Swedes can't swear: Making fun at a multi-ethnic upper secondary school (Draft)

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Abstract

During the last decade, Sweden has witnessed a significant increase in public attention concerning the following interrelated linguistic phenomena: (a) a linguistic style labelled “Rinkeby Swedish,” (b) specific “Rinkeby Swedish words” that have been perceived as disparaging in Swedish public debate, and (c) a specific young male immigrant identity indexed by this linguistic style. Drawing on ethnographically collected data and naturally occurring talk in a multi-ethnic Swedish upper secondary school, this article examines a possible shift in language ideology, whereby tabooed words and urban youth styles are not dismissed by the school institution but are incorporated in teaching activities. Furthermore, it is argued that there are reasons to look for other interactional accomplishments than solely identity in the use of urban youth styles. The article shows how identity may be used as a resource in the construction of social hierarchies as well as interactional enjoyment among some male students.

Keywords: urban youth styles, humour, identification, interactional enjoyment, classroom ethnography

Word count: 8998.

Introduction

“It’s nothing special, just ordinary Swedish!” 17-year-old Gorgis says, talking about what he calls the linguistic style he uses in a recording to which we have been listening. I am sitting together with Gorgis, Christian, and Mohammed, in a small study room in their school, as they are helping me out with the transcriptions of some classroom conversations they took part in about a year earlier. I rewind the recorded episode, and once again we listen to Gorgis’s words “tua balle me.”

“So what do these words mean?” I ask.

“Well, I say ‘suga...min...balle’ [suck...my...dick],” Gorgis explains with short pedagogical pauses.

“But wait,” I say, “‘tua balle me’ doesn’t *exactly* sound like ‘suga min balle.’ So how would you describe the difference between the two expressions?”

“He mashes up the words!” says Mohammed.

“Yeah, and I say it to sound like an *old Serbian man*, using a deeper voice too,” Gorgis adds with a laugh.

“All right, do you guys often do that? Mash up the words, as you say?”

“Well, I do speak ordinary Swedish,” Gorgis repeats in a serious tone, adding that he and his friends do not have any specific labels like Rinkeby Swedish or any other names for the linguistic style (Coupland, 2007) used in the recording of them.

Researchers and laypeople alike have employed Rinkeby Swedish as a sociolinguistic label for a particular style spoken by youths in Swedish multi-ethnic settings. The name comes from a suburb of Stockholm in which it allegedly originated. It has been argued (Milani, 2010; Milani & Jonsson, 2011; 2012; Stroud, 2004) that this label entails a wide range of problems, not least because over time it has become an *icon* (Irvine & Gal, 2000) of ethnic Otherness, associated with social and educational problems, and more recently of an aggressive sexist and homophobic masculinity (see also Madsen, Møller, & Jørgensen, 2010). As Doran (2004) has framed it in her analysis of Verlan in France, non-standard styles spoken by youths in multilingual settings acquire their meaning through a monolingual language ideology. While this “ideology of the standard” may construct a fantasy of a common national identity and one homogenous language, it simultaneously suppresses the existence of a heterogeneous society and devalues non-normative linguistic practices. This fact might of course also be a reason why Gorgis tells me so clearly that he does not call the style he uses Rinkeby Swedish.

From this follows a dilemma in researchers’ efforts to name this linguistic style. By giving a style a label and by pointing to which groups it “belongs,” both identities and language use become fixed and limited; categorization risks reducing the diversity of linguistic expressions to something uniform and conventionalized (Madsen, 2013; Rampton, 2011). The other risk is that the same linguistic style can become associated with social problems or ethnic Otherness (Milani & Jonsson, 2011). Madsen (2015) has contended that sociolinguistic researchers have actually played a crucial part in this enregisterment (Agha, 2006) of urban speech styles. Svendsen and Quist (2010) have also pointed out that there is no empirical evidence to suggest youth styles employed in the multilingual urban settings of Scandinavia, in which Gorgis and his friends live, would index ethnicity alone. Various other categories like class, gender, place, or

generation could be equally important aspects of what is being played out through the linguistic practice. Nor shall we forget the many other speech acts that may be conducted in the use of urban youth styles, some of which will be discussed in this text.

Following several scholars before me, I shall take a specific interest in the use of non-normative linguistic styles in jesting and humorous talk. This interest is related to the kind of play-acting communication that Jaspers (2005; see also Jaspers, 2011) has described in his ethnographic work, when some Moroccan boys in a Belgian school call their own linguistic practices “to do ridiculous.” The art of doing ridiculous included the use of various playful linguistic resources so as to disrupt the classroom order or to shift attention during the lessons to non-school topics. This “linguistic sabotage,” Jaspers argues, is employed by the students to negotiate their classroom participation and as a way to resist stereotyping identity categories.

In a similar vein, Charalambous (2012) has shown how some Greek-Cypriot adolescents use what she calls “silly talk,” that is, short playful utterances, as a way to engage in politically loaded issues in classroom practices. Pomerantz and Bell (2011) have argued that humour in classroom interactions may function as a resource for students to construct, negotiate, and play with institutional identities. A context of humour, Chun (2009) wrote in her article on how students make fun of other students’ learner language, “is an ideal space for engaging in ideological work, given that humorous performers have licence to break with everyday norms of interaction” (p. 278). These findings, in turn, could be related to Rampton’s (1995) seminal ethnography on crossing and how adolescents in Britain use varieties not perceived as “their own,” and by doing that, manage to display affinity and negotiate ethnic borders and identities.

Notably, much of the work on humoristic talk in classrooms—as well as the research on urban youth styles—has emphasized the possibility of constructing, negotiating, and resisting ethnic identities (Madsen, 2011; Nortier & Svendsen, 2015; Rampton, 2011; Svendsen & Quist,

2010). In this article, I will look for other aspects of linguistic practices as well, and especially some young men's joint creation of enjoyment while working on a language-rich classroom assignment. I take an interest in how identity can be both a resource in humorous talk and an effect of joking classroom communication. The article will thus investigate (a) how identities are reproduced and destabilized in some students' playful interaction, and (b) how identities can also be employed as tools in the construction of social hierarchies as well as what I will call interactional enjoyment in talk.

