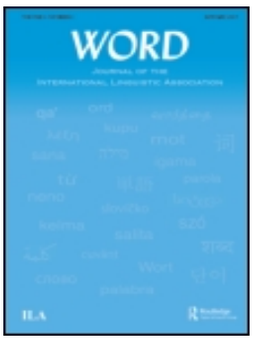

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The Acquisition of English by American Romani Children

There are probably over one million Ṛom ("Gypsies") in the United States and Canada, the majority of whom maintain the ancestral language (Ṛomanés) and culture (Ṛomanía) which had their origins in northcentral India over a millenium ago. The history of Ṛom in North America may be traced from the sixteenth century, when Gypsy slaves were transported from Britain. The greatest influx, however, took place during the last half of the nineteenth century following the abolition of Romani slavery in Central Europe.

There are various nations of Gypsies in the United States and Canada, each with slightly differing customs and dialects of the parent language. All, however, remain culturally insulated from the Gaẓó (i.e., non-Gypsy) world and, as a result, English is acquired in ways often different from other non-English-speaking groups in these countries.

This article examines the varieties of Ṛomanés spoken in North America, and the social background(s), and examines the main linguistic features of the principal dialects, which can often be related to the most common faults evident in English language performance. Corrective factors, usually subliminal rather than intended, are discussed, as well as Romani attitudes towards English, and some space is devoted to possible future trends.

1. The background of the American situation. Ṛom, or "Gypsies", are ethnically of northcentral Indian origin, having left that area perhaps 1,000 years ago, spreading northwestwards into Asia Minor, north Africa, and Europe.[1] There are no Romani groups anywhere which have remained free of Gaẓó (non-Gypsy) genetic admixture, most European groups now having a far greater proportion of European ancestry than Indian.[2]

[1] A more detailed account of the various theories of the origins of the Gypsies, as well as further references, may be found in Ian F. Hancock, "Problems in the Creation of Standard Dialect of Ṛomanés," Social Science Research Council Committee Working Papers in Sociolinguistics, No. 25, June, 1975.

[2] Not through choice, since such contacts are considered unclean, but through forced interbreeding during the centuries of slavery. Werner Cohn, in his book *The Gypsies* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1973), p. 63, estimates the average European genetic representation to be 60 per cent.

Gažikané[3] influences are also evident—though to a lesser degree—in language (*Ṛomanés*) and culture (*Ṛomanía*).

To generalize, practically all Romani groups maintain one or another dialect of Ṛomanés; loss of this linguistic ability, and of distinctive cultural behaviour patterns, in favour of Gažikanó language and values[4] means a cultural transition and consequent loss of identity as a Ṛom. There are many such individuals (i.e., who have Romani ancestry but who are ignorant, at least at first hand, of their language and culture)—Yul Brynner and Ava Gardner are two well-known examples.

Because of the gradualness of the Romani dispersion, the different attitudes on the part of the various host nations, and, as a result, the differing degrees of assimilation of non-Gypsy speech and custom,[5] there are several distinct dialect groups among the world Gypsy population. Most of these are represented in the United States today.

It is the policy of the United States Government strongly to discourage the voluntary immigration of Ṛom into this country. The first arrivals came in the 1600s and 1700s, perhaps earlier, under conditions of legalized subjection from Britain to Virginia;[6] others were brought to Louisiana during the same period from France.[7] The largest groups, however, arrived in the late 1800s to avoid possible recapture after the abolition of slavery in central Europe in 1855–56.[8]

Today there are probably over a million Americans and Canadians who identify themselves as Gypsy, although, within the overall community, the component subgroups are quite distinct from each other socially and

[3] *Gažikanó* (pl. *Gažikané*) is the adjectival form meaning 'non-Gypsy'. A male non-Gypsy is a *Gažó* (pl. *Gažé*), and a female non-Gypsy is a *Gaží* (pl. *Gažía*). A non-Gypsy of European ancestry is referred to as a *Parnoṛó* ('white one'+diminutive suffix), an Afro-American is a *Kalyoṛó* ('black one'+diminutive suffix), Chicanos and Mexicans are both referred to as *Meskáya*, Oriental Americans are *Tšitaitsúrya*, and American Indians are *Indyáya*. Collectively, though, all are *Gažé*.

