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## **Contact-induced change and mobility:**

### **A cross-disciplinary approach to Romani in Latin America**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper takes as its starting point a contact-induced grammatical innovation at the level of attributive predications that has been reported for various Romani speakers, in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and the United States. Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach, we present evidence both from a historical study that documents individual and family itineraries in the Americas during the first half of the twentieth century and from a multi-sited ethnographic study on biographical narratives. These studies reveal the existence of close links among individuals from geographically distant localities. We suggest that, in the absence of normative linguistic institutions, complex multilingual practices seem to have modified grammar at the level of the bilingual speaker and ultimately of the network as a whole. More generally, by considering a less-studied population engaged in transnational mobile practices, we seek to illustrate how mobility allows for linguistic change to spread rapidly and widely.

**Keywords:** Contact-induced change, mobility, networks, Romani

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the present paper, we focus on contact-induced innovation at the level of attributive predications that was first noted among Mexican Romani-Spanish bilinguals (Adamou 2013). We show that this innovation is not specific to Mexico, but can be found among Romani speakers residing in Colombia, Argentina and possibly also the United States. The question that arises then is how these innovative uses came to be shared across the continent. A possible explanation could be that the use of the same linguistic innovations among Romani-Spanish bilinguals is due to the fact that they are under the same cognitive pressure and that they are immersed in similar language contact settings. However, contact between the same pair of languages does not necessarily lead to the same outcome. Rather, we argue that the innovative uses in attributive predications took place in the Americas among second or third generation Romani-Spanish bilinguals and spread rapidly throughout the various Romani groups via traditional, translocal social networks and mobile professional activities. In support of this analysis, we adopt a cross-disciplinary perspective, bringing together evidence from original archival research and an ethnographic study that helps shed light on how this contact-induced language change spread across huge geographical distances.

## 2. THE USE OF A NON-VERBAL COPULA IN ROMANI IN CONTACT WITH SPANISH

According to estimates by the transnational Romani organization SKOKRA, 3.5 million Roma live in the Americas. At present, Romani families live in practically every country of the American continent: from Chile and Argentina in the south, to Colombia and Venezuela at the Equator, to Mexico, the United States and Canada in the north.

The presence of Roma in the Americas is documented as early as the colonial period, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Newcomers continued to arrive during the nineteenth century, joining the general European migrations. World Wars I and II are other key historical moments that prompted Romani people to leave for the Americas. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and up to today, Romani mobility from Eastern European countries to the Americas has been continuous.

The Romani families that have moved to the Americas down through the centuries belong to various Romani groups: Vlax Roma from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, British-Romani Travelers, Sinti and Romungere from Germany, Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Roma from Russia among others as well as Kalé from Spain and Boyash from Romania. At present, Roma in the Americas speak a variety of Romani dialects, with the exception of the Ludar who belong to the Romani families' networks but traditionally speak a variety of Romanian and the Spanish Kalé who speak Spanish, often drawing on Romani lexicon too. Despite dialectal diversity, Vlax Romani dialects seem to dominate the landscape and have been described for the United States of America and Canada (Hancock (1995), Colombia (Demant 2005), Mexico (North Vlax, Adamou 2013), and Chile (Gurbet, Irizarri van Suchtelen 2018). Most Roma are typically bilingual in Romani and the majority language of the country or region in which they live. This means that in Spanish-speaking countries, men, women and children speak Spanish at an early age, often in addition to Romani. This generalized bilingualism shapes not only their lexicon but also core aspects such as grammar.

For example, Adamou (2013) reports on a previously unnoticed phenomenon among Mexican Romani speakers whereby, in addition to the Romani copula *si* 'to be' speakers use third person subject clitic pronouns in *l-* in present tense attributive clauses; see (1). Padure and colleagues (2018) and Adamou and colleagues (2019) confirm the use of the two copulas in Vlax Romani as spoken in Veracruz, Mexico, based on the analysis of a 15-hour corpus of

interviews from 19 speakers and of responses to a copula choice task collected from 60 Romani-Spanish bilinguals.

