

SHELTA: AN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

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Travellers have historically been separated from the larger group of Irish society; customs and practices emphasise the division and reinforce Travellers' internal security: the main symbol of their difference, their linguistic code, which operates as a secret or protective language, is known variously as Shelta, Gammon or Cant. The Thesis provides a critical examination of the historical and academic analysis to date of Shelta and reports on the results of an empirical study carried out by the researcher into sociolinguistic aspects of Shelta in Ireland today.

Theories about the background and history of Irish Travellers are reviewed and the relationship between Travellers and Gypsies is analysed. Traveller identity and aspects of Traveller culture are examined with particular emphasis on family organization and ritual cleanliness because these show how Travellers maintain the borders between themselves and settled people.

The Gypsy language, Romani, is well known and has been widely studied. Shelta has been less documented and its relationship with English Cant has been obscure. A theory is put forward about this historical relationship.

Up to now, Shelta has generally been considered to be an artificially devised jargon constructed for disguise purposes. It is suggested, however, that there is reason to believe that Shelta may be the remains of a natural language augmented by a disguised vocabulary from Irish and English, having moved to an English syntactic structure.

In recent years, Travellers have undergone rapid social change: their former patterns of employment have been rendered obsolete and there has been a movement towards the towns. Changes in Shelta are examined in this new context and the future role of Shelta as part of Traveller culture is considered.

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DECLARATION

I, Alice Binchy, being a candidate for the degree of M.A. as awarded by the N.C.E.A. declare that while registered for a candidate for the above degree I have not been a registered candidate for another award of the N.C.E.A. or a University. Secondly that none of the material contained in this Thesis has been used in any other submission for any other award. Further, that the contents of this thesis are the sole work of the author except where an acknowledgement has been made for any assistance received.

Date:

Signed:

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The Travelling people are perhaps the best-known minority in Irish society. They are easily identifiable: their habits, their appearance and their speech are recognizably different from those of settled people. We can see evidence of how their community is separated from the mainstream; we can only speculate on why.

This thesis will look at the way Travellers have historically been separated from the larger group of Irish society; at how they have separated themselves; at how customs and practices emphasise the division; at ways in which they reinforce their internal security; and at the main symbol of their difference, their linguistic code, which operates as a secret or protective language.

That Travellers should have a secret language at all is a measure of the suspicion with which they view the settled community. The language, called Shelta by academics, and Cant or Gammon by Travellers, is of uncertain age: some scholars, notably Kuno Meyer, believed that it dated from c. 1000 A.D.; the consensus seems to be that it is at least 400 years old. Whatever the age, its usage has been remarkably conservative, and this study is an attempt to discover the present state of the language; the

circumstances of its use; whether or not anyone speaks it as a mother tongue, and whether it has any purpose besides disguise.

Shelta, and the Irish Travellers in general, have attracted very little scholarly interest. There was some correspondence on Shelta in the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society (J.G.L.S.) in the years immediately following its discovery by Charles Leland in 1876. First recorded in Britain, Shelta was recognized to be a property of the Irish Traveller, as opposed to the British Gypsy, although these two disparate groups have exchanged some lexical items.

In 1890, John Sampson, of the University of Liverpool, took up the study of Shelta, and collected an extensive vocabulary. He, with the help of Charles Leland and Kuno Meyer, planned a book on the subject. This book was never written, but the material for it was used by R.S. MacAlister of T.C.D. as the basis of the Secret Languages of Ireland (1937). MacAlister did no primary research himself. His book represents a compilation of the vocabularies collected by others, in Scotland, England, the U.S.A. and Ireland - the latter being a series of articles published in the early 1930s by Mr Pádraig Macgréine in Bealoideas, the Journal of the Irish Folklore Commission.

MacAlister remains the major resource in the area. He had

the advantage over previous collectors of knowing Irish, which allowed him to speculate on the derivation of the words. Since MacAlister, publications on Shelta have been infrequent. There have been a few short notes on it in the sporadically-reappearing Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society, and Jared Harper produced a master's thesis on the Cant spoken by Irish Travellers in Georgia, U.S.A. in the 1960s, followed by several short articles covering more or less the same ground. Ian Hancock, also, has addressed the subject of Shelta, in 1974 and again in 1984, but his interest is primarily in the area of classification: whether Shelta can be considered to come within the category of pidgin or creole, rather than the language itself. Apart from these, Shelta has only been referred to in passing, by writers on Anglo-Romani. Since Gypsies and Travellers have shared a common history, if not common origins, and some of the sociolinguistic factors of their languages are similar, these passing references are useful. But it is clear that unless Shelta is studied in depth now, while there are still people who speak it, it will be gone for ever, and a vital insight into Irish society will be lost. The danger is real: in spite of major reversals, Travellers' material circumstances are improving; more children are going to school; more houses are being provided; more Travellers are moving towards integration into settled society. Of course there will be Travellers who will retain aspects of their tradition when "settled"

and who will bring up their children as Travellers who have ceased to travel, but there are also Travellers who will associate the speaking of Shelta with everything they want to leave behind, as they pass into the larger group.

Research Methods

The major problem of researching a subject like Shelta is that the most willing informants are those who feel least threatened by the settled community - which means that their habits may not be as "traditional" as those less willing to talk. Alternatively, there are informants who know a lot about the subject, but who are anxious for their material to be presented in the best possible light; they will suppress information which they feel may reflect badly on their people.

Much of the research on Gypsies and Travellers has been done by participant observation (Adams et al 1975; Gmelch 1975; Okely 1983; Gronfors 1983). The advantage of this is that the observer, chameleon-like, observes in circumstances where the barriers are down, because he/she is (almost) an insider. But even those who have researched in this way accept its limitations. Okely, for example, quotes one of her subjects as remarking on how she (Okely) "perked up" when Gypsies spoke of their customs in front of her. In the present study, participant observation, even if it had

been possible from the time point of view, would not obviously have been the most fruitful method. There is no conclusive evidence that Shelta is spoken extensively when outsiders are not present. Travellers questioned directly said that it was not, and in the absence of contrary evidence, participant observation would not appear to be justified.

The over-riding justification for choice of informants was, necessarily, willingness to talk about the language. This meant that although one would have wished to have presented subjects from a wide range of ages and geographical locations, this was not possible; instead a "network" system was used, with one informant referring the researcher on to someone else who might be interested in participating. For this reason, and because it should properly be the focus of a study in itself, the phonology of Shelta is not addressed in this study. Related to this is the problem of the orthography of Shelta. This perennial problem is common to all unwritten languages, but compounded in the case of Shelta, by the fact that some words which came into Shelta from Irish have in the main retained their Irish phonology and could obviously be spelt according to Irish orthography, while others under the influence of English, have taken on an English phonology. Travellers have clearly arrived at some accommodation between Irish and English sound systems; for this reason an in-depth study of

Shelta phonology would seem certain to yield interesting results.

The five main informants in this study were selected out of a pool of between forty and fifty Travellers, most of whom were initially contacted through the Travellers' Rights organization. This was a group set up through co-operation between Travellers and sympathetic settled people. It was designed to provide a more radical approach to the improvement of conditions for Travellers than that of the National Council for Travelling People, and also to educate Travellers in pressure-group politics, so that eventually settled mediators could fall away and Travellers could articulate their demands in their own voice. When Minceirs Mislí, the Travellers' Movement, was set up, this aim was achieved.

Because of the aims of the Travellers' Rights group, and later Minceirs Mislí, contact was possible with Travellers who were receptive to the idea of their culture and language being studied. Conversations with Travellers at Travellers' Rights meetings, and at an AnCO-sponsored course in group leadership for young Travellers, elicited information about the role played by Shelta in the Travellers' social system. A class of six to ten-year-old in a Dublin school for Travellers produced valuable insights into their usage of "Cant". It seems, for instance, that children's early use

of Cant is concentrated on areas of conflict, with settled people or the law: terms for money, police, stealing and begging predominate, while items like food, animals and clothing are less well known. Cant did not seem to be as well integrated into the daily life of travelling children as it was in the case of adults.

Four of the five informants had an interest in the preservation of Traveller culture, which meant that they had no objection to the secret language being documented. They were fully informed of the purpose of the study, and were supportive of it.

The fifth informant was told by other Travellers, on their own initiative, that the researcher was known to them, and was interested in the language. She accepted this, and spoke fairly freely. The traditional secrecy of the language is undoubtedly an obstacle to its study, but not an insurmountable one, given the right type of informant. Obviously, those with most occasion to use the language will be most jealous of its secrecy.

General information on the language and the social structure of Traveller society gathered in group interviews and conversations provided the background to in-depth interviews with the five main informants. While these interviews should ideally have been conducted on a one-to-one basis,

not many Traveller families have the kind of accommodation that this would require. Some of the interviews, therefore, took place in the family living space, with other family members present and contributing from time to time.

Informant 1 was a married woman in her mid-forties, living in Dublin, but with strong connections with the North of Ireland. She was a matriarchal figure in her community. She was interviewed in three sessions. In only the first of these was she alone. She was very conscious of wasting time on the tape recorder when she paused to think of a word, so it was considered better to switch off the tape and proceed with a notebook alone. At the end of each session, she spoke the words into the tape recorder from the written list.

Informant 2 was a man in his late twenties, living in the midlands. While very conscious of the Traveller heritage, and proud of being a Traveller, he was well aware of the benefits to Travellers in being acceptable to housedwellers. This man was literate and highly intelligent, and very comfortable with the tape recorder. Because he was literate, and had a serious interest in the language, he had access to words which are perhaps technically obsolete. But since this conscious acquisition of words may indicate a direction that the language will take in the future, no distinction is made in this study between this man's

idiolect and these conscious acquisitions.

Informant 3 was a woman in her mid-twenties, living in the Midlands. Like informant 2, to whom she was related, she was proud of being a Traveller but able and willing to "pass for" settled if the occasion demanded. She was educated and intelligent, but had not the same degree of interest in the language.

Informant 4 was a woman in her sixties, from the West of Ireland but living in Dublin. She was a Traveller of a type to whom access would have been almost impossible without an introduction from other Travellers. After years of living in Dublin, her rural background was still evident. She was interviewed in two sessions, and was quite comfortable speaking into a tape recorder. The fact that several of her family members, to whom she was a revered repository of Traveller lore, were present may have contributed to the ease with which she spoke. She spoke Shelta more fluently and naturally than any of the other informants. Every word was put in context in a sentence.

Informant 5 was a man in his early thirties, living in Dublin, who was related to Informant 1. He had a slowly-developing interest in the language, and was self-conscious about his small vocabulary. He seemed to think that participating in the research would gain him access to a

greater vocabulary, and he repeated words from the researcher's lists which he did not know, with their meanings, several times.

The sequence of elicitation was the following: first, the informant would say what words he/she could remember from free-range memory. Next the researcher would prompt "Is there a word for?" in various categories, such as food, articles of clothing, parts of the body, animals. Only when this stage was exhausted, and the informant seemed to have difficulty in going any further, were word-lists produced. The success of these varied from subject to subject. Harper's lists were used with the urban Travellers with great success - the vast majority of the words were recognized, and the fact that the same words that they used every day had been collected in America gave great pleasure to the informants. These particular informants did not recognize MacGreine's lists from Co Longford to any appreciable extent, but another informant, the older woman from the West of Ireland, did, and showed the same pleasure in her words being documented.

Elicitation by wordlist is not without problems. The researcher has to gauge the reliability of reactions like "I think I heard that somewhere" and "That's a word my granny used to use". The policy was, which in doubt, to leave out. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, this technique was

useful in opening new avenues of memory.

It seems to the researcher that the more talk about the language the better, and the more informal the questioning sessions the better also; it seemed worthwhile to expend a lot of tape in making informants comfortable. Direct questioning was never very profitable; it seemed that most information was forthcoming when general interest in Travellers' ways was expressed: this meant that tapes consisted of items of folklore and old wives' tales as well as the words wanted. It appears that interest in the language is less threatening in the wider context of Traveller culture. A difference between the early part of the research and the later is relevant here. In the early stages, the researcher asked informants if Shelta was ever used in the absence of outsiders. The answer was invariably a slightly bewildered "no", usually qualified by something like "sure, they'd know it themselves". In the later part of the research, it became clear that over-emphasis on the secrecy function was the cause of this confusion: the Travellers understood the question to mean "did they ever use Shelta for secret communication when only Travellers were present?" As the research progressed, it gradually became clear where the mistake had been made, and Travellers volunteered the information that they do in fact use Shelta in intimate family settings, more or less as one would slip into dialect, as a sign of relaxation. This echoes a point

made by Ian Hancock (1971:17), that Gypsies in Britain probably use Romani with least interference from English when outsiders are present; inside caravans and trailers, Romani seems to be used as a register indicating intimacy and lack of formality. Concentration on the secrecy function, in the case of Shelta, has led to limitations in the perception of its social role and also, one would imagine, to increased difficulties in its investigation; it is easy to understand Travellers' reluctance to divulge words of their language when the orientation of the investigator towards the secrecy function creates the fear that information will be used against Travellers. Conversely, the investigator who sees Shelta as intrinsic to Traveller life and culture seems likely to overcome barriers and gain a deeper understanding of the subject.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

(1) The Gypsies

Certain classes of people have always been nomadic. Some trades, like horse-dealing and peddling, can be practised conveniently on the road; others, like chimney-sweeping and casual farmwork, are seasonal and involve travelling for this reason. As well as these legitimate trades, the lowest rung of society's ladder has traditionally been occupied by beggars. Travelling is necessary to them, because the laws of supply and demand mean that the same area cannot support the same beggars indefinitely.

Inevitably, nomadic people have attracted the attention of the criminal law. Apart from specific crimes, generally of a minor nature such as petty theft and breaches of the peace, fear of vagrant beggars and other "outsiders" who might become an economic burden on local communities led to legislation making vagrancy itself, in effect, a status offence. C.J. Ribton-Turner, in his History of Vagrants and Vagrancy, and Beggars and Begging, (1887), describes in detail the situation in England before the arrival of the Gypsies: who was allowed to beg and who was not, various

methods of licensing vagrants, and the fine distinctions drawn between the various castes of wanderers. The arrival of the Gypsies complicated matters considerably; they brought apparently magical powers and various types of legerdemain. The essential problem for the authorities was how to distinguish the ordinary vagrants from the foreign imports. Another complication was that when the Gypsies arrived, they were initially well-received, as pilgrims or the victims of religious persecution, depending on the area. This prompted some native vagrants to blacken their faces and join with them. Later, when the full extent of the Gypsies' so-called iniquities became known, and they were offered the alternative of deportation or execution, these native elements identified themselves. By now the two groups had intermarried and interbred, so the ensuing legislation had to pick its way delicately between outrage at the Gypsies, and mild disapproval of the natives. The situation in England where Gypsies and native vagrants shared a common lifestyle, is echoed in many European countries. The indigenous element in this mix are usually called Travellers, while the Gypsy group's name reflects their foreign origin. Examples of this coexistence are the Tatara or Resende in Sweden, who are indigenous, and the Kalderash who are Gypsies. In Britain today Gypsies coexist with Irish Travellers and Scottish Tinkers, neither of which have any claims to exotic origins.

Gypsies, however, do claim exotic roots: the name Gypsy is in fact a corruption of "Egyptian", and this was where they were at first thought to originate. It is clear, however, that this was a mistake, and Gypsies are nowadays considered to be the descendants of a tribe or tribes which left India in successive waves beginning in the tenth century. They were first recorded in Britain in 1505, when, according² to the records of the Lord High Treasurer in Scotland, they presented themselves at the court of James IV. They said they were pilgrims, and their leader called himself the Lord of Little Egypt, which is now thought to mean the Middle East. Their movement across Europe had been noted: in the 1300s, an Irishman returning from the Crusades reported seeing them in Crete (Smart and Crofton 1875:290). They were first reported in Germany in 1414; in 1418 in Switzerland; in 1422 in Italy, and in 1427 near Paris. At the same time they were first seen in Spain (Simson 1866: 90).

What did these early Gypsies look like, and how did they make their living? Thomas Deeker, writing in 1608, described them:

"Their apparel is odd and fantastic, though it be never so full of rents; the men wear scarves of calico or any other base stuff, hanging their bodies like Morris dancers with bells and other toys, to entice the country folk to flock about them, and to wonder at their fooleries The country folk all come running out of their houses to gaze upon them, whilst in the meantime one steals into the next room and

brings away whatsoever he can lay hold on They (forsooth) can tell fortunes; which for the most part are infallibly true, by reason that they work upon rules which are grounded upon certainties; for one of them will tell you that you shall shortly have some evil luck fall upon you, and within half an hour you shall find your pocket picked or your purse cut." (Dodds 1966:20)

The Gypsies' reputation for sleight of hand, and the above type of behaviour, was perhaps reflected in the first statute passed against them, in England during the reign of Henry VII (22 Hen. c.10. 1530). It recited the evils of these people who, being "neither craftsmen nor involved in trade, travel from shire to shire, using subtle and crafty means to deceive the people". It provided that they should not be permitted to enter the country: if they did, their possessions were to be forfeited and they were to be commanded to leave the country.

In Scotland, the Gypsies fared no better, but for a slightly different reason, if a legend recounted by Walter Simson is to be believed. James V apparently had the habit of travelling through his kingdom disguised as a beggar, or gaberlunzie man, for the purpose, as Simson puts it, of "prosecuting, as was his custom, his low and vague amours". He fell in with a band of Gypsies, and joined in their revels, but they soon discovered he was "none of their people" and he was immediately demoted to the status of a packhorse, carrying the Gypsies' budgets and other

belongings on his back. He collapsed under the weight before long, whereupon he was dismissed with scorn and contempt by the Gypsies. He was soon revenged on them, however.

Being exasperated at their cruel and contemptuous treatment of his sacred person, and having seen a fair specimen of their licentious manner of life, the king caused an order in council immediately to be issued, declaring that, if three Gypsies were found together, one of the three was instantly to be seized, and forthwith hanged or shot, by any one of his majesty's subjects that chose to put the order in execution. (Simson 1866:105).

Whether its basis was this legendary vindictiveness or not, this Act passed into the law in June 1541. There was no respite for Gypsies in England: in 1554 another statute was passed which referred specifically to them. "Egyptians" were still to be refused admittance to the country, and those already present still had to leave, but the penalty for non-compliance changed from forfeiture of goods to "pains of death". The only way to escape this fate was, within twenty days of the proclamation of the statute, to leave "that naughty and ungodly life and company" and take up some lawful work (2 Phil. and Mary, c.4., 1554). Eight years later, these provisions were extended to "persons in the company or fellowship of vagabonds, commonly called or calling themselves Egyptians, or counterfeiting, transforming or disguising themselves by their apparel, speech or other behaviour, like unto such vagabonds" (5 Eliz., c.20., 1562). In other words, the ranks of the

"Egyptians" had been infiltrated by native-born vagabonds. This statute was also required because it had been found that "Egyptians" had argued successfully under the 1554 Act they they could not be deported because they had been born in England or Scotland. The 1562 statute made it clear, in section 5, that such persons could not be compelled to leave the country; it seems however, that unless they abandoned their former lifestyle, they were still liable to be executed. In 1744, another statute subjected Gypsies to further, albeit less drastic penalties. It provided that "all persons pretending to be Gypsies, or wandering in the habit or form of Egyptians, or pretending to have skill in physiognomy, palmistry or like crafty science, or pretending to tell fortunes" should be deemed rogues and vagabonds (17 Geo. 2, c.5. section 2, 1744).

Relief for Gypsies came in 1783, when the Elizabethan statute was repealed, as being a law of excessive severity. Four years later, a book by Grellman, a German scholar, was translated into English. This put forward the theory, shared by several European scholars, that the language spoken by the Gypsies could be traced back to a language of Aryan origin connected with early Sanscrit. This was followed in 1816 by the publication in England of the first survey of Gypsies, based to some extent on work done by Grellman.

The author of this work was John Hoyland, a Quaker who proposed philanthropy and education as the new policies for dealing with Gypsies, whom he thought depraved; their bad habit of wandering resulted he thought from "a scrupulous regard to the institutions of their ancestors". For this reason he proposed exempting them, at least temporarily, from the Vagrancy Acts, which applied to all vagrants. He thought that if they were introduced to the comforts of social order, and offered useful and respectable employment, any who persisted in the wandering life could then be punished.

Hoyland's work, based as it was on Grellman's, was useful in publicizing the Gypsies' origin in India. This distinguished them from the ordinary run of rogues and vagabonds wandering the country, and it showed that their language, which had been thought to be a crude made-up jargon, had a respectable pedigree. It also meant that the slander that the Gypsies' sallow skin was the result of ingrained dirt was disproved. But the repercussions of his work are still felt today, in the myth of the pure-blooded Romani Gypsy.

This myth is inextricably bound up with the Romani language. The idea is that the closer to the Indian original a person's language is, the more claim he has to be called a pure-blooded Romani. The whole question revolves around

the degree of connection a family may have had with the native people of the countries they passed through. If they kept to the Romani ideal of endogamy, they would presumably pick up less of non-Romani habits and words. But the idea of a group being able to interact economically with other groups without picking up words of other languages is rather far-fetched, especially since the Gypsies would almost always have been the dependent partners in such transactions. However, John Sampson, a scholar who made a special study of Gypsies and Tinkers, claimed to have found a family in Bala, North Wales, in 1894 who spoke "deep Romanes", that is, with Indian-type inflections.

The distinction between full-blooded and mixed-blood Romanies first gained currency in the 1870s, when Smart and Crofton recorded the word *didikei*. In their Gypsy-English vocabulary we find: "*Didikeis*, or *Ditakeis*, n.pl. Half-bred gypsies, who instead of '*dik-akei*' say '*did-*' or '*dit-akei*' for '*look here*'." Their debased parentage was supposedly responsible for this mispronunciation. The great majority of Gypsies in Britain today would probably be dismissed as "*Didakeis*" by Smart and Crofton, and indeed by John Sampson, since they speak a mixed dialect generally called Anglo-Romanes, which is similar to *Manouche* spoken by Gypsies in France, and *Calo* spoken by Spanish Gypsies. Thomas Acton (1974:19), says that the idea of pure-bloodedness is more symbolic than real to Gypsies today; it represents a close

adherence to group norms and customs which vary quite considerably from group to group. He claims one should speak of a continuity of Gypsy culture rather than a community. Pure-bloodedness is frequently a self-ascribed label; individual Gypsies describe themselves as "real, true Gypsies" unlike the "Didakeis" down the road. Acton also points out that, according to the Gypsies he dealt with, one can become more or less "pure-blooded" in the course of one's life, depending on behaviour. If this is so, it makes nonsense of the elaborate categorization system adopted by social service officials dealing with Gypsies, as will become clear below.

While the discovery of their Indian origin initially improved conditions for Gypsies, in terms of respect for their way of life, by the mid 1950s it had become a weapon used to discriminate against the majority of Gypsies. A survey of Gypsies in Kent in 1952 considered that only 10% of its 1100 Gypsies appeared to be members of the "Romany families". The Gypsiologist Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald was advisor to that survey, and advocated preferential treatment for full-blooded Romanies, arguing that "any attempt to abolish nomadism in Romany families (I am not of course referring to travellers) would have disastrous consequences both in health and morals" (Adams 1952:Appendix 11).

This survey set the tone for local authorities throughout

the country, with the fiction of pure-bloodedness used to discriminate against the majority. Only the pureblooded Romanies, with their ancient history, language and culture were to be recognized as a distinct ethnic entity, was the line of thought. They should be protected, and their way of life preserved, but the majority were only Didakeis, Tinkers and Travellers. Onto these was projected all the built-up prejudice against those with a nomadic way of life. "Tinker" (usually with "Irish" prefixed) replaced "didakei" as a term of contempt used by local authorities in the 1960s. As Judith Okely puts it, "the tinker became synonymous with every unpopular or stigmatised aspect of any Gypsy groups: scrap work, travelling, urban proximity, law-breaking elusiveness and independent lifestyles" (Okely 1983:19). The same view appeared in the Ministry of Housing report on Travellers in England and Wales (1967:3). This defined English-born Gypsies in terms of racial types; and Irish "Tinkers" in terms of their alleged living habits, which happened to be those most offensive to settled people. Christopher Reiss, (1975:47) on the education of travelling children writes:

the distorted emphasis on folklore customs and culture once given credence, resulted in widespread denial by teachers that their children possessed any semblance of culture - the outright denial, in fact, that they were Gypsies at all. Instead they were 'scrap dealers', 'pickers', 'scrap metal travellers', 'social dropouts' and so on.

