

## The ethnic category from a linguistic perspective

Răzvan Săftoiu\*

Faculty of Letters, "Transilvania" University of Braşov, Bd. Eroilor 29, 500036 Braşov, Romania

---

### Article info

#### History:

Received January 25, 2017

Accepted January 27, 2017

Published March 23, 2017

#### Key words:

sociolinguistics

linguistic anthropology

diachrony

### Abstract

In this paper, I put forward an analysis from a linguistic perspective of an ethnic category in Romania that is defined by at least two terms: *gypsy* and *Romany*. The concept of *category* refers to the members of a particular group that sets apart from other groups by a set of specific elements acknowledged at the level of a larger community. In interaction, individuals frequently use categories and the set of features that a certain category is characterized by, since it is easier to deal with sets of knowledge than with references for each individual separately. The analysis is based on a series of expressions and phrases, proverbs and jokes which were (or still are) getting about in the Romanian space and which delineated, at the level of the collective mentality, the image of an ethnic category whose name (still) oscillates between two terms. The texts were grouped depending on the different stereotypes associated with the ethnic category under discussion, by highlighting the pejorative connotations of the uses of the term *gypsy* in relation to the ethnic category *Romany*, a significance-free category that can be 'filled up' by elements that can sketch a positive image.

---

## 1. Introduction

Throughout time, researchers from various areas of study—philosophy, anthropology, education, sociology, language sciences, political sciences, literary and cultural studies—have been preoccupied with understanding and defining the concept of identity. This can have a bureaucratically accepted meaning, but by dialogic actions speakers access and use several identities. In numerous sketches, I.L. Caragiale was keen on rendering the particularities of daily communication and he illustrated the manner in which acquaintances and strangers actively engage in a conversation 'after some moments of silence'. Either in train (*Accelerat no. 17, Identitate, Búbico*), in a visit (*Vizită...*) or 'at breakfast on the grass' (*Gazometru*), the characters are interested in establishing a social relationship, by adopting a social identity. I offer as example an excerpt from the sketch *Accelerat no. 17*, published in 1899:

"The gentleman enters the cabin after the merchant who took off his coat and sits down with the sack on his hand.

– Good evening, says the gentleman.

– Good evening, answers the merchant.

And the gentleman sits down on the front seat, after having put his suitcase on the storage shelf and the plaid under his head. For about two-three kilometres there was silence.

– Are you travelling far? the gentleman asks.

– Well! Far and not so far... to Mărăşeşti...

– To Mărăşeşti?

– Yes. What about you?

– To Mărăşeşti, as well."

(Caragiale, 1985, p. 152)

---

\*Email address: [razvan.saftoiu@unitbv.ro](mailto:razvan.saftoiu@unitbv.ro).

The context chosen by the writer, travelling by train, is one which favours the involvement in a ‘conventional’ conversation. In the excerpt chosen, I notice the ‘stage direction’ referring to the keeping of silence and the manner in which the conversation is initiated: a partially open question, by which the speaker breaks the silence and manifests his interests for the person he travels with, in the same cabin. Caragiale succeeds in highlighting an important aspect of everyday communication, *phatic communion*. The concept that I use was introduced and defined after almost two decades, in 1923, by the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.

Caragiale and Malinowski belong to two different directions, but their remarks lead to the same conclusion: when one individual joins another one and there is no previous conflicting state between them, the two tend to interact verbally. Caragiale’s sketches are based on the attentive observation of Romanians’ verbal and non-verbal behaviour at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Malinowski’s observations are based on investigations of some tribes in Oceania, that the anthropologist studied at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After detailed analyses, Malinowski formulated a universal conclusion: “There can be no doubt that we have a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314–316).

In this paper, I will focus on a particular type of identity, the ethnic one, which I will approach from a sociolinguistic and dialogic perspective. Thus, identity will be understood as a set of distinctive features of a member of a certain community, characteristics that are highlighted either by lexical and cultural phrases and associations or by dialogic games with members of the same communities or of another, in a certain context.

