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► **To cite this version:**

Peter Nahon. The French linguistic varieties of Gypsies and Travellers: an original diastratic variation perspective. *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 2024, 140 (1), pp.30-76. 10.1515/zrp-2024-0002 . hal-04570877

HAL Id: hal-04570877

<https://cnrs.hal.science/hal-04570877>

Submitted on 7 May 2024

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The French linguistic varieties of Gypsies and Travellers: an original diastratic variation perspective

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zrp-2024-0002>

Abstract: For centuries, France and the French-speaking areas of Belgium and Switzerland have been home to a large minority of Gypsies and Travellers, comprising about 300,000 individuals who all speak a form of French as their native language and form a close-knit sociolinguistic community. Their French sociolect, hitherto never described by linguists, differs from other varieties of French through a wide array of phenomena at all levels of language structure: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexical semantics and morphology. Diachronic and contrastive analysis shows that these features are either (1) non-standard, archaic or regional characteristics now lost in other varieties of European French, but kept by the Travellers as diastratic variants; (2) internal innovations within the diasystem of Traveller French; (3) outcomes of contact with heritage languages of some of these groups (Sinti Romani, Jenisch, and Alemannic and Gallo-Romance dialects). Using predominantly new fieldwork I provide here the first description of this important set of diastratic varieties of French, which represents an outstanding case of linguistic variation in a context of social separation yet with sustained contact.

Keywords: variation in French, social variation, language contact, sociophonetics, Romani

1 Introduction

To study French as a linguist means to study all its manifestations: not only the standard (if such a thing exists) but also language variation in all its complexity; not

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only the written language but the oral realities in all strata of language use.¹ The increased social complexity of contemporary language communities makes the study of social (diastratic)² variation crucial for the knowledge of the French language. However, diastratic varieties of French still have partial and unthorough coverage in the scholarly literature. A few recent research works on diastratic varieties have shed light on previously unknown or unnoticed material, yielding insights into how much this field deserves first-hand descriptions, systematic inquiries and direct fieldwork: concerning occupational slang/trade slang, see Saugera (2019) on the slang of butchers, Nahon (2017) on the slang of diamond traders, Hardy (2018) on the slang of luthiers; for school slangs, see Miribel (2017) on the slang of the French naval academy; and for varieties spoken by socio-religious minorities, see Nahon (2018; 2023) on the varieties of the Jews in the south of France. There is, though, one group of important French varieties that has gone practically unnoticed by scholars of variation: the French spoken by French Gypsies³ and Travellers. It is strikingly absent from all scholarly literature; one cannot find a single mention of it in any of the reference works on variation in French (to cite only a few, Offord 1990; Sanders 1993; Gadet 2006).

Precursory research and fieldwork I have undertaken since 2020 have revealed the existence of a coherent, though slightly internally variable, set of diastratic varieties of French, which significantly diverges from the norm of metropolitan French. This article provides a sociolinguistic sketch of these populations in an historical and ethnographic perspective, followed by the first linguistic description of the most prominent features of these varieties, based on mostly hitherto unpublished primary material.

1 For their insightful comments and suggestions on this article, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers and to Drs. Mathieu Avanzi, Éva Buchi, Jean-Pierre Chambon, Yan Greub, Nicholas LoVecchio, as well as to Juliette Delalande, to whom goes my particular gratitude.

2 The notion of “diastratic variation” is used here from the standpoint model of diasystematic variation of Flydal (1952) and Coseriu (1956), in which it refers to variation across different social groups, the linguistic variety specific to a social group being defined as a “diastratic variety” or “sociolect”.

3 Though frequently used in scholarly literature, the word *Gypsy* has been increasingly regarded as offensive in recent years; another reason for using it with caution is its imprecise meaning, as it can refer both to (historically) Romani-speaking populations who supposedly share a common ancestry in northern India, whether itinerant or settled, and to nomadic communities of other origins. Other ethnonyms will be used throughout this article in order to more precisely account for the various identities of these populations in French-speaking areas. To refer to the group as a whole, here I have chosen to use the word *Traveller*, which translates French *Voyageur*, the ethnonym used by members of all French-speaking peripatetic subgroups to name their own community and even their language variety, as will be seen below, but is also used as a self denomination of peripatetic communities in Ireland and Great Britain.

Section 2 will present the historical and sociological background of the populations under study, a state of the art of their previous coverage in linguistics, and the sources and methods used here to describe their language. Section 3 provides an overview of the linguistic features of Traveller French, covering phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and lexical features. Section 4 presents superstructural and sociolinguistic features of the variety: code-switching, cryptolectal devices, and specificities of Traveller onomastics. The discussion in section 5 suggests a general interpretation of the material.

2 The Travellers in French-speaking areas

2.1 Definition and ethnonyms

France and the French-speaking areas of Belgium and Switzerland are home to people who are part of what ethnographers call “service nomads” (Hayden 1979) or “peripatetics” (Rao 1985): spatially mobile people who primarily earn their livelihood through the practice of services, such as trade, craft and entertainment, they offer to the settled population.

They are known, in French, by several more or less interchangeable ethnonyms. Exoethnonyms can be neutral, such as *gens du voyage* (‘travelling people’, the legal denomination most commonly used in administrative documents and politically correct speech), or vaguely derogatory: *bohémiens*, *romanichels* (used mostly in western France), *camps volants* (used mostly in the north-east), among others. Endoethnonyms are also used, roughly matching their different ethnic subgroups: *manouches* and *sinté* (two synonymous names for the people of Romani-speaking ancestry who transited through German-speaking areas), *yéniches* (peripatetics of non-Romani origin originating from German lands), *gitans* (an ethnonym formerly associated only with Iberian Gypsies but which has been increasingly used colloquially to name all other groups in recent decades). Names based on occupation or way of life have also been used to designate the community at large or subgroups within: *vanniers* (‘basket-weavers’), *forains* (‘fairground workers’), *roulottiers* (‘wagon-dwellers’). Most of them, all groups combined, prefer to self-define as *Voyageurs* (Travellers), one of the few ethnonyms which have not been pejoratively connoted.

2.2 Ethnic makeup and figures

Travellers form a sizeable minority. Though recent exact statistics are unavailable in France, 150,000 to 300,000 individuals are generally accepted figures, and seem

indeed realistic (Reyniers 2017, 10). Higher numbers, up to 600,000, do appear in some sources but are exaggerated. Switzerland has about 35,000 Travellers while Belgium has 15,000, according to official census data; among these two groups, the fraction that lives in French-speaking areas may be less than half.

The ethnic makeup of the community is difficult to assess precisely. A large portion of them are Travellers of native origin whose ancestors left settled life at various points in time, mostly between the 15th and 18th centuries. Close scrutiny of the genealogy of contemporary Traveller families shows that most of these local lineages descend from impoverished peasants, deserters or homeless former soldiers following wartime, often from the vicinity of the eastern borders of France, who at some point reacted to their imposed marginality by gathering in itinerant endogamous communities. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), with its devastations and ensuing breakdown of social order, played an important role in this process. Among them, the subgroup that originated in Germanic-speaking areas is known by the name of *Yéniche* (cf. German *Jenisch*), an ethnonym also used for the peripatetic communities of Germany and German-speaking Switzerland, to which they are often related (on the history of their families, their migrations in France and the specific customs of that group, see Valet 1980). Various indigenous groups who practised itinerant trades in all provinces of old France (e.g. hare-skin dealers, ragpickers, knife-grinders, tinsmiths, chair-bottomers) also contributed in large part to the formation of what is today the Traveller community (Vaux de Foletier 1981, 21–27).

The other significant ethnic input among the origins of French Travellers is the immigration of Romani ('Gypsy') people, ultimately from northern India, who arrived in France through Central Europe during the Late Middle Ages and more or less intermingled with the indigenous Travellers over the centuries.

It is difficult to give a proper estimate of the figures of each group of origin: groups of different ethnic backgrounds usually travel together and dwell in the same areas; most families are of mixed origin and sometimes, even within a single family, the origin of each branch of ancestry cannot be precisely determined since, due to a long history of intermarriage between different groups, several of their family names are no longer a relevant indication of ethnic affiliation (Vaux de Foletier 1963; Reyniers 2017, 15). Here again, we have to rely upon self-definition; an impressionistic account of the various groups I visited (see below, §2.5.2) would lead me to estimate that roughly 60% of the whole group identify as *Voyageurs* of chiefly native, non-Romani descent, with the remaining 40% being formed of various subgroups in which the Romani component predominates. Among the latter, the largest group by far is the *Manouche/Sinti* group, whose ancestors arrived first in France through Germany in the 15th century (Vaux de Foletier 1961), transited again through German-speaking lands during the 18th century (Reyniers 2006), and then came back to France, most of them in the early 1800s (Vaux de Foletier 1973). There

are also several families who trace their ancestry to a cognate group, the *Sinte* from Piedmont and Savoy, some Eastern European *Roma* families who arrived first in France in the 19th century (colloquially called *Hongrois* 'Hungarians' by other Traveller groups), and, mostly in the South of France, several clans of Spanish *Gitanos*.

2.3 Social substructure

Various social processes of fusion between those primary ethnic groups and redefinition of secondary identities have been at play among these different initial populations in the centuries following. The longstanding fusion of all these groups into one single supra-ethnic *Voyageur* social entity (Bizeul 1991; 1993) is still ongoing at different rhythms, as, for some families, ethnic origin still plays some role in marriage patterns. However, other parameters of social organisation overshadow ethnicity as a marker of subgroup separation/fusion: these include living habits, occupation and religion.

The travelling and living habits among Travellers are diverse and largely constrain interactions between groups: while a large part of them live a fully nomadic life, others have a permanent dwelling for the winter months but travel during the summer, and still others are fully settled; among the latter, some live in conventional houses or apartments, while the majority of them live in various forms of makeshift housing. The groups that still travel can be subdivided into those who travel throughout the French-speaking area, and the families who largely limit their travels to a specific region (Auvergne, Alsace, Normandy and Perche, Maine and Vendée, Ardennes and Wallonia, Franche-Comté, French-speaking Switzerland, etc.).

Occupation is also a parameter of social structure and social differentiation; those who practice the same trade tend to travel together and, therefore, marry together and form subcommunities. This can be said of the families involved in carnival and circus work. It used to be true also of the numerous families involved in basket-weaving, as their seasonal travels were dictated by the cycle of willow harvest and they tended to find themselves together in the same environments at the same times of the year.

A rather new parameter, religion, has gained significant importance in the past 70 years as a factor of both fusion and separation between diverse groups. Originally all affiliated with the Roman Catholic church, French Travellers have been since the late 1950s highly receptive to a movement of Pentecostal evangelisation, *Vie et Lumière*, which has led many families to convert to a variant of evangelical Protestantism (Thurfjell/Marsh 2014; Williams 1991). Their religious meetings, where families of different backgrounds take part and meet, have hastened the re-

definition of group patterns: it has induced a higher affinity between families of different origins who embrace the new religion while sometimes setting them apart from their relatives who continue to adhere to Catholic practices.

Travellers of different subgroups all have in common their centuries-old presence in French-speaking areas, the fact that they almost all speak a form of French as their native language and a separate social profile based primarily on the idea that as *Voyageurs* they form a common social entity which is set apart from settled people. Cohesion within the community goes hand in hand with seclusion from the rest of society. Though Travellers, due to the nature of their work, are economically dependent upon sedentary society, contacts between the two worlds seldom go beyond sporadic commercial interaction.

Social separation is deepened by pervasive racism: recent reports indicate that among all racially discriminated categories in France, Travellers are the most disadvantaged.⁴ Another significant cause for their estrangement from the majority society is sporadic schooling and insufficient literacy, due both to the limited compatibility of nomadic life with regular school attendance and to a cultural disinclination towards writing among Travellers.⁵

French-speaking Travellers represent an outstanding case of linguistic variation in a context of profound social separation yet with sustained contact. The French variety they speak differs from the varieties spoken by settled speakers

4 The most recent official report notes that “exposés à une discrimination systémique, les «Gens du voyage» constituent la minorité concentrant le plus d’opinions négatives de la part de la population française” (Hédon 2021, 23). Racism against Travellers takes two major forms: legal and administrative hurdles against nomadic life in order to force their assimilation, and general racist prejudice among the sedentary population. According to recent studies, systemic discrimination against Travellers is steadily increasing in France (Acker 2021) and Switzerland (Sambuc Bloise 2007; Schweitzer/De Brouwer 2018; Aemisegger/Marti 2020). Rampant prejudice is less easy to quantify, but studies on media coverage of Travellers reveal that national and local media not only reflect but also promote racist opinions against them (Ettinger 2013).

