Context and Connotation: How the Words ‘Gypsy’ and ‘Gitano’ Differ

Robert Wehner-Ortega
The Plan

Research Question:

Why are the connotations of the words ‘gypsy’ and ‘gitano’ so different, and how does each word interconnect with, reinforce, or fight against racist institutions that actively discriminate against Roma?

Data Collection Methods:

To collect data I looked primarily at academic journals, trustworthy news sources, and romarchive.eu, a site that is working to collect works of Romani art and culture and augments the public’s understanding of them with “contemporary documents and scholarly appraisals.” I also use some of my own background knowledge of how Roma are perceived in Spain.
My Point/Thesis

There are many factors that lead to the different connotations of the words gypsy and gitano. The most important being the fact that the word *gitano* has been reclaimed by the Roma people living in Spain and has been recontextualized in a positive light, one that positions *gitanos* as particularly artistic and pure. The word gypsy, on the other hand, continues to be a pejorative exonym used to refer simultaneously to both the Roma as an ethnic group and to anyone living an itinerant lifestyle perceived as “deviant” by the standards of western society, hence equating deviancy to a whole ethnic group.
Etymology

Both the word gypsy and the word gitano refer to the ethnic Roma/Romani people who originated in northern India before moving north and into Europe. Roma are traditionally nomadic.

**Gypsy:**
- Originates from the incorrect belief that Roma came from Egypt.
- Is used as a pejorative exonym used by others to refer to Roma people.
- Has not been reclaimed, many Roma will not self identify as gypsy, preferring terms such as Rom, Roma, or Romani.

**Gitano:**
- Originates from the incorrect belief that Roma came from Egypt (old spanish: Egiptano)
- Was used mainly as a pejorative exonym. Still used like this, at times, in the present.
- Reclaimed by Spanish Roma in a process of identity creation which aligns gitanos closely to music, art, and purity.
Why the Term Gypsy is Violent

The word has two mainstream uses. The first is to describe ethnic Roma people. The second is to describe anyone (regardless of race, ethnicity, or any other label) that is perceived to be living a “deviant” lifestyle by the standards of western society. These two definitions for the same word connect Roma people to western ideas about deviant lifestyles.

NEVER use the words “gypped” or “to gyp.” Gypped is defined as cheated, swindled, defrauded, etc. while to gyp is to cause pain. These words derive from the word gypsy and stereotype them as thieves, frauds, and tricksters who only cause pain and damage.

This TV show not only presents Roma as uneducated, misogynistic, hyper-aggressive people. It also sexualizes Roma women. This sexualization is also seen in Spain where the term gitana is sometimes applied to any woman who is seen as beautiful, seductive, and good at getting men to do what she wants.
Use in Popular Media (Raggle Taggle Gypsy Song)

- Roma people portrayed as “Raggle Taggle”
- Stereotype that Roma are thieving and deceitful is perpetuated in how they steal the lord’s wife away.
- Civilization of the lord (goose feather beds) contrasted to barbarity of the Roma group (sleeping in a wide open field).
- This song has historically been taught to schoolchildren, teaching them a connection between stealing and Roma people.
Use in Popular Media (Soy Gitano by Camarón de la Isla)

- “Soy Gitano” is something said with pride in this song. Connection made between musical talent and gitano culture.
- The lyrics proudly celebrate gitano traditions such as the act of rompiendose la camisa.
- Gitano man is portrayed as a multifaceted, emotional person navigating a situation in which he is in a prearranged marriage to one woman but loves another. He has agency over his actions as he decides to show the other woman his true feelings, ostensibly as part of the process to get out of the marriage.

Video
On the Topic of the Word Gitano

As is seen in the video, gitano has been reclaimed and recontextualized to be closely attached to ideas of artistic capacity and purity. This is the main context of the word in artistic/musical circles and among gitanos themselves.

It can still be used pejoratively though. One definition in the dictionary is that of trapacero. This connects gitanos as an ethnic group to stereotypes that they are cheats, frauds, thieves, and tricksters. In my experiences in Spain I haven’t heard this context as much as the positive one, but it is certainly still used.
## Gitano Positive Context: Pros and Cons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros:</th>
<th>Cons:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Is used by Spanish Roma as a way to create identity and difference, fight against cultural assimilation.</td>
<td>● Plays into folk theory by asserting that gitanos are biologically wired to be better at music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Tries to shift the emphasis from stereotypes of trickery and thievery to ideas of art and purity.</td>
<td>● Even if the stereotype you are portraying is “positive” it is still racializing and stereotyping a group of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● It is the term Spanish Roma use to self identify.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, though I acknowledge the downsides of using the word gitano even in a positive context, I feel like it is more helpful than harmful. The way it has been reclaimed and allows gitano communities to fight against assimilation makes it a very important and useful term that I feel is important to use, as long as we always keep in mind the downsides of the term as well.
Further Reading

This is but one aspect of my final project, to explore the topic further from my point of view, be sure to check out my literature review, it is a short 8 page read (not counting the pages taken up by my transcription of the song lyrics) and I believe it to be well worth your time.