## 2. Theories about identity

Identity is, firstly, a social concept (Gumperz, 1982), because people are social beings who search for their personal identity by relating themselves to other individuals, in a certain community. The theory of social identity evolved in the ‘60s and is based on two different types of processes—group processes and interpersonal processes—that can explain the appearance and the development of some lexical associations. Theoretically, the distinction between *social identity* and *personal identity* is made. Thus, social identity is “the conception of the individual about oneself in terms of characteristic features of the membership category” (Boncu, 2004), and personal identity is “the conception of the individual about oneself as unique and distinct from other individuals” (Boncu, 2004). The two identities represent, actually, elements of a continuum, the individuals trying to find and adapt their personal identity depending on the requests of the society. In other words, in order to conform, the individual will choose a group behaviour, characterized by ethnocentrism, favouring of the in-group, discrimination, stereotyping (Boncu, 2004). Linguistically, the confrontation is translated by the *linguistic identity* that I consider a component of social identity (Guggenberger & Holzinger, 1993), since linguistic choices reflect the stance of the speaker in a certain social context in order to mark membership to a certain group.

In other studies, identity is discussed as a process (Hall, 2000), not as an attribute of the individuals, because identities are constructed during the dialogue and by the permanent adaptation to previous verbal actions. In other words, individuals do not interact with a predefined set of identities, but they adapt them depending on their dialogical purposes (Weigand, 2015), depending on the moment and direction of the conversation. Identities are performed and negotiated during interaction, and the linguistic choices become signs of the emerging identity type. I consider that identity is not a static concept, held by someone at one moment, but a dynamic one, which is built by verbal exchanges.

Joseph (2004) proposes a re-evaluation of the functions of the language, because—besides the communicative function (understood as the intention to transmit something to a receiver) and that of representation (understood as a mental evocation of the surrounding world)—individuals use language in order to create relationships to other individuals. Thus, firstly, one should go beyond the formal comprehension of language (meanings of the words and syntactic rules) and should focus on the identification of the context where someone says something about someone/ something, because the speaker has a certain purpose –

whether phatic or transactional. Secondly, linguistic choices sketch an image of the speaker in the mind of the listener, thus leading to categorization.

Each individual wants to build himself/herself a certain identity. There are multiple identities – some wanted, others unwanted. The speaker faces a dilemma in order to choose the most appropriate identity for a specific situation, and ‘browsing’ through different identities is achieved through speech. Thus, statements, questions are discursive actions that an individual uses in order to build a certain identity: the one of ‘a polite manager’, of ‘a worried president’, of ‘a skilled jurist’, etc. From the perspective of the theory of identity, the exchange of greeting formulas, for example, is not simply ritualistic, dictated by phatic communion, but it is a relevant interactional movement both for the status of the participants, and for the characterization of the relationship at that moment. Thus, the person that greets first is the individual who wants to have a good relationship to his interlocutor, and the one who greets back acknowledges the identity adopted by the other and reacts consequently. If the interlocutor does not greet back, he takes on an unwanted identity, by which he/she signals the non-involvement in the social relationship initiated by his/her partner. The initial phatic sequences can be analysed from the point of view of a ‘game’ of identities, but it is a mental and a discursive game, at the same time.

Goffman (1959) brought from Chinese philosophy the concepts of *Yin* (dark place, introverted) and *Yang* (sunny place, extroverted), and transposed them in the daily interaction in the form of some games where actors (individuals) perform on the scene of the inter-human relationships both in ‘exposed’ and ‘hidden’ areas to the public. Each individual plays a certain role and he/she exposes several masks, depending on the person he/she interacts with and on the context where the interaction occurs, by permanently taking into consideration the mask of the other, lest both their own image and the image of the other should suffer. ‘The game of the masks’ is actually the game of the identities that the individuals build and rebuild permanently depending on the context, on culture, on the identity of the interlocutor. Thus, in this paper identity is considered a dynamic process by which individuals manifest their membership to a social group, in a certain context.

