Irish Travellers’ Views on Cant: What Folk Criteria of Languageness Tell us about the Community

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Acknowledgement

The research discussed in this paper has been funded by the Trinity College Dublin Strategic Fund and greatly benefitted from the support received during a research stay with the University of Jyväskylä’s Research Collegium for Language in Changing Society, a stay funded by the Finnish Academy (Sept. – Dec. 2016).

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Abstract
This article argues that Irish Travellers’ ideologies of languageness and their definition of Cant are closely linked to their perceptions of social reality. Cant is a communicative code which Travellers use beside English in Traveller-specific situations. Based on the analysis of focus groups, I take a folk-linguistic and anthropological approach and examine instances of metacommunication in which languageness and the status of Cant are negotiated among speakers, and explore what they suggest about the community and the local social setting. The analysis uncovers the criteria of ‘ownership’, ‘activity’, ‘understanding’ and ‘privacy’ as essential in the participants’ definition of languageness. I argue that these criteria are strongly linked to the community’s understanding of themselves and relationships with Irish society. Further, I analyse speakers of different age groups’ evaluations of Cant according to the above criteria, and show how what is considered as ‘authentic’ Cant is linked to life trajectories and perceptions of linguistic and social reality.

Keywords: Irish Travellers, Cant, Folk Linguistics, Language Definition, Authenticity, Ideology

1. Introduction
Little is known about the Traveller Cant, also called Gammon or Shelta, a code fulfilling core communicative functions within the linguistic repertoire of the Irish Traveller minority community. Used mainly for purposes of privacy in the presence of settled bystanders, Cant is, by many speakers, carefully guarded, resulting in relatively few published examples and in-depth studies, and making the linguistic definition of Cant difficult. And yet, linguists have in recent years been much concerned with debating the question of what kind of a language Cant is. This debate has given way to various labels, such as mixed language (Grant, 1994; Bakker, 2003), slang or register (Ó Baoill, 1994; Ó hAodha, 2002), and even creole (Hancock 1973; Sayers, 2015), suggesting different scholarly backgrounds, perspectives and lines of research. The scarcity and contested nature of available information about Cant has led me to explore the question of languageness in relation to Cant from the perspective of the speakers. This exploration, however, yielded findings that take the discussion far beyond one that is just concerned with language status. With the example of the Irish Travellers I show how local, non-linguists’ definitions of communicative practices are meaningful in terms of a community’s self-understanding in wider society. The purpose of this article is therefore to analyse folk ideological aspects of Cant definitions and the insights these aspects provide into the community’s perceptions of their social environment and practices.

Resident in Ireland (with populations also in the UK and the US), the Irish Travellers are a community of an estimated number of 30,987 people (Central Statistics Office, 2016). As of March 1, 2017 and after a decade-long campaign, they are a legally recognised and protected minority community. In terms of origin, they are an indigenously Irish community with no or very little genetic connection with other European nomadic groups (Gilbert et al., 2017; Relethford and Crawford,
Their cultural identity is, however, very similar to other nomadic groups, with whom they share traditions and values, such as the preference of self-employment, moving and living mostly endogenously among extended family networks, birth, marriage and burial customs, values concerning morality, taboos and purity, and a rich folklore. Globalisation and urbanisation have brought substantial changes to the culture of the Irish Travellers. After decades of various governmental pressures, most Travellers - according to the 2016 Census 83% (Central Statistics Office 2016) - now live in some form of settled accommodation, which has substantially affected many other aspects of the community’s lifestyle. Thus, even though a nomadic mindset - a ‘different way of perceiving things, a different attitude to accommodation, to work, and to life in general’ (McDonagh, 1994: 95) -, continues to characterise the community, Traveller culture has gone through substantial changes, brought about by community external, government-led initiatives with the aim of assimilation, as well as internal developments, now manifesting in changed family relations and working patterns. These developments as well as cultural clashes heavily influence contemporary relations between settled people and Travellers, causing hostility and distrust on both sides (McElwee et al., 2003; Helleiner, 2000).

In midst of this environment, the Irish Traveller Cant is a substantial feature of the community’s communicative and social practices. Cant, in the form it possesses today, consists of the Travellers’ own lexicon which is inserted into an English grammatical framework. Using mostly English when amongst themselves, Travellers, according to their own accounts, switch into Cant in specific, Traveller-related situations (e.g. Binchy, 1994). Cant and its linguistic status has, as pointed out above, not only been a matter of substantial debate among linguists and other scholars, but also among activists and Traveller organisations involved in the ethnic recognition campaign, given that possessing one’s own language is one of the fundamental legitimising aspects in the formal recognition of an ethnic minority (see, for instance, anthropologist Barth, 1970; the Irish Traveller Movement, 2017; Ní Shuinéar, 1994). Especially in the aftermath of the successful ethnic recognition campaign, we can now observe a more open engagement among the community with matters of cultural ownership and revival, including Cant revitalisation attempts and definitions of Cant as a language, when before there was little discussion about this matter. Folk definitions are strongly bound up with a community’s self-perception, their views on history and the perceived relationship with their social surroundings. This paper’s focus is on what a group of Travellers’ different ways of describing Cant can tell us about their perceived and learned status in society against the background of the above mentioned developments, which cause social and cultural changes.

