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The activity spheres framework applied to language policy: Dispositions towards Romani revitalization in Romania

Cristian Padure and Evangelia Adamou

Abstract Current research in language policy has shifted in focus from state-controlled provisions to how individuals and social groups act upon and envisage language policy. In this paper, we pursue this line of research by applying the activity spheres framework (Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, Profile Books, London, 2010) to language policy. More specifically, we examine mental conceptions of the world associated to different activity spheres. To illustrate this dynamic relation, we focus on dispositions towards Romani language policy expressed in an online survey by respondents with an interest in Romani culture, education and language from Romania. Romania officially recognizes Romani as a minority language and has included the Romani language in the education system. Our study shows how language policies in Romania over the past thirty years shaped language ideologies by introducing literacy and formal schooling as options to support language revitalization in addition to family and daily life interactions.

Keywords Language policy; activity spheres; dispositions; Romani; revitalization

Introduction

In the 2000s, there was a shift in language policy research from the study of state-controlled provisions to that of how individuals and social groups act upon and envisage language policy (Spolsky 2004, 2009). In addition, critical scientists have been pushing for a language policy agenda that aligns with the cultural, educational, and economic aspirations of individuals (Canagarajah 2008; Pennycook 2010, 2016). In this paper, we pursue this line of research by proposing a model of language policy based on the ‘activity spheres’ defined by Harvey (2010). In this framework, Harvey distinguishes the following activity spheres: social relations, production and labour processes, daily life, technologies and organisational forms, relations to nature, institutional arrangements and administrative structures, and mental conceptions of the world. In the present paper, we suggest that these activity spheres also have a linguistic component and focus in particular on the language beliefs and ideologies that are

part of the mental conceptions of the world. Though distinct, mental conceptions are intertwined with the other activity spheres, thus offering a unique framework to understand how changes in one sphere may impact other spheres. In the realm of language policy, we argue that co-evolution of activity spheres also has a direct impact on individual attitudes towards language revitalization; these are shaped by historical, geographical and social contexts, official decisions as well as by the everyday experiences of individuals. In addition, these activity spheres can simultaneously operate at different scales, from the local to the global, allowing researchers to study the complexity of language ideologies.

To illustrate this model, we propose a study of dispositions towards Romani language policy among respondents from Romania. Romania officially recognizes Romani as a minority language and incorporated the Romani language in the education system in the 1990s. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we opted for the collection of quantitative data through an online survey. Our group of respondents is interested in the promotion of Romani culture and language.

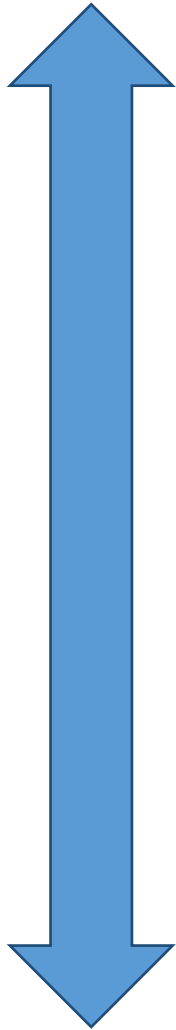
Theoretical background

A classic approach to language policy refers to the set of activities that the state develops in order to promote and regulate the status of languages that are officially recognized (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). Early research on language policy focused on decisions made by institutional actors and only rarely consulted the individuals who were impacted by the language policies. In recent studies, however, language policy is viewed as a combination of individual and group language practices, individual and group beliefs about language, and management decisions by an authorized body (Spolsky 2004, 2009). As noted in Liddicoat and Baldauf (2008), authority is not restricted to state actors, but encompasses individuals and groups that can also have authority over these issues, such as families, schools, and churches. Within critical theory, Pennycook further elaborates on the three aspects of language policy by stressing the importance of local contexts: ‘Practices can be understood as local, everyday social activities from which language regularities emerge; ideologies as different ways in which languages are understood locally; and governmentality as those forms of regulation put into play by the institutionalization of language ideologies’ (Pennycook 2016: 14). In this perspective, attention shifts from the institutions that hold power to the worldviews of the marginalized and connects language practices and ideologies to local social, cultural, and

economic conditions. In consequence, critical scientists call for language policy to be elaborated locally in order to help people achieve their specific cultural, educational, and economic goals (Canagarajah 2008; Pennycook 2010, 2016).

