

To the Honorable UNESCO State Delegations

THE ETHNIC NAME OF THE RROMS
(some clues about its accurate spelling – the double RR issue)

Articles 33 & 34 of the UNESCO's "Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights" (World Conference on Linguistic Rights – Barcelona, 9 June 1996) state:

33. *All language communities have the right to refer to themselves by the name used in their own language. Any translation into other languages must avoid ambiguous or pejorative denominations.*

34. *Everyone has the right to the use of his/her own name in his/her own language in all spheres, as well as the right, only when necessary, to the most accurate possible phonetic transcription of his/her name in another writing system –*

This implies that, to the best of technical possibility, all language communities have the right to use "*the most accurate possible transcription*" for their name itself, including when quoted in other languages.

The name of the Rromani people has been quite frequently an object of amazement for non-Rromani persons, due to the presence of an initial double RR, a spelling circulated by most Rromani local, national and international organizations, as well as many scholars.

It seems useful to explain the reasons of this spelling.

1. Rromani phonemics distinguishes two different kinds of /r/, one rolled as in Italian and Slavic languages (IPA [r]), the other one differing from rolled [r] but uttered with various pronunciations, according to the area under consideration (IPA [r:] [ɾ] [ɽ] [ʀ] [ɣ] [x] [h] etc.). The second kind of /r/ has been written with double RR as early as 1890 – in the very first Rromani dictionary written by a Rrom, Ferenc Sztojka from Paks (Hungary – *Magyar és Czigány Nyelv Gyök-Szótára* with some 13,000 entries).

The crucial point is the distinction between two phonemes /r/ and /rr/, which allows to distinguish words like:

rani "lady" / **rrani** "branch"

ćorimos "theft" / **ćorrimos** "poverty"

bar "hedge (also "garden")" / **barr** "stone". The contrast between /r/ and /rr/ is therefore well established from a linguistic point of view and the fact that most non-Rromani ears do not distinguish the two sounds (because there not such a distinction in their language) is not an argument to ignore it, just as the fact that most non-Spanish ears do not distinguish in this language *pero* "but" from *perro* "dog" is not an argument to ignore it. Similarly, the average Japanese speaking European languages doesn't distinguish between /r/ and /l/, although this contrast is essential in European languages (cf. *light/right*, *alive/arrive*, *election/erection* etc.). It happens by chance that the phoneme /rr/ occurs at the beginning of the Rroms' ethnic name and creates a contrast in sound as compared to words like **rovel** "s/he cries" or **rodel** "s/he looks for", whereas the sound is the same as in **rroj** "spoon".

This has lead the 4th Rromani Congress in Warsaw (1990) to decide this sound should be represented by for the digraph **rr**, easy to reproduce in foreign languages, instead of diacritic sign as *ṛ/ṝ/ṝ̄* etc... which would be at risk to be dropped by most publishers of texts in other languages.

2. Rromani rolled /r/ developed from Old Indic (Sanskrit) rolled र [r], whereas the other one, written /rr/, developed from Old Indic retroflex sounds like ढ [d̪] ढ [t̪] or ढ [ɽ]. **Rroj** "spoon"

corresponds to डोई [dōī] "(wooden) spoon/ladle" and **Rrom** originates from डोम्ब [domba] "a percussionist, a musician, an artist".

3. The third reason is that the Romanian government insisted through the OSCE Human Dimension process (Struţel report, Warsaw 1994) to promote the scientific accurate spelling **Rrom**, instead of the unjustified spelling *Rom in order to clearly distinguish this ethnonyme from the Romanian national name, which originates from Rome, Roman etc... We can only agree with this political preference which is totally consonant with linguistic science and Rromani usage.

Accordingly, we ask the UNESCO to adopt also the accurate spelling Rrom, especially in the perspective of the recognition of the 5th of November as the International day of Rromani language, a proposal launched by Croatia and submitted by its ambassador to the UNESCO, his Excellency Mr Goldstein, to the present UNESCO general assembly.

As far as national languages are concerned, we may distinguish the following:

1. languages with non Latin script, as Russian and other languages with Cyrillic script, Greek, Armenian, Georgian etc... The use of single p, ρ, ρ, ϕ etc... is recommended, since initial consonant doubling is impossible in these languages.

2. languages with Latin script:

a) some of them may accept easily the /rr/ spelling, as Albanian for example (although the Serbian practice has imposed so far single /r/ in Cossovia). The solution is /rr/ in such languages.

b) most of them may accept initial /rr/, although this spelling is not common. It is the case of English, French, Spanish, German, Polish, Hungarian and many others. One may observe that the ethnonyme **Rrom** is already in use in academic works and it is advisable to extend its use to all spheres of communication.

c) finally there are some languages, like Italian or Turkish, which cannot accept an initial double consonant and the spelling *Rom may be used in such circumstances.

As a conclusion, we address the interpreters' department of the UNESCO and suggest them resolutely to embed the accurate spelling with double /rr/, namely **Rrom**, to their practice and spell-checkers. The English plural should be **Rroms**, although the Rromani plural **Rroma** may be used as well (as one may observe it in various documents), the feminine is **Rromni** (plural **Rromnis**) and the adjective is **Rromani**: "several Rroms came to the meeting and two Rromnis took the floor, addressing some issues related to Rromani tradition". One may note that the British use is: noun and adjective (both gender) *Rromani* (*Rromany* is obsolete), with plural *Rromanies* for the noun – however this spelling is not recommended for international English.

In Paris, 10.10.2015



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