Identity, identification, and interactional enjoyment

This article follows a poststructuralist approach to the study of identities and language use in multi-ethnic urban settings (Nortier & Svendsen, 2015; Svendsen & Quist, 2010). We can turn to Judith Butler's (1990) now-seminal text on performativity in order to further investigate that perspective. The "performative turn" meant a shift away from the commonly taken-for-granted attitude that people spoke in certain ways because of who they were and towards an understanding that people construct identities in and through social interaction. This perspective includes the understanding that particular aspects of identity may be less negotiable than others. Drawing on J. L. Austin's (1975) notion of the performative and his theory of language as action, together with Louis Althusser's (2001) concept of interpellation, i.e., how subjects are called into social existence through being interpellated in ideology, Butler urges us to see gender—or any other identities—as enactments based on reiteration within dominant norms.

Moreover, as Cameron and Kulick (2003) have noted regarding an often-neglected point in Butler's theoretical framework, there is a distinction to be made between identity and

identification. What is performed in talk is always linked to all that cannot be expressed, told, or achieved in communication (see also Kulick, 2003; Billig, 1997). Focusing only on the explicitly expressed performance of identity, Cameron and Kulick (2003) have stated, risks “a kind of conscious claim-staking by a subject who knows exactly who s/he is, or wants to be” (ibid., p. 128).

Identification on the other hand is about how subject positions emerge in communication, depending on what can be uttered and what remains silent or repressed in talk. For the purposes of this article, an even more crucial point is the critique of how a focus on identity might overshadow other aspects of linguistic practices. In discussing language and sexuality, Cameron and Kulick followed up their critique of the identity paradigm, stating that an analysis of people’s use of language only in relation to identities risks missing other crucial aspects of the relationship between language and sexuality: “our concern to complicate and move beyond identity as a framework for investigating language and sexuality led us to the notion of desire,” they conclude (ibid., p. 140 f.).

At the time of its publication, Cameron and Kulick’s book provoked much debate. It was accused, for example, of wanting to replace the notion of identity with that of desire. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have argued that identity in sociolinguistics has by no means always been employed to indicate “conscious acts of claim-staking” as Cameron and Kulick suggest. Rather, identity—as a concept—has been used to analyse more complex linguistic acts. Moreover, Benwell (2011) has pointed out another problem with Cameron and Kulick’s analytical appeal, namely, the indemonstrable nature of the psychoanalytical approach from where the concept of identification is originally taken. Benwell demonstrates how a micro-discursive analysis searching for interactional accomplishments can be employed to look for both conscious claim-

staking “identity” work and more contradictory processes of “identification”—if such an analysis is combined with an investigation of wider narratives drawn on by participants in situated social interaction.

With Benwell’s crucial points in mind as well as Cameron and Kulick’s (2005) response to their critics, stating that they never argued for a wholesale rejection of the concept of identity, I want to take up the call to look for desire or what Milani and I (Milani & Jonsson, 2011) have called *interactional enjoyment* as a vital component in the social interaction of some of the young men in our study. We contend that desire is not reducible to the domain of the erotic (see also Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Eckert, 2002). Instead, it also captures more broadly how people create amusement, pleasure, fun, or enjoyment in and through mundane language use. I shall look for enjoyment in performances where the participants engage in playful talk, when they parody various identities, and when they stylize the linguistic practices of others (Bakhtin, 1981; Coupland, 2007; Rampton, 1999).

Ethnography in a Swedish upper secondary school

I draw on data from an ethnographic study conducted in an upper secondary school on the outskirts of Stockholm, many of whose students come from low-income, multi-ethnic backgrounds. This is one of two field sites in a project on narratives of boys and schooling, consisting of thirty interviews and two periods of fieldwork, which lasted for three months each. The schools were selected on the basis that they included students with various backgrounds. I followed students at three different school programmes (preparatory as well as vocational profiles), thus making it possible to capture a broad variation of experiences of gender, ethnicity,

and schooling, and to collect linguistic practices and norms from a wide selection of various classrooms.

Methodologically, the study of this particular school involved audio-recordings of naturally occurring conversations, participant observation, and 13 interviews with students (aged 16 to 17) in their first year of two vocational programmes. The class presented here consists of only male students enrolled on the Building and Construction programme, which aims to prepare the students for work as constructors.

In their classroom, the students are spatially divided into two visible groups simply due to their choice of desks: about fifteen of them are sitting beside the windows along one of the classroom walls, and an equally large group is sitting on the opposite side of the room. On a couple of occasions during the fieldwork, the teacher, Lasse, described this spontaneous division of the two groups as “the immigrants” and the “Swedes.” In the data presented below, Christian, Gorgis, and Mohammed are part of the former group and Stefan, Jesper, and Niklas the latter. However, many of the students explicitly object to the teacher’s framing of their groups as the Swedes / non-Swedes, and emphasize that they are friends with everyone. Although, as we shall see, ethnic jokes are common in the classroom, some of the students openly express a dislike of being addressed by the immigrant label. Most of the students (including Gorgis, Mohammed and Christian) were born in Sweden and hence have no experience of migration. However, some of the interviewed students point out that having a non-Swedish-sounding name can trigger school staff and classmates to use the category “immigrant.” It became obvious during the fieldwork that also race and language use evoked such labels.

Christian, Gorgis and Mohammed do not pass as Swedish nor white in the classroom, according to my field notes. Christian's parents are from Chile, Gorgis' parents migrated from Syria and Mohammed's parents' origin is unknown to the researcher. Apart from Swedish, Christian speaks Spanish, Gorgis speaks Syrian and Mohammed speaks Urdu. In sum, this group of students sitting close to the classroom windows seems to evoke various ethnic and racial labels, which they at the same time contest, display, as well as make fun of.