(1) Mexican Romani (Vlax)

o mobili si kalo aj i tapiceria nevi=**la**  
DEF.M car be.3SG black and DEF.F upholstery new-3SG.F

‘The car is black and the upholstery is new’ (Padure et al. 2018:264).<sup>1</sup>

Adamou (2013) argues that this distinction reflects the Spanish copula distinction between *ser* and *estar*: the Romani copula *si* ‘to be’ is the rough equivalent of *ser* and the third person subject clitic pronouns in *l-* is the rough equivalent of *estar*. The influence of the Spanish *estar* on the innovative uses of the Romani clitics is further supported by the fact that the *l-*clitics are used in locative predications and constructions with progressive aspect similar to Spanish *estar*. Moreover, the author considers attributive constructions with clitics as innovations because they are absent from the most closely related varieties in Europe (Matras 2002; Elšík and Matras 2006).

Regarding the chronology, we note the absence of the innovative uses of the *l-*clitics in Romani texts from Mexico published in the early 1960s (Pickett 1962). However, Padure and colleagues (2018) report the use of the *l-*clitics among elder speakers from Veracruz, Mexico, the eldest being born in the 1930s. We can therefore hypothesize that the innovative uses of the clitics arose within the generation of speakers born after 1930. These were second or third generation heritage speakers who were most likely early bilinguals, having acquired both Spanish and Romani early in life.

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations in these examples are as follows: 3 third person; DEF definite article; F feminine; M masculine; SG singular

In a pilot study, Acuña Cabanzo and Adamou (2013) found the same use of clitics in attributive predications in (Vlax) Romani as spoken in Bogota, Colombia. A search in the responses to the dialectological questionnaires that accompany the doctoral dissertation by Deman (2005) also confirms these uses (e.g. *Murro shau chinorró lo* ‘my son is small’), even though they are not reported in the work itself. Moreover, although no detailed study exists on Romani as spoken in Argentina, some instances of copula use in attributive predications can be found in publications of Romani tales (e.g. *Kadó diváno chachó lo* ‘this story is true’, Vlax Romani, in Bernal 2005:52–53).

In addition, in a recording from 1971 made in the United States of America, we noted uses of the *l*-clitics in attributive predications such as *desa baro lo* ‘he is very big’, in variation with the absence of clitics in the same contexts, by the same speaker, as in *desa tsino* ‘he is very small’ (California Language Archive; speaker: Frank Thompson from Philadelphia; place of recording: Los Angeles). As no detailed metadata accompany the recordings, we do not know this speaker’s age and biography. Some information can be gathered by listening to the recordings, suggesting that Frank Thompson is a speaker of Kalderash (Vlax Romani). His pronunciation in English further indicates that he is most likely a native speaker and we can therefore hypothesize that he grew up in the United States. We do not know whether Frank Thompson is also a speaker of Spanish, which would provide motivation for such uses under the pressure of Spanish. However, what the recordings do suggest is that Thompson is familiar with Mexican Roma, in particular with their religious practices (“They celebrate it in Mexico, most... Mexican Gypsies... *Guadalupe*. It’s like our Virgin Mary here”<sup>2</sup>), and their language (discussing the meaning of a word among various Roma groups: “Same thing, Russian, Polish,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://cla.berkeley.edu/item/25770>; side B, min. 9:30

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Mexican Gypsies”<sup>3</sup>). This means that Thompson was most likely in contact with Romani speakers from Mexico who might have used the clitics in attributive predications.

Finally, preliminary results on Chilean Romani confirm the influence of *estar* on Romani through slightly different means. More specifically, Chilean Xoraxane Romani speakers (Vlax Romani) use a combination of the Romani presentative *eta* with the *l*-clitics (i.e. *eta=lo* ‘there he is!’) (Irizarri van Suchtelen 2018). *Eta=lo* is mainly used in locative predications and constructions with progressive aspect and to a lesser extent in attributive predications (see an example from free speech: *nasualo etalo* ‘he’s sick’; Irizarri van Suchtelen 2018).

