

“OUR PEOPLE” ONLINE. THE USE OF A NON-STANDARDIZED VARIETY OF ROMANIAN ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract. The paper analyses the written use of a non-standardized, mostly oral variety of Romanian on social networks, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This variety is spoken by the *Daj Nostri* (“Our People”) diaspora in the German-speaking countries Western Europe. *Daj Nostri*, who originate from Central and Eastern Serbia, form real and virtual networks and are actively using their language on the Facebook group and TikTok channel the analysis focuses on. The paper investigates the different spellings and code-switching the group members use, the topics that target the use of the variety, pointing to the emerging vernacular literacy, and also the language ideologies that emerge from the online comments. The author concludes that the enduring use of this non-standardized variety of Romanian, more than half a century after the first generations migrated from Serbia to Western Europe, is proof of the crucial role language plays in the ethnic identity of “Our People”, while its current online use makes it appealing to younger generations of speakers.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, social networks, non-standardized varieties, Romanian language, language ideology, code-switching.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first iteration of the World Wide Web (Web 1.0), or the *read-only web*, in the 1990s, when the Internet took on the form recognizable for today’s users, also opened up a new domain of language use. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) became accessible to a wide audience of users, though originally designed to support only English. In spite of the fear that the Internet was not providing “a space for diversity in language practice” (Wright 2004: 12), it soon became obvious that other standardized languages could also be efficiently used across different platforms.

With the arrival of Web 2.0, or the *participatory Web era*, in the mid-2000, which includes social media as a major component, the Internet has also become an important outlet for minority and non-standardized languages (Niuean – Sperlich 2005, Mauritian Creole – Rajah-Carrim 2009, Welsh – Honeycutt, Cunliffe 2010, Luxembourgish – Belling, and de

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Bres 2014, Low German – Reershemius 2016, Romani – Leggio 2020, among others). Users of these languages and linguistic varieties came up with innovative and non-conventional spellings, easily overcoming orthographical constraints imposed by the Internet on their varieties. Furthermore, they showed a high level of tolerance towards variability and a lack of firm norms (Tseliga 2007: 135). As a result, shared writing norms spontaneously emerged on the Internet within groups of users of certain varieties.

One of the first Web 2.0 platforms to see users contributing content in non-standardized varieties of Romanian spoken in the Balkans was Facebook. The present paper examines how the Romanian-speaking *Daj Nostri* (“Our People”) community, originating in Eastern Serbia and mainly settled in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, i.e., the German-speaking countries of Western Europe, used their non-standardized variety first on Facebook and then on TikTok. “Our People” are trilingual, speaking a non-standardized variety of Romanian, Serbian and German, and their online communication is characterised by intense code-switching and code-mixing.

I first talk about the “other” Romanian-speaking communities in Serbia, focusing on the varieties they speak and their heterogeneity. Then, following a brief overview of the *Daj Nostri* diaspora in Western Europe, originating from Eastern Serbia, I present the modest body of scholarship on the topic. Further, I discuss the real and virtual networks of “Our People” and the rise and fall of social platforms they were actively using their language on before and after the COVID-19 pandemic to introduce the Facebook group and TikTok channel my analysis focuses on. Then, I move on to discussing the methodology I used for my research and sampling criteria. Pairing the resulting collection of texts with ethnographic observation in the interactive place studied, I look at the language ideologies that emerge from online comments, to then focus on the written use of Romanian and the code-switching the members of the group frequently employ, pointing to the emerging vernacular literacy and topics that target the use of the variety. Finally, I summarize my findings by showing that the online presence of this non-standardized variety of Romanian may provide a way to challenge preconceptions and encourage speakers to use it even more in the offline space.

2. “OTHER” ROMANIAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES IN SERBIA

As bordering countries with intense contacts over the years, Romania and Serbia both have within their borders minority population groups speaking the language of the other country. Not taking into account recent migrations, there are several older or historical communities of different sizes speaking different varieties of Romanian in Serbia (Sorescu-Marinković 2007): the Romanians of Vojvodina, the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia and the dispersed groups labelled “other” groups of Romanian language speakers, “hidden, marginal and problematic” (Hedeşan 2005: 17). Despite their heterogeneity in terms of the spoken linguistic variety, high social atomization, different self-appellation and traditional culture, these other groups have been usually dealt with without sufficient distinction between one another by scholars and simply labelled *Bayash* (Sikimić 2005b).

The names under which these “other” groups of Romanian language speakers are known in the Balkans and Central Europe, where they live today, are very diverse: *Rudari*, *Lingurari*, *Aurari*, *Koritari*, *Karavlas*, *Banjaši*, *Beaşi*, *Beások*, *Daj Nostri* etc. They speak dialectal, archaic varieties of Romanian as their mother tongue, heavily influenced by the

contact languages, and are today often considered Roma by the surrounding populations. There are three main hypotheses regarding their origin, which were formulated around a century ago, when these “other” Romanian-speaking communities started being of interest to researchers: 1) they are an ancient population, of unknown origin, as far away from Romanian as they are from the Roma (Chelcea 1944); 2) they are Romanians (Nicolăescu Plopșor 1922); and 3) they are a Roma branch who in time forgot their mother tongue (Petrovici 1938). The advocates of the last hypothesis support the theory that the Rudari were most probably slaves in the Romanian Principalities until the middle of the 19th century, with their traditional occupations being gold-panning and later woodcarving. Nevertheless, recent research suggests that throughout the 18th century the evolution of a unique Rudari identity has taken place (Rotaru and Gaunt 2023). Bulgarian anthropologists Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov stressed that these “Romanian-speaking ‘Gypsy’ communities” are a typical example of “the complex relationships between the origin, mother tongue and ethnic identity” (Marushiakova and Popov 2014: 16).