In the context of the development of ethno-methodological approaches, Sacks (1972) proposes the concept of ‘membership category’. Although the concept was majorly used in conversation analysis studies, I will use it in this paper because referring to reality by means of categories is a way of building identity. Membership category presupposes the existence of a set of rights and obligations of the individuals that update differently depending on the interactional context. Sacks’ research was based on recordings from the Centre for suicidal prevention in Los Angeles that allowed him afterwards to carry out minute analyses in order to formulate some conclusions related to the use of categories in interaction.

Categories are classifications or social types that the speakers use to identify and describe persons (Schegloff, 2007). Individuals use frequently categories and sets of features that a certain category has, because it is easier to operate with sets of knowledge than with references for each individual separately. Membership to a certain category is done on the basis of the type of relation and the type of knowledge. If the persons who interact are acquaintances, one can talk about a *proper relationship* (Rp), but if they are strangers, one can talk about an *improper relationship* (Ri). Similarly, one can distinguish between *proper knowledge* (Kp), associated to professionals in a certain field, and *improper knowledge* (Ki), associated to non-professionals. The correlation between the type of relationship and the type of knowledge can change if one takes into account the fact that individuals establish inadequate relationships, while addressing some unfamiliar persons (doctors, for example) that possess adequate knowledge in a certain domain in order to satisfy their interactional purpose (getting a diagnosis and a treatment, for example). Differently put, we put other individuals around us in a certain category, the one of the possessors of adequate knowledge in order to satisfy our own communicative purpose. The framing is made on the basis of a set of activities, motives, rights, obligations and competences, which allow the identification and easier relating to interpersonal communication. Relating to categories is most often unconscious, the structure of categories existing at the level of the collective mentality and being reflected in phrases, as well as in lexical and cultural associations (Zafu, 2009).

The analysis on the basis of membership categories relies on the manner in which individuals organize the information about others, it aims at the manner in which speakers use different categories (family, religion, minority, etc.) by relating to specific members (mother, father, Orthodox, Catholic, Romanian, American, etc.), on the basis of a common set of attributes and behaviours (Sacks, 1972; Stokoe, 2012). Membership to a certain category is influenced by linguistic, cultural or situational particularities that make possible the observation and identification of some categories (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Eglin, 2002). At the level of interpersonal communication, the relation can be made to two different categories, the interactants being aware of the specificity of the other category ('we' speak about 'them'), or to the members of the same category ('we' speak about 'us'). In the second situation, we can speak about self-deprecating humour, especially if aspects that 'the others' laugh at are highlighted. A special case is the one when negative features of a category are brought to the foreground without being aware that the interlocutor or any other participant in interaction is a member of that particular category. The interaction can have negative effects on the interpersonal relation, because taboo topics are approached on the basis of negative features of the category the interlocutor belongs to, the analysis can be done at the level of the negative impoliteness strategies (Culpeper, 2008).

Sometimes, the use of a certain description of an activity can activate a certain category. For example, Sacks (1986) analysed the relationship between the members of a category in the utterance "*The mother lifted the child*", highlighting the fact that the correct reading of this utterance is that the mother lifted her own child. The interpretation is based on the fact that the two members (*mother* and *child*) belong to the same category (*family*), and there are specific rights and obligations associated to this category. Such categories can be identified in interaction, but in this paper I will rather refer to the deliberate invocation of a certain category. I consider that this use is strategic because it allows the speaker to underline the role that he/ she has in interaction, to take distance from or to draw closer to the interlocutor.

