

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN MYSTIFYING AND DE-MYSTIFYING GYPSY IDENTITY

Yaron Matras

‘Gypsy’: A double signifier

No discovery has been as significant to the understanding of the history of the Gypsies as the illumination of their linguistic connection with India. Having said this, there arises immediately a need to clarify. For the connection between the Romani language and the languages of India has no bearing at all on the history and origin of the Irish Travellers, and probably little and only indirect significance for an understanding of the culture of the German or Swiss Jenische, to name but two examples out of many. At the same time it is impossible to understand the Rom, Romacel, Romanichel, Sinte, Manush, or Kaale without knowing something about the origins of their language – *romani chib*, or *romanes*, or, as it is referred to in modern linguistics: Romani. How might we resolve this contradiction? The answer is very trivial: two separate signified entities are captured by the term ‘Gypsy’.

GYPSY 1 denotes the social phenomenon of communities of peripatetics or commercial nomads, irrespective of origin or language. Whether or not the diverse communities that fall under GYPSY 1 have much in common, is the subject of occasional discussions among members of these groups, and of intense research among social scientists describing their cultures. Let us accept both the fact that members of these distinct groups often show interest in one another and may at times feel a sense of common destiny, while at the scientific level comparative research into diverse peripatetic communities is now an established discipline.

GYPSY 2 is quasi a popular English translation for a set of ethnonyms used by those groups whose language is a form of Romani. Despite the diversity of its dialects, Romani can be clearly defined as an entity. Indeed, since it is an isolated language, being the only Indian language spoken exclusively in Europe (and by emigrants from Europe, in the Americas, for instance), the boundaries between Romani and surrounding languages is much more obvious than, for example, the boundary between dialects of Dutch and German, Swedish and Norwegian, Italian and Spanish, or Polish and Slovak. I will not enumerate the features that are shared by the dialects of Romani, or the isoglosses that separate them, and I refer the reader instead to my recent book which deals with those in great detail (Matras 2002).

To some extent, there are challenges in the definition of both notions. Social scientists must come up with a set of features that are found throughout the diverse communities that constitute GYPSY 1 if they are to justify comparative research on them as a distinct phenomenon. These features are usually sought in the social and economic relations with outsiders to the community, and sometimes in folklore (e.g. origin myths; cf. Casimir 1987). For GYPSY 2 or the *Rom* – for reasons of convenience I will be using this cover-term for all speakers of Romanes or Romani, regardless of their own self-ascription – there is a long history of attempts to generalise about various aspects of culture and social organisation, which however vary considerably (and one should not forget that the customs of various groups of Jews, Indians or Germans vary as well). The one feature that stands out as a common denominator of the Rom is, by definition, their use of the Romani language.

Nonetheless, one might argue that linguists too encounter a transitional zone as far as the linguistic definition is concerned, notably in the margins of Romani, where the language itself is not spoken, but communities are familiar with Romani-derived vocabulary which they may use occasionally. However, such use of selected items of Romani vocabulary – now termed ‘Para-Romani’ in the linguistic literature – is marginal to the study of the dialects of Romani itself. Whether Para-Romani vocabularies testify to the use of inflected Romani in the respective community at an earlier time (the retention of just some lexical items having followed language shift), or whether they represent instances of vocabulary borrowings from Romani by people whose ancestors were not Romani speakers, is an interesting question, but not one that bears on the definition of the Rom. The fact that so-called ‘mixtures’ (better: patterns of insertion of foreign lexicon) exist, does not in any way relativise the coherence of Romani itself, and does not pose, for linguists, any difficulty in recognising what is and what is not a dialect of Romani. It is obvious from a linguistic viewpoint that the mere insertion of occasional words such as *gorgio* or *vardo* or *grai* does not qualify as use of the Romani language itself, just like saying “I survived the blitz” does not qualify as speaking German or the exclamation “what a tasty vindaloo!” is not a sample of Hindi.

It is a matter for speakers who use just the occasional Romani word to decide whether they choose to refer to such a style through their interpretation of the term ‘Romany’, as many do. It is similarly a matter for individuals who do not speak Romani, but whose ancestors did speak it, to choose whether they identify with their roots in such a way as to wish to refer to themselves as Rom. This applies in some cases to entire communities, where Romani is not spoken, but appears to have been spoken in the past (for instance among the Gitanos of Spain), or where Romani-derived lexical items may have been acquired, or where encounters with the Romani

language or indeed with the Romani political movement may evoke identification with the Rom (such as among the Jenische). These are the so-called ‘test cases’ where one might argue that being Romani or claiming to speak Romani is a ‘representation’ or ‘construction’, rather than a verifiable descriptive account. The fact that there are margins, however, does not in any way suggest that there is a void in between those margins.

The historical complexity of ‘Gypsy’ representations and images derives from the potential interface of what I referred to above as GYPSY 1 and 2. GYPSY 2 – the Rom – are unique in having a language that is originally Indian, and so also an Indian origin. At the same time, GYPSY 2 is a sub-set of GYPSY 1, i.e. the Rom are, historically at least, one of numerous peripatetic communities, who happen to be of Indian origin and speak an Indo-Aryan language. This leads to real-life encounters between the Rom and other peripatetics, and to a very concrete reality for those travelling in the present or past – sharing caravan sites, sharing a destiny, creating social and economic bonds and even family bonds, and borrowing from one another’s culture. There is, in my view, neither a theoretical nor a practical problem in understanding and accepting a complex set of historical interrelations between the Rom and other peripatetics. And yet, modern Gypsy/Romani Studies is haunted by a controversy among two circles at its opposite ends, a controversy that revolves around the distinction between these very two entities. My paper is devoted to this controversy.

The first side, best represented by anthropologist Judith Okely (1983), and more recently by the ‘de-constructionist school’ of Leo Lucassen (1996) and Wim Willems (1997), denies any kind of division between what I called here GYPSY 1 and GYPSY 2. More specifically, it recognises only GYPSY 1 (peripatetics as a social phenomenon), and denies GYPSY 2 (Rom of Indian origin), claiming that it is no more than a social construction by outsiders, in an attempt to exoticise or romanticise GYPSY 1. Since the ‘anti-Indianists’, as Okely (1997) herself terms them, reject a division between GYPSY 1 and 2, they are unable to accept that the so-called ‘Indianists’ make their own assertions about an Indian origin only with reference to GYPSY 2 (the Rom), and not to GYPSY 1 (peripatetics in general). The division, claim the ‘anti-Indianists’, is not an attempt at an historical-linguistic taxonomy, but amounts to a potentially racist division between ‘pure’ (‘Indian’) and ‘impure’ (‘non-Indian’). Willems (1997) indeed goes as far as asserting that it was the postulation (i.e. the scientific recognition) of GYPSY 2 by scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that formed part of the ideological justification behind the persecution of Gypsies under the Nazis in World War II.

