

# Is there a Language of Stereotyping? From Verbal Clichés to Ethnic Stereotypes: the Case of the Roma

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## ***Abstract***

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*The purpose of this inquiry is to highlight the relation which can be established between language and stereotyping as a socio-cognitive process. What I will try to do is to analyze the linguistic material - consisting of nicknames, forms of address, collocations, and expressions, on the one hand, and proverbs on the other, so as to justify the way in which the stereotypical image of a specific ethnic group – the Roma – is delineated. The literature dedicated to this topic is extremely rich, but I will focus on the approaches which will prove to be particularly enlightening for the understanding of the mechanisms which lie behind the formation of ethnic stereotypes.*

## ***Key words***

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*stereotype, language, ethnicity, proverbs, nicknames, appellatives, categorization, bias, etc.*

## **I. Introduction**

Whenever two or more people are divided into groups, positive and negative stereotypical views seem to show up. For instance, Germans are industrious, Italians are romantic and English are gentle, but also, Germans have bad taste, Italians are sexist and English are stiff. To some extent, the stereotypes we hold are based on our personal experiences with individual members of the groups we stereotype. However, we may also hold strong stereotypes about groups we have never encountered ourselves. Presumably, stereotypes are not only developed on the basis of personal experience, they may be learned through others as well. This communicative process and especially the subtle but crucial role played by language are central to the present paper. Therefore, in what follows an overview is provided of the relevant theoretical and empirical advances that have been made with respect to stereotyping, language and communication. First, however, a brief

introduction to this theoretical overview is given. Many differences can be found if one compares one of the most pivotal early works on prejudice and stereotyping [1] with one of the recent works on stereotyping [11]. Interestingly, however, similarities between these two books may be found as well. One striking similarity is the fact that in both books a complete chapter is devoted to the influence of linguistic factors on the process of stereotyping.

Since Allport (1) wrote *The Nature of Prejudice*, many other researchers have also acknowledged the importance of linguistic factors to the transmission and maintenance of cultural stereotypes [for example 10; 12 etc.]. Some have even argued that “there is no completely non-verbal social stereotyping” [6: p. 48]. Although not everyone shares this extreme view, most researchers agree that linguistic factors do play an important role in the transmission and the maintenance of collective stereotypes [see 14]. After all, for the most part, it has to be language by means of which educators influence the stereotypical views of their pupils [15]; parents influence the stereotypes of their children [5], and mass media influence their readers, listeners and viewers [17].

## **II. The functions of language in intergroup contexts**

First of all, language has the function of *transmitting* the stereotypes which are culturally shared, from person to person, as well as from generation to generation. Because language is one of the key-elements that define a culture, being therefore culturally shared, it also provides a highly efficient means for collectively defining and preserving the stereotypic beliefs.

Another important function is the *organizing* function, providing a model in which information is organized around key-elements. As Allport [1] pointed out five decades ago, there are linguistic terms such as social category labels (Jew, Black, communist) that are outstandingly potent both as cognitive organizing principles and as evaluative reference points. For instance, the enemy image of 'communists' – as Allport argues – became effective only at the moment when the label 'communist' became widely known and was consistently applied to the outgroup category. The lexicon of a given language shapes the thought processes of its speakers by providing a specific repertory of cognitive schemata.

The third function of language lies in its contribution to *stereotype maintenance*. It seems that language is used in such a way as to defend existing stereotypes against disconfirmation. Taking into consideration the well-established ethnocentric tendencies in most human groups, one should be not surprised that stereotypic beliefs about one's own group – i.e. the ingroup – tend to be more favourable than those about outgroups. Group members tend to assign fewer positive and more negative trait concepts to the outgroup than to the ingroup, especially when these

traits are important to the group's self-definition. Nonetheless, ingroup and outgroup descriptions do not only differ in evaluative content, but also in the ease with which they can be disproven. It seems that the very negative traits usually contained in outgroup stereotypes are the easiest to acquire and the most difficult to lose, according to Rothbart and Park [13]. Therefore, much disconfirming evidence is needed for unfavourable traits before they will be revised.

