

"Our local dialect" or "the slang of suburban boys"? Public discourses of sociolinguistic authenticity, community and place in multicultural Sweden

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In recent years, researchers of bilingualism and language policy have turned their attention to Sweden. Sweden as a polity has been described by e.g. Milani (2007a, p. 169) as being “not famous for heated language debate in a cold climate”, suggesting that language and the Swedish sociolinguistic context is typically thought of as uncontroversial, natural and, to use Coupland and Jaworski’s (2004) characterization of typical folk-perspectives on language, “innocent (p. 16)”. However, there has been increasing attention paid particularly to the policy-making and public debates of the 1990s and 2000s which have negotiated the status of Swedish within Sweden, and attempted to situate Swedish within two broadly defined contexts: a) globalization and the increasing influence of English within the domestic Swedish context (Oakes, 2001, 2005; Milani, 2007a) and b) the existence of national and immigrant minority languages and the legislation surrounding these (Hult, 2004; Hyltenstam, 1999, 2004). With regard to immigrants and immigrant languages, in Sweden or otherwise, King and Ganuza (2005) remark that “relatively few studies have examined bilingualism and multilingualism from the viewpoint of the speakers themselves—that is, how bilingual and multilingual individuals interpret and describe their own experiences and linguistic and cultural status” (p. 180).

In this paper, I focus on two types of public texts that are part of an ongoing public debate concerning the existence and validity of what Stroud (2004) calls a “potential, imagined, ‘pan-immigrant’ variety of Swedish” (p. 197), commonly referred to as “Rinkebysvenska” or “Rinkeby Swedish”, after a heavily immigrant-populated suburb of Stockholm, Sweden’s capital city. An alternative reference for the variety is “Miljonsvenska” or “Million Swedish”, referring to its provenance in the Million Program housing estates of major Swedish cities. Throughout my analysis, I refer to the potential variety in question as Million Swedish rather than Rinkeby Swedish. This is due to the nature of the debate itself: the idea of Million Swedish, as defined by its proponents, is the contested entity and object language of the discussion.

I examine two opinion articles from a Swedish daily newspaper, as well as a humorous feature of the web edition of an immigrant activist publication. I analyze these

texts from the perspectives of sociolinguistic authenticity (Coupland, 2003) and the process of authentication through tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz, 2003; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, 2005). I aim to show how sequences of referring terms (as discussed by Schiffrin, 2006a, 2006b), particularly to the name of the variety, its speakers, and the places in which it is spoken, are instrumental in negotiating the idea of an authentic language variety and its ratified speakers. Further, I show how the writers of the humorous feature of *gringo.se* position Million Swedish an authentic variety of Swedish through the use of the tactics of intersubjectivity.

Ultimately, I argue that sociolinguistic authenticity and authentication are two analytic tools which may help us understand attitudes to language variety and language change. This may be of particular use when examining language ideologies in places such as Sweden, Western nations which, in late-modernity, are heterogeneous and home to many different linguistic processes driven by those commonly thought of as “non-native” speakers.

1 The Swedish Language Ideological Debate

Jan Blommart’s (1999) idea of the language ideological debate provides a useful perspective on how language ideologies are negotiated, particularly in the public arena. Language ideological debates are particularly visible in the policy and media spheres, and are windows to legislative as well as everyday language ideologies. Public perceptions about language in Sweden are seen in such debates: Tommaso Milani’s (2007a, 2007b) work on policy documents, as part of the ongoing language ideological debate in Sweden, shows that Swedish is consistently positioned as an entity under threat from both globalizing forces and English as a lingua franca, and from linguistic innovation resulting from contact with immigrant languages. Swedish, in short, is no longer “safe” as Sweden’s principal language, in part because of the increasing influence of English in the country, but also due to movements within Sweden which are felt to undermine the status of standard Swedish internally.

The phenomenon of what is frequently referred to as Rinkeby Swedish (Million Swedish in this analysis), which is defined by its proponents as a variety of Swedish which originated among the immigrant populations of the suburbs of Sweden’s major cities, is one such controversial “threat” to standard Swedish. Christopher Stroud (2004) shows how non-policy actors in the public sphere discount the credibility of this linguistic phenomenon by portraying it as a form of semilingualism, through overt displays of its apparent lack of idiomaticity, syntactic disfluencies, and associations with delinquency and violence. In short, one way in which opponents further their view that this potential variety has no place in mainstream Swedish society is through reference to its inauthenticity. This idea may be situated in the literature on sociolinguistic authenticity and the process of authentication.