Data analysis

In what follows, I have selected examples from one particular lesson in order to highlight a recurrent and distinct theme in the fieldwork: how Swedishness and non-Swedishness are not simply limited to the spatial separation in the classroom but are constructed in the very work done in the classroom setting, such as assignments, as well as through jokes and reflections on language use in this classroom. My theoretical approach to the analysis of the data brings together (a) the performative approach to identity and enjoyment, as discussed above, and (b) a micro-discursive analysis with a focus on interactional accomplishments in local contexts (Benwell 2011). The first perspective guides me in the analysis of how subject positions emerge in talk, depending on wider sociocultural norms, and the latter offers tools to investigate how such wider understandings are played out and drawn upon in social interaction.

More specifically, I shall look for identities and enjoyment in performances where the participants engage in playful talk and when they stylize the linguistic practices of others (see Bakhtin, 1981; Coupland, 2007; Rampton, 1999). When doing that, I shall also use the term “ventriloquizing,” which, according to Tannen, “is a special case of constructed dialogue in that a

ventriloquizing speaker animates another's voice in the presence of that other" (2004, p. 404).

This includes a frame-shifting, Tannen argues, since the participant who imitates another's voice is suggesting a new footing (Goffman, 1981) in relation to the participants and the topic of discourse. This frame-shifting can, among other things, produce a comic effect. As Simpson (2003) has noted, for creating a humorous situation, a discursive element is needed that adds some sort of incongruity in contrast to our expectations. Put differently, with the help of the stylization and ventriloquization of the other's voice, participants can make fun of the imitated position. However, Billig (2005) has argued that not all incongruities are equally humorous and that humorous incongruities should not be separated from hierarchical social relationships. That point takes us back to the focus of this study, namely, to look for how identities, social hierarchies, and humour interplay in some young men's co-creation of interactional enjoyment in the classroom.

The classroom assignment

During one of the class's Swedish lessons, the teacher, Lasse, introduces a new language assignment. For this purpose, he has photocopied a collection of popular scientific texts from which the students are asked to find answers to a number of prepared questions. The booklet, put together by the teacher, challenges a former language ideology (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) regarding both (a) the style called Rinkeby Swedish and (b) a so-called "bad language" in the form of disparaging words used in schools. Interestingly, what school staff in two of my earlier fieldworks (Jonsson, 2007; Milani & Jonsson, 2012) labelled *prohibited language* and thus a problem to be solved is now described as an *interesting topic* upon which the students are

encouraged to reflect (see also Åhlund & Aronsson, 2015). Any critical approaches expressed in the booklet are not about non-normative linguistic practices as such but about moralizing statements on the phenomenon. This liberal view is, in turn, supported and borne out by plenty of academic references in the texts.

I noted during my time in the school that Lasse expressed an interest in language socialization and referred positively to a book I had written. I could thus identify a common theme uniting my own works and Lasse's teaching content, namely, criticism of moralizing comments on youth's use of slang or loaded words. As a matter of fact, my own presence in the classroom may have further legitimized the teacher's choice of working with this subject. This offers an interesting opportunity not only to investigate how an academic discourse on youth language use—of which I am a part—is explicitly and actively taken up by the teacher but also to see how some students jokingly handle this issue when working on the school assignment.

Admittedly, the teacher's booklet also makes some questionable statements. One of the main themes in the texts is based on a fixed relation between certain ways of swearing and national, cultural, and generational identities: it says, for example, that young people have a more tolerant attitude towards non-normative linguistic features, as if adolescents constituted one homogenous group. It also makes essentialist claims about cultures. Some of the texts in the classroom assignment invoke "Swedes" as a homogeneous group in relation to "Other cultures," and a modest form of swearing is proclaimed to be typically Swedish. In one text, for example, the linguist and TV personality Fredrik Lindström describes a specific Swedish mentality that, in comparison to many other languages and cultures, lacks swear words.

Ideas of both a national belonging and a cultural essence are thus used to make the phenomenon of swearing both understandable and legitimate. And although the booklet discusses swearing in a general sense without naming various styles, its singling out of the categories “youth,” “men,” and “other cultures” as representatives of a harsher kind of swearing in contrast to a presumed “Swedish us” is, I argue, a liberal commentary on youth styles in Swedish multi-ethnic settings. At the very same time, it clearly restricts who belongs to and who is excluded from the “Swede” category.

Christian, Gorgis, and Mohammed start working on the assignment

The three close friends Gorgis, Christian, and Mohammed start working with the text booklet. They have formed a small group in the classroom while I am sitting beside them recording their conversation. They are busy reading the photocopied articles when Gorgis reacts to the claim made in the booklet that “Sweden is the worst at swearing.”

Excerpt 1

- 1 Gorgis: Is Sweden the worst at swearing?
 Är Sverige sämst på att svära?
- 2 Christian: Yes, because they say (colloquial Swedish) “bloody fucking hell” before
 Ja, för dom säger (vardaglig svenska) “helvetes jävla skit” förut
- 3 but now when you come, then it’s Syrian swear words
 men nu när du kommer, då blir det syrianska svordomar
- 4 Gorgis: Then it’s (.) “riktiga partajgrejer va”! [real party stuff huh, old Swedish
 slang]
 Då blir det (.) “riktiga partajgrejer va!” [ålderdomlig svensk slang]
- 5 (.) then it’s “rajtan å tajtan å: tajtan” [hanky-panky a:nd panky, old

Swedish slang]

(.) det är rajtan å tajtan å: tajtan” [ålderdomlig svensk slang]

