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Transdisciplinary qualitative paradigm in applied linguistics: autoethnography, participatory action research and minority language teaching and learning*

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ABSTRACT

The paper emphasizes the crucial importance of transdisciplinary approach to qualitative research methodology in teaching and learning contexts involving highly stigmatized minority languages. Autoethnography and participatory action research are herein employed as constructive, critical, qualitative methodological procedures relevant to transdisciplinary research on minority languages in applied linguistics. An international project on teaching and learning Romani, QUALIROM, is used as a case study in order to emphasize the fact that mere theoretical knowledge and professional expertise are important but not sufficient for successful implementation and sustainability of outcomes in this field of linguistic research. The analysis suggests that socially engaged minority language learning and teaching projects should be understood as transdisciplinary, collaborative activities that transcend academic boundaries, and in which research participants create a number of interactive contexts within project-oriented communities of practice aimed at reshaping dominant social relations and practices.

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1. Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to outline a socially engaged approach to minority language research within the realm of applied linguistics, and more precisely, to illustrate the possible advantages of a qualitative, transdisciplinary orientation to study of learning and teaching minority languages in specific socio-cultural, political and educational contexts. In more general terms, the epistemological goal of this paper is to support an alternative approach to knowledge construction, geared toward the creation of a new cognitive cultural model of academic communities, which takes into consideration all kinds of input (linguistic, sociolinguistic, ethnolinguistic, autoethnographic, etc.) when conducting research in multifaceted contexts in which experiences, identities, perspectives, cultures, politics, and languages of all relevant interested parties and

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stakeholders (including those coming from non-academic settings) are accounted for. This is needed if we aim at developing a better insight and deeper understanding of the outcomes and consequences of any type of academic research, and particularly, in the area of minority languages research which, until recently, has been subjected to disciplinary fragmentation (Bastardas Boada, 2013). By applying autoethnographic approach to an analysis of sociolinguistic, political and cultural context of a European applied linguistics project (QUALIROM) designed to develop materials for teaching Romani to native and non-native speakers alike within formal educational systems in five European countries, the paper provides evidence that transdisciplinarity should be taken into account whenever projects in applied linguistics geared toward maintenance, revitalization and or perpetuation of minority languages (especially those spoken by marginalized, socially discriminated ethnic or social groups) are designed and carried out. This allows us to be certain that voices, individual points of view and collective ideologies of native speakers of those languages become a part of academically authorized knowledge and its social consequences.

Furthermore, within the realm of linguistic research, applied linguistics has for the longest time been recognized as one of the most fertile fields for quantitative academic study, which has 'grown out of desire to emulate the "objective" procedures in natural sciences' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 31), relying on quantifications, correlations, and scientific experiments designed to achieve results defined in terms of objective and potentially universally applicable facts. Qualitative research, on the other hand, offers us a possibility to interpret research data gathered in real-life contexts taking into account worldviews and social knowledge developed in meaningful interactions among real people from different cultural and social backgrounds, and present it to academic and broader audiences. Herein, an argument is made for the application of a qualitative research paradigm which focuses on reflexivity, plurality of perspectives, social and historical situatedness, personal investment and involvement in the communities whose problems are identified and analyzed (Gergen & Gergen, 2000).

Subsequently, minority language study, such as analysis of language contacts, language maintenance, language revitalization, and language policy and planning, has also been submitted to 'objective' quantitative analysis with the application of documentary linguistics methodological procedures to classify and document languages in purely academic contexts (Flores Farfán & Córdova Hernández, 2012, p. 92). On the contrary, an approach I argue for herein treats minority languages as complex, communicative systems which exist in immediate relationship with the communities that use them in real life communicative actions, thus identifying as one of its postulates the recognition and validation of minority language speakers' needs.

1.1. Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in applied linguistics and in minority language research

Interdisciplinary perspective of the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, applied to the area of minority language research, has succeeded in opening a dialogue among scientific disciplines such as language policy and planning, corpus linguistics, documentary linguistics, critical sociolinguistics, critical pedagogy, cognitive anthropology, and anthropological linguistics, thus providing us with more varied and broader perspectives in this multifaceted and intricate academic field. However, interdisciplinarity (in this as well as in other areas) has failed to recognize the complexity of the real world and the need for a continuous interaction with non-academic interested parties while carrying out scientific research (Klein, 2008, p. S117).

Until recently, transdisciplinary research has been mainly applied to medical, social and environmental studies (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008). Herein, an argument is made that linguistics in general, and applied linguistics in particular, can work not only toward designing academic

approaches to relevant research phenomena, but also toward engaging in transdisciplinary research involving different interested parties who can help us take into account and understand complex settings of human interactions, and provide us with more trustworthy interpretations of the process of negotiation of meaning in different languages with different positions on social hierarchies, in order to respond to real needs of real people 'and to constitute knowledge with a focus on problem-solving for what is perceived to be the common good' (Hirsh Hadorn et al., 2008, p. 19).

Transdisciplinary research has been defined as action research a long time before the term itself gained ground in academia:

> Research directed toward the solving of social problems was developed by Kurt Lewin (1890–1947). To achieve this, action, research and education must form an interlinked triangle (Lewin, 1951). (…) Jakob L. Moreno (1889–1974), proposed *that researchers and the people studied should both research and be researched, and both should participate in the situation and intervene to create change in accordance with their competences* (italics mine) (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008, p. 26).

