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## A NOTE ON ROMANI WORDS IN THE GAY SLANG OF ISTANBUL

### 0. INTRODUCTION

It has been known for a long time that words from Romani, the language of the Gypsies, are in use in a great number of secret languages, slangs and jargons in Europe. These are used by a variety of professional or social groups, and they are used as in-group languages for the purpose of identifying as a group member or to prevent that outsiders can understand communication. In a few cases a few words have also become part of the nonstandard language. The number of words used in these forms of speech may vary from just a handful in some (where most of the lexis may derive from another source) to several hundreds (where Romani is the main source for the lexis). Romani words have been documented in such secret languages in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and elsewhere.

These jargons must be distinguished from Para-Romani, which are forms of speech used by Gypsies in which a Romani lexicon is combined with the grammatical system of the host country (Boretzky/Igla 1994). These Para-Romani varieties may have many similarities with some of the jargons that use almost exclusively a large number of Romani words, and some of these Para-Romani varieties have evolved into a form of speech similar to jargons. All of these types of languages are discussed in the different contributions to Matras (1998).

In this paper we will discuss varieties of secret languages in Turkey that have not been discussed in the literature yet. We will deal with the secret language vocabulary of gays and transsexuals in Istanbul in Turkey.

### 1. ROMANI IN TURKEY

The Gypsy minority is one of the major ethnic groups that exist in Turkey. Even though the exact number of people is unknown, some have estimated the Gypsy minority in Turkey at more than three million people. There are at least three distinct Gypsy populations in Turkey: speakers of Romani (otherwise only in Europe, Central Asia and Iran), Lomavren (Armenian Romani, of which only the lexicon has been preserved) and Domari or Middle Eastern Romani. Andrews (1989) lists the Gypsy communities known to him and his collaborators, and on that basis the figure of three million seems too high. As we will focus on Romani, we will hence speak of Roma and leave the other Gypsies out of consideration.

In general Roma in Turkey are monolingual in Turkish. In many communities only the older people know Romani. Nevertheless, there are some groups to be met among which Romani is remarkably well preserved to the extent that even children use it.

Even in some communities where Romani is no longer in use, some groups use a number of non-Turkish words in their speech. This seems especially true for Gypsy musicians, who use a form of slang in which the bulk of the lexicon is of Romani origin. The second author collected some in Istanbul in 1995, and later Melih Duygulu provided us with a list of some 100 of these slang words.

Apart from those slangs used by Roma, there are also social groups that use Romani words embedded in Turkish: gays and prostitutes. In this paper we will present some preliminary results from our research on Romani words in these forms of slang. It is mostly for the purpose of documentation that we provide these here.

## 2. SLANG IN TURKEY

These are not often mentioned among the social groups elsewhere who make use of Romani in their slang. Victor Friedman (p. c.) informed us that Greek gays also use Romani in their slang. Due to the lack of access to users or printed sources, we have not been able to access the extent to which Romani words are used there. We know of no other examples where gays or prostitutes use a lexis in their slang which is primarily from Romani.

There have been some earlier studies on slang in Turkey, and a few Romani words can often be found in studies and collections, and most are also correctly identified as such.

In Steinherr (1932), for instance, we find words such as *biyav* 'wedding', *habbe* 'food' from Romani, but the bulk of the words is not from Romani.

Romani musicians in Üsküdar use slang words partly from Romani, such as:

SLANG	TURKISH EQUIVALENT	ENGLISH	ROMANI SOURCE
maró	ekmek	bread	maró 'bread'
baró	yabancı	stranger	baró 'big'
paní	su	water	paní 'water'
cükél	köpek	dog	džukel 'dog'
şukár	güzel	pretty, etc.	şukar 'good, pretty'
román	çingene	Gypsy	Rom 'Gypsy'

Undoubtedly a systematic survey of different regional and social types of Turkish slang would reveal more words of Romani origin, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

## 3. GAY SLANG

We accidentally met a Turkish gay man who appeared to be well acquainted with the gay slang used in Istanbul. He knew that quite a few of these were derived from Romani. We spent an evening with him trying to collect as many words as possible, which we wrote down. The first author later visited this man in Istanbul, who also enabled him to make some tape recordings with a number of people, totalling around two hours.

We will list the special slang vocabulary here. Many of these words are from Romani, but we also identified some Slavic words such as *lubunja* 'gay' (Slavic *liubima* 'darling' (feminine)).

Here we only list the Romani words.

SLANG	MEANING	ROMANI	MEANING
naş	go away, get lost	nas!	flee!, go!
gaci	woman	gadži	non-Gypsy woman
laço	good looking man	laço	good
şukar	handsome man	şukar	good, pretty
minca	vagina	mindž	vagina
çangal	shoe	cang	leg
tato	bath	tato	warm
phuri	old man	phuri	old (fem.), old woman
p(h)uri balamoz	old man	phuri balamo	old (feminine) non-Gypsy
denyo	mad, crazy	dejno, dilo, dilino	insane
matiz	drunk	mato	drunk
piiz	drinking	pi-	to drink
baaro	male adult	baro	big
but baare	big penis	but baro	much, many, very big
but	very	but	much, many, very
taliga	taxi	taliga	carriage
taligatör	taxi driver	taliga	carriage
tariz olmak	falling in love	thar- + T. 'to be'	to burn
kelav	prostitute	kelav	I play, I dance
peniz	talk, talking	pen-	to say, to speak
çorna /džorna/	theft	çor-	to steal
çornaci	thief	çor-	to steal
cici	homosexual	džidže	elder sister
soralo	homosexuals	şoralo	man with big head leader
tariz	burning, flame	thar-	to burn
habbe	meal, food	habe, xabe	meal, food

As said above, these word list is not complete, but we have attempted to list all those of Romani origin. Some other words are of unknown origin, and some appear to be of Kurdish or Slavic origin.

It is not surprising that a big portion of these words are connected with sexuality. Like in other forms of slang, the original words are modified in meaning and/or form. These are all recurrent themes in studies of slang.

There are a few remarks we could make about the phonology of some of these words. One would expect these words to be adjusted to Turkish phonology, but that is not always the case. For instance, Romani aspiration has been preserved in the word *phuri*, even though

Turkish has no distinctive aspiration. Further the vowels are clearly longer in *baare* and *piiz*, even though neither Turkish nor (most dialects of) Romani has distinctive vowel length.

As can be expected these words are embedded in a Turkish system. These words get Turkish endings, and word order is Turkish as well. Here are two examples:

- (1) *Gaci hayde habbe-ye naş-alim*  
 woman come food-on go-let's  
 R(omani) T(urkish)/(R.) R-T R-T  
 'Woman ('sister'), let us go and eat'
- (2) *Sen-in koline but tariz-im*  
 you-for love much burn-1SG  
 T-T ?? R. R-T  
 'I am burning all over for your love'

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This preliminary survey shows the presence of Romani words found their way into different kinds of slang in Istanbul used by specific social groups. The use of specific gay slang is known from other parts of the world as well, but except from Greece no Romani vocabulary of any size is in use. We cannot provide an explanation for the fact that it is precisely gays and prostitutes, both of which social groups around sexuality, in which so many Romani words show up, since the explicit discussion of such matters goes against Romani culture. It is also as yet unclear whether the vocabulary spread from one of these groups to the other – this seems unlikely if we look at their respective networks.

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