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Cuvinte cheie: megleno-români, dialectul megleno-român, bilingvism, căsătorii mixte, extincția limbii

Starea actuală a meglenoromânilor. Meglenoromâna – un idiom pe cale de dispariție

Rezumat

În articolul de față, autorul descrie cu îngrijorare situația actuală a meglenoromânei, unul din cele trei dialecte istorice sud-dunărene ale românei. Meglenoromâna, ca istroromâna, de altfel, este o mică enclavă lingvistică puternic influențată de limbile cu care a venit în contact de-a lungul secolelor. Acest contact a dus la existența unui bilingvism secular care, la rândul lui, a favorizat o puternică influență în toate compartimentele dialectului meglenoromân. Dislocarea unei mari părți a populației (stabilirea în Turcia sau în România), exodul din mediul rural spre cel urban, căsătoriile mixte, lipsa învățământului în limba română și multe alte cauze vor duce la dispariția iminentă a dialectului meglenoromân într-un viitor apropiat.

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The Current State of Megleno-Romanians. Megleno-Romanian, an Endangered Idiom

Summary

In his essay, the author focuses on the current situation of Megleno-Romanian, one of the three historical South-Danubian dialects of Romanian. Megleno-Romanian, similarly with Istro-Romanian, is a small linguistic enclave, strongly influenced by other languages it came into contact with during the last centuries. This long-lasting contact strongly influenced all segments of the Megleno-Romanian dialect and led to a century-old bilingualism. The dislocation of an important part of the Megleno-Romanian population (their settling in Turkey or Romania), the exodus from villages to urban areas, intermarriages, lack of education in the mother tongue, and other factors will lead to the extinction of the Megleno-Romanian dialect in the near future.

The Current State of Megleno-Romanians. Megleno-Romanian, an Endangered Idiom

The region inhabited by Megleno-Romanians and their current distribution

Megleno-Romanian, apart from Aromanian and Istro-Romanian, is a historical dialect of the Romanian language. All three dialects are spoken South of the Danube. Daco-Romanian, which is spoken North of the Danube, is the only dialect which acquired the status of literary and official language in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Daco-Romanian is also spoken in regions which border on Romania, South and North of the Danube (Vojvodina and North-Eastern Serbia, North Bulgaria, East Hungary, Ukraine, Moldova).

Megleno-Romanian is spoken in seven villages in the Meglen region, hence the dialect name. This region is located North-West of Thessaloniki, between the river Vardar and the mountains Kožuf and Pajak. In the following, I refer only to the area with Megleno-Romanian villages, as the whole, larger region also encompasses other, once Slavic villages, which today have a mixed population – Slavic and mainly Greek. The Romanian part of Meglen includes the villages Uma (official name Huma), Liumnița (Skra), Cupa (Kupa), Oșani (Archangelos), Birislav (Periklia), Lundzini (Langardia) and Țárnareca (Karpi).

If during the Ottoman Empire, the part of the Meglen region which was populated by Megleno-Romanians was a compact enclave, today Megleno-Romanians are dispersed over several countries. The crucial moment in this regard was the aftermath of World War I, when the border between Greece and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was fixed. Most Megleno-Romanian villages (Liumnița, Cupa, Oșani, Birislāv, Lundzini and Țárnareca) became part of Greece, Uma and the few Megleno-Romanian families in Gevgelija and the surrounding villages (Bugurodița, Mrăzeanți, Muin and Gurničet) became part of the new Yugoslavia. Henceforth, a linguistic gap between the dialects spoken on the two sides developed, resulting mainly in the usage of different words. The Megleno-Romanian dialect, rather homogenous before, was now influenced by both the Greek and the Macedonian language.²

After the Greek-Turkish war of 1921-1922, both sides agreed on population exchange. The Megleno-Romanians of Nânti, the largest Megleno-Romanian village, who had converted to Islam a few centuries before, left their home for Turkey. At the same time (1923-1926), about 220 Megleno-Romanian families especially from Liumnița, Cupa, Oșani and Lundzini, moved to Romania (Saramandu 1975: 187), more precisely to the village Cerna, in the county of Tulcea.

During the civil war in Greece (1946-1949), several Megleno-Romanian villages were burned down to force the villagers to flee – the refugees settled in most countries of the former Eastern bloc. In the last forty years, many of them have chosen today's FY Republic Macedonia, some of them Greece.

