by the closer location of SC Romani area to the Balkan radiation centre of Rom migrations, as well as by a number of linguistic innovations shared with certain Balkan dialects of Romani (cf. Boretzky 1999).

A few comments on terminology are in order here. The SC dialects of Slovakia have been termed ‘Hungarian’ Romani in the 20th century Czechoslovak linguistics, while the NC dialects have been called ‘Slovak-Czech’ (e.g. Lipa 1965:8) or, with regard to dialects of Slovakia only, ‘Slovak’ Romani (e.g. Lipa 1979:51, Hübenschmanová et al. 1991:5). Thus dialectological units within Romani have been assigned labels based on ethnonyms of the matrix nationalities. Double motivation may be discovered behind this matrix-based terminology: Firstly, in Slovakia there is a partial correspondence between the areas where SC Romani and Hungarian are spoken, respectively, as well as between the NC Romani area and the area of Slovak as native language. This correspondence, however, is merely accidental, and has been recognized as such (Lípa 1979:52, cf. also 1965:6).

Secondly, and more importantly, Roms themselves make use of matrix-based attributes in referring to their own or a different sedentary group. However, the distribution of various matrix-based ethnonyms does not correspond to the dialectological division between SC and NC. Consequently, the terms such as ‘Slovak Romani’ should be avoided in Romani dialectology (Elšík et al. 1999:279), if used in any other sense than ‘Romani of Slovakia’ and the like. For instance, the Central Roms of Selice/Sókszelőce/Šôka, a southern Slovak village with Hungarian majority, are called, and call themselves, ‘Hungarian Roms’. The Roms of Mojmirovce, a 14 kilometers distant village with Slovak majority, speak an almost identical variety of SC Romani; these, however, use the ethnonym ‘Slovak Roms’. The example thus illustrates that it is basically the matrix population and the principal non-Romani language of the Rom group in question, that determine which matrix-based ethnonym will be used as a subclassificatory attribute. Those Roms who speak Hungarian as their second language (and, consequently, have more Hungarian items in their Romani), as well as those for whom Hungarian is a native language, are usually called ungrika (ungrike) Roma ‘Hungarian Roms’ or simply Ungri ‘Hungarians’ by other groups of Central Roms. A parallel situation holds with the ‘Slovak Roms’, i.e. Slovak bilinguals or those who have completely shifted to Slovak (there is a plethora of synonymous terms, e.g. servike, slovačika, slovaňika, slovenska Roma, according to a variety).

To sum up, the dialectological division between SC and NC does not correspond to any synchronic ethnic subdivision among the Central Roms. What is more important, neither does the use of the matrix-based attributes. That is to say, in Slovakia there is no group of Hungarian Roms as opposed to Slovak Roms on a global level. Instead, there are only local differences in subgroup identity, and probably a continuum of local identities within a superordinate identity of being a long-settled ‘Central’ Rom (whatever this implies in terms of social structure and culture). Bilingualism pattern or, for that matter, native language, certainly play an important role in the construction of local subgroup identity, but they are not the only factor (see below). As far as objective similarity and subjective identification are concerned, there may be, for example, a stronger bond between groups of related or neighbouring Hungarian-bilingual and Slovak-bilingual Roms respectively, than between two
distant groups of Slovak Roms. A different dialect or a different matrix-based ethnonym may be a sign of otherness, but the same dialect and the same ethnonym do not automatically assert sameness. Finally, many Central Roms of Czechia have accepted a new identity specification: they now identify as ‘Czech’ Roms in the same sense as their ancestors considered themselves as ‘Slovak’ or ‘Hungarian’ Roms (Hübschmannová 1995:191).

While all Central Roms refer to themselves as Rom, in Romani and frequently in the matrix languages as well, there are no indigenous subgroup autonyms. It should be noted that in the function of autonyms the matrix-based attributes are only secondary, if they are accepted at all. Questions about identity specification are usually answered by statements like “we are simply Roms but, if you insist [on an attribute], then ...” (Elšík et al. 1999:279). The most widespread exonym used by members of other Rom subethnicities contains the ethnonym for a ‘Hungarian’. The term Rumungro (< Rom plus Ungro ‘Hungarian’) is used by Vlax Roms to refer to settled Roms of the former Hungarian Empire, including those of Slovakia (and now also their descendents in Czechia). Although the recent trend is to accept the Vlax exonym, it is still mostly perceived as pejorative. The acceptance is partly triggered by the need to provide a subgroup autonym in the situation of increasing international contacts with Roms of other groups (Hübschmannová p.c.). Interestingly, an analogical term, ‘Hungarians’, was in use among the Czech Sinti (v. Sowa 1890a:142). There, however, it referred to the itinerant Czech Roms (v. Sowa 1891), perhaps because of their later migration from the Hungarian Empire. On the other hand, the itinerant Polish Roms, who are called Rumungri by Polish Lovari (Matras 1999a:25), were probably never based in the Empire. Note that the motivation for the matrix-based ethnonyms as they are used by the Vlax Roms and Sinti is independent of the principal second language of the group to which it refers.

