Some twenty-five years after the publication of *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano y Hispánico* by Joan Corominas and José A. Pascual, speculation on the origins of the word *flamenco* would appear to have subsided, and only two proposed etymologies remain on the scene. One, scarcely with supporters today, is to derive *flamenco* from Hispano-Arabic *fellah mencus* and see the epithet originating in reference to dispossessed landholders who might have fled North Africa for Andalusia. On both historical and linguistic grounds, this claim is readily dismissed. The stronger candidate, however one might wish to establish the link, is that *flamenco*, as used of the Spanish Gypsy community’s styles of song, dance, and public appearance, is a derived or figurative use of the adjective designating the natives of Flanders and things Flemish. Support, of an analogous kind, lay at hand in the presence of the term *germania*, used of underclass slang, an in-group language with which the language of the Gypsies was thought to have many affinities, even genetic ties. Explanations have ranged from 1) the Gypsies arriving in Spain by way of Flanders, 2) pejorative comparisons with corrupt and flashy Flemish courtiers in the retinue of Charles V (1516-56), 3) Spanish Gypsies who served in foreign wars in Flanders and received preferential treatment on their discharge, and on to 4) equations between the rebellious natives of Flanders and the intractable, freedom-loving *gitanos* of Spain. The most elaborate and far-reaching of these figured derivations is to recognize in *flamenco* a reference to the ruddy complexion of the North Sea peoples, then see these rosy cheeks as an element of female charm, with, finally, a figurative transfer of *flamenca*
from a Rubensesque beauty to the dark-haired and dark-skinned entertainer, whose art forms projected passion, often amorous or erotic, of a similarly ideal or idealized kind. It is here that the discursive account by Corominas and Pascual's *v. flamenco* concludes.¹

This is, admittedly, a caricatural summary of decades of serious and semi-serious scholarship since *flamenco* was first addressed by philological scholarship in 1881.² All of these attempted explanations may be put under the rubric of special pleading, and this for a variety of reasons, several of which will be further explored in the following. Despite the Gypsy presence in Iberia since the mid-fifteenth century, there is no early evidence of linguistic practice involving the subject term, so that the historical depth implied in many derivations is absent. There is a pronounced lack of any causal imperative of a socio-linguistic kind for derivations involving historical or symbolic ties with Flanders. No explanation thus far posits that the word may have originated in, and been used by, the community to which it would be most commonly applied, after its adoption in the eighteenth century into both the speech and social modes of Spaniards of more advantaged classes. The folk etymology that would rush to the minds of many, that *flamenco* is a reflex—of some kind—of Latin *flamma* and referenced the supposed fiery life and art styles of the Spanish Gypsies, has never been taken seriously by scholarship in or beyond Spain, firstly, no doubt, because *flamma* was early resolved as *ll* in the northern dialects of Hispano-Romance and, secondly, because of the "un-Spanish" sound of the suffixal or concluding element -enco.

In the following I advance the thesis that *flamenco* originated in Gypsy speech, deriving from a concept first expressed in Romani and then, in a complex process of coincident language erosion and language encryption, in Caló, the para-Romani gypsy speech ("cryptolect" in the words of some scholars) that over time became increasingly based on the lexis, morphology, and syntax of Andalusian Spanish.³ Ultimately, an antecedent of *flamenco* entered mainstream Spanish concurrently

---

¹ *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano y Hispánico*, II, 906-07.
² Corominas's and Pascual's reference to the earliest scholarship is succinct but cryptic. The first popular anthologies of *cantes flamencos* appeared in the same decade as the analytical study of Schuchardt, who discusses the word *flamenco* on pages 251-52.
³ Informative overviews of Iberian Romani and Caló are to be found in studies by Adiego, Bakker, and Torrione.
with considerable semantic narrowing and reconfiguring, and changes in affect.

In the now well documented Romani dialects of central and western Europe, the verb *phabarél* has a surprising range of meanings: 1) to burn, set fire, 2) to smoke, 3) to beat, beat up, 4) to deceive, cheat. The corresponding reflexive form *phabárdol* means, variously, 1) to burn oneself, catch fire, 2) to flare up, 3) to become enthusiastic, 4) to yearn for, 5) to fall in love, 6) to be fooled.\(^4\) There are also related verb forms *phaból* and *phabow-* with this same series of meanings. In a more selective listing of human attributes, the adjective *phabardó* means, *inter alia*, ardent, enthusiastic, zealous, and agitated. Note, too, *phabindo* ‘ardent.’ These have correspondences in the ancient Indo-Aryan languages of northwestern India, in particular Sanskrit and Hindi. Attested early forms are *bhráj* ‘to roast,’ *bhurájanta* ‘cooking’ and these are in turn traced back to the Indo-European root *bher-* in the extended form *bhereg-* ‘to roast, bake.’\(^5\)