The data for this investigation of folk statements about Cant and their implications comes from ethnographic research carried out in the Mid-West region of Ireland during 2010-2012. Looking at interview data and ethnographic fieldnotes collected in a Senior Traveller Training Centre, in which I was present as a participant and observer for the duration of two years, I argue that whether or not members of the Traveller community perceive a code as a language depends on whether they see it as fulfilling four central criteria: (1) ownership, (2) activity, (3) mutual understanding and, most importantly, (4) privacy and secrecy. I demonstrate how these criteria are linked to the community’s communicative needs and feelings of belonging, and therefore to their self-understanding as a

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2 see Rieder (forthcoming) for an in-depth discussion of Cant origin and history.
3 see The Irish Traveller Language Project on facebook (https://www.facebook.com/theirishtravellerlanguageproject/) and twitter (@travlanguage).
4 Senior Traveller Training Centres had the objective of bringing adult Travellers back to education for Second Level certificates and courses. They were phased out in 2012 as part of the government’s plan to integrate Travellers into existing mainstream education services.
community within Irish society. Further, based on these criteria, the data and discussion reveal an ambiguity with which the speakers attend to and debate the ‘authentic’ Cant as well as the labels ‘language’ and ‘slang’. An anthropological perspective allows us to investigate the logics of the people we want to understand, particularly, in the present case, what Cant is from the perspective of Irish Travellers. This piece of research brings to light motivations for the different discourses about Cant, stemming from how speakers of different generations perceive themselves and their social and linguistic reality. Using a critical lens then brings observations about questions of the link between folk linguistic perceptions and power and inequality to the forefront, which may explain some of these views.

In exploring what a folk linguistic and ethnographic approach to language definition can tell us about Cant and the Irish Traveller community, I will, after giving details about Cant, begin by reviewing the literature on folk linguistics as a branch of ethnography that adds a non-linguist’s view to our knowledge of language, in this instance on folk ideological aspects of language definition. These folk ideological aspects will be analysed in section 3 in two separate steps. Firstly, folk criteria of general language definition will be identified in conversations among the participants, while pointing out how these criteria relate to the community’s background and perceived social status. Secondly, I examine conversations where Cant itself was assessed according to these criteria, revealing generational differences in terms of authenticity, which are based on different life trajectories, experiences and perceptions of social reality. The concluding section 4 summarises these findings and links, reflecting also on the potential future impact of ethnic recognition on language and cultural perceptions, and points out the importance of folk language ideologies for insights into the locally perceived internal and external community situation.

2. Cant and the Folk-Linguistics of Languageness

2.1 The Irish Traveller Cant – Structure and Use

As reported by the participants of this study as well as in earlier research, the main value of Cant lies in the possibility for the speakers to have private conversations in the presence of settled bystanders. In regard to past usage, setting out in groups working, selling and begging in rural areas was mentioned as one of the main settings for Cant use. Now, most Travellers live in or near urban spaces and selling and begging is no longer practiced, which has led to a substantial loss of vocabulary. However, Cant is also often reported as being constantly reproduced: while the core Cant lexicon is based to a large extent on Irish direct loans or modified Irish words, but also on a considerable number of words of unknown origin (see e.g. Ó hAodha, 2002; Grant, 1994; Macalister, 1937; Meyer, 1891; 1909 for theories on the origin of Cant words), the participants explained that new words are being created for new contexts and for words that have ‘leaked’ to outsiders, securing its unintelligibility and privacy of conversation. Constant reproduction may give way to localised variations of Cant, which are, as will be shown in one of the fragments below, still readily understood by interlocutors. Here, a certain speech style characterised by more than just vocabulary and by added prosodic and pragmatic effects may play an important role in the formation of a communicative Cant event and aid comprehension of newly created words.

Many Travellers report that they use Cant today for private conversation wherever they find themselves in the company of settled people, such as in trade or business situations, in situations of some potential danger, or in shops, hotels, pubs, etc. (see e.g. Binchy, 1994; 2002 and Browne, 2002 for overviews of Cant communicative contexts found in other studies). The use of Cant outside this
domain was denied by most of my participants as well as in earlier studies (Binchy, 1994), despite researchers having witnessed its use in Traveller-only situations. Reason for this case of underreporting may, apart from variability of Cant knowledge in the community, lie in many Travellers not being aware of Cant use outside these situation, but may also stem from a decade-long state- and majority-led oppression of Traveller distinctiveness, which, as suggested by some young informants of this study, has led many older Travellers to deny the existence of Cant or to downplay its functions as more than “just” a creole.

Outside the contexts reported by Travellers for the use of Cant, English is described to be the main language of conversation. Structurally and pragmatically, Cant and English should be seen as located on opposite ends of a continuum, with an indefinite number of variations between these ends: The insertion of Cant words into an English grammatical framework can take on various levels of density, depending on the context of use and speaker competence. The mixed structure of English with Cant insertions reflects and benefits Cant’s functional aspects and the purposes it fulfils for the community as a code that, when spoken quickly, does not normally raise the attention of settled overhearers.

The history of Cant is largely unknown, the first sources stemming from the late 19th century (Leland, 1874, 1907; Sampson, 1891). These sources show Cant with a similar structure as today, with slightly more Irish-derived elements, leading to the theory that Cant may have been formed and continuously transformed during the long period of language shift from Irish to English (Hayes, 2006; Ó Baoill, 1994; Macalister, 1937). As pointed out in the introduction, its unknown history makes a linguistic definition of Cant difficult. The contribution that this paper wishes to make to this discussion is exploring speakers’ local ideologies about Cant and their community, not with the objective of defining Cant from a linguist’s perspective, but in order to reach a better understanding of the community of speakers and of how they structure their world through explaining their communicative repertoire. I therefore situate this work in the context of folk linguistic research.

