

REJOINDERS

Romani self-appellations in a linguistic perspective

A reply to Leonardo Piasere

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Rejoinder to **Leonardo PIASERE**, *Pour une histoire des auto-dénominations romanès*, ANUAC, Vol. 8, n° 1, giugno 2019: 85-118.

An extraordinary feature of the relationship between Romani speaking populations and the majority populations in most European regions is the consistent distinction between Romani autonyms – the terms used by Romani speaking populations to refer to themselves, and exonyms – terms used by others to refer to Romani populations. Generally, Romani speaking populations use one or more of the terms *Rom*, *Sinte*, *Kale*, *Manuš* or *Roma(ni)čel* (or labels derived from them) as autonyms. In some regions, they are used in addition to more specific group labels that reference either historical occupations, or occupational patterns such as sedentary vs. nomadic, or else co-territorial populations (such as Orthodox Slavs vs. Muslims) or region of settlement. By contrast, majority populations tend to refer to Romani speaking groups with labels derived either from the term “Egyptian” (*Gypsy*, *Yifti*, *Gitanos*, etc.) or from the label *Tsigan* (in all likelihood of Turkic etymology, see Matras 2015: 18-23). Historical exonyms that are nowadays seldom in use include such terms as “Bohemians”, “Tatars”, “Pharaons”, and more. This asymmetry between the etymological sources of internal and external appellations might be considered to be symbolic of the social distance between the populations and the disparity of

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imagery and semiotic representations of practices and beliefs that communities on either side of the divide each tend to associate with the other. This terminological disparity is abandoned, however, once Romani populations give up their ancestral community language, Romani, and shift to the language of the majority population, in which case they tend to adopt the exonym as autonym, as in the case of *Gypsies* in England and *Gitanos* in Spain, though typically a unique term is still retained to refer to group-outsiders (*Gaujas*, *Payos*, and so on). There is thus a tight link between the contrast of labels and the contrast of languages, making the use of autonoms an inherently sociolinguistic phenomenon.

In a recent paper on the history of Romani self-appellations, Piasere (2019) reviews historical sources going back to the sixteenth century that name Romani population groups and document their language. Based on these sources, he makes the case that the autonoms *Rom*, *Sinte*, *Kale*, *Manuš* and *Roma(ni)čel* (and their respective phonetic variants) are part of an established pool of self-appellations used by Romani-speaking populations, and that in certain periods some of these names may have been used interchangeably by individual groups.

Piasere notes how in some descriptive discussions, both old and new, there has been a tendency to associate names with particular groups and to project present-day distributions back into history, suggesting that Romani speaking populations have always constituted distinct “tribes” or “nations”, each with its own self-appellation. Piasere shows how this view, and the assumptions about nationhood or tribalism that underlie it, are inconsistent with the reported facts. He proposes an alternative historical hypothesis according to which Romani speaking populations had at their disposal a variety of autonoms, which will have been volatile at times, lost and then possibly re-acquired or substituted again by others from the same pool, in all likelihood as an outcome of varying contacts among different population groups. In this way, Piasere seeks to de-essentialise the idea of fixed Romani “groups”, much in the same vein as Marushiakova & Popov’s (2004) seminal paper on segmentation and consolidation of Romani populations, which had argued against a fixed trajectory of Romani group demarcations and instead in favour of constant, dynamic re-shaping of social boundaries and group identity in response to new contacts and bonds between families and communities.

For the state of the art, Piasere, draws on linguistic works on group self-appellations including Matras (1999b, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2010) and Bakker (1999). The underlying assumption in Piasere’s contribution is that ethnic autonoms are secondary derivations from lexical words (see also Matras

2002: 26, 2004): *rom* “husband” and *romni* “wife” correspond to the name of the language *romanes*, *manuš* is “person” and *kale* means “black”. Piasere’s method is to map the mention of Romani ethnic autonyms by dated historical records and location. The pattern that emerges shows the presence of *Kale* primarily in western Europe, often overlapping with *Romaničel*, while there are also attestations of both terms in the Balkans (the latter contradict Bakker’s 1999 suggestion that *Romaničel* is a western or “northern” innovation). The term *Sinte* is attested in central Europe, as is *Manuš* (in France and Germany), while *Rom* as an ethnic autonym is attested primarily in southeastern Europe (alongside group-specific sub-labels). The argument is that the sources point to an overlap of various ethnic autonyms during the same periods of time and in the same regions, on the one hand, while on the other hand the same terms can be found at least sporadically all across Europe and therefore they cannot be considered to have emerged in particular regions, or be linked to particular populations. Moreover, an example is cited from von Sowa’s notes on a Romani speaking community in Westphalia documenting their use of alternate autonyms (*kalo*, *romaničel*, and *rom*). Piasere concludes that the terms *Rom*, *Sinte*, *Kale*, *Manuš* and *Roma(ni)čel* are all inherited terms that were used interchangeably as autonyms by Romani speaking family networks, some being preferred during certain historical periods, only then to be abandoned in favour of others. This accounts for the co-occurrence of different self-appellations in the same regions during the same period, and for the presence of the primarily “western” labels *Romačel* and apparently also *Kale* as relic forms in the Balkans (though for the latter Piasere relies on a somewhat spurious, single mention on the website of the Christian missionary organisation Dom Research Centre).