No transparent reflexes of *phabárdol*, *phaból*, and related have been seen in Caló but we do find the verb *flamar* in the early list of Caló vocabulary compiled by George Borrow in 1841, who glosses it with ‘to jest.’\(^6\) Words with initial *fl-* are otherwise rare in Caló. *Flamar*, I contend, represents the loan translation of Romani *phabarél* or *phaból* into an “appropriated” Andalusian, where *flamar* and *flama* (as distinct from Castilian *llama, llamar*) continued to be represented.\(^7\) The later dictionaries of Trujillo (1844), Sales de Mayo (“Quindalé,” 1870) and Tineo Rebolledo (1909), now seen as largely derivative, gloss the slight variant *flamear* with *bromear, chancear* ‘to joke,’ which we might, for the sake of argument, extend to ‘play a joke on someone’ and thereby link *flamar* to *phaból* in the sense of ‘deceive’ (cf. the English expression ‘get burned’).\(^8\) We note the subset of flamenco songs called *bulerías*. If this

---

4 See Boretzky and Igla 230, and Wolf 165. This is, naturally, not the only Romani word for ‘burning’ (see the German and English indexes in the first of these dictionaries) but has the greatest range of figurative meanings and is the most compatible with the Iberian evidence.

5 Pokorny I.137, s.v. *bher*- 6.

6 Borrow 46. Attested ‘fire’ words in Caló are *urdiflar* ‘to burn,’ *jar* (from Arabic *harr*) ‘heat, ardor,’ *yaque* and *llagulé* ‘fire.’

7 See Diccionario anadaluz, s.v.v.

8 Other word lists and dictionaries are by A.R.S.A., Bright, Campuzano, Conde, D.A. de C., Dávila and Pérez, Jiménez, Moreno Castro and Reyes, Pabanó, and Usoz y Río.
term can be traced to Spanish *burlar* ‘to joke’ (and not, say, to Romani *bul* ‘buttocks, arse’), this would be a further instance of the notion of deception associated with the art form. I would further contend that, in releasing only the signification ‘joke’ to Borrow and others, the Gypsy community has used the verb self-referentially – playing a joke with the word for joke – perhaps in the desire to retain among the performers more significant meanings as applied to temperament, personal style, and art forms.

The apparently isolated status of *flamenco* in Spanish and its assumed antecedents in Caló are perhaps best addressed through the perspective of “lexical orphans” in Romani, as explored by Anthony Grant. If there was, at an earlier time, a collective noun or an adjective that accompanied the assumption of Andalusian *flamar* into Caló, we can only speculate as to its form and whether it drew on Romani or Romance morphology. Although admittedly a selective juxtaposition of evidence, the general phonetic contours of *flamar* and, say, *phaból* are not all that dissimilar, and even a rough phonological correspondence may have furthered the calque or the semantic transfer. Some hypothetical Caló forms are *flamari, *flamañi* (as nouns, e.g., the art style in general), *flamardo, *flamoy, *flamipen* (drawing on one or another Romani adjectival ending; cf. *phabardó*), or even Andal. *flamoar, flamando*, with specialized meanings in Caló – conceivably something like ‘entertainer’ (in a distinct style) for the first of these. The language exhibits a number of compound verbs of generation composed with the verb *querar* (< Romani *ker*), which is the Caló equivalent of standard Castilian *hacer* ‘to do.’ Thus, we might imagine a perhaps transient *flamaquerar*/*flamaquerando* ‘flame-producing, flamboyant,’ noting in the participial form the presence of both the /n/ and /k/ sounds of later *flamenco*. Many verbs in Caló display an augmented form with an aspectu-

---

A critical turning point in evaluations of this material is found in Adiego’s important study, “The First Caló Dictionary Ever Published in Spain.”

9 For early non-scholarly commentary on *buleria* and related song names, see Ropero Núñez. Hidalgo’s dictionary of Spanish cant lists *birlesca* as a junta de ladrones; see Adiego 134. But this may be a very conscious formation, like English ‘pride of lions.’

10 In the following I will use “performance term” to characterize the vocabulary associated with song and dance types, playing styles, as indicative less of the moment of artistic composition than of its execution at the interface between performer and public. There is a noticeable lack of this terminology in existing dictionaries of Caló.