5 Precise figures about illiteracy among the overall community of Travellers in France are not available, but local estimates vary between 40% and 90%. In 1986, only 21% of Travellers in French-speaking Belgium could read and write (Liégeois 1986, 65). In France, 65% of Traveller children did not attend school at all, and among those who did, 80% were insufficiently educated compared to their sedentary classmates (ibid.). It is likely that, today, more than half of the community is illiterate or poorly literate and that those who can read are seldom assiduous readers. Despite ongoing official attempts at schooling their children, poor literacy remains frequent, as suspicion towards written material remains deeply rooted in the cultural behaviour of the communities. For a detailed ethnographic case study about attitudes towards written material among a group of Manouches in the southwest of France, see Poueyto (2011). Estabel (2003) significantly chose “*Nous, on n’écrit pas*” (‘us, we don’t write’), a quotation from one of his informants, as the title of his ethnographic study of Haute-Savoie Travellers.

through a wide array of phenomena that have currency among all the strata of their sociolinguistic community.

2.4 Diffusion of French among Traveller communities

The widespread use of French as a native language among contemporary French Travellers raises several questions, to which the answer cannot be the same for all subgroups. For each group, it would be necessary to try to identify when speakers acquired competence in French, which other language(s) they used simultaneously and for which purposes, when these other languages were superseded by French as their native language and when – sometimes centuries later – French became the only language used for in-group communication. Despite the paucity of sources documenting language uses among itinerant communities in earlier periods, and the general invisibility of Gypsies and Travellers in language policies in France (Filhol 2008), a few elements can be posited.

Before the gradual process of replacement of local dialects by the French language, the sedentary ancestors of the groups of local origin must have spoken the idioms of the places they came from before they adopted an itinerant life: Gallo-Romance dialects and, in Alsace and Moselle, Germanic dialects. It is possible that nomadic life, leading to fusion with Travellers of other origins and necessary contact with foreign populations, rendered the use of the local dialect irrelevant and incentivised the use of French as a common language, possibly at earlier stages than most of the settled population (many of whom were still native speakers of the local dialects well into the 20th century).

Among the vast subgroup of Yéniche families originating in Alsace and neighbouring Germany, many left Germanic-speaking areas and began to travel in the rest of France when Alsace was annexed to Germany in 1870. Those families usually lost their Germanic variety (still referred to among Travellers as [t'ɛ:tʃ] – compare German *Deutsch* –, a name sometimes also used to qualify their families) during the first half of the 20th century and quickly merged with the rest of French Travellers. There is still a small group of families, genealogically related to them, who stayed in Alsace up to the present day: their elderly generations still grew up speaking a Germanic dialect, while the younger ones now speak Traveller French. They have recently been the subject of two ethnographic studies (Bader 2007; Welschinger 2013), in which are found word lists of their Germanic idiom.

For exogenous families, the situation is different. The first “Gypsy” families who arrived in France in the early 15th century presumably spoke a dialect of Romani as their native language; they soon acquired some command of French while keeping Romani, presumably a form of what is now known as the Sinti/Manouche dialect, as

their in-group language. Archival evidence shows that almost all the “Bohémiens” of pre-Revolutionary France could communicate in French, though sometimes poorly (“*françois corrompû*”, as cited from a 1737 archival document by Admant 2015, 42), while using, between them, the Sinti variety of Romani. Knowledge of Romani dwindled during the 19th and 20th centuries, at different paces. The Manouche families that merged with the other groups of Travellers were the first to switch to French, and language maintenance in other groups seems mostly linked to endogamy and cultural conservatism. Most Manouches from the west of France seem to have lost command of Romani in the mid-20th century, partly due to intermarriage with sedentary people. Some more conservative groups, such as the families who have travelled in Auvergne since the 1870s, still had enough competent Romani speakers in the 1970s–1980s to allow Valet to provide good lexical (1986) and grammatical (1991) descriptions of their dialect.

Nowadays, most Manouche groups, including those whose dialect was recorded by Valet half a century ago, are monolingual French speakers except for a few families, especially in Alsace, where the trilingual environment (French, German, Alsatian dialects) may have helped to slow down language loss.⁶ There are still some individuals, mostly elderly or personally committed to “keeping the tradition”, who can speak Romani more or less fluently, but they do not use it regularly. Instead, the usual medium of communication within the group and with Travellers of other groups is always French. Moreover, many speakers, especially younger ones, do not learn the language during childhood as a mother tongue, but purposely later and usually from elderly speakers, as a conscious attempt to perpetuate the linguistic identity and prevent its total disappearance: their first language is French. From oral testimonies I heard, it seems that transmission of Romani as a later-taught second language is quite an old phenomenon,⁷ which is probably even more widespread among the most conservative groups than is usually stated (for instance by Cavallé 2021 in his sociolinguistic overview of Romani in France). There have also been attempts to publish textbooks to revitalise the language (Gouyon Matignon

6 The lexis of the Sinti Romani dialect from Alsace was remarkably described by Rao (1974), an unpublished study of which only a few Xerox copies can be found in libraries and which has therefore gone practically unnoticed in Romani scholarship.

7 Kenrick (1979, 118–119) noted that, similarly, British Gypsy boys are taught the special Romani lexical repertoire used within English during puberty, as a “*rite de passage*”. This is not specific to Romani groups: a similar phenomenon had been observed with Occitan dialects by Charles Camproux (according to an oral testimony reported to me by Prof. Jean-Pierre Chambon, July 2022), who had witnessed, in the mid-20th century, that the transmission of the local dialect in Lozère occurred when young men reached adulthood and joined the social groups of older people. They would learn the *patois* and the “manly” traditions of hunting or shepherding jointly. Those Occitan speakers had long been primarily native speakers of French.

2012 and 2014, who also describes Romani language attrition in France), but these do not seem to have had much noticeable effect. In any case, the families who keep a distinctive Manouche identity and have not socially and ethnically merged with the rest of the *Voyageurs* form a small minority in comparison with those whose sole language is Traveller French.

It shall be noted that all historically alloglot groups, when they switched to French, including those who recently did, have not levelled their language on the standard but acquired the distinctive sociolect of the Travellers. This seems to be due to two main reasons. First, the fact that most of their social and linguistic interactions are with other Travellers rather than with the settled people accounts for their easy knowledge and acquisition of the linguistic features of Traveller French. Second, the language shift to French does not come along with social assimilation to the sedentary population. Approximating the standard would be seen as assimilation to the majority, an option usually regarded as impossible by Travellers. The maintenance of a separate social identity is bolstered by keeping a linguistic profile separate from the majority, and they do this through the use of the Traveller sociolect.

2.5 Sources and method of description

2.5.1 Overview of the literature

The French language as spoken among the Traveller community has been a blind spot both of Romani studies and French linguistics.

Scholars of Romani/"Gypsy" groups in the French-speaking world, even when interested in linguistic aspects, have paid almost no attention to the way these groups speak the language of the country they live in, focusing instead on the description of "real Gypsy languages", even though these were only a minor part of the linguistic practices of the communities under study. A few works devoted to Romani dialects or sociolinguistics briefly noted that Gypsy groups in France have a particular way of speaking French (Calvet 1981, 24; Williams 1988, 391–392, 403) without giving further details. The fact that most French Travellers are not descended from Romani-speaking "Gypsy" groups seems to have hindered, among Romani specialists, interest in their lore (as noted by Valet 1980, 1).

A similar situation may be observed in disciplines other than linguistics. It is revealing that even in the specialised French academic journal on Romani studies, *Études tsiganes*, works on foreign Roma groups (mostly from Central and Eastern Europe) far outnumber those on French nomadic populations. Named by some scholars "Gypsy-lorism" (Ioviță/Schurr 2004, 267), this tendency, which combines

the fascination for exotic origins with the search for the “True Gypsy” and the ambition to unearth presumptive traces of a dreamed ancestral culture, has been described by some to have pervaded since the 19th century the scholarly study of European nomadic groups, especially in ethnography (Lucassen/Willems/Cottaar 1998; see in particular 17–34 for a survey of historiographical theories).

As for linguistics, the same can be noted in some other linguistic areas. In Spain, the traditions and sociolect of non-Gypsy Travellers, the *Mercheros*, still await description, while studies on the language of the actual *Gitanos* focus almost exclusively on lexical features and Romani-borrowed material, without paying attention to the special features of the Spanish diasystem in which they are embedded (see, for instance, Gamella/Fernández/Nieto/Adiego 2011/2012 and its bibliography). In the field of English, most studies also focus on Romani-borrowed lexis, with other linguistic features usually overlooked (exceptions are the work by Hancock 1980 on the language of American Gypsies and Matras 2010 on the speech of English Gypsies, which formulates a series of observations on the particular English features of their speech beyond the Romani-derived vocabulary). In other linguistic fields, including German, for which there is a long tradition and an extensive range of works on the vocabularies (*Sondersprachen*) used by Travellers, as well as for Dutch and Scandinavian languages, the work on Traveller varieties has tended to focus on special vocabularies rather than on everyday features in the so-called “host” language.

In general French linguistics, Traveller French and its speakers, to the best of my knowledge, have been thoroughly ignored in the scholarly literature. No mention of it appears in any of the numerous works about variation in French, whether general or specific. I could find only one exception: it is worth mentioning here, as it reflects how reluctant linguists can be to conduct fieldwork among Travellers, in the rare instances in which they evoke the idea. Hardy (2018, 28) concludes her article about the slang of luthiers with the following remark: “Ensuite, un autre aspect nous paraît important *même si la collecte des données nécessaires à une analyse pourrait s’avérer difficile, voire impossible*: l’argot des commerçants d’instruments de musique, plus particulièrement celui des vendeurs faisant partie de la communauté tzigane” (emphasis mine). Despite their numbers and geographic ubiquity, Traveller speakers have never been included as informants in any linguistic survey about French. Their French has not been covered in any of the available corpora and linguistic data collections of spoken French (for instance, the projects PFC – *Phonologie du Français Contemporain dans l’espace francophone*; OFROM – *Corpus oral de français de Suisse romande*; CIEL-F – *Corpus International Écologique de la Langue Française*; CFPR – *Corpus du Français Parlé de nos Régions*; CEFC – *Corpus d’Etude pour le Français Contemporain*). Lexicographic works, from von Wartburg’s monumental *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (FEW) to more recent pro-

jects on French lexis (BDLP – *Base de données lexicographiques panfrancophone*; RLF – *Réseau lexical du français*; TVF – *Trésor des Vocabulaires Francophones*, etc.) do not record any of the lexical specificities of the Travellers' French, nor mention the existence of their varieties.

2.5.2 Fieldwork

The first and foremost source of knowledge of the French spoken by Travellers, in the absence of any pre-existing linguistic corpus, therefore has to be fieldwork. I have conducted field investigations over the past three years in France and Switzerland. Two areas were favoured: French-speaking Switzerland and the coastal part of Pays d'Auge, an area of Normandy. Both areas are seasonally crossed by large numbers of Travellers from different families and origins.

Normandy, and in particular the coastal area of Honfleur and its hinterland, is chosen by many families of Travellers to spend the summer months, when it attracts a large population of vacationers and second-home residents who make the area more economically attractive to the Travellers. There, I have met with families who usually spend the rest of the year in inland Normandy and Perche, such as members of a large western French Manouche clan whose members usually bear the names *Duville/Dourlet/Gaisne/Helfrich*. That large but close-knit group of Travellers is descended from a few families who arrived in western France at the end of the 18th century from Switzerland and Savoy (Bataillard 1867, 1111). They travel mostly between Normandy and Pays de la Loire and have spoken only French since at least the mid-20th century. I have also investigated families whose travel habits span over the whole territory: eastern French Manouches such as the *Winterstein/Mayer/Hoffmann/Weiss* clans, and individuals belonging to families of indigenous Travellers such as the *Jeanmaire*, of remote Franc-Comtois origin, or the *Becker/Schmitt/Horn* families, ultimately of Alsatian Yéniche descent, but who have travelled throughout the other parts of France since the 1870s. Large Evangelical gatherings during the summer, during which I also conducted fieldwork, attract to that region many Travellers from various other French subgroups.

French-speaking Switzerland hosts a group of Travellers of local origin, who are Swiss citizens and seldom move outside the country's borders. These families are joined, mostly during the summer, by large groups of French Travellers of various origins, but chiefly from Savoy, Franche-Comté and Alsace. The former, when interviewed by government officials or media, often stress the structural difference they have with the latter, with whom they do not want to be grouped together, so as to be allocated special caravan sites. In practice, both groups usually dwell in the same areas, communicate widely and at times inter-marry. In addition to planned

visits to sites where I had been informed of the presence of Swiss and French caravans in the cantons of Neuchâtel, Geneva and Fribourg, I was able to informally interview several Traveller individuals at markets, fairs and even, on several occasions, in a luthier's workshop in Le Landeron (canton Neuchâtel), which has proven to be a real hub for French Romani musicians and second-hand musical instrument traders, particularly from the *Adel/Reinhard/Siegler* clans, from Alsace and Franche-Comté.

At the current stage of my research, the main procedures I have used to collect linguistic facts are participant observation and unstructured ethnographic observation, in different settings. The initial contacts I had with the variety and its speakers were informal conversations during unplanned visits to Traveller camping sites, where, introducing myself in friendly terms, I was usually welcomed. This first step led me in most cases to more active interaction with my informants, leading me to spend more time with some of them and engage actively in the social life of the speech community.

