

**Sweden's Swedishest Words:**  
Verbal Hygiene on the Periphery of the Nation

English 569  
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Swedes found five thousand words missing from their language when they opened the 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the Swedish Academy's Word List, published in April 2006. Bowing to changing use patterns, the Academy removed *fattigmansstuga* (poor man's cottage), *herdinnedräkt* (shepherdess' clothing) and *fejdlysten* (one eager to feud) from the latest edition of the Word List. First published in 1874 and most recently in 1998, even these deletions left 125,000 sanctioned Swedish lexical items.

Just as some terms had fallen into disuse, ten thousand new words made their debut on the page as well. Most were uncontroversial: some readers giggled at *nakenchock* (nakedshock,) a term coined by the tabloid *Aftonbladet* when it had particularly steamy pictures of celebrities caught baring all. *Fågelinfluensa* (bird flu) was a bow to grim epidemiological reality, while *tårtning* (getting a pie in the face from a protestor) married the whimsical with the political.<sup>1</sup>

But none of these ten thousand new terms caused as much consternation as a number of slang words which the Academy saw fit to include. Though not identified as such by the Academy, most would recognize these new words as *Rinkebysvenska* (Rinkeby Swedish.) Associated with the multi-ethnic suburban housing projects surrounding the large cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, Rinkeby Swedish was

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<sup>1</sup> Janhunen 2006

identified as a distinct sociolect<sup>2</sup> at an academic conference by linguist Ulla-Britt Kotsinas in 1985. The phenomenon probably predated its formal ‘discovery’ by a decade or more, leading to an approximate birth date in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Different language researchers emphasize different aspects of the sociolect, but some generalizations are large numbers of Turkish, Arabic, and Spanish loan-words, flat intonation with loss of tonal accent, staccato delivery, and variation in vowel quality from most varieties of standard Swedish. All these phenomena are well-known from when Swedish has historically existed in a multi-lingual setting – many of them are in fact markers of the high-status Swedish spoken in the former colony of Finland. However in this case, the geographic designation of Rinkeby, a well-known suburb of the capital, served as a marker for a variety of categories that were more difficult to discuss in the public sphere: race (non-European), skin color (brown, yellow or black), religion (Islam, Catholicism) and language (non-Germanic.)

The inclusion of terms from this sociolect raised hackles early on, even before the publication of the actual reference work. In October 2005, rumors began to circulate that the Academy would include *keff* (busted, broken) and *guss* (girl, chick) in the 13<sup>th</sup> edition. Martin Gellerstam, editor of the project and Professor of Nordic Languages at Gothenburg University, soon found his phone ringing off the hook.<sup>4</sup> He attempted to

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<sup>2</sup> Linguists resist the term dialect when referring to Rinkeby Swedish because “a dialect should be able to be spoken by people of different ages and in many varying situations.” (Josephson 2004 p.64) Instead, many prefer the term *gruppspråk* (group language,) which I translate as sociolect.

<sup>3</sup> Josephson 2004 p.65

<sup>4</sup> Skogberg 2005

calm worried language purists with statistics: of the ten thousand new words, only three or four traced their lineage to the multi-ethnic suburb.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to measure the reaction of ordinary citizens (as opposed to those with a passionate interest in language), journalist Lars Klint, writing for the evening tabloid-format paper *Expressen*, walked around downtown Malmö in September 2005 with a list of words proposed for inclusion in the Swedish Academy's Word List.<sup>6</sup> All ten were identifiable as Rinkeby Swedish, some being English loans (*jippa*, to gyp and *dissa*, to diss) and the rest a mixture of Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic influences. *Dissa* was almost universally recognized and accepted, as long as it was shown with a list of possible synonyms (put down, disrespect, humiliate). The other words engendered a more emotional reaction:

*Flera reagerar med avsmak eller skräck inför tanken att Akademiens ordlista, själva symbolen för det egna svenska språket, ska blandas upp med sådan utländsk rotväliska.*

(Many react with disgust or fear about the thought that the Academy's Word List, itself the symbol for the Swedish language, would be mixed up with such foreign gibberish.)

Klint's informal research took place in Malmö's center, an area with "notably sparse" immigrants or non-white Swedes. Thus his informants were not those who would be likely to use or encounter the new words in most social situations. Klint readily explained to his interviewees that there were many 'foreign' words already in the Word

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<sup>5</sup> 'Suburb' in a Swedish context has roughly the same connotation as 'ghetto' in American English.

