

## INNOVATIVE TRENDS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING MINORITY LANGUAGES

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**Abstract:** Revitalization of minority languages in the Western Balkans, particularly Albania, is a sensitive and crucial issue in linguistics, concerning also Balkan linguistics. Yet, there is little academic research in this respect, especially on the development of recent innovative teaching and learning materials. Drawing on the author's recent pedagogical experience in this field, this paper seeks to address this imbalance by examining and illustrating some recent pedagogical methods and materials for revitalizing the Aromanian dialect spoken in Albania, where, among the 9 ethnic minorities officially recognized, there are also the Aromanians, in danger of being linguistically and culturally assimilated. The author of the article develops her field research and didactic activity in the Korce area, in South-East Albania, one of the most important areas inhabited by Aromanians.

**Keywords:** minority languages, teaching, learning, Aromanian dialect, revitalization

### INTRODUCTION

The Aromanians of Albania most of them belong to the Farsherot group (Capidan, Th. 1931) speaking a dialect of the Romanian language, known as the Aromanian dialect, which, together with the Megleno-Romanian and Istro-Romanian, form the historical dialects of the Romanian language to the South of the Danube. Based on the linguistic differences of their speeches, Aromanians have been divided into several groups or branches: the Pindens (most of them compactly concentrated in Greece, in the Pindus Mountains), Farsherots (most of whom live in Albania, having their origins in Frashër, Albania), the Gramostens (having their origins from Gramos, a chain of mountains on the Albanian-Greek border) and the Grabovens (from Grabova, Llënga and Niçea in Albania, near Pogradec, about 30 km from the city of Korça). The Grabovens are further divided into *grăvén*, *linkót* and *niçót*. (Nevaci, M., 2011).

Most of the Farsherots live in Albania, though one may come across Farsherot communities today in the Republic of North Macedonia and Greece. This is due to the extraordinary mobility of the Farsherots and the nature of their semi-nomadic lifestyle, historically. From all the Aromanians, the Farsherots are the only ones who keep their ethnic name without its prosthesis *a*, but with an initial apical trill, *rrămăñ*, similar to the sound reproduced by the Albanian *rr* grapheme (multi-vibration apical trill). The other populations call them *Vlachs*, a term by which the Romanized populations living to the North and South of the Danube have generally been designated. Albanians call them *çobenj* ("shepherds", by their traditional profession), *rëmeri* (probably from Romanus), or *vllehë* (< Gr. βλάχος), while the Greeks call them *αρβανιτόβλαχοι* ("Vlachs from Albania") or *καραγούνηδες* ("bearers of black furs"), this latter name pointing to the traditional black sheep or goat fur these shepherds used to wear. Being a population of shepherds, the Farsherots have known a wide spread in Greece too, where many of them finally settled. The case of the Aromanians is a particular one because, even though they are among the oldest ethnic groups in the Balkans, speaking a Romance idiom, they have never managed to form a state. Most of the Farsherots are settled in Albania, and live in communities spread like small islands on the map of Albania, in the southern part of the country (the area of contact with the Tosk dialect of the Albanian language), both in the mountainous or higher parts of the southeast, as well as in the western plain, Muzachia Plain (Alb. Myzeqe) (Lozovanu, D., 2012).

During the Communist regime and its subsequent fall in 1991, the Aromanians of Albania did not enjoy the status of national minority because, according to the Albanian state, they lacked a

motherland, or, to use another term, a kin-state. Officially, the Aromanians and Roma had the status of ethnic-linguistic minorities, which neither *de facto*, nor *de iure* granted any language rights to these communities. Officially, this situation has come to an end with the entering into force of Law 96/2017, where 9 national minorities are recognized today in Albania: Aromanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Egyptian, Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Roma and Serbian.