Another recurrent ethnonym is based on the ethnonym for a ‘Pole’. The Czech Kalderaš called the itinerant Bohemian Roms Poleako (Lipa 1965:56-57), and an identical ethnonym is used by Kalderaš in Russia for itinerant Russian Roms (Demeter & Demeter 1990:121). This would indicate that the term has been used by newcomers from the south to established itinerant Rom groups. However, in Slovakia Poláko (Pojáko) is employed by SC Roms to refer to the sedentary NC Roms who live immediately north of them (e.g. in Zahorie, Myjava, and Nové Mesto regions in western Slovakia, or in Rimavská Pila in central Slovakia). Nevertheless, the NC speakers were possibly still itinerant at the time of immigration to Slovakia of the SC Roms. Nowadays, the exonym implies a lower social status, and there are instances where it has changed its referent: e.g. in the Slovak Danube region, Pojáko in the speech of the wealthier Central Roms is a derogatory name for the Vlax Roms (Elšík et al. 1999:280).

Speakers of the Northern Vlax dialects, i.e. Kalderaš, Lovari, and related varieties, now constitute a dialect layer in most countries of Europe and America. Their dispersal outside of today’s Rumania is often thought to have occurred in the second half of the 19th century after the abolition of Gypsy slavery/serfdom in Valachia and Moldavia. However, it is likely that the Lovari and related groups actually originate in Transylvania (e.g. Achim 1998); they might have arrived in Slovakia decades earlier. The presence of the Kalderaš in Czechia is attested in the second half of the 19th century (cf. Lipa 1965:56) but it is unlikely that there
had ever been more than a few families of Vlax Roms before the WW2. Most, if not all, of the Vlax speakers in today’s Czechia – who count twenty thousand and form about 10% of Czech Roms – have come from Slovakia and speak Lovari-related varieties. They mostly dwell in cities, especially Prague and Ostrava. In Slovakia they live both in towns and rural settlements, prevalently in the south and the east of the country (e.g. the Danube lowland, Nitra region, Tekov, Novohrad, southwestern Gemer, Košice, and Prešov). While the Czech Kalderaš, kettle-makers by profession, settled just before the WW2, the other Vlax Roms were sedentarized by force in 1959. Their commonest traditional profession was horse-dealing; today they are mostly car-dealers, traders, and pedlars. The Czech and the Slovak Vlax Roms keep clan ties with each other as well as with Lovari groups outside of the former Czechoslovakia. Romani is still a vital language of their everyday communication.

The Vlax Roms use the autonym Rom. Most of those who live in Czechia and Slovakia have abandoned – or perhaps never used – the professionym Lovari ‘horse-dealer’, which some closely related groups (e.g. in Hungary, Austria, and Poland) employ as a more specific, secondary autonym. Instead, clan names (e.g. Bougeští, Joveští, Louleští, Mačkeští, Penkoští) are used to distinguish various subgroups. The most common exonym, which is employed both by the Central Roms (cf. Vlaxos, Vlaho) and the matrix population, derives from an old name for Rumanians. The term has also been adopted by scholars, although some (e.g. Lipa 1965) still use the traditional ‘Rumanian’ Gypsies.

It should be noted that not all Gypsies of Rumanian origin are Romani speakers. In a few places in southern Slovakia (e.g. Stretavka near Michalovce, Horné Zelenice near Trnava, the Levice region) there are Rumanian speaking groups of Rom ancestry, who are considered to be Gypsies by both the matrix population and the other Rom groups but who themselves claim Rumanian ethnicity. These groups are referred to as ‘Rumanian’ Roms – and according to Marušiaková (1988:60) also Beáši or Balajára – by other Roms. The attribute ‘Rumanian’ is not used for Vlax speakers by any Rom group.