<sup>6</sup> Klint 2005

List which had come to be accepted – *aerobics, know-how, apartheid*. Yet the reaction of one retired high school teacher made him realize his informal anthropological experiment had perhaps influenced the reception of the new words before the list had even been published:

*Det är illa nog, men det är ändå svenska eller anglosachsiska ord. Det du nämner är någonting mycket värre och obegripligare. Jag ska kontakta akademien.*

(Those are bad enough, but they're at least Swedish or Anglo-Saxon words. What you're describing is something much worse and less comprehensible. I will contact the Academy.)

The Swedish Academy defended itself against accusations of meddling in language by noting that it merely describes the actual usage patterns, as recorded in large electronic databases of printed material. Fiction and non-fiction books, together with newspapers, form the majority of the sources used for deciding if a word is in wide-enough circulation to merit inclusion. Thus the controversial new words were considered for inclusion in 2006 not on the basis of their use in spoken discourse, but rather printed matter: *Sådana som är väl spridda och även används av författare och i tidningar*, according to Gellerstam. (Those which are widespread and also used by authors and in newspapers.)<sup>7</sup> But what then accounted for these particular words' appearance in books and newspapers?

One probable reason for an increased number of 'hits' on words such as *keff* and *guss* was the attention Rinkeby Swedish gained in the early 2000s by virtue of three

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<sup>7</sup> Klint 2005

books published during that time which made appropriated that sociolect for their own purposes. The first was a collection of short stories by Alejandro Leiva Wenger, *Till vår ära (In our Honor)*. The second was *Det är bara gudarna som är nya (Only the Gods are New)*, a collection by the Gothenburg poet Johannes Anyuru. The third, and arguably most influential, was a novel written in 2003 by Jonas Hassen Khemiri with the title *Ett öga rött (An Eye Red)*. While often interpreted by lay readers and critics alike as documentary and realist, these works of fiction actually demonstrated their use of Rinkeby Swedish was conscious and mannered: the authors ‘re-mixed’ syntactic and lexical elements in order to explore issues of ethnic and national belonging. In each book, characters ‘break’ language in order to build it back up again, calling into question the indexical quality of accent and lexicon as absolute marker of social identity.<sup>8</sup>

The chair of the Swedish Language Council described Wenger’s and Khemiri’s books as “the two most well-known attempts to make Rinkeby Swedish into a literary language.”<sup>9</sup> But the precise meaning of ‘literary language’ proved elusive, as an extensive debate and discussion of these texts, and their authors’ intentions, filled pages of reviews and letters to the editors in both mainstream newspapers and literary journals. As one reviewer wrote,

*Ett öga rött är [...], mig veterligt, den första svenska roman som konsekvent är skriven på det språk som talas bland stora grupper av (andra generationens) invandrare.*

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<sup>8</sup> For background on these authors see Leonard 2005

<sup>9</sup> Josephson 2004 p.66

(*An Eye Red* is [...] as far as I know, the first Swedish novel which is consistently written in that language which is spoken among large groups of (second-generation) immigrants.)<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the (mis)interpretation of these authors' fiction as a non-mediated portrayal of Rinkeby Swedish, these books' vocabulary was an obvious discussion point in the press. Thus these works of fiction had influenced the written register by the time the Swedish Academy began its research for the 13<sup>th</sup> edition in 2004.

To be sure, not everyone was waiting for the Swedish Academy to approve lexical items from Rinkeby Swedish before using them. Rap musicians had been using them in their songs since at least 1994, when the Swedish group The Latin Kings recorded *Välkommen till förorten* (*Welcome to the Suburbs*). Despite the members' Latin American ethnic heritage, their first albums included slang from Arabic (*keff*) and Turkish (*guss*):

*du fixar bästa gussar du säger du svär men jag e inte som dej*  
(you get the best girls you say you swear but I'm not like you)<sup>11</sup>  
"Halva Inne" from *Välkommen till förorten*, 1994

*Riktig gigant djävla betong-hiphop,*  
*ingen djävla keff toplistpop.*  
(Real giant fucking concrete-hiphop.  
no fucking lame top-40 pop)  
"Passa Micken" from *I skuggan av betongen*, 1997

The above two examples come from an actual artistic product: two rap albums. But ten years after their first album, The Latin Kings had risen enough in cultural prominence to support their own meta-cultural reference work. This was *The Latin*