The last function of language discussed here is the *identity-expressive* function which has been studied by Giles and colleagues within the framework of 'speech accommodation theory' [7; 8]. The fundamental claim here is that ingroup situations tend to activate sociolinguistic stereotypes, such as those associated with male versus female speech, or Black versus White speech, which induce divergent or convergent shifts in language use. Therefore, people will tend to shift their speech pattern either toward or away from that of the person being addressed, depending on the type of intergroup relationship and the strength of ethnolinguistic identity. According to these studies, convergence toward the stereotypic characteristics of the addressee is predicted whenever speakers (a) desire a high level of communicational efficiency, (b) strive for the recipient's social approval, (c) desire a group presentation shared by the recipient, or (d) when the recipient's speech is positively evaluated [cf. 8].

If it were to adjust all these claims to Tajfel and Turner's [16] social identity theory, convergent language shifts should be considered as a tactic for achieving a positive self-image. The more people consider membership in the outgroup as prestigious and advantageous, and the more they believe that group boundaries are permeable, the more they tend to adopt the outgroup's speech. Conversely, they will tend to accentuate the ingroup speech whenever intergroup mobility is either not feasible or not desirable, or when ingroup identity is threatened.

The literature on language and stereotyping which I have briefly reviewed in the previous pages leads us to the conclusion that stereotypes are closely – if not inseparably – linked to language. And it would be indeed difficult to imagine language-free stereotyping. Therefore, in what follows I will provide an in-depth, corpus-based analysis of some ethnic stereotypes, as they can be retrieved from the Romanian language.

### **III. The language of stereotyping**

Language-mediated transmission of stereotypes can be studied at different levels of analysis. On the most general level, culturally shared stereotypes are wired into the vocabulary of a given language. A child growing up at a given time in a given culture acquires a lexicon that reflects these stereotypic beliefs. For instance, depending on the decade in which an American grew up, he or she learned to refer

to dark-skinned citizens as 'niggers', 'Negroes', 'Blacks' or 'African-Americans' – terms which imply very different qualities and evoke very different images and associations. Along the same line of reasoning, children learn a great number of sayings and expressions which associate ethnic and social groups with particular and predominantly negative behaviours or traits and which are quite common in numerous languages, such as 'to smoke like a Turk', 'Hacerse el sueco' (to play the Swede – the equivalent of 'to play dumb' in English; a Bolivian, incidentally doesn't play the Swede, he plays the Italian, whereas a Columbian plays the Englishman, according to [2]). In other words, social beliefs about groups are embedded in the lexicon of any language at any given moment in history and they are automatically absorbed during language acquisition, i.e. at a very early age.

Maybe the most subtle way of encoding stereotypic beliefs into a language is by the very names – eponyms – the speakers of the respective language give to the outgroups. In *Nomi propri e nomi di popoli: una prospettiva etnolinguistica*, Cardona [3] distinguishes between:

- *autonyms* – i.e. the name which the group gives to itself (which is usually positive and denotes self-appraisal), and illustrates the idea of intragroup cohesion: 'we' is linked to the concept of togetherness, to a mutually intelligible spoken language, 'us' who stand for human kind by excellence, who rule this land, whereas the other just live, are accepted on it, 'us' – the free ones, meanwhile the others are the slaves, and 'us' – the Christians, the religious, the righteous, while the others are the pagans, the barbarians. [3];
- *heteronyms*, for which we can distinguish two situations: (a) the name given to a group by another group (for instance, the Greeks used to call the foreigners 'barbaroi' – barbarians, which literally meant 'the ones who babble'; similarly, the Chinese used for all the barbarian peoples an ideograph which preceded the name itself – *quan*, meaning 'dog' – that marked the ethnic difference, the otherness), and, sometimes, (b) a group can take a name to denote another group from a third party (for instance, in Romanian, besides the official name for Germans – 'german', another name is used – 'neamț' – which is taken from the old Slavonic language and in which it meant 'the mute ones, the ones who rarely speak, the ones who are taciturn').

