

Zuzana Bodnárová, University of Graz
Martin Balo, Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics

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This paper investigates gender reduction in the Romungro variety of Romani in contact with Hungarian that ostensibly took place within two generations of native speakers. The particular variety we look at was spoken in Ipolyság (Šahy), a medium-sized town in present-day Slovakia and formerly part of Hungary, and it must have been replaced by Hungarian some time after the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but not earlier than the first half of the twentieth century. Data is scarce; the only sources documenting the local Romani variety and testifying to the change come from the nineteenth century. One of them is a prayer book from the mid-nineteenth century, written by Jancsi Balogh, a famous Romani musician and early pioneer of Romani language activism (Balogh 1850). The other source comprises five letters which were written some forty years later by Jancsi Balogh's daughter, Sarolta Pusztai, and his youngest brother, Ferkó Balogh, to Archduke Joseph (Archduke Joseph 1890). The Romani texts produced by Ferkó and Sarolta, two representatives of a younger generation of Romani speakers in Ipolyság, differ most strikingly in their use of the gender system. While Jancsi Balogh's text uses the original two-gender Romani system which, at that point, does not seem to have been influenced by Hungarian, the letters written by the following generation, that is, by Ferkó Balogh and Sarolta Pusztai, clearly show signs of an eroding gender system.

Gender, by which we mean agreement classes of nouns (cf. Hockett 1958:231, Corbett 1991:4 and Masica 1991:218 for New Indo-Aryan languages in particular), is a long-lasting feature of language families in general and of Indo-European languages in particular (Nichols 2003), although it does not survive in every language and certainly not to the same extent. While it is generally agreed that gender systems are less likely to develop on their own or be borrowed from other languages, gender reduction and loss under certain circumstances are not rare. Aikhenvald 2004 points out that, besides the various possible language internal reasons for gender decay and loss, areal influence may be considered a language external factor, as the presence or absence of gender often manifests itself as an areal feature. When talking about areal influence, language contact situations stand out as potential triggers for loss or reduction of gender. The role of language contact has recently been discussed in relation to different geographical and sociolinguistic aspects (Nichols 2003, Di Garbo 2020, Igartua 2019).

As far as the reduction or complete loss of the gender system in New Indo-Aryan is concerned, Masica 1991:217-223 explains that the three genders attested in Prakrit are only retained by some languages in the west of the Indian subcontinent. A two-gender system survives in the Dardic, North-Western and Central branches of Indo-Aryan, including Romani, which is thought to have originated in the Central group (Matras 2002:56), and attenuation or complete loss is seen in the east and in the north, attributed to phonological reasons by Aikhenvald 2004, although, drawing on the possibility of geographical contact influence, neighbouring Tibeto-Burman languages, which are genderless, may have contributed to the process.

Due to its status as a diaspora language, Romani, in addition to extensive lexical borrowing, has undergone numerous grammatical changes through contact with non-Indo-Aryan languages, including its morphological system. However, apart from a few sporadic cases, such as Finnish Romani (Granqvist 2012), the gender system of Romani has largely remained stable across the board.

By comparing the geographical and sociolinguistic situation of the Romungro variety spoken in Ipolyság with those which do not display reduction of their gender system, we have tried to identify the factors that may have contributed to this linguistic change. Our findings indicate that the minority situation of Romani and geographical vicinity are not a sufficient explanation, as rural varieties do not exhibit the same kind of erosion; in fact, they seem to be less prone to it. What appears to play a crucial role is the urban context of the change and mobility; this is also in conformity with more recent research on the perpetual exchange between languages and cities (Pennycook & Otsuji 2015).

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