2 Sociolinguistic Authenticity and Authentication

Sociolinguistic authenticity is a perspective on language variety and ideology that highlights “folk” aspects of linguistics and is thus a useful tool in considering ideas of language as they exist in society. Nikolas Coupland (2003) puts forth the perspective that metalanguage provides a very valuable site for investigating and understanding everyday ideologies of language authenticity. Authentic language can be measured with relation to

the ideas of ontology, historicity, consensus, systemic coherence, and value (Coupland, 2004, pp. 418-419). Authentic things can be traced historically, are recognised by many people, are systematic, and are of clear value to relevant groups. Coupland further argues that two views of authenticity are at play in society: the establishment view and the vernacular view. While the vernacular view underpins the social agenda of sociolinguists, it is still primarily the establishment view of authenticity that is visible in social life. Ideas of standardness and correctness, and the search for the authentic in dictionaries and regulations rather than on the street, permeate public metalinguistic discourses.

Mary Bucholtz (2003) proposes that authenticity is best viewed as a process rather than a state, and introduces the ideas of linguistic authentication and denaturalization to show the processes by which ideologies of authenticity are constructed, enacted, and reproduced. Drawing from this, Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 2005) introduce six discursive tactics of intersubjectivity, or identity relations. The identity relations are presented as three contrasting pairs, and can be applied to an analysis of linguistic authenticity. The tactics are (adapted from Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, pp. 599-605):

1a. Adequation, by which actors argue that an entity is in some way similar to a more dominant entity, while maintaining its distinctiveness.

1b. Distinction, by which actors downplay similarities and create a view of mutual exclusivity.

2a. Authorization, by which actors argue for authenticity by appealing to some culturally recognized authority.

2b. Illegitimation, by which actors reject authorization tactics in order to debunk authenticity arguments.

3a. Authentication, by which actors construct an image of some facet of their identity as genuine, lasting, and authentic.

3b. Denaturalization, by which actors attempt to portray an entity as inauthentic and incredible.

One way in which these tactics can be identified in the language ideological debate is through analyzing referring sequences. Schiffrin (2006a, 2006b) notes that reference and referring sequences provide an insight into the social reality of a particular actor, and allows speakers to position themselves, others, and objects in relation to what they hold to be true and right. In my data, I will show how references to the potential variety of Swedish, its speakers and its places are tied to the tactics of intersubjectivity and sociolinguistic authenticity.

3 Data and Analysis

The data for this paper consist of two opinion articles published in Swedish daily newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, in May 2006. At that time, a web and print publication founded and run by young first- and second-generation immigrants, *Gringo*, was enjoying significant media exposure for its use of the ‘immigrant language variety’ in journalism, and its satirical treatment of the perceived language hegemony of standard Swedish. The debate between the editorial board of *Gringo* and comparative literature scholar Ebba Witt-Brattström touches on issues of the existence, classification, legitimacy, and speech community of what *Gringo* themselves call “Million Swedish”. In addition, I analyze a humor feature in the (now defunct) web edition of *Gringo*. In this feature, the authors showcase Million Swedish lexis by creating “typical” scenarios in which “default”

speakers of Million Swedish use the words in a naturalistic context. I focus on identifying the tactics of intersubjectivity in these texts in order to show how reference to speakership and place works to create the image of Million Swedish as authentically Swedish.

3.1 Debating Million Swedish: the Opinion Articles

3.1.1 Is Million Swedish a Variety?

In Figure 1, both the proponents and the opponent of Million Swedish are attempting to give an adequate definition of what the possible language variety is.

Figure 1. References to definitions of the variety¹

Gringo	Ebba Witt-Brattström
<p>Vi kallar det andra benämnt som Rinkebysvenska eller invandarsvenska för "miljonsvenska"...</p> <p>We call what others have termed Rinkeby Swedish or immigrant Swedish, "Million Swedish" ...</p>	<p>Man postulerar att miljoner nya svenskar skulle snacka detta lingo.</p> <p>They argue that millions of new Swedes talk in this lingo</p>
<p>Miljonsvenskan i sig är det perfekta exemplet på något vackert som skapas när olika människor från världens alla hörn möts och skapar ihop.</p> <p>Million Swedish itself is a perfect example of a beautiful thing that is created when different people from all the corners of the world meet and create together.</p>	<p>Det som ibland talas av ungdomar i Malmös, Göteborgs och Stockholms invandrartäta förorter är olika varianter av multietnisk pojkslang...</p> <p>What is sometimes spoken by youth in the immigrant-heavy suburbs of Malmö, Göteborg and Stockholm, is different varieties of a multiethnic boy slang</p>
<p>Om miljonsvenskan blir accepterad som en svensk dialekt är det en utsträckt hand till alla de som känner sig utanför.</p> <p>If Million Swedish becomes accepted as a Swedish dialect, it will extend a hand to all those who feel excluded.</p>	<p>Multislang är inget alternativ... Förortsslang är kort sagt ett aggressivt rop på hjälp.</p> <p>The multi-slang is no alternative... the suburban slang is basically an aggressive cry for help</p>