2.2 Folk Linguistics as an Approach to Perceptions of Languagness

Folk linguistics is an approach within the ethnography of communication which has been developed and defined largely by Dennis Preston (see Preston, 1994; 1996; 1999; 2004), most importantly in Niedzielski and Preston’s (2000) seminal work. Directly related to the questions and arguments of this paper, folk linguistic studies seek to discover and analyse non-linguists’ and speakers’ knowledge, attitudes and ideological beliefs about their own and other communicative codes. In doing that, the empirical and scientific accuracy of folk beliefs is not of main interest, but, rather, the practical truths that lie behind language use (Paveau, 2011). As Kroskrity (2007, p. 496) observes, ‘thoughts about language by their speakers have, by comparison, been neglected, dismissed, denigrated, or proscribed as objects of study and concern until relatively recently.’ However, as the following analysis demonstrates, for applied linguists, finding out about these practical truths and the knowledge structures of ordinary people is essential as it will contribute to our understanding of what and how folk knowledge influences day-to-day language use and practices (see e.g. Coupland and Jaworski, 2004; Kristiansen, 2004). What is more, I argue that folk linguistic beliefs and perceptions point to linguistic developments that may result from the effects of perceptions of and

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5 See Binchy, 2006; Ní Shuinéar, 2002; 1994; Browne, 2002; Grant, 1994 for further, also contrasting, theories on its early structure and formation.
underlying (learned) beliefs about the community’s social position, from views about the societal and linguistic organisation, as well as from attitudes towards languages.

Folk linguistics has covered several fields related to speaker perceptions, most prominently perceptual dialectology (see, for example, Preston, 1999; 2005), speakers’ evaluations of correctness and acceptability, speakers’ expressions for speech acts, their explanation of language acquisition, oral history, as well as their taxonomies of linguistic categorisation and language definition. In addition, folk linguistics is being extended to other territories in some newer studies, for instance to language policy and language revitalisation research (Albury, 2014; 2016), language teacher education (Santipolo, 2016) and folk language ideologies (Pearce, 2015; Meadows, 2014; Lagos, Espinoza and Rojas, 2013). Many of these fields of folk-linguistics study covertly and overtly expressed knowledge as important indicators and influencers of social and linguistic practices and problems (see De Houwer (1999) in regard to raising children bilingually or Albury (2016) in terms of hindrances of language revitalisation). Folk linguistic study allows us then to go beyond analysing this more explicit folk knowledge, as it serves as a ‘window to the community’s language ideology’ (Albury, 2014, p. 87). This, in Niedzielski and Preston’s (2000) terms, comes in as the study of metalanguage 2. Metalanguage 2 analysis attempts to understand ideological beliefs (such as about language in general, about the community and societal organisation) that lie behind and consciously and unconsciously motivate expressions of folk knowledge. As such, the study of metalanguage 2 seeks to understand the model and vision of language and society that members of a community have, and which ‘forms the backbone of mutual understanding among conversational participants’ (Preston, 2004, p. 87). The study of metalanguage 2 is, as will be shown in the analysis of Cant metalinguistic data, essential for understanding which concepts are underlying linguistic terms, why these concepts exist, and the ways and motivations for their application to Cant. In this study I therefore take folk linguistic comments about language in general and about Cant in particular as ‘peepholes’ that allow us glimpses into social experiences and perceptions that motivate these comments.

The investigation of metalanguage 2 is closely related to a large body of research on language ideologies and studies of metalanguage on language (see e.g. Makoni and Pennycook, 2006), in that it seeks to identify folk ideologies as mediators between forms of talk, forms of metatalk and social structures (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994; for studies of non-linguists’ linguistic ideologies see e.g. Goldman, 1983; Hill, 1998; Rosaldo, 1982; Rumsey, 1990). The study of language ideology is often associated with the critical analysis of political and social issues and interests pervading ideological statements or discourse (see Irvine, 1989; Kroskrity, 2007 for an overview of critical work on language ideologies). While this would be a focus worth pursuing in regard to Travellers’ metalinguistic expressions, I concentrate my analysis on the speakers’ perspective on language and demonstrate the rootedness of their comments in social experience and perceived social reality, therewith discussing the nature of the dialectic relationships between ideologies and perceived language practices, and between ideologies and social reality.

3. Irish Travellers on Cant

The meaningfulness of folk linguistic and language ideological statements in terms of how they point to perceived social reality and life-trajectories will be demonstrated firstly by looking at emerging criteria of languageness and where and how they were brought up in conversation, and, in a second step, at how and why they were applied to the case of Cant. Languageness was, as pointed out above, a decisive criterion for the Travellers’ recognition as an ethnic community. However, leaving
aside institutional and legal language definitions, this paper examines local definitions during the time of struggle for recognition and what they tell us about perceived cultural distinctiveness.

As mentioned, the conversations on linguistic and cultural topics as well as ethnographic fieldnotes were recorded and collected in a Senior Traveller Training Centre in Ireland. I was present at the centre on a daily basis as an observer, studying language and interactional patterns among the students, and as a participant in the classrooms and during break times, helping out as a tutor and engaging in conversations about the history and culture of the Irish Travellers. All in all, eight focus group interviews of about 40 minutes each were recorded with a total of 15 adult men and women of all age groups. Two of these interviews, both conducted with a group of eight women with whom I had especially close and continuous contact, provide the principal pieces of data for this paper. These eight women had been attending the education centre for a long time and, despite their differing literacy levels, were taught as one group in most classes. The participants were at very mixed life stages and age groups: Biddy (65) and Nancy (75) are the two senior participants who attended the centre in order to meet people and learn how to read and write; Helen (45) and Caroline (40), both married and mothers of 6 and 8 children and grandmothers to 4, went to some advanced literacy training courses and to courses preparing them for the leaving certificate (final examination in the Irish secondary school system); Noreen (27), married and a mother of 3, was preparing for her leaving certificate; Julie (22), married to a half-Traveller, and the youngest, Breda (19), single and living with her parents, also both preparing to take the leaving certificate exams. This generationally quite mixed group allowed me to see how different positions stemming from their particular life-trajectories and life-stages arose and were debated in regard to the definition of the Traveller Cant.