At the opposite end, there is by contrast a denial that there is or was any historical interface at all of GYPSY 1 and GYPSY 2. This view is best represented by Romani linguists and activists Ian Hancock (2000), Vania de Gila Kochanowski (1994), and their camp-followers. Any actual, real-life connection between the Rom and GYPSY 1 (peripatetics), they claim, results from oppression through European society, which marginalised the Rom and forced them to bond with indigenous peripatetics. Moreover, European scholarship projected its biased social attitudes onto its own investigations of Romani history, creating a one-sided narrative according to which the Rom had been originally peripatetics. Thus, in their view, the position that GYPSY 2 (the Rom), a distinct linguistic-ethnic entity, is a sub-set of the more global phenomenon of GYPSY 1 (peripatetics), is a social construction by outsiders, who project their stereotypical and romantic images onto the Rom.

My interest in this debate is twofold. First, however marginal the positions might seem in relation to the bulk of work carried out in the various fields of Gypsy and Romani studies, they are being expressed by some rather prominent scholars who have made some very influential contributions to the discipline. Moreover, it is by taking positions with regard to the margins that the mainstream discipline can define itself. Second, the arguments put forth by both groups are attempts to construct, de-construct, or re-construct a linguistic argument which has been accepted by mainstream Romani studies for over two centuries. Their arguments revolve around analyses and alternative analyses of language. It is hard for a linguist interested in an interdisciplinary approach to Romani studies to resist the temptation to review the role that language and attitudes to language play in the construction and de-construction of identities and images. I begin with a discussion of the discovery of the Indian origin of Romani, followed by a very brief review of the linguistic arguments put forth by the Old School – the school whose conclusions are being challenged at both ends of the debate.

Johann Rüdiger and the Indian origin

Clearly, interest in the Gypsies (= all ‘Gypsies’) and their origins and speech habits had been motivated well into the eighteenth century by a passion for exotic peoples, as well as by the practical consideration of authorities and law enforcement officers eager to penetrate the protective shield of social and cultural isolation that surrounded the Gypsies. But the late eighteenth century saw not just the emergence of romanticism, but also of a scientific methodology in comparative philology. It was in this latter context that Rüdiger (1782) postulated the Indian origin of the Romani language. Rüdiger’s work, though a rather short essay, is a strikingly impressive document of originality and personal integrity. Rüdiger had exchanged ideas with other colleagues, to whom he gives credit. He did not claim to have been the first to

notice a connection with Indo-Iranian languages, but he was the first to display the evidence and the analysis. Rüdiger was thus both a pioneer – his publication of the Indian origin of Romani pre-dated that of all other scholars, including Grellmann –, and he was original – he collected his Romani data directly from a speaker of the language, and he extracted the Hindustani data which he used for comparison from a manual of the language composed by a missionary. Moreover, Rüdiger was sympathetic to the Gypsies, and very critical of society's treatment of them. Elsewhere (Matras 1999a) I have discussed Rüdiger's essay at length. I will therefore only summarise in brief his linguistic procedure and findings, and document a few statements that are representative of his overall approach, both social and linguistic.

Rüdiger proceeded as follows: From his colleague and teacher Christian Büttner he heard the viewpoint that the 'Gypsy' language (*Zigeunersprache*) might be of Indian or Afghan origin. He was further encouraged by Hartwig Bacmeister to participate in a collective scholarly effort to determine its origin through comparison with other languages. He located a speaker of Romani, whom he asked to translate sample sentences and grammatical paradigms into her language, which he then compared with the Hindustani manual at his disposal. The display of the linguistic material begins with a series of sentences, in both languages, with a German gloss. It then surveys the major domains of nominal and verbal morphology, some function words, and some remarks on syntax. Rüdiger thus presented the scholarly community with the first ever sketch of Romani grammar. The dialect documented is that of the German Sinti-Manush-Kale, still very close to the Romani spoken today in Germany and surrounding regions. What makes Rüdiger's essay a methodological breakthrough is the fact that it not only shows the similarities in vocabulary and structure between Romani and Hindi/Urdu, but that it also discusses and explains the differences.

Thus Rüdiger points to changes in the syntactic-typology of Romani, which, he correctly hypothesises, are the result of language contact. He is able to relate this to a more general methodology in comparative linguistics, reminding the reader that vocabulary is more stable in other language families (Germanic, Romance) than inflection or syntax. Nonetheless, he recognises the Indian roots of Romani grammatical items as well, such as nominal case endings or personal pronouns. With the knowledge of the time, had Rüdiger attempted to compare Danish and Dutch, or Russian and Bulgarian, or Arabic and Hebrew, or any other pair of genetically related languages, he could have followed a very similar layout. There are some naïve statements in the grammatical discussion (see Matras 1999a:102-103), yet this is dwarfed by the significance of the achievement.

Nominally, Rüdiger is one in a series of scholars who speculates on the origin of the Gypsies. But in examining language he is certainly doing more than demonstrating mere fascination with the exotic. Rather, he takes a methodological approach to language as a stable indicator of origin and affinity, knowing that languages are usually not invented by populations, and that populations do not simply adopt foreign languages unless there has been some obvious motivation to do this, for instance colonial rule by another nation. Naturally, there had been no Indian colonial rule in Europe and so no reason for a (largely illiterate) population to adopt an Indian language. The fact that they do speak one is thus indicative of their foreign origin: “...none of the distinctive characteristics of a people is as reliable, long-lasting, crucial and unchanging as language. Form, practices and customs change because of climate, culture and mixing with others, however amid all this change language remains identifiable from one pole to the other.” (Rüdiger 1782: 59) Not only is he not pursuing the exotic, Rüdiger also takes a very sympathetic position toward the Gypsies, and one that is critical of mainstream society. Commenting on their status, he says:

“The Gypsies are respected and protected by the laws, as long as they do not cause offence to anyone. Nonetheless I have the impression that even in the most skilfully governed lands the survivors among this unfortunate people have not yet fully received compensation for the injustice that had been committed against their ancestors. For nowhere have they obtained full civil status and equality with the rest of us humans — to which they are naturally entitled.” (Rüdiger 1782:47)

And he continues further: “This is still a political inconsistency, which our enlightened century should be ashamed to tolerate. For, the mistreatment of the Gypsies has no other cause but deeply rooted xenophobia [*Volkshass*]” (Rüdiger 1782: 49) Finally, although Rüdiger offers a number of speculations and possible scenarios in respect of the Gypsies’ motivation to leave India, he remains modest in his conclusions:

“I dare not give a more detailed description of the reasons that motivated their migrations. However, I am, even without the use of supportive tools too much of an outsider to this particular field of history in general and will leave it therefore to the actual historians. I hereby give in modestly before them not only being content but feeling amply rewarded if my small investigation proves to be of any help to them and might give rise to further discoveries in the future. I hope that by using the plumb line of philology I was able to facilitate and safeguard the journey across the history of the Gypsies.” (Rüdiger 1782: 84).

