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

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TRANSDISCIPLINARY QUALITATIVE PARADIGM IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND MINORITY LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING[1]

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.

Keywords: applied linguistics; transdisciplinary qualitative research; autoethnography; participatory action research; Romani

Subject classification codes: include these here if the journal requires them

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[1] This is a significantly extended and revised version of my article *Kisebbségi nyelvek az alkalmazott nyelvészetben - A résztvevöi akciókutatás és az autoetnográfia között*, published in Hungarian by the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences (Filipović, J. 2016. Kisebbségi nyelvek az alkalmazott nyelvészetben - A résztvevöi akciókutatás és az autoetnográfia között [Minority languages in applied linguistics: Between participatory action research and autoethnography]. In: K. István & B. Csilla (eds.) *Áktakános Nyelvészeti Tanulmányok XXVIII.A többnyelvüség dimenziói: Terek, kontextusok, kutatási távlatok. [General Linguistics Studies XXVIII. Dimensions of multilingualism: Spaces, contexts, research prospects]*. Budapest: Akadémai Kiadó, pp. 147-163).

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 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 a 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 included interested parties and 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, Filipović, 2015).

Furthermore, applied linguistics has for the longest time been recognized as one of the most fertile fields for quantitative approach to academic study, which has "grown out of desire to emulate the 'objective' procedures in natural sciences" (Dörnyei, 2007: 31), and has relied on "numbers and variables, standardized procedures and statistical analyses in a continuous quest for universal truths" (Dörnyei, 2007: 33-34), rather than on "interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" which help the researchers "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin & Linkoln, 2005: 3). 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).

Minority language study, such as analysis of language contacts, language maintenance, language revitalization, and language policy and planning, aside from being submitted to 'objective' quantitative analysis, "has (also) been geared toward classification of minority languages, documentation and storage in documental archives, which, more than anything, assures their preservation within academic contexts" (Flores Farfán & Córdoba Hernández, 2012: 92). In other words, minority languages have been treated as objects of pure scientific interest with no real or immediate relationship with the communities that use them in real life communicative actions.

1.1. Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in applied linguistics

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, 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, even though these two approaches (interdsciplinarity and transdisciplinarity) cannot be viewed as "mutually exclusive categories" (Klein, 2008: 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 also work toward

"solv(ing) the problems of the life-world. (...) By transgressing disciplinary paradigms and surpassing the practical problems of single actors, transdisciplinary research is challenged by the following requirements: to grasp the complexity of the problems, to take into account the diversity of scientific and societal views of the problems, to link abstract and case specific knowledge, and to constitute knowledge with a focus on problem-solving for what is perceived to be the common good". (Hirsh Hadorn, et al., 2008: 19).

In line with the above 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 fidae* 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 study, thus making this research inherently interdisciplinary, as it blurs the borders among academic disciplines, steps away from the "pure" science of linguistics and includes "debates in the sociology of language, ethnicity and nationalism, sociolinguistics, social and political theory, education, law and history" (May, 2008: xiii), in order to provide a comprehensive account of a complex relationship between politics of identity and "cultural, linguistic and political expression of minority ethnicities (which) is the cause of many problems and conflicts in the modern world" (May, 2001, cit. in O'Reilly, 2003: 30).

I add to all the above a transdisciplinary and qualitative perspective as I adopt and illustrate the relevance of (participatory) action research in applied linguistic minority language study in which all interested parties, regardless of their membership in academia or their educational status, take active role and work together in improving the educational situation of native speakers of a stigmatized minority language, in this case, the speakers of Romani.

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: 26).

As will be presented in the following section, this concept is further transformed into participatory action research which adds to a better understanding of the notions of complexity and diversity in the science of the 21st century.

"'Diversity' means that empirical dimensions relevant to describing and analysing processes are heterogeneous in the sense that they belong to different disciplines or to the perceptions of different actors, and that there are plural values and norms that do not fit together in a systematic way. (...) 'Complexity' is used for the interrelations among heterogeneous dimensions, or plural values and norms." (Hirsch Hadorn et. al, 2008: 26)