It is not unlikely that SINTI are descendants of the first, 15th century, Rom migration to western Europe (Halwachs 1999:120), especially Germany. Their continuous presence in Czechia might be of a later date, although they probably constituted the first Rom subethnic group to become established in the country. The Czech Sinti, mostly horse-dealers, musicians, and entertainers, were based prevalently in the German-speaking areas of Czechia, especially in northern Bohemia. Before the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, and possibly until WW2, they were free to cross the borders with Saxony and Prussia to practise their itinerant occupations, and there has always been interaction between the Czech and the German Sinti (v. Sowa 1890a:139). A group of Czech Sinti who, in the 19th century, left Bohemia for Germany are now mostly based in Cologne and Hildesheim (Holzinger 1993:9). The minority of the Czech Sinti who survived the WW2 were forced to sedentarize in 1959. Nowadays, only a couple of Sinti families live in Czechia, mostly in towns (e.g. Brno, Olomouc), some of them keeping their family ties with Sinti in Germany (Hübschmannová 1995:190). In Slovakia small Sinti groups have been sporadically reported in western, northwestern, and eastern Slovakia. As is the case of Austrian and Hungarian Sinti (Fennesz-Juhasz et al.

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1996:72; Hutterer 1990:87) they probably arrived from Germany and/or Czechia only in the late 19th century.

The Central European Sinti-speaking Gypsies refer to themselves by the name Sinto (Cinto), which has no clear etymology, and may be a deliberate cryptical creation (Matras 1999b:110-112). This name has become the main autonym, supplementing or substituting an earlier autonym Kalo, literary ‘black’, and the original Rom. Both Sinto and Rom are attested in Czech Sinti (v. Sowa 1893a:454-455). Also Roms of other subethnicities – provided they know about the existence of this group at all – usually refer to Sinti by the new ethnonym, in a form adapted to their respective dialects (e.g. East Slovak Sintos). The 19th century Sinti outmigrants from Bohemia to Germany are called Lalere ‘the mute ones’ by the established German Sinti (Holzinger 1993:9, Wolf 1987:137); this ethnonym derives from the Sinti name for Czechs and Czechia (v. Sowa 1902:48). Researches have mostly called the Sinti ‘German’ Gypsies, and their dialect ‘German’ Romani.

Finally, the political and economic changes in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the series of Balkan wars in the last years of the 20th century brought about a new wave of Rom refugees and seasonal traders to many countries of Western Europe (cf. Matras 2000a), and in significantly lesser numbers, to Czechia and Slovakia. Most of the recent, often temporary, immigrants to the latter countries have come from, or are still based in, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, almost nothing is known about their subethnic identity and dialect background. There is probably no significant social and linguistic contact between them and the established local Roms. Scarce evidence suggests that sedentary Roms in Slovakia do not use Romani in interaction with the Rumanian Rom traders.

**Sociolinguistic aspects of intergroup contact**

Obviously, for interdialect contact to occur, Roms of different subethnicity, or Roms from different localities and regions, must speak to each other. Contact between different groups is made possible by their coexistence within a certain geographical area. On the other hand, serious hindrances of intergroup contact derive from attitudes of social distance between individual Rom groups, both on the level of clearly defined subethnicity and on a more local level. Calling this phenomenon ‘tribal particularism’, Boretzky (1995:70) explains it as a consequence of a lack of common political institutions or common ideology after the spread of Roms throughout Europe. Hübschmannová (1972, 1999:119-124) considers it to be a heritage of the Indian jāti system. According to her theory, the Rom particularism continues the subcontinental pattern of socio-economically unselfcontained kin/profession groups, though without the ideological framework of Hinduism. Marušíaková (1988) has documented some attitudinal manifestations of the Rom particularism in Slovakia, noting that this phenomenon exceeds a natural local suicentrism.

Particularism is strongest between different subethnic Rom groups. Traditionally there is strict endogamy, significant differences in the way of life, and a lack of common social and cultural events. Basically, then, it is only exchange of goods and services, and recent artificial or even forced cohabitation within urban ghettos, that make any interdialect contact possible. In Czechia and Slovakia, endogamy still prevails between the major groups, i.e. the Central
Roms, the Vlax Roms, and the Sinti. Intergroup marriages are even less common than Rom-Rom marriages (Marušiaková 1988:69). However, there are local differences with regard to the strictness of this norm. For example, marriages between Central Roms and Sinti are reported from northwestern Slovakia (where the former probably settled only relatively recently), and there are localities in eastern Slovakia where Central and Vlax Roms intermarry quite commonly (Hübischmannová 1999:119). In Czechia, survivors of WW2 often married the Central Rom newcomers from Slovakia, having mostly accommodated to their speech. On the other hand, similar way of life as a factor favouring intergroup contact should not be overestimated. Especially itinerant Roms, drawing on more elaborate internal hierarchies (Marušiaková 1988), tended to avoid the territory of competing clans of similar professions, and thus there was little chance for linguistic contact.

