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ROMANIAN – LANGUAGE OR DIALECT? OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY OPINIONS*

ABSTRACT

This article aims at presenting two concepts from the modern typology of the Romance languages, with a special focus on the Aromanian ethnolect. The first concept, which is widely accepted in the Romanian linguistics and was most prevalent before the Second World War, does not recognise Aromanian as a separate language, but treats it as one of four dialects of the Romanian language. The second movement, much closer to modern Romanist research at the international level, opts for a full autonomy of all Balkan Romance ethnolects and attributes to them statuses of national languages. It also negates the existence of a common Romanian language in the first millennium, arguing that the Balkan Romance languages developed independently from a late form of Balkan Latin around the 11th century.

KEYWORDS: Aromanians, Aromanian language, Romanian dialectology, Romanian language, Balkan Romance languages.

Romanian dialectology has occasionally been the main object of research and has rarely been directly within the scope of academic interest of Polish linguists. Nonetheless, it is definitely worth devoting more scientific attention to those Eastern Romance ethnolects and especially one of them – Aromanian. Another reason for doing so might be a heated debate being conducted over recent years in academic journals and publications focused around the issues of the Balkan Romance languages in which scholars have attempted to establish a precise place of Aromanian on the linguistic map of Europe.

According to a traditional typology of Romanian languages – presented, among others, in the two-volume monograph *Języki Indoeuropejskie*, chapter ‘Języki romańskie’ by Witold Mańczak (Bednarczuk 1988: 638) – the Romanian language belongs to the Eastern Romance sub-branch of languages (together with the extinct Dalmatian language) and is divided into four dialects:

- Daco-Romanian – used on the territory of modern Romania and Moldova;
- Macedo-Romanian (known also as Aromanian) – used on territories of modern North Macedonia, Greece and Albania;

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- Megleno-Romanian – used in the area of Thessaloniki, Greece;
- Istro-Romanian – spoken on the peninsula of Istria, Croatia.

The classification presented above is based on a classical territorial division and it is still used in the latest studies of Romanian dialects, including works of Nicolae Saramandu and Manuela Nevaci (2013), or Grigore Brâncuș (2005: 65–66). Despite insufficient knowledge concerning the evolution of Romanian in the first millennium, the aforementioned classification suggests that the language spoken currently in Romania includes four dialects – used both on the territory of Romania itself and in the Balkans. However, in the context of describing Romanian at its first stage of evolution, the term ‘Romanian’ refers to the primordial version of the language used by Romanised indigenous people – i.e. the Vlachs (Ro., Arom. *Vlahi*), who were spread across the Balkans and to the north of the Danube, where they inhabited a former Roman province named Dacia. Nevertheless, this logic does not allow for a correct interpretation without more detailed knowledge of how the Eastern Romance branch of languages evolved. Only in the chapter devoted to later developmental stages of Romanian (after 13th century), Brâncuș states that from this moment the term ‘Romanian’ should replace the older ‘Daco-Romanian dialect’ (2005: 66). Apart from ‘the Romanian language,’ terms used in Romanian linguistics when describing the first stage of language development before its division into dialects are as follows: *protoromâna*, *străromâna*, *româna primitivă* or *româna comună* – ‘common Romanian.’ The latter expression is most frequently used in the Romanian scientific literature. Romanian descends from the *vulgaris* version of Latin, which was characteristic for the region of the Danube, and it was also known as *latina dunăreană* (Rosetti 1968: 77), while its first stage of development lasted between the 5th and 7th–8th centuries. Its linguistic unity existed until the 10th century when two dialects started to develop: the northern dialect or Daco-Romanian and the southern dialect or Aromanian. At later stages, another two dialects appeared – Megleno-Romanian and Istro-Romanian (see: Rosetti 1968: 352).

The classical division of the Romanian language into four dialects is endorsed by the vast majority of Romanian scientists – not only philologists, but also ethnologists, historians, culture experts, etc. It is worth mentioning here that this thesis is also supported by many western Romanists, including the Italian philologist, Carlo Tagliavini (1977: 285): “Now let us focus on the only Romance language preserved in Eastern Europe. Romanian is divided into four dialects: Daco-Romanian (literary language), Macedo-Romanian (or Aromanian), Megleno-Romanian and Istro-Romanian.” However, Tagliavini, when describing the Romanian language, based his knowledge mainly on Romanian studies and publications concerning history of the language, its typology and dialectology. Perhaps it is a result of the fact that research into the Eastern Romance languages lied beyond the scope of interest of Western-European Romanists, also due to difficult access and isolation of these languages from the rest of Europe, especially prior to 1989. The Italian linguist quotes mainly precursors of research into the history of Romanian and its dialects, who included the Romanian scientists from the pre-WWII period: Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu (1886–88), Ovidiu Densusianu (1901), and Sextil Pușcariu (1905).

