The socialisation of interactional rituals

A case study of ritual cursing as a form of teasing in Romani

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The present paper examines the ways in which ritual cursing operates as a form of teasing in (Gabor) Roma communities. By 'ritual cursing' we mean forms of curse that are believed to cause harm to the cursed person or people related to them, i.e. cursing studied here differs from swearing and 'cussing', as it embodies supernatural beliefs to a degree. While cursing is an archetype of ritual, to date little pragmatic research has been done on this phenomenon, supposedly due to the scarcity of interactional data collected in cultures where cursing is actively practised; thus, the present paper fills a knowledge gap in the field. We examine cursing in interactions where it is used as teasing in order to socialise young children. Since ritual is a means through which social structures are re-created (Durkheim 1912 [1954/2001]), aiding young language users to acquire rituals is a key aspect of community life. However, little research has been done on the ways in which ritual practices are socialised in communities at the level of interaction, which validates our focus on teasing curses. The phenomenon studied is also relevant to previous sociopragmatic research on teasing: whilst in other (non-ritual) sociocultural settings socialising teasing implies aiding young language users to distinguish between humour and offence, due to the potential harm attributed to ritual cursing its socialisation is centred both on harm and the offence in the conventional sense of the word.

Keywords: cursing, Roma, ritual, socialisation, teasing, harm

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1. Introduction

Curses (*armaje*) and conditional self-curses (*trušula*)[1] are ritual forms which are frequently used in Romani interactions. Individuals who are not members of the Roma community often perceive these forms to be expressions of aggression and attach negative moral evaluations to them: they are stereotypically interpreted to be rude and somehow 'alien' forms of behaviour which are characteristic of the ethnic 'other' (Kovai 2002). Nevertheless, the sociopragmatic study of these forms in everyday interactions reveals that they are multifunctional, interactional rituals which help language users to index complex stances and to engage in various forms of relational work. Regrettably, Romani curses have received little attention in sociopragmatics, and thus by studying this phenomenon, we aim to fill an empirical knowledge gap in the pragmatic research of ritual behaviour.

In addition to this gap, this paper fills another – theoretical – knowledge gap, by examining ritual cursing in settings of socialisation. We explore a dataset in which adult members of Roma communities socialise children in the use of ritual curses by engaging them in teases – a theme that has received little attention in previous research. This paper is limited to investigating the ritual use of curses, i.e. we are not interested in the mundane use of such forms when they are deployed simply to cause offence.[2] In the sociocultural context of Roma communities, curses are rituals in the sense that they are interpreted as being words that have supernatural power (Kratz 1989), at least in certain situations. The Roma metapragmatically distinguish between the curse types *dend'o muj* 'coming from the mouth' and *dend'o jilo* 'coming from the heart'. The former are regarded as being non-genuine curses which are often triggered by momentary negative emotions such as anger and frustration. The latter tend to be more serious in nature and the Roma attribute a harmful effect to them.

Due to this attributed harmful power and the relational implications of being pragmatically competent in cursing by using the appropriate form of curse in each context, teaching young speakers how to use ritual curses and to discern whether a curse is *dend'o jilo* or not, via teasing, represents a recurrent practice of socialisation. For a Romani speaker, it is vital that cursing is mastered because social norms tend to regulate who can deploy curses and when they can be used. For instance, the dynamics of a friendly curse are very different from those of a curse which is meant to cause real harm, females and males are meant to swear differently, etc. Therefore, in this study, cursing differs from the more generic meaning

1. Conditional (self-)cursing refers to curses such as, 'May my father die, if you don't drink that coffee!', which one may use to boost the effect of a polite offer made to another person to drink coffee.

2. Note that such uses are also important in the social life of the Roma community.

of 'cursing' (as a form of 'swearing', cf. Salmani Nodoushan 2016). As Jay (1992, 2) notes,

> The intent of cursing is to invoke harm on another person through the use of certain words or phrases. These words are imbued with power granted to them mainly through religious or social demarcation. In other words, certain institutions like religion, have made a point to note that there exists in language a set of special words. These words are sanctioned by the institution by penalizing or punishing the speaker for such usage. These curse words thus obtain power to cause harm through physical or psychological punishments from the group consensus. [...] Today, what Americans refer to as 'cursing' or 'cussing' (the person on the street uses 'cuss' in non-specific meaning) bears some resemblance to curses and hexes of ancient times. It is doubtful that modern men and women think a curse brings about physical or mental harm, as ancestors of old must have believed.

We agree with Jay (1992) in that, in many sociocultural settings, cursing has to some extent lost its attributed function to cause harm. For instance, one may angrily utter 'go to hell' to another person, but this utterance might not be used in the belief that it will cause harm. However, there are social groups within certain cultures which continue to use curses as an 'archetypal' (e.g. Hart 2001; Ramos 2015) ritual form of communication. For example, in various Romani communities (Kovai 2002; Szalai 2010), in Turkish interactions (Vanci-Osam 1998), in Indian communities (Harlan 1994, 87), among the Akan people in Ghana (Agyekum 1999, 2004) and in Okiek communities in Kenya (Kratz 1989) ritual curses continue to play a fundamental sociopragmatic role, both in interpersonal conflict (Kaprow 1989; Gregersen 2004) and in social practices such as oaths (Agyekum 1999; Kitz 2004; Fosztó 2008; Szalai 2010). In other cultures and societies – most typically, urbanised ones – cursing has become relatively 'deritualised' over time (Muir [1997]2005), but it may continue to be used in a ritual way by certain groups and individuals (e.g. Halmari 2004).[3] Labov (1972) has also convincingly demonstrated that ritual insults represent a key aspect of urban life. Therefore, it might be slightly ambitious to argue that ritual cursing has completely disappeared from 'modern' day life.