On the whole, contacts between different Rom subethnic groups in Czechia and Slovakia are increasing in modern times, due to institutional encounters of political and intelectual elites and, more importantly, due to gradual relaxing of the particularistic norms. It may be assumed that both the real differences and the attitudinal particularism was stronger in the past, and that linguistic contacts were scarcer when the individual groups came to live next to each other. The intergroup particularism contributed to the maintenance of clearly distinguished dialect layers of Romani in the same way as the ecological and especially social isolation of Rom communities from the matrix population contributed to the maintenance of the language (e.g. Hübischmannová 1976b:331, Lipa 1979:54) for many centuries of Roms’ European diaspora.

The most important social factor inhibiting intergroup contact within a certain subethnicity is the stereotypicized status of a community or a clan, which is based on the concepts of ritual purity and professional prestige. This sort of status is important both with the Central and the Vlax Roms (e.g. Hübischmannová 1993:22-23, Lakatošová 1994:4). Since differences in status are correlated with endogamy and rules of commensality, they have a bearing on the frequency of social contacts and, indirectly, on the intensity of interdialect contacts. Nevertheless there seem to exist no avoidance strategies as far as verbal communication itself is concerned. An exception is the institution of excommunication in the groups of the Vlax Roms, the Sinti, and also the pre-war Czech Roms. Members of a community must avoid any, including verbal, contact with the excommunicated person (e.g. Knobloch 1950:235-236). Excommunication, however, is individual, and cannot be considered a significant factor in inhibiting linguistic contact. Unfortunately, no research has been carried out on linguistic variation between different status groups. The impression is that there are no linguistic differences other than geographical ones between Central Rom communities of differing social status (Hübischmannová and Neustupný 1996:93). Minor differences seem to exist between dialects of various Vlax clans; these, however, probably also reflect their varying geographical background.

Another manifestation of the Rom particularism is an ethnocentric perception of dialect variation within Romani. It has been noted (e.g. Boretzky 1995:70, Hübischmannová and Neustupný 1996:97-99) that speakers stereotypically consider their own variety to be the most correct or the most beautiful of all. Whereas Boretzky (1995:72) claims that prestige
differences between Romani dialects of the former Yugoslavia are negligible, in Czechia and
Slovakia certain prestige of Vlax Romani in the eye of Central Roms is observable. This
might be surprising at first sight, given the significantly lower number of Vlax Roms and the
fact that they are often considered to be of a lower social status by Central Roms. However,
we have to deal here with a special kind of sociolinguistic prestige, which might be termed
puristic. The Vlax Roms retain a number of cultural features and institutions as well as, until
recently, the itinerant way of life, which were lost by the Central Roms a long time ago but
which, at the same time, are considered by them to represent the genuine Rom tradition. By
transfer, the Central Roms often consider the language of the Vlax Roms to be the purest
dialect (e.g. Lípa 1979:55). As a consequence of this linguistic ideology, the numerous
Rumanian loanwords in Vlax Romani are sometimes thought to be indigenous (Lípa
1979:55), unlike the Hungarian, Slovak or Czech loans in their own dialects, which the
Central Roms mostly recognize as such. The latter are also frequently a target of puristic
selfcriticism. Indeed, Vlax Rumanianisms such as *luma* ‘world’ or *žutin-* ‘to help’ occur as
neologisms in Central Romani, especially in the speech of elites and in written publications

Apart from economic contacts, which are little affected by the Rom particularism,
regular socio-cultural and kinship contacts are traditionally limited to groups of an identical
subethnicity and a similar social status. For the settled Central Roms, fairs, pilgrimages,
weddings, funerals and similar events are, traditionally, the most important occasions to meet
people from outside their own locality, exchange information, and search for potential
partners. These events contribute to feature diffusion within closely related varieties.
Hübschmannová et al. (1991:5) observe that, in the traditional rural setting, the radius of
regional contact was a couple of dozens kilometers. Nowadays, such events are also attended
by members of an extended family from more distant regions, even from the other country of
the former Czechoslovakia. This contributes to the maintenance of socio-cultural as well as
linguistic ties between Central Roms of Czechia and Slovakia.

The traditional marriage pattern, still prevailing among Roms of most groups including
those of Czechia and Slovakia, is that the wife moves into the household of her husband’s
parents, where she is expected to learn the family’s dialect and speak it to the children
(Boretzky 1995:71). Traditionally, in order to achieve accommodation to family habits, the
girl could move to her future partner’s household as a child, years before the actual start of a
sexual relationship. This practice, in effect, contributed to greater linguistic accommodation
of newcomers to a community, and ensured a relative stability of the community’s dialect. On
the whole, however, it is clear that marriage between Roms from different communities
favours diffusion of linguistic features, especially dialect indicators.