Note that, as a trained philologist, Rüdiger does not equate ‘vocabulary’ with ‘language’. Rather, ‘language’ for him includes by definition the grammatical paradigms of inflection, function words, as well as syntax. Thus, Rüdiger explicitly makes his statements based on a study of grammar, and not just words. This point has been ignored consistently by the ‘de-constructionists’ of the Okely school, who refer to ‘language’ as though the discussion revolves around mere vocabulary. In fact, a number of sources even preceding Rüdiger were very much aware of the distinctness of secret lexicons as used by peripatetics (GYPSY 1), and the full-fledged language used by the Rom or GYPSY 2. Items from the respective speech forms are consistently identified as separate entities already in the Waldheim Glossary of 1726 (cited in Kluge 1901: 185-190), a vocabulary collected at an institution that served as a prison, an orphanage, and a shelter for the poor in Waldheim between Leipzig and Dresden in Upper Saxony. The *Rotwelsche Grammatik* of 1755 has separate vocabulary lists for *Rotwelsch* or ‘Cant’ (also: argot, or jargon), and *Zigeunersprache* or ‘Gypsy language’, and documents a two-page text in the latter. The Sulz List of 1787, a report on interrogations and court hearings authored by police chief Georg Schäffer, also separates the two. On p. 10 Schäffer presents a number of German sample sentences each translated separately into both *Jaunersprache* or ‘Thieves’ jargon’, and *Zigeunersprache* (see Matras 1999a:111). Wim Willems deliberately ignores this aspect of the Sulz List, saying only that “For the compact typology of groups which Schäffer prefixed to his compilation of names of undesirables, he based his text primarily on Fritsch and Thomasius. This explains why many of their ideas about this subgroup are recognisable in his characterizations. Gypsies are said to have a secret language (*Rotwelsch*) of their own and possibly a foreign origin, but nevertheless they were Germans and as such a segment of their own and possibly a foreign origin”. (Willems 1997: 16) In fact, Schäffer, writes that “According to Fritsch, they [=their language] is not related to any other language, rather, it is only through words that Gypsies and vagabonds [*Jauner*] can communicate among themselves. Fritsch calls this Gypsy language ‘Rotwelsch’.” (Sulz List 1787:10). But Schäffer is quoting Fritsch, and he himself documents a different reality, namely the existence of two separate speech forms, on the very same page of the List.

Rüdiger’s contemporary was Heinrich Grellmann, who was wrongly given credit for discovering the Indian origin of Romani. Grellmann was hostile in his attitudes to Gypsies, and propagated enforced social and cultural assimilation. Ruch (1986) has shown that Grellmann plagiarised most of his ethnographic chapters from a series of publications in the *Wiener Anzeiger* or ‘Vienna Gazette’. He also argued that Grellmann is likely to have plagiarised parts of his chapter on language as well, and

that the ideas he presents there were in any case not his, but those taken from Büttner and possibly also Rüdiger. I have further shown (Matras 1999a) that Grellmann cited Romani data from different dialects and so quite obviously from different sources, and that his Romani vocabulary was in large parts plagiarised from the *Rotwelsche Grammatik*, including a number of items that were, in fact, not Romani but *Rotwelsch* or Cant.

Willems (1997) dedicates the most important chapter of his book to Grellmann, celebrating the fact that the author who was most successful in broadcasting the Indian origin theory was also a cheat and a racist. Willems' argument disputing an Indian origin rests almost entirely on discrediting Grellmann. On the other hand, Willems' attitude to Rüdiger is a combination of mockery and downplaying:

“... he included a long article wherein, on grounds of some linguistic comparisons, he believed he was able to show that Gypsies originally came from India ... The development of comparative linguistics during the second half of the eighteenth century pointed naturally to the East, the cradle, to be sure, of all European languages. In Rüdiger's single substantial article about Gypsies, he revealed that he was of the romantic school which would come to maturity only decades later and then especially in England.” (Willems 1997:80).

While Willems' case against Grellmann is, essentially, the latter's academic discredit and hostility to Gypsies, Willems does not have a single point of substantial criticism against Rüdiger. His 'de-construction' of Rüdiger's work relies on plain sarcasm: referring to “some” linguistic comparisons (but not mentioning which, and whether they were correct or incorrect), distancing himself from the conclusion (“he believed”; but was he wrong?), suggesting that the conclusion (rather than the method applied) was pre-determined by *zeitgeist*, and associating Rüdiger with a hitherto unnamed “romantic school” that would evolve only decades after his passing away. This is the essence of Willems' argument against the Indian origin of the Romani language and people.

The emergence of the mainstream narrative

In the century-and-a-half that followed the publications by Rüdiger and Grellmann, Romani philology turned into an established discipline, with a periodical that served as a principal forum for discussion (the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*), and with the participation of numerous prominent Indologists. I will give a very brief summary of the major developments of this period. In 1844-1845, August Pott published a comparative grammar and a comparative lexicon of a couple dozen Romani dia-

lects that had been documented since Rüdiger. He elaborated on the etymology of both grammar and vocabulary. One of his most outstanding achievements was to point out a layer of pre-European loan words from Armenian and Persian, which he suggested were acquired during a gradual migration from India to Europe.

Between 1872-1880, Franz Miklosich published a series of papers which together constituted a further comparative study of the dialects, based largely on first-hand documentation. Miklosich identified a Greek layer of loans, and concluded that the Gypsies must have stayed in Greek-speaking territory for a considerable period before dispersing throughout Europe. He then attempted to trace the migration routes of individual groups of Romani speakers throughout Europe by analysing the layers of borrowings from other European languages. Both Pott and Miklosich were pioneers of language contact studies, applying a methodology that is now commonplace, namely to relate lexical and structural borrowings into a language to a period of cultural contact with the so-called donor language and culture. Okely however polemicises against this method:

“Studies of the language or dialects of Gypsies in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries revealed a connection with a form of Sanskrit said to have evolved around or before 1000 A.D. The different forms of ‘Romany’ found throughout Europe have also many words from Persian, modern and Byzantine Greek, Slavic, and Rumanian. These other ingredients have been perceived by scholars as ‘corruptions’ of a once ‘pure’ Indian Gypsy language.” (Okely 1983: 8).

Okely does not specify which ‘scholars’ she is referring to, and leaves the reader to deduce that the same scholars who studied the language and dialects of the Gypsies also viewed loan elements as ‘corruptions’. In none of the linguistic studies, however, does one find any evaluative judgements of this kind, alluding to either ‘corruptions’ or ‘purity’. Rather, the statements are always of a descriptive nature and are part of an historical reconstruction of linguistic and cultural contacts. It is Okely who is ‘constructing’ an image – the image of a conspiracy among biased, romantic, even racist philologists.

