The Romani Indefinite Article in its Historical and Areal Context

Abstract

The marking of indefiniteness by means of a grammaticalized numeral ‘one’ is a feature shared to varying degrees by the Balkan languages, and one not inherited from the attested ancestral languages. This is a Balkanism comparable to infinitive replacement, which is also not uniform among the Balkan languages. Romanian, Albanian (and Turkish) show the highest degree of grammaticalization, followed by Greek. Romani, like Balkan Slavic, shows weaker, but significant degrees of grammatical marking for indefinite specificity. The use of ‘one’ as an indefinite article thus represents part of a heretofore unacknowledged Balkan phenomenon, and the use of jekh in Balkan Romani (and other Romani dialects) as an indefinite article is part of that phenomenon.

Balkan linguistics, reference, language contact

I first met Professor NORBERT BORETZKY at the Fourth International Seminar for Macedonian Language, Literature and Culture in Ohrid in 1971. I had just finished my first year of graduate school, and it was my first stay in Macedonia. Professor BORETZKY showed me unfailing kindness during those pleasant weeks on the shores of Lake Ohrid, and I remember with pleasure our many conversations. Our paths did not cross again for many years, although I was aware of his many important works in Balkan linguistics (e.g., BORETZKY 1966, 1975, 1976), and we corresponded from time to time. The First International Congress of Romani Linguistics (Hamburg, 1993) gave us a chance to meet again, and our shared interest in Romani has enabled us to meet more often. Professor BORETZKY has contributed some of the most important works of modern Romani linguistics (e.g. BORETZKY 1989, 1992, 1994 1995, BORETZKY & IGLA 1994, to name just a few).

In this paper dedicated to Professor BORETZKY’s honor I shall combine Balkan and Romani topics by examining a phenomenon that has not been treated as a Balkanism in any of the handbooks from SANDFELD (1930) to DEMIRAJ (1994), but one that is nonetheless amenable to such treatment and raises the crucial question of typological versus areal linguistics, namely the rise of the use of ‘one’ as an indefinite determiner (article). I shall argue that such a development can be treated as a Balkanism in Romani and other Balkan languages.

The grammaticalization of expressions of definiteness is one of the oldest Balkanisms both in terms of possible attestation and in terms of identification as such.
Thus, for example, HAMP (1982: 79) concludes after careful etymological argument that the name of the ancient site of Drobeta — located on the Danube near modern Turnu Severin in northwestern Oltenia (Romania) — contains “a Latin misunderstanding or misparsing in Moesia Inferior of *drwidi-ta, a definite noun phrase with postposed article.” As such, it gives “direct evidence in the Roman period of one of the most notable syntactic constructions of the Balkan Sprachbund, i.e. a specimen from the autochthonous language of the model of the Romanian postposed article which was calqued out of Latin materials.” Moreover, it constitutes “direct attestation for the common possession of this important feature linking modern Albanian with Moesia Inferior.” Similarly, KöPITAR (1829: 86, 106) focused particularly on the postposed definite article as the most striking example of his characterization of the linguistic territory of what today we could call Balkan Romance, Balkan Slavic, and Albanian as an area where “nur eine Sprachform herrscht, aber mit dreierlei Sprachmaterie...” This is arguably the earliest formulation of the principle of areal linguistics underlying the concept of the Balkan Sprachbund. As indicated above, however, that which can be regarded as the inverse of grammaticalized definite reference, namely grammaticalized indefinite reference, has never figured in the catalogue of Balkanisms, just as Romani itself is usually excluded from the canon of Balkan languages in the various handbooks (but cf. KOSTOV 1973, FRIEDMAN 1985, JOSEPH 1983, MATRAS 1994a, IGLA 1996, and many works by Professor BORETZKY). Nonetheless, the marking of indefiniteness by means of a grammaticalized numeral ‘one’ is arguably a feature shared to varying degrees by the Balkan languages and is likewise a feature not inherited from their respective ancestral languages, when such are attested. This characterization includes Balkan Romani and other significantly Balkanized dialects such as those belonging to the Vlax group (cf. BORETZKY 1993: 21, 163–203; BORETZKY 1994: 31, 189–258; HANCOCK 1995: 56; IGLA 1996: 42-45, 252–75; MATRAS 1994b: 44–49).

