

LOST FOR WORDS

Centuries of persecution and nomadic lifestyles meant that Romani, the language of gypsies, was in danger of being lost forever. But a new website designed by Manchester academics has preserved the scattered dialects, finds Emily Pykett.

There is a saying in Romani: 'He who wants to enslave you will never tell you about your forefathers'. Over the centuries, the Roma - or gypsies, as they are more commonly known - have been dismissed as illiterate savages by their oppressors and denied the chance to safeguard their heritage in conventional ways. Their nomadic lifestyle also means there are precious few traditions of literary standards by which speakers can benchmark forms of speech.

Until now, navigating the 42 dialects of Romani seemed like an impossible task. But a team of researchers at Manchester University - the UK's only institution offering courses on Romani linguistics - has travelled the globe to seek out and work with speakers. And last week, they launched a website that allows users to explore the scattered dialects by browsing through a map of Europe and listening to recordings of sample words and phrases. Other interactive features include a translation



Belgian Roma, — South Mimms, Herts 1919
By Courtesy of the University of Liverpool, Special Collection and Archives

Olga Chashchikhina: "The website is a big step forward for my history and heritage"



engine, Romani chat rooms and radio broadcasts.

It's been hailed as a marvellous marriage of technology and humanity that will increase awareness of the Roma culture and shed light on its ancestors and origins. The Romani Project also helps codify the language, by writing it down and agreeing on how words are spelled.

The project's co-ordinator, Professor Yaron Matras - who himself speaks 13 languages - says one of his aims is to empower the Roma, who for centuries have struggled for freedom and recognition as a people and a nation. Their heritage is stained with persecution, forced assimilation, enslavement and even genocide (more than 500,000 Roma were exterminated by the Nazis). Prof Matras, who has previously warned that British Romani is

now almost at the level of extinction, has been researching linguistic history since 1999. "Romani doesn't really have a literary tradition and is primarily an oral language. Codification will be of great benefit to this community, which has suffered discrimination and misunderstanding across Europe," he says. "For the first time, this information will give the Roma an easy way to find out about where they came from. Our work will provide a much-needed resource so that Romani can eventually be included in mainstream media and school curriculums. We also hope it will inspire governments across Europe to develop policy in education and cultural development." An MA student at Manchester University, 28 year-old Olga Chashchikhina, is also involved in the project. She told *The Big Issue in the*

video of Kristina Karavajeva



Kristina Karavajeva

North: "It's special to me, because I am half Romani myself – my mother was Russian and my father was Romani. There are not many linguistic students doing Romani studies who are Romani themselves. In fact, I am probably one of the first post-graduate Romani students to become a Romani linguist." Conceding it is hard to ignore the delicate dimension her research sometimes takes on, she says: "Of course there is an emotional aspect to my studies – it's quite difficult, because I take everything personally when I should be staying objective. But the website is a big step forward for my history and heritage." Kristina Karavajeva, 22, a business and economics student at Manchester Metropolitan University, is a Latvian Romani. She, too, embraces the website with open arms. "I really think it's amazing, I use it myself and am recommending it to many of my friends. I was interviewed by one of the professor's research students, because my dialect is Russian Romani, even though I come from Latvia." Prof Matras adds: "There are few Romanis with an academic degree in any subject; this is an opportunity to

bridge the traditional gaps that have existed between academia and the Romani community."

Today, Romani is spoken by more than 3.5 million people in Europe and upwards of 500,000 in the rest of the world – making it the second-largest minority language in the EU, after Catalan. And, just as the Roma are descendants of the ancient warrior classes of Northern India, particularly the Punjab, so Romani is a language of Indic origin. It was brought to our shores by migrants some time in the 10th century, making the Roma one of our oldest ethnic minorities. The vocabulary still bears a strong resemblance to sub-continental languages like Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali. Experts have found that the Romani language changed dramatically as a result of contact with Byzantine Greek. There are numerous Iranian and Armenian 'loan words' and in the late 14th century, Romani-speaking populations began to emigrate from the Balkans. Differences among the speech varieties of the various populations emerged, resulting in a split into dialect branches, as Romani morphed with Turkish, Romanian, Hungarian,

German, and various Slavonic languages, to name but a few. Now the largest populations of Roma are to be found in Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro, as well as Greece, Slovakia, Moldavia, and Hungary. Sizeable Romani-speaking populations also exist in most other central and eastern European countries.

The Council of Europe has assumed a leading role in the process of granting Romani international recognition. In 1981, the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities called on member states to recognise Romanis as ethnic minorities and to grant them 'the same status and advantages as other minorities enjoy, in particular concerning respect and support for their own culture and language'.

The Romani Project website is also good news for those who represent the Roma at this international level. Emyr Lewis sits on the Council of Europe committee, which monitors how states comply with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. He says the website is essential to the Roma's quest to be accorded the status they deserve in the eyes of Europe and the world. "Language is the poor relation when it comes to issues of social inclusion. Romani as a stateless, largely oral, language has suffered more than most and continues to suffer. To find its place in a modern Europe, it requires tools like this website to enable its speakers to communicate with each other, while not abandoning its rich plurality," says Lewis. Rudko Kawczynski is president of the European Roma and Traveller Forum, which speaks on behalf of the Roma in 42 countries. Outspoken about how populations have been downtrodden for generations, he says: "For many centuries, our

people have been the subject of observation and investigation, by authorities and individuals, whose intention was to get to know our culture and our habits in order to control our movements and to limit our freedoms. Anti-gypsyism of this kind was and is present not only among extremists, but also within the mainstream of every European society."

The hope is now that the Romani Project website can help promote the language and its many dialects to the point where it becomes general knowledge, rather than a specialist interest. Romani is still largely absent from education systems, apart from in Romania, where a national Romani language curriculum was adopted in 1999. Despite being recognised in the constitutions of many European countries, the study of Romani has previously lacked the resources to be included in mainstream media. Rudko Kawczynski adds: "It is so important that research into our culture should explore new and unconventional roads. It must, first of all respect our people and our right for self-determination and self-representation. It should help our people feel aware and proud of their heritage, and it should help our culture and language occupy the place that they deserve in the mosaic of European cultures. It should help us train our people to become academic researchers, so that they can become active defenders of our culture and not just passive objects of investigation. Language is at the heart of those traditions. Language is a symbol of our unity and of our origins."

The Romani Project can be viewed online at www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/Research/Projects/romani/