This attitude reached its zenith in the statement, quoted by

Acton (1974:213) of a West Midlands councillor on a radio programme in 1964:

Councillor: How far does it come in your mind before you say 'I have done everything I possibly can and I will help the broad mass of these people, but there are some I can do nothing with whatever'. Then doesn't the time arise in one's mind when one has to say 'alright, one has to exterminate the impossibles'? I know all that leads to in one's mind, Naziism, who is it next, the gypsies, the tinkers, the Jews, the coloured man, but I don't accept that really on these particular

Interviewer: I don't think 'exterminate' is a terrible word, you can't really mean that?

Councillor: Why not?

The Second World War was a significant turning point in the fortunes of Britain's Gypsies. Before the war, they existed, in a community of craftsmen, agricultural workers, horse dealers and entertainers, in what Acton calls "a fairly stable symbiosis" with non-Gypsy society (1974:131). The outbreak of war brought quite profound economic changes. When Gypsy men joined the army, or were organized into civilian work brigades, the government set up camps for their wives and children. After the war, with an unprecedented housing shortage, caravans were seen as a temporary solution for settled people, who accordingly moved onto Government sites. With friction on these extended caravan sites, and deterioration of sanitary standards,

keep the Gypsies moving. Although the housing shortage eased after 1945, land availability remained a problem for Gypsies, especially since the changeover from rural occupations to salvage work meant more living/working space was necessary (Acton 1974:133).

A report on Caravans as Homes by Sir Arton Wilson in 1959 dealt with the 150,000 caravan residents in Britain; it concluded that caravans were not suitable as permanent dwellings. But its recommendations were directed towards the post-war housing displacement problem: it specifically mentioned "true Romany Gypsies, tinkers, Swaggers, didicois and such like vagrants" as being outside its scope. This report's recommendations were given effect the following year, by the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960. This Act put a stop to the practice of better-off Gypsies buying pieces of land to live on themselves, or rent to other Gypsies: it made it almost impossible to start new private sites. Established sites were closely watched to guard against extension. Many traditional sites had to be closed, with considerable hardship in some cases. Acton's graphic examples of what actually happened to sites around the country make it clear that a strong prejudice existed at the time against the idea of caravans as permanent dwellings; as Okely comments, "the Gypsies, for whom caravans are the preferred abode, were subject to the universalistic and inflexible law of the housedwelling

society" (1983:106).

Other Acts of Parliament were used against the Gypsies, notably the Highways Act 1959, which, in Section 127, specifically forbade "Gypsies" to camp by the roadside. This might appear to single out Gypsies on account of the ethnic origins but in a Court of Appeal decision in 1967, Parker, L.C.J. considered it difficult to believe that Parliament intended to subject a man to penalty merely by reason of his race, and declared that "gypsy" meant no more than "a person leading a nomadic life with no fixed employment and with no fixed abode" (The Times, 10 March 1967; Acton 1974:136).

The licences required under the 1960 Act by the owners of land with residential caravans were not granted easily. Gypsies who regularly frequented land which they owned or rented were liable to new fines and prosecutions when they or their landlords failed to get licences. This meant that they increasingly took to living on roadside verges, or waste land, the owners of which were unlikely to be prosecuted. But when they camped on the roadside, the Highways Act 1959 was invoked, which made it an offence for Gypsies, but no one else, to camp by the side of the road. With nowhere else to go, and facing repeated harassment from police, public health inspectors and local residents, Gypsy groups became more concentrated and therefore more

conspicuous.

The Caravan Sites Act 1968 marked a change of attitude in Government policy on Gypsies. In contrast to the previous negative legislation, which was concerned with dispersal, harassment and at best laissez-faire, the new legislation required local authorities to provide sites specifically for Gypsies - not only for those belonging to an area but also for those passing through. In principle, therefore, the idea of travelling was accepted, but there remained serious problems. Local authorities which had provided sites for a certain number of families could then apply for 'control powers' to remove any remaining Gypsies from the area. These control powers applied only to Gypsies and contained a provision for the arrest of Gypsies without a warrant. Some local authorities could apply for exemption from the requirement to provide sites, and, regardless of the number of Gypsies in their area, county boroughs needed only to provide for 15 caravans. The new national policy is considered by Okely (1983) to be partly responsible for the changing emphasis in non-Gypsies' definitions of a "real" Gypsy. Recalcitrant local authorities unwilling to make provision for the Gypsies in their area, got around the problem by claiming that there were no "real" Gypsies in that area, only social drop-outs and so on. Thus, one could find a councillor who readily agreed to a site for Romani Gypsies but not for Tinkers; in his area there would

only be Tinkers (Okely 1983:111). The Gypsy Council, an amalgam of Gypsies and interested outsiders, considered that more places had been closed to Gypsies under the 1960 Act than had been opened under the 1968 Act (Okely 1983:108). The 1968 Act came into effect in 1970, and by 1972, 50 sites had been provided. In January 1977, there were only 142 sites.

Until the mid-1970s the underlying assumption among government officials was that Gypsies would eventually be assimilated. Site provision was seen as the first step in that process. The Gypsy Council stressed the need for temporary sites, with legal access to land and simple facilities, as suiting the needs and desires of its members, but the preference of the authorities was for permanent sites; they feared that temporary halting spots would become "transit sites". This may reflect the misguided notion (Okely 1983:114) that there are two types of Traveller/Gypsies, those who rarely travel and those who move all the time. But it is possible that the authorities' preference for permanent sites in fact masks an underlying distrust of the travelling life.

Gypsies also had to contend with hostility from housedwelling neighbours. A major fact in residents' objection to Gypsy sites was the cost: yet there was an unfortunate vicious circle on this very point. Gypsies themselves made no

demands for expensive facilities; the elaborate sanitary arrangements proposed for permanent sites were provided to forestall complaints from the settled community if less stringent conditions were allowed. The sanitary and other facilities, in other words, were in line with housedwellers' standards.

Okely's description of the accommodation provided by various authorities makes it clear that the ultimate aim of the providers was settlement. The rents charged, and the requirement to decorate and maintain accommodation, were similar to those imposed on Council tenants; they were impractical for people who did not want to put down permanent roots. Because of the expense involved in setting up these sites, non-Gypsy wardens were required as overseers. Okely claims (1983:1160), that in exchange for their loss of privacy and independence, Gypsies expected and demanded that these wardens act as social workers, and perform repairs and make telephone calls for them.

The Gypsy organizations themselves are divided on the point of elaborateness or otherwise of sites. One school of thought says that the priority should be the provision of legal stopping-places for as many Gypsies as possible. Another says that Gypsies are not second-class citizens, and they should resist being treated as such by the provision of

sub-standard facilities.

It appears that criteria for size of sites are based on economic projections of local authority architects, rather than what Gypsies want. Okely (1983:118), quotes a liaison officer for Gypsies as saying that 15 was the most economic number of families to provide for on one site, in terms of plumbing and rent collection. But it is far too many Gypsy or Traveller families to live together comfortably. Okely comments: "The costly and somewhat naive erection of a 'community' hut on several sites did not, as had been hoped, create site solidarity and neighbourliness to override those of the travellers' own clusters" (1983 : 119).

(11) Travellers

Historians tracing the movement of Gypsies across Europe benefit from the fact that Gypsies, with their exotic looks and behaviour were a clearly identifiable group. Their passage created a stir of excitement and sometimes outrage, which means that documentary sources of information are plentiful. The lack of written history of Irish Travellers, on the other hand, perhaps reflects the fact that their Irish origin has made them almost invisible in terms of public record. Laws passed against vagrants have been partly directed at them, but there are other classes of

vagrants that are not Travellers. The records of the Poor Law Commission must refer in part to Travellers, but these records do not discriminate between different classes of the poor. One is left with documentary sources of varying quality and usefulness, ranging from the credible to the eccentric. This section will first attempt to sift through these sources under two headings: first the origin of the Travellers; and second, the present condition of Travellers in Ireland.

(a) The Origin of Irish Travellers

Several theories have been advanced on the origin of Travellers. They can conveniently be summarised under the following three propositions:

Theory 1: Travellers are the descendents of the outcasts who chose to live beyond the "circle of the Brehon laws", the ancient body of common laws of pre-Christian Ireland (McMahon 1971).

Theory 2: Travellers do not trace their origin to one source, but to several. They are the descendents of (a) native chieftains dispossessed by England and Scottish planters; (b) farmers driven from the land by famine, economic difficulty and conflict; and (c) unmarried mothers and alcoholics driven onto the road by destitution and social disgrace.

Theory 3: Travellers represent some blend of Irish settled people and Gypsies.

Most writers on Travellers tend to favour the first theory, or at least, to believe that Travellers have a long history. Andrew McCormick (1907), Gratton Puxon (1972) and Electa Bachman O'Toole (1973), argue that the Travellers are descended from the Picts. Puxon's thesis is that the Celtic and Nordic invaders forced the Pictish remnants into the wilder areas of the west of Ireland, where they later became wandering artisans, entertainers and horsedealers (1967:8). O'Toole's primary authority in favour of her attribution of great age to Travellers was historian Dr Liam de Paor, who told her that "The tinsmiths (i.e. Tinkers) were the aristocracy of the road, and reflect a strand that goes back for the last four thousand years" (1973:61). Sharon and George Gmelch (1976:227), take a more moderate approach. They merely record, without specifically attributing historical continuity, the fact that as early as pre-Christian times (fifth century or earlier), itinerant whitesmiths working in bronze, gold and silver travelled the country making personal ornaments, weapons and horse trappings in exchange for food and lodgings.

Travellers themselves frequently invoke their ancient origins, through legends and folklore. Thus, for example, Traveller Sean Maher (1972:65), says that Travellers were

on the road as an identifiable class as the time of St Patrick. It is part of Traveller folklore, he explains, that Travellers befriended St Patrick when he was minding sheep alone on a mountain, and they took him travelling with them, to help him find his way back to France. When he was grown up and came back to Ireland as a bishop "he went back on the road with the Travellers. In fact it was to them that he first preached the word of Christ. In this way it was the travellers who became his first disciples."

The subject of Travellers engaged the interest of scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as part of a more widespread romantically-inspired interest in Gypsies. R.S. MacAlister (1937) in a chapter on the vagrants of Ireland enlarges on the theme. He claims that the underworld of ancient Ireland was "exclusive and peculiar". The community was divided into a series of castes: kings, noblemen, non-noble freemen, and below these a class whose fluctuating fortunes caused them to rise into freedom or drop into servitude from time to time. Beneath these were the unfree, slaves and homeless vagabonds or "crumb-foxes" who had no civil rights whatever. They were not allow to enter assemblies, for their presence would bring pollution - "nefas" - on all present. This group moved about the country picking up a living wherever possible, but without any specified trade which would have conferred freedom. MacAlister notes that "they seem to

have specialised in acrobatic and clownish performances, sometimes of a very gross description" (1937:124). MacAlister's thesis is that the modern Travellers include, but are not limited to, the descendents of this group. There was another class of people on the road at the time that MacAlister refers to. The coming of Christianity threw scholars or druids of the older religions out of jobs, and MacAlister claims they formed a "guild of poets". Some of them attached themselves to the great families and acted as their domestic laureates. Others wandered from house to house paying for their board with poems and harp-playing. At first some element of the old druidic magic still clung to them, increasing their bargaining power and making their satire feared; but in time this dwindled. It did not die away completely, according to the Rev. John O'Hanlon, writing on Irish folklore in 1870. In a chapter on traces of druidism in Ireland he writes:

These pretenders to spiritualism dwindled down to the charm-mongers and fairy-herb doctors of our day. It may be added, their last tangible personification subsided into those wicked boccachs, or mendicants, who had, or pretended to have, been attended by familiar spirits, who enabled them to cure diseases, and to tell about the world of mystery and fable (1870:150).

MacAlister's theory, thus supported by O'Hanlon, is that Travellers are the descendents of the slaves and vagabonds of ancient Ireland, with admixtures, at various times, from groups such as the druids who were forced by changing circumstances to take to the road.

The second theory, that Travellers have several points of origin, none of them particularly ancient, has some significant modern support. Some commentators have argued that chieftains displaced by English plantations, farmers driven to begging by poverty and famine, and social outcasts from the settled community are the ancestors of today's Travellers. The plantation theory is supported by some Travellers. Sharon Gmelch quotes a Travelling woman:

Years ago, there used to be trouble with them evictions, the landlords, you know. The people usedn't be able to pay their rent so they were turned out and they never went back again. There wasn't any Travellers before that. There might have been an odd poor man that left his home. You know, these tramp men goin' on their own. And maybe a tinsmith. I heard now meself, I heard it from several people, Cromwell runned them out of this part and he runned them down to Connaught. He bate them off the bridge at Athlone. And some of them never had any homes, then, and they started travellin' from that. They were really settled people. Years ago, when I was only young they said that was the first startin' of the travellin' people (Gmelch 1975 : 16).

Bryan McMahon has also expressed the view that many of the Travellers' families were pushed off their land by foreign invasions (O'Toole 1973:57). Traditionally, McMahon explains, the various tribes of Travellers have travelled a small area which they call their "cut" (cuid). Formerly, no tribe could safely invade the "cut" of another, but this pattern has weakened with motorization. O'Toole (1973:57) notes that: "Mr McMahon found it interesting that the cut of some families is the same area which, in ancient times,

belonged to the clans of the name, such as the O'Briens in the Kerry area." Sinead Suinear Butler (1979:13), expresses some doubt as to whether Travellers are in fact the descendents of dispossessed settled families. She notes that there are surnames which are particularly common among travellers but rare among the settled population. Whether the position today is a totally satisfactory indicator of the fate of families several centuries ago is however, debatable.

As to the possibility that at the time of the Famine there was a significant move to the road, two points should be made. First, it seems clear that, whether or not this occurred, there already was an established group of Travellers, speaking their distinctive language, Shelta/Gammon (Harper (1969) and Butler (1979)). Moreover, George and Sharon Gmelch (1976:232) consider it "unlikely that many famine-struck peasants joined the ranks of travelling people. Most went onto the roads only until they could be admitted to one of the workhouses or make their way to the nearest port for passage out of the country."

Secondly, there appears to have been a tradition of temporary travelling which existed long before the Famine. A essay by Arthur Dobbs in 1729, cited by Ribton-Turner (1887:404) states:

It is very well known that great numbers of the native Irish from the mountainous parts of the kingdom that have houses and small farms, by which they might very well maintain themselves, when they have sown their crops planted their potatoes and cut their turf for firing, do either hire out their cows or send them up to the mountains, then shut up their houses and go a begging the whole summer until harvest, with their wives and children, in the most moving condition they can appear in, and disperse themselves over the richest parts of the kingdom. This practice has been so much encouraged of late by the success these strollers have met with, that in several places many who pay at least £4 per ann. rent, hire three or four servants and give to each of them £3 for their chance of the summer's begging. These have their fixed stations, from time to time, where to beg and where to rendezvous to divide their booty.

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that some of these small farmers found begging lucrative enough to take to the roads permanently, given the folk-memory of many Travellers of a settled way of life.

The view has also been expressed that Travellers are the descendents of unmarried mothers and alcoholics driven to the road by destitution. As to unmarried mothers, Sharon and George Gmelch (1976:232), quote the Report of the Commissioners on the Condition of the Poorer Classes, 1835, as stating that "very often women who have bastards are driven to begging, and usually go out of their parishes to beg; in this way they become inured to all the vices and miseries of a vagrant life, in very many cases prostitution may be traced to that cause" (1835:58). The Gmelches add: "There is little doubt that some of these women and their children were absorbed into the Traveller community"

(1976:232). It is debatable, however, whether there is enough evidence to support this; research experience in the present study indicates that since unmarried mothers are ostracised by the Traveller community they belong to, it is unlikely that Travellers would accept unmarried mothers from the settled community.

As to alcoholism, Sharon and George Gmelch note that present-day Travellers often trace their families' history on the road to a drinking problem. They quote one informant:

Goin' back a hundred years or more, me people lived in a cottage in the County Carlow where they was castratin' pigs for a livin' the old fellow was supposed to be mighty fond of drink. They said he spent all his money on it and got behind in the rent. When they (sic) [landlord] wouldn't let the family in the cottage no more, they had to go on the road. They travelled all of County Carlow castrating pigs and stoppin' in old waste houses for the winter. That's probably how they first mixed in with other Travellin' people, and then the children married into the road (1976:233).

What might seem to be an inconsistency in the Gmelches' argument is their assertion, elsewhere in the same article, that:

The only persons on Irish roads never classified as Travellers by either settled Irish or Travellers were single beggarmen or tramps. These men were often alcoholics, sometimes scholars, who travelled alone subsisting on charity (1976:236, fn.7).

If, however, one can distinguish between cases of individual

alcoholics and a family falling on hard times through drink, as in the case from County Carlow above, the argument remains intact.

Dr Michael Flynn of Mullingar, who has worked on genealogies of Travellers, offers an interesting amalgam of the first ("ancient origins") and second ("dispossessed chieftains/evicted farmers/social outcasts") theories as to the Travellers' ancestry. In a personal communication, he said:

I liken the situation to a conveyor belt stretching back into ancient times carrying the traveller population. There would have been a steady trickle of families dropping off and settling in houses while other persons or families would 'hop onto the conveyor belt' by marriage, or drop out from society, or take on some of the former crafts or occupations of travellers - horse dealing was a common shadowy area between settled and travelling people Their existence is unlikely to have been the result solely of disturbance, famine or displacement over the centuries - they are much older than the famine (11/7/74).

The third theory, that Travellers represent a blend of settled Irish blood and Gypsy blood, has some popular support in Ireland. There is little academic support for this view. A somewhat tenuous reliance has been made on the dark colouring of some Irish Travellers (MacRitchie 1889: 351; and O'Toole 1973:73). The subject of genetic affinities of Irish Travellers was, however, studied by a biological anthropologist, Michael Crawford, of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kansas.

The study was carried out in 1970 and involved 127 Travellers and 95 males from the settled population. Crawford concluded:

Judging from the allelic frequencies and the genetic distances, it appears that the Irish Tinkers constitute a social isolate that has differentiated from the surrounding Irish population. The Tinkers are undoubtedly of Irish ancestry, as they resemble neither the Gypsy nor the Pakistan population to any appreciable degree. It is possible that the Tinkers may have experienced some gene flow from Romany Gypsies, but probably of low magnitude (1974:101).

No one denies, however, that there has been a continuing connection between Irish, English, Welsh and Scottish Traveller-Gypsies, to use a neutral term, for many centuries. Thus Ronald Lee, a Canadian Gypsy activist and Romany scholar, has asserted that: "For hundred of years there has been movement in both directions and there is a close and intimate relationship between the original tinker people of Ireland and Scotland and the Romany families who crossed the Continent in the Middle Ages" (Puxon 1972:8).

Walter Simson, writing in 1866, takes a similar view: in fact he treats Gypsies and tinkers as one group, and he claims that "many of the Scottish wandering class have given away before an invasion of Gypsies from Ireland" (1866:6). David MacRitchie (1887) while reprimanding Simson for using the term "Gipsy" in much too comprehensive a fashion, himself states that "the tinker caste in Scotland is certainly Gypsy to some extent". Most of the hard evidence

for this connection is linguistic, and will be examined in greater detail in a later chapter.

It is clear that one is not going to arrive at a definite solution to the mystery of Travellers' origins. That settled people took to the roads at various times in various circumstances is undeniable; what cannot easily be ascertained is whether they became part of the Traveller community. The one clear thread of continuity is occupation; metal-workers, horse dealers and fairground entertainers have led a nomadic, socially isolated and largely endogamous existence on the road from the earliest times to the present.

(b) Travellers in Ireland Today

Travellers were not seen as a significant "social problem" in Ireland until the 1960s, when they began to drift towards the cities. Until then, their nomadic lifestyle meant that, from the standpoint of the settled community, any bad effects of their presence were likely to be only transient, and tolerable in the light of the services they provided. After the Second World War, however, the traditional link between travelling and Travellers' trades was broken. When enamelware and plastic began to replace tin for domestic and farm utensils, the Tinkers' skills were no longer required. When rural bus services and car ownership became widespread,

farm wives in isolated areas could travel to the shops themselves, without having to wait for Tinker/pedlars to bring their wares to them. Increasing mechanization of farms meant less demand for work horses, with a consequent drop in horsedealing, and less demand for casual labourers. With the withering away of their traditional occupations, Travellers began to move toward the cities, and new forms of livelihood.

The new occupations of Travellers in the cities were scrapmetal dealing for the men, and begging for the women. Reiss (1975:58) points out that working with scrap metal springs naturally from the craft of the Tinker; Gmelch and Gmelch (1978:322) that begging is a "direct outgrowth of peddling but without the pretence of offering anything for sale". Both of these occupations can be practised most conveniently in urban settings, but while men can supplement their earnings by dole payments, for women begging is the sole source of income. Because begging is such an important part of Travelling women's lives, and is a major context of their use of Shelta, it will be examined in some detail.

There are two main strategies for begging, house begging and street begging. There is much less stigma attached to house begging for Travellers; even housed or settled Travellers do it. Asking for food and clothing is

considered more respectable than asking for money. Most Traveller women have a schedule of settled women who will keep any castoff clothing or spare food for them when they call. This system works fairly well; for the settled woman, the excuse that she is keeping her donations for her regulars is accepted by other Travellers, so she is not pestered by constant callers, and for the Traveller woman it means that there is some regularity of income. Sometimes these relationships approach friendship between Travellers and settled women, with the Traveller being brought into the house for a cup of tea and a chat, but the charity element is a barrier to true intimacy. However, Traveller women find it useful to have "friends" in the settled community, who will make telephone calls for them, write letters to health boards and social welfare departments, and help out with money in emergencies.

While there is a fiction maintained between the travelling woman and her settled donor that clothing given is for the use of the Traveller's own family, the fact is that most of the clothing given is resold in the secondhand markets. Clothing that has no potential resale value is discarded immediately, sometimes within visual range of the donor's house. This does not endear Travellers to settled people. Apart from unsaleable clothing, food is often discarded, without regard to the sensibilities of the donor, especially prepared food, like sandwiches: "Some Travellers fear being

poisoned by settled people, others simply suspect them of giving them spoiled or dirty food" (Gmelch and Gmelch 1978:447).

There is an obvious contradiction in this behaviour. Travellers will need to approach the same people again, so it would make sense not to antagonize them. The Gmelches say that Travellers are accustomed to avoiding the consequences of their actions by constantly moving; also, as an economically deprived group, they are present-time orientated, so they tend to focus on the specific exchange taking place. However:

The house beggar who ignores the future consequences of discarding unwanted articles on to lawns and hedges will at the same time take the precaution of concealing her loaded pram from the view of each new householder she approaches to maintain the impression that she is in urgent need (Gmelch and Gmelch 1978:444).

Some Travellers drop what they have been given as a sign of contempt towards settled society and its rejection of Travellers. Although the Gmelches indicate that this is not the majority view, settled people unfortunately regard the spurning of their offerings in this light.

Street begging by adults is largely passive, for the few women who do it. They sit on the pavement, often in the cold and rain, with a box beside them for contributions:

Dubliners tend to distinguish between street beggars

who they feel are needy and those who are not on the basis of appearance. the most shabbily dressed and those with small children to care for are judged to be most in need (Gmelch and Gmelch 1978:445).

Since donors reinforce the habit of dressing poorly and bringing along a child to elicit sympathy, Travellers would be foolish not to dress the part. Teenage girls whose pride does not allow them to dress like the older women, in shawls and as poorly as possible, make much less money than they do (1978:444).

Begging by Travellers is officially frowned on. The Report of the Travelling People Review Body states that it "considers that there is no justification for begging". It then goes on to say: "It condemns the practice and suggests that the public should not lend encouragement to or support it" (1983:20). But the ambivalent attitude of settled people towards beggars perpetuates the practice. The Gmelches speculate that this may be due to the Catholic tradition which stresses the salvation of the donor through almsgiving, rather than its effect on the recipient. This, they say, tends to encourage indiscriminate giving. Another factor may be the ancient tradition of almsgiving in Ireland; Ribton-Turner cites the Senchus Mor, or Great Law. This provided for the giving of tythes, first-fruits and alms. These donations would ensure protection from pestilences like plagues, famines and wars. Ribton-Turner observes:

This superstition inculcation seems to furnish the keynote to the almost reverential treatment which the beggar even now experiences in Ireland, while at the same time it also appears to denote the underlying pagan origin of the Brehon laws (1887:374).