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<sup>10</sup> Sjögren 2003 (parenthesis in original)

*Kings: Texter*, a book of song lyrics published with an introduction by the poet Johannes Anyuru, whose above-mentioned 2003 poetry connection was one of the first literary works to include slang from Rinkeby Swedish. The resulting collection of rap lyrics, published in 2004, included an *Ordlista* (word list) in the back of the book with about 150 words, with glosses in standard Swedish for those unfamiliar with the terms' meaning. Interestingly, variant spellings are common in the list – both *guzz* and *guss*, as opposed to the Swedish Academy's *guss*. (Terminal double-z is extremely uncommon in standard Swedish orthographic practice, although it may be a better representation of the actual sound among some speakers.)

In another example of meta-cultural reference works constructing an unofficial reference lexicon, the largest publisher of 'suburban' music in Sweden, Redline Records<sup>12</sup> began publishing an on-line "lexikon" of slang words on its website in the early 2000s. That a music label would put such a dictionary as one of the main navigational links on its home page raises a number of interesting questions: How does Redline's music circulate among audiences for whom Rinkeby is neither culturally nor geographically near? Does titling the column headings "Slang" and "Svenska" (Swedish) reënforce slang's position outside standard Swedish, and/or take a position on slang's eventual incorporation into a normative form of the language? Will the Swedish Academy's inclusion of *keff* and *guss* in the Word List remove the need for an entry on these words – or perhaps shift the words from the Slang column to the Swedish column?

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<sup>12</sup> So named for the subway spur that runs southward to the Stockholm suburbs

The shift from Rinkeby Swedish's position as subaltern street slang to inclusion in the Swedish Academy's Word List did not go unnoticed, at either the lay or the professional level. Paralleling the reaction Lars Klimt got in downtown Malmö before the publication of the list, some Swedes were quick to register their displeasure with *guss* and *keff*. Interestingly, the conflagration was ignited not by explicit discussion of the Word List, but rather a separate debate occurring simultaneously over bilingual education. On March 26, 2006, Ebba Witt-Brattström, a professor of Swedish Literature, took part in an educational policy debate on Swedish television (roughly the equivalent of American C-SPAN.) Attacking the government's policies of "home language education" (comparable to American bilingual education), she said:

*Regeringen signalerar till våra nya svenskar att det räcker om de lär sig lite lagom blattesvenska så att de kan slå upp ett stånd och sälja bananer i Rosengård.*<sup>13</sup>

(The government is signaling to our new Swedes that all they have to do is learn a little darkie Swedish so they can set up a stand and sell bananas in Rosengård.)

It was not Witt-Brattström's condemnation of bilingual education *per se* which provoked a firestorm of controversy; instead, it her tangential invocation of *blattesvenska* (see footnote 10, below) as an inevitable result of poor educational choices, which would be a threat to the economic success of foreign-born immigrants.

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<sup>13</sup> Witt-Bratström Apr. 19 2006. *Blatte* is a general-purpose denigration of non-White Swedes, which in the process of being reclaimed by those to whom it was originally applied. American English lacks a close parallel; in Britain 'wog' is comparable.

Witt-Brattström's normative approach towards language performance, however, attracted the ire of *Gringo*, a satirical insert in a free alternative weekly. The ironically-named broadsheet irreverently tackles problems of culture and integration from the perspective of first- and second-generation immigrants, under the motto *Sveriges svenkaste tidning, jao*. (Sweden's Swedishest Newspaper, Yo.) A mock advertisement soon appeared in its pages:

*Witt-Brattströmska kompaniet söker språkfascister. Du! Ja, Du. Det är Dig vi behöver. Under förutsättning att Du vill bevara Sverige svenskt i ordets mest ariska bemärkelse...*

(The Witt-Brattströmian Company is looking for language fascists. You! Yes, you. We need you. With the understanding that you want to keep Sweden Swedish, in the word's most Aryan meaning...)