[4] Some groups are less easily classified. Two such groups are the *Bayáš*, or *Badžáš*, who have retained considerable Romani culture but speak Rumanian rather than *Ṛomanés*, and the so-called *fortšawlya*, which is what some Vlaχ speakers call those who intentionally forsake the culture for Gažikané ways (but nevertheless continue to speak Ṛomanés).

[5] As well as the likelihood that different groups of Gypsies left India at different times speaking different (though closely related) dialects.

[6] See Francis Hinde Groome, "Transportation of Gypsies from Scotland to America," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, XI (1892), 60–62.

[7] See Alexander Jones, "American Gypsies," *American Journal of Sciences & Arts*, XXVI (1834), 189–190.

[8] See François de Vaux de Foletier, "L'esclavage des Tsiganes dans les principautés roumaines," *Études Tsiganes*, XVI (1970), 24–29.

linguistically.[9] Most groups would scarcely consider intermarriage with any other than their own.[10] The principal groups are the Ṛom,[11] the Romnitšals, the Sinti, the Nawkins, the Calé, and the Manouche; less well represented in North America are others, such as the Bashalde, Xoraχa, Afrikaya, Zingari, and so on.[12] This examination is restricted to the situation of the Vlaχ-speaking Ṛom, since this group is numerically the largest.[13]

The other most widely spoken variety of Ṛomanés is the dialect of the Romnitšals, or "British" Gypsy groups. Since this dialect maintains English language structure and phonology, English-language competence involves above all the ability to distinguish one lexical system from another. For example, *Can you see the ship out there on the ocean?* is *Can túti dik the panivárdo avrí adói pre the lompáni?* in one American Anglo-Romani dialect.

2. The social environment of Vlaχ-speaking children.[14] *Ṛomanía* involves a strict code of behaviour both within the community and in outside contacts with Gaẓé. Underlying much of this code is the concept of defilement (*marimós*) resulting from the handling or positioning of various items, and from non-Gypsy relationships. This set of taboo factors is flexible up to a point and may differ in some details from family to family. Everywhere

[9] The linguistic groupings are given in Hancock (see n. 1). The most acceptable grouping (that of Kaufman) lists the main European dialects as Southern, Balkan, Northern, Iberian, and Vlaχ.

[10] This subject is dealt with in part by Werner Cohn, *Gypsy Categories of Men: Lexicon and Attitudes*, mineographed for private distribution, n.d., p. 32.

[11] The Ṛom are a distinct group of Gypsies within the overall Romani population, and it is historically inaccurate to apply this name to *all* Gypsies. Because of the pejorative connotations of the word *Gypsy*, however, and since the word *Rom* occurs in all varieties of Ṛomanés, it is increasingly being used as a non-specific replacement for the word *Gypsy*.

[12] A discussion of these groups, with samples of some of the different dialects of Ṛomanés, may be found in Ronald Lee, "The Gypsies in Canada," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, XLVI , No. 3 (1967), 38–51; XLVI, No. 4 (1967), 12–28; and XLVII, No. 1 (1968), 92–107.

[13] A somewhat one-sided picture of the representation of other Gypsy groups in America has emerged since most published accounts deal only with Vlaχ-speaking Ṛom. These accounts are generally quite distorted and tend to perpetuate the literary rather than the actual image. A welcome exception to this attitude is Anne Sutherland's excellent discussion "Gypsies, the Hidden Americans," *Society*, XII (2) (Jan./Feb., 1975), 27–33, and Rena C. Gropper, *Gypsies in the City* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1975).