Trudgill (1986: 24) observes that if dialects in contact are heteronomous with respect to
different standards (i.e. when the speakers relate to a different standard), the choice might be
to become bidialectal rather than to start to change the native dialect through accommodation.
The same appears to occur with Romani dialects which are significantly different in structure.
First, bidialectism is the norm in contact of speakers from different subethnic groups (while
semicommunication is less common between members of regionally well established groups).
Here, patterns of exposure to the other’s dialect, essentially derived from the number of speakers (e.g. Boretzky 1995:72, Chambers and Trudgill 1980:182-204), contribute most to various asymmetries. Thus Vlax Roms in Slovakia, as a rule, learn the dialect of the more numerous Central Roms in a given locality or region but not vice versa. Similarly, it has been noted that Slovak Sinti, the numerically smallest group, knew some Vlax as well as Central Romani (Lípa 1979:56), whereas the Czech Sinti claimed that they hardly understood the dialect of the Bohemian Central Roms (v. Sowa 1890a:142). Second, bidialectism might result from dialect contact within a subethnic group, for example, as a consequence of marriage. Provided the couple’s native dialects differ considerably (or, more accurately, if they are perceived so), the wife’s continuing contact with her old family leads to bidialectism, rather than to mere accommodation. Here, however, bidialectism tends to be an individual phenomenon. Thus, for example, a Rom woman from southwestern Slovakia (with a variety of SC as her native dialect) started to speak a variety of NC after she had moved to Prague and married a Rom from eastern Slovakia. At the same time, as the husband’s variety belonged to the most widespread dialect cluster in Czechia, she spoke it even outside of her new family and used it in her literary work. However, after her husband passed away, she partially switched back to her native dialect, which was now influenced by the one she had used most of her life.

Alternative accounts of collective asymmetrical bidialectism, other than those based on number of speakers, have also been offered. Lípa (1979:55) explains the Vlax-Central pattern in Slovakia by the fact that Slovak Vlax Roms actively control acquisition of their in-group language by outsiders. In other words, he suggests that they exercise a strategy of acquisitional negative accommodation (Rijkhoff 1998:59). However, our Vlax consultants do not confirm that such a strategy is actually part of socio-cultural norms of the group; rather it is likely to be a mere by-product of the group’s closed social network. On the other hand, conscious employment of an in-group language as a secret variety in the presence of non-Roms is actually often the case with speakers of Romani dialects of western Europe (cf. Matras 1998, Bakker 1999), including Sinti and possibly the Central Romani of pre-war Bohemia. An observation by v. Sowa (1890a:141) suggests that this strategy had not been common among the Czech Sinti before it was introduced from the west towards the end of the 19th century. Moreover, negative accommodation need not be applied with the same rigour towards Roms (of other subethnic groups) as to non-Roms.

In general, the degree of exposure to the others’ dialect, which may exhibit considerable structural as well as lexical differences (e.g. Central vs. Vlax, and especially each of these vs. Sinti), is crucial for understanding. However, interdialect intelligibility also partly manifests the ideology of Rom particularism. It is the subjective component of intelligibility, the willingness to understand (e.g. Trudgill 1986:24), that is subject to ideological influences. Two extreme responses, as well as anything in-between, were often elicited from speakers in the same community (or even from an identical speaker in different contexts) when intelligibility of one and the same Romani dialect was investigated: “I understand it perfectly – it’s Romani after all, isn’t it” or “I don’t understand a word of it – they speak a completely different language”. Provided the dialect of the other Roms is understood, imitations and
descriptions of how the latter speak focus on lexical differences and real or stereotypicized paralinguistic phenomena (such as intonation, speed rate of speech etc.), while grammatical features are rarely mentioned.

Apart from accommodation of one’s native dialect and bidialectism, one more strategy may be applied in contact of various Rom groups: recourse can be made to a common contact language. Boretzky (1995:71) argues that this strategy is employed when the dialects of the groups in contact are considerably different, especially with regard to lexicon, and when, at the same time, the speakers have no experience with the others’ dialect. One should add that degree of proficiency in one’s native dialect might also be a factor. There are no up-to-date quantitative data on language shift to the matrix languages in either Czechia or Slovakia (but cf. Hübschmannová 1976b), nor much is known about how frequently, and in which situations, Czech, Slovak, or Hungarian are used between different groups of Czech and Slovak Roms. It should be kept in mind that the assimilatory ideology of the communist state politics toward Roms might be involved in Lípa’s (e.g. 1965:9) reports that the matrix-language strategy is actually very common in intergroup contacts.