From a pragmatic point of view, cursing, as studied in this paper, has various key features that characterise any interactional ritual (Kádár 2017, 12–13):

– Ritual cursing is formulaic, i.e. it operates with words that are meant to trigger harm and/or death (e.g. Murano 2012). While language users can play with

3. Not every individual will believe in the power of curses, even in those cultures and social groups where cursing operates as a ritual practice and, conversely, as Wann and Zaichowsky (2009) illustrate, people living in urbanised societies may well suddenly become ardent believers of cursing.

the 'script' of the curse in a creative fashion (Kratz 1989; see also Extract 2 in this paper), one cannot ritually curse with forms of swearing and 'cussing' such as 'Holy shit', which are emotive but do not express harm (Goddard 2015). Note that, in many Romani communities, the formulaic nature of cursing resides in words associated with death and illness: it is enough simply to refer to a living person as dead or harmed in order for an utterance to be interpreted as a curse.

- Cursing as a ritual practice embodies a set of communally shared beliefs (Davies 1997). When cursing is used as a social practice – e.g. in teasing or in the events of ritual oaths – it follows a certain sense of moral order (Wuthnow 1989), i.e. an interactional order that reflects the belief in the gravity of cursing. In a similar fashion to other rites of aggression used in relationally constructive contexts, when cursing is used in language socialisation (Kádár 2013, 52; Kádár et al. 2019), the behaviour of the interactants follows a set of constraints and affordances. In other words, adults who train their children how to curse are responsible for ensuring that the interactional flow of the ritual is kept harmless (see, e.g. Extract 11).
- Pragmatically efficient cursing implies interactional 'investment', in a similar fashion to other rituals. As the sociologist and ritual expert Randall Collins (2004) argues, ritual practices are not only highly emotive (i.e. emotively invested), but also operate in the form of increasingly active exchanges within an interaction; this characteristic is what Collins (2004) defines as 'interactional ritual chains'. One can observe such chains in almost all the extracts that are analysed in this paper: as an adult delivers a teasing curse, it is often replied to by using another tease (e.g. Extract 2), and the child may also attempt to counter-tease. As a result of these chains, the ritual tease becomes increasingly intensive and challenging, even though the adults have been tasked with keeping it harmless. Due to this intensity, ritual cursing, as with other forms of ritual practice, tends to take place over a relatively short time period and is often demarcated from other parts of the interaction in which it is situated (see Section 3.4).

2. This study

2.1 Objectives

In addition to filling a knowledge gap by investigating a phenomenon which has previously received little attention, this paper aims to make two interrelated contributions to the field. First, by examining the ways in which Roma communities

engage in socialising their younger members in cursing practices, we undertake a pragmatic case study into how the socialisation of ritual practices is performed. Since the seminal work of anthropologists such as Durkheim (1912 [1954/2001]) and Turner (1967, 1969), it has generally been accepted that it is vital for communities to socialise their youth in the use of ritual practices, as the basic goal of a ritual is to reproduce social structures. Anthropological research has explored the various aspects of this socialisation process, e.g. by studying the rites of passage (e.g. Weil 1986). However, to the best of our knowledge, relatively little research has been undertaken into the socialisation of ritual as an interactional process (but see, e.g. Réger 1999), despite the fact that ritual is essentially an interactional phenomenon (Kádár 2013).[4] In this paper, we demonstrate that, due to the harm which is associated with ritual cursing (see above), the socialisation of this ritual practice requires adults to actively uphold what experts in the language socialisation of children, such as Eisenberg (1986, 190), define as a 'safe context' (Section 3). While this paper is only a case study, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to argue that involvement in interactionally creating a safe context – which is at the centre of our analysis – may be valid for socialising young language users in a variety of rites across different languages and cultures. This may involve even mundane rituals in urban settings, such as socialising adolescents in dealing with unwanted ritual sexual advances, which has been an important aspect in sociological inquiries (e.g. Letendre 2007).

Second, by examining cursing as a form of ritual teasing, and by paying particular attention to how language users uphold a safe context, we intend to contribute to the continuing research on teasing (see an overview in Haugh 2017). We interpret teasing according to Eder's (1993, 17) definition, as a "playful remark aimed at another person, which can include mock challenges, commands and threats as well as imitating and exaggerating someone's behaviour in a playful way". As the extracts studied in this paper reveal, mock challenges (e.g. Extract 3), threats (particularly all forms of ritual cursing) and mimetic imitations and exaggerations (e.g. Extract 9) are integral parts of cursing. Arguably, the teases that are studied here are noteworthy because of the potential danger and harm that is attributed to ritual cursing. As Haugh (2017) highlights, relatively little research has been undertaken into the ritual forms of teasing, despite the fact that ritual teasing is worthy of further exploration due to its relative inaccessibility to cultural outsiders. Haugh (2017, 209) points out that

4. Note, however, that previous research such as Blum-Kulka (1997) and Schieffelin (1986) has investigated, to a certain degree, the socialisation of certain ritual phenomena such as dinner-table talk, although such research has not pursued an interest in ritual per se.