In the present paper, we build on these approaches by proposing that dispositions towards language policy are shaped by the existing institutional arrangements and administrative structures as well as by daily experiences, spaces and contexts. More specifically, we propose to capture this dynamic relation by following the activity spheres framework (Harvey 2010). Expanding on a footnote by Marx in *Capital* (Chapter 15, volume 1), Harvey distinguishes seven ‘activity spheres’: social relations; production and labour processes; reproduction of daily life and the species; technologies and organisational forms; relations to nature; institutional arrangements and administrative structures; and mental conceptions of the world (Harvey 2010: 123, 126). Each of these activity spheres evolves on its own while remaining in constant interaction with the others. Table 1 summarizes the various activity spheres and exemplifies the types of language practices associated with each one (though this list is not exhaustive). We consider that ‘mental conceptions of the world’ encompass ideologies about language alongside other types of representations and that, in keeping with the activity spheres framework, language ideologies are to some extent both independent from and interrelated to language practices as instantiated in the other activity spheres, being ‘a mediating link between social forms and forms of talk’ (Woolard 1998: 3). The present proposal therefore revisits and actualizes Fishman’s ‘domains of language use’ that link interactional settings with language practices (Fishman 1972), by emphasizing the dynamic relation between activity spheres, including mental conceptions of the world, and language practices.

Table 1. Language policy and activity spheres

Activity spheres	Examples of language practices and ideologies	
social relations	language practices in family and in social networks, e.g. churches and schools	
production and labour processes	language practices at work; language practices shaped by local and translocal mobility due to employment	
reproduction of daily life and of the species	daily language practices in the family; daily language practices in interactions with outsiders	
technologies and organisational forms	language practices through phone communication, social media, etc. from various actors (individuals or institutions)	
relations to nature	language practices as a way to describe/name/understand the media in and through which we live	
institutional arrangements and administrative structures	language practices in formal education; language practices in administration; language practices in cultural ceremonies	
mental conceptions of the world	ideologies about language	

Romani language policy and planning in Romania

According to the 2011 Population and Housing census, Roma constitute 3.2% of the total population in Romania. Roma reside both in urban and rural areas and official numbers of the minorities in Romania show their dispersion in areas where they represent between roughly 1.5% of the majority population up to more than 20%, with only a minority of areas where Roma represent more than 60% of the local population.¹ According to the 2011 census, there are 245,677 Romani speakers in Romania out of a total of 621,600 respondents who self-identified as Roma. However, estimates of Roma vary between 1.2 and 2.5 million (Romanian Government report 2013: 6).² This leads to more plausible estimates of between 500,000 and 2.5 million speakers (Saramandu and Nevaci 2009: 56). Yet, several studies document a shift from Romani to the national language, Romanian, and to Hungarian in Transylvania, especially among the younger generations (Horváth and Kiss 2017: 24).

Indeed, Romanian is a powerful attractor as it is the national language of Romania, spoken by 90.65% of the population (17,263,561 people). It is also the main language of literacy and of the media. In 1995, Romania ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, recognizing Romani as a minority language. At present, the National Education Law that applies to the languages of the 20 national minorities also includes Romani (see Art. 32 (3) of the Romanian Constitution; Articles 45, 46 and 47 of the National Education Law No. 1/2011; Order of the Minister of Education no. 5.671 dated September 10, 2012). This legislation offers the possibility for any citizen to study a minority language and to study in the minority language.

In practice, Romani had already been included in high school and university curricula in 1990. In 1992, the study of Romani was extended to grades 1-8 and by 1998 Romani was taught in hundreds of schools at the level of pre-school, primary and secondary education (see Sarău 2013). In 2009, more than 31,000 pupils attended these classes. There are 4 hours per week of Romani language classes, the same as for the study of Romanian. Any student can attend these classes. Students who study Romani can participate in the Romani language competitions and Olympiads. In addition, students who study Romani can pass a Romani language test at the Secondary Education final exams or Baccalaureate exams. According to the periodic report presented by the Romanian Government, 443 teachers teach History and

¹ See http://ispmn.gov.ro/maps/county/limba2011_roma

² This difference in figures is a well-known phenomenon and stems from the social stigma attached to Romani identity (see Friedman 1999).