*Gringo*, started in 2004 as a tongue-in-cheek mini-publication with a focus on multi-cultural and diversity issues, quickly found a niche by freely using several varieties of Rinkeby Swedish in print. The newspaper dubbed its verbal style and tone *miljonsvenska* (Million Swedish), a reference to the "Housing for a Million" program which characterized post-war Swedish suburban development. The *miljonprojekt* provided a High Modernist built environment (Le Corbusierian 'Towers in the Park') which became the defining geographic and architectural experience for many immigrants to Sweden since the 1970s. In re-branding Rinkeby Swedish as Million Swedish, *Gringo* made a case for de-linking the sociolect from one particular Stockholm suburb and instead connecting it to a nationwide imagined community:

Människorna som bott i de uppradade betonghusen har med åren utvecklat en dynamisk kultur med allt ifrån konst, litteratur, musik och film. En våg

unga svenskar tar nu för sig och kompletterar historien om Sverige med infallsvinklar från de två miljoner människor som tidigare varit exkluderade.<sup>14</sup>

(The people who lived in the hard-angled concrete buildings have developed over the years a dynamic culture with everything from art, literature, music and film. A wave of young Swedes are now taking the story of Sweden up for themselves and completing it, with help from those two million people who had been excluded earlier.)

The performance of self-actualization which *Gringo* espoused occurred, in the newspaper's own case, partially through use of Million Swedish itself. Thus the status and reputation of the sociolect was of paramount importance, not to be impugned lightly by outsiders such as Witt-Brattström. As *Gringo*'s distinctive style and trademark, as well as the subject of a national debate and cultural flashpoint, *miljonsvenska* was an odd hybrid of the peculiar and the universal. Discussions of the sociolect were often caught between representing the paper's own identity and representing the identity of its readers (or at least the identity they aspired to or imagined for themselves.) The resulting complex relationship with language gave the editorial board a split personality about Million Swedish's uses:

*Själva använder vi miljonsvenskan för att det är vårt språk, det vi växt upp med och tycker om att uttrycka oss med efter att vi bara för några år sen tvingades tvätta bort den ur våra munnar för att få en plats... I debatten har det framstått som att det finns en direkt motsättning mellan rikssvenska och miljonsvenska. Guss ska självklart inte ersätta tjej men eftersom tusentals svenskar dagligen väljer att säga guss är det inte mer än rätt att det finns som en synonym. Ungdomar i miljonprogrammen gör oftast själva ett aktivt val att ha sin lokala dialekt. För många är det ett sätt att försvara sitt stigmatiserade område. En trots mot det samhälle de*

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<sup>14</sup> Editorial board of *Gringo*, May 2 2006

*känner sig utestängda ifrån. För andra känns det bara mer roligt och mer naturligt.*

We use *miljonsvenska* ourselves because it's our language, what we grew up with and like to express ourselves with, because just a few years ago we were forced to wash out our mouths to get ahead... In this debate, some people say there's a direct opposition between standard Swedish and *miljonsvenska*. Of course *guss* won't replace *girl* but because thousands of Swedes choose on a daily basis to say *guss*, it's only fair that there's a synonym. Youth in the Million Programs often make a conscious choice to have their own local dialect. For many it's a way to defend their own stigmatized neighborhood. In defiance of the society they feel themselves shut out from. For others it's just more fun and natural.

It was a sign of the unstable nature of the Swedish language in 2006 that Gringo could claim *miljonsvenska* to be both harmless stylistic choice as well as harbinger of revolutionary consciousness at the same time. Regardless, what lay behind both claims was the notion of belonging: how wide the Swedish public sphere would open up. Acceptance of *keff* and *guss* by the Swedish Academy seemed to be standing in for a larger question of what accommodations a previously ethnically-homogenous society would make for those whom it had previously imagined as outside the Swedish nation. "When we wrote *guss* and *keff* and got closer to the written language in *Gringo*," claimed the editorial board, "it was an eye-opener for many who harbored secret dreams of writing, but had their self-confidence broken by Swedish teachers." Language, then, was one way of addressing a still vaguely-defined and understood counterpublic who might

share, in the words of the author Jonas Khemiri, “nothing more in common than hair color, or that constantly-misspelled last name.”<sup>15</sup>

The question of (societal and linguistic) separation or integration was not only hornet’s nest which the Swedish Academy stirred up by its inclusion of *keff* and *guss*. Another issue central to Swedish self-understanding also found its way into the debate: gender equality. In her April 19<sup>th</sup> article attacking ‘blattesvenska,’ Ebba Witt-Brattström brought up her own academic work on feminism: “*kan man fråga sig om svenskan behöver ännu fler nedsättande ord för människa av kvinnokön.*”<sup>16</sup> (one can ask oneself if Swedish needs yet more denigrating words for females.) The word she seized upon to pose the above rhetorical question was the *guss*, taking at face value a parenthetical joke from Iranian-born Swedish journalist Nima Daryamadj that it sounded like Persian *goos*, which means ‘fart.’