> Research on teasing, particularly in anthropology, suggests that there may be particular ritualised forms of teasing that may not be readily interpretable or accessible to cultural outsiders. For instance, 'razzing' amongst Native American Indians (Pratt 1996), 'name-calling' amongst the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea (Schieffelin 1986), or 'kin(ship)-based' teasing amongst Australian Aborigines (Garde 2008).

This inaccessibility could be manifested in the previously discussed stereotypes that surround Romani cursing. We argue that the ritual curses in teasing can serve as playful models of conflict talk, particularly when they are produced by women (Eder 1993) as a form of gendered ritual language use.[5] As the central focus of our analysis, we explore how speakers of Romani are socialised to differentiate between serious and non-serious ritual cursing, with the aid of a cluster of *contextualisation cues* (see an overview in Gumperz 1992, 2003; Levinson 2003) – such as paralinguistic, non-verbal and interactional features (e.g. Haugh 2016) – which are meant to uphold the safe context. As we highlight in Section 3, there is a narrow and somewhat blurred border between the 'real' and teasing functions of cursing due to the ritualistic nature of this phenomenon, and therefore contextualisation cues are essential for language users to (acquire the ability to) discern the type of cursing that is being used in a particular interaction. Ritual cursing is important for the pragmatic research of teasing because, due to the power of ritual cursing to cause harm and death, in scenarios where curses are used as teases it is not merely the offence, but rather the more serious feeling of physical threat, that the person being socialised needs to be able to distinguish from humour. In addition to contextualisation cues, we also examine the way in which ritual teasing is kept separate from other parts of the interaction, which contributes to the disarming of the ritual curse.

2.2 Data and methodology

This paper is based on fieldwork that the second author undertook over a period of nearly three years during the early 2000s amongst Gabor Roma communities (Szalai 2014). These communities live in Transylvania, a multi-ethnic and multilingual part of Romania, and these communities are neighbours of the ethnic Hungarian minority population. Therefore, they are usually Romani-Hungarian-Romanian trilingual speakers. Their first language (the Gabor Romani dialect) is a lesser known Vlah Romani dialect (Matras 2002). The second author examined the language ideologies and practices in three closely interconnected Gabor com-

5. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the gendered aspects of cursing and their implications for research into the ideologies of gendered language (Cameron 2005), it is evident that gender inequalities in androcentric Gabor Roma society have a key role in the contextually situated disarming/teasing applicability of curses (see also Section 4).

munities in Mureș (in Hungarian: Maros) county. She spent the majority of her time in the settlement which the Gabor Roma refer to as *Baro Gav* 'the Big Village', but she also established contact with many other families in different villages due to the kinship networks of the local Romani families. She also participated in family events which were organised in other Transylvanian settlements (e.g. in Cluj, Oradea, Huedin) and visited Gabor families in other locations. It should be noted that, henceforth, when the generic term 'Roma' is used, it refers to the Gabor Roma.

During her fieldwork, the second author encountered cursing being used as a ritual practice for language socialisation on an almost daily basis. However, due to ethical reasons, she had limited opportunity to record cursing in various naturally occurring contexts such as business negotiations and conflict situations; in total, the dataset of teasing encounters which was used in this paper consists of 3 long (i.e. >100 lines) and 32 shorter (<100 lines) interactions in which adults socialise young language users in the practice of ritual cursing. For ethical reasons, the second author was only able to audio record ethnographic interviews and certain types of community events (e.g. death-related rituals and ritual oaths) where the participants gave consent to being recorded, and during such interviews mainly other, non-offensive forms of cursing occurred. Fortunately, for the current research, some interviews transformed into naturally occurring interactions as neighbours called in and became involved. As is attested by anthropological research (e.g. Berta in press; Stewart 1997), in various Roma communities 'privacy', in the Western European sense, has less significance: members of extended families, neighbours and friends continuously visit each others' houses to request help or assistance, to engage in transactions or simply for a friendly chat. Thus, on a number of occasions, unexpected visitors appeared after audio recording had commenced. All newcomers were made aware that conversations were being audio recorded, but soon after the interactions generally became informal as the local people were closely acquainted with the fieldworker.

Since our research focuses on the interactional operation of contextualisation cues, we have transcribed our data by using the following transcription symbols (Atkinson and Heritage 1999):

Transcription symbols

<u>Underlining</u>	emphasis
[	beginning of an overlap
=	between utterances with no time gap (latching)
CAPS	increased volume
° °	a passage of talk which is quieter than the surrounding talk
(( ))	the transcriber's comment

xxx (...) xxx	omission within an utterance
(...)	omission from the transcript
,	clause-final intonation
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
!	animated tone
@	laughter

3. Analysis

Due to space limitations, the current analysis examines a single case study, to provide a data-driven overview of how ritual teasing is used in Romani culture in the socialisation of children. The teasing example examined in this paper is lengthy: there are 114 lines in the interaction and there is insufficient space to feature the entire transcript. Instead, extracts of the interaction are used to illustrate the operation of various types of contextualisation cue through which ritual cursing is kept relatively disarmed, as well as the broader interactional frame (Turner 1979) which demarcates ritual cursing from the rest of the interaction.