All the standard grammars of Albanian, the Balkan Romance languages, Greek, and Turkish (which, although an astrate adstrate language, is nonetheless relevant here) describe grammaticalizations of the respective etymological numerals meaning ‘one’, often with reduced stress, as indefinite articles. In Balkan Slavic, however, this status is less readily accepted. I argued for that status of Bulgarian edin, (edna, etc.) as an indefinite article in FRIEDMAN (1976), and MAYER (1988: 121) concludes: “The fact that the use of edin is obligatory in indefinite NPs expressing specificity when the NP does not carry logical stress, at least in initial position, as well as in a non-specific use with personal names denoting members of a class means that there is an indefinite article in Bulgarian, although its range is more limited than, for example, in English.” Nonetheless, AUGUSTINova (1998: 15) writes: “The existence of an indefinite article in Bulgarian, addressed, for example, in FRIEDMAN 1976, is still a controversial issue and a matter of ongoing linguistic discussion.” As an example we can cite BOJADZIEV et al. (1998: 470), who state:

“The question of the so-called indefinite article in Bulgarian is unresolved. [...] In our opinion, at this stage of the development of the Bulgarian language it is not logical to accept the presence of an indefinite article of the type edna kniga ['a book']. Its place is on the periphery of the semantic functional field of the category.”

The fact that in Macedonian, unlike in Bulgarian, eden triggers object reduplication as a marker of specificity is a powerful argument for its grammaticalized status (cf. FRIEDMAN 1993 and NAYLOR 1989/1990).

For my data I took a series of nine passages from the New Testament all of which display indefinite article usage in English, which in this respect can be taken as a typical language with a very highly grammaticalized indefinite article, i.e. one in which the article’s use is obligatory in a wide variety of contexts. The passages (Mk 6:27, Jn 9:1, Mt 4:8, Mt 4:18, Mt 8:2, Mt 8:5, Mt 8:9, Mt 8:19, Mt 8:24) are given in Appendix 1 in the following languages (in order of occurrence): English (E), Romani (Arli dialect [Balkan group]; Ri-A), Romani (Gurbetdialect [Vlax group]; Ri-G), Bulgarian (B), Macedonian (M), Russian (Rn) Serbian (S), Old Church Slavonic (OCS), New Testament Greek (G),2 Albanian (A), Romanian (Rmn), Latin (L), and Turkish (T). These data are supplemented by Appendix 2, which contains examples from a series of readers (MATRAS 1996) in three dialects of Romani (in the order given in Appendix 2): Kelderash/Lovari and Gurbet (both of which belong to the Vlaxgroup), followed by Leshaki (Northern Group).

A comparison of the relevant data in Appendix 1 is summarized in Table 1. The languages are presented in the order given in the appendix (except that English is at the end of the table but the beginning of the appendix). An X indicates presence of an indefinite marker in the passage in question, a O indicates absence. An asterisk indicates that the indefinite item is animate, while a dagger indicates

1 The choice of text was dictated in part by the fact that both synchronically and diachronically a wide variety of languages are available in translation. All translations were made from the original languages except the Romani, which were translated from Bulgarian (MileU 1995) and Serbian (DIMC 1999).

2 The translation into Modern Greek followed New Testament usage too slavishly to be useful. On the use of ‘one’ as an indefinite article in Greek see HOUSEHOLDER et al. (1964: 96), who state: "The indefinite article is used more sparingly in Greek than in English; it is not used for example, with predicative nouns, not only with indefinite direct objects, and generally not in proper and popular sayings when an entire class is mentioned and not a specific member of that class; e.g. μια φωτιά 'I am a student'; χτίζωμε σπίτι 'We are building a house'; καθαρός όρανος άστραπες δέ φωβάται 'A clear sky is not afraid of lightning'. Examples: ας σας ζητά ενας κύριος και μια κύρια 'A gentleman and a lady are asking for you'; μιας φίλης μας τίς έκλεφτε την ταξίδια 'They stole the handbag of a friend of ours'; Βρήκαμε ένα σκύλο στό δρόμο τον φέρουμε σπίτι 'We found a dog on the street and brought him home'; αυτό το καπέλο είναι ενός κυρίου που μόνο εδώ 'This hat belongs to a gentleman who lives here.'
that it is the subject of the sentence. A superscript /s/ indicates identifying-specific in AVGVSTINOVA'S (1998) terminology, a superscript /g/ indicates her categorizing-generic, while lack of a superscript indicates identifying non-specific. The results are grouped by typeface: Data for languages with unambiguous indefinite article are given in bold face, those for languages with no indefinite article are plain, and those that pattern in between are italic and bold face.