Awareness of Travellers as a "social problem" is considered by George Gmelch to be a direct consequence of urbanization (1977:231). It is easy to see why this may be so. begging for women and scrap metal dealing for men, meant increased visibility on city streets, and unsightly litter-strewn camps on the outskirts of towns. A proposal to make roadside camping illegal was considered by public health officials in 1960 (cf. the Highways Act 1959 in Britain). This resulted in a request to the Government to set up a Commission to investigate the state of Travellers, or Itinerants as they were then called. The report of the Commission, issued in 1963, exposed for the first time the deplorable living conditions of the Travellers. poverty, illiteracy and an infant mortality rate four times that of the settled community. The report spurred the setting up of a nationwide movement, consisting of local committees of volunteers eager to help the Travellers, primarily through finding them places to settle. Most of the progress that has been made in the twenty years since the Itinerant Settlement Movement was set up is traceable to the efforts of these volunteers, who have liaised with local authorities in identifying Travellers' needs. This progress can be seen by a brief comparison of the situation as documented in the

1963 Report, and that of the Report on the Travelling People Review Body, which was established jointly by the Ministers for the Environment, and for Health and Social Welfare, issued in 1983.

On Travellers' health, the 1963 Report said that Travellers were surprisingly healthy considering the rigours of their lives. But their life expectancy was considerably lower than that of the settled community, and infant mortality was much higher than the national average (1963:46-7). The 1983 Report is not encouraging on the question of health; life expectancy was still considerably lower than that of the population as a whole, and the proportion of infant and child deaths to all Traveller deaths was found to be still very high. Moreover, in the greater Dublin area in the years 1977 to 1979, the number of violent or unnatural deaths of Travellers was five times higher than average (1983:121).

On education, the progress is better. In 1963 there were only 160 travelling children on school rolls throughout the country, out of a Traveller population of around 1200 families; in the 1983 Report, 300 children were in pre-school classes, and 3,000 were regularly attending primary schools. But only 10% of Travelling children continue in school after the age of twelve, and the Report states that "the number reaching any achievement in second

level education is negligible" (1983:17). The majority of teenage and adult Travellers are illiterate.

More progress has been made in the accommodation of Travellers. The 1963 Report recorded 65 Travelling families as living in houses; 335 in tents; 738 in horsedrawn caravans, some with additional tents and 60 in trailers. Out of a total of 1198 families recorded in a 1960 census of Travellers, 78% of the spouses indicated a desire to settle in one place, if a means of livelihood was available (1963:58). By 1980, 987 families were settled in standard housing, and 253 families were in chalets or in one-room tiggins on serviced sites (1983:37). Families on serviced sites numbered 131. These figures may reflect the position postulated by Gmelch, that within the settlement movement there are two opposing views on the best way to settle Travellers. Most of the local committees, including the Dublin committee, have concentrated on providing serviced camping sites. Most of these have one-room tiggins, or, more recently, 5-room chalets. They have space for the accumulation of scrap metal, grazing for horses, and some have social welfare centres and special schools. As well as these there are a number of undeveloped or temporary sites located in fields or wasteland with paved standing for trailers, water taps and outhouses (Gmelch 1977:232).

The other view, held by about a dozen committees, is that

sites only postpone the "reintegration" on Travellers into settled society. These committees favour housing, and they work by putting pressure on local authorities to allocate public housing to Travellers.

The 1983 Report showed an awareness of the complexity of the situation when it divided Travellers into four groups, based on the type of accommodation they desired: (i) families who wished to live in standard housing among settled people; (ii) families who wished to live in a house but situated among their own people; (iii) families who wished to remain living in a caravan on a serviced site; and (iv) families who wished to continue travelling but who would avail themselves of serviced sites from time to time if they could. The Review Body noted, however, that, while it would aspire to providing families with the kind of accommodation they wanted, there were problems with local authorities, who tended to give in to pressure from residents who did not want to have Travellers accommodated near them. Travelling has become increasingly difficult in recent years: Gmelch sees this as a major reason for families opting for fixed accommodation of some kind. Families also want their children to go to school, at least until basic literacy and numeracy have been acquired. But even when families are housed, problems can arise which drive them back to the road. These include: expense, bills for rent and electricity, which were never payable

before; difficulties with the carry-out of occupations (neighbours object to piles of scrap metal in the back garden, and women are unwilling to be seen by settled neighbours to go out and beg); and hostile reactions from settled neighbours. Settled people fear that Travellers will be noisy and disruptive neighbours; sometimes, when a family becomes known, hostility breaks down, but failing this, loneliness can drive a family back to the road.

There are problems with other forms of accommodation too. One of the main problems on official, developed sites is the proximity of large numbers of unrelated families (Gmelch 1977:234). On undeveloped sites families can move their trailers close to their own kin, but tiggins and chalets on developed sites are fixed, and harmony is threatened by the breakdown of natural clusters. Settlement workers told Gmelch that conflict between families was the primary cause of families leaving settlements.

"Shifting" is a major part of Traveller life. Gmelch claims that because Travellers formerly travelled in small kin-groups of three or four families, they never developed formalised mechanisms of social control. In these circumstances inter-personal relations are characterised by uncertainty and ambivalence, which means that conflict is frequent. Living among unknown Travellers in large sites, with very little privacy, increases the potential for

conflict: Travellers resolve conflict by moving on (1977: 235). Shifting, Gmelch claims, is the solution to many problems of Traveller life. Summonses and police attention are avoided by moving on. Courting teenagers are broken up in this way, and shifting is the traditional Traveller way of coming to terms with the death of a family member. This last point must have some relevance to Travellers' difficulties with housing; such cultural expressions have to be abandoned or modified if housing is to be successful.

Sites have not turned out to be stepping-stones to permanent housing, as was hoped. There is considerable turnover, and many families who have settled permanently on them have no desire to move into public housing (Gmelch 1977:236). They have the amenities they want at lower rent than they would pay in houses, with the added attraction of living among their family group. Realizing that families were not going to graduate into public housing, settlement workers have pressed for sites to include 5-room chalets, rather than the original one-room tiggins.

While Travellers remain on sites, there is little prospect of integration into mainstream society (Gmelch 1977:236). Sites are set off from the settled community by fences or intervening fields. The appearance of sites with caravans or chalets and piles of scrap metal, reinforces the view of the settled people that Travellers are different.

CHAPTER II

TRAVELLER IDENTITY AND CULTURE

This chapter will consider Traveller culture in broad terms. First, it will examine the differing notions of Traveller identity as perceived by the settled community and by Travellers themselves. Next, it will discuss two aspects of Traveller culture, family organization and ritual cleanliness, and consider them in the light of sociological analysis of Gypsy culture.

Traveller Identity

"Tinkers" was the term used for the travelling community by settled people until the 1960s, when the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy popularised the latter term. "Itinerants" as a name was never favoured by Travellers themselves, as the Report points out ("Itinerants (or Travellers as they prefer themselves to be called)" (1963:37)). The Commission considered Itinerant to be less pejorative than Tinker, but the Travellers' own objection to that term was its inaccuracy, rather than any insulting connotation. They regard Tinker as an occupational term.

The word Tinker comes from ceard or tinceard (Sampson 1890),

but it was used from the 16th century on to describe workers in metal. Sharon Gmelch (1975:10), claims that it appeared as a trade or surname as early as 1175. It is clear however that at some unknown time it became a name for the members of the travelling community applied in ignorance by settled people who thought that the Travellers' community was held together by the bond of common occupation. Some part of that confusion is evident in a statute of the pre-Union Irish Parliament in 1797 (37 Geo. III c.3). This enabled various tradesmen, such as coopers, glaziers, plumbers and harness makers, to carry with them necessary materials for exercising their trade, providing they did not carry any other thing for sale; it also permitted "any persons, other than and except travelling tinkers" who were workers, manufacturers or makers of any goods within the kingdom to sell their wares at public fairs and markets. It would seem that travelling Tinkers would be breaking the law if they attempted to sell products, but it is not clear why they were singled out for this treatment. It is possible that "Tinkers" already showed some of the occupational diversity that characterises Travellers today, and that they were accordingly being prevented from acting as pedlars. This interpretation is given credence by an English statute, from the reign of Edward VI (1551-2):

For as much as it is evident that tinkers pedlars and such like vagrant persons are more hurtful than necessarie to the Common Wealth of this Realm, Be it therefore ordeyned that no person or persons

commonly called Tynker, pedlar or pety chapman shall wander or go from one towne to another or from place to place of the the towne, parishe or village where such a person shall dwell, and sell punnes, poyntes, laces, gloves, knyves, glasses topes or any such like things or use or exercise the trade or occupation of a tynker" (Gmelch 1975:10).

The implication of this is that even in the 16th century Tinker did not mean exclusively a metal worker; rather it implied a wandering lifestyle, and a certain blurring of the distinction with pedlars. Walter Simson confirms this in a quote from a report in the Caledonian Mercury of 22 August 1829:

The country is much infected of late years by wandering hordes of vagabonds, who under the serviceable calling of tinkers assume the name and appearance of such, merely to extort contributions of victuals and other articles of value from the country people, particularly in lonely districts these bands possess all the vices peculiar to regular gypsies without any of the extenuating qualities.

Travellers are almost the only people left who habitually use the word Tinker in its occupational sense: in their eyes, not all Travellers are Tinkers, but all Tinkers are Travellers.

"Tinkers" were seen as a cohesive group by the members of the Poor Law Commission in 1835. They estimated that there were 2,385,000 beggars on the road at least part of the year at that time, of which Tinkers formed a distinct class (Gmelch & Gmelch 1976:228). A resident of Co Longford told the Commission: "Ordinary beggars do not become a separate

class of the community, but wandering tinkers, families who always beg, do. Three generations of them have been seen begging together." A Mayo resident said "The wives and families accompany the tinker while he strolls about in search of work, and always beg. They intermarry with one another and form a distinct class" (Gmelch 1975:10; Gmelch & Gmelch 1976:228). Unfortunately the Commission did not define what it meant by Tinker - but it is clear that whether the term was descriptive of occupation or lifestyle, "Tinkers" were a recognizably distinct group at that time.

The limits of an occupational definition are very obvious when one looks at the occupations of the first informants of the Shelta language. MacAlister (1937:130) describes Shelta as the secret jargon of "itinerant tinkers". But the first informant was an itinerant knifegrinder, the second a seller of ferns; little boys selling groundsel outside Marylebone Road Station, in London, more knifegrinders, and an umbrella maker, as well as "tinkers" living in an Irish area of Liverpool, "in a street which at the time was safe only for the dispensary doctor and the Catholic priest", and "tinkers" in Scotland comprise the rest. MacAlister's loose classification system indicates that a Tinker is still a Tinker if he practices another occupation, and lives in a slum instead of roaming the country. In practice, if not in theory, the community MacAlister deals with is bounded by the language they speak. This community (speakers of

Shelta) was described by a reliable informant to Sampson's study in the following terms:

They

- (a) constitute a caste rather than a class;
- (b) have a common bond of heredity as well as of craft;
- (c) intermarry;
- (d) are not recruited from other classes of society;
- (e) can, it is claimed, be recognized by physical type;
- (f) travel from place to place, in small bands or families, plying their craft;
- (g) frequent fairs, trading in calves and asses, while their women gain money by hoaxing, telling fortunes, cutting cards and tossing cards (MacAlister 1937:131; Butler 1979:10).

Nevertheless, the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy in 1963 claimed that

Itinerants (or travellers as they prefer themselves to be called) do not constitute a single homogenous group, tribe or community within the nation, although the settled population are inclined to regard them as such. Neither do they constitute a separate ethnic group. There is no system of unified control, authority or government and no individual or group of individuals has any powers or control over the itinerant members of the community (1963:37).

This statement has to be seen in the context of the time at which it was written. In 1963, Government agencies and well-motivated socially-aware members of voluntary bodies saw the most reasonable and humanitarian solution to the "itinerant problem" as settlement, i.e. assimilation. This policy could only be applied on the basis that Travellers were an unfortunate, socially-disadvantaged subgroup of the larger society; if they had any status as an ethnic minority, a policy that would transform Travellers into settled people could be questioned. Without any attribution of bad faith to the members of the Commission, it may be pointed out that the criteria they use in defining an ethnic group are based on the standards of sedentary cultures. The political and external control systems which the Commission sees the Travellers as lacking are "never found in the same forms among nomadic peoples, which typically have diffuse informal power-and-control structures based on kinship" (Butler 1979:10).

By 1970, awareness of Traveller culture and separateness had grown to such an extent that MacGreil could write:

The difference between this group and the outcasts and down-and-outs is that it inherited its position. They form a distinctive endogamous minority group. They are a sub-culture, i.e. having their own set of beliefs and ideas, values and norms and symbolic meaningful systems within the culture of the Irish people (1970:5-6).

There were problems even with the definition of Travellers as

a sub-culture: Butler claims that settlement workers' use of this term led them to focus on the unsuccessful members of the group and ignore the successful. These they regarded as "horse-ranchers" and "roadside traders" rather than bona fide Travellers. A social worker told Butler that it was the policy of settlement workers not to bring the children of rich, successful Travellers to school since they would provide poorer travelling children with an appealing model for themselves within the bounds of Traveller culture.

In 1976, an article of some significance to Travellers was published by George and Sharon Gmelch, researchers and fieldworkers for several years on the social anthropology of Travellers. The article was entitled "The emergence of an ethnic group: the Irish Tinkers". It pointed out that, although ethnic identities are usually based on difference of skin colour, language, religion, national origin or a combination of these factors, sometimes ethnic groups arise within culturally homogenous populations. Itinerant populations in Western Europe, including the Swedish Tattare, the Dutch Reiziger and the Irish Travellers are examples of this.

The Gmelches' reasons for considering Travellers a distinct ethnic group are based on accepted anthropological definitions (Naroll 1964), cited by Gmelch & Gmelch (1976:226):

- 1) Endogamy - they are biologically self-perpetuating;
- 2) They share cultural features and behavioural patterns which distinguish them from settled Irish people;
- 3) They have a separate field of communication and interaction: their contacts with settled people are brief and stylised; and
- 4) They identify themselves, and are identified by others as a separate cultural group.

The Gmelches' essential thesis is that Travellers, being the same stock of settled Irish (cf. Crawford and Gmelch 1974) gradually diverged:

At first their identity was based only on their shared lifestyle. But gradually it was strengthened through their growing isolation from settled Irish society, and simultaneously through their increased contact, intermarriage and identification with other itinerants (Gmelch & Gmelch 1976:225).

Several factors influenced the separation. One was the Travellers' use of Shelta or Gammon. Without commenting on the age or previous usage of the language, the Gmelches point out that having a secret "argot" which can be used in situations of confrontation with settled people has increased the Travellers' feelings of separateness. Names applied to settled people by Travellers, such as "Buffers" and "country people" are a related factor. A third factor

was the Travellers' acquisition of shelter of their own. Until the 1880s, Travellers relied on friendly farmers and poorer people in the country to lend them outhouses or barns to sleep in. If these were not available, they slept under hedges. Towards the end of the last century they began to make bender tents, and to acquire carts to move their possessions from place to place (MacGreine 1934). They adopted the canvas barrel-top wagons from English Gypsies who came to Ireland during World War 1 to avoid conscription (Gmelch and Gmelch 1976:235). Having shelter of their own lessened their dependence on settled people and contributed to their isolation. The distinctiveness of the Travellers' new homes was another factor:

The acquisition of the unique and readily identifiable material culture of tents and carts, as well as special types of horses, also heightened the tendency of Tinkers to view themselves, and to be viewed by settled Irish society, as a separate ethnic group (Gmelch and Gmelch 1976:235).

Rejection of Travellers by settled people has helped to reinforce boundaries between the two communities. The Report of the Commission on Itinerancy described the attitude of settled people:

In nearly all areas, itinerants are despised as inferior beings and are regarded as the dregs of society. Many [settled people] feel that they would demean themselves by associating with them The majority of the settled population wish to avoid any contact with itinerants in any form and break off any contact that is established as soon as possible" (1963:102).

In Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland (1977) MacGreil describes his finding that 71% of his sample rejected the idea of accepting Travellers into their family through marriage. The main reasons given were lack of social status (62%) and way of life (32%). MacGreil concluded:

One third of those who rejected the itinerants saw them as a socially and culturally separate group. This, coupled with the 71% rejection of them as being welcome into the family through marriage, i.e. forced endogamy, would support the view that the Travellers are enclosed from the greater society (1977:177).

One reason for the prejudice against Travellers may have been their traditional mobility: they rarely stayed in one place long enough for residents to get to know them. Such interaction as there was may even have increased prejudice. The drunkenness and brawling which characterised some Travellers' gatherings in the past seemed threatening to settled people, and may have reinforced their prejudice against Travellers. There may also be deeper psychological factors involved. The Irish peasant traditionally valued land ownership very highly, and looked down on those not holding land (Gmelch and Gmelch 1976:234). A study of Norwegian itinerants found that "within the sedentary population their very nomadism is construed as a denial of the peasants' basic values; as a result they are distrusted, feared and even persecuted" (Blom 1969:84). It is widely accepted in Ireland that the high valuation of land ownership by the peasant is reflected in the fact that

Ireland has the largest proportionate ownership of private housing in Europe. It seems likely, therefore, that because the Traveller does not culturally value ownership, this may be a factor in prejudice against Travellers.

Although changes in their designation as a group have not noticeably affected the levels of prejudice against Travellers, there have been changes at an official level. In the 1970s the National Council for Itinerant Settlement changed its name to the National Council for Travelling People. In doing this, the Council tacitly acknowledged that "settlement" was not a total answer, or even a very desirable one in some cases. They also paid Travellers the compliment of calling them by the name they preferred. This change of policy is very evident in the Report of the Travelling People Review Body, which updated the 1963 Report. It is significant that the 1963 Report could state that, despite difficulties likely to be encountered,

it is not considered that there is any alternative to a positive drive for housing itinerants if a permanent solution of the problem of itinerancy, based on absorption and integration, is to be achieved (1963:62).

In contrast, the enlightened approach of the 1983 report is heartening:

The Review Body considers that in the light of experience and current knowledge the concept of absorption is unacceptable, implying as it does the

swallowing up of the minority travellers' group by the dominant settled community, and the subsequent loss of traveller identity. It is suggested that it is better to think in terms of integration between the traveller and the settled community (1983:6).

Aspects of Traveller Culture

Croghan's definition (1984:55) of culture as "the symbolic organization of space by a group" and of language as "cultural capital" (1984:59) may be useful in seeking to understand the relationship between Traveller identity and Traveller culture.

The image of themselves which Travellers present in their dealings with settled people is not necessarily an accurate one. Travellers in the conversations with "Buffers" adopt a self-deprecatory attitude to their own way of life. They give the impression that to live as the Buffers do is the height of their ambition. But there is evidence that, internally, their way of life is a source of considerable pride.

What does being a Traveller mean? Most Travellers would accept as a Traveller a person who could show by genealogy that he/she was born of Travellers, but this is not a sufficient condition in itself. Knowledge of the Shelta/Gammon language is important, but it is accepted among the travelling community that some families speak it better

than others. To be accepted as a Traveller, a person would have to show that apart from having Traveller relations, and some knowledge of the language, that he/she subscribed to a certain set of norms. These are common to nomadic groups in many countries: the English Gypsies, Scottish Tinkers and Scandinavian Tattare are examples. Two aspects of normative behaviour, which show how Travellers set the boundaries of their community, will be examined because of what they show about the Traveller concept of self-esteem and separatism. These are (a) family organization and (b) ritual cleanliness. To set the context, the literature in these areas will first be reviewed. This deals mainly with groups other than Irish Travellers, but it will become clear that there are striking similarities of practice; there has been a remarkable absence of sociological interest in Irish Travellers.

Family Organization

Fernham Rehfisch (1961:121) defined the group he studied, Scottish Tinkers, as being a socio-cultural minority group, of which membership was granted only to those persons having at least one Tinker parent. He found that a further necessary qualification was that a person must identify with the group - thus one was a Tinker only as long as one wanted to be. Among Rehfisch's subjects, marriages among close kin were frequent, especially double first cousins. One

beneficial effect of these marriages was to strengthen ties within the local and most essential structural groups, which might otherwise have been weakened through divided loyalties when feuds erupted. These unions were seen as a means of reinforcing and perpetuating close ties within the large group. Endogamy was increased between local groups by the fact that Tinkers tended to travel in fairly restricted areas - areas determined by their ancestors' travelling patterns - which meant that most of their contact was with their relations. Relationships with groups in the same area were of two kinds: close kinship or feuding, and it was unlikely that children of feuding groups would marry. But Rehfisch acknowledged that close kin marriages were less frequent than they had been. His explanation is interesting, if true. Today there is more police intervention in Tinkers' lives than formerly: where traditionally the police would have left Tinkers to sort out their differences among themselves, they now tend to intervene and break up fighting. This means that the need for mutual support among families is much less. Another reason mentioned by Rehfisch is that with motorization, the areas travelled over are much greater, so contacts are with outsiders more than kin.

Fredrick Barth, (1975) writing about the Tater, a Scandinavian indigenous group with strong similarities to Irish Travellers, describes in some detail the processes by

which the Tater identify their own. The formal criterion is descent from a known Tater, ideally, but not necessarily, patrilineally. The only criterion of ancestral status is the ancestor's remembered way of life, so while outsiders who join the group and adopt its lifestyle never become Taters, their descendents do. Taters have large families, which results in dispersal of the children, since their economic skills would be redundant in larger groups. Barth noted that the inherent movement in Taters' lives, and the scattering of contacts caused by this movement, means that a lineage system of descent would not be flexible enough in itself. For this reason the lineage system is combined with a bilateral kinship principle, to organize the accretion of other persons around the lineage core. So while the central focus is an inner circle of parents, siblings and children, the field extends outwards to encompass second and third cousins. Knowledge of widely ramifying genealogies is a necessary requirement for maintaining such extensive relations. Barth found that the combination of the principles of lineage and bilateral kinship produced a more complex type of social organization: rights and authority of one part of a group over another came through lineage, while feelings of obligation and solidarity towards relations came through the bilateral principle. Marriage patterns in Barth's study showed close-kin endogamy - parallel cousins, cross cousins, in fact any relation outside the elementary family were

favoured as marriage partners. Contacts within the kin group were maintained by a pattern of visiting, and by the knowledge of genealogies.

Judith Okely, (1975:65) studying Gypsies travelling the South of England, found that Gypsy society was organized on the basis of kin groups tracing their ancestry to a common ancestor, whether on the maternal or paternal line. Okely, like Rehfisch, found that descent was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of acceptance as a Gypsy. Gypsy identity was confirmed by socialization and a continuing commitment to the Gypsy lifestyle and dominant cultural traits. Although these traits were liable to change over time, certain constants were noted: an ideology of travelling, self-employment, cleanliness rituals and knowledge of one or more of the Gypsy-Travellers' languages.

The kin groups in Okely's study did not own property communally: they offered support and solidarity but each composite family was an independent economic unit. Kin groups ranged in composition from complete or partial sets of married siblings, through parents with some or all of their married offspring, to siblings with cousins, aunts and uncles. Kin groups were usually of the same economic level. Where there were kin of the same economic level without consanguineal links, alternative links had to be forged through intermarriage. A popular form of marriage

was where two or more brothers from one group married two or more sisters from another, or where a brother and sister married a brother and sister. Among Okely's subjects, close kin, e.g. first cousin marriages were discouraged, but she found that the practice was common among poorer families.

Adams et al. (1975) found among the English Gypsies they studied evidence which supports Rehfisch's analysis of close kin marriages as a means of minimising the potential for conflict and rivalry. They also recorded the phenomenon of two brothers from one group marrying two sisters of another. They observed that

This type of marriage is a special example of a general pattern of marriage links found between two kin groups. These links were not seen by Travellers as mere coincidences: Travellers described the marriage patterns explicitly. One man said 'The Watkins used to marry the Whites but now they're marrying the Millers' (Adams et al. 1975:82).

The importance of the fact that kinship links exist not only in local areas but throughout the country was stressed by an anonymous contributor to Rehfisch's 1975 book. Although Travellers are aware of belonging to a geographically fragmented group, they consider that all Travellers in the country make up a unified community, with which they can identify. Kinship links with groups in other regions provide lines of communication that function in many ways. They provide information about work opportunities in other

areas, as well as news of births, marriages and deaths. This communication network is a strong contributing factor to the creation of a sense of community. News is generally carried in person: constant visiting facilitates the extension of kinship ties, strengthening existing relationships, and providing information on group members' movements, which in itself strengthens bonds.

The perpetual contacts between different groups creates a 'web-like' structure which is always changing in design as the groups keep migrating, but these constant lines of communication, with their multiplicity of functions, are of prime importance in creating a sense of community identity, social vitality and a dynamic kinship structure (Anon., in Rehfisch 1975:110).