In the last one and a half to two centuries, these “other” groups of Romanian language speakers have been living in isolated communities all over the Balkans and Central Europe. Some linguists consider that the Romanian varieties spoken in the countries where they were not influenced by the Romanian literary standard belong to the group of “Balkan Bayash Romanian vernaculars” (Sikimić 2008a: 233). They are today vigorous in many regions of Central and South-Eastern Europe, with probably tens, if not hundreds of thousands of speakers outside Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

Ethnologue, the most comprehensive reference work that provides information and statistics for all of the world’s known living languages, lists Bayash among the Romanian language dialects, together with Moldavian, Muntenian (Walachian), Transylvanian and Banat, adding that “Bayash are Roma whose dialect is based on Banat, but influenced by Balkan Romani [rmn] and Hungarian [hun]”.² The information it provides is, nevertheless, erroneous and incomplete, as there is no evidence that Bayash Romanian has been influenced by Balkan Romani, and linguists have precisely determined the origin and migration routes of the Bayash. Thus, more than a century ago, German dialectologist Gustav Weigand established that the language of the *Koritari* in Bosnia originated in Transylvania (1908: 174), while Romanian linguist Ion Calotă, much later, re-confirmed that dialectological evidence shows that they left this region, Transylvania, in the 17-18th century (1995: 154). Part of the *Koritari* in Slavonia, like the Bayash in Serbia, indeed crossed Banat during their migration, where they borrowed lexical and phonetic elements from the local dialects, as shown by Teodor Filipescu (1906: 225), author of an ethnographic and anthropo-geographic monograph on the Romanian colonies in Bosnia. This was also confirmed by Romanian linguist Nicolae Saramandu’s research in Northern Croatia, who precisely located the variety spoken by the Bayash he interviewed in “South-Eastern Crișana, North-Eastern extremity of Banat and South-Western extremity of Transylvania”, where the main transitional variety within the Crișana sub-dialect is spoken (Saramandu 1997: 109). However, Romanian linguist Emil Petrovici showed that *Koritari* in Western Serbia arrived there following a different route, via Muntenia in South Romania (Petrovici 1938: 228).

Furthermore, *Ethnologue* registers “Boyash Romanian” only in Hungary and assesses its vitality as level 4, *educational*. It should be said that these Romanian varieties are spoken in other

² <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/ron>. Accessed: October 29, 2020.

countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, as well. Hungary has indeed emerged as the only one in which standardization efforts have been made during the last years, based on the special spelling systems created for this variety, which rely on the orthographic rules of Hungarian (Orsós 2015, Kahl, Nechiti 2019, Rosenberg 2020, Sorescu-Marinković 2021). Croatia has also witnessed the emergence of different spelling systems for Bayash Romanian, based on the orthographic rules of Croatian, with the subsequent appearance of various publications in the Bayash Romanian varieties (Radosavljević 2020, Sorescu-Marinković 2021).

In Serbia, there is no generally accepted orthography for writing down these varieties, which endure solely as an oral language, with a highly limited domain of use, within the family and as a secret language (Sikimić 2008a: 235-238, Sorescu-Marinković 2011: 20). These groups of Romanian language speakers inhabit almost 180 localities in Serbia (Sikimić 2005a: 10-12), but most often live in isolated, ghettoized settlements, at the outskirts of bigger localities, which is why assimilation into the majority population is usually weak. They do not form compact, large communities anywhere, unlike the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia or Romanians of Vojvodina. All of them are at least bilingual, speaking their Romanian variety and Serbian, the official state language.

The Romanian varieties spoken by these “other” speakers in Serbia can be classified into two main groups: one spoken north of the Danube, with strong similarities to the Transylvania dialect of Romanian, by the groups who call themselves *Beași*, and the other, south of the Danube, connected to the Muntenia dialect of Romanian, spoken by communities who usually refer to themselves as *Daj Nostri*. Apart from that, there is significant lexical and phonetic variation from settlement to settlement. The differences between these two groups of varieties, those spoken by *Beași* and by *Daj Nostri*, with different dialectal bases, can sometimes even hinder communication between their members, even if they are considered one and the same community by researchers. The *Beași* from northwestern Serbia can more easily understand the Bayash in Croatia than the *Daj Nostri* in Eastern Serbia and the other way around.

During the last century, these Romanian varieties have developed independently from standard Romanian and have been strongly influenced by Serbian, the contact language, and also by Hungarian, in the north of the country. Thus, lexical, grammatical and pragmatic markers clearly differentiate them from the standard variety, while the phonological markers are an indication of their dialectal origin (Sorescu-Marinković et al. 2020). The “other” Romanian language speakers who live in Romanian villages in Vojvodina have taken up the more prestigious, Romanian Vojvodina variety, spoken by the Romanians (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018) and can also speak standard Romanian, given that they have access to schooling, media and administration in Romanian.

Frequent code-switching and code-mixing phenomena are the core characteristic in the speech of the *Beași* and *Daj Nostri*, and “among those living in a purely Serbian speaking environment, a tendency to lose proficiency in the mother tongue can be observed” (Sorescu-Marinković 2011: 24). In the first half of the 20th century, Emil Petrovici (1938) noted that the Romanian-speaking groups in Western Serbia were already speaking a Romanian variety structurally influenced by Serbian, and a language shift was inevitable in the following decades. Nevertheless, according to recent sociolinguistic field research, intergenerational transmission is still ongoing both in Western and in Central and Eastern Serbia, with Romanian still used as the medium of family communication. These latter groups of Romanian language speakers from Central and Eastern Serbia settled in the German-speaking countries of Western Europe, who call themselves “Our People”, form the subject of my paper.

3. “OUR PEOPLE” IN WESTERN EUROPE

“Our People” (*Daj Nostri*, *ai noștri* or *oamenii nostri*,³ as they call themselves) are a non-compact group from Central and Eastern Serbia who speak related Romanian varieties with a dialectal Muntenia basis. Their traditional occupation used to be woodwork, practised by only a few individuals today. Some of them until recently preserved the ritual of *gurban*, which indicates a Bulgarian sojourn (Sikimić 2008b), and the ritual trance (Tomić 1950). Geographically speaking, the area they inhabit practically surrounds the region with a majority Vlach population in Eastern Serbia, overlapping in a few places (see Map).