11 Grants writes of cognate orphans, loan orphans, and unique lexical innovations (60).
al, e.g., intensifying or perfective, dimension.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, on the model of querar ‘to do’ > querelar ‘to execute,’ we could posit a term restricted to artistic performance: flamelar. The (generally) augmentative Hispano-Romance suffix -uncho is also reported by early sources and by one of the more trustworthy scholars to have addressed Caló as in frequent use among Iberian Gypsies, representative of a linguistic tactic often seen among in-groups.\textsuperscript{13} Such use could have generated the familiar form flamuncha. Worth mentioning, too, is comparable evidence for jichanco as a synonym of gitano.\textsuperscript{14} Here it is worth mentioning that the Romani word kaló itself, which meant ‘dark’ as well – in Iberia – as the language of the dark-skinned Gypsy community, had an augmented form kalorkó (with the Romani agent suffix -kò). This might have been perceived by one or other of the linguistic parties as equivalent to Spanish calor, caliente and seen as a another pertinent descriptor of the supposedly fiery-tempered gitanos, preferentially viewed through their artistic performance. We then have no lack of evidence on which to erect one or more hypothetical forerunners of flamenco.

The Gypsy community in Spain, as elsewhere in Europe, was not self-sufficient. A variety of what today might be called service functions – horse-trading, tin-smithing, and, broadly speaking, entertainment – brought the Roma into ongoing contact, commercial, linguistic, and other, with their host environments. The Romani language, seen in toto, is replete with Persian, Armenian, Turkish, Greek, Slavic, and Romance words, and reflects the Roma diaspora and places of residence, however nomadic within given geographies. The heritage that would later be called flamenco would initially have been preferential knowledge and lore within the Gypsy community, despite its continuous exemplification through song and dance in the greater Iberian public.\textsuperscript{15} Within the

\textsuperscript{12} Bakker, “Notes on the Genesis of Caló,” 131.
\textsuperscript{13} Borrow 111, Usoz y Río 57, Coelho 124f.
\textsuperscript{14} Borrow 57, Usoz y Río 43.
\textsuperscript{15} The following speculation is confined to this note. The earliest references to the Roma in Europe make no mention of musical or dance performance (Wolf 16). If we take the example of Hungarian “gypsy” music, we find a fundamental Magyar musical tradition that has been returned to the Hungarian public in enhanced form by Gypsy performers. Similarly, the most rewarding avenue of research on the origins of Caló song and dance would seem to be the Hispano-Arabic culture (with a strong Jewish presence) of Andalusia. Gypsy horse-trading may offer another analogy with flamenco song and dance, since the Gypsies were themselves not stockmen and breeders but only dealers.
art form of flamenco, the give-and take between Andalusia and Caló vocabulary is illustrated by parallel coplas with slight lexical variations collected in the nineteenth century. Song and dance project an illusory reality to which both performer and public contribute and in which they collude. With a deflective term like *flamelar*, Gypsy performers may have pretended to their publics that they were just “flaming,” just fooling around, just jazzing, but this in no way detracts from the seriousness with which both parties will have taken flamenco song, dance, and instrumental music. The musical term *cante hondo* ‘deep song,’ later also to be grouped under the collective heading *flamenco*, suggests the significance the Gypsies attached to artistic expression. In-groups tend to exercise a strong sense of proprietorship over language, making their speech even more attractive to outsiders, who would share in the stylish cachet that they judge comes from social and lexical slumming.

At a point that will be difficult to recover, *flamenco*, like *majo*, *chulo* and *guapo*, along with dress styles, language and its registers, manners of self-presentation and self-promotion, the *aire de taco*, the “in-your-face-iveness” of lower and working class Andalusians and later more northerly city-dwellers, would be taken up as *flamenquismo* in a curious social nationalism, a statement of rejection of extra-national mores, prime among which the French-inspired *petimetrería* or dandyism. Only a few decades ago it was thought that the loss of Romani vocabulary in the larger dimension of Spanish Gypsy speech was offset by assigning encrypted meanings to Andalusian words, as was the practice in numerous other para-Romani dialects. Today, it is recognized that cryptolalic formations were relatively rare in early Caló and that much of the reported vocabulary exhibiting such devices of linguistic disguise is actually learned word-play on the part of Andalusian *dilettanti* or *aficionados*, who had little or no direct contact with the Gypsy population.

---

16 Examples in Ropero Núñez, *El léxico andaluz de las coplas flamencas*.  
17 In the performance context the words under consideration may well also have had sexual overtones or have constituted a set of code words in the service of sexual innuendo. Here it may illustrative to cite the interest of mainstream America in jazz and rock-and-roll, both initially insider music forms with descriptive terminologies equally difficult to etymologize and define in semantic terms. The word *jazz* has as many explanations as *flamenco*, but a strong erotic component has been seen as common to both.  
18 See the discussion of the emergence of the comparable term *majo* in Sayers.
of Spain. The straightforward flamenco reported by Borrow is unlikely to derive from such a source.