Participant observation, as noted by other field linguists who have been working with Traveller groups (Siewert 2003, 62–67 in Germany, or Tribulato 2022 in Italy), often is the only elicitation method that can be used to gather linguistic data among these groups. Fieldwork among Travellers, which has been described by ethnographers (Bizeul 1999; Foisneau 2017) as particularly tough, certainly requires special social skills, as the slightest feeling of being threatened or treated with contempt or undue curiosity by the investigator precludes all possibility of discussion with the informants, let alone fieldwork. Although I am not a member of the Traveller community, I found out that certain values, experiences and interests I shared with my informants – including the practice of musical improvisation on stringed instruments, or knowledge of local edible flora – provided effective starting points for conversation and acquaintance. Previous experience with social groups subjected to racial and social prejudice, such as the French Jewish communities among which I conducted extensive linguistic fieldwork between 2014 and 2020, taught me which social stances are to be avoided with such groups. As a result, between 2020 and 2022, I managed to engage in social and linguistic interaction with about fifty individuals of the aforementioned Traveller subgroups, including men and women whose ages ranged approximately between 14 and 80. These interactions lasted between a few minutes and several days, in most cases a couple of hours. Of course, no matter how welcome I was made to feel among my informants, it would be unrealistic to suggest that my linguistic interactions with Travellers were as diaphasically unconstrained as when they speak in the sole presence of members of their community.

Nevertheless, I was also able to complement my field notes taken during these informal conversations with observations and recordings of authentic in-group

utterances. I attended several religious ceremonies and meetings of the *Vie et Lumière* Pentecostal movement, where attendees regularly take the floor to share their “personal testimonies” of religious experiences with the congregation, addressing their peers in a very plain and spontaneous manner. These religious celebrations take place on camping fields, usually under a tent, on weekday evenings and Sunday mornings. They are essentially open to everyone, though attended almost exclusively by Travellers stationed on the site where they take place. Although most of my informal conversations were not recorded, I recorded several of these religious celebrations, which provided valuable material for the linguistic analysis.

2.5.3 Other sources

Ethnographic and sociological publications and unpublished academic dissertations about various subgroups of Travellers have been produced in recent decades. Some of these contain *en passant* remarks about their form of French or uncommented excerpts of fieldwork interviews from which linguistic material can be extracted. The most valuable are the following. Jouannigot (2014) collected some linguistic facts from a community of sedentary Travellers who dwell in the area of Grenoble; her observations are valuable as they were mostly taken through participant observation among preschool children. Williams (1993), in his ethnographic studies of the Manouche travellers of Auvergne, gives several transcribed utterances. Le Petit (1994) provides examples of the language of two extended families of Travellers from the area of Caen. Cannizzo (1996 and 1998) describes the behaviour of Traveller children in school classes in Avignon and Villeurbanne between 1970 and 1996, with some conversational examples. Estabel (2003) provides a few examples of the language of Manouche and Yéniche Travellers in Haute-Savoie. Poueyto (2003) gives extensive examples of the French spoken by Manouche families around Pau, alongside relevant sociolinguistic remarks. Novak (2006) contains a collection of transcribed testimonies and conversations among Travellers in Saintonge. Bechelloni (2006), in her field notes about the social behaviour of a group of settled Yéniche Travellers from Beaune (Burgundy), gives a few examples of spontaneous speech of linguistic interest. Montclair (2009, 120) describes some features of the language of a family of Yéniche Travellers of ultimately Alsatian origin living since the 19th century in the department of Haute-Saône, in Franche-Comté.

A wealth of first-hand material can also be found in content posted online, on blogs and social media. These documents raise obvious issues of interpretation since the geographic and socio-familial origin of blog posts and public comments are often hard to ascertain. The graphic system employed is not always easily inter-

pretable.⁸ Videos, often made by Travellers for purposes of entertainment, religious propaganda or self-promotion, can also be exploited as a relevant resource. Last but not least, interviews conducted in Traveller camps by local television channels, usually when there is a conflict between Travellers and local authorities, often record spontaneous utterances that can be used as linguistic material.

A few novels and literary works by people who have been in contact with Travellers contain some words or sentences assigned to Traveller characters (e.g. L’Huillier 1967). Non-academic nonfiction books on Gypsies, such as Colinon (1961), Doerr (1982) and Gouyon Matignon/Hoffman (2016), sometimes contain scant linguistic information; they are mentioned here for the sake of comprehensiveness rather than as relevant useful sources. Ephemera issued by school teachers who teach the Travellers how to read, in the form of printed brochures and online pedagogic resources, are also potential sources of linguistic material.

2.5.4 What is described here

The linguistic features retained for the following preliminary variationist survey are those that are saliently divergent from contemporary normative “standard” French (SF) and that I have found to be ubiquitous enough in my field observations and recordings among various groups and in the above-mentioned written sources so as to assert that they are generally widespread in the vast majority of the language varieties used by the Traveller community. The notion of “standard French” can refer to diverse linguistic realities, with interpretations of the term ranging from the narrower (the artificial language of prescriptive texts) to the broader (the vast array of secondary varieties that evolved from Parisian French in the course of its standardisation and subsequent diffusion among alloglot speakers). I use it here to denote the diasystem formed by the writing-based normative variety of spoken French – as described in works such as Fouché (1959) and Martinet (1945) for phonetics and phonology, Martinet/Walter (1973) for lexical phonetics, Chevalier et al. (1964) for morphology and syntax, and reference dictionaries such as the *Trésor de la langue française* (TLF) for the lexicon – with the spoken uses of the majority of metropolitan French speakers who acknowledge this variety as the normative reference of correctness. Its uniformity, the overall adoption of its features – at least

⁸ This is usually not a problem for extracting syntactic and lexical data; for phonological interpretation, contrary to the received assumption that written sources are useless, “non-standard orthography may even provide insights about the unconscious phonological system which could not be revealed by traditional measures of production and perception” (Law 2022, 197), as will be exemplified below.

at the phonological level – by most French speakers (Armstrong/Pooley 2010; Armstrong 2021) and the wide availability of linguistic material on this variety make it ideal as the starting point for a collection of variational features. In the course of the study, though, analysis of Traveller French will also be done in comparison with the broader diversity of spoken metropolitan French, in order to determine to what extent its differences with SF overlap or not with other “non-standard” (i.e. mainly diatopically or diastratically marked) varieties of spoken French.

A few words of caution: (1) there always exists, at varying degrees, a capacity of diaphasic adaptation among adult speakers who can, in non-casual speech, avoid some of the described features; (2) some of these features may be individually absent even in the spontaneous speech of a particular group, family or individual; (3) additional features of variation are often found, besides the ubiquitous ones, in the varieties of individuals or groups of different sizes. Idiolectal/familioclectal features found in less than one or two groups are generally beyond the scope of this study. They will be described and published in due course, as part of a forthcoming comprehensive linguistic description of the variational diasystem of Traveller French that will require deeper inquiries and much longer fieldwork.

Phonetic notations and linguistic examples whose source is not explicitly mentioned come from my field notes collected between 2020 and 2022.

3 Linguistic survey of Traveller French

3.1 Phonetic and phonological features

3.1.1 Vowels

The most perceptually salient feature of Traveller French is the phonetic realisation of vowels. The phoneme /a/ is always realised as a back [ɑ], in all words and positions, except in the diphthong /wa/ (graphic <oi>), usually realised [wɔ]. The phoneme /ɛ/, which in metropolitan French shows an increasing tendency to be realised as [e] in pretonic open syllables (Armstrong 2021), is still pronounced by Travellers as an open-mid [ɛ], tending to [æ] among some speakers. The same phoneme /ɛ/ is often realised as [a] when occurring before /ʁ/: it occurs systematically when /ʁ/ is followed by another consonant, *perdu* ‘lost’ [pa:ʁdʁy], *bergerie* ‘sheepfold’ [bæʁʒæʁi], but also in pretonic open syllables: *hérisson* ‘hedgehog’ [æʁisʁɔ̃], *matériau* ‘material’ [matæʁiˈo], *guéri* ‘healed’ [gæʁi], and proclitics: *vers eusse* [væʁʔəs] ‘among them’ (for this non-standard pronoun, see below §3.2.3).

Another instance of /ɛ/ realised as [a] can be observed in the proclitic pronoun *elle* ‘she’ and its plural *elles*, whose dominant realisation is [al] before verbs: *elle est*

[a'lɛ], *elle fait* [al fɛ]. This feature is attested in Gallo-Romance dialects in a wide area that covers most of the north-west of France (*Atlas linguistique de la France* [ALF], map 1404); in French varieties, it has been noted in Canadian French (Walker 1984, 113), where the pronunciation of *elle* alternates between [a] before consonants and [al] before vowels, and sporadically in Louisiana French (Rottet 2010, 1976, in examples from Assumption Parish), where [al] occurs before both vowels and consonants, as in Traveller French. Lowering of /ɛ/ before /ʁ/ has been described as a feature of popular speech in the 18th and early 19th centuries (Steinmeyer 1979, 53); it now survives only in North American varieties of French (Nyrop 1914, vol. 1, §247; Walker 1984, 86), but only when /ʁ/ is followed by a consonant, which, in Traveller French, is not a condition for /ɛ/ being lowered.

As for nasal vowels, a universal feature of Traveller French is the merger of French phonemes /ã/ and /õ/, realised as a single phone varying from [ã] and [õ] to [ɔ̃], [õ] being the most commonly heard (*maison* 'house' [mez'õ], *mon* 'my' [mõ], etc.). The neutralisation of phonemic contrast between these two nasal vowels is an omnipresent feature of Traveller French; I have observed it in every group and context. It is also witnessed by the spontaneous orthography of texts written online by Travellers, where a common graphemic notation (either <an>/<en> or <on>) is used for both French phonemes. These three examples, taken from commentaries on blog posts, can illustrate it:

- (1) *alor jponse ke vou aver conpri gitan ti et pa ke du sang fo a voire les manier du voyageur si tu va o colege et ke ta une maison ke tajamai voyager bin excuse moi tefac totalmon les gitan et aprer i fron pu de diferonce les gadjer sur la place ou kon et ya des mannouch et bin ta bo ette mannouche si ter comme eus et bin parcekeuz i von an apartemon liver il et ou le voyageur la don excuse moi mai ya des choz a fair et a pa fair* (posted by "100pur san voyageur", 21 May 2010).⁹ –

9 For the sake of comprehension and comparison, I provide here a version of each example in standard orthography: (1) *Alors je pense que vous avez compris, gitan tu es pas que du sang, faut avoir les manières du voyageur, si tu vas au collège et que tu as une maison, que tu as jamais voyagé, ben excuse-moi tu effaces totalement les gitans et après ils feront plus de différence les gadgé. Sur la place où qu'on est il y a des Manouches, eh bien, tu as beau être manouche si tu es comme eux, eh bien, parce qu'eux ils vont en appartement l'hiver, il est où le voyageur là-dedans? excuse-moi mais il y a des choses à faire et à pas faire;* (2) *moi aussi je suis voyageuse, ils sont choukarde* [ADJ. FEM 'beautiful', Romani loanword] *tes photos;* (3) *moi je suis une Manouche et il y a des mots faux nous pour parler, vers mon tata* ['father', Romani loanword] *on dit pas ça mais c'est vrai qu'il y a des mots vrais, et merci d'avoir fait ce site.* These documents, as well as the other blog citations presented in the following sections, were taken from the following websites: <<http://francoise.centerblog.net/2511344-gitans> and <https://thebrayou.skyrock.com/2793358537-dictionnaire-gitan.html>>.

- <on> is used in all occurrences of SF <an>/<on> (except two, *gitan* and *sang*, which may be aligned on the spelling used in other comments).
- (2) *moi aussi je suis voyageuse isan choukarde tes foto!!!!* (posted by “amelia”, 7 July 2007). – <isan> stands for SF <ils sont>.
- (3) *moi chui une manouche et ya des mots faux nous pour parler vers man tata en dit pa sa mai cet vrai ki a des mots vrai et merci davoire fait ce site* (posted by “cheyenne-la-manouche”, 17 June 2009). – <man> stands for SF <mon> and <en> for SF <on>.

The merger of /ã/ and /õ/, resulting in a binary nasal vowel system with /ɛ̃/, has been observed in several non-European varieties of French: in Algeria (Cheriguen/Leroy 2013), in Acadian French (Cichocki 2012), in Louisiana (Dajko 2016), with various phonetic outcomes. In metropolitan French, it has been observed in children’s speech (Malderez 1991), and it is well known that in supralocal Metropolitan French “some have suggested that /ã/ and /õ/ could be on track to merge [...]. The more widely accepted scenario is that /õ/ is shifting upward and becoming more rounded to maintain a distinction with /ã/” (Law 2022, 200) – exposure to the written language may have helped to maintain it in SF. In Traveller French, /õ/ did not shift upward and the phonological distinction between the two nasal phonemes has been lost.

