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MEXICAN SLANG *ESE* “DUDE, BUDDY” AND ITS IBERIAN CALÓ-ROMANI ANTECEDENTS

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Abstract

Use of the demonstrative pronoun *ese* “that, that man” in familiar North American Spanish speech is traced to Andalusian Spanish and the influence of Caló, the cryptolect of the Iberian Roma. In early para-Romani, the inherited four-term deictic system (situational/contextual, general/specific) yields to the very differently organized Romance three-part paradigm (*este, ese, aquel*), as, concurrently, Caló locative adverbs often replace personal pronouns. Yet, even after the wholesale replacement of Caló demonstratives by Spanish forms, the function of an earlier deictic vocative phrasing is maintained in *ese*, to be understood as you, right there, my conversational partner.

Substitution among pronouns and pronominal adjectives is infrequent in the dynamic interplay between languages but, as the introduction of Old Norse *þeim* into the Old English paradigm of personal pronouns as *them* illustrates, is not without precedent. This note on the speculative history, semantics, and register of the Spanish masculine demonstrative adjective and pronoun *ese* “that, that one”, as used in Mexico and the south-western United States, begins with another analogy, this too drawn from English.

The *Oxford English dictionary* defines the now dated term *cove* as a “fellow, chap, customer; sometimes = boss” and states that it originated in slang and thieves’ cant (*OED s.v. cove*, n.²). After a comparison with Scottish *cofe* “chapman, pedlar”, it concludes that the origin of the word still remains obscure. A first attestation, in the then popular genre of dictionaries of slang and underclass speech, is under

the rubric of Peddelars Frenche: “A *gentry cofe*, a noble or gentle man”.¹ *Pace* the *OED*, a more convincing etymology can be found in Romani and Anglo-Romani, the language and dialects of the gypsies, in the masculine singular demonstrative adjective and pronoun *kova*, used as a noun, “that man”. The loan *kova* > *cove* provides a clue in addressing the curious use of the comparable demonstrative *ese* in North American Spanish slang (and now among affective loan words in certain strata of American English) as a vocative, often at the beginning or end of an utterance, a form of address in the same register as Spanish *mano* and *vato*, and English *dude*, *man*, and *bro*.²

Of a number of reference works consulted for the purposes of this note, only *Diccionario del español usual en México* comments on this use of *ese*: “*Coloq.* Fórmula de saludo o expresión para llamar la atención de algun conocido, especialmente en el Norte. ‘¡Qué onda, ese!’” (Lara 2009: 541–542, s.v. *ese* [8]). Crowdsourcing is an important feature of online lexicography. Although usually without academic rigour, such blogging does have the compensatory interest of contributing to an emic, as distinct from etic, linguistic discourse. The slang use of *ese* has given rise to generally consistent internet commentary illustrated by the following: “*Ese*: The one you are referring to. Should only be spoken by Mexicans, Cubans etc. Otherwise it’s like saying nigga when your white. Get outta here or I’ll shoot your ass *esé*” (*Urban Dictionary* s.v. *ese*). A second entry from the same source: “A fellow Hispanic, your close friend or homey, homeboy. Hey, *ese*, I’m gonna let that little mamacita feel my latino heat!” Another site states: “ESE means ‘Friend, homeboy (Hispanic)’” (*InternetSlang.com* s.v. *ese*). A geographical qualifier enhances another post: “‘Ese’ is a word meaning homeboy, used by southside Angelenos, which is why it is also ‘S’ in Spanish – for southside.” (*Yahoo! Answers* s.v. *ese*).³ It is also alleged that Spanish-speaking gang members in northern Los Angeles avoid the term on the assumption that, because of its parallel designation as the name of the letter S, the use of *ese* would represent a recognition of *sureños* “southsiders”. None of the definitions and explanations consulted offers any comment on just why a demonstrative adjective would come to occupy this position in an utterance.

A more scholarly approach is taken by Mary Ellen Garcia, who states that such demonstratives are of particular interest for Pachuco *caló* [originally El Paso slang] because of the almost stereotypical use of the demonstratives *ese/esa* “that one”

¹ Harman (1567), cited in *OED* as sig. Giiii: “*What stowe you bene cofe ... What holde your peace good fellowe*”.