The disruptions caused by both world wars and the Greek civil war were accompanied by the exodus of Megleno-Romanians from rural to urban areas, such as Gevgelija, Skopje, Aridea, Axiupoli, and by Muslim Megleno-Romanians leaving for Turkey. After World War I, several families from Uma settled in the town of Gevgelija and in the village Bugurodica, thus starting the process of moving from mountainous area to the plains. The settling from the mounting into the plain begins right after World War I, when more families followed, settling in the villages Mrăzeanți,

² For a thorough linguistic description of Megleno-Romanian, see Atanasov 2002.

Muin, Gurničet, close to the city of Gevgelija.

It was 1915 when, due to military operations close to Thessaloniki, the residents of nearby Uma were evacuated and transferred to Serbian villages near Aleksinac. After the war, they returned, traveling 450 km (back and forth), mostly on foot. Some returnees settled in Gevgelija and neighboring villages.

The Megleno-Romanians' exodus from Greek villages did not have the same intensity as in the case of the Uma village, but it is now in full swing. During fieldwork in Greece over the past decades, I found several villages, such as Liumnița and Cupa, inhabited by the elderly. Villages like Oșani, Birislav and Țărnareca have managed to keep more young inhabitants, apart from people leaving for cities. Since the 1960s, many young Megleno-Romanians emigrated from Greece to Western Europe, looking for work. Many people from Yugoslavia took the same part in the 1970s. Despite the rural exodus, Megleno-Romanian villages in Greece are still inhabited.

Apart from the mentioned localities in the former Yugoslavia (especially the town of Gevgelija and surrounding villages),³ some Megleno-Romanians also live in Negotino, Veles, Skopje, Tetovo, Kavadarci Kočani (all in FY Republic of Macedonia). After World War II, 15 Megleno-Romanian families from Uma settled in the province of Vojvodina, in the villages Jabuka, Gudurica and Kačarevo. Some of them later returned to Gevgelija.

About 5500 Megleno-Romanians live in the above mentioned villages (except for Cerna village in Romania and for the localities in Turkey), half of them still speak the native dialect. Even old Megleno-Romanians often resort to Greek, because "it is easier to use". Young people do no longer speak the native idiom of their ancestors. Greek state policy encourage this: Kindergartens are free, small children begin to speak in Greek, and grandparents are required to communicate with them in Greek as well. The FY Republic of Macedonia pursues a similar policy towards Megleno-Romanians living on its territory. In Gevgelija, no single family is not mixed, the result being that Macedonian is spoken even at family level.

Being a very small ethnic group and living in a condition of long-lasting bilingualism, Megleno-Romanians have lost the ethnonym *român*. Among themselves, they call each other *Vlaș* (sg. *Vla* or *Vlau*), which is also used by other peoples referring to them, and to Aromanians. Usually, the term *Vlaș* marks the opposition with the term designating an individual or several individuals belonging to an ethnic group that uses another language. To highlight the birth place of an individual, infranames derived from the name of the villages are used: *Umineț* (from Uma), *Liumničan* (from Liumnița), *Cupineț* (from Cupa), *Ușineț* (from Oșani), *Brăslăveț* (from Birislav), *Lundzineț* (from Lundzini), *Năntineț* (from Nânti) and *Țărnăcot* (from Țărnareca).

The term *Megleno-Romanian* is a scientific construct. Both as an ethnonym, and to indicate the dialect of its members, it is the most appropriate one, as it refers both to a population speaking a Romanian dialect, and to their region. The term *Meglen*, although naturalized in linguistics, might cause confusion, as it can refer to other idioms as well, such as Macedonian dialects in the Meglen region.

Megleno-Romanians, like Istro-Romanians, lost their national consciousness (cf. Kovačec 1971: 24). Those living in Greece declare themselves Greeks, those living in the FY Republic of Macedonia declare themselves Macedonians (only rarely Vlachs/ *Vlaș*). This is due to the symbiosis between them and surrounding population, but also to the lack of education in their mother tongue. As they led a hard life in mountain villages, in small numbers, Megleno-Romanians

³ Everybody from the Uma village moved there. Today, Uma is only inhabited during summer.