A particularity of “Our People”, relevant to this paper, is their high mobility: in the last 60 years, a significant number of Yugoslavian and later Serbian citizens from Eastern Serbia have moved abroad, especially to Austria, Switzerland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Inhabitants of Eastern Serbia had a considerable share in the number of Yugoslav labour migrants, with some researchers asserting that in the 1960s and 1970s, their number was as much as four times larger than that of labour migrants from other regions of Serbia (Marjanović 1995, Schierup and Ålund 1986). Labour migration still continues today, which resulted in the consolidation of a *Daj Nostri* diaspora in Western Europe, occasionally mentioned by researchers (Sikimić 2005b). However, specific studies on these Romanian-speaking groups residing in German-speaking countries are still few.

Corinna Leschber’s 2008 article *Romanian-Serbian Code-Mixing Phenomena: Documentation of a Romanian Extra-Territorial Variety Showing Extensive Romanian-Serbian Code-Mixing Phenomena* was the first to document the Romanian variety spoken in Germany. The analysis is based on 600 hours of audio recordings made from 2005–2006 of 50 persons who migrated in their youth from Central Serbia to Berlin, Germany. Leschber suggests that the in-group variety of these speakers, which presents intense code-mixing and code-switching between three languages (Serbian, Romanian and German), is without doubt just a “temporarily used variety, heavily endangered by obsolescence and language death, since the youngest generation does not know this variety and never showed any interest towards learning or even understanding it” (Leschber 2008: 259).

The majority of Leschber’s informants were born in Varvarin, Stržilo and Suvaja, villages in Central Serbia, and referred to their local variety of Romanian as *rumâniește*. This was, according to the author, the main source of trilingual code-mixing phenomena. After migrating to Germany, the already mixed Romanian-Serbian variety was influenced by the Berlin dialect. The author suggests that the local variety of Romanian was used with two main aims: in everyday family communication with elder relatives, and in conversations with subversive aims, as a secret language (*idem*: 250). Leschber also noticed that, in most cases, Romanian was the dominant, matrix language, switching places with Serbian at times, while German was only the language embeddings were made from.

The second study on these “other” groups of Romanian speakers in the German-speaking countries and, at the same time, the first to specifically mention “Our People” was an MA thesis in intercultural social work defended in 2018 by Mario Brändle in Dornbirn, Austria, entitled *Daj Nostri in Vorarlberg. A Changing Community in the Focus of Social Work*. Based on interviews with “Our People” living in Vorarlberg, a mountainous province

³ This last term is only used by the community in Vienna.

in Western Austria, and virtual fieldwork in the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group, the study explores the identity and language of this community (Brändle 2018).

Brändle traces the origin of “Our People” in Austria to the beginning of migrations from Yugoslavia as part of the *gastarbeiter* (guest worker) agreement, which, starting from the 1960s, supplied foreign workers to the devastated post-war Austrian economy. In 1973, 78.5% of the 230,000 *gastarbeiters* in Austria were of Yugoslav descent. In the aftermath of the Balkan ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, a new wave of Serbs came to Austria. In 2018, 141,898 people in Austria were born in Serbia; 3,745 of them were living in Vorarlberg (Brändle 2018).

The study included 15 respondents aged 27 to 70. Nine of them were born in former Yugoslavia and six in Austria (*idem*: 13). All of them described their language as a variety of Romanian enhanced with Serbian words. As many had been schooled in Serbia, stories of discrimination and mockery for using their native idiom abounded.

In 2020, the Vanishing Languages and Cultural Heritage Commission of the Austrian Academy of Sciences launched the project *Turoyo and Boyash in Vienna*, meant to protect two of Vienna’s hidden language minorities.⁴ The researchers started from the premise that Vienna, an important settlement area of the Bayash, was not only significant from the point of view of migration history but could also play an important role in language documentation and preservation.

4. REAL AND VIRTUAL NETWORKS

The real potential of the Internet for minority languages rests “not in the replication of traditional media and the formation of passive communities of minority language media consumers, but in the formation of active communities of collaborative minority language producers” (Cunliffe 2007: 136-137). Researchers emphasise that what indexes these communities is not necessarily one shared code linked to a territory (Gal 2006: 178), but rather the breadth of their linguistic repertoires and perhaps a strategic situational switching among the languages they spoke. The new technologies help reframe de-territorialised minority languages, with combinations of several languages intentionally used together and multilingualism positively valued and encouraged.

Nevertheless, linguists studying online communication also observed that networks formed online most often reproduced communities that indeed used to share or are still sharing a territory. Leggio and Matras (2017), for example, showed how Romani speakers tended to create networks on YouTube that replicated communities that shared a tradition of face-to-face oral communication. Marushiakova and Popov (2020: 49) noticed that the communication of the *Rudari* working and living outside Bulgaria was greatly facilitated by Skype, Facebook or YouTube; however, their Internet networks were limited, and their community identity was always perceived in a national context: written correspondence (greetings, comments, etc.) was almost entirely in Bulgarian, while Romanian was used only colloquially.

Digital communication, on the one hand, and cheap flights and the ease of road transport in Europe have facilitated circular mobility and return migration between the

⁴ <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/de/vlach/projects/boyash-and-turoyo>. Accessed: October 29, 2020.

new homes and the places of origin of migrants in Central and Eastern Europe. These new forms of return migration are repositioning migrants physically and socially in their hometowns and regions (Anghel 2019, Toma and Fosztó 2018), helping them replicate and reinforce online the networks that existed offline and that still come together at certain points. The ability to engage in fast, efficient, simultaneous communication in real time has made it possible to maintain and even strengthen existing relationships and networks (Dunbar 2016).