### 3. Corpus and methodology

One of the purposes of the classification depending on social types is that of describing persons. The descriptions can refer to the *woman, man, child, friend, grandmother, politician*, etc. The moment an individual is identified as a member of a certain category, at the mental level, the connection is made between the rights and responsibilities of that particular category and the type of behaviour considered adequate for that category. The mechanism by which a category constitutes its set of attributes can be thus summarized: the personal characteristics of a member are assigned to the category he/ she belongs to, and afterwards, the characteristics reflect back on all the members of that category. The prototype of a category is made of those individual characteristics which are repeatedly noticed in several individuals in the same category. This situation is characteristic for ethnic categories, because the members are already identified. At other times, the starting point can be a certain activity, a certain behaviour or attitude. In this case, the individuals who internalize that particular behaviour will be included in a different category. One can notice that an individual can belong to several categories depending on the characteristics that he/ she is attributed before or during the interaction.

Reference to categories is most times unconscious, since the structure of categories exists at the level of the collective mentality and reflects the way in which speakers structure their discourse. For example, if the relationship between the interlocutors is doctor-patient, the answer to the question 'How do you feel today?' will be formulated in the light of the categories involved in the dialogue. Thus, in the formulation of the answer, the patient will relate to the medical state and to the previous meetings with the doctor. At other times, the relation to categories can be explicit and strategic. For example, the reply 'You are our mother!' said by a child to his mother who did not distinguish between twins is interpreted as a reproach, the mother being criticised because she failed to respond to the responsibilities imposed by the category *mother*, from which the capacity to distinguish between her own children is one. We notice that, when an individual does not correspond to one or several attributes associated to the category where he/she



was included, there is a rupture at the mental level which manifests discursively by drawing attention, attempting at a resettlement after a deviation by the verbalization of the category and by updating of the associated responsibilities. Similarly, we presuppose that, during a dialogue, a speaker uses the reply 'Don't behave like a gypsy!'. In this case, specific attributes to the category *gypsy* are actualized with the purpose of drawing the other's attention of not retorting to a specific behaviour characteristic to a category to which he/she does not belong.

The next section is dedicated to the analysis of some expressions and phrases, proverbs and jokes that existed (or still exist) in the Romanian space and which outlined, at the level of the collective mentality, the image of an ethnic category whose name (still) oscillates between two terms. The linguistic material was grouped depending on different stereotypes associated to the respective ethnic category, by highlighting the pejorative connotations of the uses of the term *gypsy* in relation to the ethnic category *Romany*. In this paper, the term *gypsy* is used with no negative connotation and by no means in a discriminatory sense. The perspective that I will approach is an interdisciplinary one: on the one hand it is sociolinguistic, because it refers to the manner in which a certain type of identity is built during dialogue, on the other hand, it is critical-discursive, because I will focus on the implications of the use of the ethnic categories *gypsy* and *Romany* at the level of interpersonal communication. Thus, the questions of this research are:

1. To what extent can the attributes of a category be modified, in the sense of adding new characteristics or modifying the existing ones?
2. What are the implications of the use of ethnic categories at the level of interpersonal communication?

In the analysis of the data, I will equally use the characteristics of the categories identified by Sacks (1992) – *membership*, *inference rich*, and *representative*. The first characteristic presupposes the existence of a tacit agreement at the level of the society, according to which categories are complete and they contain the whole population, so that each individual belongs to at least one category, being impossible for an individual not to be part of any category, because the very membership to a society means membership to a category. The second characteristic refers to the knowledge that one can obtain about an individual once he/she was introduced in a category, as it is easy to find a conversation topic either on the basis of the knowledge stocked at the level of the collective mentality, or on the basis of knowledge shared in previous dialogues. The third characteristic refers to the fact that each member of a category is presumably the representative of the whole category, so that the individual moulds himself/herself into the patterns existing at the level of collective mentality.

#### 4. Data analysis

The studies of genetic history certified the fact that the gypsy population migrated from north-eastern India more than 1500 years ago. The nomadic character of the population and the absence of a unitary language triggered the appearance of numerous myths and legends that perpetuated and led to the development, at the linguistic level, of some expressions and phrases based on stereotypes, patterns built by the major population ('we') in order to relate to the minority population ('them'). In what follows next, for a better highlighting of the formation of the attributes of the category *gypsy*, I have grouped the main expressions and phrases that contain the ethnonym *gypsy* according to the intended stereotype.