Much of this is well in line with my own conclusions in earlier work, as alluded to above (Matras 2002, 2004, 2010). I take issue, however, with the inclusion of *Sinte* in this pool of reconstructed shared labels. Before I return to this issue, I will add just a few more remarks on observations and methodological considerations. First, as Piasere remarks in passing, there is a certain semantic hierarchy of labels, whereby *Roma(ni)čel* is only attested as an ethnic autonym, while *rom*, *kale* and *manuš* also have other, lexical meanings (“husband”, “black”, “person”). The same applies to *Sinte*, which equally lacks lexical meaning. Indeed, those communities that are known to use *Sinte* as self-appellation invariably uses *rom/romni* for “husband/wife”. Some labels are thus more intrinsically compatible with others, as their meanings can be complementary, while others are more prone to compete with alternative autonyms. Second, some of the labels are widely attested in combination with attributes that form localised autonyms such as *dasikane*

rom “Slavic/Christian Orthodox Rom” (in the Balkans), *polska roma* “Polish Roma”, *gadškene sinte* “German Sinte” (lit. “Sinte who live among the Gaje”). This type of formation, however, is not attested, to my knowledge, for either *roma(ni)čel* or *kale*.

Third, it is important to note that the ubiquitous term *rom* has its origin in the Indian caste denomination label “*om* with its cognates in the names of peripatetic populations of Indian origin living outside of India such as *dom* and *lom* (Matras 2002: 14-18). Without a doubt, it is the caste-like social structure of Romani communities, where family networks historically specialise in a particular pool of mobile trades, that prompts both the retention of in-group autonyms, and the renewal of autonyms to express trade, mobility and status. In this way, the volatility of autonyms is intrinsic, providing the motivation in the first place for the kind of processes that Piasere reconstructs. This also offers an explanation for the geographical distribution of labels. In the West, the widespread retention of autonyms of pre-European etymology – *Roma(ni)čel*, *Kale*, and *Manuš* – can be linked to the rather conservative patterns of nomadism and, within language, to strategies of lexical camouflage (see Matras 1999a); this contrasts with Bakker’s (1999) hypothesis that these are shared innovations. In the Southeast, emerging trade specialisations and mobility status are captured in the adoption of trade- and status- based labels that draw on loans from the surrounding contact languages Turkish, Romanian, and Hungarian, such as *Yerli* “settled”, *Sepetči* “basket-weavers”, *Lingurari* “spoon-makers”, *Lovari* “horse-dealers”, and so on.

Fourth, while the frame of this discussion is the permanent dichotomy between in-group self-appellations and external labels as used by majority sedentary populations, we have at least two examples, both from Germany, of the interchangeability of autonym and exonym among co-territorial peripatetic communities: The Jenisch population of (non-Romani) peripatetics in southern Germany refer to Romani speakers (whose contemporary autonym is *Sinte*) as *Manisch*, from *Manuš* (Matras 1998), while in other parts of the country the same term is used as an autonym by groups of peripatetics who are not Romani speakers (see Lerch 1976). Conversely, *Sinte* (*Zinte*) is attested in an eighteenth century source from southern Germany as an exonym used by Jenisch Travellers to refer to Romani speakers whose self-appellation is documented in the same source as *Kale* (Matras 1999b). This provides further proof of the volatility of labels.

Finally, the assumption that group name is a stable feature of particular Romani communities presupposes the existence of criteria to be able to identify communities and their consistent composition over time. But

historical sources do not usually allow us to trace either the spatial movements or the ethnographic characteristics of family networks over time. At best, we can attempt to link self-appellations with dialect features, that is, structural features of lexicon, morphology, and lexico-phonology, provided that the sources offer samples of speech or lexical lists which we can compare with present-day data from the same regions. When these are examined, they do not offer any insights into a correlation between group label and dialect. Instead, dialect features are consistent for individual regions (and for recent migrant groups, with their region of origin) regardless of group label. Thus, the structural features that are documented for *Kale* and *Romaničel* in Finland are by and large fully compatible, as are those (Para-Romani) features documented for the *Calé* and *Errumantxel* populations of the Iberian Peninsula. Conversely, the speech of the *Romacil* of northwestern Greece is consistent with the features of Romani as found in that region among neighbouring Romani groups such as the *Arli* and has nothing distinctive in common with the dialects associated with populations labeled *Romaničel* in western Europe. This too supports the theory of an inherited, pre-European pool or etymological sources of self-appellations, one that pre-dated the formation of regional dialects of Romani in Europe.