This interaction took place within the following context. As part of her ethnographic fieldwork, the second author interviewed a young female host Kati (18 years old) about Romani interactional rituals of invitation and offer. Kati, as a paternal aunt, was looking after two closely related children, four-year-old Zsuzska and her six-year-old cousin Gabi, in the absence of their mother. Suddenly, a 40-year-old neighbour Teri and her son turned up. Teri and her son visited Kati on a number of occasions that day as they had a matter to discuss with Kati's mother. In the recorded interaction, Teri begins to tease little Zsuzska, and Kati immediately joins in the ritual. It should be noted that, at that time, Zsuzska had special language needs: as a result of injuries incurred during birth, she experienced a delay in language and speech development. Therefore, female relatives and neighbours frequently engaged in teasing with her, to test and support her language and social development. This fact highlights that cursing as a form of ritual teasing has a specific socialisation role in Romani communities with regards to children (Réger 1999). It is also worth emphasising that, for the Roma community, visitors like Teri are not only 'neighbours' in the 'Western' urbanised sense: in closely linked network, kin-based Roma communities, there may be a sense of ritual moral duty (Durkheim 2012, 97) for females to contribute to the education of neighbouring children.

Contextualisation cues prevail throughout interactions like the one studied in this paper; they become particularly salient in those interactional moments

when adults perceive the child as having doubts as to whether a ritual curse is genuine or not, and/or when the child does not attempt to engage in counter-teasing but becomes overtly defensive (see, e.g. Extracts (2), (4), (5) and (9). As Eisenberg (1986,190) highlights, creating the feeling of a safe context is essential when children are being socialised in teasing; since teasing 'is perilously close to real life', adults tend to construct an interactionally 'safe context for the communication of a potentially threatening message' to ensure that the tease is disarmed. Engagement in creating a safe context vis-à-vis contextualisation cues follows the dynamic formation of the teasing interaction. In addition to examining contextualisation cues, we also study the ritual contextual frame in which ritual cursing as a tease is embedded. As with any form of ritual interaction, jocular forms of ritual cursing need an initial interactional 'green light' to proceed, and since it operates with heightened emotions (Collins 2004), there is usually a point when the adults formally stop the ritual to prevent it from getting out of control.

In the following, we will focus on the contextualisation cue types that one can observe in the interaction between Teri, the host Kati and the targeted child, little Zsuzska (Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.), as well as the operation of the ritual contextual frame (Section 3.4).

3.1 Forms of address

In the context of Romani ritual teasing, forms of address are often used as contextualisation cues. For instance, the interaction under investigation begins with such a form of address, as follows:

(1)

1	Teri	((to Kati, shouting from the street))
		SO KĂRĂN TUMENGĂ, ŔOMNJE?
		What are you doing, you, Gypsy woman? [lit. 'What are you doing to yourselves, Gypsy women?]
2	Kati	((to Teri))
		Dikh, katika horbijma.
		Look, I am chatting here ((with the researchers)).
3	Teri	((Teri is outside in the courtyard, but already initiates the teasing)) ((in a whiny voice))
		ŔOMEHTE GĂLĂH E PITJŌKA:!
		Pitjoka got married! ((Pitjoka is Zsuzska's grandmother, a married woman in her late fifties at the time of the interview))
4	Kati	*In- gălahtar!*
		She was taken.
5		*Ingărdah la o phuro Pišta, dikhăh?*
		She was taken by the old Pista,[6] you see?
6	Teri	*Ige::n!=*
		Yeess!
7	Zsuzska	*=Na!*
		No!

6. Pista is a recently deceased old man and one of Teri's relatives.

This was not the first time that day that the interactants had met each other: Teri and her son repeatedly called in, and during each of these visits they stayed for a friendly chat. In the above interaction, Teri begins the conversation with a ritual tease, by using the address term 'you Gypsy woman!' (*ŕomnje*).[7] This form of address would be regarded as being derogatory in inter-ethnic settings, but its ritual intra-ethnic use displays solidarity and humour.[8] It is perhaps not a coincidence that 'you Gypsy woman' occurs at the beginning of the interaction: it teases the hostess Kati rather than Zsuzska, and as such its primary aim is to set the tone of the interaction. Importantly, *ŕomnje* has a contextually embedded meaning because it operates as a playful challenge: due to the importance of gender status in the Romani community (cf. Section 1), it is normally used when addressing married females. Kati was an unmarried girl at the time of the interview, but she fulfilled duties – including babysitting and overseeing the household, including her elder brothers' wives and children – which were regarded as being typical 'matronly' roles.

Following this initial contextualisation cue, Teri and Kati begin to tease the child in lines 3–6, by switching to a much simpler form of interaction: they deliver the clearly false claim that the child's grandmother (a married woman in her late fifties) has remarried. In line 7, Zsuzska appears to realise that the teasing has started, as she shouts 'no' to Teri.

Forms of address also operate as contextualisation cues to benchmark changes in the ritual 'line' (Goffman 1967) of an interaction: when a socialising rite of aggression becomes too intensive, the speakers may deploy forms of endearment to indicate to the person being teased that the interaction is not serious. For instance, after the initial tease, Teri begins to curse the girl's grandmother (using her Romani name *Pitjoka*), and Kati immediately joins in the ritual game; as their curses become increasingly menacing, the child – who initially understands that these curses are part of a game – begins to show signs that she is taking the curses seriously. Once Kati is aware of this, she immediately uses an endearing form of address together with a code switch to the teaser (lines 99, 101), to decrease the intensity of the ongoing ritual by giving the child a cue that the ongoing interaction is not meant to cause harm:

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7. The noun *ŕomnji* (in Vocative case: *ŕomnje!*) includes differentiation on the basis of ethnicity, gender and marital status: it refers to 'a married Romani woman'.

