

## A reply to Yaron Matras

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Rejoinder to **Yaron MATRAS**, *Romani self-appellations in a linguistic perspective: A reply to Leonardo Piasere*, ANUAC, Vol. 8, n° 2, dicembre 2019: 105-112.

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When a scholar wants to communicate with other scholars, who are not part of his/her study field, because he/she knows that they are, in any case, asserting important things, it is a risk because this attempt at communication may be misguided and things may be said that, to their others' expert ears, could sound trivial or inexact. On the other hand, he/she also runs the risk of impinging on epistemological sensitivities among colleagues from his/her own disciplinary sector if they are not accustomed to using alien, or considered obsolete, methodologies (as in the case of my article, which has a "quasi-diffusionist" style: a methodology that has not been used for decades in social anthropology but which is still used in dialectology). I do believe, however, that this risk should be taken when scholars from different disciplines are dealing with the same topic but putting different skills into play. I would therefore like to thank Yaron Matras for his general considerations on my article, for his reply to some doubts I had and also for his kindness in not insisting too much on my amatorial and almost totally incompetent skills in the field of general linguistics and Romani linguistics in particular.

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Before answering his reply, I would like to briefly outline the limitations of my article. I have tried to locate the sources in which the autonoms of the collectives appear for the first time in Romanes<sup>1</sup> in the various parts of Europe and I am aware that other sources I missed may exist. I have only used printed sources written in the Latin alphabet; the research should be therefore completed considering texts in other alphabets (Cyrillic, Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic...). The reports that I uncovered either come from archived materials (always published by a different author than the person who produced the manuscript) or from direct contacts (oral interactions) from an author with Romanes speakers. Neither of the two cases guarantees that the information is the total “truth”, due to questions that have been debated a thousand times (by historians on the interpretation of archived sources; by social anthropologists and linguists on the use of re-written oral sources; by Romani study scholars regarding the problems of relations between “Gypsies” and “non Gypsies” reflecting on text production; by scholars from many fields in regard to the hermeneutic problems that arise when individual facts are grouped in a comparison that necessarily decontextualizes them from the environment and the author that produced them). For all these reasons, and many more, the title of the article refers to a simple desire to “contribute to”: “*Pour une histoire...*”. This kind of study can only base itself on a circumstantial paradigm (Ginzburg 1979), given that, in a written literature where the people are mainly denoted by exonyms, as Matras (2019) well explains, the autonoms become the symptomatic indications of alternative semantics, in action between the speakers but encrypted in print. As soon as a study involves names, the philological work of linguists and the chronology of the documents become important. Obviously, information is not “good” in itself just because it appears in a text, ancient or new as it may be, and every quotation should be assessed starting with an exegesis of each individual source (on-line sources as well now). It is a well-known problem for those who take an interest in writings (Destro and Pesce 1995: XIII). We are not always lucky enough to have all of this and my article is also lacking from this point of view. It is exactly because I was sometimes not able to find the answers I was looking for from linguists (perhaps I was looking in the wrong places?) that I raised doubts in my article rather than disagreements.

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1. For reasons that I will not go into here, I prefer to use “Romanes” instead of “Romani” when I refer to the language. The term can be accented in various ways according to the dialect: I have not included accents here, unlike in the previous text in French (Piasere 2019) in which “Romanès” is only intended to be a functional spelling so as not to mislead any French-speaking readers who are less familiar with Romani vocabulary.