The following analysis will discuss interview fragments and ethnographic fieldnotes that relate to explicitly and implicitly expressed opinions on the questions of (1) what a language is in the Travellers’ folk sense of the word, revealing the specific and agreed languageness criteria of ‘ownership’, ‘activity’, ‘mutual understanding’ and ‘privacy and secrecy’, and (2) whether, according to their conceptual understanding Cant is a language, revealing different voices in the different age groups. Both the conceptual understanding of ‘language’ and the differing opinions of the generational groups reflect, as the analysis will demonstrate, different perspectives on their own social situations, past experiences and present and past social relationships with the settled community.

3.1. Criteria of Languageness and What they Tell us

The concept that a community has of ‘language’ tells us much about the community itself. Broken down into different descriptive sets of meaning allow specific criteria of languageness to emerge, which are indicative of what is important to the community in terms of how they communicate, what is communicated how, and why things are communicated in certain ways. In short, I argue that criteria of languageness point us to parts of a community’s worldview, to how people perceive themselves as communicative beings within their social reality. This section reveals how the criteria of ‘ownership’, ‘activity’, ‘mutual understanding’ and ‘privacy and secrecy’ emerged from the conversation with the participants and what they tell us about their self-perception and perceptions of their social reality.

The participants’ concepts and associations connected to the term ‘language’ emerged after a short discussion about what type of a speech form Cant is. This discussion was marked by
confusion and ambiguity, indicated by their use of mitigating devices and different lexical choices for Cant, such as ‘it’s just Cant’, ‘a language’, ‘a backslang’, and ‘a slang’. Ambiguous views are not unusual, even among linguists as we have seen, and especially for varieties that are not legally or otherwise recognised as such in the wider society. As Irvine (1989, p. 249) suggests, categories such as ‘language’, ‘slang’ or ‘talk’ are not necessarily competing, but they represent coexisting functions of language and concern different dimensions of language use: ‘because of language’s semiotic complexity (its multiple levels of patterning, and the multifunctional nature of the linguistic sign), there are multiple possibilities for its relationship with a material world.’ The confusion during the discussion led me to clarify and explore first what terms such as ‘language’, ‘slang’ and others brought up by the participants meant to them, which led to valuable insights into the semiotic complexity of local definitions and what guided their answers.

In terms of representativeness, the opinions arising in below fragments were not picked randomly, but were frequently recurring in the rest of the data. Even though the fragments are about Cant as a language, in this section I will filter out general definitions and criteria of languageness, and will show how the folk languageness criteria of ‘ownership’, ‘activity’, ‘mutual understanding’ and ‘privacy/secrecy’ emerged.

The first central criterion of languageness, ‘ownership’, becomes relevant through Breda’s use of possessives:

**Extract 1:**

1. INTRVWR: so wha’ what do [you think the..]
2. BREDA: [it’s a language the Travellers made up
3. theirself

Cant is something the speakers ‘made up’ themselves and which speakers can claim ownership of because they are its creators. This view is confirmed and further elaborated in the answer to my next question, where the participants are asked for their definition of a language, and were possessive pronouns and lexemes related to the verb ‘to own’ are very frequent:

**Extract 2:**

1. INTRVWR: what is a language for you? [what are the characteristics
2. of language?
3. BIDDY: [(xxxxxxxxxxx) years like
4. BREDA: ((to Biddy)) yeah
5. JULIE: ((to INTRVWR)) your own talk

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6 This does not mean that a higher status is afforded to the word ‘language’, but that after various terms were brought up by the participants the local meanings and definitions of these terms were explored. This included also an analysis of the term ‘slang’, see Rieder (forthcoming).
Julie says that language is something that is ‘your own talk’ (l. 5). Other expressions that follow in this context are ‘our privacy’ (l. 7) and ‘talking to ourselves’ (l. 9). The lexical choices characterised by the frequent use of possessive pronouns in the discourse about language is very telling here, and a look at collocations across the eight focus groups (a corpus of about 40,000 words) also supports the theory that ‘ownership’ is an important element of the participants’ concept of ‘language’. Out of 60 instances of ‘language’ the word was used with possessive classifiers, e.g. ‘your (own)’, ‘our (own)’, ‘their (own)’, ten times. The use of possessive classifiers could also indicate specificity and ways of identifying a particular version of English, Irish, or Cant among other versions. All of these instances were, however, expressed emphatically. Also, apart from these classifiers, ‘language’ was frequently used in combination with the verb ‘to have’.

The concept of ‘ownership’ and possession of a language is not a rare or unique phenomenon to the Irish Travellers. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) report that in the Cape Keerweer region in Australia and also by the Vaupés Indians of Colombia language is viewed as something that is not merely spoken but owned by a community. Connected to the idea of ownership, Geertz (1973) and Eastman (1984) have discussed language as one of a community’s cultural attributes that stands for their primordial community identity. ‘Ownership’ of language therefore refers to an aspect of the Travellers’ language ideology that relates to the value of Cant as a symbol of their identity, as something that unites across time and space, and that gives a strong feeling of rootedness in the community, of separateness and belonging.