8. Such expressions tend to be frequently used by socially disadvantaged groups; see Croom (2013).

(2)

93 Kati *Xal o beng adjeh, hi:::!*
May the Devil eat today, huh!
94 Teri *Mula::h, mula:h, [ja:::j!* ((pretends to be crying))
She has died, she has died, oy!
95 Zsuzska ((laughs)) [@@@=
96 Kati *Mulah?*
Has she died?
97 Zsuzska ((partly crying, partly laughing))
=Na!
No.
98 Teri *Mulāh tji mami e Pitjōka:!*
Your grandmother Pitjóka died!
99 Kati ((to Teri, laughing, in Hungarian)
Ne még mondjad úgy, mindjárt sír!
Do not tell it to her anymore, she is going to cry!
100 Zsuzska *Na!*
No!
101 Kati ((to Zsuzska, consoling her))
Na:, śej, či mulah!
No, girl, she has not died!
102 Teri *Mulāh tjo Pōko!*
Your Spider has died!

In lines 93 and 94, Kati and Teri playfully tease Zsuzska by ritually cursing her grandmother. In line 95, Zsuzska responds to the curses with laughter but also begins to cry, indicating that her laughter is 'more than a simple perception of humour' (Glenn 2003, 23). As the chain of the interactional ritual exchange intensifies (Collins 2004), Zsuzska appears to be confused as to whether the cursing is meant to be harmful or not. In line 96, Kati notices this confusion: she asks Zsuzska whether Teri's claim (performed in an intentionally overexaggerated tone; see Section 3.3) that Zsuzska's grandmother has died is true, to which Zsuzska immediately answers 'no', in line 97. However, Teri's next curse in line 98 forces her to the brink of tears again, and in line 99 Kati intervenes to decrease the 'pressure' (Collins 2004, 233) of the interactional ritual chain on the child, by advising Teri to reduce the intensity of the curses. Note that she does not say to stop the ritual, but rather suggests making the curses less menacing, and Teri follows this advice in line 102. When making this suggestion, Kati switches from using Romani to Hungarian, a typical indexical of social negotiation (Scotton-Myers 1988): switching to a cultural outsider's code in line 99 is an indicator that this utterance is not part of the ongoing ritual. In line 100, Zsuzska angrily denies that her grandmother has passed away and, in response, Kati steps out of the ritual line (Goffman 1967). In line 101, she supports the teased child by uttering an explicit withdrawal ('she has not died'), which indicates that the previous claims were meant to be a joke (Haugh 2016), and she uses the form of endearment *śej* ('girl'), which would be far too 'mild' to be used in aggressive teasing, i.e. it operates as a contextualisation cue for the child that Kati is not now teasing her.

3.2 False information delivered via interactional ritual chains

Delivering false information is a fundamental contextualisation cue by which adults can uphold the safe context. As the following Extract (3) illustrates, repeatedly providing false information via a chain of increasingly stronger ritual utterances, could pave the way for the disarmed cursing to be kick-started:

(3)

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8  Kati      Ingărdah la!(.)
             He took her away!
9            The či na phendăh pehkă Žužkakă!
             And she did not say anything to her Zsuzska!
10 Teri      ((enters the house))
             Na.
             No. ((She did not mention it.))
[...]
17 Kati      ((to Teri, offering her a seat))
               Haj [Teri, beš tele!
               Come, Teri, sit down!
18 Teri            [Bešah.
                   Ah, that's life.
19 Kati        Beš tele!
               Sit down!
((Teri stops in the middle of the kitchen, facing little Zsuzska, Kati is between them.))
20 Teri      ŔOMĒHTE GĂLĀH E PITJŌKA::!
             Pitjoka has married!
21 Zsuzska   Na.
             No.
22 Teri      O Del [te feril la!
             (May God keep her!) ((the 'newly-wed' grandmother))
23 Kati            [Ingărdāh la o:: Pišta, the o Mati, the [o Gabi.
                   Pista, and Mate and Gabi took her away.
24 Teri                                                    [Ingărde la o bară njamcí!
                                                  She was taken away by the great Germans!
25 Zsuzska   ((with laughing intonation)
             Ige::n.=
             Yes. ((Ironically, pretending agreement: Oh, of course!))
26 Kati      ((laughing))
             =O turči!
             The Turks!
27 Teri      ((laughing))
             Merel tji dej! @@[@
             May your mother die!
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As was noted in the analysis of Extract (1), even before Teri enters the house, she delivers a saliently false utterance upon seeing Zsuzska, by arguing that a recently deceased relative (the old Pista) has married Zsuzska's grandmother (line 5). In lines 8–10, Kati and Teri continue the tease. After Kati invites Teri to sit down (lines 10–19), the women again engage in the tease, which ultimately transforms into cursing in line 27. Following Teri's mock congratulations for the 'newly-wed' grandmother (line 22), Kati playfully identifies various men from the child's family ('Pista, and Mate and Gabi') who assisted with the grandmother's imaginary marriage by helping with her elopement (line 23). One of these men, Gabi, is Zsuzska's father, with the others being her uncles; all these men are Kati's own brothers, which further increases the falsehood of the information, thus enabling

the child to recognise the interaction as teasing. As a mimetic response in the interactional ritual chain, in lines 24 and 26 Teri and Kati name the 'great Germans' and the 'Turks' as having eloped with Zsuzska's grandmother; these are again references to Zsuzska's above-mentioned relatives, who at that time had travelled to Germany and Turkey on business. This subversive play with ethnic identities further increases the humorous stance adopted in the interaction. Delivering clearly false information proves to be an efficient strategy to engage the child in the ritual: while initially in line 21 Zsuzska is startled by the announcement that her grandmother has married, in line 25 she joins in with the ritual teasing game by uttering a mock agreement, which in turn allows the ritual of cursing to be kick-started in turn 27. Note that the initial tease is not completely harmless. When the interaction took place, both the participants (and the ethnographers) knew that Zsuzska adored her grandmother more than anyone else in her family, i.e. the 'marriage' of her beloved grandmother could cause Zsuzska relational and emotional damage.