While I find some of the explanations in the Matras's reply convincing, I cannot find the solution to all my doubts. My research has confirmed and reinforced the result of his previous studies: there is a pool of autonoms (*Rom, Manuš, Kale, Romaničel*) historically shared among those which, in Europe, are called with various exonyms (*Gypsies, Egyptians, etc.*). They are made up of names which, besides being a collective autonym, also have another original meaning ("man", "member of the in-group", "black"); only *Romaničel* seems to be a pure autonym. The etymology of all these would suggest the existence of a "pre-European pool or etymological sources of self-appellations, one that pre-dated the formation of regional dialects of Romani in Europe", as Matras writes (2019). The problem of the word *Sinto* remains (m. pl. *Sinti* or *Sinte*<sup>2</sup>). Is it a pure autonym (as in the case of *Romaničel*) or does it derive from a previous meaning (as in the case of *Rom, Manuš* and *Kale*)? From the point of view of general reasoning, the fact is inessential: the volatility of autonoms, the flexibility of social organization and the "jeu romanès" (Williams 1988), leave plenty of room for introducing new or restructured names<sup>3</sup>. It should, however, be pointed out that, to my knowledge, it is the only case, in groups that continue to speak Romanes, of such a radical innovation seeing that it involved the main autonym and not a sub-autonym (as often happened in the Balkans, where the main name is still *Rom*). Instead, from the viewpoint of the particular history, the topic could be important or, in any case, worthy of attracting the curiosity of the researcher interested in the "inside" history. I would point out that the etymology of the term *Sinte/-i* is still unknown, even if, in the last two centuries, eminent linguists have made attempts at tracing it back to lemmas of either Indian, Greek or German origin<sup>4</sup>.

2. Also on the basis of my personal knowledge, the plural is either *Sinti* or *Sinte*, as Matras specifies. In French literature, the term always appears as *Sinté*, and it is true that it is often hard to understand whether it is a "Frenchification" of the author's pronunciation or of that of the native speakers themselves. I conformed to that spelling in my French article and have no problem with dropping it here.

3. Marushiakova (1992) already showed how the situation in Bulgaria had changed in relation to the study by Gilliat-Smith (1915-16). The disappearance within a century of the *Šinte rosengre*, or at least of the name, is just as emblematic in Italy (Piasere 1986). On the other hand, I am not sure if the "segmentation vs. consolidation" process of Roma groups that Marushiakova & Popov (2004) brought to light in the ex-Soviet context in the last century can generally be transferred to the Roma history in the medieval and modern period, as the authors seem to suggest. Neither is this the place to open the debate of whether the Roma society in the Balkans has a "caste-like social structure", as Matras writes (2019) – something that many social anthropologists would have a lot to object to.

4. I have only just realised now, due to this reply, that Pott (1844, I: 34) had also already touched upon the Germanic *gesinde* etc. in his various etymological hypotheses, just as I, in my lack of expertise, did (Piasere 2019: 110).

As he had already explained in previous publications, and reaffirms, Matras states that the term *Sinte* began to assert itself from the 18<sup>th</sup> century in German regions among populations that previously used the autonym *Kale*. For my part, I have tried to show that, in German-speaking regions, the autonoms *Kale* and *Romaničel*, which had been used at least up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by groups who were also called *Sinti/-e* or who spoke dialects that can still be referred to the *Sinti/-e* today, were effectively listed. The fact must be seen as a linguistic shift from one term to another, Matras explains, rather than of the replacement of one population group to another. In the understanding that we agree on the basic reading, when does the linguistic explanation alone still seem insufficient to me?

1. I find the clarification that the etymology of *Sinte* cannot be recapitulated by any Indian voice decisive, and I thank Matras for the detailed explanation, seeing that I personally continued to consider it a possibility. If this is true, I also find it interesting that, in the Romanes of the *Sinte/-i*, the term *Sinte/-i* has taken on the normal declination into *Sintes-/Sinten-*. The *Sinten-* form has been attested since the first document that shows its declination (Biestler 1793: 366), as well as in today's *Sinte/-i* dialects, at least in those that decline the name (see, for example Tauber, 2006: 17, 67, etc.). The *Sintos-/Sinton-* form, of which Matras speaks, can be found in other Romanes dialects, like that of the Kalderaš Roma (as he himself explained 1999: 110), for whom the term is effectively foreign (on the other hand, the Kalderaš Roma consider the *Sinti* almost as *Gažé*: see Williams 1984).