Schwa deletion happens unevenly; its treatment varies from speaker to speaker but it usually diverges from SF and spoken varieties of settled people. Asserting exactly where lies the phonetic specificity of Traveller French on this point would be difficult, especially since “deletion of schwa in standard French is governed by a mass of phonological, syntactic, lexical, stylistic and geographic constraints” (Walker 1984, 86; for a more substantiated analysis, see Bürki et al. 2011), and the actual spoken use among settled speakers is itself very diverse (Martinet 1945, 37–62; data from the *Phonology of Contemporary French* project – PFC [cf. Durand/Laks/Lyche 2009] widely illustrate this diversity).

However, as opposed to many non-standard varieties of popular and regional French that tend either to pronounce all schwas (southern varieties) or to make greater use of schwa deletion than the standard (northern popular varieties and Canadian, among others), the singularity of Traveller French seems to lie primarily in the fact that schwas tend to be pronounced in occurrences where they would be deleted in SF and deleted where they would be pronounced.

Within a single speaker’s utterances, diaphasic variation on this point can be high, particularly when speaking to outsiders. The exact phonetic nature of non-deleted schwa is also a matter of variation: it tends to be pronounced, much more often than in metropolitan French, as [ə] and even [o] rather than its more usual allophones [ø] and [œ] used in metropolitan French (Martinet, 1945, 63–70), as in *remettre* [ʁom'et], though this phenomenon is subject to internal variation.

Likewise, vowel length patterns are uneven between different groups but often markedly divergent from SF. Most groups display a clear tendency to penultimate vowel lengthening (or retention of penultimate length). Vowels preceding consonant clusters are often long (e.g. [t u:bl'i pa] *t'oublies pas* 'don't forget'), though this phenomenon does not seem completely consistent and may possibly be idiolectal. Nasal vowels are, among many speakers, almost always longer than in most forms of spoken metropolitan French. These initial observations point to a need for experimental contrastive analyses, to determine more precisely where Traveller French stands, in this regard, compared to other varieties of European French.

In addition to this common stock of features that can be heard in almost all Traveller groups, the language of some family groups reveals other phonetic peculiarities. The large *Duville* clan from the west of France (Mayenne, Touraine, Perche) also exhibits the following features, which are robust among all generations: a) vowels preceding a nasal consonant are slightly nasalised (a coarticulation process that seldom occurs in metropolitan French, but more frequently in Canadian French, according to Bream 1968); b) word-final /o/ is often realised [o^w] or [ø^w]; c) /*ê*/ is realised [ē], more closed than in SF, and is diphthongised in [ēĩ] when it occurs in a tonic syllable.

The tendency to secondary vowel diphthongisation is a major characteristic of Western Oil dialects (see Gauthier 1983, 99, 101 and Pignon 1960, 243–246, 253–263 for Poitevin; Brasseur 1978, 297–299 for Normand) and regional varieties of French that superseded them, though it is now rapidly receding or entirely levelled out in regional varieties of French (Wissner 2010, 73 notes that it has “aujourd’hui pratiquement disparu en français courant dans notre région [Vendée]”; the same applies to Normandy, according to my own field observations). The variety spoken by the aforementioned *Duville* clan, which other Travellers often point to as being particularly conservative in all respects (some of them still travel in horse-drawn caravans), effectively displays a number of linguistic archaisms: it deserves a thorough description that will be undertaken in due course.

3.1.2 Consonants and semi-vowels

Simplification of some consonant clusters is a regular feature of Traveller French. When there is an obstruent + /*ʁ*/ or /*l*/ in word-ending position, the second phoneme is not realised, as in *oncle* ‘uncle’ [õ:k], *cible* ‘target’ [sib], *poudre* ‘powder’ [pud], etc. The tendency to simplify final obstruent-liquid clusters has been attested since Old French, has had a wide currency in many forms of spoken French between the 16th and 19th centuries, and has since receded, due to the regressive influence of written language (Steinmeyer 1979, 65–76; Boughton 2015, 3). It still occurs regularly

in standard spoken French and, to a variable degree, in various popular or regional varieties, but as a predominantly informal feature, and always in competition with non-simplified cluster forms, due to the universal influence of written French (Griffiths 2022).

What is remarkable about this feature in the French spoken by Travellers is that it systematically affects all words and utterances. This fact is so striking that it has even been perceived by non-linguist French-speaking observers as a specific feature of Traveller speech (e.g. Jouannigot 2014, 49, who gives the examples *cartab* and *éping*, for SF *cartable* and *épingle*, for what she describes as a marker of the speech of Traveller children in Grenoble). Tentative analysis of my recorded data for Traveller French gives indeed a clear 98.4% of word-final obstruent-liquid cluster reduction, whereas quantitative studies on that feature usually report far lower figures in other spoken varieties (e.g. in Brand/Ernestus 2021, on casual Parisian French speech, where the liquid was found absent in 42.9% cases, or in Villeneuve 2010, on regional French in Picardy, who reported a liquid absence rate of 58.0%; see also the detailed sociolinguistic survey by Boughton 2015). Formal speech settings do not diminish the tendency to cluster reduction, as opposed to other French varieties. Interestingly, I even heard this phonetic feature in religious preaching in Pentecostal meetings, occurring in words that might have been expected to be influenced by the written language of missionary material, such as *Bible* [b'ib], *miracle* [miʁ'a:k]. It even happens in anthroponyms (see below, §4.4), in contrast with other French varieties, where proper names seem to never be affected by this phonetic feature.¹⁰

Word-final consonant devoicing frequently happens, particularly on final voiced fricatives including /z/, /v/ and /ʒ/, as in several varieties of northern regional French (Lorraine, Normandy, Wallonia, *inter alia*; cf. Armstrong 2021). It can occur in combination with the aforementioned consonant cluster simplification, for instance in *civre* 'copper' [kɥ'i:f].

Etymological geminated consonants in learned words, which are sometimes pronounced as long consonants in standard spoken French due to a regressive influence of written forms (Martinet 1945, 188–200; Chevrot/Malderez 1999, 105–106; Fagyal/Kibbee/Jenkins 2006, 51) such as for instance SF *collègue* [kol:'eg], *grammaire* [gʁam:'ɛʁ], *illusion* [il:'yzjɔ̃], are not geminated among Travellers.

¹⁰ In the many available studies on word-final obstruent-liquid cluster reduction in French, I have not found any mention of the treatment of proper names. This remark relies on my own experience as a French speaker, complemented by my observations on how my French and Swiss colleagues at the Institute of Linguistics (ISLa) of the University of Neuchâtel realised the name of one of our colleagues, Mr. Maître (/m'ɛtʁ/), in their daily and informal speech. I did not observe liquid deletion (*[m'ɛt]) in any of the fifty or so occurrences.

Traveller French treatment of liaison is variable and can be compared to what was stated above about the schwa. There is no uniform pattern of liaison among speakers, as in other forms of French where liaison is ubiquitously variable (Armstrong 2001, 177–207), but it usually does not match standard use. Some liaisons regarded as mandatory or usual in SF are not made: after prepositions such as *dans*, *chez*, or adverbs such as *très* (e.g. [tʁɜz yʁ'il] *très utile* as opposed to SF [tʁɜz yʁ'il], an example noted by Jouannigot 2014, 49 among Travellers in Grenoble). In contrast, some liaisons that are impossible in SF are made, usually with words with initial *h*–: *il va aux hérissons* [oz aʁis'õ] (vs SF /o ɛʁ/-), *les Hongrois* [lɛz õ:gʁw'õ] are ubiquitous among Travellers (vs SF /le ɔ̃/-; 100% of liaison avoidance for both these words in Martinet/Walter 1973, 445, 451). SF optional liaisons are usually avoided as well. Liaison, as recent experimental studies show, is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon (e.g. Durand/Lyche 2008) that can only be satisfyingly studied word by word. Its treatment in Traveller French would require robust data analyses, based on much larger recorded corpora.

Word endings in *-ij/* are realised *-i* or *-i:*, as in the frequently used word *famille* ‘family’ [fam'i:] (vs SF, where this word has 100% of *-ij*) realisations, according to Martinet/Walter 1973, 377), or *grille* [gʁ'i:].

In some groups whose members travel in the area of Tours, there seems to be a residual habit of postconsonantal [v] vocalisation, as in the forms [ʃy'ɑl] ‘horse’ (SF *cheval*), [ʃi'o^w] ‘horses’ (SF *chevaux*); [ʃi'øw] ‘hair (pl.)’ (SF *cheveux*);¹¹ in these forms, deletion of the pretonic vowel (also in most realisations in SF) induces a [ʃv]- cluster in which [v] semivocalises into [y], that evolves to [i] when the second phone of the resulting diphthong is a closed vowel, possibly in these examples to avoid matching rounding. These forms (and perhaps other words with similar treatment, though at the current stage of my research, I cannot give further material) may be loans from local dialects, probably through regional varieties of French, as they partly match Western Oil dialectal forms: compare Louviers, Nantes *chual* ‘horse’ (von Wartburg 1936 in FEW 2, 8b, CABALLUS I 1).

In some other groups, many further phenomena (consonant deletions, epenthesis, devoicing) do appear. At the current stage of my research, it is impossible to assess whether these are systematic or due to idiolectal speech habits.

¹¹ I have not heard these three forms myself in spontaneous speech; they are transcribed based on the secondary testimony of an informant quoting other speakers.

3.1.3 Suprasegmental features

Prosody, rhythm and intonation used by Travellers clearly distinguish their variety from the language of coterritorial settled people. Pending a systematic instrumental analysis that will have to rely on experimental studies, a perceptual approach may be the best way to tackle the subject in this overview. Rhythm tends to be much faster and more abrupt than in other varieties of French. The tonal pattern associated with interrogative sentences seems to have a smaller pitch range than in SF. Many speakers display a rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences, sometimes coupled with fuzzy vowel lengthening, which can resemble some varieties of Swiss or Alsatian French, as sometimes stated by outsiders to the group (non-linguist observers exposed to my field recordings often state that the intonation sounds “Germanic”).

Some groups have partially adopted phonetic inflexions from diverse regional French varieties they have been in contact with, giving the impression of a sort of pot pourri of non-standard regional intonations, which “sound country” to any French speaker but cannot be exactly matched with any regional variety. This may be a rather old feature: in 1737, two “*Bohémiens*” (presumably Sinti-Manouche Travellers) arrested at Saint-Avold (Lorraine) were described by local officers as speaking French with a Savoyard accent (Admant 2015, 42), which may have been a way to approximately qualify an accent that seemed neither native nor foreign. In Switzerland, particularly in the cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Fribourg, the native Yéniche Travellers note that settled people who interact with them and do not know that they are Travellers often assume from the phonetic features they perceive as their “accent” that they come from canton Jura, one of the most peripheral areas of French-speaking Switzerland; this may reflect a similar perception of familiar strangeness.

Moreover, the exact nature of the suprasegmental features can differ significantly from one family group to another, though they all bear a resemblance, to some extent, that helps any speaker recognise fellow Travellers from the first words they utter, as Travellers themselves often state. Remarks by other observers can provide interesting insights: Le Petit (1994, 31) states that, within a single group of Travellers in Caen: “*Les accents et débits sont différents selon les familles. Ces accents indéscriposables couplés à un débit particulier à la fois rapide et lent à la fin des phrases, permettent de se faire une idée de l’appartenance familiale de son interlocuteur*” (“The accents and speech flow are different from one family to another. These indescribable accents, coupled with a particular speed and slowness of speech at the end of sentences, give an idea of the family background of the speaker”).

Most Travellers are accustomed to reducing or levelling these features in some way when they have to talk to settled people, and, in contrast, to increasing or em-

phasising them, in a cryptolectal function, when they want to avoid being understood by outsiders. It is often sufficient to render an utterance opaque to someone who is not familiar with the way they speak.

3.2 Morphology

Verbal morphology shows a large number of unique forms, substitutions and paradigm levelling that set Traveller French quite apart from standard morphology.

3.2.1 6th-person forms in *-ont*

The 6th person (P6) of the present indicative regularly ends in tonic *-ont* (-/ɔ̃/) in all verbal patterns. This contrasts with standard French, where P6 is formed with silent posttonic morpheme *-ent*, resulting into homophonous forms for P1, P2, P3 and P6. For instance, when in SF the P6 of the present indicative of *marcher* ‘to walk’ is *ils marchent* /maʁʃ/, homophonous with P1, P2 and P3, Traveller French has a divergent P6 *ils marchont* ‘they walk’.

P6 of all regular verbs is formed the same way (e.g. *ils parlont* ‘they speak’, *ils mangeont* ‘they eat’). For irregular verbs, “regular” forms with this morpheme are created from the infinitive stem: *ils veulent* ‘they want’ (vs SF *ils veulent*, infinitive *vouloir*), *ils venont* ‘they come’ (vs SF *ils viennent*, infinitive *venir*), even when SF happens to have a form in *-ont*: Traveller *ils étont* ‘they are’ (vs SF *ils sont*), *ils fesont* ‘they do’ (vs SF *ils font*), *ils avont* ‘they have’ (vs SF *ils ont*), based possibly on the imperfect stem. The phonetic realisation of this morpheme varies between [ã], [õ] and [ɔ̃], as noted above of phoneme /ɔ̃/. The P6 flexion of *comprendre*, however, is irregular and displays haplogenic assimilation and syncope of the final syllable of the stem: *ils compront* ‘they understand’ (instead of expected **comprenont*, cf. SF *comprennent*), which, due to the phonologic merger of /ã/ and /ɔ̃/, is homophonous to P1, P2 and P3 forms in -/ã/ (P1–P2 *comprends*, P3 *comprend*).