The first example from *Gringo* shows the tactic of *adequation* at work: *Gringo* reject externally imposed definitions and give it their own name. At the same time, Million Swedish is adequated to standard Swedish: it is both an equal form of Swedish and also a distinctive entity. By creating this distinctive reference, *Gringo* reject establishment ideas that the variety is only spoken in Rinkeby and only by immigrants. Renaming and claiming ground as a variety of Swedish is a powerful adequation tactic. *Gringo* also highlight the variety's productivity and value, calling it "a beautiful thing" that "is created" by its speakers and therefore should be afforded dialect status.

¹ All entries throughout the paper are given in the original Swedish, with translations by the author.

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By contrast, EWB *denaturalizes* the idea that Million Swedish is Swedish at all, using a number of different referring terms for it while avoiding mention of Swedish altogether. “This lingo”, she mockingly calls it, is nothing but a set of inconsistent forms of “slang”. References to *whose* slang it is are particularly interesting. A number of different elements qualify “slang”, including “boy”, “multiethnic”, and simply “multi”. The multiple references contribute to the establishment idea that a non-standard linguistic phenomenon cannot be properly defined, and thus cannot be seen as authentic. Whatever the apparent speakers of the variety may say, it is not easily definable or bounded in a way that affords it authenticity or credibility.

3.1.2 Who Are the Speakers of Million Swedish?

Figure 2. References to Speakers of Million Swedish

Gringo	Ebba Witt-Brattström
Människorna som bott i de uppradade betong-husen The people who have lived in the lined up concrete buildings	De som tar det i sin mun kan räknas i några tiotusental Those who use it [can be limited to] a few tens of thousands
En våg unga svenskar A wave of young Swedes	Pojkgeneration Generation of boys
Människor från världens alla hörn People from all the corners of the world	Vissa ungdomsgrupper Some groups of adolescents

As seen above, the naming of the variety shows that preciseness is an authentication tactic while unclear reference emphasizes inauthenticity. The referring patterns to the speakers of the variety show the opposite. Here, *Gringo* use the tactic of *authentication*. In seeking to authenticate the variety, diverse reference to speakers works to portray Million Swedish as a widely spoken variety. According to *Gringo*, Million Swedish is spoken by “the people in the concrete buildings”, “a wave of young Swedes”, and as broadly as “people from all the corners of the world”. Million Swedish is everywhere, it affects many, and is therefore a genuine and authentic variety for its speakers.

By contrast, EWB uses few and specific references to the speakership: the speakers are “a few tens of thousands, no more than “some youth groups”, and one specific “generation of boys”. “Boys” conjures up an image of unagentive children, who cannot claim authority over their unproductive language practice. Since the idea of sociolinguistic authenticity necessitates that an authentic entity can be traced historically and have “consensus” (Coupland, 2003), these specific references in essence *denaturalize* the potential language variety.

3.1.3 Where is Million Swedish Spoken?

Figure 3. References to the variety’s regional and local anchoring

Gringo	Ebba Witt-Brattström
Den pratas inte bara i Rinkeby, och inte heller bara av “invandrare” It is not only spoken in Rinkeby, nor only by “immigrants”	I Malmös, Göteborgs och Stockholms invandartäta förorter In the heavily immigrant-populated suburbs of Malmö, Göteborg, and Stockholm

<p>Ungdomar i miljonprogrammen gör oftast själva ett aktivt val att ha sin lokala dialekt Young people in the million programs often choose actively to have their local dialect</p>	<p>Förortsslangen The suburban slang</p>
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Similarly to the speaker references, the references to the variety's localities and use domains seek to either broaden or confine Million Swedish and thereby *authenticate* or *denaturalize* it. Following along from their assertion that the authentic name of the variety is Million Swedish, *Gringo* define the variety's geographic boundaries as being the Million Programs. While clearly tying the variety to place, the authors reject the idea that it is only typified by Rinkeby. Instead, *Gringo* situate the variety firmly among young speakers within a much wider geographic scope. Conversely, Ebba Witt-Brattström very explicitly constrains the use domains and localities of the variety by confining it to three cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö), and then also to a subsection of the cities: the immigrant-populated areas. Again, the difference between an authentic variety and an inauthentic form of slang appears to lie in its spread: *Gringo*'s argument rests on the geographic spread of the variety, while EWB appeals to the apparent confinement of it to showcase its illegitimacy.