##### 4.1. The stereotype *gypsies steal*

At the linguistic level, the texts that are based on this stereotype are numerous, the inadequate behaviour (theft) being attributed to the whole category: *Cîți țigani atîția hoți* [There are as many gypsies as there are thieves] 'Gypsies are all akin'. By invoking and juxtaposing two different categories (the ethnic category – *gypsy* and the occupational category – *thief*) the transfer of signification from one category into another takes place. The same mechanism functions in other proverbs: *Țiganul pînă nu fură nu se ține om* [A gypsy does not feel human, if he has no chance to steal], *E ușor să înveți să furi între țigani* [It's easy to learn to steal when among gypsies], *Își taie pâinea cu cuțitul țiganului* [One uses a gypsy's knife to cut the

bread]. Each of these proverbs bases on negative associations of the territorial instability—because the gypsy ethnic population is known as a nomadic population, that usually lived on the outskirts of cities, in shabby houses—, and of the unknown—the abandonment of the comfort and safety area produces anxiety embodied in tales with negative characters that can harm. Sometimes, the old-fashioned practices of the population were lexicalized, the proverb *Țiganul urcă și pe calul altuia* [A gypsy will always ride another man's horse] 'Stolen goods will cost less than the purchased' referring to horse theft for the nomadic population to ensure movement from one place to another. The ethnonym led to the formation of some derivatives such as the verb *a țigăni* [to cheat someone], as well as *a se țigăni* [to bargain over something], the meanings being different. The first verb appears in contexts of the type *m-a țigănit* ('I was cheated'), and the second verb appears in contexts bound to noisy bargaining, unproductive quarrel or nagging insistence. Sometimes, the verb is completed by the structure *ca la ușa cortului* [as if you were in front of the tent] 'to be a potty mouth', a common practice of this ethnic category.

This activity is similarly noticed in the collocation *cîștig țigănesc* [gypsy gain] 'shameless gain', the presupposition being that the income of the gypsy ethnic population is based on theft. Moreover, the proverb *E ușor să înveți să furi între țigani* [It's easy to learn to steal when among gypsies] is based on the association between the recurrent practice and the experience accumulated in time. Beyond the lexical level, the favourite activity is exploited as a thematic source in ethnic jokes. For example, 35% of the gypsy ethnic jokes on a web site ([www.bancuri.net](http://www.bancuri.net)) are constructed around this topic. Davies (1990) analysed ethnic jokes starting from the theory proposed by Raskin (1985), which is based on binary oppositions of the scripts (Semantic Script Theory of Humour – SSTH). The two scenarios refer to *stupidity* and to *canniness*. In order to analyse the manner in which a certain activity associated to the category *gypsy* is exploited in the ethnic jokes, I have chosen two examples.

- (1) Two gypsies return home with a sack full of banknotes after having robbed a bank.
  - Luca, let's count the money!
  - Forget about it, Flăcărică, we'll anyway find it out at the news...
- (2) The gypsy gathers pieces of wood in his arms. At one moment, the forester comes up and asks him:
  - Hey, you, what are you doing, have you come again to steal wood?
  - No, sir, I pick them for rabbits.
  - What, do your rabbits eat wood?
  - Well, if they don't eat it, I'll put it on the fire.

If in example (1) the scenario of stupidity is highlighted in Luca's reply (*Forget about it, Flăcărică, we'll anyway find it out at the news*), being based on another attribute of the ethnic category—the absence of involvement, negligence, lack of participation, and inactivity—, in example (2) the scenario is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, the scenario of stupidity can be identified, because the gypsy, representative of the marginal category, was caught in the act (*Hey, you, what are you doing, have you come again to steal wood?*) by the forester, the representative of the central category; on the other, the scenario of canniness can be identified, because the gypsy proposes a 'saving' solution (*Well, if they don't eat it, I'll put it on the fire.*), which highlights another attribute of the category: ingenuity. Thus, positive self-characterization was observed in other sociologic studies (Lazăr, 2009, p. 27–28) and it comes to counterbalance the negative projection of the majority group on the minority group.