² To avoid confusion, the term *Caló* will be used in the following only of the Romani-inflected Andalusian speech of Iberia, although several of the scholars quoted below write of “Mexican *Caló*” or “Pachuco *Caló*”.

³ Cf. “What Does ESE Mean in Spanish Slang? *Ese* is a Spanish slang term which means comrade, pal or friend. Young teens often use this term to refer to their circle of friends. This Spanish slang is often used by Mexicans or individuals with Spanish ethnicity” (<http://www.ask.com/question/what-does-ese-mean-in-spanish-slang>; accessed 9 October 2020). Additional posts at: <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=431768>, <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1046023>, <https://www.spanishdict.com/guide/what-does-ese-mean>.

masculine and feminine, respectively, employed as full pronouns and even vocatives (Garcia 2005: 809).⁴ While usefully situating this element of popular speech in the socio-economic situation of the Mexican-US borderlands, Garcia remains within the spatial framework usually associated with the Spanish demonstratives *este*, *ese*, *aquel*. She continues:

[...] to refer to a person by a demonstrative rather than a personal pronoun not only distances them but treats them as objects, thereby rendering the term insulting. However, when *éste/ésta*, *ése/ésa* are used among friends, they serve an in-group function of indicating closeness and familiarity by the fact that no matter what you call your friends, they are still your friends. (Garcia 2005: 809)

This is a questionable conclusion for a community so conscious of status, respect and disrespect, although admittedly partly supported by noun use in similar circumstances. It is also quite without historical anchor, despite the invocation of Caló.

The Roma reached Spain by the second quarter of the fifteenth century, with their subsequent principal settlement in Andalusia. The Romani language was abandoned relatively early, although large numbers of gypsy words were introduced into southern Spanish, along with the ascription of specific insider meanings and affect to pre-existent Andalusian words and by the general practice of encoding community values in other Spanish-sounding or Spanish-based words disguised by transposed sounds, substitutions, truncations, prefixes, infixes, suffixes, and culture-specific meanings.⁵ The dialect or cryptolect that emerged is *Caló*, named for its speakers, *los calés*, “the dark ones”. While contemporary Romani dialects are now relatively well known in their lexical details, the history of morphology and syntax is sketchy at best, because of the thoroughgoing absence of written records, despite nineteenth-century enthusiasts’ compilations of gypsy vocabularies everywhere in Europe. This is no less true of Caló and, as might be inferred, there was no systematic effort to record a full paradigm of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns. Nonetheless, the fundamentals of deixis in its antecedent, what is called Common Romani (CR), can be recovered from the scattered evidence. Some constants stand out among the variables.

Although the para-Romani of Iberia seems closest to the Sinti dialects of Germany and northern-western Europe (Boretzky 1992: 16), the most rigorous recent scholarship has been devoted to the dialects of central Europe, which here furnish exemplary material. Basing his observations and conclusions on recorded speech

⁴ Other recent scholarly treatment of familiar North American Spanish, often with substantial word lists, in Webb (1982), Ornstein-Galicia (1983, 1995), Ortega (1991), Lara (1992), Buzek (2012, 2013), and Gamella et al. (2015).

⁵ Caló phonology mirrors Andalusian Spanish, as do, to a considerable degree, the morphology and syntax. Only in vocabulary, which includes purposeful adaptations of Spanish words, is the Romani element substantial (Boretzky 1992: 29). See Borrow (1841) and Usoz y Río (1987) for the earliest non-native recorded evidence. On native Spanish evidence and evaluations of its trustworthiness, see Roperó Núñez (1992), Adiego (2005: 60–61), and Buzek (2012: 206; 2013). Examples of encryption practices as these relate to the words *flamenco*, *gringo*, *mano*, and *vato* are found in Sayers (2007, 2008, 2009). See further Martín Ayala (1999).

in the Kelderaš/Lovari dialect of Romani (informants then or recently residents in Poland), Yaron Matras, one of the most qualified linguists to address Romani, observes that conventional deictic categories, as might be expressed in English by *this* and *that* (and *that yonder* in other European languages), offer a poor fit with Romani. He writes of deixis as follows:

[D]eixis in Romani identifies the source of knowledge about the object of reference, distinguishing between extra-linguistic, perceptual reality of the speech situation, and intra-linguistic or conceptual reality established via the discourse context. A second opposition line is drawn between general and discrete objects of reference. (Matras 1998: 393)⁶

A tentative paradigm of the deictic terminology of the migrants to Iberia can be reconstructed from the available evidence and from related western European dialects of Romani. Although the exact intervocalic consonantism is open to speculation, one can imagine the Roma arriving in southern Spain with a deictic system based on vocalic and consonantal oppositions comprising the slightly augmented forms **adava/*akava* something cognitively perceptible (situational), of a general or exclusive kind, respectively, and **adova/*akova* something already identified in discourse (contextual), along with related adverbs of place.⁷ On the other hand, the deictic paradigm the Roma met in Andalusia, referencing real physical space, would have been the *este, ese, and aquel* of Ibero-Romance.

To move from Common Romani to early Caló, records permit much less than a complete reconstruction of the paradigm of demonstratives. What lexicographical evidence exists is invariably equated by the compilers (and to varying degrees by speakers) with Spanish *este, ese, aquel*. The impression is of a major impairment to the original CR system.⁸ Adiego (2005: 72) states: “The documentation of pronominal morphology is extremely scarce, and almost entirely restricted to personal pronouns”. The case for demonstratives is no less dire. The following forms have been published but may vary considerably in authenticity or the informants’ full recall of earlier usage: *acaba, andoba, ondoba* “this”, *otaba, andoquel* “that” (Borrow 1841); *ocona* “this”, *ocola, odolla, otaba* “that yonder” (Usoz y Río 1987); *amángi* “that person” (Adiego 2005); Caló *andoya, andoga, ocola* “that” (Dávila, Pérez 1943; cf. *andoba, andóbal* “someone”). There seem to remain traces of the Romani vocalic alternation between *a* and *o/u*, e.g. *acaba* vs *ocola, odolla*, but none of the signifying consonantal alternation seen in CR. The initial vowels (*a-*, *o-*) of this clutch of forms have parallels in other Romani dialects, e.g. *adavá* vs *odová* in the speech of the Gurbet in Kosovo, and are unlikely to have been modelled on, for example, Spanish *aquel* (< Latin *ecce + ille*) (Matras 1994: 51).

⁶ Fuller statement, in German, in Matras (1994: 67).

⁷ See the early Romani forms in Table 3 in Ayukawa (2006: 2), based on Matras (1998: 417–424).

⁸ Claveria (1962: 116) writes of a great simplification of the pronominal system. His attention is directed principally to personal pronouns and, thereafter, to adverbs of place.

In the interaction of *los calés* with Andalusians the Romani four-term system (extra-linguistic and real vs intra-linguistic and discursive, and specific vs general) did not lend itself to an easy accommodation with the three degrees of spatial proximity of Ibero-Romance. As concerns the wholesale adjustment to the new, necessarily bilingual situation, which entailed both communications with speakers of Andalusian and the maintenance of a Roma sociolect within the gypsy community, Adiego (2005: 72) observes from his fieldwork the following particularity: use of demonstratives, e.g. *aká*, which may be either inherited or Spanish, in place of personal pronouns.⁹ By inherited, one should understand the CR demonstrative *ka*, which is a marker for “that (definite) other” (discussion in Ayukawa 2006), and as a possible Spanish source, *acá* “here”, in other words, influence from either a relative pronoun or a locative adverb. In an earlier study, Carlos Clavería isolates a comparable development, the substitution of a locative adverb for personal pronouns:

El pronombre de tercera persona es hoy un adverbio locativo *acobá* aquí, que, en ocasiones, se convierte en pronombre universal, designando asimismo la primera y segunda personas. [...] Este adverbio locativo, tan en uso hoy, constituye, sin duda, un cruce entre un antiguo pronombre demostrativo *acabá* éste y el adverbio *acoi* aquí. (Clavería 1951: 116–117)