2. It is true that the term can only be found in *Sinte/-i* dialects. And it is also true that these dialects share the same set of linguistic characteristics, listed by Matras, that distinguish them from other Romanes dialects. Since I am not an expert, however, I will feel much happier when linguists finally explain the etymology of the word (its history), and when they better explain the position in some ways borderline of the dialects of the so-called Italian *Sinti* (*Sinti italiani*). Giulio Soravia (1977) has shown that these dialects have differences from those that, also present in Italy, are usually labelled as German *Sinti* (*Gačkane*, *Estraixaria*, *Krasaria*, etc.; the Romanian and Serbian *Sinti* cited by Matras can also linguistically be considered to number among the latter). Italian *Sinti* speak dialects that are much less influenced by German on a lexical level, which would lead to thinking about a migration from German-speaking countries (large?) prior to that of the German *Sinti*, who apparently only arrived at end of the 1800s. In particular, compared to other dialects (including that of their Lombard *Sinti* neighbours), the Romanes spoken by Piedmontese *Sinti* families (*Sinti pimontákeri*), who now live here and there in northern Italy and France, and mainly along the coast

from Rome to Marseilles, has several peculiarities: it has well-maintained a stressed inflectional ending, as well as the *s* in the alternation with *h* (which often becomes  $\emptyset$ ); the jotation in the simple past is not always present; the vocabulary has a much lower number of Germanisms; and there are archaisms that are not found in other *Sinti* dialects (see Partisani 1972; Soravia 1977: 51-59; Senzera 1986; Formoso and Calvet 1987; Piasere, 1991, 1996, 2017)<sup>5</sup>.

3. I reiterate the case of the Piedmontese *Sinti* because it allows me to question the chronology of the dissemination of the term *Sinte/-i*. Acknowledging that it emerged as an autonym among groups circulating in the German-speaking areas, if it were true that it only appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as Matras suggests, the speed of its dissemination would, however, have been considerably fast. I would point out that the first two printed attesting documents were found at the two extremes of the German world, in the north-east and the south-west: in 1784<sup>6</sup> in eastern Prussia and in 1787 in Württemberg. The first text that we know of in Piedmontese *Sinti* Romanes consists of a tale heard and transcribed by Bataillard in Cannes in 1850, told by a family that was circulating near the western Alps, between southern France, the Savoy dominions and Switzerland (see Winstedt 1910)<sup>7</sup>. The woman telling the story had been born in 1793 or 1794 in the department of Ain. Her father had been born in Dauphiné, we can assume around 1770. The group, however, had recently arrived in Cannes from the outskirts of Turin.

5. I would add that, compared to other *Sinti*, where marriage with the consensual elopement of the betrothed prevails, it would seem that the Piedmontese *Sinti* often also foresee the marriage request (*mangipen*), with elopement only as an alternative modality, as happens in many *Rom* and *Gitanos* groups (see Piasere 2015). *Mangipen* is not a recent innovation. Its existence was already affirmed in a tale recorded in France in the mid-1800s (see Winstedt, 1910: 249); in one community in Grenoble it is now called *demandement* (Brot 2004: 89-94).

6. I persist with this document which Matras, for reasons he does not explain, does not take into consideration, not even in his reply. It is perhaps the most famous and cited manuscript in the history of Romani Studies, although, to date, nobody has ever thought to publish it in its entirety. It is a report of a field research carried out in 1784 by one of Kant's students, the philosopher Christian Jakob Kraus, in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) and the surrounding area. The linguistic materials of the study were collected by Father Zippel, a protestant minister who had been associating with a community of *Sinte* in the area for some time. The report was partially published only in 1793 and, on Kraus' own request, signed by Johann Erich Biester, the editor of the journal in which it appeared. The matter is being increasingly studied but the only version available is still the one published by Biester (re-printed in 2014): see at least Pott 1844; Röttgers 1993 and 2018; Bense 2004; Tauber 2014; Kronauer 2014.

7. In the previous article (Piasere 2019), I gave 1867 as the first year in which the term *Sinti* was recorded in France, on the basis of another publication by Bataillard. Since the term often appears in the text published by Winstedt, I have to bring that date forward to 1850.