We can thus see how the proponents attempt to authenticate the potential variety by the tactics of adequation (the variety is distinctive but it is still Swedish), authorization (the variety is a social reality to a lot of people), and authentication (the variety is a positive and productive thing, and thus genuine). Contrasting, the opponent uses the tactics of distinction by avoiding reference to the variety as Swedish, illegitimation by characterizing its speakers as children, and denaturalization by confining it to very few use domains and even fewer speaker populations. These data exemplify how Bucholtz and Hall's tactics of intersubjectivity can illuminate our understanding of the processes by which both establishment and vernacular linguistic authenticities are constructed, reproduced, and challenged. In the next section, I look closer at how the proponents of Million Swedish create a fuller picture of the variety and its speakers and places as sociolinguistically authentic.

3.2 Tying Million Swedish to Place: a Gringo.se Feature

In this section, I describe one of the features on the (now defunct) website, www.gringo.se², in which the editors showcase Million Swedish as a "real" language variety which is tied to a particular place and group of users. In the humorously written feature, *Miljonsvenska ord* ("Million Swedish Words"), the meaning and use of 'dialectal' features of Million Swedish are explained. Although the feature may be interpreted as tongue-in-cheek, it nevertheless gives insight into how the community of Million Swedish speakers is imagined by the writers and projected to the public. One question we can ask in relation to these highly performative data is: How do the self-identified political activists and proponents of Million Swedish typify and perform its meanings, speakers, and places?

² The URL is currently the domain of the relaunched version of *Gringo*. The text analysed in this section was taken from the original version of *Gringo*, prior to the restructuring of the site and removal of old content. Hence, URLs for the specific entries in *Miljonsvenska ord* cannot be given.

3.2.1 Authorization: Million Swedish lexis in action

Figure 4. Million Swedish Words; *aina*

Aina

”Aina” är en förkortning på det turkiska slangordet ”aynasiz”, som egentligen betyder ”utan spegel”, men syftar på polisen, en eller flera. Så när någon ropar ”Skynda bre, aina kommer!” kan du vara säker på att blattarna har gjort något riktigt skurkaktigt.



“Aina” is a short form of the Turkish word “aynasiz” which really means “without a mirror”, but refers to the police, one or several [officers]. So when someone shouts “Hurry up, bre [‘bro’], aina’s coming!” you can be sure that the blatte has done something really crookish.”

This entry describes a Million Swedish lexical item as synonymous to Standard Swedish. The dictionary style is evoked by the up-front identification of the word’s provenance in the Turkish language. In order to exemplify the community which is said to use words like *aina*, the writer creates a ‘real-life’ scenario in which the word is likely to be heard. The speakers of Million Swedish are portrayed as running from the police, and also as users of the term *bre* or ‘bro’, which indexes youth and masculinity.

We can see how the writers use elements of the tactic of authorization—the authors appeal to the reader’s understanding of the dictionary as an authority, and suggest that the word *aina*’s provenance from a familiar language, as well as its use by speakers in “real” situations, lend it an authority and authenticity. Next, we can see how the tactic of adequation plays out in the Miljonsvenska Ord feature.

3.2.2 Adequation: Equally Useful Lexis

Figure 5. Million Swedish Words; *dissa*

Dissa

”Dissa” uttalas precis som det stavas och är en svensk, förkortad variant av det engelska ordet ”dismiss”. ”Dissa” kan ersätta ord som ”förolämpa” och ”nobbba”, så när du hör någon säga ”jag dissade honom/henne stenhårt” så menar blatten alltså ”jag nobbade honom/henne rejält”.



“Dissa” is pronounced just like it sounds and is a Swedish, shortened form of the English word “dismiss”. “Dissa” can be a substitute for words like “insult” or “reject”, so when you hear someone say “I dissed him/her hard” the blatte means, “I strongly rejected him/her.”