In addition, Clavería (1951: 142) recorded two forms, *andoba* and *ondoba*, which he judges originally had significations that he equates with Latin *hic* “this” and *iste* “that”, respectively. Confusion in their use led to an interchangeable demonstratives that reference the sphere of the person who is speaking. This fusion is replicated in the dialogues of nineteenth-century literary sketches of gypsy life, which Clavería documents at some length. However, in light of the earlier discussion of CR demonstrative forms, with their vocalic alteration between *a* and *o*, it would appear that, whatever the deteriorating status of the para-Romani pronominal system at the time of record, a distinction was still available, if not always exploited, between the *-a-* and *-o-* forms, or, again to cite Matras, between the extra-linguistic, perceptual reality of the speech situation, and intra-linguistic or conceptual reality established via the discourse context. Clavería (1951: 144) also traces back to Caló the tendency in more recent popular Spanish to designate persons absent or present by demonstratives, citing *andoba* as the model for such use of Spanish *este*.

From this perspective, it may be speculated that at an earlier stage, before the universalization of *acobá* across all persons (if, indeed, this truly occurred), Caló locative adverbs such as *aoplé*, *oté*, or equivalents, meaning “right there” were used to designate the second person, and were subsequently replaced by, or associated with, the roughly corresponding Spanish demonstrative *ese*.

Clavería makes another observation, which seems to anticipate the modern linguistic analysis:

⁹ In Adiego’s (2005: 72) section on pronominal morphology, an unfortunate typographical error replaces the English pronoun *I* with the letter *T*. Further on the marked demonstrative in Andalusian in Morillo-Velarde Pérez (1992). Other contemporary vestiges of Caló from another region of Spain in Román (1995).

El uso de *ése* con valor afectivo, fuera de la esfera personal de la segunda persona, tan común en el lenguaje coloquial español, ha contribuido a dar a *andova* el significado de algo que se sabe o se conoce. (Clavería 1951: 145)

This is formally congruent with Matras's analysis but reverses the likely causality, which is more surely that the functions of Romani and Caló demonstratives such as *andova* "that person right there" continued in popular Spanish, albeit under the guise of native forms, in this case *ese*. With these observations, the distance between Iberian Caló and Mexican Spanish and its Caló-inflected slang begins rapidly to close.

As is increasingly recognized, many Caló words and turns of phrase from Andalusia migrated to other parts of Spain in the popular speech and various slangs (*germanía*, *jerga*, *argot*) of the socially marginal and marginalized, the insider speech of street traders, performing artists, bullfighters, petty criminals. The pattern of heavy emigration from Andalusia to the Spanish colonies in the Americas also resulted in most American Spanish dialects sharing some fundamental characteristics with Western Andalusian Spanish, including its Caló component. Yet, the proposed filiation in the use of demonstratives proposed in this note nonetheless remains hypothetical and on the theoretical and analytic level, despite other clear indications of the effect of Caló vocabulary on North American Spanish. From the Spanish colonies we have no transcriptions by early ethnographers of actual speech and from Spain itself only the lyrics of the *cantes flamencos* and attempts at colourful dialogue in the literature of the nineteenth century, inspired by nativist *flamenquismo*.

Given their already marginalized status in Iberia, it is not too surprising that Caló personal pronouns, demonstratives, and locative adverbs did not survive in systemic fashion in North American Spanish. But some of their affective function apparently did in familiar speech, as illustrated by *ese* in its current use. To expand somewhat the frame of reference, other features of noun morphology and use in Caló suggest the mindset that could have influenced the current status (semantics, affect, sentence position) of *ese* in the slang of adolescents and marginalized young adults in Mexico and the United States. In literary depictions of gypsy speech in Spain, the nouns and adjectives *bato*, *camará*, *carnal*, *chavó*, *chico*, *chulo*, *gacho*, *guapo*, *hombre*, *mano*, *tío*, even *caló*, are ubiquitous as interjections or concluding vocatives (Clavería 1951: 138–142). Familiar North American Spanish continues this use with novel formulations and, of course, with *ese*.