But how did these innovative uses come to be shared among speakers of countries as distant as the United States, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina? Without denying the fact that speakers from Spanish-speaking countries shared the same pressure from their contact language and may have developed these uses independently, as seems to be the case for Chilean Romani speakers, we consider that Romani speakers from Mexico, Colombia and Argentina developed the same strategy in the same constructions at the same time, and that the innovation spread widely in space thanks to the contacts these groups maintained with one another. In the following sections we provide evidence to support this scenario using historical and present-day ethnographic data.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://cla.berkeley.edu/item/25770>; side A, min 33:30

### 3. A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: ROMANI MIGRATION AND MOBILITIES IN THE AMERICAS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

#### *3.1. Aims*

The goal of this study is to examine the connections established by Romani families across Europe and the Americas (Sutre 2017). We thus reconstitute migration trajectories with travel back and forth between continents, as well as within the Americas, since most of these families continued to travel extensively throughout the first half of the twentieth century, with regular stopping points in one or several cities and regions.

#### *3.2. Methodology*

*Background.* Mobility is analyzed here through the lens of the family. The term “family” is used from an interdisciplinary perspective, covering both historical and anthropological aspects and, above and beyond the nuclear family, referring to ties between individuals through kinship and marriage. These families preserve and transmit the memory of their migration from Europe to the Americas and their mobility at the beginning of the twentieth century (Acuña Cabanzo 2019). In addition to the family memory, there are also “official” archived records of their travels. Establishing genealogies using administrative, police, legal, media and scholarly archives allows for better understanding of individual and collective identities and how people present themselves.

Reconstituting family genealogies further enables a detailed analysis of migration network dynamics over several generations and the observation of shifts in make up through changes in geographic and historical family connection configurations (Bunker and Otterstrom 2013).



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Based on biographical fragments collected from genealogical databases, national and local archives, the press and scholarly papers, it becomes possible to reconstruct life stories which, although incomplete, render the complexity of family trajectories which cannot be reduced to a linear succession of clearly established events. This discontinuity is inherent in any historical research, but does not prevent presentation of the complexity of time lines, mobility frameworks and geographical belonging (Sutre 2017).

*Dataset.* The research presented here is based on data from *Ancestry.com* and *Family Search*. The data are mostly in the form of passenger lists on boats, passport and naturalization requests, draft cards from both world wars, land border crossing registers, and census and civil records (births, marriages and deaths). These databases mainly contain information pertaining to the United States but they are progressively being supplemented with documents from other countries, namely in Latin America. They include extensive civil register data from Mexico for example. In addition, our research is based on the study of the *Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)* files, consulted at the National Archives in Washington, DC. These files contain transcripts of migrant interviews by INS inspectors. Lastly, the *Gypsy Lore Society* archives at the University of Liverpool Sydney Jones library is a rich source of documents, namely the notes of members who have transcribed conversations with Romani families.

### 3.3. Results

In the last third of the nineteenth century, Romani families who already traveled extensively in Europe embarked for the “new worlds”. A minority among Romani populations, these families were characterized by high transnational mobility in Europe and specific professional activities, namely horse trading, metal working and the performing arts. Exercising these

professions ensured quite comfortable revenues, funding their travels and allowing them to cross borders at a time when stringent financial requirements had to be met to enter a new country.

Most of these families came from central and eastern Europe, Russia and the Greek-Balkan areas, and began traveling to ports in the Americas in the 1860s and 1870s, initiating transnational mobility which has been maintained over generations. This mobility is organized around stable stopping points in cities and regions, structured through networks. In their movements and coverage, these families create constantly readjusted but lasting ties, strengthened through matrimonial alliances.

