

Duty and Beauty, Possession and Truth: The Claim of Lexical Impoverishment as Control

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The manipulation by societies in power of the identities of subordinate groups is achieved in many ways. One such way is through discriminatory legislation, such as that enacted against the Romani people in almost every land, including the United States. Another is through media representation, both factual and fictional. This last category, the portrayal of Gypsies in poetry, film and novels, is the most effective in establishing such negative feelings because they are absorbed subliminally by children, at a time when they are most susceptible to acquiring society's attitudes. Apart from descriptions of Romani people and their life, which are legion, the Romani language has also been the target of comment, always worded as fact rather than supposition. In his *Tales of the Real Gypsy*, Paul Kester gives his readers those "real" facts about it (1897:305):

The Gypsies, like the birds and all wild things, have a language of their own, which is apart from the language of those among whom they dwell... the Gypsy[']s... language is deep and warm and full of the charm of the out-of-doors world, the scent of the clover and the ripple of streams and the rush of the wind and the storm. For the Rommany speech is full of all this, and though the Gypsy has few traditions, his rich mother tongue must enbalm in each word a thousand associations that thrill in the soul.

Kesler was not a linguist, and it is easy to see how he was able to allow his fantasies about the Romani people to shape his preconceptions of the language. Doris Duncan, however, presumably is, and can claim no such excuse. Writing seventy years later in a journal of popular linguistics, she made the following observations (1969:42):

All authentic gypsy [*sic*] communication is, and must be, oral. As they settle for a time in a new country, they acquire some of that country's words and incorporate them into *Roum*, more popularly called Romany. It is believed that the *Roum* language began as a very small one, concerned with the family, the tribe, the horses and herd, words required for a simple existence. It must be very old, for *Roum* is highly idiomatic, and the complication of verbs and genders is endless. There is no way to write it except phonetically, and some sounds of the gypsy tongue simply defy our twenty-six letter alphabet. . . *Roum* is a disorderly language, and must be learned phrase by phrase. Even the syntax differs from one occasion to another. Verbs are very difficult . . . no one can explain why the verb changes so radically. A major problem is that no gypsy really knows what a verb is, and it wouldn't matter anyway if he did, because this is the way it must be said. The idiom is paramount in *Roum* and cannot be changed.

Duncan is right in maintaining that Romani has adopted words from those with whom its speakers have come in contact - this is a natural process affecting all languages, and one which has caused English, for example, to lose nearly three-quarters of its original Anglo-Saxon lexicon by dictionary count. But Bayle St. John couldn't simply discuss this phenomenon as lexical adoption when referring to Romani (1853: 141), which, he said,

...contains traces of an original character, [but which] is encrusted, as it were, with words borrowed - it might be more appropriate to say stolen - from a dozen different dialects.

A number of authors have claimed that, because of our character as a people a people, Roma lack certain virtues, and that this is reflected in the Romani language which cannot even express them. Those which have been discussed by different writers include *duty, possession, truth, beautiful, read, write, time, danger, warmth and quiet*. How negatively must the non-Gypsy world regard our people, to think that we cannot even express such basic human concepts and skills!(1)

Over a century ago, Adriano Colocci first introduced a notion which has since become a part of gypsiorist folk wisdom. In his extensive discussion of the Romani people in his 421-page book *The Gypsies*, he maintained that Roma

... have no more conception of property than of duty; "I have" is as foreign to them as "I ought." (Colocci, 1889:156).

Citing Colocci as his source, Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso elaborated upon the statement in his widely-used book on Gypsies as a criminal race, and made the jump from concept to actual language, by saying that

The word *ought* does not exist in the Gypsy language. The verb *to have* is almost forgotten by the European Gypsies, and is unknown to the Gypsies of Asia (Lombroso, 1918:41).