The following observations are based on fieldwork interviews with Travellers. Among those studied, the principle of descent appeared to work on the same lines as those groups reviewed above. At least one Traveller parent is required, but commitment to the travelling lifestyle is a major qualifying feature. There was some evidence of the bilateral principle described by Barth operating to a greater or lesser extent. Travellers when they have the choice like to live in extended family groups. It is interesting to note that Travellers have no concept of the term friend in the sense of an unrelated associate: to them, friends are relations, and relations are termed friends. The people interviewed lived either on sites or what is termed "group housing", that is, a small estate of

houses built especially for Travellers, not among, but not far from, settled people. In the case of one woman, her neighbours included her brother and his family, and a selection of her married daughters and their families. A couple interviewed lived next door to the wife's parents, and neighbours were relations of the parents' generation, aunts and cousins and uncles but no married siblings.

Among these people, arranged marriages were the norm, but the informants were at pains to point out that this is not the draconian measure it seems to be to settled people: parents simply watch their young boys and girls for signs of a disposition towards each other, and act accordingly. These Travellers said that most family groups would have an aunt or some elderly relative who arranged marriages. The business would be done at weddings and funerals, or whenever the clan was gathered. The matchmaker first approaches the boy's father, then the girl's; then the boy's mother, and the girl's mother; then the boy and finally the girl. Anyone along the line could refuse, and in these circumstances, the interested parties themselves might never know what had been planned. However a girl would be wary of refusing too often, especially if she was getting on in years ("say, over 21").

A travelling couple said that young marriages are as popular as ever among Travellers: "They would be marrying at 12 if

they were allowed." They saw the rules of advance notice and pre-marriage courses laid down by the state and the churches as unnecessarily restrictive. They said that the reason for young marriages was the difficulty of keeping young boys and girls apart: with more schooling and access to television young people's attitudes were changing, and they wanted to meet the opposite sex. But a young girl's marriage prospects are very easily damaged: "if someone said they saw Mary down at the shops laughing and talking with a boy, her parents would do their best to marry her off quickly". One can surmise from this that virginity is important for brides, though this was not explicitly stated. The same couple spoke of the consequences of an unmarried pregnancy. They said that if the girl was raped, or if she was mentally retarded, she would be kept, and child would be kept, but she and the child would have "a dog's life". If she got pregnant of her free will, on the other hand, she would be "out, sent away, and no one would care what became of her."

Gmelch (1975) said that the breakup of the traditional marriage groups caused a sharp increase in preferential cousin marriages among Irish Travellers. But according to a couple interviewed, the marriage groups are still functioning as strongly as ever. They named some of these groups: the Sherlocks and Collinses travel and marry together in the West of Ireland; the Connors, Cashes and

Delaneys in Wicklow and Wexford; the Loveridges, O Driscolls and O Sullivans in the South; and in the North the McGinleys, the Thorntons and the D'Arcys. The McDonaghs and Nevins travel and marry together in the Midlands. Because of the relatively small areas travelled in by these groups, close kin marriages are very popular. Double first cousin marriages were favoured by the Travellers interviewed; one couple were such a marriage themselves. But marriages with second and third cousins were also popular.

The type of marriage described by Okely (1975:82) where two brothers married two sisters, or a brother and sister married a brother and sister was popular among these Travellers. This type of union was seen by them as cementing ties between families. Another benefit was economic: when a family lost a member of its economic unit, they liked to get someone in exchange, which left both families equal.

The reasons the Travellers interviewed gave for favouring close-kin marriages were several. One was economic, but the most compelling reason was the support that such marriages gave to young couples. They said that when a young wife left her husband as a protest after a quarrel and went back to her own people, the husband was in a better negotiating position to get her back if he was dealing with

his own aunt or uncle. They indicated that family censure was an effective control on bad behaviour in marriage. Gmelch's experience seems to support this. He quotes a Traveller:

Travelling people believe that cousins will have more nature for each other and they won't use no violence on each other. The boy won't kick the woman up so bad if she's his cousin.... If they aren't happy together they may stick on just for the sake of bein' so close in relation (Gmelch 1975:269).

This point should not be overemphasised. Marital violence is a real feature of the lives of some Traveller families.

The pattern of visiting which Barth (1975) considered contributed to family solidarity, and which the anonymous writer in Rehfisch (1975) also noted in the context of news-carrying, is very much a part of Irish Traveller life. Travellers said that news of births and deaths is always carried in person, but that visiting did not depend on having such important news. In the course of research, the tape recorder frequently had to be turned off while someone who had "dropped in" was introduced. Sometimes these casual visitors had travelled twenty miles or more. Poignant confirmation of this practice comes from a Traveller woman interviewed in the Irish Times (30 June 1984:9). She said:

I lived in a house up there in Fettercairn for three years But I left. The neighbours didn't like the idea of us having visitors - well, they'd come

three or four times a day - my daughters and sons-in-law, and my husband's brothers. They (the neighbours) began sending in petitions. I tried to do as well as I could, but it was all one to them what I did. They called us knackers and when my children went out to play they'd take theirs in. I was years putting in for a house, and it was hard living in it. When the neighbours stopped my visitors coming up - well, I stopped them myself to see if the neighbours would be better - it was very lonesome.

Another Traveller interviewed for the same article said "What the neighbours don't understand is that we have to have the visitors coming. It's so lonesome and we've been used to being with our own crowd since we were children".

Hospitals inspire a particular type of visiting: Travellers said that when one of their number is in hospital as many as twenty or thirty relations would congregate at the hospital to comfort the sick person with family solidarity. They knew the hospital authorities objected to this practice, but said they couldn't leave a loved one to bear his or her sickness alone.

Barth's view of the role played by knowledge of genealogies in the social life of Taters is confirmed in the case of the Travellers in this study. All of those spoken to could trace relationship to the sixth or eighth cousin degree. In the course of research, the Travellers brought this researcher to visit another family about thirty miles away, whom they had never met. When the researcher expressed surprise at feeling free to drop in on strangers without

notice, the Travellers said, "We'll get a link, and then they won't mind." "Getting a link" meant finding some common ancestry, or some connection by marriage. Unfortunately, this was done while the researcher waited in the car: undoubtedly it would have been interesting to hear how it was done.

Barth noted that Taters had large families, which in the interest of economic survival tended to disperse and attach themselves to various kin groups within the extended family. This was in circumstances where the Taters still practised their traditional trades; an interesting comparison can be made with Irish Travellers. For the latter, traditional trades and occupations have been replaced, or at least supplemented, by unemployment benefit, which means that in the absence of economic competition, families are more likely to stay together. This may go some way to explaining the vast numbers of Travellers who congregate on sites in the Dublin area, contrary to the previous practice of travelling and living in small groups.

Ritual Cleanliness

In their book Gypsies and Government Policy in England, Adams et al. (1975:36) point out that while a public health official might think he could tell a "real" Gypsy by the neatness of his camping ground, Gypsies themselves recognize

each other by the state of their crockery. "Real" Gypsies, and "real" Irish Travellers, that is, so-recognized from the inside, operate a strict segregation system between different body areas, and between what is clean and what is unclean. As in the previous section, most of the research has been done on Gypsies and non-Irish Travellers, but similarities of practice are striking.

Manfri Frederick Wood (1973:63), himself a Gypsy, gives the background to the idea of ritual cleanliness. He claims that it is based on the "old Romany religion": the religion is now forgotten, but some of the superstitions associated with it linger. In this religion there were two opposing gods - Moshto the god of life and Arivell the god of death. Fire and water represented Moshto and had the power to purify, but everything and everyone in the world was under constant threat of contamination from Arivell. Arivell was the source of parasites and disease, as well as nightmares and worries. To avoid coming in contact with the disease-carrying demons which were Arivell's progeny, the rules of ritual cleanliness had to be kept.

This meant, and means for traditional Romani families today, that every member of the family had to have his own utensils which had to be washed separately from everyone else's. At very least, men's and women's utensils had to be kept separate. Basins used for personal washing or washing

clothes could never be used for washing utensils and, in very traditional families, men's and women's clothing had to be washed in separate basins.

Carol Miller, writing about American Gypsies, offers a detailed rationale of the theory behind ritual cleanliness. She describes pollution laws as working on the life of Gypsy society, in the sense of symbolising certain dangers, and expressing a general view of the social order (1975:41). Certain areas of the body are regarded as pure and holy, notably the head and mouth, and the whole upper body; items which maintain these areas, such as combs, razors, clothes, towels are kept separate. Anything which is congruent with the upper body is treated with ritualised respect: this of course includes food, food preparation and utensil washing. Miller claims that the orifices which give access to the inner body are defensively guarded, since the inner body is the source of *marime*, or ritual pollution. Because it breaches the margins of the inviolate body area, eating is a delicate and close regulated matter.

Any contact between the upper body and the lower is impure. Ritual separation is assumed to maintain the purity of one, by containing the impurity of the other. The hands have a transitional status, mediating between the two areas: they can be purified by washing with "face" soap and towels.

The potential for marime varies at different stages of life. The newborn infant is totally impure because of its recent contact with the inner body of its mother. The mother is impure because of her constant handling of the infant. Women are not allowed to cook or serve food for a certain length of time after giving birth, the eldest daughter taking over these duties at these times. It is not clear when children become pure, but it is certain that they do at some fairly early stage: children are forgiven transgressions of the code because of their ignorance of the consequences of impurity, i.e., the spread of disease.

Marriage activates the full potential for pollution. Adult responsibilities include segregation of the sexes, as well as the two body areas. Married couples can give no hint of their sexual relationship, even in the most cursory of displays of affection. Miller observed that among her informants, taboos extended to such things as yawning or looking sleepy at table, because "it means you're thinking of going to bed" (1975:44). Daughters are unlikely to mention pregnancy even to their mothers, because of the relation of pregnancy to intercourse.

Under normal circumstances, adult men and women, as well as children and old people, are considered to be reasonably pure, the latter because of their presumed lack of interest in sex, the former because their contact is confined to the

appropriate connubial time and place. Miller claims that the changing intensity of power to pollute and danger from pollution throughout life indicates that the ritual separation of body areas, upper from lower, inner from outer, male from female, has a primary function in the control of sexual behaviour: improper sexual contact spreads shame and defilement through the community (Miller 1975:44).

The sole value of non-Gypsies to the group Miller studied was economic, and their main threat was of defilement, because they are seen as habitually confusing the categories of pure and impure. Because of this Gypsies conceive of non-Gypsies as carriers of all kinds of diseases, and those that associate with non-Gypsies are regarded as susceptible to disease.

Adams et al. (1975:48) say that Gypsies use the concept of cleanliness to erect boundaries between themselves and outsiders. House dwellers judge Gypsies' cleanliness by the surroundings of the trailers; they rarely see the inside, which is generally clean and neat. The surrounding area is not regarded as important to Gypsies, being primarily for storage and practical use; and Gypsies regard housedwellers with excessively neat gardens as very likely neglecting the inside of the house. Public health officials frequently ask Gypsies if they have Elsan

lavatories in their trailers. These are common in the caravans housedwellers use for holidays, and in mobile homes, but Adams et al. claim the idea is abhorrent to Gypsies, especially in close proximity to the kitchen. They say that Travellers often cover up the built-up sinks in their trailers, and use a selection of bowls instead: they fear that the sink may give the impression to other Gypsies that they confuse categories of clean and unclean. Adherence to the rules of ritual cleanliness was seen by Adams' informants as the mark of a real Gypsy.

The Travellers interviewed for this study observed the rules of segregation of categories detailed by the commentators above. They spoke of a "clean" basin for washing vessels, and a "dirty" basin for personal washing. The most striking aspect of this behaviour, in this researcher's opinion, was the way these Travellers regarded those who did not obey these rules, such as housedwellers, or Buffers. They did not go so far as to say that Buffers carried disease because of their habits, but this may have been the natural politeness of Travellers when talking to a Buffer. They did indicate, however, that they would feel sick after having been in a house which they considered unclean. One Traveller woman said that if she went into a house and saw a razor by the kitchen sink, she would be physically sick. She said that if she was offered a cup of tea in such a house, she would ask for "a sup in a bottle, please" to take

away with her, and she would discard it at the earliest opportunity. It is interesting to speculate on housedwellers' reactions to such judgments on their cleanliness. The function of ritual cleanliness as a reinforcer of boundaries between Travellers and settled people is clear. Boundaries between different groups in the Traveller/Gypsy world were firmly drawn by one Traveller woman, when asked why she disliked Gypsies. She replied "They're dirty - they wash their clothes and their dishes in the same basin".

Carol Miller's point (1975:44) that the ritual separation of body areas, which leads to separation of washing facilities, has a primary function in the control of sexual behaviour, seems to have some relevance to Irish Travellers. The sexes are rigorously separated, and the rules of acceptable behaviour for women vis a vis men are strictly enforced. Women should not be seen chatting to men outside their immediate family - husband, brothers and sons. In the evening, when the men congregate around the camp-fire, the women gather together in one of the trailers or around a separate fire. Travelling women should not look at men directly: this caused problems for one woman, when she appeared on television. She wanted to talk directly to the camera - to tell the viewers exactly what the situation was for Travellers - but she was inhibited in this by the cameraman standing behind the camera. The same woman

described the reaction of Travellers to a proposed training centre for Traveller teenagers: when they heard that it was to be co-educational, they would have nothing to do with it. The woman said, somewhat obliquely, that "it wouldn't be nice for girls to be mixing with boys when they had their periods." Travellers have no objections to small children being educated together; the implication is that puberty is the dividing line. This bears out Miller's thesis that from some unstated time shortly after birth until puberty, children are considered pure. Barnes (1975:244) points out, and this was confirmed in the course of research, that although sexual morality was a sacred subject to Irish Travellers, children are encouraged to curse in the most graphic terms, as long as they give no hint that they understand what they are saying.

Mention of sexual matters, between women together, but especially in mixed company, was taboo among the women interviewed. One woman told of "running" a social worker out of her trailer because the social worker started discussing methods of family planning in front of the woman's husband. Among these women, pregnancy could never be mentioned, even by other women, and even when it was quite obvious. The practical problems this would seem to involve were got around by the question, from some close female relative, "When will you be going away?". It is

possible however, that apart from the taboo of discussing sex-related themes, there may be an element of superstition involved: it might seem to be tempting fate to speak of an expected delivery date. All of those interviewed spoke of the dire consequences that befall an unmarried mother. Carol Miller's characterization of illicit sexual contact as spreading defilement through the community seems to be borne out by the statement of these women that the sisters of an unmarried mother would have great difficulty in finding husbands.

While the old custom of "churching" a woman after childbirth is no longer common in many areas among settled people, it is still common among Travellers. It is possible that this is less the expression of religious fervour than a concession to the idea of the impurity of the inner body; like Miller's American Gypsies, Irish Traveller women are not allowed to cook or serve food for a certain length of time after giving birth, or when menstruating. The eldest daughter takes over these duties at these times.

Mulcahy, writing about Gypsies in Spain, describes their camping ground as being bounded off from the larger population by a kind of no-man's-land. The Gypsy children emphasise the closing of this border by defecation on the settled side of it, often in full view of settled people in

apartment houses across the street. This dissuades non-Gypsy penetration into the territory, but not Gypsy crossings of the boundary to carry out necessary operations among the settled community (Mulcahy 1979:12).

Mulcahy's insight offers a graphic example of the way Travellers live among the settled community: they make forays into the "enemy" camp, but the borders of their own community are closely guarded. The fact that one cannot become a fully-fledged Traveller either by marriage or by adopting the lifestyle of Travellers (that benefit being reserved for the children of those who show the necessary commitment) ensures that family structure and Traveller culture are protected and respected. This also has the effect of insulating the group from influence from the outside. It seems clear that the close-knit texture of Traveller family life leads to a feeling of self-sufficiency and internal strength. Housedwellers are not needed for any affect they are unlikely to give. This in itself would tend to increase feelings of independence. The advantages of belonging to a community which considers itself a unit despite geographical fragmentation are obvious.

Ritual cleanliness, as Miller points out, shows that Gypsies feel the need to protect themselves from non-Gypsies. Irish Travellers, too, feel that they are likely to catch diseases from too-close contact with "Buffers", but

cleanliness also seems to have a function with regard to self-esteem. It is obviously important to Travellers to feel superior to the settled society: they would not want to feel that their position in society as a whole is a true reflection of their worth. So, because they are traditionally a low-status group, they make symbolic defence against the larger group through their belief in an overall power to contain or spread pollution that housedwellers know nothing about (cf. Miller 1975). This means that their morale and self-respect can remain intact, in the face of demeaning life circumstances. On this point of Traveller self-esteem, Rehfisch (1975:275) notes that Scottish Travellers being visited by outsiders adopt an obsequious attitude which is far from real. They refer constantly to the poverty and wickedness of their lives, indicating that they share the housedwellers' values and aspirations. Rehfisch says that this is a performance designed to elicit sympathy, gifts and improved conditions. Something of the same phenomenon can be seen in the case of Irish Travellers: when they are accused by housedwellers of being dirty, they usually reply that housedwellers would be too if they lived in similar surroundings, with the same lack of facilities. They do not point out that they consider themselves infinitely cleaner than their accusers, who are ignorant and careless enough to wash themselves at the kitchen sink.

CHAPTER III

SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF ROMANI AND SHELTA

Romani is the language of the Gypsies of the world. Gypsy populations of different countries speak different dialects of Romani. Academic discussion in recent years has shown that in Britain, while the majority of Gypsies use Romani lexis in a basically English syntactical structure, the original inflected language spoken by the earliest Gypsy immigrants may have survived in some areas. Terms therefore need to be defined: Anglo-Romani, Anglo-Romanes and Romani English all refer to the modern usage of Romani words in a basically English structure, while Romanes, deep Romanes or Romani, inflected Romani, or more recently Romnimos (Hancock 1984b:367) all refer to the original inflected language. In the discussion that follows, apart from the specific consideration of the dialectal situation, the term Romani will be used as a generic reference.

There has been some confusion of terms in Irish Traveller language also. "Shelta" is the name given to the secret language of Travellers by the discoverers of the language in Britain; it does not seem to have been commonly used by Travellers in Ireland. They call their language Minceirs' Thari, Gammon or Cant. These last terms will be analysed

in the next chapter: confusion may be avoided at this stage if "Shelta" is used as a generic term.

Shelta and Romani, while different in origin and development, share many of the same sociolinguistic characteristics. Which of these languages one uses is a major point of definition of which group belongs to, in situations where Travellers and Gypsies are associated, as in Britain; and internally, language use functions as a status symbol. Both languages are primarily used for secrecy now, for the protection of communication in front of outsiders. It could be said, therefore, that their secret languages are for Gypsies and Travellers symbols both of solidarity and separation (Mulcahy 1979:16). A review of the literature on these aspects of Romani will serve as the basis for a comparison with Shelta from fieldwork experience, and the limited literature on the subject.

(a) Secret Communication

Kenrick (1979:111) claims that Romani English today is a register of English, a special lexis of between 100 and 1000 words which Gypsies chose to use, in an English framework, in certain circumstances. The most important of these is in situations of danger, or when outsiders are present and have to be excluded for whatever reason. For many Gypsies the fact that they have a language of their own is in itself

a reason for secrecy (Kenrick 1979:117). This creates the paradox that they cannot use the language publicly to pass secret information; this consideration however did not seem to bother a Gypsy family mentioned by Kenrick earlier (1971:13), where the Gypsy mother shouted across a crowded court room to her son in the dock "Don't forget you got to have a kenner". Kenner means house, and the secret message to the son was that he would have to give a fixed address if he wanted to get bail. Romani is used, according to Kenrick, mainly when Gypsies come in contact with the police. Shelta is used in the same type of situation. When an Irish policeman comes to a Travellers' site, a few words in Shelta can send a child running to warn the person under threat, while other Travellers keep the police away until he escapes. Travellers said that the fact that Shelta uses strange words in an English structure means that suspicions are not aroused, as they would be if a foreign language were used. The fact that many settled people profess to have difficulty in understanding Travellers in ordinary speech, makes the likelihood of their noticing Shelta words even less.

A major difference between Romani and Shelta appears to be the process of acquisition. Kenrick indicates that, for many Gypsy families, learning to use Romani is a rite de passage (1979:119); it is not taught to young children, in his opinion for reasons of secrecy, but adolescents, when

they start going out with older relatives looking for work, are initiated into its use. This contrasts with the situation for Shelta; children learn to put together sentences and phrases in Shelta from a very early age (Acton and Davies 1979:102). The reason for this difference is not clear: it may be that economic differences between Gypsies and Travellers are such that Traveller children are involved at a younger age in situations where Shelta is used. The Travellers Acton and Davies referred to were in Britain, but one would need to know whether the economic patterns of Irish Travellers in Ireland are preserved when they move to England. In Ireland, going out calling at houses for food, clothing and money is an important source of income for Traveller women, and small children, a valuable asset in arousing sympathy, are usually brought along. Since "calling" is the main context for using Shelta among women Travellers (MacGreine 1933-4) it seems likely that children acquire Shelta in this way. Also there is a practice among poorer families with problems like alcoholism of sending their children onto city streets to beg, which gives these children an additional context for using Shelta. An insight into the circumstances for using Shelta emerged when a nine-year-old girl, who had given several Shelta words was asked the Shelta terms for money. She said "few pence", a phrase well known to anyone meeting Travelling children or women begging in the streets of Dublin. It seems to show a confusion between the

circumstances for using Shelta words, and the lexis of Shelta.

Travellers are protective of the secrecy of their language, but to some extent they do not need to be, because there is very little awareness of its existence among settled people. In a questionnaire on Tinkers submitted to field collectors of folklore by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1955, on the question of language the vast majority of respondents said that the Tinkers in their area spoke only English. They did not address the question of a secret language, but some awareness was evinced by a respondent in Co Mayo, who said that he thought they had a language of their own called gibberish, and that there was a guard in the town who could speak gibberish with them. This man was perhaps wiser than he knew (Hancock 1984a:92). Lack of public awareness of Shelta is another point of contrast with Romani, where romantic interest in Gypsies has meant that there is popular respect for their language.

Whether the duty to preserve secrecy imposed on Gypsy children (Kenrick 1979:117) applies also to Traveller children is not clear, but there are some indications that similar warnings are given. In field research, initial questions about Cant were met with a wide range of reactions, from amazement and delight that a few words were known, to extreme suspicion: "I did hear of it years ago,

but it's all died out now. Was it some kind of Dutch?". Experience with small children in a school for Travellers in Dublin seems to support the idea that there is a prohibition on talking about it. In a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, where children had been singing songs and telling stories to the interviewer who was using a tape recorder, the children were asked whether they knew any Cant. There was a moment's silence, then one child put up his hand; he knew some. The next minute the room erupted. Research notes describe the situation thus:

The tape is almost impossible to transcribe because of the anarchic atmosphere that developed after the first word or two. All the children started shouting words, and it was clear that they considered that they had been encouraged by an adult to do something naughty. Many of the words shouted were not Cant. There was a great deal of talk of robbing purses. The sentence "I'm going to rob Alice's purse", comes over clearly, as well as "I'm going to rob Lindy's dinner."

The change from discipline to anarchy with the change of subject may indicate an awareness of the need for secrecy. Labov (1969) has described the successful use of taboo words to make children talk freely, and this may be another instance of the same phenomenon.

The need to protect the secrecy of the language was explicitly stated in a note in the first edition of the Travellers' own newspaper, *The Pavey*:

The secrets of the Gammon which have served Travellers well when they fell foul of the law as a way of passing

on word to friends and family while in the company of guards at Garda stations and talking to other Travellers in prison may be at an end, because at least one Garda in Dublin knows the Gammon inside out. Garda -----, who is a [West of Ireland] man at Coolock Garda Station is teaching the Gammon to other guards in Dublin. So now you know, maybe the next step will be giving evidence in Gammon. Be on your guard (April 1983).

This might seem to be a rather unlikely threat, but Pertti Valtonen (1979:122) writing about Finnish Gypsies, describes a Finnish policeman as having written an article about the use of Romani by Gypsies to try to bluff the police, in the official police magazine. Mulcahy (1979:16) points out another function of the secrecy of Gypsy languages - in this case Calo, the language of Spanish Gypsies - to enemies, like the police, to the position of dupes, while ostensibly treating them with great deference and politeness.

Different families of English Gypsies have built up secret languages in different ways. Kenrick (1979:118) describes one family, the Gilligoolie Smiths, as having constructed a dialect based on a mixture of Romani and Shelta, and he quotes Brune (1975:753), as pointing out that Romani can be used as a secret language even within the Gypsy community, by previous agreement as to the meaning of certain common phrases. While this information is interesting, it should be noted that previous agreement is what distinguishes a code from a secret language. An Irish Traveller made a

passing reference to a means of further disguising Shelta, by breaking words into syllables and inserting them at various point in a sentence, but he refused to elaborate on how exactly this was done. He indicated however that this would be a test of whether someone really knew Shelta. Jiri Lipa (1979:54) gave evidence of how the secrecy of Romani was extended by two groups of Gypsies he studied in Czechoslovakia. One group was sedentary, and the other still nomadic. While the Romani used by the sedentary group was full of non-Romani borrowings, making it intelligible to non-Gypsy neighbours, so that it no longer functioned as an argot, in both varieties he found a kind of secret vocabulary of words for sensitive subjects like money. These words were not used generally, and were sufficient to render Romani incomprehensible to outsiders.