Ritual falsehood and repetitive chains (Collins 2004) are closely interrelated in the rites of socialisation. This is in accordance with Eisenberg's (1986) findings regarding teasing in socialisation, i.e. the repetition of clearly false information helps the recipient child to identify the tease and, as such, it operates as a contextualisation cue. This repetitiveness results in a limited choice of topics and a sense of redundancy in our dataset (compared to, for example, scenarios in which teasing is more hidden within the interaction): the playful threat and provocation is usually organised around prototypical themes. For instance, in the interaction analysed in this paper, 61 lines feature curses; that is, 53.1% of the 114 utterances include curses and the majority of the other lines are metapragmatically centred on cursing.

3.3 Nonverbal contextualisation cues

The contextualisation of cursing also manifests itself vis-à-vis interrelated nonverbal prosodic features. These include, perhaps most importantly, laughter (see an overview in Glenn 2003): the analysis of our dataset reveals that both adults burst into laughter as they deliver the teasing curses. This not only indicates that these are playful in nature, but also that the adults find it humorous to use otherwise dangerous curses in a safe context. For instance, in the following extract Teri bursts into laughter as she engages in the playful rite of cursing:

(4)

```
49 Teri   [Merel e Pitjōka! @@@@
          May Pitjoka ((grandmother)) die!
50 Kati   ((to Zsuzska))
          Del armaje?
          Is she cursing?
```

Teri's disarming laughter is noteworthy from a ritual point of view: as previous research, such as Emmons (2000,107–146) has illustrated, with regards to the socialisation of the ritual acts of aggression, people with various cultural backgrounds tend to engage in this type of laughter. In line 50, Kati metapragmatically confirms (cf. Silverstein 1993) the disarmed nature of the curse, by asking for clarification from the child as to whether she has understood what is going on.

As a contextualisation cue, laughter also operates as a form of 'crossing' (Rampton 1995,495) in our data: for example, there are instances where the adult (typically Teri) delivers curses with a chuckling and rising intonation, and by doing so she imitates the voice of a child who is still unable to properly curse:

(5)

```
81 Kati     Ašun, dah armaje tje mama!
            Have you heard it, she has cursed your mum!
82 Teri     @@@
            ((laughs))
83 Zsuzska  (Ande dej!)
            ( Into mother!)
84 Teri     ((with laughing intonation))
            Merel tji dej@@@!
            May your mother die!
```

In this part of the conversation, Zsuzska again becomes uncertain as to whether the cursing is meant to cause harm because she is clearly concerned for her mother (line 83), and Teri then softens the situation by repeating her curse in a childish fashion.

Together with laughter, stress and an exaggerated exclamative intonation are also typical prosodic contextualisation cues in our dataset. For instance, in the extract below, which occurs after Extract (5), Teri performs a childish crossing to ensure that the ritual is harmless to the child:

(6)

```
87 Teri   [Merel tji mami:!
          May your grandmother die!
```

The prosody of *mami:!* (grandma:a!) imitates how a child would call for her grandmother in an emergency situation; i.e., in the present context it playfully indicates to the child that, while the curse may appear to be harmful, it is actually harmless. The pragmatic power of such contextualisation cues to create a safe context becomes clearly evident in instances when they aid the child to counter-attack with curses – this is arguably a challenging task for a young child when one con-

siders the harm that is attributable to ritual curses. For instance, Zsuzska appears to be particularly clever in one part of the interaction – she not only understands that the ritual cursing is playful, but also launches a mocking counter-attack:

(7)

```
27 Teri     ((laughing))
            Merel tji dej! @@[@
            May your mother die!
28 Zsuzska                    [Tji dej, ja?=
                              ((May)) Your mother ((die))), alright?
29 Kati     ((Repeats/echoes little Zsuzska's words, with laughing intonation))
            =Tji dej, [ja? @ @
            Your mother, alright?
```

Teri's use of prosodic contextualisation cues in line 27 are standard for the interaction (see, e.g. Extract 6). However, in line 28 Zsuzska transforms the flow of the interaction, as she playfully requests clarification from Teri regarding whether it is the latter's mother whom they are cursing. Kati acknowledges this smart counter-attack by repeating Zsuzska's utterance, whilst laughing, in line 29.