Consequently, I define transdisciplinary research as generative, dialogical, collaborative and reflective and (Filipović, 2015), 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: 6). It transpires into

contextualized research based on nonpositivist orientation to science, which accounts for for meaning and purpose that humans attach to their actions, takes into consideration local voices and voices of others and stays away from the grand scientific narratives in the interpretation of the research findings, This type of research allows for a range of points of view and interpretations which not only shape in a number of ways initial research postulates and research questions (hypotheses), but it also creates space for application of grounded theories[2] which assure the possibility for inherent change of course and maturation during the research process itself (Filipović, 2015: 13). Consequently, the concept of knowledge (and knowledge construction) in transdisciplinary research includes participation, contextualization, evolution, lifelong engagement, transference and adaptation to other fields and problems/issues. Moreover, that also implies that transdisciplinary research needs to involve auto-reflection by the researchers who grow and mature with their research projects and allow for criticisms, adaptations and changes within the framework of their original and ongoing epistemological, academic points of view.

All the above also points toward the relevance of the qualitative research paradigm in applied linguistic (minority language oriented) research, which seeks to understand language and its functions in different interactional domains not as neutral means of communication. Moreover, this type of research makes an attempt to examine language in correlation with social, political, economic, cultural, and other extralinguistic factors relevant to determining the speakers' social status, relevance and power within and across groups and communities (Filipović, 2015: 23).

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[2] "The term 'grounded theory' refers both to a method of inquiry and to the product of inquiry. […] Essentially, grounded theory methods are a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development." (Charmaz, 2005: 507)

2. Qualitative, Transdisciplinary Paradigm: Participatory Action Research and Autoethnography

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

"The qualitative research community consists of groups of globally dispersed persons who are attempting to implement a critical interpretative approach that will help them (and others) make sense of the terrifying conditions that define daily life in the first decade of this new century. […] They use any and all of the research strategies (case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, biographical, historical, participatory, and clinical)",

systematically resisting the formulation of a unified epistemological and methodological paradigm, and yet maintaining a generic focus:

"(a) the 'detour through interpretative theory'; (b) the analysis of politics of representation and the textual analysis of literary and cultural forms, including their production, distribution, and consumption; (c) the ethnographic, qualitative study and representation of these forms in everyday life; (d) the investigation of new pedagogical and interpretative practices that interactively engage critical cultural analysis in the classroom and the local community; and (e) a utopian politics of possibility that redresses social injustices and imagines a radical democracy that is not yet a reality." (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: xiv- xv, cit. in Filipović, 2015: 15-16)

Participatory involvement has a long historical trajectory in ethnographic research:

"Participant observation of the positivist social science is characterized by researchers' prolonged stay within communities they investigate, and based on the assumption of the possibility and necessity of objective observation of people's lives, their problems, joys and tragedies, in order to "to produce documentary information that

was not only "true", but also reflected the native's own point of view about reality" (Tedlock, 2005: 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 & McTaggart, 2005: 560), which adds a relatively new dimension to the term participatory *action* research[3]. Social and individual involvement thus becomes one of the key features of participatory action research within the new qualitative paradigm. Participatory action research, in this context, has to be understood as involvement of researchers in the communities they study and involvement of members of those communities in shaping the conclusions of the research process. (Filipović, 2015: 16-17). 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

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[3] Participatory action research in applied linguistics has traditionally been understood as a type of research involving researcher's self-assessment and critical review of one's own academic and didactic activities. Herein, a transdisciplinary dimension is added to the term with a clear notion of social action, empathy and social engagement.

otherness, i.e., ideologies of communities of practice or interest who do not belong to the proscribed Eurocentric world view have until recently often been neglected and their points of view not taken as valuable, thus further complicating an extremely needed, but often very delicate, dialogue among the participants from both the scientific and the life-world communities: "Neglecting the diversity of goals, values, expectations and related power constellations in both society and science exposes the danger of purely symbolic participation, which results in solidifying roles and positions with low innovative potential of transdisciplinarity" (Wiesmann, et al., 2008: 8) (see Filipović, 2015, for further detail).

Following the above outlined theoretical and methodological considerations, 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 a significant portion of our general knowledge construction within the scope of applied linguistics and minority language learning and teaching.

I will start with a somewhat extensive definition of autoethnography offered by Canagarajah (2012: 260):

"The best way to define autoethnography is through the three terms that constitute it: *auto*, *ethno*, and *graphy*. To begin with, *auto*: This form of research is conducted and represented from the point of view of the self, whether studying one's own experiences or those from one's community. (...) Next, *ethno*: The objective of this research and writing is to bring out how culture shapes and is shaped by the personal. (...) Finally, *graphy*: Writing is not only the means of disseminating one's knowledge and experiences; there is an emphasis on the creative resources of writing especially narrative, for generating, recording and analyzing data."