#### 4.2. *The stereotype gypsies are violent*

The role of thief is attributed to the gypsy ethnic population for a pedagogical purpose as well, the majority population using the minority population in order to indirectly perform different speech acts: warning or threatening (*Te fură țiganii* [The gypsies will kidnap you]). Expressions such as *Te dau la țigani* [I give you to the gypsies], *Chem țiganii să te ia dacă nu ești cuminte* [I ask the gypsies to pick you up if you don't

behave], *Nu ieși din curte că te bat țiganii* [Don't get out, the gypsies might beat you up], *E obișnuit precum calul țiganului cu bătaia* [He/She is used to doing this just as a gypsy's horse is used to being beaten] highlight another stereotype associated to the ethnic category: violence, which can manifest physically and verbally (*Se ceartă ca la ușa cortului* [They are quarrelling as if they were in front of the tent] 'They have a potty mouth').

#### 4.3. The stereotype *gypsies beg*

The insistence, most of the times nagging, as well as the disrespect for the other members of the society refer to another stereotype associated with the ethnic category *gypsy*: begging as a means of living. The modality of begging is insistent and bothering to exasperation and is recorded in proverbs and phrases such as: *Dă-i țiganului azi și vine și mâine* [Give something to a gypsy today and he/ she will come back tomorrow] 'When given a kingdom, the gypsy asks: <What about bread?>', *Țiganul e ca râia* [The gypsy is like a pest], *Cere ca țiganul* [Begging like a gypsy]. The absence of a workplace is correlated with the absence of involvement in the life of the community and relocation, which is represented by another attribute of the category: nomadism. Although migration is not essentially negative, it is associated to the invasive migrations between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and it becomes the attribute of restless persons. As I have shown above, change causes anxiety in the collective mentality and modalities need to be found to counteract this state by relation to the 'other', who comes from elsewhere. Thus, the relation to the 'other' is essential for the construction of social identity. By this process, the representatives of the majority self-characterize and characterize the representatives of the minority.

#### 4.4. The stereotype *gypsies have a low social condition*

Nomadism, understood as a primitive way of life, leads to another stereotype at the level of the collective mentality: *gypsies have a low social condition*, being even associated with a certain delay from the point of view of civilization. 'Primitivism' is highlighted, at the lexical level, by numerous phrases which refer to the basic needs of the human being, such as the need for food and hygiene, which are not satisfied: *Dacă ar face muștele miere, ar mânca și țiganii cu lingura* [If flies could produce honey, gypsies would finally use a spoon to eat] 'When the sea turned to honey, the gypsy lost his spoon', *Cînd îi e foame, țiganul cîntă și dansează* [When gypsies are hungry, they sing and dance] 'The gypsy life would be terrible if there were no songs and dances'. Society, by its members, attributes statuses to individuals depending on the place that a certain individual occupies in the assembly. By social and verbal interaction, the formation of insider groups occurs, those who share the same social status and outsiders, and those who stay outside the group, out of different reasons, the conformation to social rules being one of them. Because they do not have a stable place and they cannot satisfy their current needs, gypsies are left outside the group and they are stigmatized.

#### 4.5. The stereotype *gypsies cannot overcome their social condition*

The stigma is strengthened by one last stereotype that I have identified in the corpus that I analyse: *the gypsies cannot overcome their social condition*. The social condition is an assumed one and impossible to overcome, an idea expressed in the phrases *Țiganul e țigan și-n ziua de Paști* [Gypsies are gypsies even on Easter Day] 'Give a dog a bad name and hang it', *Nici răchita pom de bute, nici țiganul om de frunte* [Just as you cannot make a barrel of a willow tree, you cannot turn a gypsy into a leader] 'There will never be bacon from a wolf, there will never be a human being from a gypsy', *Te îneci ca țiganul la mal* [A gypsy drowns when reaching the shore] 'One stumbles at the threshold'. Just as some trees cannot be used for the manufacturing of household items, because they do not have the necessary consistency, similarly, the gypsies do not have the attributes specific to other categories.