This major morphological feature appears in the speech of all groups among whom I conducted fieldwork; it also appears in most of the aforementioned written sources (e.g. Le Petit 1994, 29; Jouannigot 2014, 44; Montclair 2009, 120; Poueyto 2003, 50). Online material also provides a wealth of written evidence. Here are a few examples, taken from comments on blog posts (occurrences are in bold):

- (4) *mama moi osi fier de laitre gitane les gent il **parlon** sur nou mai il se son pa vu il **dison** ke les gitan c des craseu mai mama nou les gitan on nai les plu prope* (posted by “brahy”, 6 June 2010). ‘Goodness, I am also proud to be Gypsy, people

talk about us but they haven't seen themselves, they say that Gypsies are dirty but, goodness, we Gypsies we are the cleanest.' (Note also consonant cluster simplification in *prope* 'clean' for SF *propre*).

- (5) *Moi sa me fait pamer les paysan qui **sprenon** pour sa qui son pas! psq y sdise gitan manouche voyageur mais quan y **passon** dvan nos camps y **sdepechon** a nachave aussi vite qui **eton** vnu pur paysans* (posted by "bruneel", 9 July 2014). 'It makes me laugh, these settled people who think they are what they aren't. Because they say they are Gypsies, Manouches, Travellers but when they pass in front of our camps they hurry up to go away as fast as they came, pure sedentary people.'

Four occurrences of P6 in *-ont* (including *eton* 'are') and one standard (*y sdise* = SF *ils se disent*). Note also the apparent lack of liaison in *quan y, qui eton*.

This morphological pattern is a definite archaism. It results from a stress displacement from the penultimate to the final syllable (CÁNTANT > CANTÁNT) that appeared in medieval Gallo-Romance, is attested in medieval dialectal texts and survived in a large number of Oïl dialects (ALF 1064). In French, it is attested as an acceptable variant in the late 16th century (Guerlin de Guer 1936, 114), to be soon relegated as non-standard. It was still used in 18th-century French theatre as a marker of peasant speech (e.g. Marivaux 1727), and survived in some forms of regional French until the 19th century, when it quickly faded. It is now entirely extinct in described European varieties and survives only in Acadian and Louisiana French (Gesner 1985, 12). Its perpetuation in Traveller French and its vitality in the speech of every generation is a remarkable example of the great distinctiveness of this variety.

A similar, possibly analogical feature affects, though less regularly, the imperfect indicative P6: it has, only among some speakers, forms in *-iont*; however, this seems to affect only certain verbs, such as *être: ils étiont* 'they were' (vs SF *ils étaient*) (e.g. *i-z-étions bleus* 'they were drunk', example quoted by Williams 1993, 77 from Manouches in Auvergne).

3.2.2 Analogical verbal forms

Among Travellers, irregular verbs tend to have analogical forms drawn from other verb patterns as in *viendre* 'to come' (vs SF *venir*) and its past participle *viendu* (vs SF *venu*). Verbs in *-endre* all tend to analogically follow the paradigm of *vendre*, in particular *prendre* and the other verbs of its etymological family (*apprendre, comprendre*, etc.): *vous prenez* present indicative P5 (vs SF *vous prenez*), *qu'il apprende* present subjunctive P3 of *apprendre* (vs SF *apprenne*), modelled after *vendez, vende*, etc.

The same feature extends to other similar paradigms such as verbs in *-indre*: for instance, *peindu* ‘painted’ past participle of *peindre* (vs SF *peint*). Jouannigot (2014, 53) also notes, among Travellers in Grenoble, the form *prendu* ‘taken’ past participle of *prendre* (vs SF *pris*); *viendre* and *viendu* were also recorded among Haute-Saône Yéniches by Montclair (2009, 120).

The phrase *il y a* [j ‘ɑ] formed with P3 of *avoir* yields for the future tense an analogical form [j ɑʔɑ] formed on the present *a* stem with the future ending, in contrast with SF *aura*. Similar analogical tendencies are attested in various peripheral varieties of French (e.g. in Canadian French; Walker 1984, 128), but they are decreasing due to the pressure of the grammatical norm. The form *viendre*, retained in the linguistic lore as an analogical form *par excellence*, typical of child speech since Saussure (1922, 232), has also been part of adult speech. It is attested in *français populaire et trivial* at the end of the 19th century (Marchot 1892, 380). In contemporary spoken French, a potential to use such forms still sporadically exists, but rather for jocose purposes,¹² as conscious malapropisms or in child speech. Among Travellers, their use is definitely more generalised, especially for the forms listed here, which I heard in the language of various groups frequently enough to state that they are the regular forms in Traveller French. Other analogical formations can be found occasionally, although only systematic fieldwork can help ascertain whether each of these represents only idiosyncratic lapses or widespread innovations.

3.2.3 Substitutions

Several systematic substitutions (as defined by Walker 1995, 90) can be observed in the verbal system. The phonetic uniformity of P1, P2 and P3 that exists in the present indicative of most verb patterns is generalised to other tenses: the P1 of the future ends in *-era*, following the pattern of P2 and P3, whereas SF differentiates P1 in *-erai* *-/əʔe/* from P2 and P3 in *-/əʔa/*. For example: *je l’attrapera* [ʒlatʁa:pʁɑ] ‘I will catch him’ (vs SF *je l’attraperai*), *je mettra* [ʒmɛtʁɑ] ‘I will put’ (vs SF *je mettrai*).

The substitution of P1 with the phonetic form of P2 and P3 also occurs in the present indicative of some verbs where SF has a different P1 form. The most frequent is *je vas* [ʒvɑ] ‘I go’, systematically used by Travellers instead of SF *je vais*. I heard it from all my informants; it has also been noted by Montclair (2009, 120) among Yéniches in Franche-Comté. This form has a long history in urban and regio-

¹² This remark is based on my experience as a French speaker – I have not found any reference to that analogical form and its uses in recent linguistic literature. However, one can note that the French online collaborative dictionary *Wiktionnaire* records *viendre* and aptly marks it as “Populaire, par plaisanterie” (<<https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/viendre>>, [last access: 4.11.2022]).

nal varieties of metropolitan French as a non-standard diastratic variant until the 19th century (Martineau 2009, 231–233). It seems now to have totally receded in metropolitan French,¹³ whereas all generations of Travellers widely use it.

P1 of *avoir* is also subject to the same pattern of substitution (*j'a* for SF *j'ai*), though more sporadically, and seems to be associated mainly with pronominal use: one can hear sentences such as *j'm'a mis les mickeys* 'I put on cartoons for myself', *j'm'a vite couru* 'I quickly ran away' (here, in association with a non-standard pronominal use of *courir* 'to run' with an innovative meaning).

P1 of future indicative in *-a*, as well as *je vas* and *j'a*, have been described as common features in spoken Canadian French (Walker 1995). The grammatical P4 is unused and always replaced by P4 pronoun *nous* + indefinite pronoun *on* + P3 (e.g. *nous on fait* 'we do'). In other varieties of oral French, both solutions for expressing P4 usually coexist. In contrast, during my fieldwork among Travellers, I have never heard any of my informants use the grammatical P4. As a rule, all the recessive verb patterns (scarcely) maintained in spoken French thanks to the continuous influence of written language, such as the *passé simple* or the past subjunctive, are largely unused and partially unknown among Travellers.

Pronominal morphology and morpho-phonology are similar to popular spoken French, with vowel elision in P1 pronoun *je* in almost all circumstances, P2 pronoun *tu* when followed by a word beginning with a vowel, loss of [l] in P3 and P6 masculine *il/ils* when followed by a word beginning with a consonant; P3 and P6 feminine has been already discussed (§3.1.1).

Two non-standard forms are current and widely used, even by younger generations, in Traveller French: demonstrative pronoun *ceusse* [s'ø̃s] 'these' (vs SF *ceux*) (also recorded among Travellers in Caen; Le Petit 1994, 30) and disjunctive pronoun P6 masc. pl. *eusse* [ø̃s] 'they' (vs SF *eux*) (see example 1 in §3.1.1) with two occurrences, spelled *eus* and *euz*; the form *euz* is also recorded by Montclair 2009, 120 among Yéniches in Franche-Comté where it could represent a variant *[ø̃z], perhaps positional, although I never heard it among my informants.

The forms [ø̃s] and [s'ø̃s] seem to have appeared in popular Parisian speech during the 17th century, from which they spread to some regional varieties in the 19th century (Sainéan 1920, 101). They have largely receded and nowadays, when

¹³ Besides the fact that proving the absence of a form in a given language is always a problematic task, evidence is missing in scholarly literature about the current status of this variant in French. Here again, I resort to my experience as a French speaker in contact with many social groups in different regions of France and Switzerland: I cannot remember having ever heard *je vas* in spontaneous utterances in the past 20 years, other than in my interactions with Travellers. The very few occurrences of *je vas* that I have heard from non-Travellers were all meant as jocular imitations of stereotyped "peasant speech" in the mouth of urban French speakers.

they occur in metropolitan French, it is almost only with humorous intent. The series of demonstrative pronouns *celui-là*, *celle-là*, *ceux-là*, *celles-là*, due to a weakening of their deictic value, are usually replaced with redundant forms that iterate the deictic element *là*: [syła:l'a], [sellə:l'a], [søla:l'a], [sellə:l'a], often with loss of final [a] as in [sqil'a:l], [sell'a:l], etc.

3.3 Syntax

Syntax of Traveller French largely differs from the written norm, like most varieties of colloquial French (Ball 2000). Patterns of evolution and simplification often match those found in popular spoken French, but are used here with greater frequency and regularity. Some other Traveller features, though, are rare or unknown even in colloquial use.

Among them, irregularities in the syntax or morphosyntax of gender and agreement are frequent. Agreement often does not match the expected grammatical gender; sometimes two opposing options are used within a single sentence for a single word, as in *t'as vu ma-FEM campine-FEM comme il-MASC est beau-MASC?* 'have you seen my caravan, how nice it is?', where *campine* governs feminine agreement of the possessive adjective and masculine agreement of the following clause (with non-standard asyndeton). See also example 2 above in §3.1.1, where an adjective agrees with *photo* in the feminine, but with a masculine pronoun, *i san* (*ils sont*). These examples suggest that the opposition between grammatical genders is, at least partially, neutralised. Less often, a similar variability in agreement occurs with number.

Moreover, some words are regularly used with different genders than in SF. For instance, most language names, which are masculine in SF, take the feminine: *il parle l'allemande*, *la gitane* 'he speaks German, Gypsy', possibly by ellipsis of the feminine substantive *langue* 'language' (this was also noted among Travellers in Grenoble by Jouannigot 2014, 17); *tilleul* 'linden flower tea' is also feminine, in contrast with masculine *tilleul* 'linden tree' (as opposed to SF where the word is masculine in all its meanings).

In verbal syntax, the auxiliary verb *avoir* tends to be used for all composed verbal forms, including those where SF would use *être*. For instance, *je m'a approché* 'I came closer' (vs SF *je me suis approché*), *tu t'as remis avec lui* 'you got back with him' (vs SF *tu t'es*), *il a venu trouver son père* 'he came to find his father' (vs SF *il est venu*), *comme j'ai sorti d'là* 'when I left from there' (vs SF *je suis*). In the latter example, the non-standard use of *comme* as subordinate conjunction instead of SF *quand* should also be noted. Other examples of auxiliary alternation can be found in §3.2.3.

Auxiliary alternation with replacement of *être* by *avoir* is also an old and recessive feature of popular spoken French (Steinmeyer 1979, 191–209). It was still sporadically observed by Frei (1929, 86) and Nyrop (1930, vol. 6, §209), among others, in the speech of the “lowest strata” of the French-speaking population in the early 20th century but has largely receded since. It has been largely recorded in American varieties of French (Réa 2020, 50–51). Traveller French may be the only European French variety where auxiliary alternation is still current.

The expression of relative clauses too tends to use other patterns than in the standard, which itself obeys heterogeneous rules (Godard 1988). Relative clauses that would open with *dont* ‘whose; of whom’ according to standard grammatical use are often introduced with *que*, the relative pronoun normally used when the antecedent acts as a direct object within the relative clause. This feature is common in popular French too (Blanche-Benveniste 1990) but usually occurs in free variation with the standard form, whereas Traveller French tends to almost systematise the use of *que*.