The same author goes on to argue for the importance of *analytical autoethnography*,

"that engages directly with theories and research findings (Anderson, 2006). (...) Many forms of written artefacts go into the construction of my narrative books and articles I read, institutional reports and correspondence about my professional performance, and the texts I wrote in my role as a teacher and scholar. The very act of composing this narrative enabled me to further explore some of my hidden feelings, forgotten motivations and suppressed emotions. The structure of this narrative will, I hope, generate additional comparisons and interpretations from alternate perspectives."

(Canagarajah, 2012: 260-261)

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 between the individual, local, glocal, national and transnational cultural, socio-political and educational contexts which have shaped the community of practice I that would like to describe, and the outcomes of the QUALIROM project that I write about (see, e.g., Ellis, C., 2004, and Spry, 2001 for further information about autoethnographic research).

3. Romani Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century: the QUALIROM Project from the Outside

"The Roma represent one of the major ethnic minories in a large number of European countries. It is Europe's largest transnational minority, a 'non-territorial' nation of Europe. According to Guy (2003: 48), there are approximately between seven and eight and a half million Gypsies or Roma living in Europe, which makes them the largest European ethnic minority without a nation-state or anything that even resembles a homeland. Almost two thirds of all Roma live in the former Communist and Socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe, including Serbia, and everywhere they live, they

make up the most stigmatized and marginalized segment of the population." (Filipović et al, 2010: 261).

"From a linguistic point of view, Romani may be described as a heterogeneous cluster of varieties without any homogenizing standard" (Halwachs, 2003: 192). The all-encompassing socio-political marginalization of the Roma in all countries where they have lived for centuries and the fact that their language has not had a "developed, codified standard, and, as a consequence, no prescriptive norms" (Halwachs, 2003: 195), 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, 1012b, for a detailed account of th

e 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 (Phillipson, 1992; 2000; 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; 2002; 2004; 2005; 2006; May, 2008; Flores Farfán & Córdova Hernández. 2012; 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 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 above cited activity 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 (see Filipović et al., 2010, Filipović, 2015, Filipović 2016a, for further details regarding the QUALIROM project). However, my intention 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 linguistics and language education policies projects I have been involved over the years) actually do not provide any links to the 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 are created as byproducts/lateral outcomes (academic as well as social or cultural) of all research projects, and they are always shaped not only by initial efforts to satisfy the project's academic demands but also by their members' interpretation of the above outlined factors and forces.

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, and

marginalized minority groups, such as Roma. Consequently, the right to high quality education is seen as a prerequisite for the development of

"a new psycho-cognitive space for Romani children that would allow them to recognize and validate their own ethnolinguistic identity while at the same time learning how to be competent members of the majority community of their peers within the formal educational system. (...) As it has been shown many times before, only those who make themselves visible in the public eye can actually make a difference in their existence, in the existence of their fellow members of the same ethnic group as well as in the existence of other ethnic minority and majority groups" (Filipović, et al. 2010: 273).

QUALIROM was a university-coordinated project (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.

The 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, from the participating countries were joined in national teams. Collaborative learning and knowledge construction was 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 the design and development of teaching materials in different Romani dialects defined by the levels of the CEFR. The university professors accepted the administrative leadership of the project with a clear understanding that their academic competence was to be broadened by the native Romani speakers' experiences and learning and teaching proposals.

The main applied linguistic objective of the 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. As it turned out, this particular decision proved to have 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, expertise of the native speakers of different varieties of Romani was validated and successfully implemented throughout the implementation of the project, giving it a truly transdisciplinary flavor. 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 straight forward, well designed and with clear objectives. The objectives were all achieved and the sustainability of the project outcomes assured[4].

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: 93). On the whole, the implicit (critical) linguistic objective of the project was to help the Romani teachers perceive the importance of the common linguistic core of different Romani dialects and to become ready

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[4] 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 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 year and a half (at time of writing this paper), and member states such as Slovenia and Austria have already benefited from it, while some other states plan to invite the ECML experts, member of the QUALIROM team, some time in the near future. The seminars are designed in accordance with each interested country's specific needs and targets varied audiences, such as language planners, institutions of language education policy, Romani language teachers, etc.

and willing to apply their newly developed plurilidalectal competence when faced with students from different dialectal backgrounds in their own classrooms (see Matras, Y. & G. 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 a further discussion).