**Dialectological aspects of intergroup contact**

Any research of Romani interdialect contact in Czechia and Slovakia is seriously impeded by a lack of descriptive data, especially on Sinti and Vlax and, to a lesser extent, on SC. The best documented dialect group is NC. Within this group East Slovak Romani, a cluster of varieties originally spoken in eastern Slovakia, has received most attention in recent decades (e.g. Lípa 1963, Hübschmannová 1973, 1976a, et al. 1991, Šebková and Îlnayová 1998, but cf. already Ihnátko 1877), as it is the native language of a majority of Slovak and Czech Roms. Reliable descriptions exist for a variety spoken in western Slovakia (v. Sowa 1887, 1888-92) and for the dialect of a group of the Bohemian Central Roms (Puchmayer 1821). A variety of pre-war Moravian Romani is attested in a few texts (Daniel 1944, Mann 1936, 1947), and there is a brief analysis of another Moravian variety (v. Sowa 1893b). Publications on any NC dialect of northwestern or central Slovakia are absent. Elšík et al. (1999) is a basic description of Slovak SC dialects. The only published specimens of Czech Sinti were recorded in the German-speaking northwest of Bohemia (v. Sowa 1890a, 1893a), and Lípa (1965:57) gives a short paragraph of the speech of a Sinto born in eastern Slovakia. Holzinger (1993) contains comparative notes on the dialect of the Lalere Sinti in Germany. Finally, there is no description of Czech or Slovak Vlax Romani. Although the dictionary by Berky et al. (1996) contains Vlax items, they are not distinguished from the main corpus of Central Romani words. While publications in SC and Vlax dialects are rare, there are none in Czech or Slovak Sinti.

The linguistic distinctness of the four dialect groups – i.e. NC, SC, Sinti, and Vlax – is a consequence of separate migration waves and not, for example, of linguistic divergence in situ. This is absolutely clear for the Sinti vs. NC and Vlax vs. NC/SC divisions, since there are significant clusters of both grammatical and lexical differences. However, there may be some doubts concerning the NC vs. SC division, especially if one takes into account the cultural similarity and ethnic identity of the Slovakia’s Central Roms. Nevertheless, the NC
vs. SC isoglosses form a strong and relatively focused cluster (Elšík et al. 1999). The differences are of all sorts: phonological (e.g. SC \( s > h, dz > z \)) , morpho-phonological (e.g. loss of final \( s \) and \( n \) in SC, palatalizations and dejotations in NC), morphological (e.g. remoteness marker NC -as vs. SC -ahi, indefiniteness marker vare- vs. vala-, copula av- vs. ov-, reflexive peskero vs. pro, feminine article e vs. i, kaha vs. kasaha ‘with whom’); no special inflection for borrowed adjectives in SC, use of Slavic aktionsart prefixes with inherited verbs in NC), lexicophonetic (e.g. NC avil-/avl- vs. SC āl- ‘came’, baxt vs. bast ‘luck’, dīves vs. dive ‘day’, keci vs. keći ‘how much’, lav vs. alav ‘word’, oxtos vs. oftoso ‘8’, prindžar- vs. pindžar- ‘be acquainted’, vast vs. va ‘hand’, tajs vs. tāha ‘tomorrow’, or žūzo vs. šužo ‘clean’), and lexical (e.g. NC ambroļ vs. SC kruška ‘pear’, čhon vs. masek ‘month’, skamind vs. kafidi ‘table’, šargo vs. žuto ‘yellow’).

Within these two groups, the Slovak Central dialects form geographical dialect continua, with gradual transitions between neighbouring varieties. As long as there is no natural boundary such as mountain ranges, immediately neighbouring varieties differ only in details. In this sense they are what Boretzky (1998:1-2) called ‘average areal dialects’. Only the spread of East Slovak Roms to other parts of Slovakia has recently confused the picture a little bit. Nevertheless, it is still well possible to draw neat isoglossic maps of the established dialects. The regular areal patterns of NC and SC Romani are likely to have resulted both from geographical diffusion of linguistic features through long-term interdialect contact, and from gradual short-distance diffusion of speakers, whose demographic growth compelled them to search for new markets for their services. Considering that, in Slovakia, the Central Roms live in every second locality on the average, and in almost every locality in most regions (Seznam 1969), the dialectological nets of NC and SC Romani are practically as dense as those of Slovak and Hungarian (even if one takes into account the blind spots of linguistically assimilated localities). We do not know whether the Vlax dialects constitute a similar isoglossic net in Slovakia.