Table 1: Presence of Indefinite Marker

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<th>Ri-A</th>
<th>Ri-G</th>
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<th>Rm</th>
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<td>Mk6:27</td>
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<td>Mt4:18</td>
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Despite the small size of the sample used for Table 1, it is nonetheless clear that certain patterns can be seen to emerge. The absence of a grammaticalized indefinite articles in all ancient languages (Latin, New Testament Greek, Old Church Slavonic) and also from the non-Balkan Slavic languages — represented here by Russian and Serbian — is clearly illustrated by the absence of such forms from all the passages except Mt 8:19, where the numeral ‘one’ is used in all the languages to mean ‘a certain’ or ‘one of the class of’. On the other hand, the patterns in Romanian, Albanian, and Turkish are almost identical to English. The absence from Mt 4:18 in Albanian and Turkish is due to different grammatical constraints that incorporate such objects into the verb either as definite objects (Albanian) or as unmarked accusatives (Turkish). The Romanian exception is the only example of a categorial-generic indefinite article in our small corpus, and in Romanian, as in Modern Greek, such usage is avoided.

The Indic and Balkan Slavic languages provide interesting patterns that are mid-way between the utter absence of the ancient and non-Balkan Slavic languages and the full grammaticalization of English and the non-Slavic Balkan languages. Although Macedonian has the most unambiguously grammaticalized indefinite marker, as indicated above, it has the lower frequency of usage in the Balkan Slavic examples — only four occurrences out of nine: All of them are animate and specific-identifying, and it is arguable that object quality in Mk 6:27 is differ-

ent from that of Jn 9:1, i.e. the act of sending involves an effect of agent on patient, whereas in seeing it is the patient that can be said to affect the agent by being seen. All of the Bulgarian uses in our small sample are identifying, but AVGVSTINOVA (1998) has examples of generic-categorizing as well.

When we turn to the Romani examples we find that the usage seems to reflect that of the dominant language of the country in which the translation was published. Thus the Bulgarian Arli translation (METKOV 1995) patterns exactly like the Bulgarian version, whereas the Gurbet version (DIMIC 1990) published in Novi Sad is almost identical to the Serbian in its usage, the identifying-specific usage of Mt 8:5 being the only exception. Other Vla dialectal texts, however, indicate that jekh is also used in those dialects as a true indefinite article (see BORETZKY 1994: 31,189-258; HANCOK 1995: 56; MATRAS 1994b: 44-49, as well as Appendix 2). We can therefore discount the data from DIMIC (1990) as being unduly influenced by Serbian in the same way that the Modern Greek Gospels are over influenced by New Testament Greek. The data in Appendix 2, however, show that the use of jekh as a grammatical marker of indefiniteness is much more restricted in the Northern dialects that have been spoken outside the Balkans for a longer period of time and among contact languages that do not have indefinite articles. Thus the use of jekh in Leshaki is about half of what it is in Keldershal/Lovari or Gurbet.

What then, are we to make of these data? Can it be argued that the indefinite article represents a Balkan phenomenon, or does the presence of such a grammatical category in languages of Western Europe and South Asia argue for a typological rather than an areal explanation? (Cf. HAMP 1977 on this important distinction.) It is clearly the case that the ancestral languages of Balkan Slavic, Balkan Romance, Balkan Indic (i.e. Roman), and Modern Greek did not possess indefinite articles. We cannot be sure of the ancestor of Albanian, but the possible existence of a definite article in the language of Lower Mesoias (HAMP 1982) allows us at least to speculate upon the possibility that an indefinite article might also have been present. The evidence of Old Turkic (TEKIN 1968: 145) indicates that bir was already involved in such usage at a time when its functional equivalents were not so employed in the Balkan languages.