4. The QUALIROM Project from the Inside: a Participatory, Autoethnographic 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. 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 impression of the mechanisms of top-down language education policies in Serbia, which I had to be involved in in order to assure my country's participation in the project (for a more detailed account, see Filipović, 2015: 87-97).

First and foremost, as already stated, the project needed competent Romani speakers willing to take part in the design of new teaching materials. As 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 first thought was that it would be easy to find and choose 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[5] (see Filipović et al. 2007; 2010 for a more detailed account). As a university professor, I was very enthusiastic about the project and certain that the proposed objectives were not only reachable, but also something that I would enjoy working on. I sat and listened in awe 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

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[5] 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). A term 'hidden minority' (Sikimić, 2004: 7) is often used in anthropological and ethnolinguistic research on Romani population in the Balkans, precisely in order to clearly underlie the fact that in term of language rights, the Roma have never been provided or offered "any institutional support for language maintenance or revitalization, systematic, well-structured and high-quality formal education in their L1, or any other significant culturally and socially visible engagement" (Filipović, 2015: 89). Consequently, it is not a big surprise that no systematic information regarding the exact number of native speakers of Romani, their levels of linguistic competences and the exact distribution of Romani dialects in Serbia has never become a topic of any serious academic research in this country and in the region (Filipović, 2016a).

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 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. 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 people 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 and 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 a I did make a difference in changing the way in which they perceived the typical *gadja*[6] 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

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[6] *Gadjo*, m./*gadja*, f.: Romani term for persons of non-Romani origin.

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[7]) 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 now (since 2002 when the 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 nominal nature, limited to signatures on documents supporting the initiatives 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 from the community itself, 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[8] (I was directly told so in one of the few

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[7] 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 valorized 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.

[8] The Romani standardization debate in former Yugoslavia and in Serbia, which has been going on since 1971 (when the International Romani Union was founded in London; Matras, 1991: 109) has been dominating the

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 ex-Yugoslavia (see Đurić, 2011: 9 for a detailed account of the Romani standardization in this region). He single-handedly decided

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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 (Filipović, 2012b, Baucal, 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 endeavor 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 legislature 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: 9) However, details regarding the standardization process itself have still remained unspecified, as 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 (Filipović, 2016a).

that our materials were not relevant to the educational situation of Romani children in this country (for a more detailed discussion, see Filipović, 2016a).

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 for us and be compensated in academic credits[9]. 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)

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[9] 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.

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 all 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:

"As it turned out, the Romani teachers were exhilarated to learn about the origin of their language, about its fragmentation and the dialectal situation of the present day. Through the method of comparative reconstructions, they were shown how and why lexemes in their corresponding dialects often resemble one another, but do not look or sound completely the same. The basis for the theoretical apparatus for identification of

cognates in different dialects was provided for them and they reveled in the fact that then

on, they could explain to others how Romani came to be what it is today" (Filipović,

2015: 93).

It was another additional and unplanned gain of the project: the 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 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. 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.

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 et al, 2007, cit. in Filipović, 2015), is related to

heterarchically[10] 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, 2007: 308, cit. in Filipović, 2015: 39). 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*[11] 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 given communicative 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

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[10] 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: 71; 75).

[11] For a detailed account of language and society as complex systems, and types of leadership (adaptive, enabling and administrative) in language and society, see Filipović (2015).

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: 305, cit. in Filipović, 2015: 39). 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: 458). Every step which points toward 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 were dominating 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. 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 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: 324), writes about consequences of a top-down Romani standardization in Romania and its introduction into mainstream education in that country[12]:

> "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, Filipović, 2007, 2012a, 2015), 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

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[12] The variety in case is a standardized variety of Romani proposed by the Romani Union in its Warsaw declaration of 1990.

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 (Filipović, 2009, 2012a, 2015), 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 consisted of leaders who are capable of designing new research and conceptual paradigms in all areas 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 notion of constructive knowledge, 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 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 above outlined challenges I faced and had to deal with as the Serbian QUALIROM project coordinator (coming from the project participants on one hand, and from the institutions of the state, on the other hand), 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 grass root, 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. It has most certainly helped me understand the need for and apply an individualized scientific approach to societal challenges through 'culturally sensitive' research (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005: 1123), in order to assure positive validation and reinforcement of all the specificities of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and racial groups different from our own.

Acknowledgment

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