As will be presented in the following section, transdisciplinarity adds a new dimension to participatory action research which has been present in applied linguistics for quite some time now. It is inspired by notions drawn from complexity and leadership theories which recognize the need to include a plurality of worldviews into our research, different systems of social and cultural norms and values as well as a wide range of communicative, social, affective and other needs of different communities of practice, with explicit disregard for artificial borders between academic and non-academic expertise. In other words, transdisciplinarity can be defined as a socially engaged, critical interdisciplinarity which entails all kinds of research-relevant socially constructed knowledge.

Consequently, I define transdisciplinary research as generative, dialogical, collaborative and reflective, and I see it as a way of connecting 'science based solutions to problems in the life-world with a high degree of complexity in terms of factual uncertainties, value loads and societal stakes' (Wiesmann et al., 2008, p. 6). Transdisciplinarity then translates into contextualized research based on a non-positivist orientation to science, which seeks to understand meanings and purposes that humans attach to their actions, takes into consideration local voices and voices of others, and stays away from grand scientific narratives in the interpretation of research findings. This type of research allows for a range of points of view and interpretations which not only potentially (re)shape initial research postulates and research questions (hypotheses), but also creates space for application of grounded theories[1] which assure the possibility for inherent change of course and maturation during the research process itself. Consequently, the concept of knowledge (and knowledge construction) in transdisciplinary research includes interaction among different participants from a number of interested communities of practice/interested parties/stakeholders (with inclusion of those outside of academia), contextualization, evolution, lifelong engagement, transference and adaptation to other fields and problems/issues. Moreover, transdisciplinary research needs to involve researchers' auto-reflection and readiness to grow and mature with their research projects, allowing for criticisms, adaptations and changes within the framework of their original and ongoing epistemological, academic points of view. All this also points towards the relevance of a qualitative research paradigm in applied linguistic (minority language oriented) research, which seeks to understand language and its functions in different interactional domains and not as neutral means of communication.

In line with the previous statements, I work and write with a strong belief that minority language study should also be viewed as a *transdisciplinary* action in which solutions are sought through *collaborative, enabling and adaptive learning***,** which should be carried out in constructive and *bona fide* communication between academic and non-academic communities alike, including minority as well as majority communities of practice (Filipović, 2015).

As the term itself implies, 'minority' is often synonymous with segregated, marginalized and perceived as less valuable (in comparison with 'majority'). Minority languages are those that are

spoken by ethnic groups who live in states with different majority population(s) speaking other majority language(s). Issues of social and political power and social and cultural hierarchies define the relationship between minority and majority languages. Language (human) rights are at the core of the present-day minority language research, thus making it inherently interdisciplinary, because it blurs borders among academic disciplines, steps away from the 'pure' science of linguistics and engages in dialogue with studies of ethnicity, gender, and diaspora, as well as political and cultural studies.

Transdisciplinary qualitative perspective I adopt in this paper illustrates the value of a continuous dialogue among individuals regardless of their membership in academia or their educational, social, or ethnic status, who all take an active role and work together with a common goal to improve the educational situation of native speakers of a stigmatized minority language, in this case, Romani.

2. Qualitative, transdisciplinary paradigm: participatory action research and autoethnography

Transdisciplinary, qualitative research with a strong participatory involvement, understood as an epistemological stand rather than a mere set of research methods and techniques, is at the core of the constructivist paradigm of knowledge creation that I argue for.

Qualitative research is highly interpretative, and includes a wide range of methodologies developed within different academic fields affiliated with a wide range of epistemological frameworks, such as (emancipatory) focus groups, intrinsic and instrumental case studies, grounded theory, ethnographic, autoethnographic and phenomenological approaches, among others. It systematically resists the formulation of a unified epistemological and methodological paradigm, at the same time maintaining a common core of research and human values (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 for further detail).

Participatory involvement has a long historical trajectory in ethnographic research. However, traditional participatory research draws upon the ideology of traditional, positivist science which calls for objectivity of interpretation and design of exact models and theories with a supposedly universal value, and a proclaimed (but more often than not unaccomplished) goal to 'produce documentary information that was not only "true", but also *reflected the native's own point of view about reality* (italics mine)' (Tedlock, 2005, p. 467).

Contemporary participatory research, however, although also calling for a longer and direct involvement with a community, aims at not only documenting and describing the phenomena in question. Rather, it implies 'shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems and an orientation toward community action' (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 2005, p. 560), which adds a relatively new transdisciplinary dimension to the term participatory *action* research, implying social action, empathy, and social engagement. Social and individual involvement thus becomes one of the key features of transdisciplinary, qualitative participatory action research. Participatory action research, in this context, has to be understood as involvement of researchers in the communities they study *and* involvement of 'non-academic' members of those communities in shaping the conclusions of the research process. Interpretation, empathy, and socially meaningful actions present the cornerstones of contemporary, participatory, transdisciplinary science which considers every type of knowledge (emerging both from the heights of academic institutions and from the real people and their life experiences) as equal in the complex process of understanding the world that surrounds us and in seeking solutions to the problems that trouble us.

All of the above clearly indicates how sensitive and complicated, as well as controversial, transdisciplinary research may be: interested parties engaged in it very often possess not only different types or degrees of scientific knowledge, but also enter the research process with

extremely different cognitive cultural models and expectations. Ideologies of *otherness*, i.e. ideologies of communities of practice or interest who do not belong to the proscribed Eurocentric world view have until recently been neglected and their points of view not taken as valuable, thus further complicating an extremely needed, and often very delicate, dialogue among the participants from both the scientific and the life-world communities.

