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## Gypsies among Czechs: An anti-stereotype view

### Abstract

Refusing to fit Gypsies under sociological and ill-founded labels, i.e. stereotypes, these remarks try to show a somewhat different picture. After positioning Czech Gypsies numerically among other European countries, and offering some remarks on the current state of the Gypsy community today, it is noted that a new general phenomenon of a lack of adaptability is starting to become prominent. In conclusion, data from a large representative Czech corpus of 100 million words producing an impression of *cikán* is presented, with conclusions drawn from this.

### 1. Introduction

In the book by the Czech classical author Božena Němcová (1855, *Babička* (The Grandmother)), roving tinkers and Jews are always welcomed by the kindly heroine and given something to eat, whereas she detests the stealing and migrant gypsies. While her attitude may have reflected the stereotypical view of Gypsies (Romanies) in the 19th century, it is no longer tenable today. In fact there is insufficient evidence to justify these old and widespread stereotypes; they seem essentially unsubstantiated, vague and almost mystical, and should be avoided.

The aim of these brief notes is to comment on some aspects of the image of Gypsies in the Czech community today – trying, at the same time, to point out that subsuming these under stereotypes is mistaken and false. Even the traditional view of Gypsies as thieves, implied by the classical writer mentioned above, cannot be statistically supported: there may be some Gypsies who steal, but they are not in the majority and the stereotype, if applied to all, is false and offensive. In fact, nobody has investigated how many Czechs steal in comparison, and one must, then, wonder, why there is no such stereotype used about Czechs, or indeed Germans, French, etc, as thieves, too. So it all boils down to knowledge of facts and numbers and their un/justifiable generalisation. This is not to conceal some of the less palatable features of Gypsy life today, but simply to refuse the ill-chosen term stereotype. In fact, in addition to petty theft and *stealing*, there is a new feature, not recorded in the classical literature, namely a widespread *lack of social adaptability*, which is due both to traditional Gypsy culture and to today's social conditions, including poverty, unemployment, etc. This can hardly be called a stereotype.

Gypsies have been present for centuries. Wikipedia provides the following estimates of their presence in some European and non-European countries:

Bulgaria, 700-800,000; Spain, 650-800,000; Romania, 535,000; Hungary, 310-990,000; France, 300,000; Poland, 250-300,000; Italy, 120-180,000; UK, 90-300,000; Czechia, 40,000; Netherlands, 32-48,000; Finland, 10-15,000; Denmark, 2-12,000; Lithuania, 3,000; USA, 1,000,000; Turkey, 500,000; Russia, 220,000, etc.

However reliable these figures may be, they have to be taken at face value, although it is generally accepted that Gypsies are sometimes reluctant to admit their real nationality in censuses and polls. Anyway, at least one conclusion may be drawn from this, namely that Czechs are statistically somewhere in the middle.

All other views of Gypsies, in addition to the two mentioned above are similar in that they are overgeneralised and, hence, not strictly true. Some journalists still choose to see Gypsies as romantic, traditional, family-oriented and highly musical, extolling their dance in particular. These views, arising from historic stereotypes, are no longer tenable and acceptable. In fact, Gypsies seem to have become resigned to their traditional values being displaced in our complex modern society, a substantial problem for them being how to escape social marginalisation and isolation. A partial consequence of this, found in their *lack of adaptability* – reinforced by traditional isolation – is to be seen in their frequent avoidance of work and reliance on state social allowances and benefits. Since these are paid out as lump sums, some of them, not used to budgeting, turn to initial overspending when getting the money, to gambling and drinking, linked to the return of a modern form of usury. Another consequence is that a few, officially registered as unemployed but slightly better-off than the rest and attempting to impress their neighbours, may come to collect their benefits from stupefied state officials in a Cadillac or Mercedes. Although these stories are mostly anecdotal, such things have happened, though statistically they are negligible.

Hence, any attempt to use the problematic and – for a linguist – unacceptable term *stereotype* for Gypsies has to be rejected, as it is simply not based on sufficient convincing evidence. This will be explored further using corpus data.

