

THE ROMANI DIALECT OF THE RHODOPES

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0. Introductionⁿ

The dialect considered here is spoken in the Rhodope and the Rila mountains in Bulgaria.¹ The majority of the Roma in this area are Muslims and have preserved their language, while a great part of the Muslim Roma in Bulgaria have lost Romani and use Turkish as their mother tongue. The language shift from Romani to Turkish probably took place during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Interestingly, it still continues nowadays, long after Turkish has lost its status as a prestige language in Bulgaria.²

In many towns and villages in the region the percentage of Roma in the overall population exceeds the general figure of 6-10% given for Bulgaria as a whole. In the town of Velingrad for example there are 5-6000 Roma, or 18-20% of the population; Rakitovo has a population of 8000, 3000 of whom are Gypsies, that is nearly 40%. In the area under consideration several groups of Roma live. Here we shall deal with a dialect of the *Erli* group (from Turkish *yerli* 'settled'; a Non-Vlach dialect³), which seems to be the most important variety of Romani in this part of the country. *Erlis* (pl. *Erlides*) is the self-appellation of the group; the dialect is called *Erliski*. One should, however, note that this name may be used for various groups, either as an in-group or as an out-group designation. It is generally used for groups that had already been living in a place when another group arrived there. This seems to be true for the whole of the Balkan area. In Greece, for example, nomadic Roma use *Erlides* as an (out-group) name for settled Gypsies who have replaced Romani with Greek. The self-appellation of this group is *yifti* (Greek *yifti* 'Gypsies'). In the town of Plovdiv Turkish-speaking Gypsies are called *Erlides* by those who refer to themselves as *Bugurdži* and who speak a dialect of Romani which is very similar to the dialects of other groups who use the word *Erlides* as an in-group name. Most of the Romani-speaking *Erlides* in Bulgaria share their neighbour-

that it was published bilingually in Romani and Macedonian. Similarly, the standardization conference of November 1992 sponsored by the Board of Education of the Republic of Macedonia and the University of Skopje, while explicitly aware of the efforts at creating an international Romani literary language as specifically mentioned in the resulting document, nevertheless had as its goal a standardization of Romani as a language of study in schools in the Republic of Macedonia (see Friedman 1995).

On 17 November 1993 the first issue of a Romani monthly newspaper, *Romani Sumnal/Romski Svet* 'Romani World' (hereafter RS), was published in Skopje under the editorial leadership of Oskar Mamut, who is also employed in the Romani-language division of Radio-Television Skopje.³ The newspaper is bilingual, with all material in both Romani and Macedonian. The issue of the codification of a Romani standard language is explicitly addressed on the first page of the first number, where the editorial board states that one of the tasks they have set themselves is contributing to the development and use of literary Romani. As such, the paper can be taken as a measure of the progress and ongoing concerns of the standardization of Romani in the Republic of Macedonia. The role of the mass media is potentially of great importance in language standardization. Taking as its background RG (cf. Friedman 1985), the Skopje Standardization conference of 1992 (cf. Friedman 1995), and international efforts such as the standardization conferences of 1971 and 1990 (cf. Kenrick 1981, Cortiade et al. 1991), this paper will examine issues of RS's orthography, phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon as they relate to on-going problems and discussions in the standardization of Literary Romani in the context of the Romani dialectal situation in the Republic of Macedonia with passing reference to other countries, e.g. Romania, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and member states of the EU.⁴

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