For relative clauses where the antecedent acts as the subject within the relative clause, SF uses a single invariable relativiser, *qui*; in contrast, Traveller French in most cases uses a variable system with a relativiser that inflects for gender and number with the antecedent. The relativiser used in this novel system can be morphologically analysed as relative pronoun *que* + P3 personal pronoun agreeing with the antecedent (*il, ils, elle, elles*). Masculine singular uses *qu’il*, realised [ki] when the next word begins with a consonant and [kil] when it begins with a vowel. Masculine plural is *qu’ils*, [ki] before a consonant and [kiz] before a vowel. Feminine singular is *qu’elle* [kal]. Feminine plural is *qu’elles*, [kal] before a consonant and [kalz] before a vowel. The following examples illustrate this system: masculine singular *il y a un enfant qu’il a venu vers moi* ‘there’s a child who came towards me’ (vs SF *il y a un enfant qui est venu vers moi*); feminine singular *j’ai vu une lumière qu’elle était comme ça apaisante* ‘I saw a light that was soothing that much’ (vs SF *qui était*). Jouannigot (2014, 54) reports the following example from Grenoble Traveller children: *eusse qui zéton dans les escaliers* ‘them, who are in the stairs’, where the masculine plural relativiser [kiz] is followed by the non-standard P6 of *être*, as already noted. Diachronically, this results from the reanalysis of the invariable relativiser *qui* as *qu’il* ^{REL-he.3SG.M}, due to the partial homophony between the two forms, thus restraining its use to clauses with a masculine singular P3 antecedent, inducing the need of agreeing corresponding forms for other persons. Frei (1929, 188–189) described a similar system of relativiser reanalysis under the name “*décumul du relatif*” in some strata of popular French, from which it has now largely disappeared. Larrivées/Lefevre (2017, 9) note that quantitative data show that although “spectacular”, occurrences of this feature are scarce and marginal in vernacular French.

The relativiser used to introduce a subordinate clause in sentences in which there is no expressed antecedent is usually *ça que* instead of SF *ce que*: *tout ça qu'il faut pour nettoyer* 'everything you need to clean up'; *ils compront pas ça qu'on dit* 'they do not understand what we say' (see also example 5 under §3.2.1).

3.4 Lexicology

The lexis of Traveller French shows many uniform features that differ from SF. These can be classified typologically into formal (morphological) particularisms vs. semantic particularisms, or etymologically, into archaisms, internal innovations and loanwords. The first classification will be retained for this overview that will present selected examples from each category. Borrowings from Romani and other languages will be considered in a separate category.

3.4.1 Morphological particularisms

Traveller French is highly susceptible to morphological neology. French productive morphemes are widely and freely used to coin new words: verbs expressing additivity in *re-*, deverbals in *-age*, agent nouns in *-eur*, abstract nouns in *-(e)té*, to cite only a few. In many cases, it is hard to distinguish nonce word formations from stabilised neologisms that are a structural part of the variety's lexis. Occurrence of a word in sources documenting groups other than the ones I investigated may be a clue of its more general use. The deverbal *contentesse* N.FEM 'joy, joyous event' (*content* ADJ + *-esse* reflex of *-ITIA* – cf. Old and Middle French *contentesse* 'contentment', von Wartburg 1944 in FEW 2, 1104a, *CONTENTUS* I) has also been noted among Manouches in Auvergne (Williams 1993, 77) and seems to be widespread. Similarly, *veillage* N.MASC 'funeral wake' (*veiller* VT 'to hold a wake' + reflex of *-ATICU* – cognates exist in Gallo-Romance dialects but not in French: von Wartburg 1960 in FEW 14, 436b, *VIGILARE* I 1) was also noted by Le Petit (1994, 27) among Travellers in Caen and by Gouyon Matignon/Hoffman (2016, 23) among Manouches; it seems universal in Traveller French. French productive suffixes are also largely used to form derivatives from stems borrowed from Romani as in *tchouraveur* N.MASC 'thief', on the loanword *tchourav* VT 'to steal', from Romani *čor-* (Valet 1986, 24).

Non-conventional morphocreative patterns are also used. Delocutive derivation produces, for instance, *alléluia* N.MASC/FEM 'member of a Pentecostal evangelical denomination', an allocutory delocutive (Büchi 1995, 154) based on a prominently used word of evangelical preaching and principally used among Catholic Travellers. Analogical derivation produces *dessous* [d(ə)suʁ] 'under' (noted also by

Cannizzo 1996, 23 among Travellers in Avignon), used instead of SF *dessous*, and modelled after *dessus* ‘over’ (SF *dessus*), a form also widely used among Travellers, attested in Middle French and that survives in most Oil dialects and old regional varieties (von Wartburg 1964 in FEW 12, 432b–433a, *SÜPER* 2).

The form *dessour* also exists in some Western Oil dialects (Pont-Audemer, Alençon, Pléchéâtel, Nantais, Ancenis, Bas-Maine, Anjou, Mauges, Loches, Blois, Orléanais, Sologne, von Wartburg 1964 in FEW 12, 370b, *SÜBTUS* I 1 b) as well as in Canadian French, where it has also been explained as an analogical form after *dessus* (Chauveau 2009, 84–85). The syntax of *dessus/dessour* is peculiar: both are used with preceding preposition *en* (e.g. *en dessour l'eau* ‘under the water’, as opposed to SF *en dessous de l'eau* or rather *sous l'eau*; the same syntax is attested in Canadian French: Chauveau 2009, 85).

3.4.2 Semantic particularisms

Numerous words are used with meanings unknown in standard French. Particularly prominent are a large number of semantic innovations (restrictions and extensions), often not found in other forms of French. Some words are subject to wide semantic extension, such as *moineau* N.MASC ‘bird (of any species)’ (vs SF ‘sparrow’), which replaces in all its uses SF *oiseau* ‘bird’ and most other specific names for other species. Another instance is *chiner*, used both as an intransitive and transitive verb with extended meanings: intransitively it means ‘to practise all sorts of trade and commerce; to beg; to look for customers; to peddle door-to-door’, and transitively ‘to sell; to find; to collect; to be given (something)’ (e.g. *je vas chiner des paniers* ‘I am going to sell baskets’), whereas in SF *chiner* is used with the restrictive meaning ‘to buy second-hand items’, and mostly as an intransitive verb. The sememe of Traveller *chiner* matches almost exactly that of Sinti Romani *mang-* (Valet 1986, 92) and there may be reciprocal influence. In the same register, one finds *gadoue* N.MASC ‘dirty, repugnant place, especially a refuse dump’ (vs SF *gadoue* N.FEM ‘mud’), where the semantic extension is accompanied by a switch in gender. Here, both the use of masculine and its special meaning can be explained by a dialectal influence: FEW 23, 83a gives occurrences of masculine forms in Western Oil (Ancenis) and meanings such as ‘dung heap; rubbish dump’ in several dialects. Another word of general use in Traveller French is *mickey* [mik'e] N.MASC ‘cartoon film; television series, film (any)’ (see example above, §3.2.3), evidently drawn from the cartoon name *Mickey Mouse*, where deonomastic nominalisation is followed by a broad semantic extension.

Some semantic specialisations occurred in order to name items or concepts particular to the environment of Travellers. The most widely used may be *campine* [kõ:p'in] (more rarely [-iŋ]) N.MASC/FEM ‘caravan, trailer’, from French *camping* N.

MASC ‘camping; campsite’ (attested since 1905 in TLF; itself possibly a pseudo-Anglicism). Here, the metonymic semantic shift goes along with a phonetic adaptation of $[-in]$ to $[-in]$ (attested by Martinet 1945, 180–184 among a minority of French speakers, and described as largely receding due to the competition with $[-in]$: its conservation among Travellers is a slight archaism) and reinterpretation of $[-in]$ as a feminine ending (by analogy with words in *-ine*). The word *campine*, now noted in many sources as an “error” typical of the Travellers’ language, was already attested in 1961 in the circus milieu, with the same gender variability noted today: “*Les artistes [de cirque], peu fortunés le plus souvent, habitent un campine, terme qui s’emploie au masculin comme au féminin*” (Baudez 1961, 620). Equally ubiquitous is the use of *place* N.FEM with the special meaning ‘site for caravans and Travellers’ (vs SF ‘place; square; spot, etc.’) (see example 1, §3.1.1), also in idioms unknown to SF such as *ramasser la place* ‘to clean up and leave the site’ (with French *ramasser* ‘to collect, to pick up’). Another frequent semantic specialisation is *paysan* N.MASC ‘settled people’ (vs SF ‘peasant, farmer’), which may be a holdover from the time when the majority of the French population and the settled people with whom the Travellers interacted were rural denizens. Antiquated and rarely used in contemporary French, *commis* N.MASC (SF ‘clerk, employee’) is used with the original sense ‘man from the lowest social strata of the sedentary society whom a Traveller family hires to do menial tasks for them’, and sometimes used among Travellers as a slur.

Insults provide at least two instances of words with highly specialised meanings in SF that became stratified in Traveller French with unique semantic evolutions: *poitrinaire* ADJ/N.MASC/FEM ‘(general insult)’ (vs SF ‘person suffering from tuberculosis’) and *trépané* ADJ ‘crazy, insane’. (SF ‘trepanned, (person) who has undergone trepanation’). These semantic shifts are not found in other varieties of French. Moreover, Traveller speakers tend not to know the historical standard meaning of these words, which are no longer part of the common spoken language among settled people, regardless of the meaning.

Another pattern of innovation, at the crossroads of semantics and morphology, is the use of existing French derivative words with analogical meanings and patterns of use drawn from the meanings of the stem and the derivational morpheme with which they are formed. An example is *parlement* N.MASC ‘way or act of speaking’, with a meaning that can be predicted from *parler* ‘to speak’ and *-ment*, a suffix used to derive abstract nouns, but which is unknown in SF, where the word means nowadays only ‘parliament’. Similarly, *bonté* N.FEM ‘goodness’ retains the whole seme of *bon* ‘good’, in contrast with SF, where its use is restricted to the moral qualities of a person, and the exclamation *quelle bonté!* ‘how good!’ is frequently used when referring to food items, on the same pattern as *quelle beauté!* ‘how beautiful’, whereas SF, in which *quelle bonté* would mean exclusively ‘how kind!’, would rather use *que c’est bon!*

Travellers use many words with non-standard meanings that can also be found in varieties of regional French. Two specificities have to be noted: these words are used by communities of Travellers from the entire French-speaking areas and not only in the areas where they may be a part of the local regiolect. Among Travellers, they are used in all contexts by speakers of every generation, whereas their use in regiolects is usually dwindling or even obsolete. One example is the preposition *vers* ‘among, at the house of somebody’ (standard meaning: ‘towards’), ubiquitously used where SF would use *chez*. Many examples of its use can be given: *vers nous c’est les femmes qui battent les maris* ‘among us, it’s the women who beat their husbands’ (note P6 in -ont) as heard during my fieldwork in 2020. Or, from another source, *Tu verras jamais un vieux de vers nous à l’hospice* ‘you’ll never see an old person from among us at a retirement home’ and, with an interesting metalinguistic remark, *on parle plus manouche mon frère, c’était vers les vieux ça* ‘we don’t speak Romani anymore, brother, that was among the old people’ (Gouyon Maignon/Hoffman 2016, 6, 21). See also above, example 3 in §3.1.1. This meaning, unattested in SF (Ø TLF), is attested in the regional French of Bourgogne, Franche-Comté and the Francoprovençal area (DRF s.v. *vers*), including French Switzerland (DSR), where nowadays it is used only by some members of the older generations and is unknown among younger speakers. Another example is *guetter* vt ‘to look (at), to watch’ (in SF, ‘to watch out for something; to keep watch’). The same semantic extension occurs in the regional varieties spoken in Picardy, Normandy, Touraine, Orléanais (DRF s.v. *guetter*) but its use seems less general than in Traveller French, where it is used as a substitute of SF *regarder* in all its meanings, e.g. *guetter la télé* ‘to watch TV’.

The extensive use of some words and meanings that are still known to some sedentary speakers but that have generally fallen into disuse gives the Traveller sociolect an overall impression of archaism. Words such as *auto* n.fem ‘car’, *paletot* n.masc ‘coat’,¹⁴ *hospice* n.masc ‘retirement home’, *se fréquenter* vr ‘to have a romantic relationship’, *commander à* vt ‘to give an order (to someone)’, *se pâmer* vr ‘to be pleased and joyous; to laugh’ (see also 5 under §3.2.1), and meanings such as *dessalé* adj ‘canny, crafty, astute’ (as opposed to SF ‘desalted (often used about cured fish)’), *pays* n.masc ‘village; small town’ (as opposed to SF ‘country’) that are indeed attested in general French lexicography but would feel antiquated to most speakers of metropolitan French,¹⁵ are ordinarily used by Travellers, children included. Sometimes

¹⁴ While the use of *paletot* is ubiquitous among Travellers, Cannizzo (1996, 29) records also, among Travellers in Avignon, the compounds *croche-paletot* ‘coat rack’ and *paletot à poil* ‘fur coat’, which exemplify the lexical innovations that can develop among particular subgroups.