A certain innovation in the area of the traditional division of Romanian dialects was introduced at the turn of 19th and 20th century by the Romanian philologist, Alexandru Philippide, who believed that there is no reason to treat the dialect of the Megleno-Romanians as a separate variant as it is very closely related to Macedo-Romanian, which is indicated by a similar development of phonemes (2011: 55). On the other hand, Alexandru Rosetti (1968: 351) limited his classification only to two basic dialects: Daco-Romanian, which included Istro-Romanian (under a strong influence of Croatian) and Macedo-Romanian with a sub-branch in the form of Megleno-Romanian (with a strong influence of Bulgarian).

The Romanian linguists that distinguished in their research five independent Eastern-Romance languages were Ion Coteanu and Alexandru Graur (Coteanu, Dănăilă 1970: 142), though the latter one changed his views in 1976 in his review of a paper by Matilda Caragiu Marioțeanu (1975) when he agreed with Sextil Pușcariu in his opinion that all Southern-Danubian dialects originate from a single language – *româna comună* and “with passage of time differences between them started to increase” (Graur 1976: 8). However, a critical attitude towards the concept of ‘common Romanian’ is presented in the works of a historian of the Romanian language, Cicerone Poghiric (1987), who pointed at Balkan Latin as the common source for all Romanian ethnolects in the Balkan-Danubian region. Many controversies among Romanian academics were provoked by publications of Mariana Bara. Among others, a Romanian translation of the work *Armânii* (2014) by Gustav Weigand, edited by Mariana Bara, was heavily criticised in a peer review by Nistor Bardu (2016: 3). The linguist and activist engaged in Aromanian organisations (Fara Armânească dit Romania) presents Aromanian as one of Neo-Romance languages of the Balkans.

Romanian academics attribute to the Romanian language – the only language among those four dialects that arose to the rank of a national language – a primary role¹ and that is the perspective from which it is presented in comparison with the other dialects. In this context, the term ‘language’ – Ro. *limbă*, is used only in reference to Romanian as a literary, national and official language of the Romanian State and the Republic of Moldova. In the cases of others, only a term ‘dialect’ is applied – Ro. *dialect*. At the same time, it is worth emphasising that Romanian linguistics defines a dialect as: “main territorial variants of a given language that are subordinated to this language” (ELR 2006: 177), which stands in contrast with the Polish definition of a dialect: a spoken variant of the common language, distinguished on a geographical level, and, above all, a social level, that does not possess codified norms (Truszkowski 1992: 15–19).

Furthermore, Zbigniew Gołąb in his *Szkic dialektu Arumunów macedońskich* consequently uses the term ‘dialect,’² though at the same time he emphasises that: “in the

¹ The authors of the report on the situation of the Aromanians, presented at a session of the European Parliament in 1997, stress that during the interwar period in Balkan countries inhabited by Aromanians Romania funded schools with teaching in Romanian, which was perceived by Aromanians themselves as an attempt at their assimilation and brought fears that they will be treated by local communities as strangers – i.e. the Romanians.

² Gołąb emphasises that he bases his own scientific research in Macedonia on the work *Aromânii. Dialectul aromân* (1932) by Theodor Capidan.

case of Aromanians, an awareness of national identity and solidarity with the Romanian nation has never developed, despite the fact that in the second half of the 19th century Romanian authorities undertook some efforts in this direction” (Gołąb 1961: 176).

It is beyond any doubt that the Romanian narration was accepted as obligatory in linguistics. Although it has strong foundation and arguments of linguistic nature – e.g. a high level of grammatical and lexical similarities or a common description of their identity as *Vlachs* – it is impossible to ignore also arguments that allow nowadays a broader autonomy for other ethnolects, especially Aromanian.

In 1997 (Parliamentary Assembly Report, Doc. 7728, 17.01.1997), the Union for the Aromanian Culture and Language estimated that in the world there were approximately 1.5 million people identifying with the Aromanian nationality, mainly in the Balkans: in Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania³ and the Republic of North Macedonia. Only in the latter country, the Aromanians possess a constitutional status of an ethnic minority (Klimkowski 2012: 15–16).