Both Pott and Miklosich included in their surveys also data on a dialect spoken in the Middle East by a group of peripatetics who referred to themselves as *Dom*, and were known in the region by a variety of names. Recognising the Indic origin of this language (later to be known as *Domari*; see Matras 1999b), and the similarities in social organisation between the Dom and the European Rom, both authors regarded the Dom and their language as one of the sub-branches of Romani and the Rom. The similarity in the names – Rom and Dom – had prompted Pott to consider that both

groups might be descendants of the *Domba*, a caste of service providers mentioned in medieval texts from Kashmir. The position was thus gradually emerging in nineteenth-century philology, that the Rom had always been a peripatetic community – part of GYPSY 1 –, albeit one that originated in India and immigrated westwards, retaining both its socio-economic profile as a peripatetic group but also retaining its Indian language. Although the cover term used for them was still the ambiguous ‘Gypsies’ (German *Zigeuner*), an understanding of GYPSY 2 as a sub-set of GYPSY 1 was evolving. This track was also pursued by Grierson (1888) in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, where he pointed out that low castes of peripatetic service-providers known as ‘Dom’ were still contemporary in India. Since commercial nomads are known to migrate, the question of why and how the ‘Gypsies’ migrated to Europe did not seem to pose a problem.

There were other hypotheses. Pischel (1883) for instance suggested that war surrounding the Islamic conquests of northern India may have driven the ancestral population of the Rom out of the area, and de Goeje (1903) proposed that the Rom might have been camp-followers of the Jats, a group of warriors who served under the Sassanide armies. The hypothesis of a connection with other populations of Indian origin was strengthened through descriptions of the Indian-derived vocabulary of a further population of commercial nomads in Armenia, called *Lom* (Finck 1907). All three names – *Rom*, *Dom*, and *Lom* – could easily be proved to be connected etymologically through regular sound changes. Furthermore, all three groups had cognate terms for outsiders: *gadjo*, *kacca*, *kadja*. Grierson (1922) pointed out further cognates among the terms for outsiders used by Dom castes in India itself. The fact that there was evidence of linguistic ties with India and cognate group names in all three populations led Sampson (1923) to assume that all three groups were sub-branches of one single population, which left India together and then split while in Iranian-speaking territory.

This hypothesis does not seem likely, for, as Turner (1926) already pointed out, although both Romani and Domari are originally Central Indian languages, some of the linguistic differences between them are rather old, and seem to have pre-dated the exodus from India. The evidence seems to point in the direction of several distinct populations, sharing a caste background, or rather, sharing the socio-economic profile of commercial nomads or peripatetics, migrating from India possibly at different times, and speaking different Indian languages. While the linguistic evidence clearly points to India, as Rüdiger had already proved, the case for an origin in peripatetic populations cannot be made on linguistic grounds. Rather, it relies on piecing together the linguistic and ethnographic evidence. There are other populations of commercial nomads north and west of India (Central Asia and the Near East) which speak Central Indian languages. Most have ethnonyms deriving from Indian caste-

names (Jat, Parya, Dom), and some share specific ethnonyms and names for outsiders, as mentioned above. Although no direct connection with any of the groups can be established, the phenomenon of westward migration of Indian commercial nomads is historically well attested. Any alternative interpretation of the origin of the Rom would need to explain the combination of circumstances as an historical coincidence: A Central Indic language; ethnonyms that are cognate with caste-names and shared with other commercial nomads; and a socio-economic profile as a peripatetic population.

The division of Romani into dialects can be reconstructed on the basis of comparative data from the dialects as having emerged following the immigration into Europe of a more-or-less uniform linguistic entity. The structural similarities make it highly unlikely if not impossible that any of the Romani dialects of Europe may have formed a separate linguistic entity in pre-European times. This can be seen in the shared development of the pre-European component, as well as in the shared layer of Greek lexical and grammatical loans. In some areas of Europe, mainly in the northern, western and southern peripheries, Romani is no longer spoken, but we find populations that make use of a Romani-derived vocabulary ('Para-Romani'). It is assumed that this is due to a shift into the majority language, retaining lexical items that were functional as an in-group register or style. It is possible, and has been suggested, that such shifts took place as a result of merger between peripatetic populations of Romani and non-Romani origin. It has never been argued however in the linguistic literature that the use of individual words of Romani origin constitutes proof of Indian descent, but rather of connections with a Romani-speaking population.

'Deconstruction': No 'Rom', just Gypsies

Nevertheless, Judith Okely, in a monograph that has become a standard textbook in British anthropology, questions not just the Indian origin but even the mere existence of a Romani language. Without making any direct references to the linguistic literature, Okely writes:

"By the nineteenth century, the theory of an Indian origin emerged, thanks to diffusionist ideas and to studies of the dialects or 'secret' languages used by Gypsies mainly among themselves. [...] Today, the extent to which Indian origin is emphasised depends on the extent to which the groups or individuals are exoticised and, paradoxically, considered acceptable to the dominant society." (Okely 1983: 5)

Okely thus equates dialects (=of Romani) with secret languages, a view which does not reflect even the discussion in eighteenth-century compilations by law enforcement officers, let alone the serious academic sources of the nineteenth century. She further suggests that contemporary scholars choose to define a language as Indian by origin not according to its structures, but according to their political interest in the population of speakers. No evidence for any of this is cited, however.

In one of his earliest papers on Romani, Hancock (1970), writing in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, hypothesises on the emergence of what is called in the linguistic literature ‘Angloromani’, and which in fact is a Para-Romani style, i.e. the insertion of Romani-derived vocabulary into English discourse. Using a term from a field in which Hancock himself had been trained, and which was gaining interest in linguistics at the time, Hancock referred to Angloromani as a possible ‘Creole’: a simplified mixture of two languages, English and Romani, which had become the regular in-group language of a population mixture. Inspired by this article, Okely ventures to suggest her own hypothesis:

“I suggest that the so-called ‘pure’ Anglo-Romany recorded by Sampson among some families in Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century could also have been imported by Gypsies who migrated from Europe more recently than the sixteenth century. In any case, Hancock’s suggestions that Anglo-Romany is a creole could be extended beyond the British Isles. Further research is needed here. Perhaps many forms of Romanes might be classified as creole or pidgins which developed between merchants and other travelling groups along the trade routes. These served as a means of communication between so-called Gypsy groups”. (Okely 1983: 9)

What Okely refers to as ‘so-called pure Anglo-Romany’ of Wales however is a separate phenomenon, notably an inflected dialect of Romani, which in the linguistic literature has never been referred to as ‘Anglo-Romany’, and has only been referred to as ‘pure’ in the sense that it preserves Romani inflection paradigms, unlike Angloromani, which is based on English (cf. Sampson 1926). There are indeed other Para-Romani varieties outside the British Isles, but they do not shed any new light on the development of Romani. What Okely failed to understand was the fact that there is a difference between Romani as a language, and use of Romani-derived vocabulary in the grammatical framework of other languages. Elsewhere she writes: “By definition Romanes cannot stand as a language once the non-Indian words are screened out” (Okely 1984: 65). The archaic inflection paradigms of Romani – the language preserves for example the Middle Indo-Aryan present verb

conjugation, which has been lost elsewhere in Modern Indo-Aryan – could not have evolved (and could have been revived from Prakrit) as a result of traders and merchants seeking a common form of communication along the trade routes.