In the narration, the term *Sinti* is mentioned so often (even with the meaning of “relatives”) that it would be a long-shot to say that it was a recent acquisition. Historical and genealogical studies on Piedmontese *Sinti* in France (Robert 2004; Brot 2004) invariably show networks of families that share a story of coming from Savoy regions. I do not know how wrong I am in affirming that, in 1787 (the date from which Matras starts), the term *Sinte/-i* was already present as an autonym in a region that stretched from the Côte d’Azur and Piedmont to Eastern Prussia. When Piedmontese *Sinti* met the German *Manuš* in France in the late 1800s, there were already two “groups” with rather different pasts. I suspect that the term *Sinte/-i*, among the *Sinte/-i*, simply had a historical profoundness that goes beyond the 1700s and that the history is extremely articulate<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, was *Sinte/-i* their only autonym? We know that *Romanišel/Romaničel* must have been well present in France, but we have little proof of its “internal” use. Robert (2004: 34) suspects that the Saintonge *Romanitchel* of which Bataillard spoke (1867; and that I mentioned: Piasere 2019) were the Michelets, a network of families that, already in the 1800s, were also known as Piedmontese *Sinti*. On the other hand, *Romanišel* has not disappeared altogether and we can find it still in use today in a community in Grenoble where, it would seem, the term denotes those *Voyageurs* who are neither *Gitans*, nor *Sinti* (Brot 2004: 91).

4. The history of the Grenoble community studied by Annabel Brot (2004) helps us in another consideration. The members of the group tend to define themselves only as *Gitans* when there is no need for a more specific explanation. These *Gitans* descend from Piedmontese *Sinti* and Catalan *Gitans* circulating in south-east France who, in the last seven generations, have joined into one strict endogamy. Brot’s study, like that on the *Sinte* in Belgium reconstructed by Alain Reyniers (1992), gives a detailed account of how a given community can be the result of the fusion of families even with very different pasts and origins. These, and other similar cases, bring to mind Matras’s affirmation on the fact that substituting *Kale* with *Sinte/-i* was just a matter of linguistic order. Mergers between family networks of different origins could well have contributed to the change due to the partial substitution of group members. I believe that the two phenomena could go

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8. But I would not feel comfortable, as Bakker has done (2017: 91), to label Scaliger’s dictionary published by Vulcanius in 1597 as *Sinto*. In any case, in this history, “inside” stories will also be taken into consideration: for example, based on an oral testimony that I took in 1997, the present day Truzzi, who are *Sinti Italiani* families, descended from German mercenaries engaged by the Gonzagas, the lords of Mantua, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What is “true” in this story handed down in the family and in other similar stories that the *Sinti* tell?



hand in hand, although, in order to confirm the pre-eminence of one family network over another in the German case, we would need information on the movements of the *Kale/Sinte* populations in the modern age, which we just do not have.

5. I find the assumption, reiterated by Matras, that the term *Sinti/-e* comes from the language of travellers who were not Romanes speakers, unproven (even though possible). The text he bases this assumption on is the *Sulz Zigeuner-Liste* published by Judge Schäffer in 1787, an *ante litteram* criminologist. Already two centuries earlier, Bonaventura Vulcanius (1597: 100-109) had demonstrated, from a comparison between two lists of terms, that the “Gypsies” (which he identified as Nubians) spoke a different language to that of other peripatetic groups (*errones*), often called *Rotwelsch*. Other authors carried out similar comparisons in the 1700s, including Schäffer. The particularity of his comparison was that he also gave the translation of the German terms and phrases he reported in *Rotwelsch (Jaunerisch)* and Romanes (1787: 10-11). The phrases that caught Matras’s attention were the following:

Die Juden bestehlen die Zigeuner sehr gern [The Jews very readily stole from the Gypsies]

[Romanes:] *O bibolte T’schorna galen gern* [i.e. *E Bibolde čor(e)na Kalen gern*]

[Rotwelsch:] *Die Keime denneschoflen die Sende recht gern*

Die Zigeuner führen immer geladene Flinten [The Gypsies always carry loaded rifles]

[Romanes:] *Egalen hi Perde buschgi* [i.e. *E Kalen hi perde puški*]

[Rotwelsch:] *Die Sende keklen alleiveil geladene Klaffen*

Im Pirmasenser Land haben es die Zigeuner gut [The Gypsies are doing well in Pirmasens]