In 1928, Konrad Bercovici, probably also using Colocci but not acknowledging any source, repeated this notion on the first page (and again on the third page) of his book *The Story of the Gypsies*, and also interpreted the original observation linguistically, saying

I am attempting to unravel the story of a people whose vocabulary lacks two words - "duty" and "possession". (Bercovici, 1928:1, 3).

He goes on to rationalize this by explaining that "what we own possesses us, jails us." This was then picked up from Bercovici shortly afterwards by Erich von Stroheim who, in his racist Gypsy novel *Paprika*, told his readers that

The Gypsy mind is timeless. The Gypsy tongue has no words to signify duty or possession, qualities that are like roots, holding civilized people fast in the soil (von Stroheim, 1935:12).

Fifteen years later, the anonymous author of an article in *Coronet Magazine* plagiarized and reworded the same statement:

Even today, there are two important English words for which the Gypsy vocabulary has no known equivalent, and for which the Gypsy people have never exhibited any desire or need. One of them is the word 'duty,' the other is 'possession.' (Anon., 1950:126).

In a 1962 reissue of Leland's *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling*, Margery Silver wrote in her introduction to that edition

[In Germany], where they had been chronically subjected to the most relentless and brutal oppression of their European experience since their first appearance in 1417, five hundred thousand "sons of Egypt" - whose vocabulary a recent writer has described as "lacking two words: 'duty and 'possession' - died in the Nazi ovens beside six million sons of Jacob, whose history was founded on just those concepts, duty to God and possession of his law (Leland, 1962:xx).

Five years after that, in perhaps the most invidious way of all, since the plagiarism has been recast in such a way as to suggest an actual verbatim interview, the statement turns up again in an article by Marie Wynn Clarke, predictably entitled "Vanishing vagabonds":

A young Gypsy wife said "there is no word in our language for 'duty' or 'possession,' but I'm afraid there will be soon." (Clarke, 1967:210).

In her introduction to the 1983 edition of Bercovici's *Gypsies: Their life, lore and legends*, Elizabeth Congdon Kovanen repeats this yet again, though adding the suggestion that because of this, Gypsies themselves are responsible for the discrimination against them:

The Gypsy vocabulary lacks the words "duty" and "possession." This reflects their unwillingness to settle down, live in houses, obey the law, educate their children, be employed by others - and helps to explain their almost universal persecution (Bercovici, 1983:vii).

The eighth repetition of this strange idea is found in a novel by Piers Anthony, *Being a Green Mother*. The fact that the words "Gypsies! ...Beware - they steal children!" appear at the very first mention of the Romani characters when they are introduced on page 18 is an indication of the depiction of Roma throughout the rest of the book. The author describes someone's attempt to learn Romani, but who

...discovered that the Gypsy language had no words for what in her own were rendered as "duty" and "possession." This was because these concepts were foreign to the Gypsy nature (Anthony, 1988:39).

The most recent, though no doubt not the last, is found in Roger Moreau's *The Rom*:

One thing the Romani *chib* never acquired, though, was a future tense. Maybe this was a reflection of their attitude to life?... Neither is there the verb "to have" or a word for "possession" in Romanes, which I suppose makes sense if you don't happen to own anything (Moreau, 1995-.127-128).

Other words which Romani has been said not to have include "truth," "beautiful," "read," "write," "time," "danger," "warmth" and "quiet." The first was maintained by Jim Phelan, author of many books about Romanichals in which he describes his intimate life with British Travellers, and in which he claims to have been "long ago admitted to the brotherhood." In his book *Wagon-Wheels* he says

There is no word for "truth" in the romani (*sic*) language. There is the crux of the matter (1951:81).

The concept "beautiful," is denied in the language in Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*:

One evening, when they were all sitting around the camp fire and the sunset was blazing over the Thessalian hills, Orlando exclaimed "how good to eat!" The gipsies have no word for 'beautiful.' This is the nearest (1956:142).