The areal character of the SC dialects of Slovakia has been documented in Elšík et al.’s (1999) comparative study of two dozens of local varieties. The NC case is somewhat more problematic. The NC continuum used to extend over to Czechia before WW2 (as it still does to Poland and Ukraine), the Czech Central Romani being very similar to NC dialects of western Slovakia. It is the Czech/West Slovak vs. Central/East Slovak ‘bipartition’ that incited Boretzky (1998:17) to express reservations regarding the areal character of the NC dialects. Although the similarity between West Slovak and Central Slovak varieties is exceptionally great, there does seem to occur an isoglossic cluster (Elšík et al. 1999:278). The significance of this cluster needs to be investigated, but my impression (based on unpublished fieldwork data) is that the term ‘rough’ dialect continuum would do justice to the west-east ‘bipartition’ of NC Romani. In any case, the dialectological situation of both Central dialect groups in Slovakia is not anything close to Boretzky’s insular dialects.

Insular dialects, such as most Romani dialects of the Balkans, do not show gradual transitions with respect to other varieties of the language (Boretzky 1998:2-5). It is not the case that coexistence of various subethnic groups and different dialect strata within an area implies an insular character of the dialects involved. It is rather long-distance migrations of
speakers of a certain dialect, such as the one of the East Slovak Roms to other regions of Slovakia, that leads – through disruption of the dialect’s original geographical link with its most closely related varieties, and entering an area where less closely related varieties are spoken – to a ‘non-areal’ pattern. Nevertheless, the East Slovak Romani of western Slovakia, unlike the Balkan Romani dialects, can in a synchronic context be ‘put back’ in space and time to its origo in a dialectological net. In this sense, it can still be conceived of as a displaced areal dialect rather than a proper insular dialect.

This is also the case of the Romani dialects of post-war Czechia, which all result from recent long-distance migrations from Slovakia. The difference is that the displaced dialects in Czechia are not mere spots on a basically well-behaved dialectological net. On the contrary, Czech Romani varieties are almost all transplanted dialects, and consequently no reasonable research may be attempted using the methods of dialect geography. Roms who themselves, or whose immediate ancestors, originate in dozens of Slovak localities, and who speak a number of Romani dialects (or other languages), have been brought to live together within a town or a neighbourhood. Dialect mixing has been observed to occur among closely related varieties (e.g. those of East Slovak Romani), and certain degree of focusing of the newly arisen dialects within local communities may be assumed. However, it is likely that the fifty years, since the Rom migrations from Slovakia have started, has not been enough for interdialects on a more global level to be created. Unfortunately, no research has been undertaken on dialect mixing in Czechia. On the other hand, there is evidence of dialect mixing in Slovakia. Contrary to Boretzky’s (1998:13) assumption that there are no transitional zones between SC and NC, mixed dialects do occur.

The Central mixed dialects (Elšík et al. 1999) are located immediately to the north of typical SC dialects, and there is still a focused isogloss cluster differentiating the former from the latter. While various SC features have diffused deep into the NC area, the opposite is not the case: NC innovations (e.g. certain palatalizations, 3rd person root jo-) affect only a couple of ‘frontier’ SC varieties. The mixed dialects all show a number of important NC features (e.g. phonemes x and dz, palatalizations, final n, 3rd person root jo-, extensive use of Slavic prefixes, or remoteness marker -as), but they vary in the amount and character of SC features. Apart from individual words with SC lexicophonetic peculiarities, a number of morphological features have been borrowed (e.g. patterns in reflexive pronouns and adjective inflection, forms of definite article, copula and modal particles, indefiniteness and superlative markers, or final s deletion). Variation of grammatical forms is common (e.g. accusative masculine -e alongside -eš < *-es in a mixed dialect, cf. NC -es, SC -e), and so are fudged forms (e.g. dive ‘day’ with palatalization as in NC dives but no final s as in SC dive, or vale- ‘some-’, a contamination of NC vare- and SC vala-). There are also instances of mixed morphological patterns: while the NC dialects distinguish inflection of indigenous and borrowed adjectives, the SC do not; a certain mixed variety behaves like NC in the singular but like SC in the plural. All this suggests that the mixed Central dialects are underlying NC dialects affected by diffusion of SC features. The prevailing direction of diffusion may be connected to migratory dynamics in the past, with the SC newcomers arriving from the south.
Very little is known about Central-Sinti, Central-Vlax, and Sinti-Vlax interference through immediate intergroup contact. There are apparently no specifically Central features in the available Sinti data. As for Vlax, one finds the Central 2nd singular preterit suffix -al in Bougešti. It has replaced an original -an, still kept, for example, in other varieties of Slovak Vlax (Lipa 1965:39) and in most Lovari-type dialects of other countries. Importantly, the innovation is confined to those Vlax dialects which had come into close contact with Central dialects. In the Central dialects little Vlax influence can be detected. There are only a few recent lexical loans, both puristic (see above) and argotic: e.g. mothodi ‘absence from work’ in East Slovak Romani must derive from the Vlax verb mothov- ‘speak’. The direction of interference, i.e. Central to Vlax, corresponds to predictions based on demographic factors. The indefinite či ‘nothing’ in the dialect of the Bohemian – but not Moravian (Vymazal 1900:1) – Central Roms of pre-war Czechia is probably a loan from Sinti. It is possible that in pre-war Bohemia the Sinti were actually more numerous than the Central Roms. On the whole, our scarce evidence shows that subethnic particularism really inhibits any significant interdialect interference through immediate intergroup contact.