[14] This social environment is described in more detail in Ian F. Hancock, "Patterns of English Lexical Adoption in an American Dialect of Ṛomanés," *Orbis*, XXIV, No. 2, (1975) 32–50, and in *Southwest Languages and Linguistics in Educational Perspective*, ed. Gina C. Harvey and M. F. Heiser (San Diego: Institute for Cultural Pluralism, 1975), pp. 83–115.

it is felt, however, that they are far less strictly applicable to preadolescent children, and for this reason a certain amount of latitude is allowed vis-à-vis corrective measures. For instance, Romani children are permitted to play with the children of a Gaži client (a *kʰastománka*) while the client is in the Gypsy home for a reading.[15] Such peer-group contacts are infrequent and short-lived, but they are nevertheless among the few situations in which Gažé and Romani children are able to meet and converse.

Adult Rom may have Gažé acquaintances—especially-favoured clients, for example, or sympathetic police or government officials—and there are certain gatherings to which outsiders such as these may be invited.[16] Adults will socialize, and the children will be allowed to play together, although unmarried Romani adolescents will be seated well apart from Gažé adolescents of a similar age.

These, then, are the points of personal contact with the Gažé as far as the children are concerned. Since clients do not usually bring their children with them when visiting an *ófisa* (a fortune-telling parlour), and since gatherings to which Gažé may be invited are few (and by no means do all Romani families even agree to Gažé being invited to *these*), such contact is extremely limited and always remains within the Romani cultural sphere.

Most Romani children do not attend school. There are several reasons for this,[17] the principal ones being (1) a fear of assimilation in the direction of non-Gypsy culture (*fiále gažikané*) and (2) the mobility of the Romani population.

Some children will be sent to the first one, two, three, or four grades, partly to acquiesce to visiting officials from the Board of Education and partly since school provides a means of occupying the children during the mother's working day. As the age of the children increases, however, the rate of attendance at school proportionately decreases.

Outside of exceptional community situations involving specially founded Romani schools (e.g., in Richmond, Chicago, or Philadelphia, or in Spokane) where (often) the additional benevolence of the Welfare Department makes attendance at these Gažó-operated schools politic, the average enrollment at a public school lasts for three or four years at most. Romani children may complain that they are picked upon and harrassed by the Gažé children and called "dirty Gypsy", "thieving Gypsy", and

[15] That is, a palmistry and advice-giving session, by which means of livelihood many Romani women subsist.

[16] Rom asked into Gažé homes, on the other hand, will refuse such invitations, especially if they include the offer of a meal.

[17] See Hancock, "Problems," pp. 97–100.

so on. This may also be considered a reason for unwillingness to attend school.[18]

Although exposure to the "three R's" begins in grade 1 (and before, although Romani children are never entered into kindergarten or day care centres), it would seem that this is not of sufficient sustenance to ensure the retention of skill in these subjects. Some people will speak of how they once knew the alphabet but have forgotten it since leaving school.

There is no doubt that the few years spent at school by some Romani children has an effect upon their command of English, but there is no extracurricular socializing except of the type already mentioned. Romani children are in any case shy by nature, and are taught to distrust Gažé. Assimilation of the teacher's speech habits is not extensive. Romani children often admit to being bored and to "switching off" their awareness of what is going on in the classroom. They are uninterested much of the time by the teaching procedures and topics, which are usually presented in a strictly Anglo-oriented framework: at the primary level, much time is devoted to teaching through storytelling. Stories with titles like "Peter and His Puppy in the Park," or "When Daddy Comes Home from the Office," or even specifically ethnically-oriented ones such as "I Be Scared When It Be Dark" (all these titles being selected from primary-school readers) have little to offer in terms of points of reference for Romani children. In fact, they may even find the content of such stories contrary to their own concepts of right and wrong: the roles of the male and female characters, for instance, or the devotion to and freedom allowed animals in the home—a very common theme in children's primers—or even the very ordering of daily activities.