Also in fragment 2, Julie’s ‘your own talk’ (fragment 2, l.5) not only refers to ‘ownership’, but also to a second criterion that defines language: the criterion of ‘activity’. The word ‘talk’ puts the focus on speaking as an activity. In fact, out of a total of 90 instances across all focus groups, ‘talk’ was used as a noun to describe either the Travellers’ own talk or generally for the activity of language use (16 times). The centrality of ‘activity’ of language is also visible in the fact that questions regarding the nature and form of Cant were most of the time explained by giving examples of contexts in which the language is habitually used.

Studying again the frequencies of verbal collocates, apart from the usual ones associated with language (4x ‘to talk’, 2x ‘to speak’, 2x ‘to learn’ out of 60 occurrences of ‘language’ in total), language was once used in connection with ‘do’ (BIDDY: you try an' keep doin' your language to her (Biddy and Nancy FG (1), 7.46). Hence in this part of the folk ideology, language is not a static, abstract and symbolic notion but something that creates reality. Language is social action, it is ‘doing’ by performing and acting in interaction, bringing about a change of the interaction and of reality.

In action, what a language is ‘doing’ is certainly connected to the third and equally recurrent criterion of ‘mutual understanding’. Overlapping with the aspect of ‘ownership’, the criterion of ‘mutual understanding’ emerged not only as signifying the understanding of content, but also of understanding on a deeper level, transmitting an even stronger sense of belongingness than
‘ownership’ can express. The following conversation was recorded ten months before fragments 1 and 2 and was the first time that questions of languageness were made to the participants. The use and semantics of the verb ‘understand’ are of particular interest here:

Extract 3:

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1 BREDA: it's a language of (our) own like- it's:: it's the
2 Trav- the Travellers' own language, it's what they kinda
3 made up theirselves years ago
4 INTRVWR: and do you need (.), you don't need English to speak
5 Cant, no?
6 BREDA: no, not really-
7 THERESA: no
8 BREDA: cos (0.2) like the Travellers understand each other
9 INTRVWR: yeah
10 BREDA: no matter what word you say the Travellers understand it
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Language, as Breda explains, facilitates mutual and community-inclusive understanding among Travellers that seems to refer to more than just the cognitive process of understanding a language. Breda insinuates that there is a deeper sense of mutual understanding within the community, which is connected to strong ties of solidarity. Language, here Cant, is only part of this understanding, as it is only the concrete surface manifestation, the tip of the iceberg, of a deeper-reaching, abstract sense of connectedness among community members. Cant is a language that is constantly being renewed whenever words have become known to settled people. ‘Understanding’ could therefore not work without this deeper feeling of connectedness. This aspect of language ideology is a central indicator of the Travellers’ self-understanding as a community that is bound and set apart from mainstream Irish society by more than blood and a shared culture and that is interconnected by an abstract, almost spiritual feeling of connectedness. Language here has both a symbolic and a practical function as a tool with which one can make meaning in certain situations and as a symbol that in itself is meaning when used in interaction: using Cant means membership, it identifies speakers as belonging to the Cant community and creates an immediate connection, while also flagging the boundary towards the outside.

‘Ownership’, ‘activity’ and ‘mutual understanding’ may be present in most speech communities’ ideologies, while the ‘privacy/secrecy’ criterion may be seen as unique to the Irish Travellers and speakers of similar codes. Interestingly, ‘privacy’ of conversation resulting from unintelligibility was not explained by referring to its purpose – providing private communication in front of bystanders –, but as an aspect that was assumed to be an implicit and universal feature of language:

Extract 4:

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1 NANCY: the same now with your talk, say.. in Germany, 19.39
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France, and everything, we back here doesn't understand it, you could be givin' out about ((scolding)) us, we wouldn't even know what you 're sayin'

The possessive pronoun in line 1, 'your talk', signals both ownership and exclusion of everyone not included in 'your' in terms of understanding and intelligibility. The participants very frequently referred to other languages to illustrate the secrecy and privacy aspect of Cant. In this context, and similar to other European languages, Irish was brought up recurrently as an example to explain the privacy function of Cant and of language in general.

The criterion of privacy may be seen as related to dominant and mainstream language ideological positions that considers a speech form to be a language if it is substantially distinct from an established variety and if it is connected to a certain speech community. However, the criterion of 'privacy/secrecy' expresses another nuance of meaning apart from exclusivity: The distance between Cant and English is important as it allows Cant to function for deliberate use in situations where private content needs to be communicated while moving outside the community’s private space. A frequently raised concrete situation illustrating this function was the ability of complaining about people who cannot understand the language.

Extract 5:

NANCY: were you ever in Connemara? 23.12
INTRVWR: yeah, years ago [(xxxxxx) Connemara
NANCY: [my god, see you could be givin' out stink t' you, and you wouldn't even know what they're sayin'

To give out about somebody is a very intimate activity and deliberately excludes the person that is the object of it. This example points to two functions of the 'privacy/secrecy' criterion: Firstly, towards the inside, the 'privacy' criterion of language fulfils a community need for the expression of an intimate relationship, which is brought about by belonging to the same community, by mutual understanding through a shared code and by sharing community-internal information or experiences. Hence, language is a tool that creates a bond and grants privacy of conversation. Secondly, language and its being reserved for members of the community allows to withhold information that is not for the ear of an outside in their presence.