I would argue that, like the grammaticalization of definiteness, object reduplication, infinitive replacement, analytic comparative adjectives and futures using ‘will’, all of which are to be found in Western European, the rise of the indefinite article in Balkan languages, including Balkan Romani, took place during the period when these languages were in contact with one another, and thus constitutes a Balkanism in this sense. As TOPOLINSKA (1995) notes: “Analytic markers of referentiality emerge in periods of convergent development, in conditions of creolization, while synthetic markers are instruments of linguistic divergence.” The fact that this development did not go as far in Balkan Slavic and Balkan Indic as it did in the other Balkan languages (including here Turkish) may be due to the later impetus given to this development. It should also be kept in mind that for Balkan Slavic

3 Although Sanskrit is not represented here (translations of the Bible into Sanskrit exist but were not available to me), it, too, had no indefinite article, nor did Middle Indic (MASCA 1991: 248). The use of unstressed etymological ‘one’ to mark indefiniteness in Neo-Indic languages of South Asia is an independent development and, unlike the situation in Romani, was not accompanied by the development of a definite article (MASCA 1991: 370-71).

4 This is reflected in many of the world’s languages by the use of oblique (e.g. dative or ablative) cases for the agents of verbs of perception such as seeing, hearing, and feeling.
there is the additional ideologically based discouragement of such usage (e.g. BREZINSKI 1968: 48, see FRIEDMAN 1976 for other references) motivated both overtly by the perception that it imitates West European languages and perhaps covertly by the fact that such usage is different from the rest of Slavic, especially the prestigious Russian (for Bulgarian) and Serbian (for Macedonian – at least until 1991) and resembles the surrounding non-Slavic Balkan languages. It is certainly the case that colloquial usage is greater than literary usage. (The Modern Greek New Testament is also a case in point in this regard; cf. note 2.) The striking differences in various Romani dialects can be attributed to influences from other languages either through literal translation, as in the case of DIMITIĆ (1990), or later contact, as in the case of Leshaki illustrated in Appendix 2.

Although AVGUSTINOVA (1998: 15) refers to „striking typological parallels“ in the use of indefinite articles in the various Balkan languages, HAMP’s (1977) distinction among areal, typological, and genetic linguistics – particularly between areal and typological in this instance – is crucial in understanding these phenomena in a broader context. That the developments are convergent is undeniable. Once a genetic explanation is ruled out by evidence, as is the case with indefinite articles in the Balkan languages, convergence in the absence of contact or multilingualism must be treated as typological, but convergence in the presence of such factors has the possibility of an areal explanation. And thus I conclude that the situation of the Balkan indefinite article, including that of Roman, is comparable to that of Balkan infinitive replacement as analyzed by JOSEPH (1983). JOSEPH (1983: 242–43) points out that although infinitive replacement is found in all the Balkan languages and may well constitute a Balkanism in the sense of a shared innovation due to contact, it is also the case that Albanian and Romanian have new or reinterpreted infinitival constructions, Bulgarian and Greek retain a few traces of old ones, and only Macedonian has completely eliminated the category (but cf. ČASULE 1989 on the use of the verbal noun). Similarly, it can be argued that Romanian and Albanian (and Turkish) show the highest degree of grammaticalization of indefiniteness, followed by Greek. Romani, like Balkan Slavic, shows weaker but nonetheless significant degrees of grammatical marking for indefinite specificity. The fact that indefinite articles are considered more a colloquial than a literary feature in at least some Balkan languages and their use, e.g. in Bulgarian, is overtly discouraged by normativists is another argument in favor of a contact origin, despite the occasional ideological appeal to Western European languages. And so, the use of jekh (jekhe, ek, etc.) in Balkan Romani (and other Romani dialects) as an indefinite article can be argued to represent part of a heretofore unacknowledged Balkan phenomenon, and the comparison with other Balkan languages in turn argues for the grammatical status of the phenomenon.

Abbreviations

A Albanian
B Bulgarian
E English
G New Testament Greek
L Latin
M Macedonian
OCS Old Church Slavonic
Ki-A Romani (Arl dialect, Balkan group)
Ki-G Romani (Gurbet dialect, Vlax group)
Rmn Romanian
Rsn Russian
S Serbian
T Turkish

References


Bibles


Bulgarian. 1912. Bibliju. Carigrad: BFBS.