During the Ottoman rule, on the territory of present Albania, there were 17 Romanian schools and one secondary school in Berat: two primary schools in Korçë, Plasë, Voskopojë, Berat, Elbasan and one primary school in Llëngë/Lunca, Nicea / Niçë, Vithkuq, Shipskë, Fearica (Fier), Grabovë, Lushnjë, Karbunarë. For the issues related to the Romanian schools in the Ottoman Empire, of particular interest are the decisions of the *Vlah Teaching Congress*, which took place in Manastir/Bitola from 15 to 23 September 1909: pedagogical organization of primary schools, administrative organization, better locations for schools, teaching materials, secondary schools, organization of the Association of the Romanian teaching and ecclesiastical body in the Ottoman Empire. Among the various issues discussed, mention should be made of the urgency of drawing up compulsory school regulations, in view of the need for schools to be governed by fixed and systematic rules, the need to draw up a school curriculum capable of fostering the development of the national feeling/consciousness and providing young people with practical notions of life, with special reference to local needs; approval of the use of the Aromanian dialect in the first two elementary grades, with the provision that the literary Romanian language be used in the upper grades; the observation that "there is a great shortage of school premises and teaching materials, with the request to the Superior Board of Schools to take care of this problem and to solve it in the best possible way; the commitment of the relevant institution to improve the financial situation of the didactic personnel." (Berciu-Drăghicescu, A., Petre, M., 2004). The final result of the complex measures to be taken was to have a more modern, organized, but also more accountable school. This school tradition, unfortunately interrupted by adverse historical circumstances after WWII, had been started by the Romanian state, which developed and supported a wide network of Romanian schools in the Balkans at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. This information is very valuable to us today because it teaches us that history still has many important lessons in store for us, which may also help us solve the contemporary dilemmas concerning the preservation and revitalization of the minority languages.

## **EXPOSITION**

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES**

In recent years, under totally different geopolitical circumstances as compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Western Balkans, teaching minority languages has become a significant area of focus, as societies recognize the importance of preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. Several innovative trends have emerged in the field of teaching minority languages to ensure their survival or revitalization and promote their usage. They aim to make language learning more effective, enjoyable, and relevant, thus contributing to the preservation and revitalization of these languages.

The development of teaching and learning resources often relies on the existence of an appropriate and accessible orthography. The orthographic and linguistic content needs to be synchronized with a cultural approach, suitable for the linguistic community in question. Furthermore, there is a great diversity in the range of approaches to pedagogical materials for minority, sometimes even endangered, languages around the world. Among the traditional materials are the ones activating all four language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), while others focus only on one skill. Other materials are developed for a broad spectrum of educational contexts, while others are shaped according to a specific method, age groups or institutional setting such as primary or secondary schools, informal classes for adults etc. On the other hand, the resources may be monolingual (only in the target language), bilingual, diglossic or multilingual, highlighting the various needs of learners found in different sociolinguistic contexts.

More traditional methods and materials focus on grammar instruction and exercises, while others may use cultural approaches to language learning. More recent materials make use of twenty-first

century online technology to make minority or endangered languages accessible to a wider audience. In some cases, the resources for the minority languages may rely on language documentation materials collected by outsiders, such as dialectologists, linguists, folklorists, anthropologists etc. In other cases, they may be created by or with the contribution of the respective speech communities. According to some specialists, these resources do not play only the role of tools for linguistic instruction, but also the role of instruments for resistance and reclamation of a certain minority language. (Spolsky, B, 2009; Edwards, J. 2010).

## **INNOVATIVE TRENDS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING MINORITY LANGUAGES**

Technology has always played an important role in language education. Besides “learners employ different thinking skills when learning a language.” (Zhelezova, D, 2019). Online platforms, mobile apps, and interactive language learning tools have been developed to make learning minority languages more accessible and engaging. There is a great diversity of online platforms meant to teach standard Romanian to Aromanians, especially the ones living outside Romania, native speakers of Romanian living abroad, as well as to non-native Romanians, who want to learn standard Romanian as a foreign language. These platforms have been developed by various institutions such as the Romanian Ministry of Education (e.g. CRED-Curriculum Relevant (<https://digital.educred.ro/>), a free teaching and learning platform developed by Romanian teachers from all over Romania, based on the school curriculum for primary and secondary school, centred on the acquisition of competences), the Institute of the Romanian Language (<https://digitaedu.ro/>, a platform using digital tools and free educational resources), various organizations specialized in creating online educational resources, including religious themes (<https://library.livresq.com/>).