The denial of the language is a necessary tool to be able to deny the immigration of a population from India. Okely rejects both as a romanticist fantasy:

“It may be the case that groups of people brought or appropriated some linguistic forms, creole or pidgin related to some earlier Sanskrit in the movements along the trade routes between East and West, but it does not follow that all ‘real’ Gypsies or Travellers are the genealogical descendants of specific groups of persons allegedly in India nearly a thousand years ago. It is of course exciting that such linguistic links can be made between some Gypsies and ‘magical’ Asia. The Gypsiologists have thus given exotic status to persons who labour also under negative and banal images” (Okely 1983: 13)

The construction of an abstract adversary, termed ‘Gypsiologist’ by Okely, turns the argument into a self-righteous crusade. Okely nevertheless tries to offer a quasi sociolinguistic argument against the possibility that a Romani language could ever have existed:

“Given the special economic niche of all Gypsies who can never approximate to economic self-sufficiency, but must always trade with outsiders in the surrounding society, their language usages have to be consistent with their positions. In order to earn their living, the Gypsies need to be fluent in the languages of non-Gypsies. It would be of little use for Gypsies to tell fortunes in Romanes to non-Gypsies, their major clients. Thus, any forms of Romanes used between Gypsy groups cannot and can never have been the sole nor necessarily the dominant language of a Gypsy group.” (Okely 1983: 9)

The statement however is rhetorical: Nobody has ever claimed that the Rom were monolingual. On the contrary, all studies of Romani, beginning with Rüdiger (1782), have stressed the century-old multilingual reality of Romani communities. Nobody has ever denied that Gypsies are and in all likelihood were always fluent in the languages of non-Gypsies, and nobody has suggested that they once used Romanes to tell fortunes to non-Gypsies. None of this derives from the recognition that they speak Romani among themselves. Indeed, the claim is similar to asserting that Chinese Britons couldn’t possibly speak Chinese, for in order to operate Chinese restaurants in England they must be able to speak English. It is again astonishing that a narrative like this, which is so fundamentally ignorant of two centuries of se-

rious scholarship from different parts of Europe, has been celebrated for nearly two decades now as a breakthrough in the ethnographic study of foreign cultures.

Contrary to Okely's understanding of the linguistic argument, the retention of an Indo-Aryan language does not mean that no Europeans have been absorbed into the Romani population since its arrival in Europe (although a massive sign-up is unlikely to have occurred). Nor does it mean that the Rom were once a self-sufficient sedentary group, and not part of an Indian caste of commercial nomads. It also does not mean that there are no commercial nomads of indigenous European origin, who coexist alongside the Rom in Europe (our GYPSY 1). There is therefore no basis at all for Okely's claim that "The fixation upon the distant place of origin diverts attention from the circumstances in which the Gypsies first appeared in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. With the collapse of feudalism, many persons were uprooted and took to wandering." (Okely 1984:64)

Furthermore, the Indian origin of Romani does not mean that all commercial nomads in India speak Romani. This would not have been the case after one thousand years of separation even *if* all commercial nomads in India had originally spoken the same language. Okely had devoted so little time to reading the actual work of the infamous 'Gypsiologists' that she failed to notice long discussions comparing very distinct languages. Okely the anthropologist could nonetheless be expected to know that several hundred different languages are spoken in India. Nevertheless, commenting on Irving Brown's observation that the language of the Dom of India was different to that of the Rom of Europe, she says: "Thus the original search for Indian links based on language links is turned on its head when it suits the Gypsiologist!" (Okely 1983:11).

Okely's 'de-constructionist' narrative has in more recent years inspired the works of Lucassen and in particular Willems, who sets out to expose the alleged myth of an Indian origin. As alluded to above, Willems even draws a connecting line between interest in the origin of the Romani language, and the Nazi genocide: "Again and again, in popular criminological writing, we find Grellmann's vocabulary list of 'Gypsy words' recurring – to which every writer tried to add a number of words that he himself had noted down – printed together with an ethnographic portrait of the group, and with comments on the Gypsies' occupational activities". He goes on to name some of these writers, concluding that: "They, in turn, exercised considerable influence on criminological biologists during the Nazi regime" (Willems 1997:22).

Like Okely, Willems is drawn to the linguistic argument, and equates Romani language with Para-Romani vocabularies:

"His [Miklosich's] linguistic research brought him to the conclusion that Gypsies left India in groups somewhere between the eighth and tenth century – without his ventur-

ing to establish the reasons why – a standpoint which continues to win supporters even today. There has been an ongoing interest in the study of Gypsy language, with the idea of an umbrella parent language as a continuous thread, even though social reality presents the more differentiated picture of many dialects and mixed languages – with a Romani vocabulary, true, but the grammar of another language. What has been noted recently is that some Gypsy groups adapt their core vocabulary to the grammar of the country in which they are living so that to outsiders it appears as if they are listening to their own language without their being able to follow the words actually spoken.” (Willems 1997:82-83).

And, showing little originality, he also repeats Okely’s alternative scenario for the evolution of Romani as a so-called trade language:

“It is possible [...] that linguistic influence made itself felt through trading outposts or cultural transmission and that thus the speakers of an Indo-European language in Europe did not migrate in the remote past from Central Asia but perhaps made the language of others their own. Research into these matters has still not generated conclusive answers, which prompts the question whether in the case of so many diverse Gypsy groups a similar process may not have taken place, i.e. that certain groups between the eighth and eighteenth centuries came, as a kind of group ritual, to adopt a dialect of the Indian Romani” (Willems 1997:83)

Contrary to Willems’ impression, research into these questions is very conclusive indeed, and rules out that archaic inflections and regular sound changes could have been acquired by illiterate merchants on trade routes as a ‘group ritual’, especially as there is no known precedence for such an occurrence anywhere in the world.

Willems also copies Okely in his polemic style, full of self-righteous rhetoric: “Folklorists carry on with their search for authentic traces of Gypsy culture with undiminished zeal, including linguists who have elevated Romani-philology to a special status” (Willems 1997:305). Without analysing any of the texts actually produced by linguists studying Romani, Willems pretends to be able to detect their hidden passions and questionable motives. The rhetoric continues as Willems argues that linguistics is irrelevant to the study of Romani history, since Gypsies are not persecuted because of their language (as though linguistics were the study of a cure against discrimination): “Linguistics will never be able to give conclusive answers to all such questions concerning the reconstruction of the Gypsies’ history. Moreover, the criterion of language is utterly inadequate for explaining why people were (or still are) defined as Gypsies. Where governments were busy stigmatizing Gypsies, languages appears never to have been utterly of decisive importance” (Willems 1997:308) Finally, Willems too regards the Indian narrative as part of a political campaign (a point also emphasised by Okely (1997) in a more recent paper):

“Since, for some Gypsy groups in western European countries, the process of emancipation has only commenced recently, hardly any reevaluation of extant historical knowledge has yet taken place. It remains questionable, moreover, whether corrections are to be anticipated from this corner since the intelligentsia in Gypsy circles are not likely to profit very much by challenging the core concepts of Gypsy studies. For political and pragmatic reasons they will sooner close ranks in support of the idea of a *collective* Gypsy identity, including a language that belongs to them.” (Willems 1997:307).