Harper (1969:79) describes the secrecy of Irish Traveller Cant, spoken by the descendents of Irish Travellers in Georgia, U.S.A., as of

primary importance to its understanding It serves to socially and economically demarcate the Traveler in other words as an invisible shield to protect Travelers from the encroachments of non-Travelers into their social and economic domain. One Traveler said 'The word cant, to us, means you can't understand us.

(b) Identification

Apart from the function of secret communication, the main

purpose for which both Romani and Shelta are used is identification, both self-identification as a member of the group, and the identification of strangers as Travellers or Gypsies.

Thomas Acton (1971) claims that Romani is used by Gypsies at wakes, when the discussion of the dead person's life and qualities is in Romani. Kenrick (1971:13) compares this to the case of Jewish English: while there are probably only about fifty words of Jewish English in regular use, at weddings and funerals when the evening grows late, more of these words emerge: "The influence of the atmosphere, and the presence of so many close relatives and friends brings out words that have become half forgotten". Irish Traveller wakes and weddings are well-known gatherings of the families, but regrettably there is no evidence of Shelta use in this ritualistic way. Travellers directly questioned said that Shelta was not used at funerals.

Romani and Shelta are both used, however, to find out if someone is a Gypsy, or Traveller. This is done in a subtle way, according to Kenrick (1979:115), by using a Romani word that sounds like an English one, so that if the other turns out not to be Gypsy the speaker has not given away his identity. Sometimes Romani is used when the parties recognize each other as Gypsy and non-Gypsy, to determine how the latter feels about Gypsies; if he recognizes Romani

words, he probably is well-disposed towards them. Harper (1969:86) describes how Travellers overhearing Cant spoken in public houses, know that they are among friends. Irish Travellers interviewed for the present study said that they would always use Shelta when they met strange Travellers. If they saw what appeared to be Travellers on the boat to England, for instance, they would speak a word or two of Shelta at first, and see if it was picked up. If it was not, then nothing would be lost; the listener would only think it was a strange accent. If the person turned out to be a Traveller, then conversation would continue in Shelta, so that mutual social placing could be carried out.

The other main issue in the sociolinguistics of Romani and Shelta is that of classification. Both languages consist, to a greater or lesser extent, of a foreign lexicon inserted into an English syntactic framework. The problem in the case of Romani is whether Anglo-Romani as it is spoken by the majority of Gypsies in Britain today is the remains of the original inflected Romani, or a pidgin or creole developed in the 16th century from contact between English nomads and Egyptians, which coexisted with inflected Romani for 300 years. Donald Kenrick (1971;1979) takes the first view, Ian Hancock (1971;1979;1984b) the second. Because this controversy is relevant to the development of Shelta, which will be dealt with in the next chapter, the main points at issue will be reviewed here.

Hancock's case rests primarily on a quotation from Hotten (1864) which refers to Harman's 1566 Caveat for Common Cursetors. This describes the coming together of various types of vagabonds in Britain soon after the first Gypsies arrived. Some Gypsies joined the English gangs, and some English the Gypsies, according to Hotten, and the settled people soon regarded them as one group. Hancock finds evidence for his pidgin/creole theory in the description of Hotten of how the two disparate groups solved their language problems:

The secret language spoken by Gypsies, principally Hindoo and extremely barbarous to English ears, was found incomprehensible and very difficult to learn. The Gipsies, also, found the same difficulty with the English language. A rude, rough and most singular compromise was made, and a mixture of Gipsy, Old English, newly coined words, and cribbings from any foreign and therefore secret language, mixed and jumbled together formed what has ever since been known as the canting language, or Pedlar's French, or during the last century, St Giles' Greek (Hotten 1864:6).

Kenrick does not take this evidence seriously. He points out that it was generally thought until Grellman and Hoyland published their works that Romani was a made-up jargon. In most European countries, and in many other parts of the world, communities of thieves have had slangs which included many Romani words. An example of this is Rotwelsch, used by German thieves, not as a pidgin between Germans, Gypsies and Jews, but as a secret language. Pedlar's French or Tinkers' Cant in England contains no Romani words, as it would have if it had been part of the basis for a pidgin (Kenrick 1971:7).

Hancock sees the phonological simplicity of Anglo-Romani compared to the inflected language, as evidence of its having originated as a pidgin; Kenrick says this is possibly due to non-Gypsy wives learning the language to the best of their ability and passing it on to their children with English phonology. One is reminded here of the "didicoi" point, that "half-bred" Gypsies mispronounce words simply because they are "half-bred". Kenrick, however, considers that the adoption of English morphology is more likely the result of English-speaking contact with outsiders, than of intermarriage. Kenrick claims that Hancock's suggestion would mean that until the last century, Gypsies in England spoke four languages, English, inflected Romani, Anglo-Romani and Cant. Then either inflected Romani died or it became merged with the Anglo-Romani creole. He quotes informants to Leland's 1874 work as being able to distinguish between Romani and Cant, without ever having mentioned a third intermediate language. On the contrary they seem to have considered inflected Romani as the language of the older people, and Anglo-Romani that of the young (Kenrick 1971:7). These factors lead Kenrick to reject the theory that Anglo-Romani developed several centuries ago as a pidgin for communication between Gypsies and English vagabonds, which has since become creolised. Having done so, he then has to find an explanation for the terminal state of the inflected language in England. He does this by analogy with the situation of Calo in Spain.

In both Spain and England the lack of new Gypsy immigration over several hundred years has meant that in most marriages Spanish or English existed as a common language between the partners: this contrasts with the situation elsewhere in Europe where marriages of newly-immigrated Gypsies had only Romani as a common language. This meant in the English situation, that Romani degenerated into a "jargon" used in certain circumstances, instead of being a first language. Kenrick (1971:7) claims that the existence of non-nomadic communities of Gypsies in Spain has meant that Calo has remained viable longer, being now at the state of degeneration that English Romani was at one hundred years ago. Because English Gypsies move around more, and in smaller groups, their contacts with outsiders are more frequent, and their language has suffered accordingly. Kenrick's position, thus, is that Anglo-Romani represents a special vocabulary of between 100 and 1000 words, mostly Romani in origin, but with some slang Cant and Shelta.

Hancock prefaces his reply to Kenrick by saying that essentially their differences are definitional. He finds Kenrick's analogy with Rotwelsch insulting; he sees any cross-fertilization between Romani and theives' cants as reflecting the relations of both groups with society at large. The difference between Pedlars' French and Romani is that the former remains a social variety of English with the addition of exotic lexicon. Structurally it is still

English. Anglo-Romani, however, although it has lost its non-English structure and phonology, retains some ever-diminishing grammatical and structural features which are not English (Hancock 1971:15). He thinks that, in transformational terms, the deep structure of Anglo-Romani would seem to show non-English features, that its line of direct retention goes back to the inflected language. Hancock agrees with Kenrick's assertion that the pidgin-origin theory would mean that up to the 19th century Gypsies spoke four languages, and argues that some do today. While in some families inflected Romani has merged with Anglo-Romani, he would not claim that this situation is widespread, even though the inflected language is disappearing. In some families where older people still speak the inflected language, it operates as a kind of prestige norm, but more commonly it is not understood by other members of the family. Hancock (1986:109) suggests that it is in its internally-generated vocabulary that Anglo-Romani comes closest to the creole model:

Speakers have shown remarkable inventiveness in keeping its lexicon as free from English (or recognizable English) as possible, the reason being that since the structure already derives from that language, use of English vocabulary too would result in a language which would be English itself.

Hancock widens the field of discussion, in his 1971 article, by pointing out that pidginization does not only result from an inability to grasp a language fully; there are social

factors involved which often erect linguistic barriers as boundary markers. He gives examples of this from Chinese Pidgin English and Palenqueno Creole Spanish. In these cases, the source language is retained by its original speakers as a sign of their superiority over those who have to rely on the pidgin/creole. Hancock concludes

There is every indication that Anglo-Romanes today serves as a boundary device, and it may in fact be proven to be spoken in its most attenuated form, i.e. with the least lexical interference from English, in the present of non-Gypsies (1971:17).

Elastic definitions can be illuminating, but there is a point when they become unhelpful as tools for analysis. This seems to be the case with creole/pidgin; the basic aspect of the definition of pidgin is that of a code created to facilitate linguistic contact between two or more groups with mutually unintelligible languages. Sometimes a pidgin becomes a mother tongue or creole or moves closer to one of its source languages, becoming a regional or social dialect of that language. Jamaican creole is an example of this process of creolization. According to Hancock, Anglo-Romani developed as a pidgin between Gypsies and native vagabonds, and, over the generations, it expanded into a creole. But Kenrick (1979:112), stretches the definition of creole to include gradual change in an existing, (non-pidgin) language through contact with another language, without the use of an intermediate bridge language. Kenrick argues that this form of creolization is what

happened with Romani. The Gypsies had to learn English quickly to overcome the reluctance of settled people to trade with "dark-skinned strangers", and the settled people would have had no incentive to cooperate with these strangers in the construction of a pidgin. Kenrick cites the example of the nomad Kalderash in Western Europe, who trade in ten languages apart from their own, with no sign of pidgins developing. One may, of course, agree with Kenrick's explanation of the historical development of Anglo-Romani, while being reluctant to subscribe to his characterisation of it as a creole.

The definition of pidgin and creole is stretched even further by Dell Hymes, in Pidginisation and Creolisation of Languages (1971:73). Hymes contrasts the theme of simplification, which in pidgins increases the accessibility of messages, with complication of outer form, which reflects a parallel interest in making messages inaccessible. Hymes elaborates:

If the simplification of pidgins is a means of transcending language boundaries, might not the complication of some languages in outer form be a means of maintaining boundaries? Within a small community, sharing a maximum of knowledge and experience, variation in form, variable relation between form and grammatical function, syntagmatically complex words, reliance on inflational and covert relations, might more easily develop. Such developments could at least have the effect of maintaining boundaries between small autonomous communities. Such an effect might be welcomed, even cultivated, especially where one's language is regarded

as the vehicle of indispensable lore, where it might serve to discriminate against those who marry in, etc.

Hymes thus advocates an extension of the definition of pidgin/creole to include cryptic languages. Shelta would then fall within these terms of reference, as in Hancock's concurring argument (1974:130). But Shelta, as will become clear in the next chapter, is much more than a code for passing unintelligible messages. The danger with an expansive definition of pidgin/creole is that one may be diverted from the genuine insights into language use and structure which the narrower, more conventional definition preserves. Shelta has to be considered in the context of its history, its structure and its present usage before one can make any judgments as to its classification.

CHAPTER IV

CANT AND SHELTA

Gypsies and Travellers are distinct groups, both from settled society and from each other. But while the differences between them are easy enough to see from the inside, based on such factors as origin and language, from the outside they may appear to be one group. This is partly, of course, because the settled community regard nomadism as the major point of difference between themselves and Travellers and Gypsies. Throughout history, therefore, Gypsies and Travellers have been lumped together with vagrants and others who were nomadic. This in turn has led to a degree of confusion when settled people have attempted to describe the languages spoken by members of these outcast groups, and a tendency to see a common language where none exists. As well, there has sometimes been the opposite mistake of treating the various groups, and their languages, as entirely separate, when in fact their outcast status over the centuries has brought them into contact with each other, and has meant that their languages have become almost inextricably tangled.

Romani is relatively easy to disentangle. It has for centuries been the language of the Gypsies, and such words

of it as have strayed into other languages can be easily tracked down because of their Indian origin. "Sturdy beggars" and vagrants, however, have long been acknowledged to have a language, or more properly a jargon of their own which is called Cant. "Cant", confusingly, is what many Travellers call the language which academics call Shelta. The problem, only dimly perceived, even by many of those who have studied the subject, is whether the term "Cant" embraced Shelta in earlier times. Several writers argue that it did, and that when Shakespeare's Prince Henry said that he could talk with any tinker in his own language he meant Shelta, rather than Romani as was originally thought. This chapter will look at the early writing on Cant, and its speakers, and try to determine its relationship with Shelta.

"Misplaced ingenuity is the leading characteristic of the vagabond, and nowhere is it more conspicuous than in the jargon of his calling" (Ribton-Turner 1887:479). The author of the first recorded reference to Cant, Harman, in his 1567 Caveat for Commen Cursetors, gives a vocabulary of the vagabonds' language, commenting: "As far as I can learn or understand by the examination of a number of them, their language - which they term peddelars Frenche or Canting - began but within these XXX yeeres or lyttle more." But what did Cant consist of, and why did it develop? On these questions there is no consensus and a striking and colourful diversity of view. Thus Hotten, commenting on Harman's

work in 1864, argues that cant was "a rude, rough and most singular compromise" arrived at by newly-migrated Gypsies and the native vagrants and vagabonds who shared their lifestyle, as a solution to their communication problems (1864:6). On the other hand, William Harison (1577) considered that the arrival of the Gypsies had a radically different effect; rather than mixing with the Gypsies, the native vagrants set up in opposition to them, adopting some of their habits:

Moreover, in counterfeiting the Egyptian roges they have devised a language among themselves, which they name canting, but others pedlars French, a speech compact thirtie years since of English, and a great number of od words of their own devising without all order or reason: and yet such is it as none but themselves are able to understand. The first devisor thereof was hanged by the necke, a just reward no doubt for his deserts, and a common end to that profession (Ribton-Turner 1887:466).

Barrere and Leland (1897:x) accepted the view that the arrival of the Gypsies acted as a spur to the vagabonds to form their own language. They considered that the vagabonds, seeing that the Gypsies were well-organized and powerful, "according to the spirit of the times", formed themselves into a guild, and set up in competition with the Gypsies.

Ribton-Turner (1887:485), commented that it was thought for a long time that the English vagabonds learned the language of the Gypsies, but that this was not so. He quoted from

Martin Markall by Samuel Rowlands (1610) on the "Runnagates Race" a passage dealing with the reaction of the English vagabonds to the Gypsies' arrival.

.... and first of all they thinke it fit to devise a certain kind of language, to the end their cousenings, knaveries and villainies might not be so easily known, in places where they come: and this their language they spunne out of three other languages viz. Latine, English and Dutch: these three especially, notwithstanding some few words they borrowed of the Spanish and French (:585).

But Ribton-Turner concluded that while the English vagabonds might have been spurred to polish and improve their cant by the Gypsies' arrival, "no single individual has ever invented a spoken language, and cant words must have existed long before the time of Henry VII" (:467).

The central argument of this chapter is that the relationship between Cant and Shelta has little to do with the arrival of the Gypsies. Instead, as will be explained below, Shelta is a distinct language of ancient and obscure origins, spoken by Irish Travellers, while Cant consists of the jargon of vagrants, vagabonds and Irish Travellers, and contains a significant element of Shelta words. Over the centuries the Irish Travellers in Britain have had a major role in contributing to the development of Cant there. They have done so on their own terms, sharing some Shelta words with the vagabond community to strengthen their common Cant, but at the same time preserving the greater part of

Shelta for themselves as a private language of their own. It is submitted that this explanation brings together in a coherent way the apparent inconsistencies in previous accounts of the nature of Cant. In summary, up to now, Cant has been studied as a seemingly isolated phenomenon, rather than as the product of the intermingling of the Shelta language and the jargon of a wider social group.

Before we come to an examination of Cant itself, it may be worthwhile to consider the vargrants who spoke it, and attempt to determine who exactly they were. George Borrow (1888:176) in Romano Lavo L11 describes the "sturdy beggars" and vagrants, who were called

.... in the old cant language Abraham men, and in the modern Pikers. These people have frequently been confounded with the Gypsies, and like them they have a secret language. But the Gypsies are a people of oriental origin, whilst the Abrahamites are the scurf of the English body corporate. The language of the Gypsies is a real language, more like the Sanscrit than any other language in the world; whereas the speech of the Abrahamites is a horrid jargon, composed for the most part of low English words used in an allegorical sense."

In 1858, a missionary to Gypsies in Wandsworth described the people he found living among them who were not Gypsies. They were of three classes and the Gypsies called them, in Romani, Chorodies, Kora-mengre, and Hindity-Mengre. Chorodie in Romani means a low miserable person:

They have coarse vulgar features, and hair which puts one wonderfully in mind of refuse flax, or the material

of which mops are composed. Their complexions, when not obscured with grime, are fair rather than dark, evidencing that their origin is low swinish Saxon and not gentle Romany (Borrow 1888:220).

The second group were the Kora-mengre, which the missionary described as the lowest of hawkers. their name means one who cries out, and comes from the same root as Koran. The third group were the Hinidity-mengre, or filthy people. These were the vagrant Irish ("though it is a question whether the lowest Irish are a bit more dirty in their ways than the English Chorodies"). The missionary said that there were not many of them present at the time he was writing of; but the fact that the Gypsies had a name for them indicates that they were not infrequent visitors. "The trade they ostensibly drive is tinkering, repairing old kettles and making little pots and pans of tin". But the writer notes that their real trade is making false rings, and that they call themselves "cairden droich oir" or workers of false gold (Borrow 1891:220).

Ribton-Turner (1887:245) quotes a young prisoner in Salford jail in the late 1830s as describing the different groups on the road at that time, who spoke Cant:

There are three sorts of cant, the gypsies, the beggars and the thieves. The cants are distinct in many ways but alike in others. A stranger to the cant would not understand the gypsies or others, save a few words here and there. The gypsies have a cant word for every word they speak. The vagrant cant is a lower style than the thieves: they use it to tell what they got at different houses; that are not thieves: they will not

push themselves forward to steal, and one half of them if they saw another stealing would tell of him and yet, if they could do it themselves they would. The Manchester and Liverpool thieves are reckoned to be the most expert, they are thought to be of Irish parents, and to be the most cunning. In fact I'll be bound to say that three parts of those who are travelling now throughout the kingdom, have Irish blood in them, either from father, mother or grandmother (1887:245).

This evidence suggest that, certainly by the last century, a sizable proportion of the vagrants in England were Irish. There is some evidence that they were present even earlier. Barrere and Leland (1897:x1) claim Irish or Welsh "strollers" were represented and ridiculed as a common type in plays and broadsides until "within a century". Indeed, it is clear that legislation to cope with influxes of Irish beggars goes back to the earliest times (Ribton-Turner 1887).

Donald Kenrick, considering the question of the identity of Irish Travellers, claims that there is no evidence that the Irish against whom laws on vagrancy were enforced in Britain in the Middle Ages were necessarily Travellers, but that there is some evidence of nomadism. He continues: "We might assume that if there were travelling craftsmen in Ireland at this time they would have been among the immigrant Irish whose behaviour offended the Parliament" (1979:2).

If the Irish comprised some proportion of the vagrants in

Britain over the centuries, it would not be surprising if Cant had been subject to some Irish influence, and it seems that this was so. Hotten, in his Slang Dictionary (1864:22) writes

The Celtic languages have contributed many Cant and vulgar words to our popular vocabulary. These have come to us through the Gaelic and Irish languages, so closely allied to their material as to be merely dialects of a primitive common tongue. This may arise from the Celtic portion of our population, which from its position as slaves or servants to its ancient conquerors has contributed so largely to the lowest class of the community, therefore to our slang, provincial or colloquial words; or it may be an importation from Irish immigrants who have contributed their fair proportion to our criminal stock.

Leland (1897:xii) argued that the majority of words in "old canting" do not come directly from Irish, Scots Gaelic or Welsh, but via "minklas thari" or Shelta, "which is spoken by a very large proportion of all provincial tinkers as well as by many other vagabonds, especially by all the Irish who are on the roads." John Sampson confirms this. In his foreword to McCormick (1907:xiii) he claims that Shelta is spoken by four classes in Ireland: tinkers, beggars, pipers and sievemakers, and in England by nearly every knifegrinder. MacRitchie (1889:354) finds it remarkable that, although Shelta is clearly based on Irish,

it is not confined to those districts where Gaelic is still spoken, but is employed by tinkers and tramps throughout the British Islands: of whom it is presumed that a great number have never been outside the borders of England.

Most of the examples of Shelta which have been collected, he continues, were obtained "from people who do not appear to have any known connection by kin or ancestry with Ireland or the highlands of Scotland."

On the position in Scotland, Sampson argues that the Cant of Scottish Tinklers is composed of debased Gypsy, and a "mystery element" which he identifies as Elizabethan Cant, as used by dramatists like Fletcher, Greene and Dekker. He claims that Scottish Tinklers have little or no connection with Irish Tinkers. This contrasts with the opinion of Walter Simson (1865). Simson, who has been reprimanded by MacRitchie for using the term Gypsy too comprehensively, describes a Scottish traditional belief that before the death of James II in 1460, the county of Galloway was infested by a band of Saracens or Gypsies from Ireland. This is despite the fact that the "earliest authentic notice" of Gypsy presence in Scotland was in 1506 (1865:55). Simson comments, in a note, that "almost all the Scottish Gypsies assert that their ancestors came by way of Ireland into Scotland."

Since it has been shown in an earlier chapter, that it is extremely unlikely that Irish Tinkers have any Gypsy ancestry, and in the absence of any record of Gypsies arriving in Ireland, we may presume that invaders from Ireland, described as "sorners (forcible obtruders), fancied

fools, vagabonds, outliers, masterful beggars, bairds (strolling rhymers) and such runners about", (Glendock's Scots Acts of Parliament; Simson 1865:99) were the ancestors of today's Travellers. If they were, then they would have spoken Shelta, since there is some evidence, discussed in the next chapter, that Shelta long pre-dated the fifteenth century. It seems a reasonable inference, therefore, that Shelta had some input into the "Elizabethan Cant" element in the language of Scottish Tinklers described by Sampson, especially since, as we have seen, there appears to have been a sizable Irish contribution to the Cant framed in England in Elizabethan times.

It is clear from the evidence either that vagrants, tramps and Tinkers spoke Cant and Shelta, or that the distinction between the two was not clearly drawn. It will be recalled that there is widespread support for the view that Cant was formed by outcast groups at the time of the arrival of the Gypsies, probably as a response to Romani. Yet it is curious that such a development could have taken place among a group of largely uneducated people if they had no access to any language other than English. There seems to be something to be said for the view that Irish Travellers contributed parts of their language to Cant, while retaining other parts of it as their own preserve. It is interesting to compare this interpretation with the approach of Hancock

to the question of partial withholding of a language, coupled with partial sharing with another group. Inspired by Hotten's controversial description of the emergence of "the canting language" as involving a contribution from the Gypsies, Hancock considers it

probable that like the Chinese in the Canton pidgin situation, the Gypsies were content to have the English know the restructured variety, but withheld knowledge of their own inflected language to maintain their separateness within the overall outlawed society (Hancock 1984:91).

If one believes that the groups that came together were Irish Tinkers and English vagrants, and neither Harison (1577), Ribton-Turner (1887), nor Barrere and Leland (1897) mention a Gypsy connection at this stage, then the above passage could be applied to the protectiveness of Irish Tinkers towards Shelta. This would explain the fact that "every knifegrinder" in Britain is said by Sampson (1907:xiii) to know Shelta, even those with no connection through birth or ancestry with Ireland. Before comparing individual words of "Elizabethan cant" with those used by Travellers today, the following facts, though slight in themselves, may be used to add weight to the argument:

(1) "Cant" appears to be derived from the Irish word caint "speech" (MacRitchie 1889). Similarly, Shelta is believed to be derived from belre or bearla "speech". The difference of course is that the latter is disguised and the former not. "Cant" is the name applied to their language by most

Travellers today.

(ii) Hotten in his Slang Dictionary (1864:23) claims that the Cant used by tramps and thieves in the North of England is known as "gammy". This bears a striking resemblance to Gammon, a common synonym for Cant among Travellers today. Hotten describes "gammy" as "from the old Gipsy corrupted. In the large towns of Ireland and Scotland this secret language is also spoken, with of course additions peculiar to each locality."

(iii) Listed in Hotten's dictionary (1864:182) is "Greeks, the low Irish. St Giles' Greek, slang or cant language." St Giles was an area of London frequented by the Irish.

(iv) Some words in Hotten's dictionary which are attributed to Ancient Cant are in fact Shelta, e.g. gloak "a man", kena "a house", taoc or tog "a coat". (Hotten 1864:105-356).

