



# Rapping the ‘Better folk’: Ideological and scalar negotiations of past and present



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on sociolinguistics of globalization, discourse studies and global hip hop studies, this article examines how the ideological sociocultural and -historical reality of Finland is (re)constructed and (re)negotiated in a local rap song and how the song takes issue with the official, but often tension-ridden Finnish–Swedish bilingualism. Its specific, ironic take arises from the fact that the rap artist is Finnish-speaking, but echoes a Swedish-speaking minority who are traditionally and stereotypically seen as a privileged, historical elite. The song exemplifies how rap can constitute a site for investigation of language ideological debates in bi/multilingual societies and how nationalistic-laden ideologies (one nation–one language–one state) are taken for granted, brought forth but also significantly problematized and questioned.

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## 1. Introduction: “This isn’t for better people, this is just folk of better quality”<sup>1</sup>

Finland has two national languages: the majority of Finns (89%) speak Finnish as their mother tongue while a small minority of 5.3% has Swedish as their mother tongue (Statistics Finland, 2014). In principle, the rights of the Swedish-speaking minority are protected by the law (Constitution of Finland, Section 17)<sup>2</sup>, but the reality is often quite different. Views on the Swedish language in Finland are extremely polarized – it is both appreciated and despised. And the same goes for the allegedly better-off Swedish-speaking Finns, often referred to in Finland in a derogatory way, by using the Swedish expression *bättre folk* (‘better-(off) folk/people’). In the past, the Swedish-speaking Finns formed the leading layers of Finnish society; they thus have long traditions of upper-class culture (Heikkilä and Rahkonen, 2011; Roos and Roos, 1984). The ‘bättre folk’ stereotype is based on both this historical (‘elite’) position and the ‘ethnic mobilization’ developed by the Finnish(-language) nationalist ideologies and Finnish-speaking ideologists at the turn of the 20th century (Heikkilä and Rahkonen, 2011, p. 145). It has been further upheld and also reinforced by (often strong and misguided) popular beliefs and the media (Heikkilä and Rahkonen, 2011, p. 145).

In Finnish society there is an on-going public debate over the status of Swedish and, in particular, the so-called ‘enforced’ Swedish (see e.g. Mäntynen et al., 2012). This term is often used to refer to the fact that it is compulsory for Finnish-speaking Finns to study Swedish (and – vice versa – for Swedish-speakers to study Finnish) at every level of education starting either from elementary school or, at the latest, from junior high school, all the way to the university level. One extreme of the debate is

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<sup>1</sup> The “Bättre folk” song and its lyrics were also analyzed in a Finnish-language article of the author (Westinen, 2012), but from a different point of view and aimed at a national audience. In addition, the song was included in the author’s PhD thesis (Westinen, 2014), which did not, however, specifically focus on (language) ideologies but on constructions of authenticity.

<sup>2</sup> In 1995, the Sámi, the Roma, and the Deaf languages were also given constitutional status in Finland.

represented by the Swedish-speaking Finns, who are concerned about the ‘domain loss’ of the Swedish language. Some of them feel that service in their mother tongue is insufficient in official institutions (Grönlund, 2011, p. 7). Therefore, if knowledge of Swedish was no longer required of staff in public agencies and offices, the Swedish speakers would face injustice, as they would no longer receive service in their mother tongue. At the other extreme, there are some Finnish-speaking Finns who see the state’s official policy of bilingualism, and hence the Swedish language, as a burden of the past and an unnecessary and problematic privilege favoring the Swedish-speaking minority. These attitudes towards Swedish-speaking Finns and the Swedish language have recently become increasingly hostile and threatening, particularly in the area of education, showcasing yet another cycle in the ongoing debate of Swedish in Finland. This is partly because the relative and absolute number of Swedish-speakers has diminished continuously throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, and it is no longer seen as a useful resource for all Finnish speakers, for example in Eastern Finland (where some people would prefer studying Russian over Swedish at school), and partly because of the recent success of the populist party *Perussuomalaiset* (the Finns), who actively question the necessity of learning Swedish at school, contrary to the politics of the pro-Swedish *Svenska folkpartiet* (‘Swedish People’s Party’) (see e.g. Boyd and Palviainen, 2015; Mäntynen et al., 2012: 337). People voice their negative attitudes in many public forums, for example, in letters to the editor in newspapers and in social media (Grönlund, 2011, p. 7).