Witt-Brattström’s point was soon picked up and advanced by others with similar concerns about language’s ability to shape gender relations. Writing in the feminist journal *SalongK*, Åsa Mattson noted:

*Var tog tjejerna vägen? undrar jag. Svenska Akademien har alltså släppt in några så kallade "blatteord" från miljonprogrammen i sina finrum. Killarna från tidningen Gringo har suttit och myst i TV-sofforna och alla verkar vara så nöjda med det här beviset på fin integration.*<sup>17</sup>

(Where did the girls go, I wonder? The Swedish Academy has let some so-called “darkie words” from the Million Program into its parlor. The guys from the *Gringo* newspaper have sat and enjoyed themselves on the TV

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<sup>15</sup> Khemiri Aug 2 2004

<sup>16</sup> Witt-Bratström Apr. 19 2006

<sup>17</sup> Mattsson Apr. 24 2006

couch and everyone seems so pleased at this evidence of wonderful integration.)

Mattsson's use of 'home invasion' metaphors highlights the ways that Rinkeby Swedish lexical terms seem to her an intrusion of an unwelcome linguistic guest into a socio-political space carefully constructed to promote gender equality: the Swedish state as formal parlor. Continuing, she articulates two seemingly contradictory points: first, that assimilation of Rinkeby Swedish into the official Word List robs the sociolect of its subversive power; and second that precisely this power is dangerous and must be contained:

*Att låta ett outsider-språk, med en potentiellt farlig udd, uppgå i det etablerade systemets språk, utan att ha vunnit reella maktförskjutningar, är att falla offer för det som kallas "den repressiva toleransen". Det etablerade systemet går med på att skriva in några grabbiga "blatteord", mot att det läggs ett glömskans täcke över den verkliga diskrimineringen? Varför ska Akademien få svänga sig med era ord för?<sup>18</sup>*

(To let an outsider-language, with a potentially dangerous sting, into the established system's language, without having won real power, is to fall victim to what is called "repressive tolerance."<sup>19</sup> The established system is fine writing in a few boys-club "darkie words" as long as there is a veil of forgetting over the real discrimination? Why should the Academy get to play around with your words?)

The obvious thought and consideration Mattsson has given linguistic power has nevertheless placed her in a bind when considering a subaltern sociolect with (according to her) misogynistic tendencies. Left unclear in her writing is for exactly whom

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> As George Bush's speechwriter put it, "the soft bigotry of lowered expectations"

*miljonsvenska* holds a “potentially dangerous sting” – women or institutionalized racism? Her inability to successfully reconcile her admiration for Rinkeby Swedish’s representation of an oppressed minority with her revulsion at its (perhaps imagined) sexism is a small example of the challenges confronting Second-Wave Feminists across Europe. Leaving aside for the moment the accuracy or completeness of her understanding of Rinkeby Swedish, it is clear the language is standing in for larger questions of demographic change: immigration from Turkey, Iran and the Arab world, as well as Latin America and Africa, brings the threat of destabilizing what was once a relatively homogenous Swedish public sphere. The added factor of (imagined) race and ethnicity confronts feminists such as Ebba Witt-Brattström and Åsa Mattsson with a new axis of identity and affiliation, one for which their training and experience may not have prepared them. One can see this tension revealed clearly at the end of Mattsson’s polemic, as she argues that gender trumps culture and ethnicity:

*Sedan anser jag inte att det finns någon könsneutral "blattesvenska"... De där okejade orden är ju hämtade från grabb-blattesvenskan till den etablerade grabb-svenskan, liksom alla språk i manssamhällen är grabb-språk. Språk är en del av den patriarkala normen i ett samhälle; kvinnors identiteter konstitueras, genom språket och kulturen, som underordnade. ... Språket i patriarkala samhällen som det svenska, och det manliga subspråk som finns i miljonprogramsområdena, är ännu klart falliska.*

(So I don’t consider there to be any kind of gender-neutral “darkie Swedish.” ... Those approved words are of course brought from boys’-club-darkie-Swedish to the established boys’-club Swedish, just as all languages in male society are boy’s-club-languages. Language is a part of the patriarchal norm in a society; women’s identity is constructed, through language and culture, as subordinate... Languages in patriarchal societies such as Sweden, and the sub-language in the Million Program areas, are still clearly phallic.)