In the following section we will reconstitute a few examples of family trajectories in the Americas.

*The trajectories of the Ciuron family.* A family of metal workers from Polish Galicia disembarked in 1914 in Philadelphia. The immigration officials were as impressed by their wealth as by the extent of their travels. Indeed, they had traveled throughout Western Europe: documented in Italy in 1906, they were in France in 1907 and 1908, and then left for Belgium. Back in France in 1909, they stopped off in several cities before moving on to England in 1911. Their arrival in Liverpool did not go unnoticed by the *Gypsy Lore Society*, members of which hastened to their camp to take plentiful notes on their lifestyle, family history and language. Starting in 1912, the Ciurons embarked in small family groups for the American continent. A first group put in on Madeira in May 1912, hoping to discover a new market, but their hopes were disappointed. They continued on to Brazil which they crisscrossed looking for distilleries with stills in need of repairs. Another group settled in Montevideo in Uruguay where they opened a sheet metal workshop. A third group, which had until then remained in England, embarked for Canada in 1913. In 1914 they all met in Philadelphia. Other families, who had

traveled well before them to Mexico, came to join them. They took up work on the east coast of the United States, for distilleries, sugar plants, agri-food and chemical companies in need of sheet metal and boilers, hospitals, universities and hotels and restaurants. For example, they were granted highly lucrative contracts with Princeton University, Villanova College in Pennsylvania, the Episcopal hospital in Philadelphia, hotels and restaurants in New York and Trenton, NJ, as well as with the Rhode Island State College in Kingston. While some stayed in the United States, others eventually went back to Europe or left for Latin America. Thus, in Mexico in the 1950s the anthropologist David Pickett met the children of Andreas Ciuron who had moved to Uruguay in 1912. Several of them explained that they had arrived in Mexico in 1920-1930 (Pickett 1962). Furthermore, among the people encountered by the sociologist Štěpán Ripka during his study of Pentecostalism among Mexican Roma one finds descendants of this family who showed him a family photo taken in Mexico in the 1930s (Ripka 2007). Family members are still to be found today in Venezuela, Colombia and Peru.

*The trajectories of the Perez family.* In early September 1914, three families disembarked in New York. They had set off from Liverpool, having arrived there from Cape Verde, but the children were born in Argentina. They were horse traders and also put on traveling shows featuring animals they had trained: tigers, lions, monkeys and bears, among others. When their performances did not bring in enough money they worked as farm hands. Questioned by the Ellis Island Board of Special Inquiry, they stated that they have lived about fifteen years in South America. They were not granted entry into the United States, even though they had over \$5000 and were in good health. They requested permission to transit through the country on their way to Mexico, which was granted.

In October, a boat took them to Progreso, in the Yucatán Peninsula. They did not forgo their plan to go to Chicago however, as a few weeks later they were arrested crossing the border

between Mexico and the United States. Questioned by the officers, one of the men explained that he was born in Portugal but grew up in Argentina. To the officer who asked whether he had ever lived in Uruguay, the man answered: “I lived part of twenty old years in different South American countries, but principally in Argentine”. With their traveling circus, they moved around various countries in Latin America but the epicenter of their travels was Argentina. In 1914 they decided to explore new territories in the United States and Mexico. Immigration files show a solid network spanning Europe and the Americas, which allowed them to garner information on possible destinations and kinds of opportunities to be found there.