According to Willems, then, Gypsy activists are pretending to be speaking a language of their own, for political reasons.

To summarise the arguments of the Okely-Willems school (see Lucassen 1996 for similar conclusions): There is no Romani language for which an Indian origin can be postulated. What there is amounts to the use of individual words, i.e. an in-group vocabulary among diverse groups of Gypsies. Since there is no language, there is also no evidence to link Rom to an immigration from India. The fact that so much attention has focused on Indian origins derives from the need that scholars felt to exoticise Travellers, and to interpret their social organisation forms and ethnic identities in terms familiar to mainstream society: in terms of race, territorial origins, and language. In modern times, this image of the Rom as, historically, an immigrant group of non-European origin, is useful to campaigners seeking to promote their political ideas, since recognition is more easily granted to groups that fit a territorial-linguistic definition, and who are or were at some point in their history self-contained and self-sufficient, i.e. with a language, economy, and land of their own.

I have clarified why most of these claims must be rejected. In the next section I will explain why I nevertheless agree with the final observation, namely that campaigners seek to promote an historical narrative which they believe can help them mobilise their own people as well as outsiders who are sympathetic to their cause in a more efficient and more convincing way.

Neo-Construction: Romani warriors, not Romani Gypsies

During the time I served as press officer and assistant to a well-known Romani civil rights campaigner, in the early 1990s, I was instructed to prepare a paper which claimed that the Rom originated not in a caste of musicians and metalworkers, but in a population of captives who were taken prisoner in India, and brought to Europe as slaves. The search for an historical narrative of this kind was inspired by a feeling that there were similarities between the status of the Rom as the Pariahs of Europe, and the African-Americans. The concrete trigger was the release of the film ‘Malcolm X’, some parts of which were a source of political inspiration to the campaign I worked for. I searched the libraries and was able to find evidence of

Indian warriors who were taken prisoner and brought to Mesopotamia during the Umayyan dynasty. I also came across the well known text by At-Tabari describing the capture of Zott at Ain-Zarba by the Byzantines. None of this however was conclusive proof that this was indeed the origin of the Rom. In the pamphlet that was then produced, I wrote that the ancestors of the Rom “may have been brought to Asia Minor against their will”.

The argument reminded me however of the logic of Zionist analysis of Jewish presence in Europe, which I had been taught at school in Israel: It seemed to agree with the anti-Semitic viewpoint, which regarded Jews as a parasitic nation since they lacked a territory, and as money-lenders and merchants, which of course were judged dishonourable occupations. In adopting these aspects of anti-Semitic thinking, Zionism, as is well known, sought to remove the Jews from the Diaspora, and to change their socio-economic profile, turning them into an ‘industrious’ and ‘productive’, territorial nation. But it also sought to create an historical narrative. And so we were taught at school that Jews first arrived in Europe as captives of the Romans who had crushed their uprising and destroyed their Temple. From slaves building roads for the Romans in Europe, they then mysteriously worked their way up to become pharmacists, merchants, scholars, and money-lenders in Spain, France and Germany. Official textbooks taught us that they were forced into these trades, since they were not allowed to cultivate land (which implies that, had they been allowed to purchase and cultivate land, they would have happily become farmers). Since Zionism accepted the anti-Semitic premise that continued Jewish presence in the Diaspora was an anomalous condition, it needed to restore pride to its people by developing an argument according to which Jews had been reluctant to move to the Diaspora in the first place. They therefore could not have emigrated to Europe, as Roman citizens, of their own free will, in order to promote their careers or businesses. The captives-narrative served to underline the consistency of the victim role throughout Jewish history.

Romani activists have been searching for an escape from the postulated origin of the Rom as a caste of commercial nomads, or Dom, for a number of years now. The idea of a warrior origin of the Rom was first put forth by Kochanowski (1968), inspired by de Goeje’s idea of the Jats and their camp-followers, in a paper called *Black Gypsies, white Gypsies*. This was then picked up by Rishi, a retired Indian diplomat who publishes a magazine on Romani issues, who writes:

“Roma, the so-called Gypsies of Europe ... are the descendants of the Rajputs and Jats of Northern India, to be precise, the Greater Punjab ... The ancestors of the Roma left their

mother country India (they call it Baro Than – the land of their ancestors) to foreign lands about a thousand years ago during the Muslim invasions of India. In foreign lands they were victimised not only by governments but also by industrial and trade guilds and the church. They were forced to live a non-sedentary life.” (Rishi 1983:1)

This line of argument was then continued by Kochanowski, now referring to ‘inter-disciplinary collaboration between European and Indian scholars’:

“En effet, en collaboration avec les savants de l’Europe et de l’Inde, nos études interdisciplinaires où sont comparés les systèmes et non pas les faits séparés nous ont permis d’apporter les solutions à ces questions qui peuvent être réduits aux trois principales:

1. Origines exactes des Romané Chavé en Inde? Etat de Delhi et ses environs, en particulier le Rajasthan.
2. Castes originelles? Environ 90% de Kshatriyas et de Rajputs; 10% de Brahmanes.
3. Dates et causes de leurs exodes? – 1er exode au VIIIe siècle après J.C. dû au débordement du fleuve Sindh; – 2e exode à la fin du XIe siècle après J.C. dû à la défaite de la dernière bataille de Teraïm (1192)” (Kochanowski 1994:146)

Kochanowski thus suggests two waves of migration from India. The first was of Kshatriyas (a warrior caste) from the province Sindh, or ‘Sindhiens’, whom Kochanowski brings in connection with the ‘Sinti’, a popular notion among the Sinti which however lacks any foundation whatsoever since the term ‘Sinti’ is a European loan word adopted by the population in or around the eighteenth century, possibly a borrowing from a German-based secret language (see Matras 1999a:108-111). Kochanowski explains that the Sinti left Sindh for Mesopotamia due to climate changes, and later continued to Greece together with the Roman legions. Four centuries later, the Rajputs (another warrior caste) were defeated at the battle of Teraïm, by a coalition of Muslims. Some of them fled through Kashmir and Afghanistan, and arrived in Greece, only to meet their fellow countrymen and unite with them there: “C’est ainsi que les Kshatriyas sindhiens et les Rajputs de Delhi et de ses environs (en particulier du Rajasthan) formeront ensemble un seul et même Peuple: le Peuple romano dont les membres s’appellent eux-mêmes les *Romané Chavé* (litt. “Fils de Ram”).” (Kochanowski 1994: 41) Kochanowski’s fantastic story – attributing the name Rom to the ‘Sons of the God Ram’ – was now presented again by Rishi as a case of international research collaboration, in the following ‘Appeal’:

“An appeal. Roma – Descendants of Warrior Classes of India. Interdisciplinary research in India and abroad by prominent linguists and scholars has proved beyond doubt that the Roma are, mainly, the descendants of people of warrior classes of North-India – Kshatriyas, Rajputs and Jats. [...] Please do not repeat not connect them with the *Doms*, a lower caste in India.” (W.R. Rishi, in *Roma* 42-43, January-July 1995, p. v).