- 6 Mohammed: Shut up!
Käftan!
- 7 Gorgis: Listen, you’re a Pakistani (.) you have no right to speak in this country!
Hörru, du är pakistanier (.) du har ingen talán i det här landet!
- 8 Tough shit, “You can migrate back to your (.)
Tyvär, “du kan vandra tillbaks till ditt (.)
- 9 crappy homeland, where you all worship cows, which pee on your feet (.)
fula hemland där ni avgudar kossorna som ska kissa på era fötter (.)
- 10 and you, and your feet” (laugh)
å dig, och dina fötter” (skratt)
- 11 Mohammed: Hey, listen, read!
Hörru, lyssna här, läs!
- 12 Gorgis: Jalla [come on, emblematic for the urban youth style] (.) what, why is
Sweden (.) is that good or bad? [---]
Jalla [kom igen, emblematiskt för förortsslang] (.) vaddå, varför är Sverige (.) är det bra eller dåligt? [---]
- 13 Mohammed: You’re supposed to read this fucking text! [---](points in the text) look,
Du ska läsa den här fucking texten! [---](pekar i texten) kolla,
- 14 look there, there, there (.) there, there
kolla där där, där (.) där, där
- 15 Teacher: It’s awfully noisy in here!
Det låter nåt fruktansvärt här!

By giving Gorgis, Christian, and Mohammed the task of defining Swedes’ swearing, the school assignment asks them to list the characteristics of a national persona. In the young men’s discussion of this topic, the Swede appears as someone else, as someone different from who the

students themselves are. In line 2, Christian imitates “the Swede” by using the quotative marker “they say,” followed by the rather mild swear words “helvetes jävla skit” [bloody fucking hell]. This is a stylization (Coupland, 2007) of the Swedish voice. As in the example, stylizations are often excessively and humorously depicted, rhetorically skilled, and in many instances followed by laughter. Georgakopoulou (2007) has pointed out that some of the humour embedded in the use of stylizations is based on the fact that the imitated voices are recognizable. By stylizing the other’s voice, participants can make fun of well-known stereotypes, which is what the young men do: Christian’s turn “helvetes jävla skit” involves not just an imitation but also a meta-reflection on the linguistic style being used and the social category it points out—“the Swede’s” modest swearing makes him/her funny.

In lines 4–5, Gorgis picks up Christian’s practice of stylizing the Swedish voice in the expressions “party stuff” and “rajtan tajtan” [hanky-panky], old-fashioned colloquial Swedish that today sounds comical, outdated, and silly. The young men’s interaction thus reproduces an indexical link between Swedishness and mild swearing.

The fixation of national and ethnic identities is also accomplished by Christian’s use of temporality and place as discursive resources when he says that traditional Swedish swear words were prevalent in Sweden *before* Gorgis arrived: “but *now* when *you* come, then it’s Syrian swear words” (line 3). This expression is no doubt ambiguous since it is not clear whether Christian is referring to Gorgis as a representative of migrants, whose arrival in the new country has changed Sweden, or whether, more literally, Christian is saying that Gorgis’s presence in the classroom is transforming swearing practices. Whatever the case, through simultaneously situating old swear words to both Sweden and the past and concomitantly locating Gorgis’s presumed Syrian profanity both as contemporary and as a symptom of a change in Sweden, Gorgis is constructed in the conversations as different from “the Swede.”

At the same time, the Swedish racist is the target of ridicule. When Gorgis calls Mohammed a “Pakistani,” adding that his friend has “no right to speak in this country” (line 7) and should “migrate back to” to what he called his “crappy homeland.” (lines 8–9), it sounds like a parody of the harsh Swedish racist voice. Gorgis’s comment is a stylization according to which he is borrowing the voice of the Swedish racist, who derogatorily refers to sayings like “worship cows, which pee on your feet” (lines 9–10). That is a multilayered joke—Gorgis performs the racist, who, in turn, disparagingly imitates the Pakistani’s voice.

By saying “you have no right to speak in this country,” Gorgis also suggests a shared experience of exclusion—the phrase “migrate back” positions Mohammed as not belonging to Sweden but in a similar way to Gorgis, whom Christian, in a previous turn, has positioned as someone who *had come* to the country.

The excerpt thus offers many examples of hierarchical social relationships that Billig (2005) has argued are embedded in humour. However, the parody in the use of the Swedish racist’s voice is a way to evoke and express racist images in a language not seen as the boys’ usual way of speaking. And in so doing, Gorgis appears to caricature what is being said. Their putting on the racist voice manages to undermine the same racist images while having fun—both the old-fashioned “hanky-panky” and the xenophobic expression “you can migrate back...” are used to poke fun of the absent Swede. “The Swede” is employed as a tool to humorously deal with the booklet’s statement that Swedishness is limited and different from other cultures—a Swedishness from which, according to their conversation, both Gorgis and Mohammed are excluded.

Dad doesn’t even know my language!

The work continues with Gorgis reading the next question from the teacher's prepared assignment: "Why are swear words that include mother and/or grandmother so loaded, according to the text?" However, as shown in excerpt 2, Gorgis finds the expression "and/or" strange, and arising from this questioning, a new discussion takes place between Gorgis and Mohammed (while Christian is busy reading the text).

Excerpt 2

- 1 Gorgis: (reads) "Why are swear words that include mother and and or" (.)
(läser) "*Varför är svordomar som innehåller mamma och och eller*" (.)
- 2 who the fuck writes and or? (Rickard laughs) [---]
vem fan skriver och eller! (Rickard skrattar) [---]
- 3 Gorgis: (reads) "and or grandmother so loaded, according to the text?"
(läser) "*och eller mormor så laddade enligt texten?*"
- 4 Mohammed: Your mother (.) your mother is
Din mamma (.) din mamma är
- 5 Gorgis: Well, yes, but now you have to find it in the text
Ja, jo, men nu du måste ta det ur texten
- 6 Mohammed: You mammaknullare [motherfucker, directly translated into Swedish]
Din mammaknullare [direktöversatt från engelskans motherfucker]

The excerpt starts with Gorgis questioning the academic prose in the booklet; he does so by critically asking, "who the fuck writes and/or?" This question distances Gorgis from the school assignment's academic prose while making the researcher laugh (line 2). Moreover, in the following conversation, Gorgis and Mohammed are ribbing each other. It starts when Gorgis reminds Mohammed that he has to "find it in the text" (line 5): a comment that the more study-

oriented Mohammed extensively uses earlier in the lesson and in a way his friends might have perceived as a bit ingratiating. When Gorgis now ventriloquizes (Tannen, 2004) Mohammed's voice, he is making fun of him. That mocking turn shapes a conversation replete with jokes and blame, as we shall see in the following, ranging from jokes about language use to a sense of ethnic belonging and race. In excerpt 3, the discussion picks up where excerpt 2 left off.