The latest claim to a lack of certain basic human responses or skills is found in Isabel Fonseca's *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey*, where she maintains that there are no words in Romani for "read" and "write." Elsewhere in the same book she states that there are no words for "time," "danger," "warmth" and "quiet" either, because these are foreign concepts for **Roma** (1995-.98). Even before the book reached the bookstores,

reviewers were accepting and repeating these false assumptions:

"[the Gypsy's] is a world...where there are no words for "time" (or for "danger," "warmth" or "quiet")...where no day is different from any other (Kobak, 1995:14).

The assumption that the Romani way of life is evidence of some kind of evolutionary arrested development, which accounts for an inherent disregard for ownership - and by implication a "license to steal" as Marlock & Dowling (1994) call it - has found its way into at least one standard textbook on anthropology. In words recalling those of Charles Davenport half a century before him (1915:10-11), Cyril Dean Darlington wrote that

the gypsy communities which eventually wandered into Europe . . . still betray the evidence of their paleolithic ancestry . . . the lack of interest in property or understanding of ownership. For this reason, many of them are regarded by settled societies as criminal tribes or castes (1969:364).

Like Bayle St.John, who saw lexical *thefts* as a more appropriate label than lexical *adoptions* in his discussion of the non-native element in the Romani vocabulary, none of the above writers sufficiently overcame their stereotypical preconceptions of Gypsies or of what they *expected* of the language, to ask a Gypsy himself whether these words existed, or even to consult a Romani dictionary, of which dozens exist. For a **people** who were enslaved in the Rumanian principalities for five and a half centuries, a **people** whose lives were an interminable succession of duties and obligations, and for whom possessions were a precious thing, it should not be surprising that there are in fact many words for these two concepts. For "duty" there are, in the various dialects, the words *musajipé, vója, vuzhulimós, udzhilútno, udzhilipé, kandipé, slúzhba, kandinimós, thoximós* and *vudzhlipé*; for "possession" there are *májtko, arachimáta, sersámo, trjábo, butjí, aparáti, kóla, prámi, dzhéla, dzhélica, joságo, starimáta, icharimós, astarimós* and *theripé*. The words for "truth" include *tachipén, chachimós, vortimó, siguripé* and others, while "beautiful" is *šukár, mündro, rínkeno, jakhaló, orchíri, pakváro*, etc., in the various dialects, while "read" is *dzhin-* or *gin-* or *chit-* or *giláb-* or *drab-*, "write" is *ram-* or *jazd-* or *lekh-* or *pišú-* or *pisát-* or *chet-* or *škur-* or *skrij-* or *chin-*; "time" is variously translated by *vaxt, vákti, vrjámja* or *chéros*, "danger" by *strážhno*, "warmth" by *tatichosimós* or *táblipen* and "quiet" by *míro* or *mirnimós*, although in truth, the fallacy of such a belief, i.e. that

such words don't exist in the language, should scarcely need refuting. Many of these words come from the ancient Sanskrit stock of the language, while others, like *prámi* or *míro*, have been adopted from Greek and Slavic. Isabel Fonseca concedes in her book that Romani had to adopt the words for "read" and "write" from other languages, but apparently doesn't recognize that English, too, has had to borrow most of its lexicon from other languages (incidentally, the word for "read" is of native Sanskrit origin in Romani). Indeed, a dictionary count of English word origins indicates that only 28% of that language is traceable to its original Anglo-Saxon stock; should we assume from that, therefore, that the concepts of "duty," "possession," "beauty," "quiet," "danger," etc., were foreign to the English, since all of these words have been "stolen" from French? Furthermore, English also "lacks" a future tense, in the sense meant by Moreau, but constructs it, just as Romani does, with a word which expresses the intention or desire to undertake the action ("will" or "shall;" in Romani, *ka(m)*). There is clearly a double standard operating for these writers.