The same applies to “Our People”, whose social media groups replicate a community that used to share a territory in the country of origin, Serbia, and even face-to-face communication or distant family ties, and whose members, at certain moments during the year, come together physically again. They actively use Serbian, German and Romanian for written online communication in the case of the Facebook group I focus on, and German, Romanian and, to a much lesser extent, Serbian for both oral and written communication, in the case of the TikTok profile I analyse.

5. “OUR PEOPLE” ONLINE: THE RISE AND FALL OF SOCIAL PLATFORMS

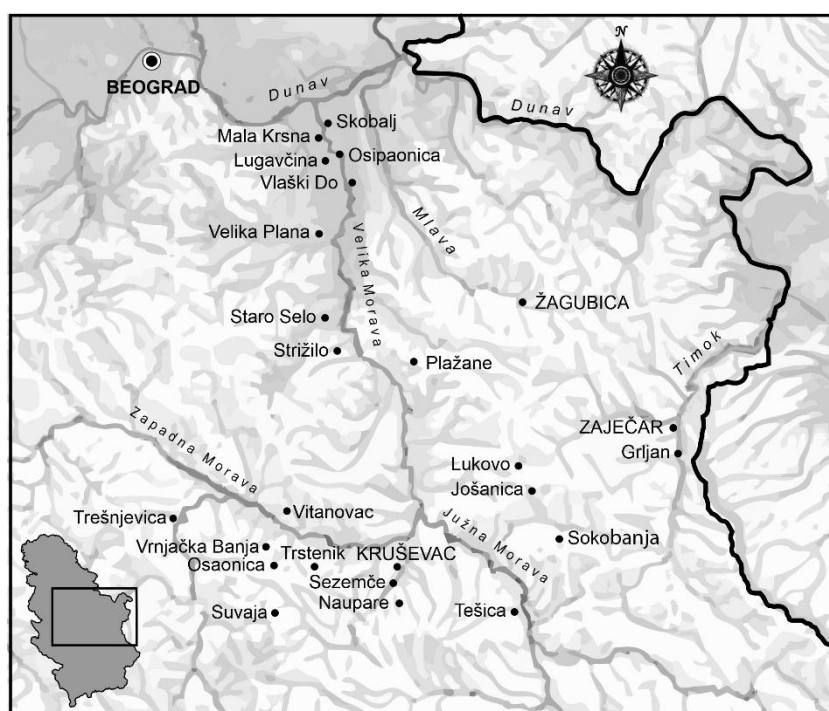
Digital communication and networking have today become central to the daily lives of *Daj Nostrri*. During the last decade, their online presence on social networks was noticed and discussed by researchers, who highlighted the role that the language resources they use online have in defining their identity (Brändle 2018, Sorescu-Marinković 2020). The existing scholarship on the online presence of *Daj Nostrri* has so far focused on Facebook, as it only covers the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period. However, as the circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic strongly differed from “normal” life, social media platforms were used differently, and user preferences dramatically changed (Feldkamp 2021).

Even though all social media platforms increased their usage rates during COVID-19, and Facebook, launched in 2004, remains the most widely used platform in the world, after two decades of existence, it nevertheless finds itself in a battle for relevancy, at least among younger adults. The decline of Facebook is a complex phenomenon influenced by a combination of factors, and the platform faces the challenge of adapting to evolving trends, with younger users flocking to other platforms. One of the big winners of the COVID-19 pandemic was TikTok, launched in 2017 in most markets outside China. Although it had been on the rise even before COVID-19, the pandemic acted as a catalyst and fuelled the platform’s reach towards different age groups (*idem*: 73-74). Researchers believe that the main properties of TikTok that favoured its success during the pandemic were: its hyper-personalized algorithm, its anti-social approach, meaning that to use it, neither friends nor followers are needed, and the fact that many influencers created accounts and content during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were offered an additional narrative level on this platform (*idem*: 79).

Until 2020, the online presence of *Daj Nostrri* on social networks was most prominent on Facebook. One of the biggest and long-lasting Facebook groups of “Our People” was *Daj Nostrri* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/101707331836/>), which in November 2020

counted almost 10,000 members.⁵⁴ Launched in 2009, the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group, located in Emmenbrücke (Lucerne, Switzerland), was private, meaning that membership was acquired only upon being approved by the group administrator; only members can see who is in the group and what they post.

A close observation of the comments and discussions of the group members between 2018 and 2019 revealed that most originate from several villages of Central and Eastern Serbia (see Map), with which they still have family ties and enduring contacts.



Map of the places in Serbia where “Our People” come from (map created based on the observation of discussions between the members of the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group)

The bulk of the content on the Facebook group consisted of status updates, memes, videos, live parties etc., with an entertaining character. All group members had the right to post and comment, and many of them used all three languages: German, Serbian and Romanian. The use of Romanian was never stated as the group’s purpose (cf. Stern 2017,

⁵ There are also other smaller Facebook groups or pages of “Our People”: the FB page *Društvo Oamenii Nostri/Naš Narod – Naši Rumuni – Naši Banjaši* (https://www.facebook.com/banjasi/?ref=page_internal), created in 2015, with 4,415 followers, located in Vienna; the FB public group *Nasi “Rumuni” – Banjaši – Oamenii Nostri* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/oameninostri>), created in 2013, with 1,045 members; the public FB group *Daj Nostri Grljana* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/399844576853409>), created in 2015, Austria, with 621 members, etc. Accessed: October 20, 2020.

Belling, de Bres 2014), though it was implied that all members spoke it, and communicating in Romanian was more a by-product than a deliberate, premeditated plan⁶.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the posts on the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group became very rare, the group lost cohesion and, apparently, its administrators, too. Nevertheless, the online presence of “Our People” continued, but switched to other social networks. One of them was TikTok. One of the key differences between Facebook and TikTok is the type of content and data the users are so addictively plugging into the latter. TikTok is mainly about videos, typically short-form videos where people record themselves doing funny stuff – some of the most popular are lip-syncing music videos, dancing videos and comedy skits, whereas Facebook has pictures and video posts to quizzes, trivia, fun posts, challenge posts, memes. Another prominent difference is that TikTok is more individualistic in that it does not function on the principle of groups but individual profiles.