*The trajectories of the Costello family.* In August 1917, a large family group from West Virginia left the United States for Mexico. Horse traders in summer, they worked in mines and foundries in winter. In May 1918, they wished to return to the United States. Indeed, the situation in Mexico was very difficult. The Mexican Revolution had engendered much political, economic and social instability. In addition, there was a lack of food and of work as well as a Spanish flu epidemic. But crossing the border in the other direction turned out to be more complicated than expected. With increased immigration from Asia and Europe, the Mexican Revolution — the effects of which were felt into the 1920s — and the entry of the United States into the First World War, the border with Mexico was closing down. In May 1918, it became mandatory to have a passport to enter and leave the United States. The border between Mexico and the United States became a war front and Romani families were deemed especially suspect. Thanks to support from the American consul in Monterrey, Mexico, the Costellos were finally able to reenter the United States between 1918 and 1919, in small family groups. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s they traveled freely between the United States and the Caribbean, namely Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and various Central American countries. Between December 1918 and August 1919, they went back and forth several times between Florida and Cuba where they

traded horses and worked as metalsmiths. Gathered in August 1920 in New Jersey to celebrate two weddings, some of them traveled in the fall of 1920 and winter of 1922 to Venezuela and Puerto Rico. State records and press archives show that the family was firmly settled in Puerto Rico. The island served as a platform for traveling within the Caribbean, namely to Cuba, but it was more than a simple hub. The addresses provided to the American consulate for the Costellos and the people vouching for them indicate strong family and social ties there. From 1929, due to the economic crisis, many of them left the United States for South America, namely Brazil. They hoped to find a more favorable economic context and to do business there. Brazil was not chosen at random, some group members had already traveled there in the beginning of the 1920s. One finds traces of them in Peru in 1923 and 1924, showing that their mobility was not limited to the Caribbean but extended throughout South America, all while retaining ties with the United States. In June 1931, they left El Salvador for Los Angeles. The boat passenger list shows segments of their itinerary through the birth places of their children, namely Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. One little girl is christened Galicia, the name of the ship on which she was born, which called at several ports in South America, including Valparaiso, Punta Arenas, Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro. From the 1930s, one finds some of the family members settled in the United States while others continued to travel in the Caribbean and yet others within the Hawaiian Archipelago.

### *3.4. Discussion*

These few examples of trajectories, beyond each family's specificities, show common patterns in mobility and settling places. These groups traveled throughout the American continent, weaving a tight social network, maintained over space and time. Their mobility does not signify absence of local ties, quite the contrary. Each family group has their own territory,

circumscribed in cities and regions. International travel expertise is born from an alternation between traveling and staying put, and families and individuals draw on this expertise with more or less success depending on circumstances and constraints.

Reconstructing family itineraries across the American continent thus highlights this expertise in transnational mobility. It consists of knowing which routes to take and by what means of travel. As a result, each family drafts a personalized map of the world. From this perspective, the question of sharing information is crucial. Letters, telegrams, phone calls and even messengers provide constant updates for each family, on routes but also on the economic, political, social and cultural situation in each location. Indeed, many of the American immigration service files contain letters and telegrams exchanged within Romani families.

Over time, these transnational social networks have come to cover the entire American continent and beyond. These networks are in constant flux. While some are maintained despite distance, being reactivated by exchanges and contacts, others fade away, temporarily or definitively.

#### 4. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH: ROMANI MOBILITIES AND NETWORKS IN THE AMERICAS THROUGH THE STUDY OF TRANSLOCAL LIFE STORIES

##### *4.1. Aims*

The reflections summarized in this section come from a multi-sited study, in Colombia, Canada, and Hungary, that explores Romani mobilities across and beyond the Atlantic (Acuña Cabanzo 2019). One of the main aims of the study is to describe how Romani groups in the Americas formed and to this day maintain the connections and networks that are essential to their way of life and belonging. Through describing individual and family journeys the study

allows for a better understanding of how ties, connections and networks are formed and maintained through time, and how they shape mobilities and immobilities. In what follows, we focus more specifically on the Colombian part of the study.