According to data from a web portal ethnologue.com (updated in 2018), the Aromanian language is used today as a native language by almost 113,000 people – mainly by the Aromanians from older generations that still cultivate their traditional lifestyle. Among younger generations (people aged 25–50), the majority were people with a passive knowledge of the language and with limited lexical and grammatical competence (Nowicka 2011: 185). The language status ascribed by researchers to Aromanian was: “in danger of extinction.”⁴ Zbigniew Gołąb, who conducted dialectal field studies in Macedonia in 1958, wrote in reference to works of the Macedonian anthropo-geographer, Jovan Trifunovski: “the Aromanian dialect on the Macedonian territory may actually become extinct within 25 years” (Gołąb 1961: 176). However, today the language of the Aromanians has the biggest chance of survival exactly in this area. The North Macedonia accepts the Aromanians as an ethnic minority, thanks to which teaching in Aromanian is guaranteed by law (though the degree to which groups of interest take advantage of these regulations exceeds the scientific scope of topics described in this paper). At the same time, this language is not officially recognised by the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and therefore does not have a status of a protected language.⁵

Many philological publications have been dedicated to the Aromanian dialect, including linguistic, dialectological and ethnological studies describing the shepherd folklore and culture which constitute foundations for traditional lifestyle and economy of the Balkan Vlachs. One of the first publications deserving a credit was *Die Aromunen* – a work of the German philologist, Gustav Weigand, from 1894, who during his research trips collected Aromanian folk texts, compiled a glossary and described the Aromanian grammar. Another interesting aspect of this work are the

³ In Romania, especially in the region of Dobruja and Bucharest, there are Aromanian communities, though their presence is mainly a result of migrations and resettlement actions from the 1920s and 1930s (Nowicka 2011: 76).

⁴ <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/rup> (accessed: 22.04.2021).

⁵ Romania signed the Charter already in 1995, while in 1997 the Aromanian Community in Romania demanded to be added to the Charter and thus would gain protection for the Aromanian language, see: Parliamentary Assembly Report, Doc. 7728 (1997).

words of the introduction in which he explains that both the journey and the publication of his work were financed from funds of German scientific associations without any support from the Romanian government. During his scientific research, Weigand met with numerous attacks in Greek press accusing him of being an agitator for Romanian propaganda (Weigand 1894: VIII).

In the previous century, many studies dedicated both to the Aromanian ethnolect and culture were published. As mentioned above, most of them were published by Romanian philologists. The canonical works include studies by linguists of Aromanian origins: Theodor Capidan, Tache Papahagi and Matilda Caragiu-Marioțeanu. Caragiu-Marioțeanu admits that Aromanian is the native language of the Aromanians, though it does not signify that their language differs from Romanian since Romanian functions as their literary language. According to her: “Romanian and Aromanian are two hypostases of the same language – Proto-Romanian” (apud Trifon 2016a: 33). In the latest dialectological studies, apart from the firm position of the traditional classification presented, among others, by Nicolae Saramandu and Manuela Nevaci (2013), more cautious definitions of Aromanian are becoming also noticeable. For instance, Grigore Brâncuș in his article *Aromâna – dialect arhaic* introduces a neutral term ‘idiom’ and thus avoids classifying Aromanian either as a dialect or a language (2013).

While Romanian linguistics (with few exceptions) continues the tradition of dividing Romanian into four main dialects, outside Romania another thesis is gaining on popularity – a thesis that rejects the stage of the so-called *româna comună* and assumes that the late form of Balkan Latin was a continuum from which four independent languages were formed: Romanian, Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian and Istro-Romanian. Victoria Popovici, who is the author of the chapter dedicated to Romanian in the latest edition of *Manuel des langues romanes* and a professor at University of Jena, explains this turn of events by “motives connected mainly with language politics being a result of a necessity for promotion of Aromanian as a language of a national minority” (2014: 309–310). In the same chapter, German linguists – Wolfgang Dahmen and Johannes Kramer⁶ – wrote that this traditional classification leads to absurdity: “According to this logic it would be necessary to assume that this what is called Daco-Romanian, i.e. the national language used in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, is also a dialect despite the fact it is used by 25 million people. Hence, it would fall into the same category as Istro-Romanian, which is currently used by merely 500 speakers. Today, the idea of existence of independent languages is gaining on popularity” (2014: 314). Michael Metzeltin, a Romanist from Vienna, in the first chapter of a study focused on typological matters, *Das Rumänische im romanischen Kontrast. Eine sprachtypologische Betrachtung*, which was also published in Romania, on his list of the modern Romance languages, which are “more or less standardised in manner; of regional, national or international significance; characterised by awareness of their own independence, texturing, codification, norms; of an official or journalistic character” (Metzeltin 2016: 19), mentions among the Balkan Romance languages only Romanian, which was also

