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Reality rhymes – Recognition of rap in multicultural Norway

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the role of Hip Hop and rap lyrics in the reevaluation and legitimization of a new multiethnolectal speech style developed in multiethnic and multilingual environments in Oslo, Norway. This speech style, commonly referred to as “Kebab-Norwegian”, has been met with negative attitudes not only from the establishment but also in mainstream media. However, attitudes seem to be changing, partly due to the efforts of rappers from immigrant backgrounds who promote themselves as users and propagators of the new speech style. They take a clear stance against the prevalent idea that “Kebab-Norwegian” poses a threat to the Norwegian language. In our paper we present on-going research on some of the most recent high school textbooks where lyrics from these performers have been included, and we also consider the strategies of promotion employed by some of the publishing houses.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Framing and objectives

Hip Hop clearly plays an important role in the lives of youth around the globe, connecting them in a supranational community of practice, and granting them a voice for expressing their local concerns and desires (Alim, 2009; Pennycook, 2007; Terkourafi, 2010). Hip Hop makes sense in many ways, by connecting the global and the local and providing tools for expressing both resistance and belonging (Cutler & Røyneland, 2015). Recent work on language and identity among urban youth in multiethnic environments in Norway suggests that Hip Hop also plays a decisive role in the creation and formation of a new, multiethnolectal urban speech style (Brunstad, Røyneland, & Opsahl, 2010; Cutler & Røyneland, 2015). By ‘multiethnolectal speech styles’ we mean particular speech styles that are characterized by the inclusion of linguistic features from many different varieties, used by people with several ethnic backgrounds, to express their minority status and/or as a reaction to that status to upgrade it (e.g. Clyne, 2000; Eckert, 2008; Quist, 2008; Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008). Among the self-proclaimed users of such a speech style in Norway, the vast majority express affiliation to the four classic elements from Hip Hop culture, through a

preference for rap music, Dj-ing, graffiti, break dancing, and/or through a particular clothing style often associated with Hip Hop, or several of these elements.

In our article we argue that there is an emerging change in attitudes toward this multiethnolectal speech style, which potentially contributes to a new understanding of the overall dialect situation in Norway. These attitudinal changes are, we claim, partly a response to the efforts of Hip Hop artists, especially rappers. Dialects and to some degree sociolects have high ideological value among Norwegians (e.g. Røyneland, 2009; Røyneland, 2010). Dialects are generally widely accepted and used both within private and public domains—also within different musical genres like Hip Hop.¹ After an initial phase where English was the dominant language, Norwegian rap went through a period of “Norwegianisation” and today many rappers use their local dialects, however often with American English Hip Hop expressions interspersed as a way to reference the provenance of African American Hip Hop (Brunstad et al., 2010). Authenticity in Hip Hop is to a large extent determined at the local level. Local languages—both indigenous and migrant—as well as local dialects have become the ‘base languages’

¹ Dialects are here understood in the traditional sense—i.e. as geographically defined varieties—whereas sociolects are understood as a set of features that are typical for certain social groups (e.g. Chambers & Trudgill, 1980). Notwithstanding, it may be rather tricky to keep dialects, sociolects and ethnolects apart as they may get conflated, particularly in urban areas; people who reside in a specific geographical area often belong to the same social group and sometimes also the same ethnic group.

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of local Hip Hop scenes as well a key marker of local authenticity (Androutsopoulos, 2009; Terkourafi, 2010). “Keepin it real”, thus, both entails *keepin it local*, or street, by capitalizing on different aspects of localness and *keepin it global* by displaying loyalty to the culture of the hip-hop genre (Terkourafi, 2010).

We are not studying Hip Hop as pedagogy, but rather more indirectly how Hip Hop has consequences for pedagogy, in the sense that it has contributed to the reevaluation and legitimization of “Kebab-Norwegian”, which has in turn has fed into pedagogical resources and into other mainstream, middle-class cultural manifestations. Hip Hop practices interact with dominant language ideologies both inside and outside educational contexts. We examine a selection of high school textbooks adhering to the revised Norwegian national curriculum standards from 2013, to show how Hip Hop elements interact with representations of linguistic diversity in Norway. Through a content analysis, we consider *where* and *how* the textbooks thematise the new, multiethnolectal speech style, and whether reference to Hip Hop is made. Further, we offer some examples of the impact that Hip Hop artists’ emblematic performances have had in the media, and especially on the general public. The interplay between identity formation by which young people conceive themselves and others, several Hip Hop elements, and textbook producers’ interpretations of the national curriculum standards may be contributing to a new understanding of linguistic diversity. This in turn may lead to a less puristic and normatively more flexible spoken language ideology.