Yet was all this talk about sexist language really supported by empirical evidence? Both Åsa Mattsson and Ebba Witt-Brattström were still working off the questionable assumption that Iranian-born columnist Nima Daryamadj's Middle Eastern origin gave him absolute authority on non-European linguistic matters. In fact, neither Mattsson nor Witt-Brattström had bothered to look up the actual origin of *guss*. It turned out to be not scatological Persian after all, but instead the mainstream Turkish word for girl, *kız* (with the dotless i representing a close front unrounded vowel.)

This embarrassing gaffe by a journalist and professor of literature, respectively, was pointed out by one of the authors mentioned above: Alejandro Leiva Wenger, whose 2002 collection of short stories *Till vår ära (In our Honor)* included a number of tales recounted in several varieties of *miljonsvenska*. Wenger, writing an op-ed column in response to Witt-Brattström's interpretation of *guss*, suggested the professor "consider taking a basic course in hermeneutics."<sup>20</sup> As one of the most visible authors who have used Rinkeby Swedish for their own artistic purposes, Wenger sought to inscribe a new, more accurate history of the word into the official record:

*Men i verkligheten har ordet "guss" aldrig betytt något annat än "tjej", vilket många av miljonprogrammets ungdomar har känt till i två decennier nu. Man ska inte heller glömma att tjejer varit lika mycket som killar delaktiga i skapandet av detta språk. "Guss" används av bägge könen. Att som Witt-Brattström framställa tjejer som passiva offer för förortens ungdomsspråk är att förringa deras kreativitet och förneka det faktum att förortsslangan också tillhör dem.*

(But in reality the word "guss" has never meant anything other than "girl," which many of the Million Program's children have known about for two

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<sup>20</sup> Leiva Wenger Apr 27 2006

decades. We shouldn't forget either that girls have been active in shaping this language just as much as guys. "Guss" is used by both sexes. To describe girls as passive victims of suburban youth language, as Witt-Brattström does, is to belittle their creativity and deny the fact that suburban slang belongs to them too.)

Born in Chile and a resident of Sweden since the age of two, Wenger here invokes his own identity as a child of the Million Project as a mark of insider status – a native speaker, in so many words. Reclaiming suburban slang as *språkglädje* (language joy,) Wenger countered Witt-Brattström's educational doomsday scenarios by asserting that "linguistic competence isn't mutually exclusive with the use of suburban slang – quite the opposite." He aligned himself with Åsa Mattsson, however, in his critique of *Gringo*'s extravagant claims to having raised the status of Million Swedish – as well as questioning of the symbolic value of having a few words included accepted by the Swedish Academy.

The problematization of *guss*' misogynistic power did not slow down Åsa Mattsson or her crusade against the inclusion of Rinkeby Swedish terms in the Swedish Academy's Word List. The day after Wenger published his op-ed piece, Mattsson sat down with the recent dictionary<sup>21</sup> compiled by Uppsala linguist Ulla-Brit Kotsinas and Latin Kings rapper Dogge Doggelito and performed her own investigation. She fired back with a new claim that "*Guss* is not the only one... I maintain that at least one third of the words [in Kotsinas' dictionary] are sexist and/or homophobic."<sup>22</sup> While none of the terms she enumerated – slang for prostitutes, homosexuals, women, and the copulative act –

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<sup>21</sup> *Förortsslang (Suburban Slang)* Stockholm: Norstedts, 2004

<sup>22</sup> Mattsson Apr. 28 2006

were under consideration for inclusion in the Swedish Academy's list, apparently the mere fact of their existence was now ground for critique. She capped her argument with the apocryphal observation that men who called women "whores" were now being let off without punishment in Sweden, while whites who called immigrants *svartskalle* (wog, nigger) were being sentenced to jail time. While I know of no empirical data which would support or contradict her thesis, the argument is interesting at least in so far as it raises the question of (literally) policing language. It's unclear from her writing whether she considers only one of the above examples worthy of incarceration, both, or neither.