Immersion programs are designed to create an environment where learners are exposed to the minority language in everyday contexts. This approach may involve language camps, summer schools, or community-based initiatives that encourage participants to use the language actively in various activities and social interactions. An enriching didactic experience in this respect was the organization and coordination of the Summer School “Students from Albania to Baia-Mare Maramuresh, July 16-25, 2019”, financed by the Romanian Cultural Institute: 15 Aromanian students from Albania, had intensive Romanian classes and were immersed in the traditional and contemporary culture of the Maramuresh county in Romania, one of the most picturesque touristic areas still preserving aspects of the Romanian traditional life. The Romanian lessons were monolingual, taught only in Romanian. The summer school was organized in cooperation with the Faculty of Letters of the North Baia Mare University Centre, part of the Technical University of Cluj. Part of the program's activities were also activities that were directly related to the specificity of university and faculty life, including the cultural promotion of the area that the students visited, such as Baia Mare, Maramuresh, one of the most representative areas of Romanian traditional, but also modern culture. The activities on the campus aimed at familiarizing students with the Romanian academic environment, with European educational standards and developing relevant skills for success in higher education in Romania. The development of these skills was necessary for these students in the future if they wanted to pursue university or master studies in Romania. On the other hand, off-campus activities facilitated immersion in Romanian culture, both modern and traditional.

Creating digital content in minority languages, such as e-books, videos, podcasts, and online articles, has been an effective way to promote language use and increase learners' exposure to the language. Content creation can involve collaborations between educators, linguists, ethnologists etc. and community members to produce culturally relevant and engaging materials. (Pauwels 2016, 141)

In this respect we would like to give as an example Tobias Weber's media-based curricula for the endangered languages context (Weber, T. 2023). Weber designs a media-based syllabus for teaching South Estonian and extrapolates this case study to a broader overview of the ways in which a media-based curriculum can be developed and taught for other endangered languages. Weber notes a variety of benefits to using a media-based curriculum instead of a textbook-based one, such

as the fact that with the former, students improve their media literacy in addition to learning the language. The media-based approach is particularly well suited for those endangered languages that have a considerable media presence; in such cases, the rich variety of contemporary media resources can compensate for a lack of expressly designed pedagogical materials such as textbooks and reading comprehension material. For the Aromanian dialect, we would like bring to the public's attention the *Proiect Avdhela* website (<https://www.proiectavdela.ro/avdhela>), conceived as a digital library for the Aromanian dialect, a library divided into the following sections: ethnology, history, spirituality, linguistics, literature, media. The motto accompanying each section is a famous prayer "Viryiră mama-i Dumneadză, oară tă noi pecătoșli" (in transl. *Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, pray for us the sinners*), which was found carved on a wooden icon from 1739, discovered at Ardenica Monastery in Albania, and whose author is the Aromanian monk Nectarie Tărpu. The icon was portraying Virgin Mary holding Jesus Christ as a baby in her arms and the same prayer was carved in three other languages, besides the Aromanian dialect: Latin, Albanian and Greek. As far as the digital library is concerned, the ethnology section brings together works in electronic format written by scientists and researchers from Romania (e.g. the academician Matilda Caragiu Marioțeanu, the ethnologist Irina Nicolau and others), as well as from Bulgaria (Svetla Rashkiewa). The linguistics section provides access to works by Theodor Capidan, Vasile Tega, Matilda Caragiu Marioțeanu, including a pedagogical resource, a textbook for the teaching and learning of Aromanian entitled "Metodă aromâna" (*Aromanian Method*) by Iancu Ballamaci. The literature section contains Aromanian poetry, including contemporary one by the Aromanian poet living in Albania, Spiru Fuchi, as well as literary analyses of the *Mioritza Ballad* in Aromanian by the academician Nicolae Saramandu, the literary study "Poezia aromâna între tradiție și contemporaneitate" (*The Aromanian Poetry between Tradition and Contemporariness*) by Gheorghe Vrana. Last but nor least, the media section presents us with photos and short videos taken at the end of the 19th century by the famous Manakia Brothers, who are also known as "the Lumière Brothers of the Balkans", considering that they created their works around the same time period. Another interesting aspect of the website is that it may be enlarged and enriched by readers and specialists who can send their research, works in this field to the editorial board of the Aromanian Association which has created the website.