Following the theoretical and methodological considerations previously outlined, I pursue this line of reasoning with an illustrative autoethnographic case study, a qualitative research methodology which, coupled with participatory action, may enhance our understanding of the complex social and academic dynamics that, whether we are aware of them or not, make up a significant portion of our general knowledge construction within the scope of applied linguistics and minority language learning and teaching (see Anderson, 2006, for further discussion on scientific relevance of analytic autoethnographic research, which emphasizes the commitment to theory along with an account of real-life circumstances).

I consider the definition of autoethnography offered by Canagarajah (2012, p. 260) as highly useful for my approach to qualitative research. As this author states, the *auto* in autoethnography implies the strong presence of a personal view of the researcher. *Ethno* refers to the underlying epistemological assumption that research is carried out in order to identify, describe and understand cultural and social set-up of a community in question. The *graphy* part of the term, rather than simply referring to the written form in which the results are presented, should also be understood as a particular narrative genre, which is reflective, experiential, emotional and expected to elicit a wide range of interpretations by the targeted reading audiences.

Hence, in the continuation of this paper, I use the term 'autoethnography' in a similar sense. First, trying to evoke a critical self-awareness of my participatory role in order to establish a clearer and more comprehensive overview of the social dynamics of the research/project community I was a part of, and second, in order to be able to make a more meaningful connection among the individual, local, glocal, national and transnational cultural, socio-political and educational contexts which have shaped the community of practice that I would like to describe, and the outcomes of the QUALIROM project that I write about. Moreover, I illustrate the transdisciplinary dimension of this type of participatory action research which has allowed me to make critical connections between the academy and the real world of different Romani communities across Europe. These critical connections have, in turn, helped me and other members of the project team understand the need for an open-ended and constructive dialogue through the creation of an innovative research space in which the members of different Romani communities were encouraged to take charge and become agents and decision-makers within the course of the project design and development.

3. Romani teaching and learning in the 21st century: the QUALIROM project from the outside

The Roma are often considered a truly European minority, with no identifiable political entity to adhere to (Guy, 2003). They are a 'non-territorial' nation of Europe (Council of Europe, recommendation 1203/1993) mostly living in the former Communist and Socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe (FYR Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovak Republic, Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Czech Republic, etc.) In all the countries they live in, they are among the most stigmatized segments of the population: with extremely low levels of formal education and with no or insufficient child, social and health care they live in severe poverty, often victimized and always marginalized (Baucal, 2012, Filipović, Vučo, Djurić, 2010; Ringold, Orenstein, & Wilkens, 2003; etc.).

From the structural linguistic point of view, the Romani varieties can be identified 'as a heterogeneous cluster of varieties without any homogenizing standard' (Halwachs, 2003, p. 192).

The all-encompassing socio-political marginalization of the Roma in all the countries where they have lived for centuries and the fact that their language has not developed a standard variety defined by Eurocentric nation-state political, socio-cultural and linguistic standards, have been identified as decisive factors reflected in low academic achievement and unsatisfactory educational status (invisible at best) of Romani children in all mainstream educational systems I am aware of (see Filipović et al., 2010; Filipović, 2012, for a detailed account of the Romani educational situation in Serbia). All aspects of language policy toward Romani (status, corpus and education policies) have come into focus in recent decades, within the context of language ecology, language human rights, and new glocalized approaches to identity politics (Flores Farfán & Córdova Hernández, 2012; May, 2008; Phillipson, 1992, 2000, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, etc.). One large, overarching international initiative can be cited as an example of such engagement. The *Decade of Roma Inclusion* (2005–2015) involved eleven countries from Central and Eastern Europe and aimed at improving all aspects of Roma life (health care, social protection, employment, education, social and political participation, etc.), which built up toward the creation of the *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* (http://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/pages/4/roma-decade-and-the-eu).

At the same time, the *Council of Europe* was actively engaged in the language education policy aspect of the *Roma Inclusion*. In 2007, the *Common European Curriculum Framework for Romani* was published followed by the *European Language Portfolio for Romani*, and it aimed to test these documents in real-life educational contexts in different European countries.

QUALIROM (*Quality Education in Romani for Europe*, http://qualirom.uni-graz.at/home.html) (December 2010–December 2013), sprung out of the previously cited activities of the *Council of Europe*. It was supported by the *Life Long Learning Programme* of the *EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency*), under the *KA2 language sub-program* and the *Awareness raising and development of new materials and/or online courses* sub-action.

QUALIROM was an applied linguistic project, with well-defined methodological objectives linked to the most recent academic developments in language teaching in general, and Romani teaching in different socio-cultural contexts in Europe in particular. A general starting point of QUALIROM was the assumption that formal education on all levels, from preschool to tertiary education, presents one of the key factors in enabling social mobility and successful integration of any individual into the professional arena and the public domain in general. This is extremely important in case of children from minority groups in general, and marginalized minority groups such as Roma in particular. Consequently, the right to high quality education is seen as a prerequisite for an optimal individual cognitive and affective development of each and every Romani child, which helps them recognize and validate their own ethnolinguistic identity, while at the same time supporting their integration into the majority community of their peers and teaching staff. The project was university-coordinated (the main coordinator was the *Treffpunkt sprachen - Zentrum für Sprache, Plurilingualismus und Fachdidaktik* of the University of Graz, Austria, and universities from three other European countries participated, each coordinating national teams in their countries: Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic, University of Helsinki, Finland, and Universities of Belgrade and Novi Sad, Serbia). The fifth participant was Slovakia, where a high school principal with extensive experience in innovative teaching of mainly but not only Romani children was coordinating the project. *European Centre for Modern Languages* (ECML), an institution of the *Council of Europe* dedicated to language learning and teaching, located in Graz, Austria, was also a project team member.