As the children grow older, they are removed from school, the boys to learn the occupational techniques of the older men and the girls, those of the women. In fact, far fewer girls than boys ever attend school at all since it is considered unseemly for a woman to be literate or "worldly" (*mordiní*). This attitude has deep-rooted ramifications within the culture and may affect marriage, prestige, and other aspects of *Romanía*. A literate or semi-literate girl would certainly deny this ability if she were being considered for marriage. Literacy presupposes contact with non-Gypsy culture.

The American Romani child does not enter school ignorant of English. Then where and how is it acquired? The answer is that, alongside Romanés, a distinctive kind of English, which I have called elsewhere Romani-English and abbreviate as *RE*,[19] is also used in the home. Romani-English

[18] Stories are recounted of Gažiá mothers refusing to allow their children to attend school once they discover that they are sharing their classrooms with Romani pupils.

[19] See Hancock, "Patterns of English Lexical Adoption," §5.00, pp. 91–97.

is distinctive because it has developed largely within a closed community and is under constant influence from the mother tongue, Ṛomanés.

3. The principal grammatical and phonological features of Ṛomanés. Ṛomanés is an Indic language, with a heavy lexical overlay (in some dialects well over half of the total vocabulary) from languages spoken in areas through which the Ṛom passed during the exodus from India. Because of this history, many varieties exhibit a phonology especially rich in non-indigenous (i.e., non-Indian) sounds. Vlaχ Ṛomanés, like most dialects, has two genders, a series of nominal cases formed by three case endings (nom. acc., and voc.), and certain enclitic postpositions. To illustrate, the noun $\sqrt{}$*ẓukl-* 'dog', is declined thus:

	Masculine		Feminine	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Nominative	ẓukól	ẓuklé	ẓuklí	ẓuklyá
Accusative	ẓuklés	ẓuklén	ẓuklyá	ẓuklyán
Genitive	ẓuklésko	ẓukléngo	ẓuklyáko	ẓuklyángo
Dative	ẓukléske	ẓuklénge	ẓuklyáke	ẓuklyánge
Locative	ẓukléste	ẓuklénde	ẓuklyáte	ẓuklyánde
Instrumental	ẓuklésa	ẓuklénsa	ẓuklyásа	ẓuklyánsa
Ablative	ẓukléstar	ẓukléndar	ẓuklyátar	ẓuklyándar
Vocative	e ẓuklé!	e ẓukále!	e ẓuklíye!	e ẓuklyá!

There are four verbal classes and five tenses, illustrated here by the *a*-class verb $\sqrt{}$ *dikʰ-*, 'see':

dikʰ-av	'I see'
kam-dikʰ-av	'I shall see'
dikʰ-av-as	'I saw, I used to see'
dikʰ-lem	'I saw, have seen'
dikʰ-lem-as	'I had seen'

There is no infinitive mood. In the indicative mood, however, there are three persons singular (masc. and fem. distinguished in the 3rd person) and three persons plural (no pronominal gender distinction), with a singular and a plural imperative mood. In the Vlaχ dialects, as well as in most others, the original verb *have* ($\sqrt{}$ *tʰer-* in the Southern dialects) has been lost and a Balkan-type construction with *sə* 'there is/there are' has been acquired. Thus, *The man has five houses* is *o murš sə-les panẓ kʰərá* (lit., 'The man, there-are to-him five houses').

At the phonological level, aspiration and retroflexion are contrastive in this dialect: *kʰak/kak*, 'armpit/any' and *máṣina/máṣina*, '(safety)match/machine.' There are two /r/ phonemes, as in *ṛana/ṛaṇa*, 'injury/poles',

uvular and flapped respectively, and various phoneme clusters not permitted in English.