The blind repetition of someone's statement without checking the original source is a mark of shoddy scholarship- perhaps it is felt that less rigor is needed in Romani Studies than in other areas of research. A list of writers who, one after the other, have quoted the Romani proverb about not being able to sit on two horses with one backside, could also be assembled - all traceable without acknowledgement to Jan Yoors' book *The Gypsies*, or the story about the Gypsy in jail who weeps for his jailer who must stay there, or the story of the nails used to crucify Jesus. Victorian writers unashamedly lifted material from each other too. These descriptions of the Gypsy children on the Romanian slave estates are far too similar to be coincidental, and appeared in the British and American press at the time that the fictionalized image of the Gypsy was taking shape, though its inspiration seems to be traceable to a German source dating from 1841:

The children are seldom provided with clothing before they are ten years old. This is especially true of the wandering Gypsies ... they find every kind of meat good: dogs, cats, rats, mice and even sick farm animals are eaten by them (Brockhaus, 1841:801).

Thus in British literature just a few years later we find

The children wear no clothes until the age of ten or twelve years-, and resemble imps rather than human beings as they run beside the carriage of the traveller shrieking for alms, with their long matted hair flying in the wind, and their black limbs shining in the light (Pardoe, 1848(i):168).

The children go naked up to the age of ten or twelve, and whole swarms of girls and boys may sometimes be seen rolling about

together in the dust or mud in summer, in the water or snow in winter, like so many black worms (St.John, 1853:140).

The children to the age of ten or twelve, are in a complete state of nudity, but the men and women, the latter offering frequently the most symmetrical form and feminine beauty, have a rude clothing (Gardner, 1857:58).

Another area in which writers have shamelessly appropriated from each other's work, even to the extent copying each others mistakes, is in Romani lexicography; we find for example the English Romani word for "hedgehog," *hochiwichi*, turning up in Romanian Romani wordlists such as that by de Kogalnitchan who lists *hotschautscha* (1837:60), or Vaillant, who has *hoc'awiça* (1861:108) - though the source of the word is in the regional English dialect *urchin* (cf. "sea urchin"), and it exists only in Britain, having first been recorded by Roberts in 1836, Vaillant's and Kogalnicean's unacknowledged source. There is likewise scarcely a dictionary of Caló (Spanish Romani) that is original, each one copying freely from the one preceding it, mistakes and all, usually without a word of acknowledgement. Grant has addressed the particular issue of plagiarism in Romani Studies, calling it the researcher's "biggest problem" (1995:53).

In its January 8th, 1992, issue, the *New York Times* published the results of a public opinion poll surveying national negative attitudes to 58 different racial and ethnic populations in the United States over a 25-year period. For the entire quarter-century, Gypsies were ranked at the very bottom of the list, the most discriminated-against minority in the eyes of the general population. Since most gadzhé have no personal or social contact with the Romani American community, such attitudes in this country can only be based upon how we are presented in literature. The persistent, relentless portrayal of Roma as rootless, lawless, immoral, childlike thieves, as a people for whom the basic human concepts of truth and beauty, obligation and ownership do not exist, and who are ignorant of danger and never seek warmth or peace or quiet, is attributable to such individuals as Colocci, Lombroso, Bercovici, von Stroheim, Silver, Clarke, Kovanen, Anthony, Woolf, Phelan, Fonseca, Moreau, Ehrlich and others, whose investment in defining our character will ensure that anti-Gypsy prejudice will remain firmly a part of Euro-American racist attitudes.

(1) The same kind of prejudice that leads people to claim that these words don't exist in Romani is responsible for the reference in the August, 1996 issue of *Disney Adventures: The Magazine for Kids* on page 24 to a condition called "gypsyitis." The symptoms of this affliction include "an urge to run away from it all and dance among the dandelions," and being "footloose and fancy-free," instead of

being a normal "buckle-down, rules-and- regulations kinda person," which is to say one for whom "duty" means something. The objection to this kind of stereotyping seems to have escaped the magazine's editor Phyllis Ehdich, who defended it in a letter to the International Roma Federation as being "on the contrary, a positive portrayal of the Gypsy spirit."

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