However, my intention here is not to analyze the concrete outcomes of the project (which have been rated as excellent by international external evaluators), but to show how these objectives (as is the case in practically all applied linguistic and language education policies projects I have been involved with over the years) actually do not provide any links to sets of complex personal, social, local, regional, national and transnational factors and forces that are all deeply interconnected and relevant to social reality and communicative activity in which given projects

are carried out. Specific emergent research communities of practice (academic as well as social or cultural) are created as byproducts/lateral outcomes of all research projects, and they are always shaped not only by the initial efforts to satisfy the project's academic demands but also by their members' interpretation of the previously outlined factors and forces.

The QUALIROM project developed a strong transdisciplinary perspective from the onset. Members from academia and native speakers of different varieties of Romani with no, some, or extensive teaching experience and greatly varying levels of formal education[2] from the participating countries were joined in national teams. Collaborative learning and knowledge construction were envisioned for all those who took part in the project. The Romani teachers were expected to learn about the most recent developments in European language education policies, as well as about innovative approaches to communicative language teaching and learning based on the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)*, and the *Curriculum Framework for Romani* and the *European Language Portfolio for Romani*, developed by the Council of Europe. Their (newly developed) competence in applied linguistics was to be applied in design and development of teaching materials in different Romani dialects defined by the levels of the CEFR. Their post-project engagement in applying those materials in different real-life educational settings was also envisioned by the project documentation. The university professors accepted the administrative leadership of the project with a clear understanding that their academic competence was to be broadened in a transdisciplinary endeavor by the native Romani speakers' experiences and learning and teaching proposals. The notion of shared ownership over newly created knowledge was implicitly present in all phases of project design and development.

The main applied linguistic objective of the QUALIROM project was to prepare sets of teaching materials in different Romani varieties that would be applicable and adaptable to diverse socio-cultural and educational situations, which present themselves in different countries, within different formal and informal educational systems. Also, it was specified from the very beginning that no standardization process would take place or be discussed throughout the project with an objective to illustrate that non-standardized varieties can be successfully employed in the education of Romani children from different linguistic backgrounds (thus creating an epistemological stand with a clear social engagement component). As it turned out, this particular decision has proven to exhibit long term effects on the outcomes of the project which will be discussed in the next section.

National teams, consisting of academic coordinators and Romani speakers/teachers worked together on the material design and development for students of different ages (primary and early secondary education) and at different levels of language proficiency in various Romani dialects (A1–B2, in accordance with the competence levels of the *CEFR*). Therefore, linguistic, cultural and social expertise of the native speakers of different varieties of Romani was validated and successfully implemented throughout the rollout of the project which paid special attention to the relevance and importance of *Romanipe*: teaching and learning descriptors and activities which 'draw together the aspects of life, history and tradition that are essentially Roma' (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 23). All the national teams met twice a year at international teacher training seminars with the experts selected by the project coordinators and supported by the ECML (*European Centre for Modern Languages*) and the Council of Europe. In the meantime, they worked in their respective countries continuously collaborating in face-to-face and online communications.

From the applied linguistics point of view, the project was very straightforward, well designed and with clear objectives. The objectives were all achieved and the sustainability of the project outcomes assured[3].

It is also noteworthy to pinpoint the sociocultural orientation of QUALIROM. From the sociolinguistic point of view, the project's language ideology could be defined in terms dialectal and cultural heterogeneity understood as a prerequisite for the formation of a common linguistic repertoire in 'which forms and functions shared by speakers of different varieties of Romani' were

introduced, which allowed them, among other things, to 'perceive the value of their own language, helping them understand it as a resource, and not only from the financial or pragmatic point of view' (Filipović, 2015, p. 93). On the whole, the implicit (critical) linguistic objective of the project was to help Romani teachers perceive the importance of the common linguistic core of different Romani dialects and to become ready and willing to apply their newly developed plurilidialectal competence when faced with students from different dialectal backgrounds in their own classrooms (see Matras & Reershemius, 1991, for a detailed discussion on the concept of 'native literacy' as relevant to the standardization of Romani). As already mentioned, this has turned out to be a very complicated point which has inhibited the implementation of the project results in mainstream education in Serbia (see Filipović, 2016a for further discussion).

4. The QUALIROM project from the inside: participatory, autoethnographic, transdisciplinary account

A self-reflective, critical evaluation of the project's life and the follow-up activities and consequences provided in this section describes a rather complex situation which is very far from the clear-cut outcomes outlined near the end of the previous section. Herein, I make an attempt to present them as an autoethnographic narrative, based on participatory action research that I was a part of throughout the project and emphasizing the transdisciplinary understanding of my role in it. I will focus on the analysis of interactions among members of the Serbian national team, as well as among members of different national teams at international training seminars. Also, I will provide an outline of my personal professional experience with the institutional mechanisms of top-down language education policies in Serbia, which I had to be involved with in order to assure my country's participation in the project. The data that I used in this account were gathered over the period of four years (2009–2013), covering a year of pre-project preparations and three years of project activities. Aside from personal notes based on participant observation during this period, I relied on face-to-face interactions and e-mail correspondence with members of my national team, members of other national teams, national teams' coordinators, as well as representatives of Serbian institutions responsible for design and development of language education policies for national minorities recognized by the Serbian legislature. Moreover, official reports from semi-annual meetings and seminars as well as participants' evaluation sheets (gathered at the end of each seminar) provided valuable information which supported my interpretation of the data.