Traditions of Roma and/or Romani language every year (Raport periodic 2013: 20). In addition, Roma and non-Roma school mediators are employed to facilitate the success of Romani origin pupils at school (Szasz and Csesznek 2019). Moreover, a specific curriculum at the University of Bucharest is available for the training of teachers of Romani. In this context, the Ministry of Education created a syllabus and teaching materials using a standard variety, based on Kalderaš, and an alphabet elaborated by the International Romani Union in 1990 at the Fourth World Romani Congress that took place in Warsaw, Poland. According to Volle (2006), there are mixed feelings in the population regarding the standard, and dialects are highly respected (see Matras 2013a for a comprehensive classification of Romani dialects in Romania).

In addition to the education system, the National Roma Culture Centre as well as a number of associations throughout the country aim to preserve and promote the traditional and contemporary culture of the Roma, including the language.

Regarding the media, the Romanian Television and National TV broadcast two shows that are partly in Romani (*Opre Roma* ‘Way to go Roma’ and *Din viata romilor* ‘From the life of the Roma’). According to the Department for Interethnic Relations, the following TV and radio stations also broadcast programs in Romani: TVR Timișoara Territorial Studio - 4 minutes; TVR 2 - 60 minutes; SC Termica SA, Radio Meridian 95.9, Roșiori de Vede; SC Radio Horion SRL, Radio Horion 103.6 Craiova (<http://www.dri.gov.ro/1812-2/>). However, there are no journals exclusively written in Romani.

Finally, according to article 76 of the Law on local public administration (215/2001), the citizens who belong to a national minority representing over 20% of the local population can address the local public administration authorities in the minority language. In addition, the names of the localities and announcements of public interest should be made in the minority language. Although this law concerns 348 localities, identified in the 2011 census as having more than 20% of Roma, it is not applied in practice.

Regarding activity spheres (in Harvey’s sense), we note that Roma in Romania partake in entities at different scales, from the small-scale family, to the neighbourhood, the city, the nation-state, and larger unions such as the European Union. Within these entities, Romani individuals can maintain social solidarities formed around shared culture, tradition, history, memory, religion, and, last but not least, language practices. Indeed, despite evident variability, Roma in Romania are tightly connected through family networks, and perhaps more loosely connected through social networks such as churches and schools (Toma and Foszto 2018). Employment can be local or transnational, within Europe. Such mobilities are

not only due to economic factors, but also to adverse situations that cannot be adequately controlled by the state, the police, and the military, as noted by Matras (2007). Access to technologies helps sustain translocal communication networks through texting and social media (Matras 2015). In terms of employment the situation varies, but for most Roma, employment entails speaking languages other than Romani. As a result, family relations are at the forefront, promoting the maintenance of Romani, while relations with outsiders are crucial at work, thus promoting language interactions in a language other than Romani. Finally, individuals may share some common mental conceptions through cultural norms, social hierarchies, ethical and moral standards, and belief systems like religious and political ideologies. More relevant to our study, we have focused on dispositions towards language policy.

The online survey

Respondents were contacted through the first author who is a member of the Romani community in Romania and is involved in the institutional promotion of Romani. In that sense, the study is not representative of the population but offers a glimpse into the language ideologies of those who are interested in the promotion and support of Romani language and culture though they are not necessarily actively involved as practitioners.

Methodology

Design. Following Albury (2014), we used a survey method to collect information on knowledge and dispositions within a folk linguistics approach to language policy. In Albury (2017), the author expresses the view that folk linguistics, as elaborated for dialectal diversity by Preston (as in Preston 2011), offers a methodology for capturing knowledge at the level of a given community. More specifically, Albury proposes to investigate ‘knowledge’ and ‘dispositions’ that individuals may have towards language policy. Knowledge, on the one hand, can be shaped by socially endorsed or culturally specific language ideologies (Woolard 1998), as well as by a set of more malleable, personal assumptions (Van Dijk 2003). Dispositions, on the other hand, include attitudes (Baker 2006), but are considered more stable and systematic as they are shaped by societal ideologies (also see Jaffe 2009).

In the survey, participants read statements about revitalization and language policy regarding Romani and were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement. Although

Albury adds a qualitative component to the survey, we did not include this option so as to collect as many answers as possible with a light survey format.