Finally, a related prosodic contextualisation cue that is frequently deployed in our dataset is the lengthening of vowels (cf. Gumperz 1992, 235):

(8)

```
94 Teri   Mula::h, mula:h, [ja:::j! ((imitates crying))
          She has died, she has died, oy!
```

In this instance, Teri playfully imitates crying as she mockingly cries for Zsuzska's grandmother. It should be noted that, while this represents the default use of lengthened vowels in our dataset, they can occasionally fulfil another function, as the following extract illustrates:

(9)

```
49 Teri      [Merel e Pitjōka! @@@@
              May Pitjoka ((grandmother)) die!
50 Kati      ((to Zsuzska))
             Del armaje?
             Is she cursing?
51 Zsuzska   ((in a crying voice))
             Ige::n.
             Yes.
52 Kati      ((to Zsuzska))
             Hi::, dah armaje amară mame!=
             Huh, she cursed our grandmother!
53 Zsuzska   Ige::n!=
             Yes!
```

When Zsuzska becomes confused and is threatened by the curse, Kati switches to an endearing style of address: in line 52 she aligns herself with Zsuzska by switching to the plural form (she refers to the cursed person as 'our grandmother') and also by using the vowel lengthened form *hi::* (huh) to elicit Zsuzska's reflection on the curse. As experts of child language acquisition, such as Blount and Padgug

(1977), have highlighted, vowel lengthening is particularly prevalent in the language behaviour of parents and other caretakers in contexts of uncertainty, and it is likely that in the above interaction *hi::* (huh) indexes a protective stance towards Zsuzska.

3.4 The ritual contextual frame

So far, our focus has been on the contextualisation cues which are used to ensure that cursing is kept within a safe context. In addition, we will now briefly discuss the way in which cursing as a ritual practice is demarcated from other parts of the interaction. As the extracts that we have studied have illustrated, ritual cursing is emotionally loaded (Collins 2004), and the adults in the interaction continuously need to support and reassure Zsuzska – by using both contextualisation cues and metapragmatic comments – that the curses are not harmful. Consequently, it is also important that such rites of aggression are demarcated from 'ordinary' (non-harmful) conversation, that is, they take place in a ritual contextual frame (Turner 1979).

Initially, the teasing is simply concerned with the alleged marriage of the girl's grandmother, and ritual cursing does not commence until the teased girl first begins to doubt the truth of the tease. In other words, in terms of the ritual frame, the child is expected to accept the ritual challenge in the form of a counter-challenge (Turner 1979), so that the rite of cursing can begin in a playful form with many embedded contextualisation cues. It is relevant here to revisit the following part of the interaction (featured in Extracts (3) and (7)):

```
24 Teri      [Ingărde la o bară njamcî!
             She was taken away by the great Germans!
25 Zsuzska   ((with laughing intonation)
             Ige::n.=
             Yes. ((Ironically, pretending to agree: 'Oh, of course!'))
26 Kati      ((laughing))
             =O turči!
             The Turks!
27 Teri      ((laughing))
             Merel tji dej! @@[@
             May your mother die!
28 Zsuzska   [Tji dej, ja?=
             ((May)) Your mother ((die))), alright?
29 Kati      ((Repeats/echoes little Zsuzska's words, with laughing intonation))
             =Tji dej, [ja? @@
             Your mother ((not mine)), alright?
```

Curses begin when, in line 25, Zsuzska finally 'accepts' Teri's challenges by responding ironically to her tease. This interactional 'green light' paves the way for the first ritual curse of the interaction, which is heavily loaded with paralinguistic contextualisation cues (see the previous section). When Zsuzska responds to the curse with a humorous counter-challenge in line 28, and Kati credits this response

(line 29), Teri begins to deliver curses which are heavily loaded with contextualisation cues:

(10)

```
30 Teri      ((laughing))
             [Merel tji dej! @@@
             May your mother die!
```

During the interaction, Zsuzska becomes deeply involved in the ritual practice, as a number of the extracts have demonstrated. As the interaction intensifies, Zsuzska takes Teri's curses to be increasingly menacing and, from line 102, the adults gradually slow down the ritual, ultimately leaving the ritual frame in line 111, as the following extract illustrates:

(11)

```
102 Teri     Mulāh tjo Pōko!
             Your Spider has died!
103 Zsuzska  Na!
             No!
104 Teri     [Mulāh! =
              Died!
105 Kati     [Gălāh ando fōro!
              Went to the town!
106 Teri     =Na-j kon t'anel tukă xabe:n!
              There is nobody to bring food to you!
107 Kati     Vi o Kalapošo, vi o Kalapošo mulah?
             The Hatted, has the Hatted also died?
108 Teri     Mulah v'o Kalapošo:!
             The Hatted has also died!
109 Zsuzska  Na.
             No.
110 Kati     @@@ (1.0)
             ((laughs))
111 Teri     ((to her son, leaving, moving towards the door))
             No hajdi!
             Well, come, let's go!
112          ((to the hosts))
             Ret laśi!
             Good night!
113 Kati     Źe la pačesa!
             Go with peace!
```

As Zsuzska's response becomes increasingly defensive – the emotive *Na!* (No!) would indicate that she is beginning to take the curses seriously – Teri uses a play on language, in line 102, as a contextualisation cue delivering false information (Section 3.2). In this case, she deploys humorous ambiguity when she claims that it was the girl's grandfather and not her grandmother who had died. The adult teaser assumes the child's perspective, and in the mock curse she uses the child's own, simplified idiolectal term (*Pōko* instead of *Pitjōko*) for naming her grandfather.[9] In this context, when uttered by an adult person, the curse becomes a