#### 4.6. A new category: *Romany*

In the previous sections, I have identified the main attributes of the category *gypsy*, attributes which were established on the basis of some stereotypes. As I have indicated, the majority population attributed, in

time, negative features to the category *gypsy* on the basis of socially unacceptable practices (theft) and of the ascertained incapacity of ensuring their basic needs for survival (food and hygiene), in the context of nomadism. The relationship with ‘others’ cannot remain unanswered from the category that it is aimed at, so that a new category has been proposed: *Romany*. Yet, unfortunately, the category *Romany* is not represented at the linguistic level in phrases, expressions nor ethnic jokes, which leads to the idea that, for now, it is an ‘empty’ category, without attributes, currently under construction. Thus, subject names were issued (*The grammar of Romany, Romany language and literature, Romany culture and civilization, Special places for Romany students*) or institutions dedicated to the minority group were settled (*The centre for social inclusion for the Romany ethnic citizens*).

## 5. Implications of the use of ethnic categories

After the analysis in Section 4, I have noticed that both the stereotypes and the ethnic jokes are attributed to the majority (central) population that relates to the minority (marginal/ peripheral) population. Thus, the performers of the jokes always belong to the central population, and the jokes are aimed at the representatives of the marginal population (never the opposite, see Davies, 1990; Laineste, 2005). In order to be able to perform the jokes whose target is an ethnic minority, the representatives of the minority population are similar to the majority population in the sense that they speak the same language (sometimes the phonetic and/or lexical particularities are the target of jokes) and they share the same cultural space.

Marin (2010) studied the construction of ethnic identity of the gypsies in a community in Braşov and she considers that there is ‘an identity crisis’ in both groups: both the majority population and the minority one are trying to construct themselves a positive image. The idea is also supported by Lazăr (2009, p. 27), who noticed that “the Romany offer about themselves an image that powerfully contrasts what the representatives of the other ethnic groups say about the Romany: they have predominantly qualities, being described by the epithets: ‘welcoming’, ‘decent’, ‘hardworking’, and ‘united’”.

The main idea that comes out from the studies where the two ‘competing’ categories were analysed is that each category has its own attributes, speakers are aware of them and they choose them depending on their communicative purposes. In time, the category *gypsy* ‘attracted’ negative attributes, but the word cannot be eliminated from the Romanian language. For now, the category *Romany* is under construction, the speakers themselves being aware of this thing: “When I hear *Romany*, I think about the gypsies who are civilized, work and do not steal... but when I hear *gypsies*, I already think about jails, alcohol and others” (Sorin, 16 years, from Gârcini, Braşov County) (Marin, 2010, p. 10). The coexistence of two terms and implicitly of two categories is not impossible since “the existence of an official term does not exclude the current use of other words” (Zafiu, 2009).

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I started from the idea that identity is a dynamic process by which individuals show their belonging to a social group, in a certain spatial and temporal context. Identity is negotiated during interaction, by verbal exchanges, as individuals ‘browse’ through various identities. Similarly, I defined the concept of membership category in relation to the studies of conversation analysis. Individuals use categories in order to easily relate to the extra-linguistic reality by sets of attributes. At this level, I was interested in noticing to what extent the attributes associated with a certain category, *gypsy*, are stable or if they can change in time. On the basis of the analysis, the conclusions suggest that, generally, ethnic categories are partially flexible, because new attributes can be added only in the sense of the ones already existing. Thus, the category *gypsy* cannot receive positive attributes, as it is constituted at the level of the collective mentality of negative stereotypes. Contrarily, for the category *Romany* I did not identify any representations at the linguistic level in expressions, phrases nor ethnic jokes, the conclusions being



that, for now, *Romany* designates an ethnic group. Similarly, the analysis highlights another conclusion: categories evolve in time.