We designed the survey using Google Forms, in Romanian, and maintained the possibility for respondents residing in other countries to participate. Indeed, it is not rare for Roma from Romania to reside in a different country for work while keeping close ties to their country of origin.

The survey included 30 statements, that were either statements of knowledge or dispositions (i.e. statements that included evaluation and an attitudinal stance). These statements were constructed following the language policy and planning framework elaborated by Hornberger (2006) regarding status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. Moreover, they were adapted to the specificities of the Romani context in Romania in a two-step process: first, they were modified according to our understanding of the specific context; and second, they were discussed in collaboration with two other Roma and modified according to suggested formulations.

Respondents. We shared the survey through two Facebook groups: *Rromii de pretutindeni* ('Roma from everywhere') with a total of 24,457 members and *Profesori limba rromani* ('Romani language teachers') with 652 members. Within 24 hours we collected responses from 100 people. Within a week of posting the survey, we had collected responses from 180 people. We then closed the survey. In addition, there were 113 public comments in the large group and 16 comments in the small group, mainly by respondents who wanted to confirm that they filled the questionnaire and thank the authors for this initiative. From these comments we can conclude that most respondents were loosely related to associations for the promotion of Romani culture and that less than 20 Romani language teachers and mediators completed the survey.

At the end of the survey, we included three questions about the respondent's profile (place of residence, knowledge of Romani, self-identification). 86.5% of respondents declared residing in Romania, 80.5% declared being Roma, but only 65% declared speaking Romani. We did not collect any data regarding age and gender as our goal was not to investigate these specific socio-demographic characteristics in detail. However, we consider that as the respondents were members of a Facebook group this indicates that they have access to Internet, a good level of literacy allowing them to respond to the survey, and a high level of motivation to participate to the survey. In that sense, they are not representative of the Romani population as a whole.

Procedure. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale their agreement with various statements (*strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree*) or to choose among several responses.

Dataset. We collected responses from 180 Romanian individuals, although not all respondents answered all questions. Responses to individual questions therefore range from 165 to 171. Indeed, some respondents commented on Facebook that they found the survey too long.

Results

In this section we present the results broken down by mental conceptions of the world in relation to the various activity spheres though we do not compare the mental conceptions to language practices in these spheres. We further relate the results to more generally accepted categorizations in the language policy and planning literature on status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning.

Mental conceptions of the world: Language endangerment and revitalization. First, we wanted to explore whether the respondents considered Romani to be endangered and whether they thought that revitalization efforts were needed (note that we did not use technical terms such as ‘revitalization’ in the survey, but instead used verbs like ‘support’ and ‘promote’). To the statement ‘Romani is at risk of disappearing’, 48% of respondents (strongly) agreed and 25% (strongly) disagreed. This reflects the uncertainty in available figures, where numbers of speakers range between 250,000 and 2.5 million speakers, that is, from endangered to safe. However, in a subsequent statement, 93% of respondents (strongly) agreed that the revitalization measures currently in place were working and that the situation of Romani was improving. We could therefore interpret the responses to the two questions as reflecting the notion that Romani is threatened, though not to a great degree thanks to the language planning and policy actions in place. This reflects the positive outcomes of language policy and planning measures that have been undertaken in Romania over the past thirty years.

In agreement with this view, 49% of respondents (strongly) agreed that revitalising Romani is one of the most important issues Roma people are facing today.

Concerning the statement ‘It is too hard to revitalise Romani today’, 29% of respondents (strongly) agreed. The responses most likely reflect the assessment of the current situation, with Romani receiving institutional support and being spoken by larger numbers.

Respondents also were in favour of revitalising Romani, despite costs in time and money (89%).

Regarding the reasons why Romani should be revitalised, 85% of respondents noted that Romani is part of Romani culture, though only 30% considered that one has to speak Romani to be ‘a real Rom’. We can see here the expression of a moderate view whereby Romani is a valuable part of Romani culture but not a defining feature of Romani identity. In addition, 27% of respondents considered that Romani is more broadly part of the national identity of all Romanians. Although this attitude represents a minority of responses, it deserves our attention as Romani is often promoted among Romani organizations as part of a transnational identity (Matras 2013b). To the question on why Romani should be supported, approximately 70% of respondents answered that Roma have a right to learn Romani, thus suggesting that sensitivity to language rights has increased. 37% of respondents declared that Romani is a good language for the arts (music, literature, etc.); 32% declared that Romani is a good language for socialising; 9.5% declared that Romani is a valuable skill in the economy; and 9.5% that it is a good language for politics. 37% of respondents agreed with the idea that learning Romani should also be favoured because ‘bilingualism makes people smarter’, a notion that is currently promoted in linguistics and popular science and that we find relatively well reflected among this pool of respondents.

89% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘In general, it seems that Roma think Romani is a valuable language’ but only 19% agreed that ‘non-Roma think that Romani is a valuable language’. This suggests that negative attitudes from non-Roma are perceived to be frequent. Moreover, 88.5% of respondents (strongly) agreed that improving the image of the Romani language should be considered among other revitalization strategies.

Mental conceptions of the world and social relations. Regarding status planning, 66% of respondents (strongly) disagreed with the statement ‘It would be better if everyone in the country spoke one language in all situations’, with only 16% (strongly) agreeing with this statement. This result clearly reflects multilingual practices that are entrenched among Romani communities and that are well described in the literature.

Regarding the strategies that could be used in language revitalization, 70% of respondents strongly agreed with the importance of using Romani in more situations. This question did not specify what these situations might be, but it can be interpreted as a general domain expansion, from informal and semi-formal to formal contexts. At present, Romani is generally considered to be well preserved in traditional informal settings and public events

related to Romani culture, it is also expanding in the media, but is not well established in politics or the justice system (see Halwachs 2020); this is indeed the situation in Romania.

In reaction to the statement ‘In revitalising the language, people who can speak Romani should do so...’, 85% of respondents suggested that they should speak Romani ‘when talking with family and friends’. Concerning the same statement, 70% agreed that it was an appropriate language for traditional ceremonies and cultural activities. 40% declared that Romani should also be used in official situations such as in parliament or in dealings with government officials. The predominance of Romani in informal domains such as in interactions with family and friends is in keeping with what Romani sociolinguistic studies report. However, what our study reveals is that respondents feel that Romani should no longer be limited to these contexts but should also be used in more formal domains such as official settings.

More than 70% of respondents agreed that more people should learn Romani. Moreover, 30% agreed and 40% disagreed that when Romani is revitalised, it could also be used by non-Roma. The idea that non-Roma should also learn Romani could thus be associated with the feeling that out-group members do not sufficiently support Romani revitalization efforts and that they could become allies in this process.

Mental conceptions of the world and production and labour processes. In reaction to the statement ‘In revitalising the language, people who can speak Romani should do so...’, 32% of respondents declared that Romani should be used at work. These responses reflect the fact that Romani is mainly an in-group communication language and is not widely used at work. Instead, Roma are multilingual and learn the languages that are needed to communicate with outsiders at work.

Mental conceptions of the world and daily life. In this section, we focus on responses related to mental conceptions about language policy in the family. In particular, the great majority of respondents declared that, at home, Roma children should grow up bilingual, speaking Romani and at least one other language (96%). This preference for a bilingual model is consistent with the literature that reports multilingualism as a widespread practice among Roma and the promotion of such practices at the micro-level of language planning.

Moreover, 82% of respondents (strongly) agreed that Romani will die if parents do not speak it to their children, thus considering language acquisition at home as an important aspect of Romani preservation. This reflects the importance of family language policy to

ensure transmission; see Extra and Yağmur (2011) on high rates of Romani language transmission at home among immigrant communities in Europe but also transmission across transnational networks in Latin America (Acuña, Adamou and Sutre, in press).

Mental conceptions of the world and technologies and organizational forms. With regards to the statement ‘In revitalising the language, people who can speak Romani should do so...’, 69% of respondents considered that it is important to use Romani in the media and on the Internet.

Mental conceptions of the world and institutional arrangements and administrative structures. In this section, we consider the role that institutions are expected to play in the promotion of Romani. In reaction to a statement with multiple possible responses regarding the actors that should be involved in language revitalization, 77% of respondents declared that revitalization is the responsibility of the education system and 76% that it is the responsibility of families and communities. 46% of respondents thought it is the government’s task. 43% of Romanians said that language support is the task of linguists. Moreover, they considered revitalization to be the responsibility of individuals (42%). Overall, these responses most likely stem from the fact that Romani is primarily the language of in-group communication. Similarly, the centrality of the education system in the responses is most likely related to the strong presence of Romani in formal education in Romania. More generally, Albury (2014) reports that university students from New Zealand who responded to a similar survey regarding te reo Māori consider that education should be the main vehicle for language revitalization. Indeed, it seems that in a society with high literacy levels, language revitalization can become strongly associated to formal education.