Greek. Received Text. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).


Romanian. 1924. Biblia. Bucharest: BFBS.


Turkish. 1969. Kitab' mucaddes. İstanbul: BFBS.

Appendix 1: Biblical Passages

English

Mk 6:27 And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought.

Jn 9:1 And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

Mt 4:8 Again, the Devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain 4:18 he saw two brethren ... casting a net into the sea.

8:2 And behold, there came a leper and worshiped him.

8:5 there came unto him a centurion.

8:9 For I am a man under authority.

8:19 And a certain scribe came.

8:24 And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea.
Romani (Arli)

Mk 6:27 Taj vednaga o thagar bičhalgjas ikeš, kaske vakergias te anel o šero leskoro;
Jn 9:1 Taj kana zanakheis, dikhljas ikeš kore bijando manuš
Mt 4:8 Pale Les ingeljas o benk ikešhe bute učeaste veš,
4:18 dikhljas e dje phralen .. kaj chivenas i mrezva
8:2 Taj, ake iek prokažimo alo paš Leste
8:5 iek šelengoro baro, alo paš Leste
8:9 vi me sm manuš kas si incaripe
8:19 Taj alo iek ilivalo
8:24 Taj, ake, baro vazdiba e pajneste ko cikno denizi,

Romani (Gurbet)

Mk 6:27 Athoska bičhalda thagari mudarimatres te džal thaj te anel Jovano-skoro šoro;
Jn 9:1 Thaj džikaj nachelas dikhla e manušes, savo sas bijandimatar koro.
Mt 4:8 Palem indjardales o benk pe vuči plain
4:18 dikhla djuh phralen .. sar čhuden mačharendje astarde ande mora
8:2 Thaj dikh, melalo lepratar pašunisardape leske
8:5 pašunisajlo leske jekh kapetano
8:9 taj me sijam baro manuš
8:19 Thaj sar avilo leste jekh lirlamo
8:24 Thaj dikh, baro vazdipe morijaske pajendar dija pe mora

Bulgarian

Mk 6:67 И тутакси, проводи царът единъ орженикъ, комуто заповъдя да донесатъ главата му;
Jn 9:1 И като заминаваше видът единого человъка слеп од рожденето.
Mt 4:8 Пакъ го завожда двоилътъ на една планина много висока
4:18 видъ двамин братъ .. че хървала мрежа въ морето
8:2 И ето, единъ прокащън дойде при него
8:5 единъ стотникъ дойде при него
8:9 и въз съмъ човъкъ подъ властъ
8:19 И дойде единъ книжникъ
8:24 И ето, глечма буря се подигна на езерото

Macedonian

Mk 6:27 И веднаш, откако испрати целата, царот нареди да ја донесат глава негова.
Jn 9:1 Кога одени виде един слеп човек од неговото раждане
Mt 4:8 Го одведе гаволот ното на многу висока планина
4:18 — ги виде двајцата браќа .. како фраат мрежа во морето

English

The Romani Indefinite Article

8:2 And he saw a blind man
8:5 — he saw a man blind
8:9 and he called one blind man
8:19 Then he saw a man blind
8:24 And he said, the head of the sea is...
The Romani Indefinite Article

6:27 et ecce leprosus veniens...
6:27 accessit ad eum centurio...
8:9 et ego homo sum sub potestate
8:19 Et accedens unus scriba...
8:24 et ecce motus magnus factus est in mari

Turkish

Kural hemen muhafız askerinden birini gönderip onun bağımsız getirmesini emretti
Ve geçerken anadan doxmin kör bir adam gördüm.
iki kardeşi... denize ağ atararken gördüm
Ve içtem bir cümzlü gelip...
bir yüzbaşı yalvararak...
ben de emir altında bir adamım
Ve bir yazici gelip ona:
Ve iste, denizde büyük bir firtına oldu

Appendix 2: Comparison of Kelderash/Lovari, Gurbet, and Leshaki (MATRAS 1996)

Sas pe kaj nas pe jekh baro žiganja
Sas pe kaj naj sas jekh bari životinja
Sys peske baro kirmo
‘Once upon a time there was a big animal’

Sas pe kaj nas pe jekh baro žiganja
Sas pe kaj naj sas jekh bari životinja
Sys peske baro kirmo
‘Once upon a time there was a big animal’

Aj uço sar jekh kher
Taj ući sar jekh čer
I huço syr jekh kher
‘And as large (tall) as a house’

Vov vas jekh Dinosaura.
Vov vas jekh Dinosaura.
Sys peske Dinosaura.
‘it was a dinosaur.’