Cardona [3] underlines that there seems to be a predilection of human groups for a number of collective semes for denominating ethnic groups: type of food / feeding, physical traits, environmental conditions, clothes or the way of speaking.

Referring to the type of food / feeding, we can mention the Eskimo (it means 'the one who eats raw fish'), the Romanians call the Italians 'macaronari' (from macaroni) which mirrors their habit of eating pasta, whereas the Irish call the

Germans 'potato-fingered' because they are known for the habit of cultivating and eating potatoes (in Romanian there is an equivalent collocation – 'neamț cotofleanț' – where the latter comes from *Kartoffelpflanzer* which literally means 'potatoes cultivator').

The ethnic labels linked to physical traits have usually racist and xenophobic connotations. Just to illustrate I can enumerate: Blacks for Africans or African-Americans, Red-Skins for the indigenous populations in North America, whereas the Caucasians are called by these populations the 'Pale Faces' or 'Round-Eyes', then we also have mulattoes, and in Romanian 'oacheș' (which shows that somebody has dark skin) for the Rroma, or 'hepatic' for Asians.

Regarding dressing styles, I can mention here that the Greeks used to call the Romanians (Walachians back then) 'caraguni' (where 'cara' means 'black' and 'gună' means 'flannel'), or that the Aromanians used to call the poor Albanians 'ghiusmepingă' (which means something like 'half of a peasant shoe').

We can note a logocentric attitude (derives from ethnocentrism) with respect to the way of speaking – there is a common and constant tendency to identify everything that is incomprehensible: for Poles, Danes, Swedes 'to speak German' is incomprehensible, for the people in the Mediterranean area, Arabic is incomprehensible, while for English-speaking people, Greek is impenetrable and unlearnable (illustrated by 'This is Greek to me.'), for Romanian – Chinese or Turkish (illustrated by 'a vorbi chineză' (similarly to the French 'c'est du chinois') – 'to speak Chinese' which is the equivalent of the previous English expression). 'A fi turc' – 'to be Turk', which is used when a speaker is irritated by his or her interlocutor's lack of ability to understand the meaning of his or her message. This category also includes the terms mentioned above used by Greeks – *barbaroi* – *to denominate the others, the aliens, the barbarians, the ones who babble, who do not speak an intelligible language, or the Romanian eponym for Germans – neamț* – coming from old Slavonic, for the ones who are mute, who do not speak very much.

Finally, the environment conditions can be retrieved from toponyms such as Iceland, Greenland. Cardona [3] claims that 'German' comes from Gr. *germos* which means 'warm', and this is easily understandable if we keep in mind that they were living nearby the Rhine valley, which had a lot of hot springs.

#### **IV. The stereotype of the Rroma**

The eponym 'țigan' – *Gypsy* – was originally a heteronym, descending from the way the ancient Greeks used to call the members of a Manichaeist sect – *Athinganos* or *Atsiganos*, because, initially, in Romanian there was the term 'ațigani' (the term was borrowed in Romanian not from Greek but from Bulgarian,

according to [9]). They auto-denominated themselves 'rom' which in Rromani means 'man'. In the Middle Ages, the noun 'țigan' (Gypsy) was the synonym to the idea of being a slave.

In the Dictionary of Romanian Language [4], 'a fi țigan', i.e. 'to be Gypsy', means two things: 'to be a dark-skinned person' or 'to be a person with bad habits'. These meanings can be retrieved also from derived words such as: 'țigănic' ('which looks like a Gypsy'), 'a se țigăni' (roughly 'to bargain', 'to hassle'), 'țigănesc' ('Gypsy-like', and has as synonyms the series 'vulgar, coarse, blunt, paltry', illustrated in [18] by the collocation 'țigănesc', glossed as 'hard life, with frequent quarrels and rows') etc.

