'Ghetto language' in Danish mainstream rap

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we carry out an ethnographically informed sociolinguistic analysis of language use in contemporary Danish rap. We contextualize our analytical observations by drawing on knowledge from interviews with stakeholders from the music industry and ethnographic fieldwork carried out among a group of young rappers. Based on this research, we argue that while current Danish rap may be innovative and renew the way language is used compared to the linguistic tendencies of the Danish hip hop market before 2013 it does not expand the way language as such is talked about, but to some extent reproduces existing value ascriptions.

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1. 'Minority rappers' and 'ghetto language'-from margin to mainstream

In the beginning of 2014, we talked to 19-year-old Isaam about how Danish standard language dominated in the rap he had been producing with friends, in youth clubs, and with a number of mentors from the Danish hip hop scene a couple of years earlier (see Stæhr and Madsen, 2015). We were puzzled by the lack of youth slang and mixing otherwise characteristic of the everyday urban vernacular, but he explained:

> well the music business here in Denmark
>
> there it's so much eh ethnic Danes
>
> […] who are the foremen of it all (.)
>
> and they select what can hit the audience the best
>
> so they'll rather take for example an (.) an ethnic Dane than (.)
>
> if if they do not understand what he's saying'
>
> (Retrospective interview with Isaam, February 2014, our translation)

In this way, Isaam linked their linguistic choices to a wider tendency within the Danish hip hop market to devalue language use that, in his way of phrasing it, ethnic Danes would possibly not understand. However, 2014 also became the year that the Copenhagen-based rap artist Sivas Torbati (also known as S!vas) reached a mainstream audience and successfully made the linguistic style he and other hip hop artists occasionally refer to as 'ghetto language' a significant part of his brand (the media has recycled this linguistic label). Sivas became acknowledged and awarded specifically for 'his inimitable use of

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inventive ghetto slang which mixes Danish with Middle Eastern and all sorts of homemade phrases. And in the mouth of Sivas sounds fresh, surprising and yes, awesomely cool' (Gaunt, Berlingske, 2014, our translation). Sivas, in fact, explicitly claims in the media that it is his mission to put (ghetto) language on the agenda and to extend people's knowledge of this way of speaking in general. In addition to using and developing the contemporary Copenhagen youth vernacular as part of his creative endeavors, he has designed a language app translating vocabulary from his lyrics to standard Danish.

In this article, we investigate the language ideological and sociolinguistic perspectives of the success of Sivas and the linguistic characteristics of his music as well as the music of MellemFingaMuzik, a group with close links to Sivas and the most recent, popular addition to this musical wave. Furthermore, we look into Sivas' participation in public debate, and we discuss the connections of Sivas' music and the reception of it as related to a wider movement within the current Danish music market – from the marginal position of minority language in urban Danish rap as described by Isaam above, to the present celebration of these resources in urban rap spearheaded by Sivas (most recently including MellemFingaMuzik). In this article, we carry out an ethnographically informed sociolinguistic analysis of language use in Sivas' and MFM's musical productions. We contextualize our analytical observations by drawing on knowledge from interviews with stakeholders from the music industry and ethnographic fieldwork carried out among a group of young rappers (see Stæhr and Madsen, 2015). Based on this research, we argue that while current Danish rap may be innovative and renew the way language is used compared to the linguistic tendencies of the Danish hip hop market before 2013 (Ringsager, 2015; Stæhr and Madsen, 2015), it does not expand the way language as such is talked about, and the enregisterment (Agha, 2003) we witness in these musical productions to a great extent reproduces stereotypical existing indexical value ascriptions.

To situate our case study within the sociolinguistics of hip hop, we begin by briefly sketching some key findings of this research field and their language ideological implications. We relate these findings to the sociolinguistic conditions of Copenhagen, and to our previous research on hip hop and language in this context. As a framework for engaging with sociolinguistic and language ideological aspects of music and popular culture, we briefly introduce our employment of Agha's (2003, 2007) theory of enregisterment, and after this we attend to Sivas' breakthrough, the change in the rap scene it reflects, and the language use in his productions. Finally, we discuss the value ascription and language ideological perspectives that this case brings about.

2. Hip hop, non-standard language and street credibility

Language-focused hip hop research describes vernacular, hybrid, and creative linguistic practices as characteristic of this cultural form, and hip hop language has received scholarly attention from both a sociolinguistic (overview in Cutler, 2007) and a literacy pedagogical perspective (overview in Alim, 2011). Sociolinguists have documented a close relationship between hip hop language and African American English (Morgan, 2002) and shown how non-African Americans adopt linguistic practices associated with AAE as part of their hip hop involvement (Bucholtz, 1999; Cutler, 1999). In hip hop outside the USA, English hip hop terms and AAE features are combined with local linguistic resources in localized interpretations of the genre (see e.g. Alim et al., 2009; Cutler, 2007; Pennycook, 2007; Varis and Wang, 2011). In Europe, it appears that it is a general feature of hip hop to employ the full linguistic repertoire of the situated environment, which may include non-standard dialectal or sociolectal resources and features of minority languages in contexts with large migrant communities (Androutsopoulos, 2007, 2009; Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003). In her review of the sociolinguistic literature on hip hop, Cutler notes that '[l]ocal dialects by virtue of their marginalized, stigmatized status fill a role similar to that of AAE in the USA' (Cutler, 2007, p. 525). Thus the preference for non-standard language use in hip hop is related to ideologies of authenticity, which involves the idea of being true to one's roots as well as being streetwise, as Cutler (2007, p. 529) explains:

> Authenticity in hip-hop is a complicated construct that depends on many variables, but one component involves socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural proximity to the urban African American community where hip-hop is created and disseminated, that is 'the street'.

Hip hop pedagogical studies (Alim, 2011; Alim et al., 2009; Hill, 2009; Pennycook, 2007) pay particular attention to the critical language awareness involved in creating rap lyrics. Hip hop is considered a cultural form with great potential for expanding traditional views of language by allowing for creative linguistic practice, such as mixing, innovative slang, etc. (Alim, 2011; Alim et al., 2009). Alim refers to the language and educational ideology of hip hop as *ill*-literacy using a term that plays on public discourses' evaluation of hip hop culture as 'illiterate', but inverts this notion by emphasizing the meaning of 'ill' in hip hop culture, where it is used to positively evaluate skilled and counter-hegemonic practices. The language pedagogical qualities of hip hop culture rests on the reframing of notions of correctness by linking them to hip hop cultural priorities rather than institutionally sanctioned norms of grammar rules, and it emphasizes the artistic creativity involved in the verbal productions.

As we have documented elsewhere (Stæhr and Madsen, 2015) and will discuss more in the following section, the verbal productions of the young rappers we have studied have contrasted with the tendencies of non-standard and hybrid language use described in sociolinguistic studies of hip hop (see similar findings in Stylianou, 2010). In this way, the language ideologies of the local rap community in the context of our research differed strikingly from the *ill*-literacy perspective. Before we elaborate on these findings, we will explore in more detail the kind of language use that was previously absent but is now present in mainstream rap.