¹⁵ As it has been largely observed (e.g. Boulanger 1986), lexicography usually takes decades to record ongoing linguistic change. While the discrepancy between dictionaries and real use can be easily demonstrated when it concerns the appearance of new features, e.g. neologisms, thanks to attesta-

it is the frequency of use of a given word or idiom that lends a sense of archaism or oddity. *Voyez-vous* ‘you see’ is used by many speakers in almost every sentence as an almost desemantised pragmateme, whereas to most French speakers its use would still sound like an affected and rather snobbish deictic locution. A stylistic phenomenon that also seems reminiscent of archaic popular French¹⁶ is the pervasive use of antiphrasis as an expressive device as in *alle est vaillante l'enfant, là* ‘she is lazy, this child’ (literally: ‘she is valiant’). Cannizzo (1996, 30) also noted its frequent use among Traveller children in Avignon, as a feature that can cause misunderstandings in school settings.

Another noteworthy feature is that large parts of the standard vocabulary can be virtually absent from the lexical range known or used. This is not specific to Travellers but can rise to much higher proportions among them than in most parts of the sedentary population. Learned vocabulary that appears chiefly in acrolectal/written language, as well as semantic fields encompassing activities or areas of knowledge not commonly favoured among Travellers (e.g. husbandry, law, philosophy, medicine and anatomy) or describing items that are not part of their typical environment (e.g. home furniture, books), are more likely to be absent from their lexical repertoire. This phenomenon of lexical attrition, which is evidently due to their limited exposure to discourse produced outside of their community, cannot be ignored, as it is apt to cause striking situations of misunderstanding during ordinary interactions. It has to be paralleled with semantic extensions leading to the use of generic words (such as above, *moineau*) that cover wide semantic ranges.

Here again, internal variation between the varieties of different families can be significant. The features noted here are the most widespread, but many other lexical peculiarities are used only by a few groups or families. Poueyto (2003, 51–52) gives several other examples of non-standard words used by Manouches from Pau that can be traced to former regiolects. Montclair (2009) gives a couple of examples of unique neologisms used by Yéniche Travellers in Franche-Comté. Some groups who practice specific trades often use occupational vocabularies that do not always

tions in other types of corpora, lexicographical delay in recording word obsolescence or nuanced changes in the connotation of a word is less easy to assess with pre-existing documentary proof; often, we can only resort to *ad hoc* empirical data. The status of the words cited here as slight archaisms is based on my own experience as a native speaker, unanimously confirmed by a dozen urban French speakers of my acquaintance, between ages 25 and 70.

16 I have not found any work on the diachronic or sociolinguistic distribution of the use of antiphrasis in French to substantiate this statement. However, from my experience as a native speaker of Parisian French, exposed to a large variety of Gallo-Romance dialects and regional and diastratic varieties of French, it seems clear that the use of antiphrasis, as a stylistic device of emphasis, has a larger currency in dialectal or dialect-influenced varieties and popular speech, while being virtually absent in formal registers of normative French.

overlap with the ones used by sedentary practitioners of the same trade. Each group would deserve its own lexical inventory, even though, on the basis of their common features, they usually regard their varieties as a single *Voyageur* linguistic entity.

4 Superstructural and sociolinguistic features

4.1 Self-perception of the variety

Paralleling their self-definition as *Voyageurs*, Travellers of all categories use the word *voyageur* as an autoglottonym for the forms of French they regard as their own. The following examples, taken from online comments on blog posts, illustrate this with interesting metalinguistic remarks: (1) *Moi, mes petits parlent le voyageur et j'en suis très fière. Y'a pas de honte au contraire.* 'I, my children speak *voyageur* and I am very proud of it. There is no shame, on the contrary' (20 July 2008, by "gitanedu31"); (2) *cest n'importe quoi areter votre delire les gadger c ridicul vous ne pouver jamais parler courament le voyageur* 'It's absurd, stop your ravings, you settled guys, it's ridiculous, you'll never be able to speak fluently *voyageur*' (31 August 2008, by "un vrai voyageur").

Often conscious, to varying degrees, of how their sociolect differs from the standard, speakers can modulate the use of diastratic variants at diverse levels. The capacity to imitate settled French and to voluntarily avoid Traveller variants, usually in commercial interactions with outsiders, is not attained by everyone. Younger speakers, especially preschool children, often have difficulty adopting standard features, even though they consciously identify Traveller variants as a "we-code", as noted by Jouannigot (2014) in Grenoble.

From my observations, it seems that the ability to avoid linguistic markers of Traveller French is more widespread, though not universal, among middle-aged men, who are more exposed to interactions with other French speakers than other age and gender categories. However, while lexical features may be easily avoided, residual features of Traveller French usually remain at the phonetic, morphological or syntactic levels, to some extent. Capacity for diaphasic adaptation may also vary between subgroups. Jouannigot (2014, 55) notes that the parents of the Traveller schoolchildren she met as a schoolteacher in Grenoble were unable to accommodate their French to hers, while Montclair (2009, 120) remarks that the younger generations among Franc-Comtois Yéniches tend now to be able to avoid Traveller features when interacting with outsiders, whereas the older generation used Traveller French "*dans tous les contacts sociaux*".

Interactional strategies with non-Traveller interlocutors and diaphasic variation are not limited to intentional linguistic accommodation to the non-Traveller

norm. In contrast, some have noted Travellers have a tendency to voluntarily accentuate their so-called “mistakes” when speaking to outsiders as part of a strategy to enhance pity and concern during interactions with social workers and administration (Cavaillé 2021, §23). Accentuation of ethnic/social speech markers as an interactional strategy, most notably to express group identity or negotiating the meaning of group membership – a process called “psycholinguistic distinctiveness” by Giles/Bourhis/Taylor (1977) – has been frequently observed among various communities and is the subject of many theoretical studies (cf. Giles/Johnson 1987), often emphasising “pride” as the most frequent rationale for this strategy (Cargile/Giles/Clément 1995). Among French-speaking Travellers, the psycho-social implications of this behaviour seem more intricate: rather than solely expressing pride of being a member of the group, accentuation of sociolinguistic markers is the linguistic aspect of a broader strategy where voluntary compliance with racial stereotypes serves to playfully deceive outsiders in order to arouse compassion.¹⁷ Linguistically, further exploration of this phenomenon is needed to assess precisely which are the sociolinguistic markers subject to deliberate accentuation, which would also allow determining the extent of the self-perception of linguistic variants.¹⁸

However, the paucity of contact with varieties of French accounts for the fact that many Travellers seem to have a partial perception of the actual variation. A few salient grammatical features, such as the P6 in *-ont*, are usually perceived as conscious sociolinguistic markers, but other features are not. On the opposite side, features that are not typical of the sociolect are thought to be a part of their own *parler voyageur*. This happens with a variable set of words of common French argot (slang) that spread to Traveller French, such as *daron* N.MASC ‘father’, *bonnir* VI ‘to speak’: Travellers who use these words usually state that they only belong to their sociolect.

17 Fournel-Bettendorff (2008, 26–27), in her study about the health of Manouche Travellers in Auvergne, acutely analysed the phenomenon in its behavioural aspects: « En présence d’un sédentaire qui connaît mal leur milieu, d’un médecin ou d’un assistant social, surtout s’ils cherchent à obtenir un bénéfice, les Manush’ se plaisent à paraître tels qu’on les conçoit, sachant offrir un spectacle dramatique. Nous avons été souvent témoins de ce genre de scène: seuls avec nous, les personnes se comportent de façon tout à fait modérée. L’intrus sédentaire arrive et le père paraît saoul, la mère se plaint, le fils hurle et prend un couteau faisant mine d’attaquer sa mère, un enfant qui jouait tranquillement avec une poupée, attrape un bout de ferraille tranchante qui traînait à l’écart... Si l’on est attentif, on remarque les clins d’yeux et les sourires qui démasquent le jeu entre les personnes ».

18 Generally speaking, the awareness of control in sociolinguistics is still a burgeoning and new area of inquiry (e.g. Babel 2016), but one which is still largely focused on English. This gives additional motivation for focusing precisely on the sociolinguistic analysis of these heavily under-explored aspects of variation in French.

4.2 Language contact, use of loanwords and “Para-Romani”

Most speakers can additionally embed into their form of French a special vocabulary of borrowings from their heritage languages: Sinti Romani and Alemannic dialects (including the Yéniche sociolect). This phenomenon of language contact can take two pragmatic forms: the use of a few loanwords introduced intermittently into a French sentence, or utterances literally saturated with Romani or Yéniche words.

Sporadic borrowings appear quite often in spontaneous speech, mostly for euphemism or with an intensive effect that the use of a French equivalent would not achieve. Euphemism accounts for the general use of Romani words for notions that could be somewhat taboo, shameful or connoting some sort of danger, such as *tchadav* [ʧad'a:v] VT ‘to vomit’, *tchourav* [ʧuʁ'a:v] (sometimes [ʧo-]) VT ‘to steal’, *klisto* [klist'o] N.MASC ‘policeman’, etc., which are often preferred to their French synonyms. Expressivity accounts for the use of *zinda* [z'inda] INJ ‘my goodness!’, *ava* [b:va] ADV ‘yes, sure’, affective words such as *tchavo* [ʧa:v'o] N.MASC ‘(male) child; sonny boy’, kinship terms and a wide range of insults and offensive words such as *djounguelo* [dʒ'unʒelo] ADJ ‘ugly’. The most commonly used loanword, though not as frequent as its aforementioned synonym *paysan*, is *gadjo* [ga:dʒ'o] N.MASC (FEM [ga:dʒ'i], PL.MASC/FEM [ga:dʒ'e]) ‘settled person’. Romani loanwords keep a distinct morphology. Variable nouns and adjectives retain Romani nominal morphology (SG.MASC *-o*, SG.FEM *-i*, PL.MASC *-e*, and, less systematically, PL.FEM *-ia*), and verbs obey a simplified French flexion. The stem in *-/a:v/*, which etymologically corresponds to Romani P1 of the present indicative, is used invariably for the infinitive, and P1, P2, P3 (including semantic P4 with the P3 pronoun *on*, as noted above) of the present indicative. P5 is inflected in *-/a:ve/* and P6 alternates between *-/a:v/* and *-/a:vʃ/*, depending on the speaker. Past and future are expressed with auxiliary verbs preceding the invariant Romani stem in *-/a:v/*: past uses auxiliary *avoir* (*il a tchadav* ‘he vomited’) and future with the auxiliary *aller* (*tu vas tchourav* ‘you will steal’). Imperative is usually also expressed with the stem in *-/a:v/*, e.g. *moukav!* ‘close [your mouth]!’, except a few stratified Romani imperatives with null morpheme, such as *ap* [ap] ‘comeIMP.2SG’, *dik* [d'ik] ‘lookIMP.2SG’. Speakers are conscious that they are introducing a foreign element into French and thus can avoid using these words.

Such occasional borrowings have to be distinguished from a phenomenon of deeper lexical mixing: most speakers can use loanwords to relexify almost completely their French with borrowed vocabulary. The lexical repertoire used for cryptic purposes is the ground where inter-individual and inter-familial variation can be the widest. A common repertoire of a few dozen Romani words is known and used by all, on top of which each family has its own stock of words, usually borrowed

from their heritage language. Families of primarily Romani-speaking descent usually master a larger Romani lexicon than the native Traveller families; between them, some variants match the variation that could be observed in the Romani varieties spoken by their ancestors, among whom different dialects coexisted (Valet 1991). This is a French manifestation of a language mixing phenomenon known in almost every language area where Gypsy groups live, often described in scholarship under the name of “Para-Romani languages”, a notion that can be typologically misleading as it encompasses genetically unrelated languages that have in common a strong influx of Romani words (Matras 2002, 243; for a thorough discussion of this notion, see Matras 2010, 9–12). Several of these varieties, including English and Spanish Para-Romani, have been well described (Bakker 2020 provides the most up-to-date overview of scholarship on Para-Romani). To the best of my knowledge, French Para-Romani has not been described in the literature on Romani languages. As this does not pertain directly to French linguistics and the subject of this article, which is to describe a French variety, I intend to give a detailed description of this linguistic practice in further publications.

Some groups of families of Yéniche origin keep different cryptolectal repertoires. The German-speaking peripatetic ancestors of these groups spoke dialectal German with a capacity to use, within their dialect, secret argotic vocabularies that partially overlapped with the old German vagrants’ slang known as *Rotwelsch*.¹⁹ In France, most of these groups lost knowledge of the Yéniche/Rotwelsch cryptic vocabularies and recreated within French a special vocabulary borrowed from general German-Alemannic loanwords (e.g. *prot* ‘bread’, *fress* ‘to eat’, *hount* ‘dog’, *fug* ‘bird’, *volt* ‘forest’, *torf* ‘village’, *rokmass* ‘billhook (for basket-making)’, cf. German *Brot*, *fressen*, *Hund*, *Vogel*, *Wald*, *Dorf*, *Rebmesser* [?]), among which surviving *Rotwelsch/Jenisch* words are only a tiny fraction.

In France, the only word borrowed from *Rotwelsch* vocabularies that I could record in my fieldwork among Travellers is *tof* or *tofs* [tʰɔf(s)] ‘prison’, a word often found in the various German *Sondersprachen* under the form *Tofes* ‘arrested; prisoner’, which ultimately comes from Hebrew תפוס *taphus* ‘caught’ (Wolf 1956, entry 5734). Valet (1990, 13, 21) records at least one more loanword from *Rotwelsch* in the French spoken by the Yéniches in Auvergne: *sus* ‘horse’, ultimately from Hebrew סוס *sus* ‘horse’ (Wolf 1956, entry 6390).