The following words from Harman's Caveat for Commen Cursetors (1566) are still used by Travellers today:

Harman's Cant

pek "meate"
lybbege "bed"
yaram "milke"
to nyp a bunge "to cut a pursse"
togemans "a cote, a cloak"

Gammon/Cant

pek "food"
lee "bed"
yorum "milk"
nyup "to steal"
tugs "clothes"

booget "a travelling tinker's basket"	budget "a tinsmith's box"
ken "a house"	kena "a house"
chete "a thing"	chat "a thing"
strommel "straw"	strumbel "straw"
bufe "a dog"	(?) Buffer "a settled person"

Harman's list gives whyddes "words"; it is interesting to note that the expression in Gammon/Cant "stall your whidden" has the specific meaning of "stop talking Gammon/Cant Shelta."

It is worth looking closer at these words. With the exception of bufe "a dog" which means to be onomatopoeic, they do not seem to be metaphorically constructed words. It will be recalled that Borrow, quoted above, described the speech of the Abraham men, which term itself comes from the Irish bramanach "a noisy fellow" (Ribton-Turner 1887-473) as a "horrid jargon, composed for the most part of low English words used in an allegorical sense." Ribton-Turner notes that while Cant contains Irish, Scottish and Welsh words, as well as Latin and French, it also contains many ordinary words used in a metaphorical way e.g. a grunting chete "a pig", crashing chetes "teeth", a waddler "a duck". These seem to bear the marks of a constructed language - it is very similar in fact to the way the vocabulary of

Anglo-Romani is expanded through incoining (Hancock 1984b). This accords with the suggestion that various groups of vagabonds came together as a group and devised a language, to compete with the Gypsies. But the words quoted from Harman, which are still extant today, cannot be explained in the same way. The fact that contemporary commentators thought that Cant was "spunne out of Latine, English and Dutch" with a few words of French and Spanish may perhaps have been an indication of the incomprehensibility of the language (cf. MacAlister 1937:86); but since it seems unlikely that vagabonds and vagrants in the Middle Ages were generally conversant with these languages, the other language - Shelta - known by Irish Travellers with whom they were apparently consorting seems to offer a possible source of explanation.

Clearly there is a difference between words which gain currency through borrowings from other languages and terms which are constructed from metaphorical and allegorical sources. One can perhaps therefore separate the constructions from the borrowings; if the constructions were done in response to the Gypsies, where then did the borrowings come from, and more importantly, what was the unifying factor? It is the opinion of this researcher that the language borrowed from was Shelta; that a certain proportion of the vagrants in England in the Middle Ages were Irish Travellers; that they shared some of the secrets

of their language with the English vagrants in the construction of a language with which to confound the Gypsies, the English grafting on some made-up expressions of their own; that in fact it was the Shelta element which led to Cant being dignified with the name of a language, as Shakespeare used it, rather than a made-up jargon.

Many, but not all, Travellers today can distinguish between a Cant and a Shelta word. There is some evidence that a kind of hierarchy obtains among Travellers based on language use: those who use Shelta are considered the "real Travellers" while those who use Cant words are thought by some Travellers to be mere hangers-on. A Traveller woman in Co. Meath said that she thought Travellers of the lower class use Cant in England to give the impression to Gypsies they meet that they are "real Travellers", with a language of their own. This seems to echo the earliest explanations of the emergence of Cant, as a direct response by groups already in Britain to the arrival of the Gypsies.

CHAPTER V

SHELTA

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was considerable romantic interest in Gypsies and their way of life. The Gypsy Lore Society was founded. Borrow was writing his descriptions of Gypsies in various settings, and the Romani language was being investigated. At the height of the Gypsy boom, Shelta was discovered by Charles Leland, a noted Gypsiologist. The subject was taken up enthusiastically by the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society, which published vocabularies collected by contributors in various parts of Britain and Ireland. At first most of the collectors were amateurs, but as time went on and interest in this mysterious language grew, linguists became involved, notably John Sampson of the University of Liverpool, and the German folklorist and Celtic scholar, Kuno Meyer. Both of these contributed significantly to the systematic study of the language, but unfortunately John Sampson died while preparing a major work on the subject. His papers, however, form the basis for the principal resource for the student of Shelta, R.S. MacAlister's The Secret Languages of Ireland. This chapter will trace the chronology of Shelta's discovery, and present Meyer's and MacAlister's observations on the structure of the language for critical assessment in

the light of Shelta as it now exists.

The first intimation of the existence of Shelta came from an itinerant knife-grinder, whom Leland met on a road near Bath. When questioned on his knowledge of Romani, the man agreed that he knew Romani, but volunteered the information that since Romani was becoming "too blown", i.e. comprehensible to outsiders, it was being supplanted by another language, which was like "old Irish", and was very difficult to learn. It seems that Leland attached little significance to his discovery at this time, but a year later in Aberystwyth he met another vagabond, who told him that the language was called Shelta, and gave him about a hundred words of it. Leland himself describes his next encounter with the language:

Two years after, in America, I found an Irish half-blood gypsy tinker who spoke Shelta quite perfectly, and also Irish Gaelic and Welsh. He was absolutely certain that Shelta, while it was pure Celtic, was quite separate from the other tongues. Its pronunciation is strongly Gaelic; its words are, however, generally unlike it although it has roots in common. My informant, who very much enlarged my vocabulary, himself pointed out differences between the terms in Shelta and Old Irish. According to his account, the tinkers had from very ancient times always been a closely allied clan, intermarrying and speaking this peculiar language. Their units began to break up 'about the time the railroads came in'. Since then Shelta has declined (Leland 1886:346).

It has been pointed out that Leland's reference to "Old Irish" is misleading: he apparently used the term as one might say "ould Oireland", rather than in its strictly

linguistic sense (MacAlister 1937:131).

Leland published the news of his discovery in a chapter of his book The Gypsies (1882), and returned to the subject in an address to the Oriental Congress in Vienna in 1886. An extract from this paper was published in The Academy (20 Nov. 1886) wherein Leland elaborated on the ubiquity of Shelta: "I doubt if I ever took a walk in London, especially in the slums, without meeting men and women who spoke 'Shelta'". This publication elicited a response from Mr H.T. Crofton, who submitted a short vocabulary which he had obtained from "two wanderers" (The Academy 18 Dec 1886). Crofton's contribution is significant because he recognized the use of back-slang applied to "Erse" words in the formation of some Shelta words; he also noted that some Shelta words are formed by the application of rhyming slang to English words.

Another collector, about the same time, volunteered a short vocabulary of words. Mr T.W. Norwood had collected these words more than thirty years previously - before Leland had heard of the language (Norwood 1887:12). On these, MacAlister comments "Most of the words on Norwood's list are very strange, unlike anything recorded by other collectors" (1937:132).

In 1891, G. Alick Wilson published in the J.G.L.S. a list of

words taken down from a Tinker child in Tiree, Scotland. He said that after the conversation with the child, the child's mother came to the collector and told her "the words did not belong to any language at all, but had been made up by the little girl herself" (Wilson 1891:121). Wilson pointed out faults in Leland's spelling, due no doubt to unfamiliarity with Gaelic, Scots or Irish, and he also showed that the numerals quoted by him were in fact Gaelic. Wilson did, of course, have an erroneous idea about the relationship between the medium of sound and the medium of writing; but his main point about the Irish base remains valid.

In the same issue the J.G.L.S. published another short vocabulary taken down by the rector of Clonegal, Co. Wexford, the Rev. Canon J.F.M. ffrench. In contrast to Leland's rather self-damning remarks on the pronunciation of Shelta ("of Celtic origin it surely is, for Owen gave me every syllable so garnished with gutterals that I, being even less of one of the Celtes than a Chinaman, have not succeeded in writing a single word according to his pronunication of it") (MacAlister 1937:131), Canon ffrench found difficulty in transcribing the words because "the pronunciation is very soft and liquid" (MacAlister 1937:131).

The same issue of J.G.L.S. also carried a note by Fearon

Rankling on "A Family of Shelta-speaking and Romani-speaking Highland Tinkers" but this is disappointing because it transpires that when Rankling was given the names of several common objects,

unfortunately, I had neither pencil nor paper with me and was unable to make any notes, and the words being entirely strange to me, I could not retain them. The only word I can remember is yergan = tin (Rankling 1891:349).

Two more vocabularies were collected at this time in Scotland, one from Tinkers in the island of Barra by John Sampson, and the other in the island of Arran by David MacRitchie, but it will be noted that although all the collectors claimed that the language belonged to the Irish Tinkers, only one short vocabulary emerged from Ireland at this time.

In 1890, John Sampson took up the study of Shelta in earnest. His credentials for the job are described by MacAlister:

He had the advantage of extensive experience in the noting of Romani, and he possessed in consequence a skill in practical phonetics not at the command of his predecessors. Moreover, his unique knowledge of Romani, and his wide acquaintance with cant jargons, enabled him to distinguish between true Shelta and borrowings from these other sources (MacAlister 1937:134).

Sampson had been urged to take up the study by David MacRitchie, then president of the Gypsy Lore Society.

"Probably", MacAlister quotes Sampson as saying, "he selected me as the least squeamish of his members. But even to me it sometimes occurred that Shelta was a language which no gentleman should be asked to collect". The search led Sampson into what he described as some very unpleasant adventures. MacAlister quotes a discription by Sampson of an encounter with Irish Tinkers in a tavern: "Three more uncleanly and evil-looking men I never saw" (1937:134). But he eventually found a reliable informant in John Barlow, aged 79, who possessed a large stock of words; and his Shelta was claimed to be free of Irish, Romani or Cant contamination. According to Barlow, the speakers of Shelta "constitute a caste rather than a mere class; their common bond is one of heredity as well as craft. They intermarry, are not recruited from other classes of society, and do not turn to other forms of livelihood" (MacAlister 1937:136).

The last contribution to Shelta collection at this time was by Frederick Arnold (1898). He wrote of a colony of Tinkers he came across north of Poughkeepsie, New York, who while understanding some Romani, were more conversant with "Minkier Thari":

Minkier they call themselves; thari they call their language. They also call it the suni language, which means the "look here" language, jst as the gypsy half-breeds are called the didakei (for dik-akai) or look-here people. This is a name I have never understood (1898:217).

Arnold claimed to have met Tinkers who spoke the language in New York city and in Cambridge and Boston, Massachusetts, and said that there was a colony of these Tinkers in New York city, between First and Third Avenues, near 102nd Street and 110th Street. The words he gives include some undisguised Irish e.g. "ishka" (water).

There was a hiatus in the collection of Shelta from the turn of the century to the 1930s, when Mr Padraig MacGreine wrote a series of articles in *Bealoideas* about Tinkers' Cant. MacGreine had the advantage of knowing Irish, which enabled him to reproduce the words more accurately than previous collectors, but his primary interest seems to have been the Travellers' way of life; he presented his word lists without comment on where the language may have originated or how it was formed.

In 1891, a paper by John Sampson, based on his work with his informant Barlow, attracted the attention of Dr Kuno Meyer. Meyer met Barlow, and began a study of Shelta word formation which went far beyond Sampson's work. On the basis of his own and Meyer's findings Sampson defined the language: "Shelta or Sheldru is a secret jargon of great authority spoken by Irish tinkers, beggars and pipers, the descendants of the ancient ceards and bards [it is] a systematic perversion of the preaspirated Gaelic spoken anterior to the eleventh century".

We will deal with the arguments for and against the attribution of great age to Shelta below; first it may be useful to present Meyer's and MacAlister's observations on the construction of the language. These observations are based on the materials on Shelta which had been published up to the time MacAlister produced his book in 1937: while most of the lists are collected in Britain, MacGreine's work is included.

(a) Structure

Usage of both definite and indefinite articles in Shelta are closer to the Irish form than the English - in Irish absence of an article indicates the indefinite article - so also in Shelta, but the definite article is omitted more than in either English or Irish. When it is used, it is usually the Irish "an" (pronounced "in", according to MacAlister, who never heard the language spoken, quoting from collectors who probably had very fixed views about Irish vowel sounds). Gender, although of great importance in Irish, does not seem to be present at all in Shelta; both the masculine and feminine genitive are represented by "a" as in beor a kena "the woman of the house".

The possessive is usually formed by the English "s". MacAlister claims there are traces of a native plural, as in ad gloxı "two men". He also cites an example of a hybrid

plural, glox-1-s.

The Irish rule of adjectives following the substantive they qualify is not rigorously applied in Shelta, e.g. gam1 lak1n "a bad girl" and gret1n gut "a black bird". This freedom extends even to numeral adjectives. Comparatives are formed on the English model, e.g. gam1 "bad", gam1er, gam1est. Where a substantive in the genitive case qualifies another, the English order is more common, as in the glox's n'uk, "the man's head", except for such idioms as beor a kena "the woman of the house".

All pronominal forms, except personal pronouns, are formed from English. Personal pronouns are formed by the Irish mo and do + dil, which means something like self. Mo and do in Irish produce lenition of the following word so, for example, mo dil becomes mo/y1l/. MacAlister claims that do y1l coalesces into /dy1l/ with unpalatalised "d", but there are many examples of it spelt jeel, which would be palatalized. The Irish -sa is suffixed for emphasis, and this takes the English genitive e.g. mw1lsa's "my own". All three persons are constructed with the third person of the verb -my self 1s, for I am.

Most of the inflections of Shelta are of English type. The present tense is formed by -s; the past tense by -d and the present paricipal by -1n(g). Verbal stems and their

substantive cognates are almost always identical: gruber means to work, and also a job or piece of work. Most verb stems end in -i, e.g. suni "(to) see", tari "(to) talk". In the present participle, the two i's are kept separate - suni-in, "seeing". MacAlister mentions some occasional "native inflections": in the future tense -a is added, mainly when there is a possibility of misunderstanding, as in nides buga "I will not give"; there is a participial form in -o or -u, as in ar gwilo, "after lying down", or in grat guso "saddle", or "place of sitting"; there is a verbal noun formative in -al, e.g. sunal "sight". This should not be confused with the Irish -al, with a long a, which forms a verb from the substantive. The English "-er" is used to form the noun agent, as in tari-er "a speaker".

In syntax Shelta is closer to English than to Irish. The constructions, though using as their basis Irish words, are ungrammatical from the Irish point of view: for example, serku na sli "daughter-in-law" bears more relation to the English than the Irish form; it could almost be called a calque.

Irish has an elaborate system of initial mutations, such as lenition and nasalization, in various syntactic combinations. These are very rare in Shelta - so much so, that MacAlister says that "when they occur they look more like an Irish influence on an English basis than an Irish

idiom almost completely swamped by intrusive English" (1937:162). MacAlister points out that the very few inflexions present are mainly English, and adds, significantly, "and even the non-English inflexions are not obviously Irish" (1937:163).

When words are borrowed to make up for deficiencies of the language, English is preferred to Irish: MacAlister does not address the problem of when English came to be preferred over Irish.

(b) Word Formation

Most of the methods of word formation given here apply only to consonants. According to MacAlister, this is because vowel sounds have been so inaccurately recorded that it is impossible to identify systematic vowel-shifts. All that can be seen, he claims, is the lengthening of some vowels, e.g. kut'ɪ, from Irish cuid; others are shortened as in the second vowel of lak'(e)r, from Irish tailliur. This seems to be the result of accent-shift, as most Shelta words stress the first syllable, irrespective of the stress of the Irish word.

Kuno Meyer lists the following processes for word formation in Shelta:

1) Reversal of the Irish word (particularly words of one syllable), e.g. kam "son" from mac; karb "old woman" from brac or frac; rik "comb" from cir; bog "to find, get, give" from gabh; gre "to rise" from eirigh. Sometimes suffixes are added to the words formed in this way, e.g. thal-osk "day" from latha.

2) Prefixing an arbitrary letter or letters (one should perhaps call it phoneme, but Meyer and MacAlister both used the term letter, perhaps reflecting a bias for the written language), e.g. g-ather "father" from athair; gr-imsher "season, weather" from aimsir; gr-anı "to understand" from aithnim.

3) Substituting another letter or letters for the initial, e.g. slunya "glass" from gloinne; shalawa "dumb" from balbh; sheldhru "speech" from belre, now bearla.

4) Transposition of letters, or anagrams, e.g. axaram "tomorrow" from amarach; mugathon "fool" from amadan.

MacAlister's account of Shelta word formation was written nearly fifty years after Meyer's, so it is not surprisingly more comprehensive: he had the benefit of the vocabularies collected in the intervening years. A difference of approach is immediately obvious between MacAlister and Meyer. Meyer's methods of formation are fairly simple, and

the connection between the Shelta word and the underlying Irish one is obvious once the rule is stated; MacAlister's methods are much more complex, and sometimes appear to derive from looking at the Shelta word, and the projected Irish source word, and devising a method of moving them closer together. This difference of course reflects in some part the fact that Meyer dealt primarily with the spoken language, while MacAlister relied on the written version.

MacAlister lists eight methods of word formation:

- 1) Deaspiration
- 2) Denasalisation
- 3) Substitution
- 4) Apocope
- 5) Prefixes
- 6) Metathesis
- 7) Reversal of syllables
- 8) Complete reversal.

Obviously, some of these overlap with Meyer's classifications, so only deaspiration, denasalization, apocope and reversal of syllables will be dealt with here.

Deaspiration

In Irish, as well as their basic sound, consonants have an

aspirated or lenited form, which is denoted script by a dot over the letter, or a h after it, in contemporary script. According to MacAlister, nearly every consonant is de-aspirated in some instances in Shelta: and this rule is usually combined with some other, such as reversal, as in bug from gabh; gre from eirigh; aburt from ar bith.

Denasalization

This involves such changes as m becoming b as in bin from min (an archaic word meaning fine), n becoming d as in dura from aran. This process also works in reverse but more rarely - so b becomes m as in elum from baile. In the case of mider from diabhair, bh becomes b then m.

Apocope

This takes three forms:

(i) Initial Apocope, e.g. Irish "uisge" becomes ska1. This device is sometimes combined with others, such as munik from "ainm", where there is initial apocope, reversal and a suffix. (a1)nm becomes n(u)m which becomes munik with the addition of an arbitrary final syllable.

(ii) Final Apocope, e.g. fe from "fe(oil)", or krimast from "minist(eir)" which reverses the first syllable and substitutes kr for n. The Irish /x/ sound is particularly susceptible to the final apocope e.g. grasano from

"sasanach", granko from "franc(ach)".

(111) Double Apocope, initial and final, as in ligí from "(ea)gl(aís)", or mis from "(aí)ms(igh)".

Reversal of Syllables

This is similar to the process of metathesis, but involves reversing only some of the letters e.g. lak'in from "cailín", rab'ísta from "paróiste", with p becoming b, rodus from doras.

(c) The age of Shelta

The major point of difference between Meyer and MacAlister is on the age of the language. Both base their theories on evidence from within the language itself, but while Meyer puts the origin at a point "certainly anterior to the eleventh century" (1891:260), MacAlister claims the language is of much more recent origin.

In an article "On the Irish Origin and the Age of Shelta" (1891), Meyer argues cogently for his early origin theory. He puts forward three principal arguments: (1) the fact that some Shelta words were apparently produced from Old Irish forms; the Shelta words thobar "road" and gather "father", from Irish bothar and athair respectively, seem to have been formed when th in Irish was still pronounced as

/t+h/, rather than as /h/ alone, as now; and malya "hand" and Jumnik "Sunday" were formed when mh in lamh and domnach had not yet come to be pronounced as /v/ and /w/ respectively. If these words were formed before aspiration became the rule in Irish phonology, it would mean that the language originated before the eleventh century; (ii) the fact that certain words (e.g. karb "an old woman" from brac or frac) are preserved in Shelta which have been obsolete in Irish for centuries: they appear in some of the earliest Irish manuscripts; (iii) the most compelling reason in Meyer's eyes for believing Shelta to be very old, is the similarity of some of the techniques for disguising language in Shelta to those found in manuscripts dating from the twelfth century and earlier. The Auraicept na n-ecce "Instruction of the poets", copies of which are found in the Books of Lecain and Ballymote, gives details of methods of disguising words, each of which has a name. They include the introduction of arbitrary syllables, which device was called formolad, reversals, which were called delidnid, final apocope which was called dichned, and so on. It appears from examples of disguised language using these devices which appear in the Amra Choluimchille dating from the twelfth century that they were used by the filid or poets, either to make writings incomprehensible to outsiders, or to fill up lines for metrical purposes.

Meyer draws attention to a vocabulary of obscure words

recorded in 1643 by Dudley Macfirbis, but acknowledged to have originated several centuries earlier. The vocabulary was called Duil Laithne, and it was examined by a 19th century scholar, Professor Thurneysen, who showed that the words were formed from Irish words using the Ogham technique. This involved replacing one or two letters of the Irish words by the name which these letters bear in the Ogham alphabet called Beithe-Luis Nion. So the Irish dunad "a fort" becomes dul-unad, dul being the name of the letter d. Of interest here is the fact that some Shelta words are formed on the Ogham principle, some of them actually appearing on the Duil Laithne list e.g. Shelta muni "good" is Duil Laithne "manaith", from Irish maith. Ogham is mentioned as a spoken language in an obituary notice of Morishe O Gibelan in the Annals of Clonmacnoise, before 1328. But Ogham, and the language or jargon of the poets mentioned above, were highly exclusive languages, used by elite groups: how then did their secrets become known to Tinkers and Travellers? As Meyer puts it "Shelta contains devices which none but scholars could have introduced, such as the names of letters from the Ogham alphabet, archaic words and forms, borrowings from Greek and Hebrew, and the like" (1909:242). The explanation, he claims, is in the influence of monasticism on the whole of Irish life at the time. Some of the monks' learning filtered down to all who came in close contact with them, particularly members of two professions, metalworkers and masons, both of which have

preserved secret languages. Meyer cites as an example of the close connection a cerd in the sixth century who as well as making bells and croziers for the monks, also found time to write three hundred gospels (1909:242). Meyer's thesis is that the cerds and metalworkers who had an entree into the monasteries because of their profession picked up ancient devices and techniques for disguising language from the monks, which they used in the creation of an artificial language of their own, Shelta.

MacAlister's approach is different. He asserts that "some of the marks of antiquity that had been most confidently indicated prove on closer examination to be illusory" (1937:163). These include words like thobar, which Meyer considered to be relics of preaspiration. MacAlister counters:

if (as was assumed by the first students of Shelta) the word gre 'to arise' was derived from erg-im when g was pronounced hard, the language would not be a mere relic of the eighth or tenth century A.D.: it would be prehistoric. This being incredible we must find some simpler explanation: and the explanation surely is that the inventors of the language worked it out from written forms of Irish: they disregarded the dots of lenition and so pronounced the words with the consonants hard (1937:166).

MacAlister describes Shelta as a language concocted for secrecy by a community living "parasitically" in the midst of Irish speakers. He thinks that, when they began to fashion Shelta, they may possibly have been primarily Irish

speakers, but they gradually adopted English from other outcasts with whom they joined forces (1937:164). Who these other outcasts were he does not say. There are no records of English or English-speaking wanderers coming to Ireland in any numbers, and at the time MacAlister refers to English was not widely spoken in Ireland. MacAlister continues: "A sufficient number of the Irish-speaking hosts knew enough English to make English alone insufficient as a disguise" (1937:165). But since settled people were not fluent enough to recognize English words when interspersed with "jargon", English words could be used without modification, with the exception of a few rhyming slang words. The clear implication here is that in MacAlister's opinion, Travellers took to speaking English before the settled community. A problem with MacAlister's analysis is that he does not specify whether he is referring to Travellers in Ireland or Britain. The vast majority of the Shelta he reproduces was collected in Britain. Treating the whole body of Shelta as a unit seems certain to lead to a flawed analysis. Irish Travellers could have learned English from other wanderers in Britain, but then they would not have been living in the midst of Irish speakers; there would have been nothing to stop them using Irish as a secret language if they felt they needed one, rather than going to the trouble of disguising words which were already incomprehensible to the general populace. When MacAlister described the first fashioners of Shelta as possibly being

primarily Irish speakers, it is not clear what other possibility he is addressing. He does not seem to think that Shelta was entirely formed after English took over from Irish generally, which would be an untenable view. His essential proposition is that Shelta contains English words because, while Irish words had to be disguised to preserve secrecy of communication in front of Irish-speaking people, these people were not conversant enough with English to pick out English words when mixed in with "jargon". The argument turns, in effect, on the proposition that Travellers learnt and used English before settled people. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, the serious decline of Irish began because, inter alia, English became the symbol of upward mobility (Croghan 1984:63). This consideration does not seem likely to have affected Travellers, living as they did on the fringe of society. Irish declined most slowly in some of the poorer areas of the West of Ireland, areas which are designated Gaeltacht today. Gaeltacht areas in the West of Ireland have traditionally supported large populations of Travellers (O'Toole 1973:57). One would have thought that Travellers would be the last members of Irish society to change to English, given their social isolation and minimal social contacts outside their own group. Instead, MacAlister claims that they not only learned enough English vocabulary to use it as disguise against settled people but also used to as the syntactic loom on which to weave their own

language. MacAlister then does not believe that the language is old: he believes that "it has been fashioned into its present form by persons whose major language was English" (1937:162). "It contains next to nothing ancient and exclusively Celtic" (1937:163), but he accepts that "there remains a small heritage of early material, enough to show that for all its spuriousness it has some links with the older secret languages of Ireland" (1937:164).