Additionally, the works in the citations are all interesting reads which I certainly recommend looking at.
I recently became fixated upon flamenco, the music of Andalucia, a region in southern Spain. A region I consider to be home by virtue of the fact that almost my entire family on my mother’s side lives there. With this fixation on flamenco came an increased awareness of the Roma people, an ethnic group of travelers who are traditionally nomadic and originated in northern India many centuries ago before moving north and east into Europe. In Spain, Roma people tend to refer to themselves, and are referred to by others, as gitanos and have created an identity closely tied to flamenco music and artistic expression.

In English, people who would be called gitano in Spain are called gypsies. Both of these words, gitano and gypsy, originated from the incorrect belief that Roma people originated in Egypt. It is easy to see how gypsy evolved from Egypt, and the word gitano evolved from the old Spanish word egiptano, a word that has since been replaced with a more modern egipciola (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Angel Vargas, and Montano Pena; ND). Yet, despite the shared roots of these words and the way that they can be used to refer to the same group of people, the words have very different connotations. I was reminded of this fact recently when I was, rightly, called out for using the word gypsy, which I didn’t realize was so derogatory because I was viewing it from a Spanish context where it wouldn’t be considered derogatory. Why do these words have such different connotations? There are many factors, the most important being the fact that the word gitano has been reclaimed by the Roma people living in Spain and has been
recontextualized in a positive light, one that positions gitanos as particularly artistic and pure. The word gypsy, on the other hand, continues to be a pejorative exonym used to refer simultaneously to both the Roma as an ethnic group and to anyone living an itinerant lifestyle perceived as “deviant” by the standards of western society, hence equating deviancy to a whole ethnic group.

In Spain, gitanos were forcibly assimilated through racist laws and forced relocation, a process which ended up erasing a lot of difference between non-gitanos and gitanos. The pushback to this assimilation involved a concerted effort on the part of gitano communities to create difference and create a new identity. This was achieved most visibly through the way in which gitanos positioned themselves as uniquely close to flamenco music and the ways that gitanos began to literally perform their difference through the medium of music (Papapavlou 2003). One effect of this identity creation is that the gitanos managed to reclaim the word gitano and recontextualize it to be more closely associated with artistic capacity and ideas of purity (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Angel Vargas, and Montano Pena; ND). This new connotation is particularly visible in some of the jaleo (shouts of encouragement from the audience to the performer) that can be heard during flamenco performances. Shouting something along the lines of “¡Olé! ¡Gitano/a Puro/a! ¡Asi se canta!” is very common in my experience and is essentially a way to tell the artist that they are doing the best possible job they could possibly be doing.

This more positive connotation can be easily contrasted to the connotation seen in books taught to school children/young adults in England. Perhaps the most eye-opening example, though it is admittedly somewhat outdated, is the fact that in the 1956 Encyclopaedia Britannica gypsies are described as a group of people who have the average mental age of a ten year old, have never accomplished anything of significance in regards to art, music, culture, or social
organization, are quick to anger, and make a living based off of fortune telling which they themselves know is false (Kenrick and Taylor 1984). This is almost exactly the opposite of the positive art centered connotation which the word gitano has in Spain, and though this definition has long since been replaced with a more correct, less discriminatory description, it nonetheless shows how Roma used to be viewed by society at large. It also provides a good way to transition from talking about the academic description of Roma people to the everyday use of the word Gypsy, whose connotations have not changed nearly as much as the academic description.

The main issue with the word gypsy is the way that it is used to describe two completely different things, hence equating one to the other despite the fact that often times the two things are not related in the slightest. The first use of the word gypsy is to refer to ethnic Roma people. The second use of the word is to describe anyone, regardless of ethnic or racial identity, who is seen by the standards of western society as leading a “deviant” lifestyle, one that is seen as involving anything from free-spiritedness, to itinerance/nomadism, to using thievery, trickery, and cheating as a means to make a living (End 2015). When English speakers use the word gypsy, they do not differentiate between the two definitions and end up racializing what are seen as “deviant” lifestyles as something that is a defining factor of Roma people.