At a time when loans from Andalusian such as cantaor, tocaor, and bailaor were entering Castilian to designate southern singers, players and dancers, these northern adaptors of Andalusian and Caló ways and tastes could have seized on an antecedent of flamenco but found the Caló term to require reconfiguration for comprehensible incorporation into Castilian. Although the transformation of a Caló term into flamenco may represent a folk etymology on the part of Castilian patrons and publics of Gypsy music, I judge it more likely that it was the interaction of Gypsy entertainers with tavern-owners, their initially lower class publics, horse traders, the bull-fighting community, in short, the speakers of germania or cant, that effected the final shaping of the word, and this through a conscious and jocosely cryptolalic appeal to a known ethnonym, flamenco, “Flemish.” Criminal and underclass jargons offer many instances of such transnational adoptions as does, indeed, the term germania itself.

Flamenco as an elected term for a musical and dance style may have been something between a euphemism and a dysphemism, a lightly coded, deflective term. We might even imagine the art forms and their rather exotic descriptor at a similar figurative distance from the middle and upper class mainstream of urban northern Spain. Yet assigning new connotations to flamenco clearly met a socio-linguistic need. Bringing the circle full round is the later use of flamenca in the coplas as a synonym for gitana.

The derivation of flamenco here advanced, ultimately from a Romani term undocumented in Iberia, will appear open to the charge of special pleading that was leveled at earlier etymologies at the outset of this note.

---

19 See Adiego, “The First Caló Dictionary,” 141. The devices of linguistic disguise, seen both in Caló and germania, are discussed in Claveria, Coelho, and Matras. These include reversal and substitution of phonemes, metaphorical semantic extensions, and other word play reminiscent of English rhyming slang. Coelho 133, notes the use of adjectives for nouns, a device by which flamenco could come to designate the art form itself.

20 Bakker, “Genesis” 139, citing Borrow, writes: “The name ‘Germania’ is a distorted form of a foreign language’s name, as is often the case with this kind of secret languages (for example Dutch ‘Bargoens’ < Burgundy; Danish ‘Keltring’ < Celtic; German ‘Rotwelsch’ < Welsh or Walloon”. Other scholars have seen a reference to Italian in Rotwelsch. Cf., too, French bohémiens ‘gypsies,’ Swedish tattare “Tartars.”

21 See Burridge and Allan.
Yet the present explanation has several critical advantages, even if they only exhibit enhanced plausibility rather than deliver proof. The relevant cultures and classes – Gypsy, Andalusian, northern underclass Spanish – were in long, well-documented contact. Several different sets of group dynamics can be recognized and causal relationships established. Los Calés wished to preserve their integrity (fundamentally, prevent pollution by other ethnicities) but those who sought a living as entertainers were obliged to solicit and frequent the gadžé, the non-Roma. Lexical and other trades went in both directions. In the now relatively well-documented and understood socio-linguistic matrix of the eighteenth century, what may well have been a key Gypsy cultural concept – ardor, intensity, brilliance, flamboyance, illusionism – one originating within the community itself, brought some of its lexical baggage with it, when tastes for, and simulations of, Gypsy art forms and social manners were appropriated by Spaniards of all classes. Flamenco would then appear to have been launched as a vogue word, quite conceivably from a narrow socio-linguistic base, perhaps even a single scene and group of performers. While multi-staged and more complex than earlier, in essence superficially based etymologies, the proposed origin of flamenco in Romani words with sets of meanings centered on burning, ardor, etc. will, at a minimum, have cleared the scene of ad hoc implausibilities and prepared for more focused future research. Prime on this agenda will be the recovery of an authentic Caló vocabulary, after Adiego’s exposure of the weak basis to such hitherto respected sources as Trujillo.

In conclusion, this derivation for flamenco may be summarized in the following formula: a Romani lexeme calqued into Andalusian, possibly with a degree of ingroup encryption, then appropriated by speakers of germania and Castilian, with a concurrent phonological reshaping and superficial semantic anchoring in a pre-existent term that already had an exotic coloring of its own.²²

²² Bakker, “Genesis,” 79, writes of three comparable stages in the emergence and development of the language as a whole. Flamenco as the name for the avian genus Phoenicopeterus has not thus far been addressed in this note. While origins distinct from those proposed for the terms for Gypsy song and dance on the one hand, and Flemings on the other have been advanced (Latin flamen?), the resultant homonymity entails that the words overlap in semantic and affective terms, the birds seen as flamboyant as the performers.


Coelho, Adolfo. *Os ciganos de Portugal: com un estudo sobre o calão*. Lisboa: Imprensa nacional, 1892.


