CHAPTER 2

The Sounds of a Mixed Language

2.1. Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the Swedish Romani sound system. We examine segmental features: vowel and consonant inventories; as well as word-level prosody: lexical stress, the quantity distinction, and lexical pitch accents. Since the core of the sound system has been adapted from Swedish, a comparison with Swedish underlies the synchronic description of the language in sections 2.3–2.6. We focus on two segmental features for more detailed analysis: (i) an aspiration feature in the voiceless stops /pʰ tʰ kʰ/ and in the voiced stop /ɡʰ/ that is not present in Swedish: the aspirated voiceless stops go back to Romani, whilst the /ɡʰ/ represents an innovation; (ii) a series of voiceless post-alveolar fricatives: Swedish has a similar series, but it is simpler in several respects. We pay special attention as well to a third feature of the language: the conspicuous occurrence of variation in pronunciation at all levels of phonology.

Although mainly adapted from Swedish, the sound system contains traces of European Romani. In Section 2.8, we compare it to that of other Romani dialects.

We make no attempt to present a complete description of the Scandoromani sound system. In particular, we leave aside issues of sentence-level prosody and syllable structure, partly due to insufficient data. Meanwhile, phonetic and phonological analyses of Scandoromani are complicated by factors specific to the language and its users: see the discussion in sections 2.1.1–2.1.2.

2.1.1. Speakers and Available Recordings

The number of potential consultants for studies on Swedish Romani is quite small, partly due to the small number of speakers and partly due to the language’s traditionally secret status (Section 1.1.2). This makes the number of available audio recordings small indeed. Although the lack of recordings can, to some extent, be explained by technical circumstances, a bigger problem that persists is the unwillingness of speakers to be recorded. Earlier descriptions of the language (Section 1.2.2) have been solely based on transcriptions,

1 It has only been possible to do recordings and deep interviews with Swedish speakers, Lenny Lindell (LL) and Keith Thorbjörnson-Djerf (KTD); see Section 2.1.1.
mostly performed by linguistically and phonetically untrained persons. The description by Lindell and Thorbjörnsson-Djerf (2008) is based on interviews with two speakers, with recordings made of one of them (Lenny Lindell, LL).

2.1.2. *Allophonic Variation, Minimal Pairs, and the Phoneme Inventory*

Swedish Romani exhibits a high degree of formal alternations, concerning both morphology and—more importantly to the present chapter—phonology. Often one or more speech sounds or lexical stress patterns, or both, differ between forms. Many words containing one of the voiceless post-alveolar\(^2\) fricatives \([ɕ \, ʂ \, ɧ \, χ]\) can exchange this fricative with another fricative from the same group. Speakers are well aware of such variations in pronunciation,\(^3\) evidenced by the deliberate choice of our language consultants—the authors of Lindell and Thorbjörnsson-Djerf (2008)—to encode these variations into the writing of their dictionary. The word *bàscha* ‘1. to bark, yell, argue, be difficult, be stupid; 2. epithet’ can be pronounced with three different fricatives and written as *bàsha*, *bàscha*, or *bàcha*.

Such sound alternations may signal either regional affiliation or family membership: i.e., they go back both to different regional dialects and different ‘familylects’ (Section 1.2.1). Given that a speaker usually is either a member of or has close contact with several families that can be spread out over several regions, it is generally difficult—if not impossible—to assign a word form to a specific dialect or familylect or draw precise boundaries between variants. One will often obtain a number of phonological variants from a single speaker; in many cases—at least our consultants LL and KTD—the speaker regards several word forms as possible within his idiolect. We cannot be certain that regional affiliation and family membership are the only factors behind the rich variation in pronunciation: one or another morphological or phonological word form could be chosen on stylistic or pragmatic criteria.

For these reasons, we have not tried to label precisely which variety of Swedish Romani we are investigating; we note only where our two language consultants come from (LL from the county of Västergötland and KTD from Halland). We treat the phonological variants obtained from them as *free*

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\(^2\) The term ‘post-alveolar’ refers in IPA to a specific place of articulation. We use the term in a modified, broader way to refer to *all* places of articulation posterior to the alveoli. In this way, we can refer to a series of fricatives containing \([s], [ɕ], [ɦ], [χ]\) that are not otherwise well covered by a single term: e.g., *dorsal* fricatives does not work, since \([s]\) is not dorsal. Note that we wish to include only *lingual* fricatives and not \([h]\).

\(^3\) This is only true for segmental features and lexical stress patterns: speakers do not seem to be aware of variation in pronunciation with respect to lexical pitch accent.