Apart from the frequently mentioned function of ‘giving out about somebody’, Cant often served as a way to joke about other people. Speaking in Cant when teachers or other outsiders were present was many times a great source of amusement. As with ‘giving out’, joking also excludes those who do not understand, and therewith forms a strong bond among members that can take part in the joke. The bond itself is strengthened not only through the inclusive function of the joke, but ever more so through the shared amusement about the exclusion of the outsider the joke was aimed at. Again here, language is only the tip of the iceberg, expressing and symbolising an underlying shared experience and connection.
Due to their emphasis of the criterion of ‘privacy and secrecy’, the participants seem to define a language as something that departs from the norm of conventional language use, in the way it function as a device that can be used to conceal content apart from facilitating communication. We may now ask, why the criterion of ‘privacy and secrecy’ is such a decisive part of the language ideology of the Irish Travellers context? The fact that privacy was stressed as a universal function and purpose of language – and not only Cant - is, in the first instance, indicative of a community that has a certain perception of their own history and situation within Irish society and of their relationship with settled people. Privacy and secrecy only make sense when there is a feeling that one needs to be cautious and protective of private contents. According to the participants’ narratives about the past, even though Travellers were welcome hands in rural areas and there was a mutual dependency of the two communities, the fact of using Cant around settled people nevertheless marks a sense of separateness and distance. Over the years and decades, an increasing marginalisation and, in many ways, oppression deepened this distance. Taking away opportunities of freedom of movement by road acts and governments’ objective of sedentarisation of Irish Travellers, i.e. pressures to move into permanent housing, from the early 1960s onwards is only one facet of this oppression which, however, has had repercussions in many other aspects of Traveller life such as work and family relations. Apart from taking away basic identification and subsistence patterns, access to alternatives in the settled spheres is also extremely difficult. Participants’ narratives often circled around their being discriminated against in the job market, in education, and in public life (e.g. in restaurants and bars). Also, halting sites and housing estates at the outskirts of town is only another example of Travellers being, both symbolically and physically, kept away from mainstream Irish life. These issues have contributed to a relationship between settled people and Travellers that is marked by distrust, mutual lack of understanding for the other and cultural clashes, not to mention severe social, health and economic problems in the Traveller community (see also McElwee et al., 2003). In this climate, the need for Cant from the Traveller community perspective as a code granting privacy and secrecy is very understandable, and also the strong associations of the concept of language with ‘ownership’ and ‘mutual understanding’ gain a new quality and strength when we take social experiences into consideration: They signify a perception of themselves as a separate community with their own language and a different, albeit repressed, lifestyle, an identity that is defended against all outside forces, but, in conjunction with the ‘privacy/secrecy’ criterial, they also signify a distrustful relationship with the settled community.

3.2 Cant as a Language or Slang – A Question of Membership?

Having established the criteria that construct the participants’ concept of language as well as motivations for these criteria, this section turns to the question of whether Cant fulfils these criteria. This gives us not only further details about the status of Cant, but also about the community: the discussion of fragments reveals some internal variation in the participants’ opinions on the languageness of Cant, which point to different perceptions of authenticity and may be derived from differences in their social experiences.

Firstly, several of the above fragments have already revealed where Cant stands in regard to their languageness criteria. For example, in fragment 3, Breda talked of ownership: ‘it's a language of (our) own like.. it's:: it's the Trav- the Travellers' own language, it's what they kinda made up theirself years ago’ (l. 1-3), and the participants also frequently mentioned the matter of ‘mutual understanding’ that Cant grants, as well as the one of Cant as an ‘activity’ in certain contexts. What the use of Cant ‘does’ is that it changes the whole context of an interaction by selecting particular participants and marking a
conversation as Traveller-internal and private, fostering solidarity through understanding. So, these characteristics of languageness in the participants' sense are fulfilled.

However, especially the older participants saw a problem with the term ‘language’ in connection to Cant because it no longer fulfils the criterion of ‘privacy and secrecy’, as the use of the past tense and other, frequent references to the past in contrast to ‘now’ in the following fragment show:

Extract 6:

1 NANCY: ((quite loud and high pitched)) well back 20 year ago-
2 HELEN: ((strong)) when our people (xxxxxxx) now, that was our
3 privacy
4 Tricia: and now it [has (xxxxxxx)
5 HELEN: [and now it's all over now] 34.17
6 NANCY: ((quite loud and high pitched)) I'd say about 20 year
7 ago or more, [that you wouldn't, weren't allowed
8 (xx), you wouldn't tell anybody or:
9 (...) 34:26
10 INTRVWR: so is it a slang or a language? 34:26
11 BREDA: language
12 NANCY: language
13 JULIE: language
14 BIDDY: °I don’t know°
15 INTRVWR: ((to Nancy and Julie)) because nobody else
16 understands it?
17 BIDDY: well everyone understands it now, [don’t they?
18 ((general mumble))
19 INTRVWR: [I don’t
20 NANCY: [they didn't back
21 then, they didn't know it 20 year or 30 year back
22 INTRVWR: hm
23 BREDA: ((to INTRVWR)) well you know now, [so (xxxxx) 34.37

We can observe a strong contrast between now and then and between the meanings of Cant attached to different times, i.e. the temporality of Cant definition. Nancy, Biddy, and Helen set the
context for the ‘languageness’ of Cant as twenty or more years ago when Cant was still kept secret, and contrast this with ‘now’ that ‘it is all over’ (Helen, l. 7), because it has been spread to the settled community and everybody understands it now (Biddy, l. 22), linking to her comment that she is not sure whether to call Cant a language. Breda reinforces this in her comment ‘you know it now, so’ in line 28, in which she herself questions the languageness of Cant, because it is useless as a secret code, as I myself as an outsider also know it now (even though everybody, also the older participants, know that I only knew very few words). Again, the ‘privacy’ criterion seems to be a very vital aspect of languageness, as the concept of language as applied to Cant is tightly connected to its use in public spaces and to an outsider’s inability to understand the community. With ‘privacy and secrecy’ gone in the older participants’ perception, also the symbolic ‘ownership’ and ‘mutual understanding’ criteria are in a difficult place, as Cant is not exclusively owned by the Travellers anymore. So, the languageness of Cant in the older participants’ as well as Breda’s view is strongly attached to temporal aspects, i.e. to the temporal location of the past.