First and foremost, as already stated, the project needed competent Romani speakers willing to take part in the design of new teaching materials. Because Serbia was the only country of the five that made up the project consortium which had had any form of Romani teaching present in primary formal education prior to the initiation of the project (the teaching in Romani in the Slovakian private high school was not a part of the general educational framework in that country), my first thought had been that it would be easy to find and choose potential project participants among the teachers who were already in the system. However, it turned out that the small community of Romani teachers working in Vojvodina, in northern Serbia (which is until the present day the only region of Serbia where Romani teaching is taking place systematically in primary schools), was very reluctant to even consider such engagement, due to years of discrimination and lack of official recognition of their status as teachers within the schools where they worked[4] (also see footnote No. 3). As a university professor, I was very enthusiastic about the project and certain that the proposed objectives were not only achievable, but also something that I would enjoy working on. I sat and listened in awe to the fervent debate that went on between the main coordinator of the project, an internationally recognized expert in Romani dialectology and minority languages education policies, and the two Romani teachers who challenged every theoretical and methodological notion he cited, and every suggestion he made.

Well, little did I know that it was only the beginning! During the first half of the project, I also had to struggle with the teachers' points of view based on practical experience in the field and no expert knowledge on language teaching methodologies and/or concepts stemming from different language acquisition theories (which proved to be rather difficult for somebody who had already been used to her students listening and accepting, often uncritically, her academic orientation), their skepticism regarding the European role in the process of providing Romani with more space within mainstream classrooms, and last, but not least, the effects of their private attitudes and relationships on the project development.

As I stated in the introductory section of the paper, I feel very strongly about empathic participation and transdisciplinary interventions in which people from different walks of life are joined together in order to work on a solution to a commonly recognized problem. However, none of my previous experiences in teamwork had taught me about the difference between professional responsibility and private engagement. The cultural models I was learning about during this project (and I had a strong belief that I was a very 'pluricultural person' with a high degree of knowledge about others) proved to be completely different from what I had originally envisioned. No previous personal or academic experience had provided me with qualifications to manage those differences without overstepping social and cultural boundaries which would take me too far into my Romani colleagues' private lives without any expertise in providing adequate emotional or psychological support. Consequently, I found myself personally responsible for cases of domestic violence against a Romani woman involved in the project, for financial hardship that two out of three Romani participants were facing and which affected their performance in the project, as well as for the tensions between them and the third Romani participant who had a university degree and a very well-paid permanent position with an international institution. It took me about a year and a half into the project (the whole first part of it) to become able to make a distinction between professional and human engagement, to learn that my capacity for empathy and readiness to be their friend were not sufficient, and that some of the problems they were facing I could not solve. However, I proved to be a good listener and I hope I did make a difference in changing the way in which they perceived the typical *gadja*[5] from the Serbian academic community. We continued professional cooperation upon the completion of the project, which I feel is among the most important project's outcomes. The relevance of such a conclusion was something that had not even crossed my mind when I entered the project!

On a professional and academic level, I had to engage in communication with Romani language planners from the Romani community (the National Council of Romani minority in Serbia[6]) and with language education planners from the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological development. The Ministry has been overtly very supportive of any initiatives regarding the improvement of the position of Romani children in our educational system for more than a decade and a half now (since 2002 when Roma were recognized as a national minority entitled to human and language rights defined by the Serbian Constitution). However, most of the support was of a nominal nature, limited to signatures on documents supporting this and other projects without any clear strategy for their implementation. I have to admit that I was grateful even for that minimal engagement, without which most of the project activities would have been impossible to carry out. Romani scholars, members of different Romani communities in Serbia, on the other hand, have until the present day expressed explicit and direct contempt for a project coordinated by a *gadja* who does not speak Romani, a project that supported linguistic variation and respect for a number of non-standardized Romani dialects used in the teaching materials developed within it[7] (I was directly told so in one of the few phone conversations I had with one of them). The opposition to the project experiences and products transpired most clearly when the proposal for a national seminar based on the QUALIROM was rejected by the national institution in charge of accrediting seminars that primary and secondary school teachers can apply for in order to renew their teaching licenses at five year intervals. The

lead member of the evaluation committee was a Romani scholar, highly ranked in the Romani community and the political institutions that represent it, who fervently propagates the idea of a unified standard Romani which should be used on the territory of all the states founded within the borders of the former Yugoslavia (see Đurić, 2011, p. 9 for a detailed account of the Romani standardization in this region). He single-handedly decided that our materials were not relevant to the educational situation of Romani children in this country.

The international social and anthropological dimension of the QUALIROM project, however, is, in my view, much brighter. Members of all national teams (between 10 and 26 individuals) met on a regular basis two times a year from December 2010 to December 2013 for teacher training seminars led by the experts in applied linguistics appointed by the Council of Europe.