⁶ Those linguists return to the discussion about the Aromanian issue in their latest publication from 2021.

known in the past as ‘Vlach.’ However, in the later part, Metzeltin tends to equalise the language status of Romanian and Aromanian, and in Chapter 3 ‘Classification of Romance Languages’ he states: “apart from Western Romance (...) there is also Eastern Trans-Adriatic Romance, which is distinctive both in respect of culture and language type, and which consists of Romanian and Aromanian” (Metzeltin 2016: 38).⁷ One of the greatest advocates for Aromanian as an autonomous language is Nicolas Trifon – a French linguist (born in Bucharest into an Aromanian family), who is engaged in the issues of securing minority rights for Aromanians and recognising Aromanian by international academic circles. In his scientific and journalistic activities he devotes a lot of space to modern Aromanians and attempts to create a definition of the Aromanian identity. In his publications, that are on several occasions quoted in this paper, Trifon initiates a polemic discussion with representatives of the traditional, mainly-Romanian, school of academic thought, who maintain superiority and hierarchical dominance of the Romanian language in relation to other Balkan Romance idioms, at the same time pointing out their nationalistic attitudes and ideas (Trifon 2016a: 243–246).

An extreme stance concerning the origins of both the language and the Aromanians is taken by some of Greek philologists, including Achille Lazarou. In his book *L’Aroumain dans ses rapports avec le grec* (1986), Lazarou presents the Aromanians as bilingual Greeks who are direct descendants of Romanised Macedonian population since 146 BCE, when a Roman province was formed there (apud Trifon 1995). Lazarou describes Aromanian straightforwardly as “leur idiom relève d’un accident de l’histoire grecque” (apud Trifon 2016b).

Also in Poland views on the Aromanian language have been evolving. One of the first scientists undertaking Romanian studies was Stanisław Łukasik, who in his work *Pologne et Roumanie* (1938) wrote about the Aromanians as a Southern-Danubian population which separated at the turn of the 8th and 9th century from the Daco-Romanians and migrated to the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula. A similar opinion defining Aromanian as a dialect was presented by the Slavist, Zbigniew Gołąb, in his works based on field research conducted in Macedonia. In comparison, modern Polish scientists discussing this issue tend to support the view in which the Balkan Romance languages are treated as autonomous ethnolects. The anthropologist, Ewa Nowicka, in her book *Nasz język rozumieją aniołowie* – which is a summary of her many-years-long research and numerous interviews with representatives of the modern Aromanian community – devotes a lot of space to the sociological aspect of Aromanian as one of the main unifying factors consolidating this community and simultaneously playing a crucial role in their identity. The topic of Romanian dialectology from a linguistic perspective lies within scientific interests of the Romanian philologist, Tomasz Klimkowski. Traditional dialects of the Romanian language are treated by him as autonomous linguistic entities, which view he bases predominantly

⁷ He develops this topic in a monograph written together with the renowned expert on Aromanian culture, history and language, Thede Kahl, titled *Sprachtypologie. Ein Methoden- und Arbeitsbuch für Balkanologen, Romanisten und allgemeine Sprachwissenschaftler* – unfortunately, there was no possibility to consult this study during work on this paper.

on the latest typological data, including the research project Ethnologue under the auspices of SIL International. Klimkowski proposes to classify these languages as part of the Balkan Romance language group, and by doing so to replace the term *româna comună* with the term *romanica-balcanică* (Balkan Romance), and thus to accept that it is “the last stage in a relative unity of those four Balkan Romance languages” (Klimkowski 2011: 23). According to this conception, the Aromanian language developed from Balkan Romance probably in the 11th century, while in the 20th century it achieved a full standardisation. The other Balkan Romance languages – Istro-Romanian, Megleno-Romanian and Ancient Romanian – evolved around the 12th century, while the latter one achieved its standardisation in the 18th century in the form of modern Romanian (Klimkowski 2011: 181). An especially interesting and innovative approach to the classification of the Balkan Romance languages was presented by Klimkowski in his latest research as part of the scientific project *Vlachs in European and Polish Cultural Area. Migration – Settlement – Cultural Heritage*: “Romanian dialects constitute currently independent languages which are jointly called the Vlach languages, while a hypothetical proto-language from which they derive is called Proto-Vlach.” He proposes the following division and new glossonyms for the Balkan Romance languages: *Romanian, Vlashki/Zheyanski, (Meglen) Vlach* and *Armanian*.⁸