Excerpt 3

- 10 Gorgis: It is very loaded to say your mother, your grandmother's cunt or to put
Det är väldigt laddat att säga din mamma, din mormors fitta eller öh stoppa
- 11 Mohammed: (points to the text) Here, here, here, here
(pekar i texten) Här, här, här, här
- 12 Gorgis a toy in her eh (.) amcik [cunt, Turkish] and yes, lots of
en leksak i hennes eh (.) amcik [fitta, turkiska] och ja, massa
- 13 Rickard: What's amcik? [---]
Vad är amcik?[---]
- 14 Gorgis (laughs) No, cunt (laughs) but that's in Turkish
(skratt) Nej, fitta (skratt) men det är på turkiska
- 15 Mohammed: What?
Vaddå?
- 16 Gorgis: Amcik (.) amcik
Amcik (.) amcik
- 17 Mohammed Fuck, that's gross!
Fuck, va fult!
- 18 Gorgis: You put your eh, but that's Turkish, that's not Syrian (1.0)
Man stoppa in din eh, men det är turkiska det är inte syrianska (1.0)
- 19 in Syrian, it's chu:ta [cunt, beginning pronounced with a tʃ-sound]
syrianska, då det är chu:ta [fitta, uttalat med tʃ-ljud]

- 20 Mohammed: Kuta? [beginning of the word pronounced with a k]
Kuta? [början av ordet uttalat som ett k]
- 21 Gorgis: Chuta
Chuta
- 22 Mohammed: Really? Is that why they keep saying kuta all the time?
Är det? Är det därför dom säger kuta hela tiden?
- 23 Gorgis: Yes, exactly, chuta!
Ja, exakt, chuta!
- 24 Mohammed: Do you know what kuta means in my language?
Vet du va kuta är på mitt språk?
- 25 Gorgis: No
Nä
- 26 Mohammed: Idiot and dog
Idiot och hund

In excerpt 3, Gorgis and Mohammed's friendly quarrel takes the shape of a discussion on one's own language and those of others. Gorgis explains that "amcik" is Turkish (line 18), not Syrian (as if his friends would have expected him to speak his mother tongue). In line 19, he provides the Syrian word "chuta" as a synonym for "amcik." Mohammed then responds to Gorgis's statement by referring to his own language: "You know what kuta is in my language? Idiot or dog" (lines 24–26). At the same time, Gorgis and Muhammed correct each other's pronunciation of the word; Gorgis claims to call it "chuta" (lines 19, 21, 23), while Muhammed does not seem to take any notice of Gorgis's corrections, as he continues pronouncing it as "kuta" (lines 20, 22, 24).

In this short dialogue, the languages categorized as "my own language" are resources used to comment on how the young men themselves speak and how the word chuta/kuta should

be pronounced. Yet the “own language” is also a target for teasing comments and becomes a means by which social hierarchies are shaped in the group. When the discussion continues in excerpt 4, Gorgis picks up Mohammed’s language and ventriloquizes the latter’s voice:

Excerpt 4

- 27 Gorgis: (laughs) (high-pitch nasal voice) No:: “baba shop shop” [keep quiet, Urdu]
(*skrattar*) (*ljus nasal röst*) *Nä::ej “baba shop, shop” [håll tyst, urdu]*
- 28 Mohammed: Quiet, shop!
Tyst, shop!
- 29 Gorgis: Shop, shop
Shop, shop
- 30 Mohammed: Keep quiet!
Tyst!
- 31 Gorgis: (high pitch) “Shop,” then his father (high pitch) “Mohamme:d shop!”
(*ljus röst*) “*Shop,*” *så hans pappa (ljus röst) “Mohamme:d shop!”*
- 32 Mohammed: Why, Dad doesn’t even know my language!
Vad då, pappa kan inte ens mitt språk!
- 33 Gorgis: (American accent) That’s fucked up, man! Fucked up!
(*amerikansk accent*) *That’s fucked up, man! Fucked up!*
- 34 Mohammed: Yes, he is Swedish!
Ja, han är svensk!
- 35 Gorgis: HOW COULD HE POSSIBLY BE SWEDISH?
HUR KAN HAN VA SVENSK?
- 36 Mohammed: But eh
Men eh
- 37 Gorgis: Does he have the same skin colour as you?
Har han samma hudfärg som dig?
- 38 Mohammed: No

Nej

- 39 Gorgis: What is the colour of his skin?
Va har han för hudfärg?
- 40 Mohammed: He's white
Han är vit
- 41 Gorgis: WHAT?
VA?
- 42 Mohammed: He's white, white, whi:, he's like me
Han är vit, vit, vi:, han är som mig
- 43 Gorgis: Hey, listen
Alltså lyssna
- 44 Mohammed: HE'S LIKE ME; I was kidding (laughs)
HAN ÄR SOM MIG, jag skoja (skrattar)
- 45 Gorgis: Hey, you, I imagine your father
Alltså du, jag föreställer mig din pappa
- 46 Mohammed: He's born in Swede:n, he has been Swedish
Han är född i Sverige:, han har varit svenska
- 47 Gorgis: How do we picture his dad?
Vad är det för bild på hans pappa?
- 48 Teacher: But Mohammed and Gorgis, please!
Men snälla Mohammed och Gorgis!
- 49 Gorgis: He's got a turba::n (Gorgis and Mohammed laugh)
Han har turba::n (Gorgis och Mohammed skrattar)

In line 27, Gorgis imitates the language that Mohammed has just called “his own.” He does so by using the Urdu word “shop” [meaning shut up] as well as speaking in a high-pitched nasal voice. He evokes a ridiculed stereotype of the “Pakistani man,” which he also ascribes to Mohammed’s father. The position of the “Pakistani” is thereafter under negotiation in the talk; it is used rhetorically to create both laughter and social hierarchies in the group.