could not organize themselves and create their own institutions to further cultural development. Education in their language, more exactly in standard Romanian, which started in the second half of the 19th century, did not last long. Except for folktales collected by Pericle Papahagi and Theodor Capidan and for Ion-Aurel Candrea's texts,⁴ there is no literary creation in Megleno-Romanian. In the last 50-60 years, however, a Megleno-Romanian intelligentsia emerged, educated at Greek and Macedonian colleges and universities. Among prominent Megleno-Romanians are professors Taško Tokov (Agronomy Faculty), Dimitar Baialdziev (Law Faculty), Damian Dimčev (Medicine Faculty), at the University in Skopje, Ivan Antonov (the first speaker of the Radio and Television from Skopje, born in Uma and graduated from the Romanian high school in Sofia), company directors, officers in the Yugoslav Army etc. The parents of well-known Belgrade-based theater actor Ivan Bekjarev (named after his grandfather – Vani ă Bichiaru), also came from Uma.

Perspectives of preservation of the Megleno-Romanian dialect

The dispersal of Megleno-Romanians (Turkey, Romania, former Yugoslavia, FY Republic of Macedonia and the former socialist countries in Europe), led to a considerable decrease in Megleno-Romanian speakers. Megleno-Romanian is an endangered idiom. Tache Papahagi's anticipation that Aromanian will disappear in the 20th century did not come true yet,⁵ but the danger still exists. Megleno-Romanian is spoken by a smaller number of people than Aromanian, and is thus more threatened. Few young people speak it, those who do come mainly from families where all members are Megleno-Romanian, which also has become rare. The integration into their respective host societies lead to the gradual extinction of Megleno-Romanian. It thus follows the same path as other endangered idioms, which are reduced to family use, and finally abandoned completely.

The factors which contributed to the preservation of Megleno-Romanian are the following:

a) Traditional life style. Megleno-Romanians have lived for centuries in villages in the Meglen region, dealing with agriculture, silk worms and cattle breeding. As Christians, they were excluded from important positions in the hierarchy of the Ottoman state, helping to keep their way of life. On the other hand, the Ottomans did not organize a schooling system for Christians, as Turkish served as sole official language. Each family had its household and was not dependent on anyone. Mothers spoke to their children exclusively in the mother tongue, greatly helping the preservation of the language. Megleno-Romanians were largely isolated from external influences, as they alone lived in their villages. Only men introduced new words, after they returned from the city, where they had sold milk and cheese, potatoes, meat and cattle, and had interacted with people who spoke Macedonian, Turkish and Greek. Most men were bi-, even trilingual.

b) Romanian schools. Many Aromanians speak of "Romanian propaganda", which was, in their opinion, nefarious for Megleno-Romanians and Aromanians, as Romanian schools allegedly contributed to their "denationalization". However, I believe these schools in fact helped not only preserving the Romanian dialects South of the Danube, but also helped to create an Aromanian and Megleno-Romanian intelligentsia, represented by Theodor Capidan, Tache Papahagi, Pericle Papahagi, George Murnu and others. Later, as a result of this Romanian consciousness, a new

⁴ Papahagi 1902, Capidan 1928, Candrea 1924, 1925.

⁵ "The 20th century will see the extinction of Aromanians" (Papahagi 1963: 5).

generation of Aromanian intellectuals emerged: Matilda Caragiu-Marioțeanu, Toma Caragiu, Nicolae Saramandu, Ion Caramitru, Lascu Stoica, Nistor Bardu etc. The depth of their works on Aromanian and Megleno-Romanian is due, among other, to a good knowledge of Romanian and to education received in Romanian schools and universities. None of the aforementioned intellectuals lost their mother tongue in an Romanian environment. In the plurilingual environments, where Aromanians and Megleno-Romanians were schooled in a language other than Romanian, professors, doctors, engineers, bankers or traders preserved the language much less, because they lacked the knowledge on the formation and evolution of the Romanian language.

Many Aromanians do not consider themselves Romanians and at censuses declare themselves as Macedonians, Greeks, Serbs or Bulgarians. This new trend among Aromanians – considering themselves not as Romanians, but as a totally different people – might condemn them to extinction. Attempts to introduce optional classes of Aromanian language, as in the FY Republic of Macedonia, and adopting a new orthography, which was intentionally created different from the Romanian one, show an erroneous path taken by the Aromanians after 1990. There is nothing wrong in trying different approaches to preserve one's mother tongue, but exaggerated anti-Romanianism is quite another thing. In addition, they attempt to engage Megleno-Romanians in this approach.