Another recent method of revitalizing minority languages is by building collaborative learning communities. Building collaborative learning communities both online and offline has been instrumental in connecting learners and speakers of minority languages. Social media groups, language exchange programs, and virtual meetups allow learners to interact with native speakers, share learning resources, and practise the language in authentic settings. We would like to illustrate this method through the ongoing Project "Scriem, citim și vorbim aromânește" (*We write, read and speak Aromanian*), financed by the Department for the Romanian Diaspora, Romania, in which the Aromanian dialect of the Romanian language is being taught and learned in parallel and in comparison to the standard Romanian by the children from the Aromanian communities living in Korçë and Selenicë, Albania. The project was designed by two linguists (including a dialectologist) from the Institute of Linguistics and Dialectology of the Romanian Academy and involved 2 local teachers and 10 pupils from Korçë, as well as 2 local teachers and 20 pupils from Selenicë, Albania. The courses have been developed online and onsite by the specialists of the Institute, in collaboration with the local teachers of the Aromanian dialect (native speakers). The alphabet, the rules of pronunciation, the vocabulary and grammar, as well as the texts in the Aromanian dialect were presented in parallel and in comparison with their correspondents in standard Romanian, so that the pupils could realize the great similarities and small differences between the two variants (dialect vs. standard). Finally, the dialogues, the texts, the stories or the anecdotes, sometimes collected by the specialist in Romanian dialectology, were presented in both standard and dialect, while the new vocabulary was also explained in English, allowing thus even foreigners to learn the Aromanian dialect in comparison to the standard Romanian. The pupils from Selenicë were beginners in standard Romanian but more proficient in the Aromanian dialect since all of them were coming from Aromanian families, many of them using the dialect at home and having already been trained in a Sunday (private) school by their Aromanian teachers in Selenicë. Half of the pupils from Korçë were beginners in the Aromanian dialect, since the dialect was no longer spoken in their

families, but they were more proficient in the standard Romanian since they had been taking Romanian classes at the Romanian Information Center in Korçë. The other group of children were more proficient in the dialect and less proficient in standard Romanian, since they had been studying only the dialect with their local teacher, but not the standard. In addition, they are still using the dialect within their families. Furthermore, the pupils enrolled in the Aromanian classes received tablets from the project representatives, enabling them to get connected more easily to the online classes and further explore online apps and resources for Aromanian.

Some innovative approaches involve larger language revitalization projects, often involving partnerships between educational institutions, community organizations, and government bodies. These projects may include teacher training programs, curriculum development, and initiatives to integrate the minority language into various aspects of public life. Many minority language communities have implemented language revitalization programs. In the Aromanian communities of Albania, these programs focus on folk festivals, intergenerational mother tongue transmission, encouraging parents and elders to pass down the idiom to younger generations through storytelling, family gatherings and community events.

Emphasizing multilingual education, where minority languages are integrated into the overall curriculum, fosters language awareness and positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity. Ireland is a very good example of a country in this respect which has introduced heritage languages such as Gaelic in the public school system. Another example is Spain where the Basque Country has introduced the Basque language (Euskera), a minority language, in their school curricula.