The ‘proof’ provided by Kochanowski amounted to a discussion of the Rom’s care for horses (which supposedly links them with ancient warriors), accounts of their service in European armies and the fact that they made ‘good soldiers’, and alleged comparisons of blood groups from among descendants of the Kshatriyas in India, with the European Rom.

Proof of a different kind for a warrior origin is sought by Hancock. Having cited the warrior origin hypothesis in his earlier works (1988, 1991, 1992), Hancock has become more fond of it and has now adopted it, basing it on linguistic arguments. In his entry on Romani in the Encyclopaedia of European Languages, Hancock writes:

“In its lexicon and phonology in particular, it [Romani] demonstrates a Central Indian core, but with greater evidence from North-western Indian and to some extent Dardic. Such linguistic clues support the most current theory of the origin of the population itself, which is that the ancestors of the Roma descend from a composite population assembled as a military force at the beginning of the 11th century to resist Islamic invasions led by Mohammed of Ghazni”. (Hancock 1998b:378-379)

That Romani has a Central Indian core and some north-western and Dardic features, was demonstrated by Turner (1926), and little fresh evidence has been cited since (but see Matras 2002, ch. 6 for an analysis of the Dardic origin of the Romani past-tense conjugation). But this evidence merely lends linguistic support to an immigration from the Centre to the Northwest, which makes sense geographically, in terms of the route taken toward Europe. It does not amount to any proof of a warrior origin.

Hancock is somewhat more explicit in other contributions, however. His evidence is lexical, and is based on an interpretation of lexical items as reflecting a military culture:

“If we look at the vocabulary of Romani, we find indications of a specifically military history. For example, the most common word for someone who is not a Rom is *gadjo*, and this comes from an old Indian word *gajjha*, meaning “civilian” or “non-military person” (“civilians” is still used by Roma to refer to non-Roma in parts of Europe, e.g. in Slovenia and Italy). Another word for a non-Rom is *das*, which originally meant a prisoner of war, and which means “slave” in modern Hindi and Panjabi. [...] The words for “sword”, “battlecry”, “spear” and “gaiters” are also all Indian, and all belong to the military semantic domain”. (Ian Hancock, “The Roma: Myth and Reality”, The Patrin Web Journal, <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/mythand-reality/html>, posted 05 September 1999).

But this is inaccurate, to say the least. There is no Old Indian word *gajjha* meaning ‘civilian’. The attested form is the Old Indo-Aryan word *garhya* meaning ‘domestic’, from which Pischel (1900) hypothesised an unattested Middle Indian sound form **gajjha*, which could have developed into the Romani word *gadjo*. Pischel thus argues for an etymology that supports a dichotomy between settled outsiders, and Rom as Travellers or peripatetics. Hancock is merely reversing the argument, in a rather playful manner. The word *gadjo* is of course used by Rom today, not just in Slovenia and Italy. Its general meaning is ‘non-Rom’, though some groups use it in a more specific meaning, namely ‘farmer’, which tends to support Pischel’s hypothesis. As for *das*, it does indeed mean ‘slave’ in Indo-Aryan languages, and presumably it meant that in Early Romani too, but there is no evidence whatsoever that it ever meant ‘prisoner of war’. Only the Balkan Rom use *das* as a term for foreigners or non-Rom, though not just any foreigner, but specifically for the Slavs (as opposed to the Turks/Muslims of the Balkans, called *xoraxane*, and the Greeks, who are called *balame*). The origin is in a word-play, modelled on the similarity between Greek *sklavos* for ‘slave’, and *slavos* for ‘Slav’. It has nothing to do with viewing all outsiders as ‘prisoners of war’ or even ‘slaves’, and so it provides no evidence that the Rom regarded themselves as warriors, as Hancock suggests.

Some of the alleged ‘military’ vocabulary is commented on in Hancock’s (1998a) unpublished manuscript, to which the author also refers in Hancock (2000). Glossed as ‘gaiters’ we find the word *patavo*, which in fact simply means ‘clothes’. And glossed as ‘battlecry’ we find *chingaripe*, which simply means ‘shout’. Hancock further suggests that the lack of Indo-Aryan terms for smithery and metals, and use of Greek-derived items instead, indicates that the relevant concepts were unknown to the Rom’s ancestral population before they reached Europe, and that therefore the Rom could not have been metalworkers.

These statements are based on the mistaken and misleading assumption that lexical borrowing is always motivated only by cultural and conceptual renewal, and that by contrast the stability of inherited vocabulary is a reliable indicator of an ancient, original culture. Romani borrows the numerals ‘seven’, ‘eight’, and ‘nine’, and the words for ‘flower’, ‘bone’, and ‘road’ from Greek, which does not in any way indicate that the relevant concepts were unknown to the Rom prior to their immigration to Greece. Romani also borrows words for ‘grandmother’ and ‘grandfather’ from Greek, and the word for ‘family’ from European languages – none of which suggests that the ancestors of the Rom did not have tight family structures before arriving in Europe. On the other hand Romani has Indo-Aryan words for ‘to beg’, ‘to steal’, ‘to

tell fortunes', 'to sing', and 'to play music', though this does not at all suggest that the ancestors of the Rom were thieves, beggars, fortune-tellers, or musicians, either. Hancock further maintains that the fact that some Romani words have surviving cognates in distinct Indo-Aryan languages suggests that Romani was a *koïné*, i.e. a language of diverse origins spoken by a composite population. Split cognates however are a trivial phenomenon among related languages, which does not prove a *koïné* origin, especially since sound changes from Old Indo-Aryan to Romani are on the whole extremely regular (cf. Matras 2002, Ch. 3). Moreover, a *koïné* does not prove a military origin.

Nonetheless, the mere suggestion, by a distinguished linguist, that there is linguistic 'evidence' of a warrior origin is sufficient for the new narrative to become adopted by followers of the political cause. Romani activist Ron Lee argues on the email discussion list *Patrin* for what he calls 'Scenario 1': "The ancestors of the Roma were the defeated army of an Indian kingdom who left their original homeland in Gurjara and made their way north up the Indus valley into the Dardic speaking regions. They remained here after forming a new kingdom until driven out later by Ghaznavids." Challenged to cite the evidence for the theory, he responded:

"We all have the right to our theories but academic theories will not give pride to young Roma searching for their identity. Scenario 1 makes sense and with further research I am sure it will be verified. No other theory even makes sense. In the meantime, like the Jewish scribes who wrote the Old Testament, people like Ian [=Hancock] and I and others are trying to create Romani history". (Ron Lee, *Patrin* email discussion list, 14.08.00)

In a further posting, Lee went on: "Roma nationalists and intellectuals are doing what is necessary to create a Romani nation and a Romani history and like Zionists, some of us want to see our people survive with pride in their origins". (Ron Lee, *Patrin* email discussion list, 17.08.00)

Referring to Hancock (2000), Acton & Gheorghe (2001) similarly accept that "recent linguistic arguments suggest that the Romani language and identity derives from a relatively late twelfth century emigration, distinct from the earlier eighth century migration which created the Dom or Nawar and similar groups of the Middle East" (Acton & Gheorghe 2001: 59).