## 2. Today's stereotypes or badly interpreted and reported problems?

The situation of Romani or Gypsies differs widely among European countries, reflecting different histories. In Czechia, only a small number of the original old ethnic groups of Sinti (German Gypsies) are preserved, along with a few of the old original Czech and Moravian Gypsies. Until the Second World War, these groups made up a Gypsy community which was relatively integrated into Czech society. Unfortunately, most of this community perished during the war, leaving very few alive. The postwar situation, dictated and formed by the Communist regime, was largely aimed at settling Gypsies in selected villages and city areas

and stopping their migratory tradition. The situation has deteriorated significantly since Czechoslovakia was officially abolished and replaced by two new states, Czechia and Slovakia, in 1993. Since this change had been anticipated for some time, many East Slovak Gypsies, not having much in common with those in Bohemia, officially opted for Czech citizenship and moved over to Czech territory, bringing with them new (somewhat lower) ways of life and standards of living. In consequence, a new balance and integration has been sought ever since. There is no research available on this, but a study from just after the war speaks of there being some 6-7 times more Gypsies in Slovakia than in the Czech speaking territory. Many of these moved around 1992-1993 and this has given rise to new problems and contributed to unexpected turmoil and social tension. Generally speaking, all Gypsies (belonging to several distinct groups, in some cases with their own dialects) face now the problem of how to get to grips with the mainstream society. Nevertheless, Gypsies are not a well-defined social group, being very diverse due to different social level, education, etc.

Naturally, this has been reflected – not favourably – in the views of the majority community. According to a recent opinion poll (see Wikipedia), 68% of Czechs have some antipathy towards Romani and 82% of Czechs reject any form of special protection of Roma rights, which the present government is trying to introduce. According to a 2010 survey, 83% of Czechs consider Romani to be asocial and 45% would like to expel them out of the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, this attitude remains virtually unchanged. Police statistics from the early 1990s showed that the crime rate among the Romani population in Czechoslovakia was high, especially with respect to burglaries. A particularly disturbing fact is that some newcomers, often noisy and untidy, coming from destitute villages without electricity and sewage to large city blocks of flats, resort to plundering and ransacking them to the extent that anything wooden (furniture, stairs, etc). is burned in open fires ignited inside the flats, making them virtually uninhabitable.

The *negative* aspects of the behaviour of some Gypsies can be reported in a somewhat distorted way in newspapers and the press in general. Due to an official journalistic protocol for reporting these acts (sometimes criminal in nature), a misguided and inappropriately used political correctness has crept in. Thus, reporting that a burglary or theft has taken place may look innocuous enough, indicating that these could have been perpetrated by anyone – were it not for TV reports showing faces easily recognisable as belonging to Gypsies. But this is just one foolish example of political correctness and the clumsiness of some journalists.

All in all, let us repeat, these are just some aspects of Czech-Gypsy coexistence which are not really very important and are often exaggerated in the interests of sensationalism. It is often television that is responsible and, as one journalist has put it, any news that sells well is alright and acceptable, at least at the moment, and that includes crime. Gypsies, shown in a negative light, fit the bill perfectly. Let us add that part of the blame for not helping Gypsies may be directed towards

the Czech state itself, which has not been able (or willing enough) to move or abolish a factory pig farm from the site of a former Nazi concentration camp for Gypsies (Lety).

However, on a more *positive* note, one must realise that most of the members of this ethnic group, or rather groups, try to make a living as well as they can, though often hampered by a lack of expertise and qualifications. Culturally, the Czech community has so far been able to offer at least some basic cultural and educational amenities and facilities, hopefully to be followed by others. These include a Romani/Gypsy Radio station (Romea.cz) and Romani journals (the popular *Amaro Gendalos*, the cultural and linguistic *Romano džaniben*, the children's journal *Kéreka*, etc.). There is also a Gypsy department at Charles University where the language and culture can be studied; several small Gypsy political parties and other groups (who tend to quarrel between themselves); dance ensembles, etc.