According to Law 96/2017 “For the Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Albania”, minorities, living in areas where their concentration is of more than 20% and upon their request, have the following linguistic rights:

- education in minority languages;
- use of minority languages in the justice system;
- minority languages may be used by administrative authorities and public services;
- the use of minority languages in the mass media;
- the use of minority languages in cultural activities and institutions;
- the use of minority languages in economic and social life;
- the use of minority languages in cross-border exchanges.

Due to a long period of lack of exertion of linguistic rights, at the moment Albania is working on its infrastructure in order to ensure the above mentioned rights. In connection to the education in minority languages there is a lack of primary and secondary school teachers of minority languages, recognized and certified by the Albanian state. As a result, the Albanian Ministry of Education approved in 2023 the opening of a BA Program in Albanian Language - Literature and Minority Language at “Fan S. Noli” University of Korçë, which will ensure the preparation of minority language teachers for the following national minorities: Aromanian, Bulgarian, Egyptian, Greek and Macedonian. Even though its legislation is almost entirely synchronized with the European legislation and particularly with the *European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*, Albania has not signed or ratified the *Charter* yet.

In terms of innovative ways of learning minority languages, creating language-learning apps and games tailored to children has been a popular trend to engage young learners in minority languages. These apps often use interactive elements and storytelling to make language learning enjoyable for kids. For example, *IndyLan*, is an educational tool designed specifically for users to learn not only some of Europe’s endangered languages but also more about the cultures of the people who speak these languages (<https://www.enter-network.eu/project/indylan/>).

The tool constitutes a gamified language-learning solution in the form of a mobile application. Smartphones have become a popular educational tool and the number of the smartphone and tablet users of all ages is constantly growing in the EU. The *IndyLan* application will help speakers of English, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish to learn Gaelic, Scots, Cornish, Basque, Galician and Saami. For the Aromanian speakers we would recommend the *duolingo* app (<https://www.duolingo.com/>) for standard Romanian. According to the data we have, it has been proved that learning languages focusing on the 4 skills, listening reading,

writing and speaking, by means of this interactive and at the same time entertaining app really functions (<https://www.duolingo.com/efficacy>).

Finally, minority or heritage language schools are authentic ways of learning a minority or heritage language. They are supplementary language schools that provide instruction in the minority language outside regular school hours. Additionally “in the language classroom, this is often what is called the production or free-practice stage of a lesson. Examples of creating might include telling a story, giving a presentation, taking part in a role- play, or writing a paragraph or essay.” (Zhelezova, D. 2019). Heritage language schools allow children from immigrant families or minority communities to maintain their language skills and cultural identity (Edwards 2009). In Albania the first school of this kind was established, after the fall of the communist system, in Divjaka by the Aromanian teacher Kostandin Koçi, who donated his house to be used as a school. More recent schools have been opened in Selenicë and Mekat with the financial support of Nicolae Iorga Foundation in Sarandë or the Department for Romanian Diaspora, Romania, under the guidance of local native teachers who often work as volunteers.

To sum up, minority languages are part of a country’s cultural heritage and it is in its own interest to protect them. In the case of Albania, considerable progress has been made during the last twenty years in relation to minorities and their linguistic rights, especially in terms of legislation. But there is still a lot to be done with respect to the implementation of the already existing legislation and the creation of solid bases for the protection and promotion of the minority languages and idioms spoken in this country.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present article has made an overall presentation of the most recent and innovative trends and methods in the field of teaching and learning minority, sometimes called heritage languages, relying mainly on the author’s long didactic experience in teaching standard Romanian, Romanian as a Balkan language, Romanian language and culture, at an academic level, at “Fan S. Noli” University in Korçë as well as on her field research among the Aromanians living in Albania.

It is essential to adapt teaching methods to the specific needs and context of each minority language community, taking into account factors such as the number of speakers, the language’s status, and the community’s educational goals. By embracing innovation and creativity, educators and language advocates can help revitalize and sustain minority languages for future generations.

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