These links described by MacAlister are summarised below:

1) In ancient Ireland, the druids preserved an obsolete form of the Goidelic language for use in sacred hymns, which they had to know by heart. These hymns were in fact composed when that stage of the language was in common use. As the spoken language developed away from the older form, the latter became more useful as a means of excluding non-initiates, enhanced by the use of cryptic devices.

2) The underworld of Irish society, "composed to a large extent of the dregs of an aboriginal population" (1937:255), may have preserved fragments of an earlier speech, supplemented by argot words. MacAlister calls this Serf-Speech.

3) In the monastic schools of the middle ages, a jargon was developed, MacAlister claims by schoolboys, because of the range of the vocabulary: "it is of the earth, earthy"

(1937:91); and also because, "Every public school has its own language, foisted upon and adapted to the accident and syntax of the mother-tongue of the pupils" (1937:256). MacAlister calls this Bog-Latin; its original name, as used by Meyer, is Duil Laithne. MacAlister thinks it highly likely that "Bog-Latin" borrowed some words from Serf-Speech.

4) Masons and Tinkers each had a secret technical jargon of their own, artificially developed to preserve the secrets of the trade. The mason speech, Bearlagair na Saer, followed Irish in accident and vocabulary. There are very few words in common between it and Bog-Latin; if there had been, MacAlister claims that this would have meant that they were borrowed in Bog-Latin and survived in Bearlagair na Saer, from Serf-Speech (1937:256).

5) At the dissolution of the monasteries, monks were forced to fend for themselves. MacAlister believes that those who were artistic allied themselves to itinerant Tinkers, who may have retained fragments of Serf-Speech: the common elements between Bog-Latin and Shelta may constitute these remnants of Serf-Speech. In MacAlister's opinion, the monks repaid their hosts with the invention of additional secret vocabulary, which needed scholarship for its contrivance. "English gradually ousted Irish, but the artificial vocabulary remained; it merely changed its setting" (1937:257). The words were invented to fit into

an Irish structure; when that gave way to English, the words were transferred untranslated. A comparison between the vocabularies of Shelta, Bog-Latin and Bearlagair na Saer shows a few common words, which MacAlister identifies as Serf-Speech, but, he continues "of its accidence and syntax one fact only emerges, and that fact is quite remarkable. This lost language had no personal pronouns, and supplied their place with a possessive pronoun and a substantive" (1937:257). This construction is common to all three languages; MacAlister's point is that this may be a survival from Serf-Speech.

MacAlister's view on the origin of Shelta could be summarised thus. It is an essentially modern, artificially contrived jargon which contains earlier material transmitted through contact with secret languages invented for different purposes. Sinead Suinear Butler, in her "Commentary on MacAlister" (1979) criticizes MacAlister, as well as Meyer and Sampson, for assuming that Shelta is a "deliberately scrambled" version of Irish. She thinks it should be considered "a separate entity with lots of elements from other sources", including but not comprising disguised Irish. Butler suggests, interestingly, that Shelta is the Travellers' mother tongue, with English and Irish being mere *linguae francae* for use in bicultural communication. "The fact that the idiom and construction of Shelta are more similar to English than to Irish in no way 'proves' that

they are directly taken from English" (1979:17). If Irish had been the first language of Travellers, she points out, there would still be evidence of its influence in the Shelta material MacAlister dealt with. If Shelta had been invented by native Irish-speakers it would have had to follow Irish in its syntactic structure:

The native Irish speaker would be incapable of dropping aspiration, nasalization, eclipsis, because he is not aware of these processes in the first place - he simply performs them, and knows that speech without them would not be 'right' (1979:18).

Butler, referring to Bearlagair na Saer, raises the question of why, considering that most of the recorded material of this language emanated at roughly the same time as the vocabularies of Shelta, it did not demonstrate a similar rejection of Irish syntactic framework and its replacement with English. The masons, she points out, being professional skilled craftsmen, would have had to ply their trade among the upper classes, who spoke English. They would have had more exposure to English in their day-to-day life than Travellers in their rural/peasant environment. If masons, using a jargon which we know to have been invented deliberately, used the syntactic structure of their mother tongue, Irish, why then, if Shelta was similarly invented, did Travellers not do the same, instead of using English? Butler believes that Shelta does not evince an Irish syntax, not because as MacAlister claims this was replaced with English, but because Shelta never had an Irish syntax. It

had a Shelta syntax, which would seem to be more parallel in its contemporary form to English than to Irish (1979:22). Butler finds MacAlister's description of Shelta words being transferred untranslated from their "original Irish setting" into an English one unconvincing. If anything were to be replaced, she argues, it would tend to be "parole" rather than "langue", in Saussurian terms. This point is well made. The very existence of Hiberno-English today demonstrates the influence a discarded mother-tongue has on the language that replaces it. Butler points out that Travellers use English in a way distinctive to them, and argues that this may reflect an underlying Shelta structure. Travellers, for example, almost invariably use present tense verb forms with the third person termination (I goes, we goes, they goes). This is consistent with the Shelta pattern (my jeel goes). As MacAlister (1937:257) points out, this construction is typically Shelta since the language has no personal pronouns (see also Binchy 1983).

Butler's final position on Shelta is that, onto a pre-Celtic core (Serf-Speech in MacAlister's terminology) were grafted at different times Oghamised additions as well as disguised English and Irish words.

MacAlister's work was reviewed in an M.A. thesis by Jared Harper in 1969. The subject was the Cant spoken by Irish Travellers in the Southern United States, whose forefathers

had left Ireland around the time of the famine. Harper believes that both Leland and Sampson were wrong in attributing great age to Shelta; Leland did not present any evidence for his assertions, but Sampson

thought he had proof of some Shelta words passing over into English slang as early as the 16th century. It is far more likely that these were simply somewhat archaic slang words in John Barlow's (Leland's informant's) idiolect (1969:63).

In fact, as we saw in the last chapter, most Travellers use words which were collected by Harman in the mid- 16th century. Harper minimises the significance of pre-aspirated or lenited forms apparently persisting in Shelta. He claims that MacAlister's literacy theory is erroneous, and in fact led MacAlister to conceive of Shelta word formation as very complicated:

But this complication probably arose from his not distinguishing between unconscious devices such as transposition and substitution, and unconscious phonemic and morphemic changes, such as 'de-nasalization', 'de-aspiration' and apocope (1969:63).

One may disagree with MacAlister's literacy theory, but as a theory it holds water. An illiterate person who heard the Irish word bothar pronounced "bo'her" would have no way of knowing that there was a silent t in the written form, and would surely disguise the word as hob'er; one would not expect an illiterate person to give the backslang version of the word borough as gorub. Harper believes, therefore,

that the language could have been formed by illiterate people. While one may agree with him that apocope could be an unconscious device, his dismissal of "de-nasalization" and "de-aspiration" remains unconvincing and simplistic.

To understand Harper's belief that Shelta could have been formed by illiterate people, one first has to distinguish between argots and disguised speech. An argot is a secret jargon, a spoken code, whereas disguised speech is produced by the application of certain rules consistently to the speaker's mother tongue - generatively one might say in that an infinite number of utterances might be produced. An argot on the other hand is limited by the number of lexical items that comprise it. Harper proposes that Shelta originated as disguised speech, using very simple rules, possibly consisting of the reversal of monosyllables and the first syllable of longer words, and the substitution of certain initial phonemes for certain others. He claims that these operations could be carried out by illiterate or pre-literate people. "The people who first used Shelta were either monolingual Irish speakers, or bilingual in English or Irish. One suspects that they were bilingual" (1966:68). One would have to, given that the lexical items are predominantly Irish, while the structure is English. Harper continues "For some reason that remains to be determined, this disguised speech became an argot. That is, a number of Shelta words became 'frozen' and memorized as if they

were 'ancient' words" (1969:68). The question of whether or not Shelta is made up of "frozen" words is central to its definition - as an artificially contrived jargon or a "real" language. John Barlow, Sampson's informant, saw no connection between Shelta and Irish, although he knew Irish. He obviously did not consider it to be made up of perversions of Irish words; although the structure was gone he still saw it as a separate language. And among Harper's own wordlists are several examples of words which seem to have been coined since his Travellers reached America, e.g. grandly "candy" is formed by a recognised Shelta rule, which suggests that while "freezing" may account for some words surviving, the disguise process is still at work, as it is in Dublin.

Harper claims that since Shelta became an argot, any phonemic or morphemic changes affecting the dominant language affected the argot. He quotes Sampson's passage on the conformity between Shelta and the other language of its speakers; but he (Harper) sees no inconsistency in Sampson's observation that neither aspiration nor eclipsis are observed in Shelta even where it is spoken according to the Gaelic idiom (Sampson 1890:215; Harper 1966:69). Harper's conclusion is that the enormous complications in MacAlister's treatment of Shelta word formations, particularly the substitutions, can probably be explained in terms of various sound changes from dialect to dialect in

Ireland (1969:69). One may disagree with Harper's conclusions, but at certain points his criticism of MacAlister is incisive. He is right in commenting that MacAlister created unnecessary complications in his rules for word formation in Shelta: some of his rules have only one or two examples, which makes one look twice at the rule. His word derivations, also, are sometimes strained in the extreme, e.g. avarı from Irish "baile", brauen from Irish "abhar".

The major unresolved issue in Shelta is that of its lack of an Irish syntactic structure. One can offer several possible explanations.

1) Shelta was formed since English took over from Irish generally. This seems unlikely: one has to choose here between Meyer's and MacAlister's theories. Meyer believed the language was very old, so MacAlister's "literate inventors" are the only contenders. Travellers at no time in the recorded past have been literate, and MacAlister's positing of monks thrown onto the road at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries as contributing to the formation of the language indicates that this cannot be the real explanation.

2) Shelta had an Irish structure before changing to an English one. This is MacAlister's explanation. Problems with it are (1) there are very few traces of Irish syntax -

MacAlister claims that what there is is not idiomatic; (11) this would mean that Travellers learnt English before settled people, which, given their social situation, seems unlikely.

3) Shelta had its own syntactic structure which lasted until quite recently: it never had an Irish structure because its own was extant until English became generally spoken in Ireland. One has to posit social changes for Travellers since English became widespread as causing the native structure to be dropped, and the vocabulary to be transferred to English. The problem with this explanation is the absence of more traces of the native structure at the time the material dealt with by MacAlister was collected, not more than two generations after English became widely spoken. One might suggest that collectors who thought Shelta was a made-up jargon were not sensitive enough to signs of a syntax that was neither Irish nor English, but this is speculation. Speculative and deficient though it may be, this explanation remains the most coherent answer to the question of Shelta's lost syntax.

MacAlister can perhaps be criticised for the rigidity of his insistence that Shelta was an artificially-constructed language. He would have progressed further with greater effect had he approached the subject with an open mind, rather than limiting the scope of his study by constantly

looking for signs of influence from Irish or English. The developments that have taken place in pidgin/creole studies since they began to be treated pragmatically rather than as bastard Englishes illustrate this point. In fact, in the case of Shelta, it was over-emphasis on the artificially contrived aspect of Shelta that first attracted the attention of theorists on pidgins and creoles: they saw a parallel between simplifying the outer form of a language and complicating the outer form, one for the purpose of enhancing communication and the other for the purpose of inhibiting it. The area of research on pidgins/creoles which seems to have most to offer in an understanding of Shelta is that of the continuing influence of the dominant source language(s) on the newly developed pidgin. Todd points out that

Once a pidgin's grammar is firmly established and can function adequately in any given circumstance it is less open to change than the pronunciation and the vocabulary, but it too is influenced if the pressures from English endure and persist (1974:60).

The fact that in Shelta grammar was apparently the first element to go (one cannot be sure about pronunciation), seems to underline the point that Shelta does not fit comfortably into the pidgin mould. In fact, it could be argued that the attention of theorists on pidgins/creoles to Shelta is misplaced, and results from an over-emphasis on the "disguise-for-secrecy" function. The inventiveness of word-coining in Shelta may seem at first glance to bear

some resemblance to the simplification of lexical categories in pidgins, but when these are put into their proper perspective, the differences between Shelta and pidgins become clearer.

Shelta's designation as a secret language should be brought into focus here. It is the opinion of this researcher that the secrecy of Shelta has been widely misunderstood. If the secrecy of Shelta had been perceived as two-fold in meaning, the primary sense being secrecy as in sacred, special, apart, with secrecy of communication in front of outsiders as very much secondary, study of Shelta would undoubtedly have taken a different course. Meyer, Sampson et al. focused on the secondary aspect; but it could be argued that the dwindling vocabulary of a natural language was expanded by disguising (i.e. making secret) words from its speakers' other lingua franca vocabulary, not primarily to exclude outsiders, but to preserve the ancient heirloom, the secret language. Gypsies have a secret language too, and no one suggests that it was constructed to confound non-Gypsies, because the history of their language is known: there are still people in India who speak the language in its original form. Writings by Kenrick (1971) and Acton (1974) and others on the secrecy of Romani show that it has a deep symbolic meaning for Gypsies. It seems possible that the same applies to Travellers.

If Travellers include the descendents of "the underworld of Irish society, composed to a large extent of the dregs of an aboriginal population" (MacAlister 1937:255), then they probably spoke Serf-Speech as MacAlister calls it. As time went on, their retention of this archaic language held them together as a community. Over the centuries this language was eroded under influence from the dominant language. Its speakers knew ways of disguising language for religious/magical purposes learnt from druids and later monks: this enabled them to take in words from the dominant language and make them their own through modifications. Because Shelta is primarily used for secrecy today does not mean it always was. In fact, one could argue that the secrecy function is recent; documentary sources as well as folklore indicate that in the recent past relations between Travellers and settled people were based on respect for mutual differences. In this situation, the construction of a complicated code, with a wide-ranging vocabulary, seems unlikely.

CHAPTER VI

SHELTA TODAY

Travellers have existed as an autonomous community for centuries. They have been seen by the settled community as united only by the bond of common occupation, whereas in fact they have been held together by their outcast status, their traditionally nomadic way of life, and their endogamy. But while these are contributing factors to the sense of community among Travellers, the sine qua non for membership of that community is knowledge of Shelta. This has apparently been an enduring bond over the centuries, and even today, when the average urban Traveller may have a vocabulary of less than a hundred words, Shelta is still regarded as the mark of the real Traveller.

Shelta is learned in infancy - one might say as a joint first language. How travelling children learn to keep separate their two vocabularies, which share the same syntactic structure, would make an interesting study, and would appear to be relevant to research on bilingualism.

Some Travellers today suggest that while "Shelta" is the language of the real Traveller, Cant was and is an inferior variety spoken by people on the fringes of Traveller life,

who did not really belong. If this were true, it would mean that the majority of Travellers today are "hangers-on", and the descendants of hangers-on, since the most common name for the language today in Ireland is Cant. It is not clear whether cant in the Travellers' sense has had any bearing on the secondary or dictionary meaning - whether in fact instead of there having been two separate entities, what we are talking about is the same entity at different stages of development.

It is clear from evidence presented in earlier chapters that Shelta was at some stage a language. How Shelta vocabulary came to be transferred to English, is a question we must attempt to resolve, however tentatively.

George and Sharon Gmelch, writing about the emergence of Travellers as an ethnic group, described how, at some uncertain stage in the past, Travellers gradually differentiated themselves from the settled population. Perhaps the evidence they presented should be looked at in a slightly different light. Supposing that Travellers, as seems quite likely from what we have seen in earlier chapters, have always considered themselves as separate from the settled population, could it not be said that the changes that led the Gmelches to describe them as "gradually differentiating themselves", were in fact changes in the perception of Travellers by settled people? On this

hypothesis, Travellers up to the time of their supposed separation or differentiation were truly a secret people, speaking truly a secret language, looking like Irish people from the outside but have a secret "nationality" of their own, and having more in common with nomadic groups throughout the world than with settled people. It could be argued that it was the change of perception of Travellers by settled people that created the need for a protective language; Shelta lexis was used for this, in an English syntactic structure. Travellers claim that the advantage of Shelta/Gammon/Cant as a disguise code is that outsiders do not realise it is being used against them: so the English structure is an advantage in itself. Shelta, therefore, rather than dying, merely changed its setting. The history of Cant in England in the Middle Ages, as, (it is argued) a reduced form of Shelta used for subterfuge, could be said to have repeated itself in Ireland. Some traces of the real language remain, however, in its usage in domestic and non-confrontational settings, and in the fact that the mark of a real Traveller remains his knowledge of Shelta/Gammon/Cant.

Shelta Today

We must now examine the changes that have taken place in Shelta since it was last studied, by MacAlister; at what the present vocabulary tells about the Travellers' social

system; at Travellers' attitudes to their language; and at the prospect of its survival.

Most of the Travellers interviewed had a basic Shelta vocabulary of between one and two hundred words. There are undoubtedly people with vastly richer stores of words, and there are people who would only know a handful of words. The vocabulary present below includes the words in commonest use. Since Shelta is an unwritten language, one would expect there to be a fair amount of variation in versions of the same word, but even allowing for the passage of time, more variation was found than was expected. For example, chirps and chirks were both given for the word MacAlister gives as t'ux "clothes"; MacAlister's mirsun "shawl" is given as both meersoon and meersoom; MacAlister's kun'el "potato" is invariably cullion; MacAlister's tirpog "a rag" has become trapog; talop "belly" has become tralop; l'esk "(to) tell" has become leisp; nefeis "shame" was in MacAlister's time interchangeable with nefin: this is now invariable neshif; kuldurm "asleep" has become cudlum: this may be the result of interference from English. One Traveller explained this word: "If you have a child and you're trying to get him to sleep, you cuddle'um." One wonders whether these transpositions may not be the result of the continuing Shelta process, at work on itself.

Merril McLane, writing about the survival of a Calo lexicon

among a group of Spanish Gypsies, describes the extension of the meanings of established words: while usually this is for the purpose of enlarging the vocabulary, it functions differently in Calo: "it is a process, perhaps peculiar to dying languages, in which the meaning of existing Calo items are extended to replace ones that have been lost, rather than representing new items or concepts" (1977:306). One type of change is where the original meaning is retained by is extended to include one or more meanings for words which have been lost. This process can also be seen in Shelta: malya "hand" > arm, wrist; it has also been extended figuratively - malyad, "arrested"; cora "foot" > leg; reib "straw, grass" > hair; pi "mouth" > face. The word lurc "an eye" was extended to mean a watch; this led to the eclipse of the Shelta word turc "time" - because of the similarity of the words Geig someone the turc, became Geig someone the lurc. Something of the same process can be seen in the words glodax and ladu, given by MacAlister as meaning "dirt, dirty" and "earth, soil", respectively. The two words seem to have been compressed in the modern word lagadı "dirty". One may query interference from the Romani mochadı "dirty, impure".

While in Calo meanings are extended to compensate for a dwindling lexicon, and in Romani words are "incoined" or compounded, in Shelta there are two ways of filling gaps in the lexicon. One is the use of generic terms like inoch,

which can be used as verb or noun. Sentences like inoch the inochs, which could mean Hide the stones, or Peel the potatoes, depending on the context underline the present-time orientation of most Shelta communication: gesture and proximity are necessary supplements.

The other way of filling gaps in the lexicon is the traditional Shelta process of prefixing. Even quite young children are aware, perhaps even subconsciously, of how this is done: when asked a Shelta/Cant word they do not know, they will quickly make one up - grapple, for apple was given by a young child who could not remember the word grula (Irish ul + prefix gr-) or the older muggle. (Note that the construction is identical, except that an English rather than an Irish word is used in this case.) Other examples are groilet for toilet, slag for cigarette, (from fag + prefix sl-), gredog for guard. This last seemed to be a very ad hoc invention, based either on some modification of "guard" or on a reworking of the Shelta shade or sedog. One older Traveller, when asked if he had ever heard this term (gredog) said he had not, but pointed out the similarity between the new word and the Shelta for goat, grebhog: this explanation, which seems an unlikely one, would make the new word analogous to the word pig for police in some circles. If Travellers still recognize a Shelta word as such, after modifications such as the above, and the, perhaps unconscious, transpositions mentioned earlier,

the implications are interesting for the classification of the language; this is an area which would profit from further investigation.

Anthony Cash (1977:178) himself of Traveller descent, has pointed out the range of the vocabulary of Shelta in itself indicates the inadequacy of the "secret code" definition. He quoted some Shelta/Gammon words which he considered could only belong to intimate familial contexts. The vocabulary gathered for this study has 31 words under the heading Food and Drink; 24 under the Family and Other Persons; 22 under Parts of the Body; 14 in Household Items; 12 under Birds and Animals; 8 under Clothing; 8 under Trade and Work Items; 7 under Money; and 7 under The Camp. While the police are well represented, with four or five alternative titles, and there are words for stealing, police station and prison, these are far outweighed by words which belong to the most un-confrontational of contexts. MacLane points out that Calo retains words for moral concepts like good, truth, lying and shame. While words for truth and lying were still extant when MacAlister's words were collected, they are no more; but Shelta retains two words for good, one in the everyday sense, the other in the sense of holy or venerated. The word for shame is retained in Shelta, and is very widely known. Calo has 18 words for family members, including two words for virgin: Shelta has no word for virgin, or bride, and only 11 for family members, and these

not all widely known. But Shelta has two words for promiscuous women: the difference was explained by a Traveller: "Ripiuc is a prostitute; minteil is a whore - one who does it for nothing". That Shelta should now have no words for aunt, uncle, brother, sister, cousin, or daughter (significantly, the word for son is widely known) is difficult to understand in the light of the importance to Traveller life of the extended family, but the fact that Shelta, unlike Romani, does not seem to have any ritualistic function at weddings, wakes and such occasions, may be at least a partial explanation.