Not all participants see the privacy of Cant lost, however. Taking the temporality aspect further, Breda, even though she seemed to agree with Nancy’s and Biddy’s objections in the above fragment 6, has in other conversations stressed that what is known to settled people is not the actual Cant. The following fragment reveals a clear temporal distinction between the old Cant of the past, which has been lost, and the actual Cant that is in use in present times by younger speakers:

Extract 7:

1  **NANCY:**  well I'm thinkin' now the settled people learns it as well in the (. ) library 24.28
2  NOREEN:  there're books there
3  **NANCY:**  books in the library about that
4  NOREEN:  there's books in the library and stuff like that about it
5  **NANCY:**  yeah, and they go in and learn it theirself
6  **BREDA:**  but d'yu know the books in the library like that's:: (. ) not the actual Cant that you use
7  **NANCY:**  ((high pitch)) in [the library (xxxxx) in the library
8                  (xxxxx)
9  NOREEN:  [(of course they aren't)
10     (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)]
11  **BREDA:**  (oh if I see the yokes) in the book now, I wouldn't understand that Cant
12  **BIDDY:**  yeah but 'tis (xxxxxxx) the auld Cant of the [(xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)]
This fragment raises questions about authentic speakers (see e.g. Coupland 2010) as defined by participants of different age groups in relation to the type of competence and knowledge of Cant, which may point to divergent perspectives (Kroskrity, 2000) on Cant. The authentic Cant in the older speakers’ sense is the Cant that they used in the past, and that is now published in books and therefore lost, the auld Cant. Cant and its former function to provide privacy and understanding in public spaces is then lost for the older speakers, and with it its languageness. Breda states, however, that she would not understand the auld Cant, and for her, the authentic Cant is the actual Cant that is still used in everyday practice. For the younger speakers, privacy is therefore still granted by the constant renewal of Cant. Breda has been quite emphatic about this usefulness and ongoing value of Cant on several occasions, such as in fragment 8 below, where she stresses that Cant is not getting lost and continues to have value because words are being replaced by new words. These new words are automatically understood by other members of the community, which again emphasises the strength of the community symbolised by their ability to ‘understand’ each other:

Extract 8:

1 **BREDA**: well it's not gettin' lost or people (..) the Cant
2 that (..) like (..) the country people mean, wasn't
3 the Cant that the Travellers have. The Travellers
4 still have a different language, and noone will ever
5 find out about it. There's still a secret language
6 there. And no one will ever find out about it. The
7 Cant that y' know is only bits that everyone knows.
8 So they still have another language. And nobody will
9 find out.
10 **INTRVWR**: alright, so there are new words created 26.37
11 **BREDA**: oh there is yeah
12 (...)
13 **BREDA**: now all Travellers, no matter what y' talk 26.50
14 about, 'f a Traveller heard a word once, believe me
15 they would (..) they'd ahh-
16 **INTRVWR**: they would understand? [from the situation
17 **BREDA**: [oh yeah, and they keep 27.00
18 goin' on with that word then
Due to this reproduction of Cant, there is a difference between what is defined as the authentic Cant by the two age groups, between the *auld* Cant and today’s *actual* Cant. This generational variation we witness in the perceptions of authenticity leads to different definitions of Cant. The perception of losing Cant to the settled people makes the term ‘slang’ seem more appropriate to the older speakers:

**Extract 9**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRVWR:</strong></td>
<td>what, what apart from warnings and private comments would you use it outside the home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BREDA:</strong></td>
<td>talkin’ in [front of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NANCY:</strong></td>
<td>[if we didn't like [you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIDDY:</strong></td>
<td>((high pitch)) [it's only a slang (we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>have), d'yu know (.), it’s only a slang</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The older participants have had to witness how the core vocabulary, the *auld* Cant, has been taken away. Therefore, to them, what is left, is that Cant is something that is now used in certain contexts as an informal, in-group way of talking. The younger participants still see the ‘privacy’ function as upholding, making them more firm in their assertion of Cant as a language (see fragment 6).

From older participants’ doubts about the languageness of Cant we may get a sense of ‘privacy’ - and loss thereof - as having a lot to do with not only a loss of the *auld* Cant and the possibility of private talk, but also with the perceived loss of a community that shared a culture and a lifestyle, a loss which has impacted on community cohesion. The settled appropriation of cultural valuables touched language that was taken away as a protective device, but also went beyond language, pervading most other parts of their lives and protective cultural elements: The older participants frequently bemoaned their traditional nomadic lifestyle as a thing of the past, taken away from them through various forms of forced settlement. This resulted in a loss of possibility to move on whenever needed, as well as in weakening family ties as a consequence of a lack of travelling, which makes contact much more difficult. Biddy once explained that Cant used to be the Travellers’ identity. The loss of the main cultural strongholds must to a large extent determine the elders view of their community as one without identity and as victims of the majority Irish society that stole that identity.