There is some indication that the retroflexion/nonretroflexion, and especially aspiration/nonaspiration, distinctions are being lost among younger speakers in favour of the English pattern—no retroflexion, and aspiration only after initial prevocalic, and final plosives.[20]

Besides Ṛomanés, a distinctive dialect of English is used very commonly within the households at a social level. This Romani-English appears to have been learnt some 100 years ago at the time of arrival in North America when, presumably, English in any form was not well known by Ṛom. Having once been learnt from the Gažé, it developed within the community tangentially to that of the mainstream society, and it is this dialect to which Romani children are exposed from an early age. Although the dialect is naturally modified by the coexistence of the regional American dialects—an Alabaman Ṛom sounds more Southern than his Washington cousin—there is a fair degree of homogeneity within Romani-English wherever it is spoken in North America. Vlaχitske Ṛom (i.e., Vlaχ-speaking Ṛom) from Vancouver, Chicago, San Antonio, and New York City sound very similar, and the dialect is one of the many criteria of identification as a Ṛom, for example, on the telephone.

Speakers are aware of *non*-Romani English and pride themselves on an ability to use it. In fact, they frequently do so in business contacts with Gažé. This ability to switch dialects is illustrated in the following passage, in which a woman is chatting informally in Romani-English:

[ʌʸ ˈvant ʃu tʰˈno / ˈraʸdo / dɛts ə ˈfɹs ˈtʰʌʸm ʌʸ ˈhiəd dɛt kʰʌʸn ə ˈgasɪps #
I want you to know, Raida, that's the first time I have heard that kind of gossip.

ʌʸ ˈvant ʃu tʰˈno ʌʸ ˈdoːn ˈlʌʸg ɪt # daz ʃiʸ tʰiŋ bɪˈkɑzʌʸm diniˈli ə ˈsʌmpm̩
I want you to know I don't like it. Does she think that I'm *dinilí* [crazy] or something?

(*telephone rings*)
ˈdʒas ə ˈminɪt / raʸdo (*picks up telephone*)
Just a minute, Raida.

ˈhɛlo / həˈloʷ sɪstər / ʃər sɪstər / ˈwaʸ ˈdoʷnt ʃu ˈkʰəm ˈraʷn tə-ˈ-
Hello . . . hello, sister . . . sure, sister. Why don't you come around to-

mɑroʷ n̩ wiʸəl ˈtʰɔːkʰ əbaʷd ɪt / ˈyɛə / əˈbaʷd əˈlɛvn̩ #
morrow and we'll talk about it. Yes, about eleven.

[20] The reverse occurs in the speech of one adult whom I know, who has a tendency to retroflex where this feature is historically nonexistent (e.g., *beš* for *beš* 'sit').

(*hangs up*) ˈdɛt vz ˈmisəs rɛt ˈ riːvə dʒas kʰɔːl #]
That was Mrs. Rathtrevor [who] just called.

Children do not often hear this "talking like an American" among family members. When they do, it is in a specific context, being part of the overall business technique because it is otherwise out of place in natural conversation. Television sets are switched on early in the day, and, being especially housebound, Romani children spend a great deal of time in front of them. Despite this fact, it is a moot point whether or not Network English has a lasting effect upon Romani English.[21] Often the same lack of interest is displayed toward the actual *content* of television programs as is displayed in the classroom. Cartoons are popular, and westerns—these probably because of a shared concern with the outdoors—but programs of the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" or the "Edge of Night" variety are not especially appreciated.

4. Language-learning faults. In the bilingual Romani home, language-learning faults occur in both systems. Besides independent errors such as regularized irregular plurals, verbal preterites, and so on, there are also those resulting from interference from the coexisting language. In the speech of one 2½-year-old child, for example, there is gender confusion (*bengésko Mámo!* for *bengéski Mámo!* 'naughty Mama!'), frequent copula deletion (*o Húli bengésko* for *o Húli sə bengésko* or *o Húli bengésko-lo* 'Huli is naughty'),[22] and a confusion of semantic boundaries: *tató* '(heat-) hot' used for *íto* '(pepper-)hot' (both 'hot' in English), or *pʰuró* 'old (persons)' confused with *puranó* 'old (things)' (both 'old' in English). Phonologically in this child's speech there is a tendency not to aspirate at all, and to pronounce the uvular /ṛ/ as [w] and the flapped /r/ as [d].