Shelta Vocabulary and Sentences

Presented below are a vocabulary and sentences collected from the five main informants. The criteria for inclusion have already been mentioned in the Introduction, where the difficulties of orthography have also been discussed.

agetchl = afraid

aid = butter

alamach = milk; gamı alamach = buttermilk

anosha = now, at once, there, belonging to there

aswurt = up, above

beor = woman

beeg = steal

binni = little, small, nice, fine
blainog = cow
bleater = sheep
braven = oats, corn
buffer = settled person
bug = (to) get, give, buy, take
buggle, bugail(?) = (to) take, give
burry, buri = good, great, fine

Cam = son
caideog = stone, rock
cena, cinne = house; gritch cena = hospital;
ledi cena = chapel
chat = (any)thing
chelp = cook
chelpin = boiling
cheri = fire
cherpins = fingers
chimis = sticks, trees
chirks, chirps = clothes, bedclothes
claithean = a hedge
cob = cabbage
coinne, conye = excrement
coireog = privates
comra = dog
coras = feet
corries = shoes

corrib = kill, fight, hit

craidí = (to) stay, lodgings; craidí-in = waiting

cri = rise, get up

cripeach = cat, rabbit

crolus, crolusc = hunger, hungry

croudeog = hen

crush = (to) go, in an emergency sense

cudlum = sleep

cuinne = priest

cullions = potatoes

curry = horse

deis = (exclamation) look out, look at this

díl (also yíl, jeel) = my, your, his/her, their,
me, you, him/her, them

dolímí = night

dreeper = bottle

dura = bread

elim = butter

fe = meat

feen = man

fecír, ficír = (this word is given as "a sweep" by

MacAlister: this definition caused great
amusement. The real, or present meaning was
difficult to determine exactly, but it has to

do with sexual intercourse).

gallye = a child

gamı = bad, evil, wicked

gap = kiss

gat, gater = alcoholic drink porter; gat cena = public house

gatch = poor; gatch cena = poorhouse

gath = young

gathera = father

Galyune = (exclamation) God, Lord

geig = ask, beg; geiger = beggar

gestiman = magistrate

gladar = to cheat

glazer = window

glimmer = fire

gleoch = man; gleoch sudıl = gentleman

gleochın = looking

glocots = police, guards

glorı = listen

glorog = ear

gop (long o) = cold

gopa (long o) = pocket

grade, goreid = money

gradar (long a) = solder

gredog (long e) = guard, policeman

grag, greig = a street or town

grainne = a ring

grainneog = a hedgehog (Irish)
grani = to know, understand
grascrin = cursing
gre = tea
grebhog = goat
gredan = face
grifin = coat
grisce = straw
grishul = beard
gritch = sick; gritch cena = hospital
gritchins = onions
grockins = stockings
groda = soda
grojer = soldier
gruper = (to) work
grucra, grooje = sugar
gruinneog = window
grula = apple
grupa = a shop
grutchi = (to) close, shut
gushach = small pot, cup, porringer
gulimas, gullies = shoes, boots
guth = wire

inoch = (any)thing; generic term used as a verb and noun

jigger = a door

jumnick = Sunday

kimmis (see chimis) = sticks

klisp = to break

kradı (see craıdı) = stop, stay

krishk = old

labı, lobby = hide

ladu = earth, dirt

lagun = bucket, can or pot

lagadı = dirty

laicin = girl

laig = (to) lose

lampa = a bag

lampeid = a blanket

laprog = a duck

lascan = salt

lascun = herring; lascan lascun = salty herring

laspurt = bastard

lasun gathera, nadherum = grandfather/mother

ledı cena = chapel

ledog = a lady

leisc, leisp = (to) tell

lı = bed

lıba = blood

lırkı = mad, angry

loba = word

lobar = to fight
lorc = car, two-wheeled wagon
losped (long a) = married
lub = a hole
luban (long a) = tent
lubar = to hit someone
lubin (long i) = loaf (of bread)
lugi-in, lungi-in = crying
lu-og = meal (wheat, oats etc.)
lurc = eye; a watch; the time
lurp = flour
lush = a drink; porter
lush = to eat, or drink
lushed, lushy = drunk

malyas = hands; malyad = taken by the police
maisın = basin
maloch = nose
marach = donkey
medrin = carrying; beor medrin = a pregnant woman
mealtog = shirt
meirigin = box, budget, gladar box
mersum, miarsuin = shawl
mideog = a shilling; five mideogs = five pence;
midil = devil
milc = a bit, a bite
minceir = Traveller; minceir's thari = Shelta/Gammon/Cant

minic, munic = name
mintell = whore
miscon = breast
mishur = dresser
misli = go, walk; misli-in = going
molly = camping place, camp
mong = a fool
muggle = apple
munkera = the country
muni, muine = holy, good; muniness = heaven
muog = pig
muscog = spoon
muskers, muscos = police

nadeis = place, camp
nadherum = mother; lasun nadherum = grandmother
neaca = a can, e.g. for milking cows
nefeis, neshif = shame, embarrassment; aneshif = ashamed
nides = people; nide go burry = fairies
ni'deis = don't, it's not, no
nioc = (to) steal; niocin = stealing
niuc = head; penny: niuc of cob = head of cabbage
niucle = candle
niup = urine
nobra = turf; nobra's thari = Bog-Latin
nomera = a room
nuggle = gun

nump, niump = a pound

olimı, dolimı = night, darkness

paveys = Travellers

pek = food

pi = mouth, face

pincın = louse, flea, vermin

plank = (to) hide

rack = comb

raglı = garden; muggle raglı = apple garden = orchard; a
farmer

raglum, riqlum = iron, hammer

rattler = a train

reib = hay, hair, grass

ribeal = a bottle

riblin = sheet

rille, rillich = mad

ripiuc = prostitute

rispa = trousers

rispin = "piece"

rispun = prison

rodus = door

rog = a four-wheeled wagon

roglin = laughing

rouiltye = milk

rumog = egg

salc = take, arrest

saka = sin

sarc = field

sarrag, sharrock = (police) barracks

sca1, scuth = water

scaihop = whiskey

scop = (to) open

scir = (?) holy; beor scir = a nun

scibilin, scibol = barn

scimeis = drunk

scurrer = wheel

searg = red

seders = matches

sedogs = guards

shades = guards

sham = man

shilc = (to) sell

siucan = bacon

siudin = a cake of bread

sluinne = a glass

skafer = silver

skiv = fish

sooner = a dog

spunch = tobacco

sraca = a cake of bread

sread = a spade
sreata = gate
srideal = bottle
srinte = a pint
srocter = a doctor
stain = tin
stall = stop, don't
staimeirs = papers, summonses
steamer(s) = a pipe, cigarettes
strumble = straw
strumna = piper
subla, sublich = a boy, young fellow
sun1 = look, look at; sun1-in = looking

tal gata = ten
talosc = day
thar1 = (to) talk
tobar = road
tom = big, fine
tor1 = to follow, to come back
tosarun = half-crown
tospin, tosped = dying, dead
tral = tongue; cuinne's tral = Latin
trollop = belly, stomach
trapogs = rags
trip = a sup
tugs, teaches = clothes

tur = backside

washbol = soap

weed = tea

whid = talk; stall your whiddin = stop talking

Shelta/Gammon/Cant

yourum = milk

Sentences and Phrases in Shelta

The sublich 's out anosha = the boy's out at the moment

Stall anosha = stay there

Galyune, beor anosha, we'll be salc-ed = God, the woman's
there, we'll be arrested!

The gleoch anosha = the man belonging to there

Burra subla that'll bug a milc of fe = good boy that'll get
a bit of meat

Bug us a steamer = give me a cigarette

I bugged them inochs = I bought those things

The beor never racked her head today = The woman never
combed her hair today

Cri and misli = get up and go

The gleochs are corribin in the greig = the men are fighting
in the town

The gallyes are corribin around the gleoch's cinne = the
children are messing around the man's house

It's a corribin day = it's very cold
Corrib the gruinneog = break the window
Tospin with the crolus = dying with the hunger
Sun1 all the cripachs in the sarc = look at all the rabbits
in the field
Geig the chelped cullions = ask for cooked potatoes
Go over to the cuinne and bug a few niumps = go over to the
priest and get a few pounds
The 'beor bet the galye and she's a comra = the woman beat
the child and she's a dog (bitch?)
Crush up anosha and bug a few chimmis = run up and get a few
sticks
Crush and labelis = go and hide
The gallye's after conyin herself = the child's after
dirtying herself
Kraid1 in a nadeis = stay in a camp
Deis, the feen is gleochin at you = Aw, the man's looking at
you
Deis the innick = look at the thing
He leisped my dil = he told me
Sun1 her dil = look at her
Will you have a look at her dil
Leave my dil alone = don't be bothering me
Bake the dura = bake the bread
Fe chelped = cooked meat
Tom goreid = gold, a lot of money

Misli to the cena and geig the beor anosha for a milc of
grisce for a li = go to the house and ask the woman for a
bit of straw for a bed

Grutchi the sreata, the corries are misli-in onto the tobar=
close the gate, the horses are going onto the road

He hasn't a gulima on his foot = he has'nt a shoe on his
foot

Geig gulimas at the cina = ask for shoes at the house

Gami beor = "a woman that won't give you nothing"

Geig the gleoch for a gath = ask the man for a drink

He won't let in the minceirs to the gruppa = he won't let
the Travellers into the shop

Galyune sik sudil = Good God Almighty

The gleoch is inochin cullions = the man is digging potatoes

Get the cripach to corrib the inochs in the cena = get the
cat to kill the mice in the house

Galyune may inoch you = may God bless you

The midil may inoch you = the devil may take you

Gami gleoch up anosha, gonna corrib us = there's a bad man
up there, he'll get us

The gallye got corribed = the child got punished, beaten

The laicin's buggin us a cup of weed = the girl's getting us
a cup of tea

Se lunars in the rispun = six months in prison

The lagadi basin is for washing yourself = the "dirty" basin
is for washing yourself

The cherps are all lagadi = the clothes are all dirty

A lampa for the cullions = a bag for the potatoes
 He'll leisp them when he goes back he got no tea = he'll
 tell them when he goes back he got no tea
 Don't leisp her dil = don't tell her
 You tospin laspurt = you dirty bastard
 Getting losped = getting married
 A losped gleoch = a married man
 The beor is crushin lirki = the woman's in a temper (lit.
 "going mad")
 The feens is lushin their weed = the men are drinking their
 tea
 Lush a muggle = eat an apple
 Luog braven = oatmeal
 Misl1 down to the nomera and glori is the gallye lung1-in =
 go down to the room and listen (to see) is the child crying
 Geig someone the l urc = ask someone the time
 That's a midil of a laicin = that's a bold girl
 The midil may salc you = the devil may take you
 That the midil may corrib you = that the devil may kill you
 Geig a mealtog at the cinne = ask for a shirt at the house
 A milc o' dura = a bit of bread
 He'll thari about us when he misli-1s = he'll talk about us
 when he goes home
 That binni gallye there'll be fluent in minceir's thari by
 the time she's three = that little child there'll be fluent
 in Cant by the time she's three
 Geig them their minic = ask them their name

Galyune sik sudil, I'm aneshif, I'm all lagadi and the nides
are suni-in at me = God Almighty, I'm embarrassed, I'm all
dirty and the people are looking at me

A gami niuc = a dirty head

The laicin wants to make her niup = the girl wants to
relieve herself

Don't salc the nobra when the gleoch is suni-in = don't take
the turf when the man is looking

Don't pek fornint the woman = don't eat in front of the
woman

Look at the pi of the beor = "that's an ugly mouth"

Plank the innochs = hid the stones (in this case)

Geig a rispa = ask for a pair of trousers

Rille gleoch = mad man

Rille beor = mad woman

Crushin rillic = going mad

Salc in the gallye o' the road, the sedogs are coming = take
in the child off the road, the police are coming

You're going to be salc-ed to the sharrock = you're going to
be taken to the barracks

The scai is chelped = the water is boiled

Geig a srideal = ask for a bottle

He's shilc-ed the lorc and he's the gallye gone to the grupa
= he's sold the car and sent the child to the shop

Suni the glochots with the stameirs in their malyas = look
at the police with the summonses in their hands

The talosc is misli-in = the day is going

The beor bugged us a few tugs = the woman gave us a few
clothes

Make weed for the subla = make tea for the boy

Stall your whiddin = stop talking Shelta/Gammon/Cant

Sun1 the binn1 croudeogs in the chimis = look at the birds
in the trees

Keep down your chirps near the nides = keep down you clothes
near the people = be modest

Conclusion

Today Shelta is spoken mainly (though not exclusively) in situations of confrontation of danger. The social situation of Travellers obviously has a great deal to do with its survival : as McLane points out, the fact that Calo-speaking Gypsies are moving out of the exclusively Gypsy modes of employment into the open market has hastened the decline of their language (1977:317). Social improvements for Travellers, no less than for Gypsies, can be a threat to the survival of the distinctive features of their way of life. There is a real prospect of Shelta being left behind, as a reminder of the bad old days.

In summary, the situation could well develop in either of two ways:

(1) Under the pressure of prejudice against them from the settled community, Travellers will accept housing and settlement, and try to "pass" into settled society. It is clear that they will be facilitated in this by Government policy. In this event, they may jettison any aspect of their lifestyle which might brand them as Travellers, and Shelta will be abandoned.

(11) Travellers will accept the improvements in conditions which are offered to them, but under their own terms. That is, they will accept housing, if they can live in groups defined by their family structure. Their children will go to school, but with the awareness that they have a culture which is not that of the majority. Being a Traveller will no longer mean living on the side of the road in squalid conditions but instead, having certain rules about cleanliness, living in extended families and knowing and speaking Shelta. In this event, the language will survive, as an alternative way of speaking which is appropriate to certain situations. These situations will be different to the present ones: the need for a secret code for use among hostile strangers may diminish, and it is possible that Shelta may develop along the lines of Anglo-Romani, used in intimate family contexts as well as on ceremonial and other culturally-significant occasions.

There is some evidence that the second prediction will come

true. Respect for the language appears to be growing. Although their vocabulary and knowledge of Shelta may be limited, all Travellers regard fluency in the language as the mark of a real Traveller, and fluent speakers enjoy higher status and respect - sometimes because, by the nature of things, they tend to be older people - but even among younger people, those who take a special interest in the language are regarded with special favour. There is a tendency for Travellers, as they mature and produce children of their own, to become more firmly rooted in the social system, and more interested in passing on Shelta to their own children. Minceirs Mislí, the Travellers Movement (made up of Travellers alone) are making significant progress in the promotion of pride in their own culture and way of life. At the same time, they are trying to encourage an awareness among young people of the value and uniqueness of Shelta. It is too early to speculate with confidence on the success of these efforts, but the indications are good. Obviously, respect for and pride in Shelta is inconsistent with its definition as a secret code for the conduct of antisocial business: efforts will have to be made to fix Shelta firmly in the centre of the Traveller world, to move it from the troubled border line between Travellers and settled people to the mainstream of Traveller life.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH ON SECRET CODES

Methodology

Shelta is most commonly used by Travellers in situations of conflict with settled people. The problems of a settled person trying to research Shelta, therefore, are initially daunting. Most researchers on sociolinguistic topics would aspire to obtaining a sample of natural speech. With Shelta, this presents insuperable problems. Shelta is spoken among Travellers held in police stations, for instance, but it would clearly be unethical to try and observe them covertly there: one would have to enter into a conspiracy with the police against one's subjects, which would be a serious breach of research ethics. Ethically, the best that one can hope for is honest and informed informants, who can describe the situation from the inside.

One cannot a priori, specify the ideal persons one wants to interview (that would represent a good regional mix, with equal rural/urban representation, and a range of age-groups etc.). This is because access can be difficult. For example, in the very early stages of this research, a Traveller woman was approached who was well known to the researcher through a weekly visit to the researcher's house. This woman seemed an ideal subject. She was talkative,

intelligent and very willing to reminisce about life on the road forty years ago, when she was a child. But a seemingly-casual enquiry as to whether she knew any Cant brought a vehement denial that it existed at all, followed by half-a-dozen reasons why she would not know it if it did. (Travellers "are too educated nowadays"; "only the old tinsmiths spoke it"; her grandmother lived in a house, etc.) After this incident, the woman did not reappear for several months; and when she did the relationship was, and has remained, strained.

Any attempts on the researcher's part to start the woman talking were treated with reserve as if an ulterior motive was suspected. This woman clearly knows Cant (her children are frequently heard using it among themselves as they wait on the doorstep) but she is not a suitable subject because she can apparently (and quite understandably) see no benefit to Travellers in disclosing the secret language to outsiders.

People can change their minds about participating in research of this kind, perhaps because of discussions with others in the community. This researcher was referred to one woman by Travellers, told to mention their name and the purpose of the study, and assured that she was an excellent subject. A preliminary meeting went well, the woman was friendly and interested, and a recording session was

arranged for the following Sunday. Sunday however found the door of the relevant caravan locked, and no one visible inside. But the woman's sister emerged from her own caravan to say that A was very sorry, but that she had no Cant at all and she would only be wasting the researcher's time. Sudden confirmation of this came when the door of the other caravan flew open, and the woman in question told the researcher to be off with herself and to take her circus with her. (This referred to the crowd of children who had accompanied the researcher from her entrance to the site.) Knowledge of the language, while essential for participants in a study such as this is not as important a qualifying feature as a favourable disposition towards the research. One therefore, is not choosing from the entire pool of Travellers in the country, but from the much smaller pool of people who are willing to talk about their language. This self-selecting group, in the case of this study, were relatively politicised people, who could see the benefits to their community in academic interest in it. One has to begin with people who have positive open attitudes to settled people, while not compromising their Traveller identity. Access to these people is not difficult, provided one can convince settled people working with them of one's bona fides: they do not give introductions easily, having had experience of vouching for researchers whose subsequent work showed insensitive and intolerant attitudes to Travellers. These Travellers who straddle the border

between Traveller and settled society are willing and informative subjects. they give information, but on their own terms. Because of the interview strategy, which was to avoid direct questioning, informants could end discussion of a topic at will. It was hard to determine whether the closure of a subject was because of boredom with the topic, or reluctance to give more details, but attempts, through restatements and rephrasings of information already given, to go further left the impression that on certain topics (death, for example) information was being withheld.

Traveller mediators can sometimes be persuaded to lead one deeper into the Traveller community, by introducing one to members who would not otherwise be willing to talk. This is of course the ideal informant, but there is very little one can do to bring about this situation: it depends on the judgment of the Traveller mediator, both regarding the value of the research, and the suitability of the researcher.

Having gained access to Traveller informants, the problem is how to make them feel comfortable about disclosing information they have always regarded as secret. Even the Travellers already mentioned, who can see the social and political benefits of their culture being documented, are uneasy when it actually comes to the point of what they say being recorded. In this study, treating Shelta as part of the overall pattern of Traveller culture was found to be by

far the best approach. This involved allowing the Travellers to set the agenda for recording sessions, both electronic and written.

Tapes and Technical Equipment

5-inch tapes were initially used, on a UHER tape recorder, but it became clear very quickly that this was not the best method. UHERs would give the best phonological reproduction, but for the vast majority of the information that emerged, this was not a predominant consideration. Cassette recorders were used from then on, and these had several advantages. They are not as cumbersome as UHERs, nor as obvious in use. Moreover, many Travellers possess cassette recorders, and are well used to recording music from the radio on them, so inhibitions were fewer. The 5-inch tapes used on the UHER lasted about twenty minutes, so a normal recording session of forty minutes involved changing tapes, and, tantalizingly, the most interesting information always seemed to emerge when tapes were being changed. Whether this was deliberate or not is debatable! Cassettes, on the other hand, last about three-quarters of an hour, and are simple to change.

With some informants recording was decided against, and a notebook was used instead. One woman in particular was

very conscious of the tape running, and got flustered if she could not think of a word. She was much more relaxed when a notebook and pencil were used. This worked well with the research on Shelta usage, when she only had to say whether or not she knew a word, but it was less successful with the general cultural information. The interviewing technique (described in more detail below) allowed the informant to direct the conversation. But if in the course of a seemingly casual conversation, the researcher whips out a notebook and writes down a point, the tenor of the conversation changes. The informant, consciously or unconsciously, becomes aware of the type of disclosure that triggers writing, so that instead of a sea of information out of which the researcher picks what she wants, the information is filtered, whether positively or negatively, by the informant.

One has to keep in mind that, rather than being a simple transfer of knowledge which the informant has and the researcher wants, this is a specialised human communication. While on the surface it appears to be an ordinary conversation, there is in fact an invisible tug-of-war going on between the researcher and the informant. The rules of ordinary conversation do not apply. One quickly learns new rules that: not to react to information, not to rush in to fill silences, and to keep to a fairly impersonal manner. This point will be developed more completely below, but it

is worth stating that while it might seem that developing a personal relationship with an informant would be useful, it is not as simple as that. Most people speak more freely to those who do not seem to have a special interest in the information that they are receiving. The use of silence is very important. If one allows the seconds to tick by at the end of an utterance, while in normal conversation this would be bad manners, in this situation it allows the informant to elaborate. In fact, if the informant does not realise that this game is not played by normal rules, he may feel he has to elaborate. An example of this occurs in a taped conversation with one of the child informants. (The researcher had known the child previously and chatted briefly with her at the end of a group recording session.) The child described a recent period spent in a night shelter for young Travellers sleeping rough. Although comfortable at night she found it hard to pass the days. She was cold and, waiting for the shelter to reopen, constantly asked passersby the time. At the end of this, the researcher said nothing. After a pause, the child said, I sniff glue now. The second piece of information was in natural sequence after the first, but the opportunity for its disclosure would have been lost had the researcher picked up the conversational ball left in her court.

It is well known that direct questioning as an interview technique is unproductive. It tends to produce

monosyllabic responses, which go no further than the minimum asked for. This is because the interviewer is in control, and the interviewee, having "contracted" to answer questions will do no more than that. Interviewing Travellers, these difficulties are compounded by the exaggerated social distance between Travellers and settled people. In this study, an attempt was made to combine casual conversation and information-seeking. As was stated above, the Traveller was allowed to set the agenda. His or her brief was merely to talk about Traveller life. The interviewer did not ask questions, or make comments, except when a topic seemed to have reached the end of its natural life, when a low-key remark would bring the conversation to life again, in a slightly different direction. The researcher tried to avoid directing the conversation as such.

This technique worked well in one-to-one situations, and in those when there was one main informant, but other people present. It is a good preliminary technique, because it allows the informant to get on record his or her particular slant on things, after which a more structured approach to word-elicitation causes few problems. A certain amount of self-disclosure also seems to be a good relaxant. This type of research is very time-consuming. It can involve sitting in a trailer for an afternoon and only getting 15 minutes of usable tape or sometimes little or nothing. It is a particular type of participant observation: one does

not just blend into the wallpaper, but becomes part of the life of the place. It is totally unlike ordinary visiting, where the visitor is the centre of attention for a time at least: the researcher has to manipulate a very delicate balance between personal contact and professional neutrality. Her role is both interviewer and would-be friend, and good judgment is necessary to know when which role is appropriate. If someone picks up a child, for instance, Travellers would take it very badly indeed if anyone present did not say, A fine child, God bless him: this has to be done, although there is no professional reason to do so. The researcher can watch the people who drop in to Traveller homes, and take her cue from them. A neighbour might come in and sit down for a few minutes, and leave without saying anything beyond hello and goodbye, and sometimes not even those. They just participate in the life of the place for a few minutes. This is a good role model, but not very easy for a settled person to play. One has to avoid mixing the two roles: one cannot refrain from commenting on a baby, as above, and equally one cannot react sympathetically if someone points out a feature of Traveller life that seems unfair. Unfeeling though it seems to say so, one will get more information if one does not react to even traumatic experiences in people's lives. On a human level one should: this is the balance between personal and professional attitudes. One informant described the personal situation of a neighbour on the site, a mentally

retarded woman who at the age of 15 had been sexually assaulted by her brother-in-law. While a sympathetic response from the researcher might have deflected the flow of information into specific cases, her non-committal response prompted the informant to move on to details of attitudes towards extra-marital sexual behaviour and unmarried motherhood among Travellers.

The type of interview described above left informants in a receptive frame of mind for the specialised language research. As described in the main text, this involved a mixture of elicitation by word list, non-directed memory, and finally prompting by the researcher for words in various categories, Food, Clothing, etc. The interviewer has the Traveller as a disadvantage in a way, in that the secret language is not so very secret after all: it has been documented, and the researcher has had access to these sources. One has primarily to avoid exploiting this advantage, as one could quite easily do by concentrating on the protective aspects of the language, which would leave the Traveller feeling stripped of his cover, and forevermore suspicious and resentful of researchers. Treating the language as just another aspect of Traveller culture seems to ease tensions in this area. One should not flatter oneself anyway that one is getting a complete picture of Traveller life, including language: at one point in this research a neighbour dropped in on a recording session.

He listened for a few minutes and then asked the informant whether he was giving all the words he "had in the book", to which the informant replied, No, we have to keep something for our own culture. This interchange was done so quickly and quietly that it was only noticed when the tape was played back.

As a result of this research, the researcher formed the opinion that use of Shelta develops in two stages: young children acquire Shelta for protective purposes at the same time and in the same way as they do English; and it is only as Travellers get older and more integrated into their community that the language expands into other contexts. Usually young children and teenagers knew words for money, police, shop, steal, beg, run, and stop; they were less likely to know words like fire, sticks, flour, bacon, etc. They were interviewed in group sessions, which were useful in breaking down inhibitions. In fact, the fewer words people had, and the more reluctant they were to disclose them, the more successful group sessions were. The cumulative effect of other people gave courage to shout out words that participants were not sure of, and the presence of others who did not appear to feel that secrecy was a problem helped remove inhibitions on this score. Group sessions had a very game-like quality, which was in marked contrast to the one-to-one sessions. Another contrast was with regard to intersexual problems. In one-to-one

sessions, if the researcher read to a male informant from a list any word pertaining to sex, there was an immediate point-blank denial that such a word existed. In a group session, on the other hand, the researcher was able to capitalise on the bravado and giddiness of young men together. Some of them asked if the researcher knew the meanings of certain common English obscenities: she countered by saying she was sure there were Shelta equivalents. They agreed there were, but were still slightly embarrassed about giving them. They finally agreed when she suggested that they give the Shelta words without English equivalents. These words were then validated from the lists; those that did not appear were filed for future reference.

A recurring problem with unwritten languages is the fact that speakers have a strong, if inarticulate, aversion to their language being written down. The fear among Travellers of their language being taken away from them and put in books is very real. It seems to go deeper than the simple fear that settled people will be able to understand their cryptic utterances, but even this natural fear is very hard to overcome. Perhaps it is a function of Travellers' illiteracy, but it was impossible to make them understand that there are some books (academic books, for instance) which hardly anybody, in terms of the population as a whole, ever reads. They understood the danger of the language

dying out, but resisted the idea of books having a function in its preservation, even when reminded that future generations of Travellers will most probably be literate. It would be wrong to characterise their fear of the printed word as wholly superstitious; one has to admire their prescience, because of course documenting their culture will change it. It may mean for instance that the documented facts will become the standard of behaviour, and that instead of being in its natural state of flux the idea of Traveller culture will become static, and therefore in danger of death.