Nevertheless, there is another type of contact that involves different subethnic dialects. Innovations may be diffused over wide areas, affecting more than one dialect group. In this type of interdialect contact, even those varieties are affected whose speakers do not actually get in touch with speakers of the group in which the innovation originates. There are a number of instances of a northwestern diffusion from Northern Vlax to NC and beyond: e.g. the future in -a, demonstratives in k_d- (cf. Matras 1999a:22, 2000b:11-15), or the indefiniteness marker vare- ‘some-‘. The Vlax change tikno > cikno ‘small’ has affected only the easternmost NC dialects, which corresponds to the original location of Vlax in today’s Rumania. Some features have diffused from Sinti to NC: e.g. the aspiration in interrogatives (e.g. sar > har ‘how’, soske > hoske ‘why’) affected not only Czech Romani but also West Slovak dialects (cf. Matras 1999c). Other innovations have come from the north or northeast of the NC area: e.g. the prothesis in the 3rd person pronoun o- > jo-, common to most NC dialects; or grast > graj ‘horse’, which has only affected East Slovak Romani. Finally, taking into account that there are no Hungarian lexemes in Sinti, the numeral izero, sero ‘thousand’ may be a result of diffusion from the Central Romani dialects, rather than a direct borrowing from Hungarian.

Conclusion

Despite close historical connections between Czech and Slovak Roms, the dialect situation of Romani is very different in each country. In Slovakia, an areal pattern has developed in the dialects of the long-settled Central Roms, with gradual transitions and regular geographical diffusion of features through population expansion and social and cultural contact. In Czechia, on the other hand, most varieties are recently transplanted dialects with no areal transitions; mixed dialects are probably formed only on the level of individual Rom communities. The long established Romani dialects of pre-war Czechia, which might have patterned areally to some extent, have undergone radical death after the genocide of their speakers. In connection to an internal disintegration and ongoing external
integration of the communities of today’s Czech Central Roms, language shift to a matrix language is much more common in Czechia. The reasons for significant language-shift differences between Slovak regions need to be investigated.

Linguistic contact between the most numerous Central Roms and the other subethnicities, the Vlax Roms and the Sinti, is inhibited by strong particularistic norms that regulate mutual attitudes and interaction. While interference between dialects of different subethnicities who cohabit within a region is rare, linguistic evidence shows that, on a more global level, features easily diffuse between adjacent subethnic dialects. Given the subethnic particularism, these developments are difficult to explain in sociolinguistic terms. Perhaps differing length of contact is responsible for the different outcomes of these two types of subethnic interaction.

Although ethnic identity frequently coincides with dialectological criteria, this is by no means necessary. In case of the settled Central Roms of Slovakia, there is a continuum of local group identities but a clear division into two adjacent dialect groups. As a consequence of cultural similarities and relatively unrestricted contact between their speakers, the linguistic distinctiveness between NC and SC has been diminished through creation of a variety of mixed transitional dialects in contact areas. Some distinctions in local group identity may be reflected in subclassificatory ethnonyms based on terms of matrix nationalities and languages. Different matrix-based ethnonyms do not necessarily coincide with differences in dialect, and they do not constitute a global subethnic division.

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**Notes**

1 In parts of northwestern Slovakia (e.g. Kysuce) there were semi-itinerant grinders and tinkers both among Central Roms and pauperized Slovaks. It is possible that the Rom itinerancy is secondary in this region.

2 However, Marušiaková (1988) placed the Vlax Roms over the Central Roms in a hierarchy which is based on internal subgroup cohesion, cultural conservativism, stereotypicized economic status, stereotypicized colour of complexion, as well as on asymmetries in commensality patterns and proclaimed interest in the other groups.

3 The opposite is true in Hungary, where speakers of Vlax clearly prevail over speakers of Central Romani. Even complete dialect shift from Central Romani to Vlax is reported there.
Ješina (1886) is a plagiarized description of Czech Romani, which actually mixes Sinti with Bohemian Central Romani. He copies Puchmayer (1821) for Bohemian Romani, and his source on the former dialect is itself a copy of a description of Sinti as spoken in western Germany (cf. Wolf 1987:40-43).

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