

Dirt and cleanliness for Gypsies and non-Gypsies: a semantic concept or an ideological construct?

To be considered for the focus stream: *Urban Linguistic Diversity*

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The marginalised communities of Gypsies, Romani and Travellers (GRT) suffer from a negative representation often predicated on the grounds of a logos of 'dirt', 'waste' and 'filth' (der Geest's 2009, Newell and Green 2018a/b, Greenfield 2013). This dirt narrative has a powerful traction on mainstream society, often generating negative, emotive responses. Paradoxically, however, Gypsies and Travellers have a strong tradition of cleanliness along very different customs from settled society. Funded by the British Academy, the study investigates the narrative of dirt from both the perspective of GRT and settled people. The role of language that has rarely been investigated by linguists is central to the research that has two strands: a. ascertaining the value of a semantic concept; b. reflecting on the narrative centred on that concept.

Framed within Critical Discourse Analysis, the study scrutinises 10 years of British press where the Gypsies and Travellers are associated with disrupting the natural landscape, with an interpretation of dirt as 'matter out of place' along the lines of Mary Douglas (1966) and Sibley (1988: 410) for whom '[T]he unclassified residual category is dirt, pollution, a threat to the integrity of the collectivity'. Similarly, der Geest observes (2009:79), 'identifying and removing "dirt" are acts of observing and restoring order'. The investigation of the press is juxtaposed to a study of *Travellers Times*, the GRT magazine, to identify any differences in the treatment of the construct dirt.

The other side of the investigation draws on Critical Ethnography (Barton 2001, Breda 2013) and uses interviews with Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers with the aim of establishing what dirt really is and means in those cultures.

Dirt facilitates the formation of value judgement and moral concepts; therefore, the study shows how dirt is integral to the construction of a discourse deployed in settled society to discriminate against mobile communities (Riggins 1997, Riabchuk 2016, McKee 2015). The other core of the study, however, is the attempt to understand in-depth the actual and symbolic meaning of dirt and its function in settled and GRT communities.

The study was carried out by a team of investigators, two of whom are Romani, therefore it is an example of an ethnographic study that observes these marginalised communities from inside.

Keywords: Gypsies, Travellers, dirt, press, interview, group identity

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