Some of the effects of the fact that Roma are connected to deviance through the word gypsy can be seen in the words “gypped” and “to gyp.” Both of these words are clearly derived from the word gypsy. Many English speakers will use these words without knowledge of the fact that they stereotype Roma people and cause much damage. To be “gypped” is to be swindled, cheated, tricked, or defrauded while “to gyp” is to cause pain (Challa 2013). Every time these words are used, the stereotypes of Roma people as thieving frauds who do nothing more than steal then move on is perpetuated. There is no equivalent to these two terms in Spanish, which is
a positive and seems to reflect on the fact that the connotation of the word *gitano* is more positive. However, there are ways in which the word *gitano* can still be used pejoratively. This is an important discussion to have, and we will get to it. But before exploring that aspect of the word, I find it important to see very clear examples of the words *gitano* and gypsy used in the context of popular media. This will be accomplished by exploring two fairly similar songs, the first is “Raggle Taggle Gypsy”¹ a folk song sung in Scotland and Ireland. The second is “Soy *Gitano”² a song by the legendary flamenco *cantaor* (singer) Camarón de la Isla.

By nature of its being a folk song, “Raggle Taggle Gypsy” has several different variations when it comes to the lyrics, some being significantly more problematic than others. The version I analyze here tells a story of a band of three gypsies who come upon a rich landlord’s estate and lure/seduce his wife, stealing her away. This is immediately playing on the stereotype of Roma people as thieving, deceitful, and uncaring of whatever damage they might cause to others. Kenrick and Taylor (1984) mention that this song has historically been taught to English schoolchildren in music class, the result being that the first thing children associate with the word gypsy is the idea of being stolen away by a band of rogues. In addition, the last four stanzas serve to contrast the gypsies, which the audience is meant to see as uncivilized, to the civilization of the lord. The lord is shown as being the pinnacle of civilization and comfort through the talk of his “goose-feather bed,” house, land and money. The gypsies are positioned as the opposite of this, simply laying in a “wide open field” with no comfort.

The word choice seen in the song reinforces these depictions. The gypsies are referred to as the “raggle taggle gypsy-o” immediately bringing to mind pictures of a dirty, unorganized, uncivilized, kind of shady character. There is also a part where the gypsies are referred to as being “yellow.” This seems like an overt allusion to the belief that a Roma person can be
identified simply by having a darker skin color, or at the very least a color that is “other” than whiter Europeans. This could also be an allusion to phrases such as “yellow bellied coward,” as the color yellow generally feels to have a negative connotation to it, a connotation which I would not be surprised to see used towards Roma people.

On the other end of the spectrum is the song “Soy Gitano” a song written by Camarón de la Isla, a man who was probably one of the most famous gitanos to ever walk the earth and certainly one of the most famous and revered gitanos in Spain. One way to interpret the song sees a cry of a man who loves a woman he cannot marry because he has been put into a different prearranged marriage. In this song the main character, a gitano man, is shown as being a multifaceted person trying to come to terms with conflicting emotions of being in love with one person but engaged to another. The man is not portrayed as some sort of devious trickster driven by an affinity for thieving, but as someone who has to come to terms with a pretty extreme emotional journey and try to make a way forward for himself. He is depicted as having agency in his actions and how they will determine his future.

The song is punctuated in many places by the words “Yo soy gitano” being sung in a powerful, prideful way. It is obvious that being gitano is something positive, something to be proud of. This idea is further supported by the constant references to traditional practices surrounding gitano weddings such as the act of “partiendo la camisa.” My understanding is that the action of tearing your shirt at a wedding is used to express happiness in Roma tradition. The fact that it is a central feature of the song shows that the artist is not afraid or ashamed of gitano tradition. He is proud of his tradition and not trying to hide it. In this context, “Yo soy gitano” and the word gitano itself is used as a powerful and prideful statement of identity.
In the interest of exploring all aspects of the words *gitano* and gypsy, it is important to mention that *gitano* can still be used in a pejorative way, a way totally in opposition to how it is used in the song above. The official Spanish dictionary, curated by the *Real Academia Española* (2019), has two problematic definitions/uses of the word *gitano* nestled in among the more neutral and positive uses. One says that to call someone *gitano* is to call them a *trapacero*. That is, a *gitano* is someone who is tricky, cheating, and conniving. The dictionary says that *gitano* can be used to refer to someone who has a special kind of art in the way they maneuver social situations to win over the will of others, and is usually used to refer to a woman (Real Academia Española 2019). This romanticizes and sexualizes gitanas as being exotic, beautiful/sexy, and apt at getting men to do whatever they are told through use of their exotic feminine charm and again emphasizes a perceived shared deviousness or conniving character shared by *gitanos*. In these two uses, the word has very similar connotations to its English language counterpart.

Some *gitano* activists are working to take these pejorative definitions out of the legal academic dictionary, leaving only the positive and neutral or factual definitions (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Angel Vargas, and Montano Pena; ND). There could be some debate on the usefulness of this action. Some may see this as erasing evidence that shows that Roma people are still discriminated against. The continued plight of Roma people in fighting persecution and discrimination has historically been swept under the rug and though this has been changing recently in the last couple decades, there is still not much emphasis on discrimination against Roma people. Erasing the pejorative definitions from the dictionary could be seen as a way to erase the evidence of the discrimination and try to assert a more colorblind ideology. On the other hand, it is important to start taking action to try to phase out the pejorative use of the word,
and though removing the definition from the dictionary is a small, mostly symbolic step, it does feel important.