There are several TikTok profiles of “Our People” who post videos and lives in their Romanian variety and, in turn, trigger comments which contain, apart from German, Romanian, with heavy code-switching and code-mixing. Most of these videos can be traced on TikTok using the #dajnostri hashtag, which in April 2024 turned up 2,519 posts when searched. As the medium is different and relies mainly on videos rather than written posts, the sequences of written language are much shorter here than on Facebook and represent mainly comments on the videos. I will focus on the profile __mariina01, who in April 2024 had 13,600 followers and 97 posts hashtagged #dajnostri. Marina comes from Staro Selo in Eastern Serbia and lives in Vorarlberg, Austria, and her videos have an entertaining character, focusing on the funny aspects of family life abroad. Using Romanian here is also not a purpose in itself but gives cohesion to the audience, which is formed partly of *Daj Nostri*, partly of ex-Yugoslavs living in German-speaking countries and partly of Romanians speaking German. Many of her videos have hundreds of comments and stir up discussions on the Romanian variety she and the other persons in her videos speak. Apart from the #dajnostri hashtag, the analyzed videos also feature #jugosbelike and #ausländer, pointing to the multiple, complex identity of the *Daj Nostri*, who identify with the ex-Yugoslavs and, at the same time, are foreigners in Austria.

6. METHODOLOGY

As observation is the bottom line of any fieldwork and online observation offers a degree of ethnographic grounding in the “virtual field”, I have been doing systematic observation of the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group since September 2018, when I became a member, and of the __mariina01 TikTok profile since March 2024. As in any ethnographic endeavour, systematic observation allows researchers to acquire some of the “tacit knowledge” underlying the semiotic practices of regular members (Androutsopoulos 2013: 7).

As Androutsopoulos puts it, online observation refers to the process of “virtually being there”, with or without active participation, and watching the digital communication you will eventually analyse unfolding on a website or a network of connections across sites. Online observation is implicitly part of much linguistic computer-mediated communication

⁶ See Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019 for an analysis of a similar online use of Vlach Romanian.

(CMC) research but often not explicitly acknowledged (*idem*: 7). However, even though it may not seem so, the interaction between group members is difficult to follow in a virtual field. While in traditional research fieldwork, researchers carefully choose their interlocutors and talk to one or maybe two at once, the virtual field I studied comprises almost 10,000 members, in the first case, all of whom can post and comment at any point in time, and more than 13,000 followers, in the second. Furthermore, digital language data is available in overwhelming amounts and can be strikingly heterogeneous. Therefore, I restricted my analysis to sequences of written language found on the Facebook group and the TikTok profile.

Using Susan Herring's framework for computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2007), my analysis focused on 26 Facebook posts and 26 TikTok posts containing Romanian to different degrees. In the first case, the sampling was done using the search option offered by Facebook groups: namely, I looked for several Romanian keywords (*vorba* "word; language", *skrije* "write", *mankare* "food", *mamaljiga* "polenta", *banj* "money", *banj da fata* "money for the bride", *(alu) kare* "whose", *faka* "does"), with different spellings, and thus selected 26 all-time openers written fully or partially in Romanian. Based on these openers, I then analysed their language ideology, spelling in Romanian, code-switching and the topics frequently discussed in this language variety in the openers proper and in the comments they triggered. In the second case, the sampling was done by combining sampling by theme and sampling by time: I chose 10 posts from 2022, 10 from 2023 and 6 from 2024 hashtagged #dajnostri, where the video contained Romanian, alone or in combination with other languages. I tried to see in which language the written comments on the video were and focused my analysis on the same elements as above.

7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

It has been emphasized that literacy in non-standardized and even endangered languages is successfully promoted through the Internet (Rajah-Carrim 2009, Sperlich 2005). Writing online in a non-standardized variety, using *ad hoc* non-conventional and innovative spelling can stand for vernacular literacy. Voluntary and self-generated, it stands in stark contrast to the institutional literacy supported by language authorities. It has been shown that the rise of digital networking technologies and the new communication means and opportunities they can provide is increasingly blurring the distinction between institutional and vernacular literacy (Iorio 2016: 168).

The online observation of the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group, as well as previous findings (Brändle 2018, Leschber 2008, Sorescu-Marinković 2020), suggests that "Our People" use German, Serbian and their Romanian variety for communication. The comments in Romanian on the Facebook group can be considered a form of vernacular literacy. An analysis of the frequency of use of Romanian in the group revealed that, roughly speaking, about 15% of the total posts analyzed contained Romanian to some degree (Sorescu-Marinković 2020: 299). The sheer fact of writing in this Romanian variety is remarkable, as there is no tradition of literacy in the community nor any agreement regarding how their language should be written or what graphemes should be used. Usually, this lack of generally accepted norms translates into insecurity, resulting in the speakers' preference to switch to German or Serbian. Notably, the need for a writing system for Romanian is mentioned in some comments.

As for the TikTok channel, of the 26 analyzed videos, only two did not contain Romanian. The majority of the videos triggered comments that also contained Romanian, though not to such a large extent as on the Facebook group. Code-switching and code-mixing are the norm in the videos, but most of the comments are in German. Nevertheless, there are also examples of writing in Romanian. Serbian is used to a much lesser extent than on the Facebook group, and code-switching in the comments is not that common, given that they are much shorter than on Facebook.