These majority–minority sensitivities have also been addressed in different ways in popular culture – one example of this is a recent rap song, entitled “Bättre folk” (2011), by the Finnish-speaking rap artist Pyhimys (the Saint). What makes this song particularly interesting is that it is, in fact, a commentary on the polarized attitudinal climate in Finland. Its narrator, the Swedish-speaking Robban, demands equality between people and languages, and encourages the audiences to forget the past and the stereotypes associated with Swedish-speaking Finns. By focusing on the political and ideological tension regarding languages in Finland, the song can even be seen as illustrating one of the core missions of politically-aware rap on the whole: it represents and speaks for the ‘underdog’, in this case, the linguistic minority, and its treatment in public and popular discourses. Its specific take arises from the fact that this minority is not often seen as the underdog but rather a privileged minority. The song exemplifies how rap can constitute a site for the discussion and investigation of language ideological debates in bi/multilingual societies in which one of the languages is the dominant one and others have, in one way or another, a problematic minority role. In this sense, the Finnish example of rap as societal critique resembles and is linked to rap in other similar, tension-ridden bi/multilingual settings (such as English–French bilingualism in Quebec (see e.g. Sarkar, 2009) and *te reo Maori* (Maori language) and English in New Zealand (see e.g. Mitchell, 2001b)). Thus, with a sociolinguistic and discourse analytic take, this study also contributes to the emergent tradition of sociolinguistic hip hop research outside of the United States (see e.g. Alim et al., 2009; Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2002, 2003; Mitchell, 2001a; Pennycook, 2007; Terkourafi, 2010).

The specific aim of this article is to examine how the ideological sociocultural and -historical reality of Finland is (re)constructed and (re)negotiated by projecting various *scale-levels*, i.e. spatio-temporal scopes of understandability (Blommaert, 2010; Blommaert et al., 2015; Westinen, 2014) via the use of different linguistic and discursive *resources*. The scales can range (at least) from global, national, and regional to local, and they often intertwine and overlap. Thus, I will use the notion of scale to analyze the nuanced and multilayered nature and context of rap, in a way that transcends the simplified local–global dichotomy with the means of which many globally available discourses of popular culture have often been conceptualized (e.g. the articles in Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2002; Mitchell, 2001a). More specifically, by paying close attention to *what* is being said and *how* it is said, I will show how the rap artist carefully creates his critique on the historical and ideological juxtaposition between the Finnish-speaking Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns and suggests his solution to how the majority should treat the minority.

In line with the aims of this special issue, this article examines how a particular local hip hop culture – Finnish hip hop – aligns itself with both the local and more global (often better characterized by the notion ‘translocal’ – see below) traditions and discourses, by projecting various scales as part of its project. It also explores how ‘fixed’, ideological *a priori* categorizations – the indexical links between the Swedish language, the particular sociocultural and -linguistic community and the ‘better-offness’ – are very much taken for granted and made use of but are also, significantly, criticized and made fluid and contestable via ironic remarks. The article is organized as follows. I begin by conceptualizing (language) ideologies and their connection to rap music, after which I describe the theoretical and methodological framework, discourse studies and sociolinguistics of globalization and the key concepts, scales and resources. To set the scene, I then sketch a picture of Finnish hip hop culture and rap music, and, finally, analyze in detail the ways in which the lyrics of “Bättre folk” ideologically (re)construct and (re)negotiate the past and present.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. (Nationalistic) language ideologies

Nationalism can be broadly defined as the ideological ways in which a nation state is (re)constructed; *banal* nationalism, in turn, denotes the everyday ideological (re)production of the established nation states (Billig, 1995). Similarly to ‘nationalism’, the concept of ideology has also been theorized in various fields such as sociology (e.g. Foucault, 1980), political science<sup>3</sup> (e.g.

<sup>3</sup> Ideology can of course also be theoretically conceptualized within the framework of politics and political orientations, but it is not the specific focus of this article; it is commented on in the analysis when considered particularly relevant.

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