There are thousands of Gypsies in Hungary and its neighboring countries living mainly in small settlements or villages; their mother tongue is Romanian or they spoke the language before they had shifted to speaking other languages. They are known as “Vlach”, “tub-makers” or “spoon-carvers”, referring either to their language or their traditional occupation (Kovalcsik 1996:77).

According to earlier research, Boyash were divided into three ethnic subgroups, all self-identifying as Boyash, forming a relatively coherent community, and speaking clearly connected language variants. However, the latest research suggests that none of these statements hold true, since the communities using dialectal Romanian language as their mother tongue are much more heterogeneous and complex (Arató 2013a:5; 2013b:49; Bodó 2009:84).

The aim of my presentation is to introduce and assess preliminary findings from a unique and ongoing dialectological field-based research, conducted among the Boyash communities in Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine, which began in 2014. Results of this study make two significant contributions: (1) my study makes a contribution to the existing body of literature on language, dialects, and sub-dialects of Boyash people, allowing further cross-country comparison with data describing various Boyash communities residing in different parts of each country; (2) as for Slovakia, it is the first research which aims at identifying and examining the still existing groups since 1965, when the latest literature related to the topic was written. Even in Hungary there are still many uninvestigated or understudied areas where Boyash groups reside.

This research uncovers previously unstudied terrain of Boyash dialects, and due to lacking data, my fieldwork findings truly enrich academic understanding of the subject. My goal is to further classify the dialects, explicitly revealing the relationship between those, as well as compare the Boyash dialects to various Romanian dialects. In my presentation, I rely on data collected during fieldwork; namely, I use audio-recordings of directed conversations, structured around a linguistic questionnaire that I prepared for the documentation of the Boyash dialects, and casual conversations. After discussing my findings regarding the active use of language, these results are juxtaposed with the content of published sources from different countries (grammatical descriptions, dictionaries, folk songs, folk tales, etc.). Overall, my initial results encompass a discussion about phonetics, lexicon, lexical borrowing from Hungarian, Slovakian, Croatian, Ukrainian languages, and syntax. In addition, I go beyond linguistics by shedding light on cultural and social characteristics of the Boyash communities, explaining how and why these groups assimilate linguistically and socially. I found that in places where these communities shift to speaking only the language of the majority, they consequently lose their mother tongue, either Boyash or Hungarian. This, in turn, indicates a slow extinction of minority languages and underlines the importance of codifying and studying those.
References