7.1. Language ideology

The description of the *Daj Nostri* Facebook group is in German, with an inserted sentence in Romanian, meant to express the linguistic reality and ideology of “Our People”:

Der wo diesen Satz versteht ist ein wahrer Daj Nostri
 Satz: “*Jo sind Deni Bäd alu Nesa, alu Voja Gjaku*”⁷
 Hi Leute, ich habe diese gruppe gemacht, nicht einfach so zum spass sondern wollte schon immer wissen wie viele DAJ NOSTRIS von uns gibt. Es ist egal von wo man her kommt. Wir sind alle Gleich und haben eines Gemeinsam.
 Wir reden die selbe sprache.
 [Who understands this sentence is a real (member of) Our People
 Sentence: "I am Deni Bäd of Nesa, of Voja Gjaku"
 Hello, good people! I created this group not so much for fun, but because I have always wanted to know how many OUR PEOPLE there are. It doesn't matter where you come from. All of us are equal and have one thing in common.
 We speak the same language.]

The description of the Facebook group does not explicitly name the language that *Daj Nostri* speak, but the numerous comments on certain posts reveal that members are aware that it is Romanian, which they also frequently call *voarba nostre* (“our language”). Other members claim that their language is Vlach or Moldavian, and most agree that their variety was influenced by or mixed with Serbian. The debates about the origin of *Daj Nostri* and the language they speak are rather extensive, in Serbian or German, and make frequent reference to scholarly texts about the community.

The question of the language spoken by *Daj Nostri* comes up on TikTok as well, but, as the medium is different from Facebook, the comments are much shorter, and generally, there are no references to scholarly literature. As the TikTok channel I focus on is followed not only by *Daj Nostri*, but also by Serbs, ex-Yugoslavs and Romanians living in German-speaking countries, certain videos in Romanian trigger discussions about the language used, usually in German. The creator of the videos regularly replies that it is Romanian, but participants in the discussion also give other answers, such as: “Vlach”, “Romanian with an accent”, “Romanian dialect mixed with Serbian”, “a mix of Serbian and Romanian”, Moldavian, “Vlach, meaning ‘Romanian’ mixed with Yugoslavian”, “Bulgarian Romanian”, “Serbian Romanian”, “Romanian with Bulgarian”.

⁷ German, *Romanian*, Serbian.

Derogatory remarks about the “broken” language *Daj Nostrî* speak can also be found among the comments on the TikTok videos:

Das is nd richtig rumänisch... das sind einfach kaputte wörter
[This is not correct/real Romanian... These are just broken words]

The creator of the channel, Marina, without going into explanations about the origin of the community, states the language ideology she adheres to, namely that there is no “real” or “fake” language, and one should feel free to use their variety without constraint:

Ich wusste bisher nicht das ein „richtiges Rumänisch“ und ein „falsches Rumänisch“ gibt aber danke für die Info
[I didn’t know that there was “real Romanian” and “fake Romanian”, but thanks for the information]

7.2. Spelling in Romanian

The competence of “Our People” in several languages means that multiple orthographies are available to them. Given that Romanian is only the medium of family communication and “Our People” have never attended school in Romanian, they write their Romanian vernacular with the help of the languages they know. In the case of the Facebook group, these are German and Serbian, and in the case of the TikTok channel, it is mainly German, although Serbian also surfaces at points.

In both cases, the orthography is diverse but predictable and created on the spot by the members of the group, generally following the conventions of the German or Serbian language but also using Romanian special characters to express in writing the sounds specific to their variety.

Here are two examples from the Facebook group of Romanian written mainly with German orthography, even though the Serbian spelling of certain words can also be noticed:

Jo wrou se spasesk pumintu sta... Mije num trebuje om kare sische se Fak turte de prombj
[I want to save this world... I don’t need a man who can make corn cakes]

pa schci tu nuje garantie ku kupischca aj nostri
[you know there is no guarantee with our children]

In the following example, also from the Facebook group, Romanian is written according to Serbian-language spelling rules, with the Romanian character *â* rendering both /ə/ and /i/:

Aša sâ sâše samo la rumunj. La noi sâ sâše "bja un joint bzw. Căgarâ. Nu jesć rumunâ, Oder
[Only Romanians talk like that. We say to drink a joint, respectively a cigarette. You are not Romanian, or]

Nevertheless, it is usually impossible to make a clear distinction between the spelling systems used, and probably most of *Daj Nostri* rely on both spelling systems they know, German and Serbian, to render their Romanian variety:

Tata al nostru, kajesc in scer, svincaske se lumelje teu, se fije voja ta, kum in scher, a sa si pe pemit. pinja noaste denje noe astez, si jartenje greseljilje nostre, kum jertem si noj la gresitori nosti. schi nu nje dusa in ispite, numa pezezesce nje de Cel reu. AMIN

[God, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, may your will be done upon the earth, as it is in heaven. Give us our daily bread and forgive us all our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen]

The lack of norms and the informality of the medium (Facebook) make people feel freer and more comfortable to write the language as they please as long as it does not impede communication. The same applies to TikTok, with the remark that here many of the comments are just transcriptions of the funny parts of the video in Romanian. Therefore, one can observe the multiple spellings used by different persons for one and the same word pronounced in the video, as comments. The following examples are taken from the comments on a funny video about a *Daj Nostri* mailman who spreads gossip:

Dieser *postaru* killt mich
[This mailman kills me]

veru poschtaru
[the cousin mailman]

Poštaru
[mailman]

The same applies to another video about children throwing tantrums in shops and moms threatening to punish them. The video also triggers comments that reproduce the spoken Romanian in the video, but with diverse spelling:

tje fring ku bataja
[I'll beat you up]

ku betaje ce fring
[I'll beat you up]

am s ce frng
[I'll beat you]

7.3. Code-switching and the use of Romanian

As mentioned earlier, using two or more languages at once, combining repertoires, and code-switching is the norm for “Our People”, who have an extended competence in several languages and can use them creatively to communicate. Out of the all-time 26 Facebook openers which contain Romanian that I selected with the use of Romanian keywords, using the search function offered by the Facebook group, 10 openers were monolingual, 11 were bilingual (10 used Romanian + German, and one used Romanian + Serbian), and 5 were trilingual (Romanian + Serbian + German).