Action is important. Scholars can debate the connotations of words and the racist systems they uphold as much as they want, but I feel it important to also end with some proposal for action and for change. In this case, I would call for people to stop using the terms “to gyp” and “gypped” as these terms do nothing other than reinforce negative stereotypes. Refraining from referring to Roma people as gypsies is also important. I have come across a case where a Roma man I talked to preferred to be referred to as gypsy than Roma, and in that case I believe it to be more acceptable to use the word, however, unless the Roma person explicitly states a preference for the word gypsy, it is imperative to stick to Rom, Roma, or Romani.

In Spain, it is important to avoid using the word *gitano* in a pejorative manner. It is also necessary to think critically about the word *gitano* even when using it in a positive light. Even when used positively it is a term which at its core racializes a group of people and can be connected closely to folk theories of racism, such as a belief that there are biological factors of race which make a *gitano* inherently better at music and art (positive connotation) or inherently driven towards deviance and deception (negative connotation). I tend to use the word *gitano* in its positive connotation even with the knowledge that it racializes a group and can be used to uphold folk theories for one important reason. That is, the reclamation of the word by the *gitano* community has been an important tool in creating a *gitano* identity and upholding difference, allowing *gitano* communities to fight back against forced assimilation. It is a fraught term, but I believe it to be more helpful than harmful at the moment, though there still needs to be much change to try to perfect the term and expose and deconstruct the institutionalized racism that continues to affect Roma people.
Notes

¹ Raggle Taggle Gypsy Lyrics (lyrics taken from google)

There were three old gypsies came to our hall door
They came brave and boldly-o
And one sang high and the other sang low
And the other sang a raggle taggle gypsy-o

It was upstairs downstairs the lady went
Put on her suit of leather-o
And there was a cry from around the door
She's away wi' the raggle taggle gypsy-o

It was late that night when the Lord came in
Enquiring for his lady-o
And the servant girl she said to the Lord
"She's away wi' the raggle taggle gypsy-o"

"Then saddle for me my milk white steed
- my big horse is not speedy-o
And I will ride till I seek my bride
She's away wi' the raggle taggle gypsy-o"

Now he rode East and he rode West
He rode North and South also
Until he came to a wide open plain
It was there that he spied his lady-o
"How could you leave your goose feather bed
Your blankeys strewn so comely-o?
And how could you leave your newly wedded Lord
All for a raggle taggle gypsy-o?"

"What care I for my goose feather bed
Wi’ blankets strewn so comely-o?
Tonight I lie in a wide open field
In the arms of a raggle taggle gypsy-o"

"How could you leave your house and your land?
How could you leave your money-o?
How could you leave your only wedded Lord
All for a raggle taggle gypsy-o?"

"What care I for my house and my land?
What care I for my money-o?
I’d rather have a kiss from the yellow gypsy’s lips
I'm away wi’ the raggle taggle gypsy-o!"

² Soy Gitano Lyrics (lyrics taken from google)

Yo no puedo aguantarme

Y ni vivir de esta manera

Porque yo no puedo, porque yo no quiero, ni aunque Dios lo quiera

Porque ya no puedo ay, porque yo no puedo ay, porque yo no puedo vivir sin ella.
Soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,
a partirme la camisa,
la camisita que tengo,
Yo soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,
a partirme la camisa, que ellos tiñieron.

Ay me retiro,
del esparto yo me aparto,
Ay que te lo digo me retiro,
En el sarmiento me arrepiento,
de haberte querido tanto,
Ay que te lo digo me retiro,

Soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,
a partirme la camisa,
la camisita que tengo,
Yo soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,
Me parto la camisita, la camisita que tengo.

Y a mi me gusta saborear la hierba, la hierba buena,
Un cante por soleá,
Un voz quebrada y serena,
Una guitarra y tus ojos,
Ay al ladito de una candela

Soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,
a partirme la camisa,
la camisita que tengo,
Yo soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,

Y a mi me gusta saborear la hierba, la hierba buena,
Un cante por soleá,
Un voz quebrada y serena,
Una guitarra y tus ojos,
Ay al ladito de una candela,

Yo soy Gitano y vengo a tu casamiento,
a partirme la camisa,
la camisita que tengo,
Yo soy Gitano yo vengo a tu casamiento,
A partirme la camisa,
Que es la única que tengo.
References Cited

https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/30/242429836/why-being-gypped-hurts-the-roma-more-than-it-hurts-you