Gorgis's mocking jibe elicits a response from Mohammed. In line 32, Mohammed claims that his father does not even know his language, thus mitigating the force of Gorgis's parody since Mohammed's father cannot sound as comical as Gorgis made his voice if he doesn't even speak Urdu. By declaring this, Mohammed is now saying that he and his father do not share the same language. This statement challenges the ethnic and linguistic homogeneity previously constructed during the lesson, both in the booklet and in the young men's interaction. The unexpected nature of Mohammed's answer is further underlined by Gorgis's following turn, "That's fucked up, man! Fucked up!" Mohammed is thus held accountable for saying that he does not have the same language as his father.

From line 34, the discussion of Mohammed's father's language shifts to a definition of his nationality, and later on, his skin colour. This shift draws on an idea of the "Swedish speaker" as both Swedish and white, and vice versa. Mohammed's first comment regarding his father's language challenges normative and homogenizing conceptions of family, nationality, and race, and, more specifically, the "Swedish-speaking Swede" as white. However, this is not achieved without difficulty. Mohammed's description of his father as Swedish (line 34) is met by Gorgis's dramatically framed question: "How could he possibly be Swedish?" (line 35) After having said that his father is white (line 40)—and as a response to Gorgis's equally astonished "WHAT?" (line 41)—Mohammed quickly changes his statement by adding, "HE'S LIKE ME; I was kidding" (line 44).

I understand Mohammed's comment as a repair for not giving a preferred response in his previous turn. Mohammed's father can neither be, at least according to Gorgis's comments, white nor a Swede, despite Mohammed's initial efforts to state exactly that. Note how Mohammed's description of his father as both "white" and "Swedish" is met by Gorgis's final mocking turn:

“He’s got a turba::n!” (line 49) This comment positions Mohammed’s father as excluded from the category of white Swedishness by imagining him with a turban—a sign of the ethnic Other. Identities are obviously being negotiated here—yet all various ethnic and national categories like “the Swede,” “the Pakistani,” and “the Syrian speaker” are also ridiculed and employed as resources for teasing and poking fun at friends. “The non-Swedish, non-white, turban-wearing father” is made fun of at the same time as ethnic and racial hierarchies are being reproduced. This, in turn, even further demonstrates Mohammed and Gorgis’s close friendship. Since the disparaging words are met with laughter, friendly relations are displayed in the group while social hierarchies are being reproduced. This co-created amusement is in itself essential for understanding what is being achieved in the communicative practice. The use of disparaging labels evokes laughter, and Gorgis and Mohammed finally laugh together (line 49).

Someone’s got to saki, saki!

While Gorgis, Christian, and Mohammed are working with the booklet, another group of students, sitting at the other side of the classroom, are discussing the same classroom assignment. Suddenly a student called Stefan accuses his friends Niklas and Jesper of not having done their part of the schoolwork. For a short while, Gorgis, Christian, and Mohammed quietly observe the discussion in the other group. Then Gorgis interrupts, commenting on their dispute:

Excerpt 5

1	Stefan:	I finished that shit [the assignment] a long time ago (inaudible)
<i>Jag är klar med den där skiten [skoluppgiften] för länge sen (ohörbart)</i>
2	Gorgis:	Ugh, how
<i>Usch, va</i>

- 3 Stefan: (To Niklas) You didn't do anything, you fucking clown
(Till Niklas) *Du gjorde ingenting, din fucking pajas*
- 4 you kept playing games on your mobile, I did everything!
du satt å spela på mobilen, jag gjorde allt!
- 5 Gorgis: A ha ha, wha [what a] pussy givi [meaningless], wha [what a] pussy!
A ha ha ke [vilken] fitta givi [utan bokstavlig betydelse] ke [vilken] fitta!
- 6 Stefan: I'm the one who saved it [the classroom assignment] on my Hotmail,
Det är jag som har den [skoluppgiften] på min hotmail,
- 7 you have to start from the beginning
så du får göra om
- 8 Gorgis: E:::y!
E:::y!
- 9 Mohammed: (to Niklas) Eh, he may take your name off [as a writer of the assignment]

(till Niklas) Eh han kan ta bort ditt namn [som författare på inlämningsuppgiften]
- 10 Gorgis: Someone's got to SAKI, SAKI::: [suck me, suck me], someone has to saki, saki:::
Någon ska gå å göra SAKI, SAKI::: [suck me, suck me], någon måste saki, saki:::
- 11 (clicks his tongue) listen, tua balle me [suck my dick, creative/non-normative Swedish]
(klickar med tungan) hörriu, tua balle me [sug min balle, kreativ/icke-standard svenska]
- 12 te ma lajk te len [meaningless]
te ma lajk te len [utan bokstavlig betydelse]
- 13 Christian: (to Gorgis) Hey, listen, what's up today? It's shitty weather, bre ! [bruv, emblematic for urban youth style]
(till Gorgis) Hörriu, va ska vi göra idag, det är skitväder, bre! [brorsan, emblematiskt för förortsslang]
- 14 Jesper: "Bruv, it's shitty weather!"

“Brorsan, det är skitväder!”