As a rule, the openers in Romanian were very short:

Maj bunezua narod

[Good day, people...]

Daj nostri sch totz skrije p njimzeschtsche ...

[Daj nostri, but everyone’s writing in German...]

mifome ali nuscua she sa malink haha

[I am hungry, but don’t know what to eat haha]

However, there were also exceptions regarding the length, like the one below:

maj bun djimnjaca koritarilor.eece bijau kafe „mam gendjit deshe noj nu skrijem kumvorbim?noj trebe se njenvicem se skrijem pe ljimba nostre.vorbim ciginjeshte a ckrijem njemceste.. deshe?normal ac trebuji toc daj nostri se invecce orginal se ckrije se se vorbaske rominesce.ke asha nikad nu al se merzem la ince. al se ruminjem tot in lok.

[Good morning, through carvers. I’m drinking coffee. I thought about why we don’t write the way we speak. We must learn to write in our language. We speak Gypsy, but write German. Why? Normally, all Daj Nostri should learn to write and speak original Romanian. Because like this, we will never move forward, but will stay in one place.]

As for the bilingual openers, of which Romanian + German combination is the most frequent, German was the dominant, matrix language, with embedded Romanian words (cf. Leschber 2008, whose recordings showed that Romanian was the matrix):

eine frage an euch: „mich würde es Interessieren wo her ihr alle kommt und *alu kure santcec*, kann ja sein das man übere ein paar ecken verwant ist da wir ja alle irgendwie hier „daj nostri sind

[A question for you: I would be interested to know where you all come from and *whose you are*. It can be that we live around the corner from each other because all are here somehow “Our People”.]

As for the following trilingual opener, Romanian is the matrix, with embeddings from Serbian and German:

Hallo dobar Dan *amfrut se intreb Kare schtije u Geschäft bun se fak sche jo uzire bajn aschu tez sche mije hvala*
 [Hello, good afternoon, I wanted to ask you who knows of a good business to make a bit of money. Help me. Thank you.]

The openers that contained Romanian to some extent trigger, as expected, the most comments in Romanian, though often the comments were exclusively in German. Extensive code-switching is, however, not always well-received by the members. As in one of the above-mentioned examples, a member of the group urges the other to write in their variety, which they use for everyday communication, not in German. This might be evidence that the online use of the language does not reflect offline use, where the Romanian variety “Our People” speak might be more widespread.

This assumption is confirmed by the analysed TikTok channel, which presents *Daj Nostri* of all generations speaking in Romanian. Marina, the creator behind the channel, belongs to the middle generation and in her videos frequently features her mom, the older generation, and her children and other younger relatives. All of them speak Romanian and German, frequently mixing codes, though to a different extent.

Out of the 26 videos I analyzed, 17 were bilingual, Romanian-German; 7 used only Romanian and 2 only German. The videos in which Romanian was used usually had German subtitles. Serbian was not used in the analyzed videos, except in the background music in 2. The inserted Serbian words in longer conversations in Romanian can be interpreted as the current state of the variety, which was heavily influenced by Serbian at an earlier stage.

The comments triggered by the videos are in most of the cases very short, unlike on Facebook. 90% of the comments are in German, but there are also comments in Romanian, bilingual or, very rarely, trilingual.

As for the comments in Romanian, apart from the examples in 7.2, we can also mention the following:

ajmorit s numaj menink njumik
 [you died and I don’t eat anything any longer]

arata minile majndate
 [show your hands immediately]

A da se jesc ku fata Asa o mrzesis du nujes normalna a ku betu vorbesc mandru
 [Why do you behave like this with your daughter, you are not normal, but talk nicely to the son]

The majority of bilingual comments contain Romanian and German, to different degrees:

lele morrrrr du bist ur sympathisch
 [My God, I’m dying, you are super nice]

Hahahah immer *vorbesche narodu*
[Haha people are always talking]

meine Mutter sagst immer *duze la muma morte*
[my mom always used to say: go to my dead mom]

Du mit Stift *jo ku fakeletschili i dou n kap*
[you hit her with the notebook on her head, I hit her with the rolling pin]

Nevertheless, we can also encounter bilingual comments where Romanian is used alongside Serbian:

U pravo jest a scha je
[You are right, it's like that]

Among all the comments on the analysed videos, of which some have more than 300 comments, trilingual comments are the least frequent. Here are two examples:

Foll der Streß mit ex sve kaze nije *bi je* mein got *nuje binje*
[All the stress with my ex, she says to everything it's not right, my God, it's not right]

e jbg pa *Asta a fost* vor 100 J Wo meine ommer jung Frau war. *a kuma* nixmer
[Too bad, well, this was a hundred years ago, when my grandma was a young woman. Now there's nothing any longer]

7.4. Instances of use of Romanian

Each of the languages used and switched between in online communication indexes multiple cultural affiliations. They also function as “icons of individual identities, including but not limited to ethnicity” (Leggio 2020: 518-519). In the case of “Our People”, German is the most frequently used language, as the language of the environment in which the group members live and to which they are currently most exposed. Serbian seconds German but only for the older generation, who was schooled in Serbia or ex-Yugoslavia. It has a more reduced area of use, which covers tradition, connection to the places of origin, but also everyday topics, and is used mainly on the Facebook group. In the case of TikTok, as already mentioned, Serbian is rarely used.

As for Romanian, in the case of the Facebook group, it is mostly used to talk about a few issues, namely: traditional culture, family and community relations, the origin and language of the community. Two of the most frequent topics, connected to traditional culture and family relations, are buying the bride (*banj da fata*) and the intricate family relationships in the village, where everybody is distantly related to everybody else (*alu kare*).

Out of the 26 analysed posts, five dealt with paying for the bride, which raised heated debates in the online space:

Servas Leute!!! eine frage an euch:_ bei uns is es ja so: *jej banj pä fatä* denkt ihr dass es auch in 20jahren so sein wird????