#### *4.2. Methodology*

*Background.* Although most studies concerned with ethnicity focus on specific localities and territories, previous research has shown that this approach only captures part of what belonging means. Belonging comprises being part of a household and an extended family dispersed throughout a myriad of localities. Indeed, participant observation among Romani families in Colombia has shown not only the importance of the relationships built within the household, but also of the ties built across households through daily visits and exceptional events between families such as marriages (Acuña Cabanzo 2019). However, even as these relations were being described, evidence of their translocal connection with others through migration, temporary transnational movements, or the use of digital media, became an intrinsic part of the narrative. This multiplicity surfaced in the families' own recounting of movements and connections, formed and shaped by the translocal "space of speech" (Pennycook and Otsuji 2014:165). By "following the people" and "the life" (Marcus 1995), the study came to illustrate how a life-story perspective could show the scope of the relations of extended families that have made their homes in countries like Colombia. The main techniques used to describe the processes of production and reproduction of such connections were in-depth interviews, together with participant observation, "go-alongs" (Kusenbach 2003) and secondary source examination.

*Dataset.* The main data gathering period took place between 2013 and 2014. The participants whose stories are explored here belong to families that were living in Colombia at the time of

the fieldwork. Respondents' age and gender varied, but given the positionality of the researcher, a young, single man, the sample had a masculine bias (12 men, 3 women), evident in the narratives chosen here to exemplify the networks.

The fieldwork recordings contain 15 biographical narratives gathered in cities and towns around the country: Bogota (N=4), Giron (N=1), Sabana Larga (N=3), San Pelayo (N=1), Pasto (N=4), Ataco (N=1) and Ibague (N=1). The sample includes a spectrum that ranges from elders in their 70s and 60s (N=5), adults in their 50s (N=3), adults in their 40s and 30s (N=4), young adults in their 20s (N=2) and one teenager (N=1).

### 4.3. Results

To exemplify how practices and experiences of mobility created the Romani dispersion in the Americas, thereby forging the connections and networks that concern us in this paper, the following sections examine three life summaries. Names have been changed for anonymity.

*The story of Uncle Rodolfo.* During the series of interviews held with him in Pasto, Colombia, Uncle Rodolfo's memories stretched back to his family's arrival in Brazil on a boat named *Terra Nostra*. He remembered that his family had embarked in France, but originated from Yugoslavia (in Uncle Rodolfo's terms), and in particular Serbia. Hailing from the Balkans, this lineage became known in South America as the *Greko*. His story started with his grandfather, part of a group who arrived on the boat to Rio de Janeiro, with a few horses. Curitiba became the center for their movements, a fact evidenced by Rodolfo's insistence that some of his family members, including some of his uncles and aunts, are still there. From there they traveled to Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay and throughout Brazil. Some eventually settled in those places, that they considered good for business or family purposes.



It was his father who made the decision to leave his siblings and cousins in the South Cone and make the trip to countries near the Equator. Although Rodolfo's narrative is not very clear about the set of reasons that took them there, his father and seven of his siblings (they were fourteen) took some horses and headed north, through Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and finally Colombia. In the long term, his father was the only one who chose to stay, the others went back to Brazil by land. Rodolfo was born in Tuluá, in the valley of the Cauca River, whereas his siblings were born in the bigger cities of Medellin and Cali. His narrative, alongside many others gathered in Colombia, shows the importance of itinerant craftwork and sales in the country. He grew up in a family of metalsmiths, who adapted to the Andean terrain and the sugar cane *hacienda* economy. Working metal meant going from locality to locality repairing tools, pots, pans and boilers used to make sugar cane products, and being very familiar with the workings of transport, which is to say horses, and later buses and cars.

At the time, in the 1940s, the center of operations for their mobile economies was Bogota, which was later replaced by Medellin. These centers served as places to restock their materials and meet with their relatives. However, they traveled quite frequently throughout the area where sugar cane was grown, selling their crafting and repair services. The surge of violence at the end of the decade compelled them to return to the South Cone in the 1950s. For young Rodolfo, this entailed traveling by land across the continent for almost a year, through Colombia's southern border to Ecuador, then Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and finally Argentina, where his family united with his mother's brothers. This connection allowed them to live and work in Argentina for nearly four years, traveling around the provinces of Tucuman, Cordoba, Rosario and Buenos Aires, taking advantage of both their family network and their own skills to find work wherever they went. At the end of the decade they returned to Colombia, again crossing the continent by land and living in tents depending on available opportunities in the cities of Pasto, which has a special place in their family history, Cali, Medellin, Bogota, Bucaramanga,

Cucuta, among other Colombian cities. He then reached adulthood, got married, and became head of his own family, after his father passed away.