In expressions and proverbs, the image of the Rroma is the best represented one amongst the ethnic minorities, and reflects maybe the strongest negative stereotype, as we will see. In Iuliu Zanne's monumental work *Proverbele românilor* [18] there are 129 proverbs under the category 'țigan', i.e. *Gypsy*, but in many cases more than one illustrate the same idea. How does the Rroma appear in the Romanian language and in the collective mentality of the Romanian people?

He is *brassy and blatant*, idea illustrated in the expression 'a se certa ca țiganii' which can be roughly translated as 'to quarrel like Gypsies'.

He is *vulgar* when he is speaking, mirrored in the expressions 'a se certa ca la ușa cortului' or 'a înjura ca la ușa cortului', which can be paraphrased as 'to make the dust / feathers / fur fly' and 'to swear through a two-inch board'.

The Rrom is also seen as *deceitful, dishonest* and as *a light-fingered / on the steal*, according to the saying: 'Țiganul până nu fură, nu se ține om.' [18] which can be roughly translated as 'If a Gypsy does not steal, he doesn't consider himself a man'.

Another trait is that he is *boastful*: 'Tot țiganul își laudă ciocanul.', which is the equivalent of the English 'Every potter praises his own pot.'

Being *liar* is a characteristic encoded in the proverb 'Țiganul cu minciuna mănâncă purceaua.' which roughly means that he can get whatever he wants by lying.

He is *faithless*, as in 'Și-a mâncat credința ca țiganul biserica.' which can be roughly translated as 'He ate/has eaten his faith as the Gypsy ate/has eaten his church.' (the meaning of this saying is clarified by the following legend in [18]: it is said that the Gypsies' church was made of concrete, while the Romanians' was made of green cheese, the doors were made of pork bacon, and the lock was a well-done hogling. The Gypsies wanted to change their church with the Romanian one. The Romanians accepted the change with the condition that the Gypsies would be

their slaves for life. The Gypsies agreed and that's how they ended up as slaves and then, greedy as they were, they devoured their new church in three days.)

The Gypsy is also associated with the *lack of tenacity*, which can be depicted from the expression 'a se îneca precum țiganul la mal' – it has as an equivalent the English *to stumble at the threshold*.

He is seen as being *instable / vagrant / a rolling stone*, according to 'a se muta ca țiganul cu cortul' which can be approximately paraphrased as 'to be on the wing' (from their habit of leading a nomadic way of living).

*Lacking* the sense of *decency*, and the *sense of measure* is illustrated in 'a se întinde ca o pomană țigănească' which is roughly the equivalent of 'to spin out the time', to endlessly linger on doing something.

Being *greedy* and *lickerish* is a trait encoded in the expression 'a se strânge ca țiganii la pomană', approximately translated as 'to gather as the Gypsies at the funeral feast', i.e. uninvited.

There are also proverbs and expressions which encapsulate the disharmonic social behaviour of the Roma: 'a-și da în petec ca țiganul' – which can be roughly translated as 'to screw it big gipsy-like', 'de-a valma ca țiganii toamna' which can be paraphrased more or less as 'to troop like the Gypsies in autumn' (it can be explained historically – autumn was the season when they were bargaining for work), 'A nimerit ca țiganul miercurea la stână.' (roughly 'to arrive at the wrong time'), or 'S-a vârat ca țiganul la masa boierului' (approximately 'to come uninvited', 'to gatecrash').

Some of the proverbs even annihilate their ontological and social rights: 'Nici salcia nu-i ca pomul / Nici țiganul nu-i ca omul', which can be translated more or less as 'Neither the willow is tree-like / Nor the Gypsy is human-like' or 'Nici tata domn / Nici țiganul om' (approximately 'Neither my father is a gentleman / Nor is the Gypsy a man').

Besides the significant number of expressions and proverbs (just some of them have been selected above to illustrate the traits which constitute the stereotypic portrait of the Roma in the collective mentality of the Romanians), there is also a rich inventory of appellatives and ironic nicknames. I have grouped them into five major categories, as follows:

- a. There are some which are reserved only for the Roma, such as 'gasper,-iță' (it is associated with the proper name *Gaspar* who is one of the Three Magi of Orient, and who is represented in legends as a Moor, therefore, having dark complexion).