[Romanes:] *Andro Pärmäsensedikotem higalenge misto* [i.e. *Andro Permesendikotem/them hi Kalenge misto/mišto*]

[Rotwelsch:] *In der Pirmasenser Martine hene Sende recht tof.*

It can be well noted that, while the anonymous translator (probably a *Kalo*) translated *Zigeuner* (“Gypsies”) with *Kale* (here in the accusative and dative: *galen, galenge*), the anonymous translator of the *Rotwelsch* (probably a *Rotwelsch*-speaker) translated *Zigeuner* with *Sinte* (*Sende*). According to Matras, this indicates why the autonym would have been *Kale*, while *Sinte* would have been an exonym and then later imported as an autonym in Romanes. Unless he has other information that he has not disclosed, if his suggestion is only based on this, then, in my opinion, it is fragile. In this case, it is no longer linguistic questions under discussion but rather how the sources are interpreted:

a) There is nothing to affirm that, at that date (1787), *Sinte* was not already in use in Romanes. Indeed, we just saw that, on the basis of Zippel and Kraus's studies in 1784, we are certain that it was already an autonym of Prussian *Zigeuner*, who shared it with *Kale* (Biester 1793: 365-366). Another interpretation could be that, among the autonoms, *Sinte* was the "most reserved", the one that was not pronounced to the first *Gažo* who asked for a translation (especially in prison). It could, if anything, be used with someone with a similar position of social marginality or someone with whom to share a relationship of greater intimacy, like, for example, a priest (Zippel) who cares about your condition. There is nothing to say that the *Kalo* translator that Schäffer engaged did not also use *Sinte*<sup>9</sup>.

b) Matras himself mentions the case of the Jenisch population, that does not speak Romanes but which identifies his own language with a term that derives from the Romanes (*Manisch* < *Manuš*). Why could *Sinte*/*-i* not also have derived from a Romanes-speaking group? Is it merely because it is not of Indian origin? Matras's material mainly regards the German environment: I will shift to the Italian one, which I know better, to try to explain my idea. In 1889 (p.17), Adriano Colocci, an expert on "Gypsies" in his time, wrote that he had never met Gypsies called *Sinti* in Italy, and we find the first (as far as I know) printed affirmation of the term about ten years later in the testimony of a *Dritto* (i. e. peripatetic non-Romanes speaker) who garnished his speech with ten or so words in *Dritti* language, and where he said that *Sinto* means "Zingaro" ("Gypsy") (see Zucca 1902: 188-192; see also Trevisan 2011: 258). For the entire first half of the twentieth century, the term *Sinto* was only listed in the so-called underworld slang meaning "Gypsy", or similar (also in a *gergo* full of *Sinti* terms that I briefly analysed years ago: see Piasere 1986). We had to wait until Catholic Missionaries working among Gypsies in the late 1950s finally established that *Sinti* was an autonym widely shared among the *Zingari* of northern Italy (see Torreggiani s.d.; Karpati 1962). Must we deduce that the term *Sinto* in Italy entered into Romanes around 1900, imported by one of the many jargons of non-standard Italian that contain it? Only the discovery of Caccini's manuscripts will show, on the contrary, that for the whole of the 1800s his *Šinte rosengre* had been circulating around Italy (Piasere 1996; Caccini 2001). Does it mean therefore that in the German world *Sinte* entered into Romanes from a non-standard language and then made a U-turn in Italy? While everything is possible, it is still guesswork.

9. I use my experience for this interpretation: when the *Roma* I know from Slovenia, Croatia and Istria speak with *Gaže*, they introduce themselves as *Sinti* so as not to use the Italian pejorative terms of *Zingari* and *Nomadi*; but in their Romanes, they only ever use *Roma*. And there is no lack of administrative documents and publications that speak of these "*Sinti*"...



Once again, I raise doubts (which are secondary to the main thesis that Matras and I are sharing) while waiting for linguists, anthropologists and historians to start working more closely and organically. And I hope that our discussion acts as a bit of a trailblazer.

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