[Hello, people! A question for you: with us it's like that: you take money for the girl. Do you think it will be like this in 20 years' time?]

NARODULOR eine frag bei daj nostri was denkt ihr über die sache *dali s mai se ja BANJ PE VETCE*. ????? und auf die ganze geschichtte. schon damit bekant???

[PEOPLE, a question for “Our People”. What do you think, do they still get MONEY FOR GIRLS? And about the whole story. Sounds familiar?]

poatsche schinjiwa sm spuže dsche s de banj d mujere? undsche logike? ist doch erbärmlich.. ka knd kumpri o wake ili purschao, nicht? dake akuma d schinjiwa 20 di mi d evro d mujere pa onda winje schinjiwa altse sche poatsche s ske "haha, jo ar putscha sm kumpru p mujera ta 5 ori" .. k 20 di mi d evro opste nuje vrednost dala o mujere. dake ar schiru jo banj d fate onda samo d zlate.. znaci 50 di kile fata onda 50 di kile zlate sm de ili 2.5 milioanje di frankur.

[Can someone tell me why is money given for the bride? Where's the logic? It's pathetic. Like when you buy a cow or a sow, right? If somebody pays 20,000 euros for a woman, then somebody else comes who says “Haha, I can buy your wife five times”, because 20,000 euros is not the value of a wife. If I were to ask money for a girl, I would only ask for gold. If the girl weighs 50 kg, then I ask for 50 kg of gold or 2.5 million francs.]

The second topic, family relations and connections within the community, also engaged many group members in an attempt to find out whether “Our People” living in Germany, Austria and Switzerland had initially been part of the same extended family in native Serbia. This sampling was done with the help of the patronymic particle *alu* (of), which is part of the traditional name by which they are known within the community⁸:

eine frage an euch :,, mich würde es Interessieren wo her ihr alle kommt und *alu kure santcec* , kann ja sein das man übere ein paar ecken verwant ist da wir ja alle irgendwie hier „daj nostri sind (Translated before.)

This opening from April 18, 2012, triggered 95 comments. Here are only a few:

Jo sind Bäd alu Nesa, alu Voja Gjaku ;-)

[I am Bäd of Nesa of Voja Gjaku.]

jo sint bajtu alu Raja alu Nizu al shonti und meine muma ist aus Jovanovic

[I am the son of Raja of Nizu of Shonta and my mom is of Jovanovic.]

⁸ For more on the same phenomenon among the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, see Sorescu-Marinković 2023.

jo sind Predrag alu mija boxeru
[I am Predrag of Mija the boxer.]

alu draga al gjori din tesice....texas ;-)
[Of Draga of Gjora from Tesice, Texas.]

viktor alu nebojsa, voja gjaku..
[Viktor of Nebojsa, Voja Gjaku.]

Jo sind fata Alu Draga nipota alu baliku din Filipovic naupara
[I am the daughter of Draga, granddaughter of Balik from Filipovic, Naupara.]

Sohn alu Vukasin alu jova radu galji d trstenik
[The son of Vukasin of Jova Radu of Galija from Trstenik.]

jo sint bjatu alu jova jova budriman din josanica meine mama kommt aus strizilo
[I am the son of Jova Budriman from Jasanica, my mom comes from Strizilo.]

The main topics of the videos in which Romanian was used on the TikTok channel were similar but treated in a more relaxed manner, with a large dose of humour: eloping, family relations, women marrying today at an older age than before, the role of women in the family, superstitions, mothers' preference for sons over daughters, *Daj Nostri* partying in Austria, going discount shopping in Austria, rumour spreading fast within the *Daj Nostri* community, the stigma of women recording TikTok videos, the lack of respect for the elderly, *Daj Nostri* being mistaken for Turks. Language issues were rarely brought up as the main topic of the video; nevertheless, they frequently surfaced in the comments, triggered by somebody outside the *Daj Nostri* community asking what language was spoken in the video. As the videos replicate real-life situations and reproduce the use of language in the offline space, this is nevertheless the underlying topic of all the analysed videos. Marina, the creator of the TikTok channel, also tackles the young generation's loss of competence in Romanian, but most of the youngsters from her videos speak it.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to researchers' warnings, my analysis of the linguistic practices of *Daj Nostri* on social networks shows that Romanian is still used more than half a century after the first generations migrated from Serbia to Western Europe. The virtual networks of "Our People" reproduce the communities that used to share a common territory in Eastern Serbia and replicate their use of languages. Even though Romanian has been and still is only the medium of family communication, it has kept its place in the linguistic repertoire of the community, while Serbian and German switched places, which points to the crucial role language plays in the ethnic identity of "Our People". For first-generation migrants, Serbian was the dominant language, in which they were schooled, and German was just the language of the new environment; in contrast, for the younger generations born outside Serbia, German is the dominant language, and Serbian is fading.

The current use of the Romanian variety *Daj Nostri* speak on social networks might be interpreted as a contestation of the “ideologies of contempt” (Dorian 1998), which suggest that languages not used on the Internet are backward and inferior. The online presence of this non-standardized variety of Romanian may provide a way to challenge preconceptions and assert its role as a contemporary tool. Thus, although this variety of Romanian has always been associated with tradition and rural and family life, as the topics discussed in Romanian in the Facebook group and TikTok channel show, by being now used in social media, it becomes modern and accessible, appealing to younger generations of speakers.

Acknowledgements

1. The article is the result of the project Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia (VLingS), funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (grant number: 7736100) within the program IDEAS (2022–2024). The funding is provided through the Budget of the Republic of Serbia and the World Bank project – the Serbia Accelerating Innovation and Entrepreneurship Project (SAIGE).

2. I am deeply indebted to Mario Brändle, who introduced me to the Facebook group discussed in this paper, and to Viktoria Stan, who pointed me to the TikTok channels of *Daj Nostri*, helped me understand them and generously provided invaluable insider information.

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