- b. There are also words used for the Roma population, which come from the Rromani language, such as baroi ([9]: from Rrom. *baró* – ‘big’), and barosan ([9]: from Rromani expression ‘*Baro san!*’ – ‘You are big / great!’), cocalar (‘Rrom who is looking through garbage’ according to DLR, and Graur [9] tells us that it comes from the Rrom. *romul cocaló os* – ‘skinny man’), corcodină (either from *Corcodel*, which is a frequent name among the Roma, or it is a compound of two words coming from Rromani, according to [9]: *romul corcó* – ‘himself / herself, alone’ and *Del* – ‘god’), danciu or danciuc for the child (Graur argues it comes from the Rromani expression ‘*Dan ci!*’ – ‘Give me something!’), modoran (in Rrom. *modoran* – ‘nomad, foot pad’), pirandă (comes either from *Piranda* which is a very frequent name among the Roma women, but Graur [9] claims that it might come from the Rrom. root *pirav* – ‘to make love’, which also explains the expression ‘a umbla piranda’ – approximately ‘to loiter’).
- c. Words which already had a pejorative meaning in the vulgar tongue or which were used in slang, and then they were also used to denominate the Roma: başoldină (initially, meant ‘the favourite woman of the sultan’ in Turkish), haramină (‘despicable, worthless person’), horholină (‘old Gypsy woman’, but initially meant ‘promiscuous girl’).
- d. There is also a group of terms used to designate equally the devil and the Gypsy, because this association have been always present in the collective mentality, and the folk imagery (the black colour made this link possible): cornurat (‘with horns’), eghiptean (‘Egyptian’), or faraon (‘pharaoh’), sarsailă (‘term for the devil’), tartor (‘another term for the devil’).
- e. The last set is made up of metaphoric appellatives, which can be subdivided into:
- i) metaphors originally having a chromatic association, which has been interpreted in a negative way (stigmatization of the black, dark-skinned man): arap,-ină (‘black’), bronzat (tanned), camea (‘candy’), ciocolată (‘chocolate’), colorat (‘coloured’), oacheş (‘brown’), panteră neagră (‘black panther’), tuciuriu (‘grimy, gippy’).
  - ii) zoomorphic metaphors, in which predominate terms derived from ‘crow’, and other kind of birds with dark feathers: cioară (‘female crow’), cioroi (‘male crow’), ciricliu (according to [9], from Rrom. *ciricli* – ‘bird’), cotofană (‘pie’), codobatură (‘wagtail’), garvan (from Bulg. *garvan* – ‘crow’), graur (‘starling’), gărgăun (‘hornet’), stăncuță (‘jackdaw’) etc.

## V. Conclusions

The abundance of terms measures the interaction at the crossroads between the East and the West. As a rule, people tend to define themselves symbolically by using positive, glorifying self-stereotypes, whereas they derogate others, by creating negative, demonising stereotypes.

In order to get along in a group, one must share a common understanding of the environment and of another. How people understand outgroup members has captured the imagination of stereotyping researchers for decades. And the most striking images are encoded by language, as shown in the analysis of the Romanian linguistic corpus consisting of nicknames, forms of address, collocations, expressions, and proverbs.

There is ample converging research evidence that language fulfils multiple functions in such a subtle way that it may easily escape control of both speaker and listener. In other words, language plays a powerful role, but it is not easy to become fully aware of its impact. It is exactly this feature that renders language analysis such an interesting methodological tool, allowing access to the more subtle, less controlled processes of stereotyping.

Coming back to the main focus of this paper, it seems to be the case that we can only observe stereotypes through their linguistic expression. Rather than assuming that stereotyped language comes from a particular cognitive structure, we can analyse the language itself: what people say to each other, how they describe 'others' and how they set similarities or oppositions with such individuals.

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