In the 1980s a new set of factors, including drug related violence and economic difficulties during what would later be labeled The Lost Decade, took Rodolfo's family to Central and North America. This was a very different trip. His family traveled by plane to Guatemala, where, once again, they met up with one of his maternal uncles, just before he passed away. After three months, Rodolfo and his family headed north by bus, into Mexico. His maternal aunt and his cousins hosted them in Guadalajara. A few months later he left for the town of Gomez-Palacio, where his daughter was based following her marriage to a Mexican Rom years before. Like in Guatemala, he continued working, switching progressively from artisanal metal craftsmanship to hydraulic and mechanical machinery repair. Half a year later he took his family to Tijuana, where they crossed the border to San Diego irregularly, and then to Los Angeles. There they stayed with his sister-in-law's family while they found a place for themselves, with the help and resources of their relatives already established in the United States. They then began earning their livelihoods buying and selling used cars.

*The story of Isaiah.* Isaiah's story helps to understand how these crossings to North America occurred, and what consequences they had for the new generations born in this unstable setting. Isaiah was also born in Colombia, in 1983, but two years later his family decided to travel north, and crossed the Mexico-United States border in the trunk of a car, just as Rodolfo had years before. Isaiah barely remembered the tent life in cities such as Pasto and Jumbo, in the South-West of Colombia. His family decided to travel to Mexico directly; he remembered the city of Mazatlán as the place where most of his family were gathered, living in tents and transporting their belongings from place to place on huge trucks. A year later they found a way into the United States, paying a *coyote* to smuggle their whole family in the trunks of several cars. This

is one of Isaiah's first memories, being smothered by smog and gasping for air, cramped together with others, having to be still and silent. Although they crossed through Texas, and were detained at the border, they were eventually able to reach their relatives in Los Angeles.

His father's cousin helped with the settling process, providing a home for the twelve people who had managed to enter the country. His father later became a recognized Christian pastor among the Romani communities in California. Through his newfound church and with help from their relatives, he found a way to provide for Isaiah and his siblings, who started school in English and a new life in the United States. His father also bought, repaired and sold used cars for a living, and over time became wealthy enough to help those who arrived after them. Almost a decade later, in 1994, even though they were doing well, Isaiah's father decided to return to Colombia. Rodolfo had already gone back, wishing to be with his own father in his last years. Emotions were powerful enough to reroute their lives back to South America.

In accordance with his father's wishes, Isaiah and his family spent the following years in the South of Colombia and Ecuador, living in tents, which was a shock after having spent most of their lives in comfortable conditions in California. Again making a living from a mixture of metal craftsmanship, sales and repair work, they moved between cities such as Quito, Ibarra, Pasto and Popayan. They lived together with most of his paternal uncles until his father decided to move to Venezuela. In Rubio, just across the border from Colombia, he continued his calling as a Pentecostal Christian pastor. After getting married, Isaiah decided to stay in Colombia, arguing at the time that Venezuela was more of a police state, where freedom of movement was restricted. At the time of the fieldwork, he was in his early thirties, and continued to live in tents with several uncles and their children.

*The story of David.* In 2013, the same year that Rodolfo's and Isaiah's life stories were gathered, a much younger member of the *Ruso* family, in Bogota, also shared his own. Unlike them,

David was still finding his way, looking to meet his future wife, since he was nearly 18 years old. David grew up among stories of the travel of his relatives, to Argentina, Mexico, the United States, among other places. When he was 11, his family, working in the stainless-steel industry in Bogota, was wealthy enough to afford transnational visits to relatives in Miami, Houston and Los Angeles. In each place they were well received by either their own aunts and uncles, or members of Romani churches in the United States. One year later they went back to California, to ask for the hand of a young American Romani woman for his brother. Although the marriage did not last, it showed him the possibilities that transnational kinship connections gave him. Moreover, he had traveled by himself just a few months before the interview.