Wenger was quick to pick up on the implications of Mattsson's call for verbal hygiene. The next week he fired back in an opinion piece: "Mattsson doesn't seem to recognize symbolic violence anywhere else than in a word's lexical meaning. [She] is an editor-in-chief. Ebba Witt-Brattström is a professor... they have a voice... But the youth in question have no chance of contesting, on a level playing field, the label that Mattsson wants to put on suburban slang. They will experience the consequences as a form of social stigma."<sup>23</sup>

Ebba Witt-Brattström's answer appeared to revel in precisely the stigma that Wenger feared. In an attack which clarified what was at stake for her, she wrote:

*Multislangen är inget alternativ. Den har få användningsområden, huvudsakligen sex, sexualiserat våld, homofobi, machomätning, knark och lagbrott. Den har inga ord för läxa eller en liter mjölk, men den har minst sju sinsemellan obegripliga slanguttryck för den frekventa förolämpningen "jag knullar din mammas/systers fitta". Som Åsa Mattsson påpekar är det inte helt oskyldigt att "bassa" betyder sätta på/ha samlag, ge stryk eller*

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<sup>23</sup> Wenger May 2 2006

*skita i någon. Vi har här att göra med en sexualpolitisk klassrevanschism utan motstycke i historien... Förortsslangen är kort sagt ett aggressivt rop på hjälp, ett se-oss-innan-det-är-för-sent riktat till oss utanför betongen: skolministern, integrationsministern, hela Vuxen-Sverige.<sup>24</sup>*

(Multicultural slang is no alternative. It has few areas of usage, mainly sex, sexualized violence, homophobia, macho competitions, drugs and lawbreaking. It has no words for homework or a liter of milk, but it has at least seven incomprehensible slang expressions for the frequent insult “I’ll fuck your mother’s/sister’s cunt.” As Åsa Mattsson points out, it’s not coincidence that “*bassa*” means to have sex, hit, or not care about someone. This is sexual-political class revanchism without comparison in history... Suburban slang is, bluntly, an aggressive cry for help, a “look at us before it’s too late” directed at those of us outside the concrete ghetto: the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Integration, all of Grown-Up Sweden.)

Here the gloves come off: Witt-Brattström explicitly identifies her professional and social (and arguably ethnic) position with enlightened authority, fighting to save benighted residents of the suburbs from their own deficient culture. Tellingly, her examples of lexical items missing in *miljonsvenska* are strongly evocative of the role of the social welfare state plays in Swedish society, which grew from its origins in the labor struggles of the 1930s to aggressively confront issues of public health and nutrition (“a liter of milk”) and national education (“homework”). Witt-Brattström is implying that social democracy, carefully nurtured over seventy years of Sweden’s history, is under attack from an internal cultural and ethnic other which threatens the imagined solidarity of the nation, and thus its hallowed traditions of consensus and conflict avoidance.

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<sup>24</sup> Witt-Brattström May 13 2006

There are historical reasons why such a problematization of social homogeneity (through linguistic or other means) might seem particularly threatening to Witt-Brattström. The rapid industrialization, urbanization and modernization of Sweden in the 20th century was guided by and enabled through the power of a strong central state. Sweden's extraordinary leap forward took place under the long-running (1946-1969) Prime Ministry of Tage Erlander. Erlander's remarkable success in deploying Social Democratic reforms resulted in the construction of one of the model Modern Welfare States in the form of a social safety net known as the *folkhem* (people's home). Such a radical transformation of the social sphere through state intervention, however, is generally interpreted as emerging from a sense of social solidarity.

Indeed, social reform through consensus depended on a (relatively) culturally- and ethnically-homogenous nation which shared a common vision of the future. The annual labor/employer consultations on wages and productivity, initiated in 1938 at Saltsjöbad, are one of the oft-cited instances of consensus politics which rely upon a shared vision of progress and sacrifice. Although never as homogenous as popularly imagined – the integration of Finns, Walloons and Scanians ran the spectrum from voluntary to forced – 20th century Swedish society and culture appears, in retrospect, markedly more uniform than many other European nations. If books on the forging of modern nations such as Germany and Spain are replete with sections on the problems of borders, tongues and faiths, Sweden's diversity is counted in footnotes rather than chapters.