9. In several Romani communities, including those of the Gabor Roma, people tend to have a name for in-group (Romani name) and another for out-group (Gaźo/non-Romani name) situa-

play on language and a further source of humour, as it could be understood literally to mean: 'May your spider die!' Besides, Kati engages in the ritual chain in line 105, by toning down the concept of death ('Went to town', rather than 'died'), and the two adult participants co-construct a reformulated version of the message, by replace another more widely known Romani name with a nickname (Hatted) which is referring to Zsuzska's grandfather. In this instance, it is Kati who states that Hatted (her own father, Zsuzska's grandfather) has died, to further downplay the seriousness of the message. The emotive and relational tie between Kati and Hatted is meant to signal that the cursing is playful, as no member of the Roma community would curse their own relatives. Zsuzska continues to feel threatened and acts defensively, and so Kati begins to laugh in line 110. Following a conclusive pause, Teri terminates the ritual in line 111 by telling her son to leave, after which she engages in a leave-taking ritual with Kati. This takes the form of a blessing, and as such it is clearly demarcated from the previous curses.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined ritual as an interactional phenomenon in its perhaps most archetypal form, by exploring the operation of ritual cursing in a community where people attribute great importance to the power of curses in certain situations. It is relevant here to note that ritual has many types and forms (Bax 2010), spanning 'hidden' ritual practices in urban settings, such as inviting an attractive person to the cinema, through ritual games like British Bulldog, to the ritual practices which are observed in business negotiations. It would be unwise to limit the pragmatic analysis of rituals to those forms of interpersonal behaviour which are 'ritual' (only) in a popular sense (or in a first order way, see Watts 2003). Nevertheless, it is beneficial to involve the study of such rituals in projects like this Special Issue because – somewhat paradoxically – it is often difficult to find interactional data in which archetypal rituals occur and, following Goffman's (1967) seminal work, ritual has been interpreted in a technical (second order) rather than a popular sense (see an overview in Horgan 2019; see also Kádár and House's

tions. A person may have more than one Romani name. Some Romani nicknames are reserved mainly for family settings, while others are widely used in the community. The informal, familial Romani nickname of Zsuzska's grandfather is *Pitjōko.* She had difficulty pronouncing this name, and therefore she often used a shorter, simplified form of the name *Pitjōko>Pōko*. This child language form of the name was a source of amusement for the other interactants, as this shortened form is phonologically identical to the noun *pōko* 'spider'. The grandfather had another Romani name, *Kalapošo* 'Hatted', and this name was widely used in the community.

introductory paper in this Special Issue) in sociolinguistic and (to a lesser degree) pragmatic research.

The ritual engagement studied in this paper only represents a specific and gendered use of a more widely adopted ritual practice in the Gabor Roma community. While both men and women use curses, women are believed to be typical users of curses in Gabor Roma language ideology, particularly in caretaker speech. Women are expected to perform ritual curses in public in certain speech activities of conflict management. This is perhaps the reason why it is mainly women who have responsibility for the socialisation of children through the situationally appropriate, skilful use of curses, by playfully modelling conflict talk in teasing. It is important to note that curses in the interaction contain female referents, to ensure that cursing practices are understood to be non-serious curses 'coming from the mouth', and thus are in line with the interactional frame of teasing. As the extracts that were studied illustrate, male referents (e.g. the grandfather of the teased child) do occur in teasing. However, both the participants and the people being cursed are all female. This plays an important role in the formation of a safe context in which to conduct a tease, particularly in a sociocultural context where there is potential for the ritual to cause harm. Future research could be undertaken to examine ritual cursing beyond this context; this is important not only to further the pragmatic understanding of this archetypal form of ritual, but also to contribute to the understanding of Romani sociocultural behaviour. This is of fundamental importance because of the negative stereotyping of the Roma community in Europe (and perhaps elsewhere).

Our aim has been to use ritual cursing as a case study to provide a contribution to two interrelated topics i.e. (a) to study the ways in which ritual practices are socialised, and (b) to explore teasing in situations where ritual socialisation has been relatively insignificant. With regards to the former, since Durkheim's research, ritual has been understood to be a form of behaviour through which language users reproduce social structures, and so the socialisation of this phenomenon is an area that the sociopragmatics of ritual cannot ignore. Interestingly, while some research has been undertaken into both the conventionalisation of ritual practices (e.g. Terkourafi and Kádár 2017) and the social ritualisation of initially non-ritual practices (Kádár 2017), these are essentially macro processes which take place over long periods of time. We believe that the study of ritual socialisation is noteworthy, not only because it fills a knowledge gap – ritual socialisation, and in particular the role of cursing as a means of socialisation, has not received sufficient attention – but also because it provides a glimpse into micro-level interactional practices by examining how individuals (re)enact ritual practices within their communities. As the examination of ritual curses has illustrated, what appears to an outsider to be 'brutal' forms of ritual communication

are actually used in carefully designed ways on the micro level, to ensure that younger members of a social group properly acquire them. Of course, this does not decrease the intensity of the rites of aggression, such as cursing, because ritual represents an emotively intensive form of interpersonal interaction (Collins 2004).

Regarding our second goal, the study of contextualisation cues in teasing ritual Romani curses is also relevant to the sociopragmatic research on teasing (e.g. Haugh 2017). Arguably, the operation of the contextualisation cues that were studied in this paper is in accordance with the findings of previous research on the role of prosody. Nevertheless, this paper has illustrated that, in the case of the rites of aggression, teasers deploy contextualisation cues to ensure that the person being teased does not feel threatened. Since cursing is often directed at a third party – usually a teased person's loved ones – the use of curses as a form of tease involves assisting the person undergoing socialisation to differentiate between harmful and harmless curses. In other words, while cursing and its use in teasing revolve around offence (and its lack) in modern urbanised societies (Jay 1992), it is a more complex phenomenon in cultures like the Roma community.

We hope that this research will generate further interest not only in ritual socialisation, but also in the pragmatics of Romani.

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