As reviewed earlier, the tactic of adequation focuses simultaneously on the *adequacy* and *equality* of a particular form to another. In this example, the Million Swedish lexical item *dissa* is adequated: it is shown to be both a Million Swedish lexical item and a more widely known, uncontroversially Swedish verb—itsself a borrowing. Again, the reader is invited to imagine themselves in a situation where Million Swedish is spoken, in this case one where a *blatte*³ is describing a negative turn in an interpersonal relationship. Since *dissa* can replace other, most ‘standard’ forms, it is presented as equal to standard Swedish while remaining distinct in its meaning and use.

3.2.3 Authentication: A typical day in the hood

Figure 6. Million Swedish Words; *tamam*, *område*, *hinka*

“Tamam”, “område” och “hinka”

Ordet “tamam” betyder typ “okej” på turkiska och kan ersätta ordet “softa” till exempel. “Område” är ett annat ord för “förort” eller “hood”. Och ordet “hinka” ska inte förväxlas med substantivet “hink”. I hooden är “hinka” ett annat ord för “dricka” (inte vatten).
Så när nån skön tuggare säger “Tamam, kompish! Nu taggar vi till vårt område och hinkar!” så betyder

The word “tamam” means, like, “okay” in Turkish and can be substituted for the word “softa [to chill]” for instance. “Område [lit. area]” is another word for “suburb” or “hood”. And the word “hinka [‘to bucket’]” shouldn’t be confused with the noun “hink [bucket]”. In the hood, “hinka” is another word for “to drink” (not water). So when some cool dude says “Tamam, buddy! Now let’s roll to our område and hinka!” it means...

In this entry, the writers tie Million Swedish to place by suggesting that distinct lexis is used to describe the variety’s locality. Crucially, *område* is described as synonymous to both standard Swedish *förort* (suburb) and *hood* which can be traced to English and the use of this form to mean economically disadvantaged, inner city, high rise neighborhoods – a very similar description to the one typically used for the Million Program suburbs in Sweden. In short, *Miljonsvenska ord* situates Million Swedish predominantly within the Million Program suburbs, presenting a whole group of lexical items which may be used to describe this locality.

4 Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, I have described two competing metalinguistic discourses regarding a potential, emerging, and youth-driven language innovation, and attempted to show how ideologies of authenticity are created in the public sphere. Following ideas from work on authenticity and the tactics of intersubjectivity (Coupland, 2003; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004), I have attempted to show how Million Swedish, is constructed through references to its nature, its speakers and its localities.

³ As a note, the term *blatte*, referring to an imagined default speaker of Million Swedish, appears to have originally been a pejorative term for ‘non-Western European’ or ‘non-White’ immigrants. Subsequently it has been ‘reclaimed’ by socially conscious immigrants, particularly by youth.

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Proponents of the variety create a broad reference base for its speakers and localities in order to create an image of it as widely spoken by diverse populations, thereby rendering it authentic. At the same time, the proponents emphasize the variety's identity by creating a specific reference to what it is, rejecting previous attempts to define it. In the feature of *gringo.se*, the potential variety is presented through the tactic of *authorization* as an entity whose lexis has genuine provenance (and is not made up), through *adequation* as equal to standard Swedish, and through *authentication* as a salient social reality to its users. Conversely, the opponent of the variety denaturalizes it through an inverse process: narrowing the references to its speakership to merely "boys", while simultaneously confining the variety to a few specific locations and domains.

These discursive processes paint a portrait of a dichotomy between two views of authenticity: the establishment-oriented view and the vernacularly oriented view. It is possible that this debate is indicative of other similar processes, perhaps particularly in Europe. Late-modern Europe is a place where migration has been a social reality for some time. It is not entirely surprising that youth-driven linguistic innovation with elements from foreign languages happens, perhaps particularly in places of intense language contact, such as the Million Programmes. Places like these have the potential to be of great interest to sociolinguists, as they are certainly sites of complex social networks, communities of practice, and innovative and productive negotiations of ethnoracial and national identity.

Finally, a perspective on language ideology which emphasizes both authenticity and the process of authentication provides a very dynamic way of looking at language ideology beyond the policy perspective. It allows us to approach questions of particular relevance to the idea of language variety: What is a variety? What makes it real? Who decides when it is real? And in situations of contact between a supposed "standard" and a vernacular reality, we may also look to ideas of authenticity to ask who is allowed to create, use, and shape an authentic language variety.

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