In Vlaχ-speaking households, Ṛomanés is the dominant language and has an extensive effect upon English. A list of characteristics of one Texan variety of Romani-English has appeared elsewhere.[23] These include, for instance, calques from Ṛomanés such as: 'We got *down from* the car' (Ṛom. *hulitšám le mobilyéstar*) instead of 'We got *out of* the car', 'you think because Tommy can't come back' (Ṛom. *gitšisarés kə naští avél pále o Tóma*) instead of 'you think *that* . . .' and 'We stood in Miami for three weeks' (Ṛom. *bešlyám ánd'e Maiyáma trin kurké*) instead of 'We *stayed* in Miami . . .'. Equally common is the use of the definite article in a Ṛomanés

[21] It is now generally accepted that the influence of Network American upon the speech of Afro-American ghetto children has been grossly overestimated.

[22] Copula deletion is permissible in some Ṛomanés constructions, such as *kai o Bab?* ~*kai s'o Bab?*, 'Where is Bob?'.

[23] See Hancock, "Patterns of English Lexical Adoption," pp. 91–97.

rather than an English way: *They done moved to the Houston, Look at the Robert, Don't break the* (i.e., *your*) *leg*, and so on.

The colloquial English most often heard on television programs presents little barrier to understanding, but the formal English of newscasters is only imperfectly understood. Because of the commonplace inability to read, so-called City Hall words never become familiar through print, nor can their meanings be clarified with a dictionary.[24] This leads to another common characteristic of Romani-English, the confusion of similar-sounding words, also listed in more detail elsewhere:[25] *pickaninny dog* for *pekingese dog*, *junction* for *injunction*, *knowlogy* for *knowledge*, *ministration* for *menstruation*, and so on.

The above can only be considered "faults" when measured against the yardstick of the elusive Standard English. Correction of these faults in home-environment speech would result in unwelcome social pressures and attitudes, and the accusation that one were a *fortšáwo* or snob.

Because familiarity with American English is widespread and is put to practical use, there is evidently an assimilation of its rules by children, even if they do not themselves incorporate those rules into the home dialect of English. Again, this cannot be seen as a situation in need of correction or help. The ability to speak a more standard variety of English is regarded and admired as a skill, but not as a desired goal from an educational or social viewpoint since these are Gažikané concepts and have no application within the community, where it is one's command of *Romanés* which is admired. The attitude toward English is that, "since Rom earn a living from the settled Gažó population, it is viewed as imperative that the language of that population be acquired for this to be possible... besides being essential to livelihood, this skill is also put to very frequent use in dealing with the inevitable officialdom of the Gažó world,"[26] for whom "good" English is thought to be quite unnecessary.

5. Conclusion. As long as Rom continue to exist as a discrete ethnic entity in North America, the linguistic situation is unlikely to change radically. To be sure, in some groups Romani-English is becoming less and less easily definable. However, this situation appears to be the result of cultural isolation and of the resulting gradual (though not inevitable) loss of Romani culture—the exception rather than the rule.

[24] A friend of mine recently displayed a box of "love pills" for which he had paid $6 at a local novelty shop. In large letters on the box was written the word *spurious*. When he learnt the meaning of this, he returned to the shop and (unsuccessfully) demanded his money back.

[25] See Hancock, "Patterns of English Lexical Adoption," p. 96.

[26] See Hancock, "Patterns of English Lexical Adoption," p. 87.

The feeling persists that Gažé schools play neither a helpful nor a useful part in *Romanía*. As long as this is so, and as long as anti-Romani social pressures ensure that the cultural barriers remain firm, there is little likelihood of future Romani participation in the mainstream of American life.

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