



# Context and Connotation:

## How the Words 'Gypsy' and 'Gitano' Differ

Robert Wehner-Ortega





International  
**Romani Day**  
April 8

# 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:

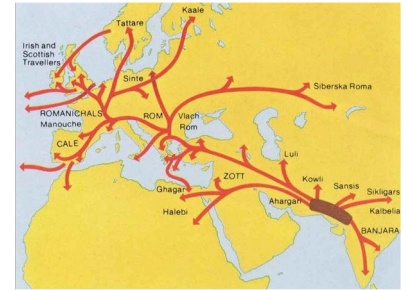
To collect data I looked primarily at academic journals, trustworthy news sources, and romarchive.eu, a site that is working to collect works of Romani art and culture and augments the public’s understanding of them with “contemporary documents and scholarly appraisals.” I also use some of my own background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

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# 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.



And the servant girl she  
said to the Lord,  
She's away with the  
Raggle Taggle Gypsy-o

Video

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## 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

## Pros:

- Is used by Spanish Roma as a way to create identity and difference, fight against cultural assimilation.
- Tries to shift the emphasis from stereotypes of trickery and thievery to ideas of art and purity.
- It is the term Spanish Roma use to self identify.

## Cons:

- Plays into folk theory by asserting that gitanos are biologically wired to be better at music.
- Even if the stereotype you are portraying is “positive” it is still racializing and stereotyping a group of people.

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.



# Citations

- Challa, Janaki. “Why Being ‘Gypped’ Hurts The Roma More Than It Hurts You.” Code Switch: Word Watch. Last Modified December 30th, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/30/242429836/why-being-gypped-hurts-the-roma-more-than-it-hurts-you>
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- Kenrick, Donald and Taylor, Gillian. 1984. “The Portrayal of the Gypsy in English Schoolbooks.” *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 6 (1): 38-47.
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