- 15 Gorgis: Eh, ko fa en spark len [You’ll get a kick brother, creative/non-normative Swedish]
Eh, kof fa en spark len [du kommer att få en spark brorsan, kreativ/icke-standard svenska]
- 16 Jesper: “Len [bruv, emblematic for urban youth style] (.) shitty weather” [---]
“Len [brorsan, emblematiskt för förortsslang] (.) schitväder” [---]
- 17 Gorgis: Hey, man (laughs), well, how rude you sound, man! (Jesper laughs)
Hörru killen (skratt), asså, hur illa du låter mannen! (Jesper laughs).

Because I had trouble understanding the content of this excerpt (as I mentioned in the introduction), Gorgis, Mohammed, and Christian helped me (about a year after it was recorded). I asked them about expressions like “te ma lajk te len,” “saki, saki,” and “tua balle me,” which, to my knowledge, are not established slang words. However, even after listening to these words on my recordings, the young men could not explain the meaning of “te ma lajk te len.” Rather, the words seem improvised during their talk as the conversation unfolds.

Gorgis explains that “saki, saki” is easier to define, meaning “suck me, suck me,” and, in turn, is a phrase he learnt from a female character in a Vietnamese film, although he can remember neither the exact film nor quote: “It’s something like ‘suck me, suck me, twenty-four dollars.’ I don’t know what,” Gorgis says, underlining that there is nothing special about comments like that. So, considering Gorgis’s explanations, how can we understand the conversation? Who is to saki, saki? And why does Gorgis in the end tell Jesper that he sounds rude?

The discussion starts with Stefan's way of showing his disappointment at his friends' work on the classroom assignment (lines 1–4). Stefan's threat that he might hand in the classroom assignment with only his name on it and thereby making Niklas and Jesper start from the beginning (line 7) is summarized by Gorgis's words "someone has to saki, saki!" (line 10) This is a comment on power relations in Stefan's group. Gorgis's "saki, saki" upgrades what Stefan demands of Niklas and Jesper—he underlines the offence they have caused by not working on the assignment together with Stefan.

In the same turn (line 11), Gorgis uses a synonym for "suck me," namely, "tua balle me." Here he repeats the comment on hierarchies in Stefan's group, this time by stylizing the ethnic Other's voice. "Of course I know how to properly say 'suck your dick,'" Gorgis tells me when helping me with the transcript, adding that by saying "tua balle me," he sounds "like an old Serbian man."

Gorgis's explanation reveals an indexical link between tabooed words and specific ethnic, gendered, and aged positions. On the one hand, the expression "saki, saki" sounds like a racist imitation of a female Asian sex worker, and, on the other hand, by using the voice of the "old Serbian man," a similar expression is employed but now in a rougher tone. Thus, Gorgis switches between the racist category of the female Asian sex worker and the equally racist stereotype of a Serbian man in order to comment on social relations and hierarchies in Stefan's group. At the same time, with his friends as an audience, Gorgis employs this non-standardized speech style to entertaining effect: his funny voices manage to lighten the somewhat tense atmosphere caused by the accusations that Stefan aimed at Niklas and Jesper.

The ethnic Other's voice is also marked, although in a rather different way, by Jesper when he says, "Brorsan, det är skitväder!" [Bruv, it's shitty weather!] (line 14) He thereby

repeats Christian's previous turn (line 13), "Det är skitväder, bre" [It's shitty weather, bruv]. Christian's way of switching from Gorgis's talk on "saki, saki" to talking about the weather comes abruptly and surprisingly. Nonetheless, the utterance enables Jesper to change the topic, from not having worked on the classroom assignment to Christian's use of urban youth style. Jesper's ventriloquization of Christian can also be understood in relation to Gorgis's previous teasing remark that Jesper would have to "saki, saki." Mocking Christian's speech style (as well as Gorgis's and Mohammed's) is a way for Jesper to renegotiate his subordination and to position himself above Christian and his urban-youth-style-speaking friends.

By imitating Christian's voice, Jesper intimates that this style is inferior and therefore an object of derision. This is a risky business though, since the language ideology he expresses is closely related to both normative ideas of "good Swedish" and Swedishness. That might be the reason why Gorgis *does not* laugh at Jesper's imitation of "len," "brorsan," and "shitty weather," when laughter is expected. He thereby shows that Jesper's joke about urban youth styles is not funny. This is further demonstrated in Gorgis's reply, "ko fa en spark, len" [You'll get a kick, bruv, line 15], which, according to my field notes, is clearly addressed to Jesper. However, the reply is expressed creatively, with Gorgis shortening the words "du kommer få en spark, len" to "ko fa en spark, len." Thereby, Gorgis both voices his dislike of Jesper's disparaging use of the linguistic style and clearly employs the same style himself.

To sum up, I understand Gorgis's comments to Jesper, "ko fa en spark, len" [You'll get a kick brother] (line 15) and "how rude you sound, man" (line 17), as an answer to Jesper's initial joke about a linguistic style, which is meant to index non-Swedish urban youth. Gorgis has throughout the lesson imitated the voices of the Swedish racist, the Pakistani father, the Asian sex worker, and the Serbian old man, to which his friends have responded by smiling and laughing

lots. His comments and his display of stereotyped identities had an entertaining effect despite their literally harsh meanings. When Jesper does the same thing, his parody is met with criticism. However, by repeatedly adding the words “man” and “len” (both meaning “bruv” or “friend”) in “Eh, ko fa en spark, len” (line 15) and “Hey, man, well, how rude you sound, man!” (line 17) Gorgis simultaneously underlines his friendly relationship with Jesper, who, in turn, responds with a friendly laugh.

Jalla, we have to find the theories!

The meta-reflections on specific words that were called “ordinary Swedish,” and yet are not so easy to define, lead me to one final point to be made, namely, how expressions that “do not make sense” are utilized in the interaction.