Some years later his brother met another young *romni* through social networks, this time from Venezuela. The use of social networks has changed over time. Initially, Facebook and Skype were the principle means of communication, but have recently been replaced by WhatsApp and Instagram. His brother fell in love online and then traveled to Venezuela to ask for her hand in marriage. David followed in his brother's footsteps a few years later, also contacting his future wife through social networks, falling in love, and finally taking another trip to Venezuela to get married. They now have two children and live in Bogota. The connections that were created by these marriages became crucial five years after the interview. In 2018 Venezuela's situation spiraled into an unprecedented economic and political crisis. Many Romani families, including those of the brides in question, crossed the border to Colombia and either stayed in the country, or used their networks to continue traveling to Ecuador, Mexico and the United States. New unions happened during this turbulent time, and David's cousins, and other relatives, continued the family trend of migration to North America. Many now live in Dallas, Houston and California, and have received David in more recent visits.

#### *4.4. Discussion*

Life stories such as the ones summarized above shed light on mobility practices and how they serve to form connections. First, it is important to note the close relationship between movement and survival. Many of the skills and crafts that Romani families have depended on, such as peddling, horse trade and metal working, require mobility to make a living, as uncle Rodolfo's life attests. Second, at specific times families have also taken advantage of certain economies to create centers, or hubs, such as Bogota and Los Angeles in our three narratives, which created enabling conditions for the movement of others, and their own future movement, while also guiding their pathways and directions. The need to move, or not, also guided the choice of housing for each family (tents, houses or apartments) and the placement of these hubs in key nodes to allow them to use the knowledge of an economy and/or a border to do business. Third, affects and the embodiment of these networking practices are also a central factor in how and why people move. For example, homesickness took Rodolfo's and Isaiah's families from the United States back to Colombia, and love, marriage, friendship and intimacy have forged numerous translocal ties, including the ones that David activated to find a wife. Fourth, these movements and the networks they create cannot be separated from the transport and communication media that make them possible. The summaries show how boats, planes, cars and horses all played crucial roles in the narratives. Such networks, at different moments, also depended on letters, telegrams, phone calls and the internet to be maintained (Larsen and Urry 2008). These networks and available resources operate differently depending on gender, age, ability and other bodily characteristics as well as the positionality of the person traveling (Ryan 2011; Acuña Cabanzo 2019). These variables also entail that work and effort must be devoted to maintaining ties and connections, whether mobile or static (Pathirage and Collyer 2011; Schapendonk 2015; Acuña Cabanzo 2019). What these summaries show is that how, when and

where movements are possible, as well as who moves and who stays, are also shaped by the mobility, migration and border regimes that regulate and control individual and collective practices.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By considering a less-studied population engaged in translocal mobile practices, we illustrate how in addition to language contact, which can trigger convergent innovations, mobility can be an accelerating factor in allowing such innovations to spread more widely in space and more rapidly in time. More specifically, the starting point of this article was contact-induced grammatical innovation at the level of attributive predications that has been reported for various Romani speakers in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and the United States. Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach, we present two studies. The first is a historical study that documents individual and family itineraries in the Americas during the first half of the twentieth century. The second is a multi-sited ethnographic study based on biographical narratives. Both studies reveal the existence of close links among Roma from geographically distant localities. The ethnographic study confirms that this dispersal has led to networks formed by connections that span across the continent. We argue that these connections are key to understanding the present-day shared linguistic uses as for many of the Romani speakers in the Americas, the space of communication is translocal, mirroring their lives and memberships in Romani collectives.

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