The first seminar started with a lot of underlying tensions and suspicious looks on the faces of Romani teachers from the five countries. National teams sat together, speaking their national languages, wary of the university professors they had to communicate with. There existed a language barrier as well. English was the official language of the project, and the seminars were held in English. However, the majority of Romani teachers (except those from the Finnish group) did not have high degrees of communicative competence in English. That is why we resorted to simultaneous and consecutive interpreting (depending on the locations of the seminars). Of course, money was scarce, so I decided to include my Ph.D. students (who are by no means professional interpreters) to work with us and be compensated in academic credits[8]. They accepted gladly as they saw it as an excellent experience to include into their professional CVs. As the Romani speakers from the Austrian team were also from the countries of former Yugoslavia (Serbia and Macedonia), and there was a woman from Slovakia who spoke Serbian, my students served as interpreters for them as well. This decision represented one of the first steps in establishing interpersonal (and international) connections based on mutual trust, good will and confidence. Unlike the professors, my graduate students were not considered as a threat to the Romani teachers' professional and personal identities.

At the same time, we were always using the same room and board facilities during these semi-annual seminars. Meal times, walks to the meeting rooms and back became excellent spaces for the formation of an *emergent community of practice*. Languages were mixed (Slavic languages in particular, Czech, Macedonian, Serbian, Slovak), Romani dialects were used interchangeably, the relevance of English fading in the process. I was witnessing a birth of an emergent language behavior which was leading to the creation of a *self-organized, complex, adaptive community of practice*, the QUALIROM community of practice (for more on complexity approach to language study, emergent language behavior and emergent communities of practice, see Filipović, 2015). Both academic and non-academic members of the QUALIROM project were included, who after a while started working *collaboratively* on the tasks assigned to them. National teams were not as identifiable any more: people sat in mixed groups during the seminars and at breakfasts, lunches and dinners. The Romani teachers' self-awareness and self-confidence was blooming, growing with every seminar we attended. Each time we met, they felt more freedom to speak their minds, to share their teaching and life experiences relevant to the outcomes we were aiming for. Empowered, they started to think critically not only of language teaching, but also of the structure and linguistic systems of the Romani varieties they spoke. The seminar on Romani linguistics and dialectology held about mid-way through the project was extremely revealing. The Romani teachers became extremely enthusiastic when learning about the origins of their language, about the formation of a dialectal continuum as well as about Romani dialectal situation of the present day. The professor in charge introduced them to the method of comparative reconstruction, and helped them learn to recognize lexemes in their corresponding dialects which do not look or sound completely the same but have the same stem origin. More importantly, the Romani teachers themselves recognized the pedagogical value of this seemingly highly theoretical presentation: they thought of ways to help their students speaking different Romani varieties within the same classroom understand each other

better and work together toward a creation of a set of common cultural values among the members of different Romani communities.

That was another additional and unplanned gain of the project: Romani teachers from the five countries began to develop serious interest in their own language and linguistic heritage which helped them perceive it as a valuable resource, rather than a monument of times gone by. Furthermore, while working on the project, they started seeing themselves in a different light and began to acknowledge a need for self-growth and continuous education required in order to satisfy the general administrative criteria presented by the corresponding educational laws in their countries. In Serbia, two of three Romani teachers involved in the project (as I already mentioned, the third one already had a B.A. degree in pedagogy and was at the time studying toward another university degree in law) chose to complete their senior year in high school. They are now struggling to get funds to enroll into a college for future Romani teachers in Vršac, Serbia. Moreover, upon the completion of the project, the teachers from Serbia involved in the project created an NGO (of which I was also one of the founding members) dedicated to the promotion of Romani teaching in this country. On one hand, this social initiative provides an excellent example of a bottom-up language education policy in which grassroots activities are carried out in order to support a concrete language community's educational needs. On the other hand, it can also be viewed as a very effective argument in favor of emancipatory academic and social activity.

5. Theoretical and methodological implications: leadership in transdisciplinary language education policy formation

The QUALIROM project is, in my view, an excellent example of *language leadership* in a transdisciplinary research setting. The concept of leadership, as an integral part of the complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007), is related to heterarchically[9] organized communities of practice, in which activities and initiatives are freely taken by all members of a given community, in this case, within the QUALIROM community of practice, regardless of the individual members' levels of formal education and competence in English as the international language of academic communication. Emergent language behavior is the key element of this particular community of practice. Emergence is understood as a process which involves: '(1) the reformulation of existing elements to produce outcomes that are qualitatively different from the original elements; and (2) self-organization' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 308). Within the QUALIROM community, new communicative patterns emerged, in which elements from different languages and different Romani varieties were used freely and interchangeably in order to achieve desired communicative, socially meaningful, goals. *Adaptive*[10] leaders were born, engaging in informal, adaptive interactions among willing individuals ready to create new and constructive alliances within the QUALIROM community of practice. The fact that they went a few steps further, and, as in case of the Serbian Romani speakers, organized an educational NGO and made an attempt to accredit a national educational seminar, based on their QUALIROM experiences, indicates that they went beyond adaptive leadership, and became *enabling* leaders, ready and empowered to apply their expertise outside of the original community of practice in which new linguistic practices emerged. The final and the crucial level of leadership needed for any type of social change to be recognized and validated within the realm of language education policy is the *administrative* leadership, which 'refers to the actions of individuals and groups in formal managerial roles who plan and coordinate activities to accomplish organizationally-prescribed outcomes in an efficient and effective manner.' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 305). This is the type of leadership that, as far as I know, has not been achieved yet in any of the Romani language policy and planning contexts. In my opinion, this is precisely due to the fact that empowerment in our hierarchically organized societies is still viewed as a struggle to gain power, as dominance, rather than as a

'positive, affirmative, enabling conception of power' (Allen, 1998, p. 458). Every step which points towards a bottom-up language and social change is viewed as threat to the authority and legitimacy of the official language planners, appointed from the top-down by the institutions of a state (educational, political or other) or a given educational system.