On a more general level we ask how Hip Hop practices interact with dominant (standard) language and literacy ideologies, and how various conceptions of language and society are bridged and transformed in educational settings in a society sometimes referred to as a “dialect paradise”. Trudgill emphasizes that there is great societal tolerance for linguistic diversity in Norway “[...] and that, what is more, linguistic diversity in Norway is officially recognized and protected” (Trudgill, 2002, p. 31). In fact the Norwegian Parliament decided in 1878 that no particular spoken standard should be taught in elementary and secondary schools. This principle is still valid today and has no doubt been essential for the continued use of local dialects in Norway and for the contentious position of the oral standards (e.g. Jahr & Mæhlum, 2009). An interesting question is whether this tolerance for diversity applies to all kinds of linguistic variation. We explore some parallels between historical language struggle and debates and the creation and formation of a new, multiethnolectal urban speech style, and we suggest that this parallelism provides some interesting implications for the pedagogic practices in classrooms.

The Norwegian case may in turn contribute to the wider debate about emerging translanguistic varieties in urban contexts, along the lines, e.g., of the metrolingualism proposed by Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) and ideological debates regarding the concept of purism. Moreover, our case study suggests that the commodification of language is a complex, multilayered phenomenon (Cutler & Røyneland, 2015; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Heller, 2010). Hence, a commodity is any (linguistic) semiotic resource which may be traded into other, more valuable resources, such as for instance increased social status or higher income. Hip Hop artists use multiethnolectal features as a commodity in their self-promotion. At the same time, Hip Hop elements seem to be used as a commodity by publishers in the promotion of the new high school textbooks. This double aspect of commodification brings into view the question regarding the schools’ and educators’ perceptions and legitimization of Hip Hop as culture.

1.2. Sociolinguistic speech style

The new speech practices found in contemporary multilingual urban areas may, in our view, best be described as a

multiethnolectal speech style. We prefer to use the term *style* and not *variety*, since a sociolinguistic style includes a wider range of semiotic symbols than a variety, which is restricted to linguistic items alone. Style may be defined as a clustering of resources, including linguistic resources, and an association of that clustering with social meaning and with an identifiable aspect of social practice (cf. Eckert, 2001, p. 123; Quist, 2005, p. 76). Whereas the study of varieties is basically structuralist in its approach to variation, the study of styles sees variation as a resource for self-positioning in social space, and is more concentrated on how social meaning is created through language. Social style is, according to Auer (2007), a multilevel phenomenon which directly challenges, and which may overcome, the more traditional approach to linguistic variation where focus often lies on single variables.

1.3. Linguistic characteristics of and attitudes toward multiethnolectal Norwegian

The multiethnolectal speech style is characterized by a wide range of co-occurring linguistic features including an association of these features with certain social practices. A closer look at the specific linguistic phenomena reveals at least three patterns of development (Ekberg, Opsahl, & Wiese, 2015): Contact-induced changes, such as lexical loans from some of the background languages available in the communities; new patterns that arise from an extension of lexical material or grammatical patterns offered by the respective majority languages; and, finally, developments that reflect phenomena of general language change, such as the interaction of weaker grammatical constraints and a more direct realization of information-structural preferences. A typical feature of multiethnolectal speech styles is an extensive and also extended use of loan words from immigrant languages. Some such words come to play the role of discourse markers with specific discourse functions (e.g. *wallah* = *I swear by Allah* (Arabic)). Many are swear words or expressions that in other ways index cultural taboos or proscriptions (e.g. *kæbe* = *prostitute/girl* (Berber), *maricon* = *homosexual* (Spanish), *tæsjje* = *steal* (Berber) *kotha/kohti* = *male/female dog* (Punjabi)). Other common features of the speech style are violations of the syntactic V2 constraint, rendering a XSV word order, where ‘X’ is a topicalised element, ‘S’ the subject and ‘V’ the finite verb (e.g. **Plutselig han kom* XSV ‘Suddenly he came’ instead of standard verb second *Plutselig kom han* XVS ‘Suddenly came he’), as well as some morphological developments (e.g. grammatical gender simplification like the use of masculine gender with neuter nouns), some prosodic features (e.g. “staccato” sounding intonation), and the development of new determiners (for more examples from the Norwegian context, see Opsahl, 2009; Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008). Several of these features are found in urban multiethnolectal speech styles across Scandinavia and also in other parts of Europe (see Nortier & Svendsen (eds.), 2015; Quist & Svendsen (eds.), 2010).

Analyses of how this linguistic development is covered in the media (Ims, 2014; Svendsen & Marzo, 2015) and in a large Internet based survey (Ims, 2013) reveal large amounts of negative attitudes toward this speech style, and highlight the fact that we indeed are dealing with ideological struggles (which is nothing unique: see for instance Androutsopoulos (2010) for related cases in Germany). It is often argued that the use of this speech style is a hindrance for young people who are trying to enter the job market. In the media it is commonly referred to as “Kebab-Norwegian” and framed as something problematic (Svendsen, 2014). However, several Oslo-based rappers from immigrant backgrounds promote themselves as users of this new speech style and take a clear stance against the prevalent idea that it poses a threat to the Norwegian language. Two prominent rappers of immigrant background, Emire and Lillebror, stated in an interview some years back that:

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