In addition to these vocative interjections, noted by Clavería (1962), Adiego (2005) calls attention to metonymic replacements in Iberian Caló, whereby a verb generates a quasi-agent through the addition of the suffix *-dór/dóra*, thus, *xalóra* "spoon" < *xalár* "to eat", in which the spoon, not the person holding it, becomes the "eater" *par excellence*. In a comparable augmentation, not so much of form as of relevance and status, it may be claimed that Mexican *ese* "that", used pronominally, becomes "that man" or "THE MAN" and, in line with Romani deictics, the specific man in his discrete space whom I am here considering – you there, my friend, and not that guy

over there. This honorific designation (if that is, indeed, the affect) would then seem to be enhanced through the (deferential?) use of the Spanish third person form for the second person, the addressee (cf. the comparable indirection of *usted*), although, as noted, such movement between grammatical persons has precedents.¹⁰ These observations and speculations suggest a very different conclusion than that drawn from the evidence by Garcia (2005), who sees in *ese* only a familiar insult.¹¹

In familiar Mexican speech, the insistent, deictic denomination, the calling out of the conversational partner, runs in parallel to the high use of reflexive pronouns with verbs (stressing involvement, subjective and shared experience), and of empty or redundant object pronouns (stressing perfective, now observable action). The reiterated reference to the intended attentive addressee returns attention to the utterance itself and demands acknowledgment and comprehension. The multi-faceted syntactic linking is symbolic of the larger contextual interaction among peers and strengthens the in-group bond.

North American Spanish slang is a vehicle for the speaker’s linguistic inventiveness and dexterity, which throws out a reiterated challenge to the hearer – *ese* – to keep up, follow along, link known language to novel language.¹² Self-referentially, language and word-play themselves become the subjects of discourse – a discourse that is otherwise, contentually, often quite mundane – and, along with other attributes such as styles of dress, tattoos, social patterns, becomes an integral and dynamic component of in-group identity.¹³ In this, the exponents of Chicano slang are true heirs to the genius of Iberian Caló and, in some respects, to the ethos of its speakers, *los calés*.

In summary and conclusion, a plausible but not necessarily the only possible development of Caló demonstratives and their use over time may be schematized as follows:

1. A four-term system of Romani demonstratives adjectives (situational/contextual, general/specific) is introduced to Andalusia and evolves among successive bilingual speakers under the influence of the three-term, spatially orientated Romance system, yielding forms such as *acaba* “this”, *ocola* “that”.
2. Concurrently, Romani personal pronouns, originally simple notional oppositions, are at times supplanted in para-Romani by locative adverbs with a more explicit deictic function: in the first person, *acobá* “here”; in the second, *acá* “there”

¹⁰ “¡Esele! Hi there!” would seem to have a post-positioned definite article or, more likely, masculine singular pronoun but cannot be associated with para-Romani use. See Ortega (1991: 101), which has a full entry for *ese* but does not speculate on the history of the usage. *Ese* does not figure in Lara (1992).

¹¹ The extent to which *esa* may be used in similar or comparable fashion among Latinas is not addressed in the present note, but see Galindo (1999).

¹² Examples and analysis of rhetorical tricks in Ornstein-Galicia (1983).

¹³ Ornstein-Galicia (1995: 128) invites the examination of familiar North American Spanish in terms of its interpersonal rather than ideational denotational function. As here tracked, however, *ese* illustrates the necessity of retaining all three concepts: *denotation* in the service of *interpersonal* communication and solidarity, in the shared *ideational* and ideological world of the speech community.

(therein echoing Romani *ka* “the [specific] other”); and possibly in the third, *allá* “over there”, suggestive of *acá +el* and/or *aquel*.

3. The hybrid system of personal pronouns and demonstratives, after infiltrating underclass Andalusian speech from Caló, is stabilized and clarified through the replacement of most para-Romani personal pronouns by the Ibero-Romance paradigm of *yo, tu, el/ella* and of Caló demonstratives by the Ibero-Romance paradigm of *este, ese, and aquel*, complemented by some Caló hold-overs, e.g. *andoba* and *ondoba*. Yet these demonstratives retain the potential to serve as personal pronouns, most notably in the second-person, deictic vocative phrasing *ese* in a well-established sentence slot, a calóism that carries the original Romani valence of a contextualized, specific “you there”, my conversational partner.

These are, at best, tentative conclusions, given the lack of textual evidence between the Roma’s adoption of Andalusian in Iberia and the contemporary use of Caló-inflected slang in North American Spanish. It is to be hoped that further traces of the Caló heritage will be revealed in future thorough-going investigations into popular colonial and post-colonial North American Spanish.

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