The factors that can lead to the extinction of Megleno-Romanian are multiple:

a) New way of life. Megleno-Romanians and Aromanians have radically changed their way of life in the last six decades. They are no longer connected to the village (at least in the FY Republic of Macedonia) and look for work in urban areas (Gevgelija, Skopje, Axiupolis, Edessa, Thessaloniki). Even life in the village changed a lot, especially in Greece: the villages are, practically, small towns, with paved roads and streets, modern, comfortable houses. They are not shepherds any longer, nor do they use the plow and oxen for working in the field, but tractors and combines. They are very modern in their way of dressing, television keeps them up to date. Their children go to fee-free kindergartens, where they speak only Greek. Parents speak to their children in Greek only.

Although they followed a different path, Megleno-Romanians in the FY Republic of Macedonia had roughly the same faith. After 1946, the communist regime in Yugoslavia nationalized land and private property. Megleno-Romanians left their villages for towns. The old way of life, with its largely self-reliant economy, which contributed to preserve their language for more than a thousand years, vanished. They are educated in a language other than their mother tongue, in the language of the majority, which will become the language spoken even at family level.

b) Mixed marriages. In urban, but also in rural areas, Megleno-Romanians live together with Macedonians and Greeks. They are well-integrated into society, and intermarriages contribute to this to a great extent. Marriages with Macedonians or Greeks are frequent. The Megleno-Romanian spouse usually abandons his/her family language, and adopt the official language of the country, which enjoys a greater prestige.

c) Common religion. As both Megleno-Romanians and Macedonians and Greeks are generally Christian Orthodox, there is no bias or restriction against mixed marriages.

d) Inferiority complex about their mother tongue. As their mother tongue was not the

language of culture, many Megleno-Romanians avoided using it. This inferiority complex makes them even conceal their origin. In environments where the majority knows that they are Megleno-Romanians, much more families of common people abandon their mother tongue, than families of intellectuals. For the same reasons, even if both parents are Megleno-Romanian, many children do not know their mother tongue.⁶ Young people want to be like everyone else, to achieve something in life, to show their talents and abilities, which they can only do in the language enjoying a greater prestige, not in their mother tongue, which is restricted to family use.

e) Lack of education. Schools in the standard language are the most effective tool for maintaining a language. The speakers of Walloon in Belgium or of French in Switzerland do not even think of instructing themselves in the dialects and vernaculars they use in the family. Similarly, the Turks of the FY Republic of Macedonia, who speak a dialect different from standard Turkish, are not instructed in their vernacular, but in Turkish. The case of Albanian is similar. Albanians from the FY Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro speak the Gheg dialect, but the consciousness that they belong to the Albanian people, where the standard language is based on the Tosk dialect, makes them learn Tosk.

Romanian schools in the Ottoman Empire represented a “nursery” for awakening the Romanian consciousness among Aromanians and Megleno-Romanians. Romanianism was best received among Megleno-Romanians. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, especially after World War I, Romanian schools were abolished by the new Balkan countries. The time after 1990 led to a revival of Aromanians, who now showed a strong anti-Romanianism. Although Romania still offers them scholarships and the possibility to study in the country, they only speak of “Romanian propaganda”. They adopted a modified orthography and opted to train in the Aromanian dialect, in optional classes, which have been unsuccessful so far. Megleno-Romanians, not being numerous, did not have such claims. In any case, there is no Romanian school in Greece today.

The idea of creating an independent Aromanian language has little chance of success, as Aromanian is an idiom spoken in all Balkan countries, but words from the official languages of these countries entered the language. Due to these considerable lexical differences, it seems impossible to create a unified language. Also, Aromanians are not a compact group, inhabiting a larger territory in any country. The creation of a new language is linked to a territory where you can develop and polish a dialect on all levels of education, administration, science etc. The only way to save Romanian dialects South of the Danube (Megleno-Romanian and Aromanian) from extinction is to provide education in Romanian. Education in a language of culture, which enjoys great prestige, has a rich vocabulary from all domains, which is the language of Eminescu and Creangă, Eugen Ionescu and Mircea Eliade, Cioran, Enescu and Brâncuși, and which furthers integration into the society, seems to be the only solution for preserving these dialects.

⁶ Even my grandson, whose parents are both Megleno-Romanians, says that his mother is *Vlăincă*, his father, *Vla*, while he himself is *Makedonec*. My grandchildren do not know Megleno-Romanian because it was not spoken in the house.

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