Vov vas jekh Dinosaura.
Vov vas jekh Dinosaura.
Sys peske Dinosaura.
‘It was a dinosaur.’

So kerel o Lazo? Vov kerel jekh podo.
So čerel o Lazo. Vov čerel jekh podo.
So kerel Lazo. Jov kerel mosto.
‘What is Lazo doing? He is making a bridge.’

So dičhol po patreto? Me dikhav jekh vaza.
So dičhol po slika? Me dikhav jekh vaza.
So dikhes pre daja bila? Me dikhav jekh vaza.
‘What do you see in the picture? I see a vase.’
Skiris jekh kopači? Na, jekh raca.
Crtos jekh kaš Na, jekh raca.
Malines tu jekh rukh? Na, reca.
‘Are you drawing a tree? No, a duck.’

Si e raja bange? Kodo si pale jekh xoхanmo patreto.
Si e linije banđe? Gava si pale jekh xoхavni slika.
Sy da kreski bange. Dava sy pale optično vizija.
‘Are the lines crooked? It is an optical illusion.’

Me sim o Eino. Me sim jekh Eskimo-šavoro.
Me sem o Eino. Me sem jekh Eskimo-čavoro.
Me som Eino. Me som čavoro-Eskimo
‘I am eino. I am an Eskimo boy.’

Me traiv ande jekh gav. Siamen jekh kher.
Me traiv ande jekh gav. Si amen jekh čer
Me bešto som dry gav. Jamen sy kher.
‘I live in a village.’ ‘We have a house.’

Kada si amari lumja. Amari lumja si jekh planeta.
Gada si amari phuv. Amari phuv si jekh planeta.
Daja si ajmamy phuv. Jamari phuv sy jekh planeta.
‘This is our world/earth. Our earth/world is a planet.’

Ži kaj o Marso trobuj jekh raketa te tradel duj breš.
Dži ko Marso trubul jekh raketa te tradel duj breš.
Ko Marso mušynel duj berš raketa te tradel.
‘It takes a rocket two mouthns to travel to Mars.’

Me sim jekh pajesko levo.
Me sem jekh pajesko lavo.
Me som jekh panitko lvo.
‘I am a sea lion.’

Kado si muro dad. Les si jekh mustaca.
Kava si mmo dad. Le si mustaka.
Dava sy miro dad. Les sy chorja.
‘This is my father. He has a moustache.’

Me sîchuvava jekh buči
Me sîčivava jekh zanato.
Me sykhlakirava man buty.
‘I learn a trade,’

E mam si ande pinca. Voj phenel: „Jekh šimjako si ande pinca. Muri loli taška si la jekh gropa.”
È mami si ando podrumo. Voj phenel: „Jekh šimjako si ando podrumo. Mrami loli tašna si la jekh xv.”

‘Grandma is in the basement. She says: “We have mouse in the basement. My red bag has a hole in it.”

Me šuvav jekh phal katar e lada ži kaj e felastra.
Me thav jekh phal katar o sanduko dži ke pendžarvarva,
Chuvav jekh baro phal moxtenestyr až ki dudali.
‘I put a big stick from the trunk to the window.’

Me pekav jekh bokoli mura dejake. Me lav jekh boro gono aro.
Me pekav jekh kolako mme dejace. Me lav jekh boro džako aro.
Me pekav mme dake marykla. Me lav jekh boro gono jažo.
‘I am baking a cake for my mother. I take a large sack of flour.’

Kadi si jekh vundžija pe jekh naj. O naj pe jekh vast.
Goda si jekh bundia pe jekh naj. O naj pe jekh vah.
Dava sy jekh nay pry jekh gušt. Gušt pry jekh vast.
‘This is a nail on a finger. The finger on a hand.’

Si kadi jekh rota?
Si li godi jekh rota?
Dava sy jekh rota?
‘Is that a circle?’