The warrior origin theory is gaining ground, because Romani activists and others sympathetic to their cause wish to see the Rom they sympathise with in a consistent, smooth and indisputable victim role throughout history. They want, in a sense, package-Gypsies which sell better on the human rights market. Moreover, like the Zionist movement in its relation to anti-Semitism, they have internalised the anti-

Gypsyist point of view that self-employed musicians, fortune-tellers and scrap-metal dealers are a nuisance to society and a source of shame, and not pride. Having accepted this viewpoint, the only way they can protect themselves from the supposedly shameful image is to replace it by a proud ancestry: to postulate namely that they have been turned into what they are reluctantly, having held a prestigious and honourable social position before being victimised.

Good guys, bad guys

Although their respective viewpoints differ, there are some similarities between the type of discourse employed by Hancock, Lee, and Acton, and that used by Okely and Willems. I see similarities in three principal areas:

First, both circles present an historical narrative of Gypsy history that is subordinated to an ideological agenda. The picture they depict of early Romani history and origins is, to use a term that some of them so adore, a ‘construction’. In Okely’s writings, the agenda is to relativise the European notion of ethnicity by questioning the link between ethnicity and language and territory. In fact, one might interpret Okely’s work in a similar light as the interpretation that she herself offers for the work of others: Okely sets out to maintain the image of Gypsies as ‘free’ of the conventional baggage of nations and modern nation-states – ‘free’ of a state and a territory, but also ‘free’ of a language and an origin. This is an image which matches the stereotype of the ‘Gypsy’ who allegedly wanders aimlessly about throughout history, ‘free’ of the worries or awareness of a past or a future.

While Okely may be correct in recognising the social and political functions of the Indian narrative and its adoption by some Romani communities, the fact that the Indian origin is used in such a way does not mean that it is fictitious. Willems’ agenda however is to expose a fallacy, a hoax, by criticising text. His political agenda is to trace the roots of racism to the enlightenment, and so to celebrate himself as an enlightener – enlightening us in respect of our naïve acceptance of the romanticism of that period, the beliefs that were formed in that time, onto which we still hold on. To prove his point, Willems needs to demonstrate that there was no Indian origin, and that there is also no Indian language, at least not one that could only have been brought to Europe by an immigrant population.

Hancock, finally, and with him Kochanowski, Rishi, Lee, and other activists, view the historical discourse as an instrument toward changing the image of the Rom and their status in present-day society. Through the constructed narrative of the warrior-turned-victim they highlight the oppressive role that outside society has played in relation to the Rom, hoping to strengthen the legitimacy of their claim to be able to influence and shape the destiny of their people.

This brings me to the second point of similarity. In order to challenge the mainstream view on Romani origins, both sides need to take up the central argument on which this view is based – language. We therefore find on both sides attempts at a linguistic discourse, which however is stripped of any technical or established methodological notions that are normally part of linguistic analyses. In the centre of the linguistic ‘arguments’ put forth by both sides is the notion that language equals words or lexicon; the analysis of grammatical structures, which is the essence of comparative and historical linguistics, is lacking entirely, not just from the active discourse (granted, only Hancock and Kochanowski are linguists by training), but also from the reception of mainstream philological literature. Okely, and in her footsteps Willems, both equate the Romani language with the odd word, and come up with the theory of vocabularies picked up along the trade routes – a fantastic idea, inspired by pieces of disconnected impressions on the emergence of trade pidgins, on the spread of Indo-European languages following the spread of agriculture (rather than through population migrations), as well as on quite a deep layer of romanticism (see Willems’ fantasy of Romani as a ‘ritual’ language). Hancock plays word-games, attaching to words unattested meanings that support his argument, and claiming, in methodological perspective, that ancient culture is reconstructable through an analysis of vocabulary – an outdated notion in historical linguistics, which if pursued consistently might indeed backfire heavily.

Thirdly and finally, both sides assert a very self-righteous position, claiming to expose racist, conservative, and biased adversaries. In the foreground we find less de-construction of the actual arguments that are being criticised: Willems has no debate with Rüdiger, for instance, or any subsequent philologist, about the Indian origin of Romani inflectional paradigms, Okely does not discuss the westwards migration of Indian peripatetics, and Hancock downplays the socio-economic profile of the Rom, Dom, Lom and Indian Doms. Instead, the focus is on discrediting the authors who represent the mainstream viewpoint. In the writings of Lee (and to a lesser degree also Hancock), there is recurrent reference to ‘European scholars’ who represent the oppressive point of view, supposedly. Okely has coined the terms ‘Gypsiologist’, which represents apparently all those who have studied Gypsy language and culture pre-Okely, as well as ‘Indianist’, which appears to be a person who adheres to the view that there is a connection between Romani and India, and perhaps also between Gypsies and Romani. This personification of the argument serves as an implicit intimidation of the readers, who must constantly reassure themselves that they stand on the right side of the debate, lest they too should be exposed as part of the system of oppression. The individual concepts of adversary however usually remain undefined (e.g. it is not clear to me whether a Jewish lin-

guist raised in the eastern Mediterranean who supports the ‘Dom-theory’ qualifies as a ‘European scholar’).

A blend is offered by Acton, who relates to both Willems and Hancock, and baptises the adversary as ‘Gypsylorist’. Acton states that he, together with the International Romani Union, represents Romani nationalism, which “developed in dialectical opposition to an earlier discourse of European states and scholars about the ‘true Gypsy’ which formed a variant of European ‘scientific racism’, well analysed from different points of view by Hancock, Mayall, and most recently, Willems, and which has been called ‘Gypsylorist’ (after its flagship publication, the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*).” (Acton 1998: 6). For Acton, then, the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, to which both he and Hancock have contributed, represents a variant of European ‘scientific racism’, which is why he joins forces in a crusade against it – a case of ‘dialectical opposition’ indeed.

The ideological commitment, the lightweight linguistic arguments, combined with the heavy load of adversary personification, gives the impression that the neo-construction of Rom/Gypsies serves the purpose of ideological or intellectual mobilisation, rather than academic investigation. As a result, the gaps between positions and interpretations are widening. The ideological baggage complicates the dialogue and debate between the various approaches considerably. Nonetheless, the fact that such different directions are being pursued results in new and divergent models, especially models of interpreting language. Overall this poses a very healthy challenge to the ‘mainstream’ interpretation of the linguistic and ethnographic facts, a challenge which it cannot afford to ignore entirely, and as a result of which it must review the structure of its argument continuously. It is thanks to this review procedure, invoked by the debates, that the ‘mainstream’ approach can, on the whole, look with satisfaction at the achievements of two centuries of Romani-related research; for so far, none of its central arguments have been convincingly refuted.

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