The exception to the latter pattern is the label *Sinte*. Unlike the other autonyms, *Sinte* is a predictable indicator of linguistic-structural dialect features. These include structural innovations such as use of the negative indefinite *kek*, predominance of formations in *-h* in intervocalic positions, the copula and interrogatives, initial jotation in *j*, prevalence of loan verb adaptation in *av/er*, shift to initial word stress and syllable reduction, and the extensive impact of German on vocabulary, among others. The self-appellation *Sinte* is thus linked inherently with a particular pattern of language internal structural innovations, with the historical impact of the German language, as well as an origin in a distinct Romani speaking population that had consolidated itself in the German regions. This applies to populations of neighbouring territories in the Low Countries, Austria, Poland, Bohemia, and northern Italy as well as to Romani speaking communities that accompanied German settlers in Russia, Hungary, Serbia and Romania. The label *Sinte* is not found among any Romani speaking populations that do not show a historical connection to Germany, or whose dialect fails to show the pool of structural features alluded to above.

In my article on Rüdiger and eighteenth century German scholarship on Romani (Matras 1999b) I argued that the term *Sinte* was originally an exonym that was borrowed into Romani from the speech of non-Romani peripatetics, as it is first attested in such function in its earliest mention in

the so-called Sulz List of 1787. Its attestation as a ubiquitous self-appellation of Romani speaking communities in Germany is not found until later, well into the nineteenth century, coinciding with the gradual disappearance of the label *Kale*. That this represents a shift in autonyms rather than a replacement of one population by another is suggested by the nature of the dialect material, which remains consistent in the earlier, eighteenth century sources, where the label is *Kale*, and the later sources, where the autonym is *Sinte*. Piasere (2019: 110) contends that the chronology is not convincing, since Italian *Sinte* stories are documented from the second half of the nineteenth century, having been recorded earlier in that century. But the argument does not rely merely on the apparent chronology.

I had argued that *Sinte* could not have been part of the Early Romani pool of names since it does not show a pre-European etymology. Piasere asks (2019: 92) for clarification about my understanding of that early pool of names, which I refer to as having pre-European etymology but post-European diffusion (Matras 2004: 67). What I meant is that the terms are etymologically pre-European, that is, they were part of the lexicon that was inherited before contact with Byzantine Greek; but their use as ethnic designations only emerged after arrival in Europe. Thus, *kalo* means “black”, but may have only been adopted as a group name after the encounter with (fairer-skinned) Europeans. Similarly, *manuš* means “person” but may have only come to signify a community in Europe.

More pertinent to the argument is the etymological status of *Sinte*. In Matras (1999b) I pointed out that *Sinte* carries the inflectional characteristics of a European loanword in Romani (see Matras 2002 for a comprehensive discussion of inflectional loanword integration patterns into Romani). Piasere (2019: 110) disputes this, but in doing so he misinterprets some of the linguistic facts: He refers to the argument that the plural ending *e* is not typical of inherited or pre-European words, and cites counter-examples such as *bale* “pigs” and *janre* “eggs”. This fails to take into account the structure of Romani nominal inflection classes. The word accent in *Sinto* falls invariably on the first syllable, thus /sínto/, identifying the word as a European loan and its inflectional ending *o* as one borrowed from Greek (“athematic” or “xenoclitic”), contrasting with the inherited masculine singular ending *o*. Pre-European masculines in *o* that take a plural ending in *e* invariably have a stressed inflectional ending: /baló, janró/. Admittedly, stress often shifts to the first syllable in the Sinti and neighbouring dialects, though this is a late phenomenon. Crucially, the inflection pattern of *Sinto* is that of European loans: The oblique-dative is *sintóske* contrasting with

baléske, and the feminine is *Sínta* or *Síntica* contrasting with the feminine derivations in *i* or *ni* of inherited (pre-European) nouns that end in an inflectional vowel. In the plural, the nominative formation is *Sínturi*, *Sínti*, *Sínte*, and not **Sinté* in line with the pattern *balé*, *janré*, and the oblique is *Sintón*, not **Sintén* in line with the pattern *balén*.

So while I am in full agreement with Piasere on the core of his thesis, and congratulate him for a coherent and lucid display of the argument and an exhaustive survey of the sources, I would maintain that once the mapping of names to regions and sources is supplemented by a mapping to linguistic features, it becomes clear that *Sinte* – consistent with its structural inflection patterns – is in fact not part of the shared pre-European pool of terms, but one that entered the scene later, specifically into the Romani dialects that emerged in Germany, probably in the eighteenth century. The presence of the term among speakers of “German Romani” outside of Germany, in such places like Italy, Serbia, or Romania, could in principle be traceable to diffusion as a result of continuous family and social links between the communities in Germany and the out-migrants (links that in some cases continue to exist today) and so it is not necessarily indicative of the chronology of the emergence of the term and its use to replace other terms such as *Kalo* in Germany itself.

This does not in any way weaken Piasere’s argument; on the contrary, it strengthens it: The fact that a particular group in Germany was prone to adopt an external appellation for itself, and that this appellation then spread among groups that shared dialect features (and other customs and practice), indicates the volatility of self-appellations, and thus stands contrary to the assumption of historically stable, self-contained “nations” or “tribes”, just like Piasere argues.

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