Only a few groups, principally in Switzerland and possibly due to contact with German-speaking Travellers who still use these vocabularies, retained command of

¹⁹ *Rotwelsch* and contemporary secret vocabularies used in Germany, including diverse lexical repertoires used by Yéniche (*Jenisch*) vagrants, have been extensively described (see, for instance, Wolf 1956). For a linguistic analysis of a sample of a Swiss German *Jenisch* variety, where lexical outcomes of contact with French can be found, see Schläpfer (1981).

a wider array of Rotwelsch words. Among those *Yéniche* groups, the use of Para-Romani has also often gained currency.

Many individuals of mixed origin or who have lived in contact with different groups can switch from one vocabulary to another, or even express conscious preferences. For instance, one of my informants in Normandy told me in 2020 that despite the widespread use among all Travellers of the Romani set phrase *Baro Devel* [baxo d'e:vɛl] 'great god' as an expletive, he preferred to use his idiolectal word [aʁk'ɔt] (< German *Herrgott* 'lord god').

Contact between Para-Romani-speaking Travellers and other marginal groups has led popular varieties of French, especially argot, to borrow words of Romani origin, in several waves. The outcome of this contact on French has been described by Esnault (1935) for old argot, Max (1972) for Parisian 20th-century slang and Goudaillier (1997, 108–109) for recent suburban slang ("argot des banlieues").

4.3 Reduplicative infixing used as a cryptic device

The cryptic efficiency of a language can be increased with diverse variants of reduplicative infixing, a procedure of speech disguise largely used for cryptolectal purposes in many language communities all around the world (McCarthy 1991), particularly in Europe. The most comprehensive survey of infixing secret languages in Europe and especially in Gallo-Romance areas can be found in Pinon (1982). Most of these consist of infixing a meaningless syllable after each syllable of the utterance to encrypt, either an invariant syllable or an infix made from an invariant consonantal element and a vowel repeated from the preceding syllable. I found two infixing cryptolects to be used by French Travellers: they represent these two different categories precisely. Although dozens of these secret languages were inventoried by Pinon and others, their use among Travellers has hitherto been entirely unrecorded in literature. The most used pattern of infixing consists in adding *-av* between syllables – the use of this system, known in French as *javanais*, has been widely attested in French among different sociolinguistic groups since the mid-19th century. Another system, unparalleled in other sources, is used by at least two different groups of Travellers: it infixes *-IVgV* (where V stands for the vowel of the preceding syllable). For instance, *merci* becomes *melegerciligi*, *gadjo galagadjologo*. It is used mostly on individual words within an utterance rather than to encrypt whole sentences. Travellers name both systems *javanais*, which is also the most common name used in French-speaking areas to name similar practices (Pinon 1982, 378).

Besides their sociolinguistic interest, these infixing systems have been used by linguists as a tool to identify and describe underlying phonological structures of the language in which they are instantiated, especially for segmental phonology (see

McCarthy 1991 for a survey of these studies); their use among Travellers could serve, with adequate fieldwork in future studies, to assess the phonological nature of several features of their variety.

4.4 Onomastics

As a rule, anthroponymy should never be neglected when studying linguistic communities. Names are also an area of linguistic variation with interesting features and elements of language contact: they deserve consideration here, especially as Travellers' onomastics and naming patterns are notably absent from all major studies in French anthroponymy (for instance, Dauzat 1977).

Travellers of all groups usually keep the old Romani habit of *romeno lap* 'Romani name', which consists of using, within the group, individual given names that differ from the official given names (Bataillard 1867, 1119). While official names are chosen among the most common repertoire of French Christian names,²⁰ the *romeno lap* has to be unique in one family group and is generally coined from an appellative whose meaning is felt as congruent with the child's personality or appearance. Admant (2015, 425) has shown that the practice was already current among Sinte "Gypsies" in early 18th-century Lorraine; Vaux de Foletier (1963) gives a few examples of the names, based chiefly on Romani words, that archival research can yield for earlier periods. Ethnographers have witnessed that some Manouche groups still have enough mastery of Romani vocabulary to be able to coin names in the ancestral language: Treps (2003) in Lorraine, Poueyto (1997) in the area of Pau. In groups that have been only French-speaking for generations, such as the *Duville* clan from the west of France, names for internal use are largely based on the French lexis, with a large number of hypocoristics drawn from French words, Romani words with French morphemes or in some instances from Romani words morphologically reanalysed and semantically reinterpreted as French words or names. A thorough study of these names, beyond merely enriching the knowledge of French anthroponymy, would reveal patterns and procedures of hypocoristic derivation seldom found in other sectors of name formation.

Last names of French Travellers have never been studied, besides one short work by Vaux de Foletier (1963) focusing only on the names of "Gypsies" found in French archival sources between the 16th and the 18th century. Nonetheless, their linguistic study can be of great interest. In oral use, last names are adapted to the phonetic

²⁰ With uncommon naming patterns since often, two or more brothers bear the same official given name. The same has been noted by Rao (1974, 70–71) among Manouches in Alsace.

habits noted in the rest of the speech. For instance, the surname *Bredemestre* is pronounced [brɛdm'ɛst], with the loss of final post-stop /ʁ/ already noted supra. Surnames of Traveller families often exist in a variety of allomorphs that could reveal older phonetic features of their speech, as names were empirically noted on registrars by civil officers upon oral declarations and therefore recorded their actual pronunciation. The name *Coussandier* and its various metaplastic variants (*Coussantier*, *Coussautier*, *Cousautier*, *Couzothien*, *Couzothia*, *Cousantien*, *Coussetien*, *Causantien*, *Gusothien*, *Gusothier* and even two partially Germanised variants, *Gusothiem* and *Justheim*, which indeed belong to members of the same family born in Germanic-speaking regions) display a high variability that affects consonant voicing (/k/ – /g/, /s/ – /z/, /t/ – /d/), pretonic vowel openness (/o/ – /u/) and nasal articulation of vowels (/ã/ – /o/ – /ə/, /ɛ̃/ – /e/ – /a/). The name can be traced to a Northern Francoprovençal dialectal type *cosandier* ‘tailor’ (von Wartburg 1944 in FEW 2, 1090a, CONSÜÈRE I 2 a), whose use as a surname in sedentary populations is historically attested only in canton Neuchâtel (RNFS 1, 406), where the Traveller family bearing that name may have originated. The several variants of the name of the large Manouche clan *Lafertthin* (*Lafertthine*, *Lafertin*, *Lafertini*, *Lafertun*, *Laffertin*, *Lafortin*) come from an earlier *La Fortune* attested as the name of a Sinti family in Lorraine in the early 18th century (Admant 2015, 425) and show high variability in vocalic phones. The equally plethoric *Lagrene* family of Alsace-Lorraine and its name variants (*Lagrenée*, *Lagrenez*, *Lagrenne*, *Lagrain*, *Lagraine*, *Lagreine*, *Lagren*) derive from a *Lagaraine* family (= *La Garenne* ‘the warren’), widely attested in the same sources for the same period (Admant 2015, 127, 502, 595). The name of the Yéniche clan *Chira* (and *Schira*), which travels mostly in Normandy, derives ultimately from *Girard* through phonetic changes that took place during the 19th century, possibly in German-speaking lands (hence the devoicing of [ʒ-] to [ʃ-]). The frequent moves of some families across the French-German linguistic border have induced an uncommon sort of language contact, in the form of “bilingual names”, such as *Lafleur/Loeffler*, a name attested among Travellers since the 16th century (Vaux de Foletier 1961, 89): both variants are used by the same Traveller family (and sometimes both borne by one person), and can be understood either as a French (*la fleur* ‘the flower’) or German (*Löffler* ‘spoon carver/trader’) native name. Another family of Yéniche background that travels in Burgundy bears the bilingual name *Schatz/Chat* (German ‘treasure’/French ‘cat’).

It should be noted that, among some groups, the actual last name used by an individual may also diverge from the official one. One informant, introducing himself, once said to me: *Je m'appelle Mayer, mais je porte aussi Winterstein* ‘I am called Mayer, but also “bear” Winterstein’, with non-standard use of *porter* in contrast with *s'appeler*, suggesting a different way to bear a name beside the official one.

5 Discussion

At all levels of language structure, the variety-specific features observed in Traveller French can be classified into three etiological categories: (1) non-standard features attested in older strata of French, rejected in the current norm of French as “incorrect”, “regional” and/or “popular”, sometimes for centuries, but retained as diastratic variants by the Travellers; (2) internal innovations within the diasystem of Traveller French; (3) the outcome of language contact with heritage languages of some of these groups.

The presence and the perpetuation of many of the observed differences between Traveller French and other forms of metropolitan French can be attributed, at least partly, to the scant exposure of speakers to the written language and to the urban spoken norm. The influence of written code on oral language, described under the name “*effet Buben*” (Chevrot/Malderez 1999) as an important factor in language history and evolution, is almost nonexistent here. The rise of schooling literacy among French speakers in the 19th and 20th centuries gave widespread currency to a single written and oral norm, leaving aside the Travellers as the only group of native-born speakers among whom illiteracy has remained frequent up to today, as noted previously. Complex social changes in the latter part of the 20th century led to an unprecedented diffusion of that norm in most parts of European French-speaking society (Armstrong/Pooley 2010; Armstrong 2021, §10, who notes that in France “the former Parisian variety of French [...] has swamped most others”). Features such as regularising substitutions, levellings, syntactical simplifications, phonologic mergers, phonetic shifts, and other innovations that used to be common in popular speech and especially in regional varieties were erased from spoken use as an effect of the pervasiveness of the written code and the ubiquitous diffusion of the standard norm. These features were retained in the speech of Travellers, amid their estrangement from the main society, and some were reinvested as diastratic markers of the sociolect.

As noted, many of these features are now absent from all other varieties of metropolitan French, but some of them do appear, piecemeal, in peripheral varieties of French less exposed to the norm: sometimes in regional varieties, often as recessive features, more often in North American French varieties. Describing some features of the German dialect of German Sinti speakers, Matras (2002, 242) notes that “all these individual features can be found in dialectal German, though not in the combination in which they occur in the ethnolectal German spoken by the Rom”, a situation relatively similar to what has been described for Traveller French. Hancock (1980, 261), in his study of the ethnolectal English of American Gypsies, noted also that alongside phonological features, lexical malapropisms and loanwords, it retained “forms which are either obsolescent or regional in American Eng-

lish”, due to similar sociolinguistic causes: the language was first acquired in non-standard forms; limited access to school and isolation from the rest of the population hindered language levelling to a norm that gained currency among the majority society.

The language of the French-speaking Traveller community also offers a wide range of instances of language contact. Contact between Romani and French is probably among the least known and studied forms of “Para-Romani”. In contrast with other “Para-Romani” languages whose speakers have long lost command of the local dialect of Romani (e.g. Spanish *Caló*, English Para-Romani), France, where Manouche Romani is still in the process of going extinct, offers an interesting space to explore the process of language attrition and the replacement of inflected Romani with “Para-Romani” as an ethno-cryptolect. The use of similar cryptic lexicons of German/Yéniche origin among some groups of Travellers may be, in turn, the least known and least linguistically described interface of language contact between Germanic languages and French (Romance?). The analysis of the sociolinguistic patterns of the adoption of a “Para-Romani” vocabulary by non-Roma Traveller groups, a phenomenon which has also been described recently among Italian-speaking Travellers (Tribulato 2022), may also yield significant insights into the roles and functions of these special vocabularies among the groups that use them. More largely, the use of cryptic lexical repertoires of foreign origin, which is a constant of sociolects of groups exposed to language contact, deserves further study. It has other instances in French: most notably, the predominantly Hebrew-based vocabularies used by French Jewish communities; the recent description of these varieties (Nahon 2023) now makes it possible to conduct a contrastive sociolinguistic analysis of these phenomena, which may shed light on the patterns of language contact in the context of minority groups. All these aspects are now part of my research agenda.

This overview is an attempt to do justice to this whole province of linguistic variation, inexplicably neglected until now in French linguistics. Hopefully it will be henceforth taken into account, with the attention it deserves, in descriptions of French variation, in studies on the oral language and its relation to the norm, and in sociolinguistic accounts of language contact. André Martinet wrote, in the preface to Weinreich’s *Languages in Contact* (1953), that “linguistic divergence results from secession, estrangement, loosening of contact”. Even the limited illustrations here provide a remarkable instance of the deep diastratic variations such a social secession can induce. They also show just how necessary is a thorough and systematic description of the varieties of all French-speaking Traveller subgroups, such as I am working on and hope to offer to the scholarly community within a few years.

The richness of the particularisms displayed in this initial linguistic sketch gives a reasonable indication of how abundant the harvest of linguistic facts will be when

the inquiry is extended to the linguistic practices of all groups. On another point, what would have been impossible to ascertain without fieldwork shows how much linguistic studies have to rely on the study of the language in its real use, through reliable primary sources, to describe and analyse it in the full range of its variety and complexity.

6 References

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