Excerpt 6

1	Gorgis:	Ok (reads) “there are many theories concerning how
<i>Ok (läser) “det finns fler teorier kring hur</i>
2		the word pussy originated, list these!”
<i>det ordet fitta uppkommit, redovisa dessa!”</i>
3	Mohammed:	Jalla [come on, emblematic for urban youth style], we have to find the
theories here!
<i>Jalla [kom igen, emblematiskt för förortsslang], vi måste hitta teorierna
här!</i>
4	Gorgis:	The theories on the listed pussy will be found in the clit [clitoris, Swedish
slang,]
<i>Teorierna om redovisande fittan kommer vi hitta i klittan [klotris, svensk
slang]</i>
5		(.) amcik [cunt, Turkish] gitta [go, emblematic for urban youth style] e::y
<i>(.) amcik [fitta, turkiska] gitta [stick, emblematiskt för förortsslang] e::y</i>

- 6 Mohammed: Here (reads), “the woman, many people regard puss::y as the
 Här (läser), “kvinnan, många anser at fitta::n är det
- 7 most vulgar word in the Swedish language”
 fulaste ordet i svenska språket”

In excerpt 6, Mohammed uses the the word “jalla,” (line 3) together with the academic expression “find the theories.” Gorgis follows up Mohammed’s words by making a humorous and taboo-breaking turn—the theories should be looked for in the woman’s genitals (line 4). Through this twist, Gorgis uses the academic voice to bring about a new tabooed meaning. Thus, the voice of authority—as conveyed in the academic prose from the articles—is repeated in a fresh context, making it ridiculous and worth laughing at. Doubtless, it would be easy to conduct a gender analysis of this and all the other excerpts in the article: to look for how the young men construct heterosexual masculine identities using sexist speech (see Kotthoff, 2006). Nevertheless, and without wishing to downplay that interpretation, the same linguistic practices have other noteworthy aspects deserving of analytical probity. Gorgis’s use of the Turkish word “amcik,” together with “fitta, klitta, gitta,” transforms the academic language into a rhyme replete with loaded taboo words, which, after all, were the very topic of the classroom assignment.

Concluding remarks

Writings on non-normative youth styles have argued that there are reasons to make language use comprehensible and not to relegate those linguistic practices among youth in multilingual urban areas to the realm of the “incomprehensible” or to the position of the ethnic Other (Milani & Jonsson, 2011). However, with this article I would like to add that the “unintelligible” might have

a crucial function in the construction of interactional enjoyment in a classroom context where some students work on an assignment which thematically addresses ideas of language use, swear words, and identity. Part of what the young men say might be understood as entertaining and engaging its interlocutors in absurdist humour—how else can we understand “te ma lajk te len,” which Gorgis himself cannot explain? And how otherwise would Gorgis’s suggestion to look for academic theories in the female private parts be understood? By using unintelligible talk as a resource—interwoven with teasing comments, ventriloquizations, and stylizations of the ethnic Other’s voice—the young men help to co-create a humorous situation.

This is also achieved by using ethnic identities as crucial discursive resources for playing and having fun. The boys lampoon various identity positions throughout the lesson. The stylization of the old Serbian man, the Asian sex worker, the Swede, the Syrian, and the Pakistani is for fun. The laughter and giggles in the interaction also make sense in relation to the pleasure of jointly using tabooed words and stereotyped identities in a disparaging, yet humorous, way, with friends as the audience. I argue that identity is not always the end of the performative work being done here but might also be understood as a resource in the construction of interactional enjoyment. This play with languages and identities is in actual fact encouraged by the classroom assignment. It gives the young men licence to swear and connect tabooed words with specific cultures, which in itself contributes to the humorous atmosphere. The interactional space encouraged by the classroom assignment is ludic. The young men are given permission to play. And they do.

This interactional enjoyment is embedded in the institutional context. Through the school assignment, the students’ language practices are being acknowledged at the same time as the young men are facing an excluding Swedishness, expressed by the same task. The idea of fixed

ethnic and national identities, articulated in the booklet, follows the logic of the teacher's talk of "the immigrants and the Swedes" in the classroom: a categorization that many of the students rejected. The interactional enjoyment created by the young men during the lesson can thus be understood as a way to find meaning and participation in a school context that positions them as excluded from Swedishness.

However, the young men simultaneously take an active and playful part in the construction of the ethnic Other. In Jesper's stylization of words like "brorsan" and "schitväder," he produces urban youth styles as something worth laughing at. Gorgis's jokes about the Asian sex worker sound sexist. Speaking like "a Serbian man" sounds racist and his teasing comments about Mohammed's father as anything but Swedish reconstruct Swedishness as homogeneous and excluding. This playing around with one another's voices and identities involves a balancing act that may simultaneously produce both racist and anti-racist meanings. It allows the young men to laugh at the Other, but at the same time their jokes enable them to disrupt stereotypes and display the arbitrary that categorizations of ethnicity, gender, and race contain (see Weaver, 2011).

As Kothoff (2006) has argued, stereotypes employed in jokes can foreground gender (and other) identities, in both an affirmative and a subversive way. The young men's play includes the enjoyment of mocking social order by using otherwise forbidden words and the pleasure in the humour that reproduces as well as challenges social hierarchies (Billig, 2005). However, among all the meanings that can be read from the young men's jokes, they succeed also in making the various stereotypes comically absurd.

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Notes

Linguistic recourses from other languages than Swedish are explained in brackets in the transcripts. Such transcript practice does of course risk to reproduce languages as fixed and separate from each other. Words that stand out as in need of translation even in the young men's community, are followed by an explanation of language of origin, whilst words that are well established in the youth style that the participants employ, are referred to as "emblematic for urban youth style".

Transcription conventions:

(.)	a short pause of less than one second
(2.0)	a longer pause, time in seconds
(reads)	comments on context
[hanky-panky]	explanations of untranslatable expressions
:	extended sound
::	longer extension
<u>Sweden</u>	underlined, said with stress

HOW COULD	said in loud voice
?	indicates question intonation
!	indicates exclamatory intonation
“ ”	quotation marks indicate the speaker's reference to someone else's voice, i.e., “You can migrate back to your crappy homeland”
[---]	missing speech
<i>Är Sverige sämst</i>	original transcript marked in italics