It is not only the language and origins of the Aromanians that provoke controversies. Similar difficulties are caused by the ethnonym and the name of the language derived from it. In the Polish scientific literature, ‘the Aromanian language,’ Pol. *język arumuński*, functions as an accepted term, while the ethnonym used is ‘an Aromanian,’ Pol. *Arumun*, and its plural form ‘Aromanians,’ Pol. *Arumuni*. These names are used both by Nowicka and Klimkowski. However, the ethnologist Ewa Kocój uses in her works the term ‘Aromans,’ Pol. *Aromanie* and ‘the Aroman language,’ Pol. *język aromański* (Kocój 2016: 159). A different version might be found in a book by Karl-Markus Gauss titled *Umierający Europejczycy*, though in this case it probably is a language calque from a German term *Aromunen* that was used by the translator Alicja Rosennau, e.g. *Byli zagorzałymi Arumunami, ale ani aktywnie, ani biernie nie znali „limba armăneasca”* (Gauss 2006: 203). Historians tend to use more often historical ethnonyms, such as: ‘Vlachs,’ Pol. *Wlach* (Wasilewski 1988) or ‘Koutsovlachs,’ Pol. *Kucowolosi* (Stawowy-Kawka 1993) or most commonly used ‘Volohs,’ Pol. *Wolosi* – however, not every Vlach must be an Aromanian – it is enough to mention here the Vlachs living in the Polish part of the Beskids. The Aromanians refer to themselves mainly as *Armăni*, though as emphasised by Nowicka, in conversations conducted in English they most often use ethnonyms *Vlahi/Vlași* (2011: 67). The Serbs call them *Cincari*, while the Greeks – *Κουτσόβλαχοι*, which name might be perceived currently as offensive. In philological literature two interchangeable terms for the language (dialect) are used: ‘Aromanian’ or ‘Macedo-Romanian.’ The latter term is treated as a scientific one, and was widely popularised in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, and nowadays it is rarely used in a different context than in a collocation ‘the Macedo-Romanian dialect’ (Sala 2006: 332). In the

⁸ <https://vlachsproject.eu/index.php?id=monografia> (accessed: 19.09.2020).

Aromanian language it is possible to encounter various terms for the language due to its dialectal diversity: *limba armânească*, *rrămăniască*, *rrămăneshti*, *armăneashti* or *armăneashce* (transcription according to the norms of the Aromanian spelling).

Ethnic and linguistic identity of the Vlachs-Romanians-Aromanians has always remained a controversial and hotly debated topic in the academic world, often used also as a tool to propagate various political concepts (both on the Romanian and Aromanian side). This issue commonly leads to heated street debates, which in modern days have moved to the Internet, especially in Romania where it seems that anyone, whatever their level of education, has a firm opinion on the ethnogenesis of their own nation and language. From the above presented opinions concerning the place of Aromanian on the map of Europe two main concepts seem to emerge. The first one, which is traditionally accepted in the Romanian linguistics, and also widely among scholars from the pre-war generation, does not grant the Aromanian language status of a separate language and treats it as one of four dialects of so-called *româna comună* – which was the primal and common form of the Romanian tongue in the period between the first half of the first millennium and the moment of the dialectic division. From among four dialects of this language only Daco-Romanian achieved a status of a national and literary language. The second trend, which is closer to modern Romance research at the international level, opts for a full autonomy for all Balkan Romance ethnolects and granting them statuses of independent languages. This trend negates the existence of a common Romanian language in the first millennium, arguing that around the 11th century the Balkan Romance languages developed independently from a late form of Balkan Latin.

This paper does not exhaust the full argumentation on the topic, does not present all publications, dissertations and studies that were published over the last hundred years. Nevertheless, the presented opinions and arguments seem to be sufficient to illustrate the situation of the language and its speakers who – scattered throughout the Balkans and having different citizenships – have never had aspirations to create a national state with Aromanian functioning as the official language. The Aromanians have been striving merely to preserve their identity, culture and mother-tongue.

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