After the QUALIROM, at least in Serbia, the Romani language education policy returned to its 'normal self', and can be traced back to the chambers of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) and sessions of the Serbian National Council of Romani Minority, both of which (yet again) fail to recognize the relevance and the importance of language leaders who are not members of the academic world in this country. In the fall of 2016 an international conference was held in SASA, 'Maintenance, protection and perspectives of Romani in Serbia', in which traditional standardization debates dominated the conference discourse. Top-down Romani standardization was thus once again presented as the *sine qua non* for any language education policy (i.e. for any systemic integration of Romani into the mainstream educational system), in which no space for adaptive, enabling or administrative leadership is to be found (for an illustration, see, e.g., Đurić, 2012; Acković, 2012).

However, if language is viewed as a complex system in constant and open interaction with speech communities and societies in which it is used, it becomes obvious that a space should be made for emergent interactional practices to be employed which would satisfy the communities' not only basic communicative, but also social, cultural, ethnic, religious, affective, psychological and other needs. These new practices should become recognized by the administrative leaders and translated into language policy documents. In case of Romani, this would imply that no standard variety should be imposed from the top-down, which often, if not always, stands in opposition to the speakers' communicative competence in local non-standardized varieties. This is what Halwachs (2012, p. 324), writes about consequences of a top-down Romani standardization in Romania and its introduction into mainstream education in that country[11]:

> Its use in Romani classes is often criticized by local Roma activists and teachers; primarily, because neither pupils nor their Romani-competent parents are able to identify with this variety. In these accounts the standard is described as distant to local varieties and even as incomprehensible to some extent. Furthermore, as it is almost exclusively used in the classroom only and, consequently, has no functions neither in everyday life nor in the public, *this standard is also valued as useless for the future life of the pupils* (italics mine).

Within an alternative approach to Romani language policy and planning, in line with the view of language and society as complex, adaptive systems and following the concepts of heterarchy and leadership, different Romani communities of practice should be empowered to apply communicative practices they feel comfortable with, with an expectation that new communicative and structural patterns would emerge that should find their place within a standard variety (or varieties) of Romani somewhere in the future. This is, of course, very difficult to communicate to most language scholars across Europe, raised and educated within standard-language-cultures (Milroy, 2001), in which the language ideology of modernity, based on the nationalist model of top-down language standardization (Geeraerts, 2003), is applied in the process of status and corpus language planning, and, consequently, in language education policy and planning. This type of standardization has been proven to be (almost) totally insensitive to social change and individual or communal needs, which still causes fervent debates in many European societies, the Serbian one included. As Halwachs' (2012) argument clearly illustrates, it has proven to be ineffective in at least some cases of Romani standardization as well.

That is why I view this participatory, autoethnographic account of the QUALIROM project as a proposal for the search for alternative scientific and societal actions which would create communities of practice and interest consisting of leaders who are capable of designing new research and conceptual paradigms in several fields of linguistics (sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, educational linguistics, anthropological linguistics, etc.). Minority language education policy and planning should be understood as an illustrative example of a possible generalized

implementation of this alternative approach to language and society. The underlying assumption behind this proposal is that we are all social decision-making agents (regardless of our status or ranking in academic, professional and/or 'real-life' communities) and that we should all be empowered through the implementation of a transdisciplinary, participatory and empathic research paradigm to perform as adaptive, enabling or even administrative leaders within complex, non-linear, self-organized and adaptive social structures which are open and flexible to change and improvement. That will also bring us closer to a constructivist knowledge paradigm, understood not as a property of a person or an institution, but as a participatory action based on a given community's perception and interpretation of specified social problems coupled with academic expertise, which results in new findings understood as common goods, shared by all the interested parties and stakeholders. Knowledge which is defined not only by using scientific theories, models, and terminology, but rather constructed in dynamic exchange with people living and working outside of research laboratories and university campuses, in which no clear boundaries are set between scientists and 'subjects or objects' of their research, or among academic disciplines and fields of study. Because quest for knowledge is only sustainable if we are ready to engage personally, function as leaders and (self-)critically evaluate problems at hand as well as our scientific interventions, with self-confidence and empowered by our participation in heterarchic, self-organized, flexible, adaptive and changeable communities of practice or interest.

6. Personal reflection

I am fully confident that the previously outlined transdisciplinary challenges I faced and had to deal with as the Serbian QUALIROM project coordinator make it clear that scholarly defined applied linguistic research objectives are *not* sufficient for the recognition and implementation of successful outcomes of international projects related to teaching and learning minority (often stigmatized) languages in locale-specific social, political and educational domains. In that sense, the QUALIROM project for me is an illustrative example of a grassroots, bottom-up language education policy which implicitly and explicitly defies socio-political contexts based on rigid language ideologies both within the minority and the majority communities. More importantly, it also represents an excellent illustration of the relevance and importance in academic research of meaningful qualitative, transdisciplinary initiative and intercultural dialogue, based on social heterarchy and leadership. And last but not least, the autoethnographic perspective that I opted for has allowed me to recognize and try to address the social relations of inequality which could have marked and seriously affected the project outcomes. The transdisciplinary orientation of the project design contributed to the creation of an innovative community of practice and interest based on distributed responsibility and leadership which was capable of carrying out a complex task of producing a unique set of teaching materials, while at the same time assuring the positive validation and reinforcement of all the cultural, linguistic, ethnic and other specificities of different Romani groups that were most certainly the most important cohesive force of the QUALIROM project.