Concerning the statement regarding standardization, ‘Languages with different dialects need to have one correct, standard version’, 68% of respondents (strongly) agreed. The distribution of responses among our groups of respondents who are familiar with the education system that promotes standard Romani is unsurprising. In any case, this statement does not imply that speakers would follow the standard in their language practices.

Turning to statements related to corpus planning, 61% of respondents (strongly) agreed that each word in Romani should have one correct spelling. This seems related to the fact that the promotion of a standard in orthography is widespread in relation to teaching materials. Matras (2015) suggests that the importance of a standard orthography across various Romani settings and populations internationally is more diverse.

Reacting to the statement ‘If a word doesn’t exist in Romani, it would be better to...’, 55.5% of respondents suggested that a new Romani word should be created based on Indian languages. 23% among Romanians opted for the possibility to use a Romanian word and 36% a new Romani word that would somewhat resemble the Romanian word. This distribution suggests that many respondents are familiar with the Indian origins of Romani in contrast to the prevalence of a more pragmatic approach in support of possibility for speakers to make use of their entire multilingual repertoire to address communicative needs (see among others significant borrowing in Romani from Slovakia in Elšík 2009 and outcomes of considerable bilingual mixing in the Romani-Turkish community in Greek Thrace in Adamou 2010).

Moreover, 91% of respondents (strongly) agreed that it is important to spend money on making Romani dictionaries and grammars, poems and prose written in Romani or translated into Romani. It has been suggested that such productions have merely symbolic value, but the specific statement does not clarify what the motivation behind this response is.

Lastly, in reaction to the statement ‘In revitalizing Romani, it is important to learn how to...’, the majority of respondents chose the option ‘speak it and understand it when it is spoken’. 70% of respondents further agreed with the option ‘read and write it’. This suggests that respondents are in favor of promoting Romani literacy in addition to traditional domains that are covered by oral language practices. Some authors have questioned the importance of literacy in language revitalization (Romaine 2006). The responses in our survey suggest that literacy in Romani is considered to be a useful competence when the option is available. In addition, more than 70% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that revitalising Romani is about properly managing the language’s vocabulary and grammar.

Conclusion

In this paper we consider that language ideologies form part of the broader set of mental conceptions of the world and propose that they should be examined in relation to the co-evolution of the various social, cultural, economic, and political activity spheres as defined by Harvey (2010). We illustrate the merits of this approach through the study of dispositions towards Romani language policy and planning among respondents from Romania including individuals with an interest in Romani language and culture.

More specifically, bilingual child acquisition at home is favoured; parental transmission of Romani is seen as key; general multilingualism is the preferred language

model as opposed to monolingualism; Romani language is viewed as an intrinsic part of Romani culture; speaking Romani is primarily associated with interactions with family and friends rather than in formal settings. These results confirm previous observations on Romani language policy and planning (see Matras 2015; Halwachs 2020).

In addition, responses to our survey shed new light on the impact that institutional practices have on Romani language ideologies in the long term. We found that respondents from Romania consider both speaking and reading/writing to be crucial to support Romani. Indeed, they noted that education plays a central role in the revitalization of Romani, in addition to the role played by families and communities. Finally, respondents opted for the creation of Romani words based on Indic roots, a process that requires the intervention of a learned stakeholder. Responses regarding the role of education confirm observations on how institutional language arrangements shape individual attitudes. It can be seen that once institutional language policies are established, for example by including Romani in the education system, they promote a language ideology whereby language maintenance is ensured through schools. Similarly, institutional language policy based on education endorses the significance of Romani in reading and writing in addition to oral interactions and promotes top-down lexical creation processes rather than everyday processes of lexical borrowing available to individual speakers.

To conclude, this paper is an attempt to apply the activity spheres framework to language policy research. We argue that it has the advantage of proposing a theoretical approach to the study of language policy in a dynamic manner by considering the language practices associated with different activity spheres and their interactions with language ideologies. We further suggest that it is important to consider the dispositions of speakers when discussing language policy.

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