### 3. Let's try to be a bit more objective: What a large corpus has to say

Any serious judgment and conclusion has to be based on reliable facts rather than partial polls and the views of journalists, often driven by their own goals. A detailed examination as reflected by a large corpus of contemporary Czech (SYN2010, see korpus.cz) – which cannot be accused of partiality, political bias or of being skewed – does offer a different picture. A responsible and representative corpus, reflecting many types of discourse, provides evidence which cannot be found anywhere else at present.

842 examples of the word or rather forms of the word *cikán* (Gypsy) and its less common variant *cigán* have been found. Some concordance examples are given below.

Jak děláš , když máš vozík prázdný ! " A < *cikán* > si povzdechne : " Juj , máme tak vysokou normu

Barman měl kolem hlavy uvázaný kus hadru jako < *cikán* > . Unaveně kývl na Haralda , který nepřipomínal Zněla pohřební hudba . Za hlavou mu stál < *cikán* > , kterého denně potkávali na dálnici . Vedle něj medvěd

Vypadal jsem jako zarostlý < *cikán* > . Starý jeden seržant nám zaopatřil i to a netrvalo

Dežovy obchody nebyly z nejčistších , že byl < *cikán* > , nehraje v tom žádnou roli .

Obchodoval s cikány

že ty hodinky ukradl < *cikán* > jemu . Výborné - ta zpověď byla ovšem neúplná .

se starý < *cikán* > po chvíli otočil a nafoukaným houpavým krokem zašel zpět za

že pánům v necestu byl . Klel < *cikán* > : " Jaká slabost mi v ty staré hnáty vlezla

tvář od Medvěda , < *cikán* > v kostkované košili , hluchoněmý opilec zmateně

gestikulující , věčně

Ke konci usazený < *cikán* > vzal Mohamedovu hlavu do dlaní , zadíval se mu do mě pustil sednout postarší < *cikán* > , četl jsem o chlapci , který zachránil tonoucího kamaráda

Starý < *cikán* > hbitě zaklapl medailon obrovskou rukou a strčil jej zpět pod jak < *cikán* > půjdu dlouho , dlouho podél hranic , v nesmírné Přírodě

V Osvětlení začínal plešatět . Vypadal jako < *cikán* > , ale chtěl vypadat jako Árijec – a to se

Cikáni si libují ve vtípech o cikánech , například jak < *cikán* > ukradl motorku připadá si bez domova jako < *cikán* > . I takový byl osud mimořádně nadaných a citlivých lidí

Nesmysly Koumá < *cikán* > kolem domu dupá botou s holinkou lze ho trestat kvůli

Tu ten < *cikán* > co mě znal pokoj v hospodě najal ! Leč jak

křesťanská ctnost vůbec být možnou , " povzdychl < *cikán* > , " musí se také přece

Inspection and comparison of various contexts reveals today's usage of the word in quite a positive light.

Looking in the immediate lexical vicinity of the word *Gypsy* (*cikán*) and selecting only some obvious examples, we obtain ***cikán/cikáni***: *ukradnou* 4 x (will steal), demonstrating that stealing does in fact not figure much. The four occurrences of *steal* seem to be a very poor basis for any sweeping conclusion, let alone a stereotype.

The rest of the interesting collocates are even lower, all having just two, i.e. they have been found only twice in 100 million words: *zmlácení* (beating), *kočující* (migrating), *bída* (poverty), *tábor* (camp), *ukradl* (stole), *ubodán* (stabbed to death), *smradlavej* (stinking), *zarostlý* (unshaven) which tells us even less about the word's usage.

A telling figure is that of the corpus genres where the word *cikán* is found. Most belong to fiction (511), followed by journalism (209), while the lowest percentage, not unexpectedly, come from professional and scientific texts (122).

Although a detailed analysis of the full usage of the word *Gypsy* would tell much more, it is possible and maybe interesting to note at least one observation. Over one third of its usage (deduced from its nominative case form) signals that the word for Gypsy is used as agent, doer, in a active role and not in the passive way that one might perhaps expect from journalistic reporting.

These few brief remarks can only provide a partial illustration of a complex and rich problem, with one proviso. The corpus data, discussed at the end, do point to stereotypes as an ill-conceived idea which is unacceptable, at least in linguistics.

## References

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