The younger participants were being raised in the time of transition into this new life and their sense of identity is characterised by reinvention, replacing those aspects that were lost and filling Traveller identity with new content (see Rieder, 2015). Their ongoing use of Cant as a way to protect themselves and their privacy indicates an ongoing distrustful stance towards settled society, as Noreen expressed in a conversation that I noted down as a fieldnote:
Extract 10:
Tina told us a story about how her mother once lost her wallet and someone found it. I didn’t get the whole story, but at one stage she said, ‘she was well-lushed’ [=drunk].

Noreen then explained to me at first that they use it when they think buffers could hear it, and they wanted to be a bit more discreet about what they were talking about. I then said, that this wasn’t the case now, everyone would understand anyways. She then said to Tina and me that you see, how much it is in you, it just slips in sometimes. She says that even if there’s nobody there from who to hide anything, there could be and ‘the tongue has to be always quicker’, they do it just in case, to have more discreetness.

Hardship caused by discrimination and frequently denied access to many aspects of settled life, such as the labour market, is still an everyday experience in many young Travellers’ lives that was a frequent topic of conversation among the participants. In this context, Cant and other identity factors prevail as measures to protect themselves and their privacy, but also as possibilities to countervail perceived domination and denied access. Differences in the life experiences and trajectories of these age groups are therefore to be seen as underlying their definitions of Cant as well as of who is regarded as an authentic speaker of Cant.
4. Conclusion

As Woolard and Schieffelin (1994, p. 58) and Makoni and Pennycook (2006, p. 22) point out, beliefs about language or certain elements in the linguistic repertoire are always in service of other, ideological beliefs, and also Kroskrity (2007: 496) argues that ‘rationalizations are typically multiple, context-bound, and necessarily constructed from the sociocultural experience of the speaker.’ By taking a folk-linguistic perspective, this paper has demonstrated how the participants’ criteria of languageness and the observed generational differences in regard to the definition of Cant are both constituted by, and certainly also reproductive, of views of their social position and life experiences.

As section 3.1 revealed, the concept of ‘language’ was filled with the criteria of ‘ownership’ of a speech form, ‘activity’, ‘mutual understanding’ and ‘privacy and secrecy’. While the first three indicate strong feelings of solidarity and belonging, the forth criterion emerged as the most important criterion. As pointed out in the introduction, we cannot be sure whether the function of providing private conversation in public spaces is the only purpose of Cant. However, the fact that it was stressed as a central languageness criterion is a sign of the community’s present-day social need for not being overheard and of their perception of their relationship with the settled community as one that is marked by distrust. Section 3.2 went further into these perceptions by asking whether Cant is a language in the participants’ sense. The section revealed an internal division according to age groups. For the older generation, the temporality aspect of Cant as a language was very strong: all of the folk criteria were described as being present for Cant in the past. However, the difference between past and present, was reinforced frequently in the discourse, with ‘privacy’ emerging as the central criterion that is nowadays missing in the view of the older participants. The younger speakers, however, see the ‘privacy’ function still as fulfilled. These two positions gave way to different labels assigned to Cant by participants of different age groups: Cant is, in the older speakers’ view, a ‘slang’, while the younger participants believed that Cant is a ‘language’, as the ongoing reproduction of words continues to grant privacy. This internal division can be explained by different upbrinings and experiences of older and younger people: The older participants have suffered a loss of major cultural strongholds, which leads them to see Cant as lost and as only useful as a ‘slang’. The younger participants are experiencing difficulties of gaining access to the settled world, which sustains a difficult relationship with the settled community, motivates the constant renewal of Cant, and therefore makes Cant still useful as a ‘language’.

In evaluating these comments and perceptions against the background of scholarly literature, at this moment there is no way to measure the actual vitality of Cant and any reproductive activities in the Cant-speaking community. However, as elaborated in section 2 and shown in the analysis, the focus of folk linguistic study of beliefs and underlying principles for the way speakers define their linguistic repertoire is to provide an insight into deeper-lying motivations of ideologes and their relationship with life experiences and perceived social positions. Hence, insights into Travellers’ language and social perceptions are not just meant to document: They tell us about self-perceptions and social relationships, a matter that is of central importance to the future and development of not only Cant, but also of policy and politics aimed at improving cross-community relations. The analysis has shown an ongoing importance of Cant for young Travellers’ identity, which is upheld by its proclaimed usefulness in a climate where young Travellers want to protect sensitive content. This presents a counterpoint to two widespread suggestions: That Cant may be about to die due to the loss of other cultural features, and that there is a gradual merging of the Traveller and settled community. The view of the young participants point in a different direction and their recognition as an ethnic minority in Ireland in March 2017 shows first signs of cultural and linguistic revival, as well as improved self-confidence and pride in their culture.
While these are positive developments, the fact that ongoing perceived usefulness of Cant seems to be strongly linked to difficult community relations should lay the ground for further analysis and the finding of solutions to the sociocultural and political-economic situation of the Irish Travellers. The ‘National Strategy on Travellers and Roma People 2017-2020’ is a major step with ambitious goals which are waiting to be implemented in order to improve Travellers’ life circumstances and remove inequalities.

References


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**Appendix**

**Transcript Notation**

(.)(0.1) pause, length of pause
: stretching of preceding sound
wor- sharp cut-off
[ overlap
°text° quieter speech
( xxx ) speech unclear
(text) analyst’s guess at unclear speech
((text)) analyst’s comment