Notes

1. Grounded theory is understood as an epistemological orientation and a set of methodological procedures which allow researchers to learn from their own fieldwork in ways that add new theoretical dimensions to their initial hypotheses and allow for their meaningful conceptual adaptation during the research process and data analysis. (see Charmaz, 2005 for further detail).
2. Some of the Romani participants had, prior to the inclusion in the project, been exposed to some secondary education, while others had high school and/or university diplomas. None of them had any previous formal training in applied linguistics and language teaching methods. Legislative affirmative measures in Serbia allow members of Romani communities to work as teachers of their L1 without satisfying the academic criteria expected from teachers of other subjects in primary and in secondary education. (I dare say that the validity

of this provision is highly debatable since it discourages Romani students from entering and completing tertiary education.) In other four countries, no formal teaching of Romani in primary or secondary education before the initiation of the project had been present. Enthusiast volunteers from Romani communities carried out all teaching activities for which no formal educational credentials were required.

3. If you visit the official QUALIROM webpage, you will easily find your way through hundreds of teaching materials that were produced and published online in free domain format, which continue to be updated and improved even upon the completion of the project. Furthermore, a proposal for a Romani teacher training module at the university level was also designed by the academic coordinators, but it awaits some future funds to be set into motion. Finally, the ECML, as an institution of the Council of Europe offered the other members of the project consortium to design a training seminar based on the QUALIROM materials which is now available to all ECML member states as one of the training activities provided by this organization. The seminar has been active for the last two years and a half (at the time of writing this paper), and member states such as Slovenia, Austria, Serbia and the Czech Republic have already benefited from it. The seminars are designed in accordance with each interested country's specific needs and target varied audiences, such as language planners, institutions of language education policy, Romani language teachers, etc.
4. Until the present day, no reliable data on a number of teachers in Serbia who speak Romani could be found. Informal analyses carried out in 2009 indicated these numbers to be extremely low. The number of total Romani population according to unofficial and consolidated data (educated guesses based on combined unofficial and census data) range between 250,000 and even 500,000 of Roma in Serbia, while it is postulated that between 91,500 and 203,000 Romani children of preschool and elementary school age live among us (Baucal, 2012).
5. *Gadjo*, m./*gadja*, f.: Romani term for persons of non-Romani origin.
6. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and educational laws yield significant space and relevance to the official attitudes and opinions of councils of national minorities with respect to multiethnicity, multiculturalism and multilingualism which are publically recognized and overtly valued in all spheres of life and language use (private, educational, professional and administrative domains). In general terms, they form a part of the overall top-down infrastructure of legislative architecture in the areas of social services, administration, education and the like, having decision-making power in all cases concerning the members of those ethnolinguistic groups living in Serbia. Roma are among them.
7. The Romani standardization debate in the former Yugoslavia and in Serbia, which has been going on since 1971 (when the International Romani Union was founded in London; Matras & Reershemius, 1991, p. 109) has been dominating the Romani linguistics scene in the region, without any serious references to language education policies and real-life issues of generations of Romani children, who have been denied textbook materials in their L1 on the basis of a quasi-academic argument that no educational materials can be published in non-standardized linguistic varieties (Baucal, 2012; Filipović, 2012). The latest coordinated attempt is a product of a number of top-down and bottom-up language planning activities initiated and carried out by a number of Romani scholars from different countries created upon the break-up of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. The results of their endeavour is a document published in Sarajevo in 2012 titled *Standardizacija romskog jezika (Standardization of the Romani language)*. The general conclusions of the document are that both macro and micro language planning need to be addressed, meaning that (1) cooperation with authorities and policy makers on a state level need to be approached and legislation regarding the status and the use of Romani in different language domains should be clarified, and (2) corpus language planning (particularly in the area of specific linguistic registers in the area of modern science and technology as well as political discourse) needs to be paid attention to. Cooperation among the scholars from the Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Slovenia, Rumania and Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a prerogative for any systemic, sustainable and long term standardization of the Romani language (Đurić, 2011, p. 9) However, details regarding the standardization process itself have still remained unspecified, since no clear objectives have been decided upon (whether the standard should be based upon a single dialect, or to what extent it should be mutually understandable to Romani speakers from other European countries.
8. This also belongs to the realm of experiences that none of us learn about when we attend courses on field methods in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Far from ideal financial situations teach us to be extremely creative and resourceful in order to carry out some of the basic activities envisioned by different project proposals.
9. Heterarchy is defined as an emergent form of self-organization of communities of practice in which responsibility and authority are defined and assigned by establishing relationships of trust and confidence, heterogeneity and minimal hierarchy (Stark, 2001, pp. 71, 75).
10. For a detailed account of language leadership (adaptive, enabling and administrative), see Filipović (2015).
11. The variety in case is a standardized variety of Romani proposed by the Romani Union in its Warsaw declaration of 1990.

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