As for the implications of the use of the category *gypsy* in interpersonal communication, I could notice that its use can be interpreted as a form of verbal aggressiveness in the light of negative stereotypes, representing at the same time a source for ethnic jokes, along with the ‘international’ categories, such as the Albanians, the Jews, the Hungarians, as well as the ‘national’ ones – the people in Transylvania, Moldavia and Oltenia. Actually, the investigation of the manner in which ethnic categories are used and recycled in jokes, as well as in political discourse, is a research topic which is worth investigating in order to formulate pertinent conclusions referring to the development, in time, of membership categories.

## References

- Boncu, Ș. (2004). *Psihologie socială. Curs*, [online].
- Caragiale, I.L. (1985). *Momente și schițe*, Editura Eminescu, București.
- Culpeper, J. (2008). *Reflections on impoliteness, relational work and power*, in Bousfield, D. & Locher, M. (eds), *Impoliteness in Language*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, p. 17–44.
- Davies, C. (1990). *Ethnic Humour around the World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Eglin, P. (2002). *Members' gendering work: Women, feminists and membership categorization analysis*, in “Discourse & Society”, vol. 13, p. 819–825, [Crossref](#).
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Guggenberger, H. & Holzinger, W. (eds) (1993). *Neues Europa – Alte Nationalismen: Kollektive Identitäten im Spannungsfeld von Integration und Ausschliessung*, Drava, Klagenfurt.
- Gumperz, J. (ed.) (1982). *Language and Social Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [Crossref](#).
- Hall, S. (2000). *Who needs identity?* in du Gay, P., Evans, J. & Redman, P. (eds), *Identity: A Reader, Sage and the Open University*, London, p. 15–30.
- Joseph, J. (2004). *Language and identity. National, ethnic, religious*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.
- Laineste, L. (2005). *Targets of Estonian ethnic jokes within the theory of ethnic humour (Ch. Davies)*, in “Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore”, p. 7–24, [Crossref](#).
- Lazăr, M. (2009). *Semantică socială și etnicitate. O tipologie a modurilor identitare discursive în România*, in “Studii de atelier. Cercetarea minorităților naționale din România”, no. 26, Cluj-Napoca.
- Malinowski, B. (1923). *The problem of meaning in primitive languages. A study of the influence of language upon thought and of the science of symbolism*, in Ogden, C.K. & Richards, I.A. (eds), *The Meaning of Meaning*, Harcourt, London, p. 296–336.
- Marin, T. (2010). *“We are Gypsies, not Roma!” Ethnic identity constructions and ethnic stereotypes – an example from a gypsy community in central Romania*, in “Studii de atelier. Cercetarea minorităților naționale din România”, no. 36, Cluj-Napoca.
- Maynard, D. & Zimmerman, D. (1984). *Topical talk, ritual and the social organization of relationships*, in “Social Psychology Quarterly”, 47, p. 301–316, [Crossref](#).
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, de Gruyter, Berlin, [Crossref](#).
- Sacks, H. (1972). *On the analyzability of stories by children*, in Gumperz, J.J. & Hymes, D. (eds), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication*, Rinehart & Winston, New York, p. 325–345.
- Sacks, H. (1986). *Some consideration of a story told in ordinary conversations*, in “Poetics”, vol. 15, no. 1–2, p. 127–138, [Crossref](#).
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*, 2 vol., Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Schegloff, E. (2007). *Categories in action: person-reference and membership categorization*, in “Discourse Studies”, vol. 9, no. 4, p. 433–461, [Crossref](#).
- Stokoe, E. (2012). *Moving forward with membership categorization analysis: Methods for systematic analysis*, in “Discourse Studies”, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 277–303, [Crossref](#).
- Weigand, E. (2015). *Identity as a dialogic concept*, in “Language and Dialogue”, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 7–22, [Crossref](#).
- Zafiu, R. (2009). *Păcatele limbii: Rom*, in “România literară”, no. 10, [online].