This imagined solidarity lent legitimacy to the actions of Erlander's powerful central state apparatus, and, together with the capital generated from postwar production

of consumer and industrial goods (from Sweden's undamaged factories), gave Sweden the reputation as a successful social democracy which represented a "middle way" between capitalism and communism.<sup>25</sup>

The asylum policies of the 1970's were a watershed step towards demographic transformation, coming on the heels of already increased immigration through the post-war guest-worker policies. Erlander's successor, Olof Palme (Prime Minister from 1969 to 1976) envisioned a broader role for Sweden, entering the global stage as a 'moral superpower.' Now the state's engagement with the outside world would be rationalized through moral imperatives (accepting asylum-seekers from conflicts in southern hemispheres) rather than just economic policies (welcoming guest-workers to confront a labor shortage.) Indeed, the homelands of some of the parents of the multi-dialectal authors mentioned above – Tunisia, Uganda and Chile – kindle memories of unrest and civil war during the 1970's, and thus constitute a map of the engagement which Palme's Sweden sought with the world beyond the Scandinavian peninsula.

Now this engagement was having unanticipated consequences for Sweden's own sense of national belonging. Åsa Mattsson's and Ebba Witt-Brattström's critique of a new generation of Swedish speakers is, in a sense, *Orwellian* (used in the neutral sense of the term), insofar as it is congruent with Geoffrey Nunberg's observation of the difficulties of "maintaining a coherent political discourse in a culturally and ideologically

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<sup>25</sup> See Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way*

fragmented community.”<sup>26</sup> Mattsson and Witt-Brattström perceive the social homogeneity imagined as central for Sweden’s lauded cultural and sociological achievements (gender equality, universal literacy) as threatened by the brave new world of New Swedes<sup>27</sup> who didn’t look (or talk?) anything like northern Europeans. Their sometimes overheated rhetoric is an (unconscious?) attempt to position first- and second-generation immigrants as stuck in an earlier phase of human development, perhaps comparable to the working class of the 1930s. With the help of good Social Democrats, they will advance their own standing and welfare. Left unspoken is the implication that in exchange for such help, they should support Social Democracy in turn, and not ask too many uncomfortable questions about linguistic normativity.

Throughout my discussion of Mattsson’s and Witt-Brattström’s efforts at verbal hygiene, I have suggested that it is the *imagination* of suburban residents as somehow outside the Swedish nation, at least as much as their actual cultural or geographic isolation, which influences the argument over linguistic pollution. Indeed, as the debate over Rinkeby Swedish has grown more heated and loaded with unspoken assumptions, some researchers have set out to prove that multi-ethnic *blandspråk* (mixed languages) have several precedents in Swedish history. Olle Jospelson, chairman of the Swedish Language Council, noted that

*Det går att hävdas att Rinkebysvenska alltid förekommit i Sverige. Man kan exempelvis grubbla över den finska minoritetens svenska i forna tiders*

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<sup>26</sup> Nunberg 1990 p.476, quoted in Cameron p.120

<sup>27</sup> New Swedes (*ny svenskar*) is the widely-used euphemism for Swedish citizens of non-Nordic ethnic heritage.

*Stockholm, som det skämtas med redan i 1600-talet, eller Bellmans muntra språkblandning...*<sup>28</sup>

(One can suggest that Rinkeby Swedish has always existed in Sweden. One can consider the Finnish minority's Swedish in the Stockholm of old, for example, which was joked about as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, or [national poet] Bellman's oral language-blending...)

The last example is perhaps the most interesting, as Carl Michael Bellman's 18<sup>th</sup> century drinking songs and chronicles of drunken life in the capitol derive some of their humor from parodies of German in Stockholm unable to quite master Swedish phonetics or vocabulary. None of this mangled language has prevented Bellman from achieving his position as national poet and muse. All this is to suggest that perceptions towards loan words change through time – often suddenly. It is telling that research on loan words in Swedish published as late as 1992 focus their attention on English imports, rather than any of the Rinkeby lexicon.<sup>29</sup> In part this may reflect class bias: English is seen everyday in newspapers, computer manuals, and academic textbooks. In contrast, Rinkeby words were restricted to the relatively closed circuits of distant suburbs, rap music, and youth culture. Only the publication of Wenger's, Anyuru's, and Khemiri's books, by mainstream Swedish publishing houses, set the complex processes of reception, review and critique into motion which ensured widespread media attention to a subset of Rinkeby Swedish, which in turn coincided with the timeframe for the Swedish Academy's next volume of words.

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<sup>28</sup> Josephson 2004 p.65

<sup>29</sup> Edlund and Hene's 1992 *Loan Words in Swedish* devotes the entirety of its 20<sup>th</sup> century section on "Attitudes towards Loans" to English words.

It seems appropriate to conclude with a passage from one of the literary worms mentioned above as so influential in the spread of, and debate over, *keff* and *guss*. In Jonas Khemiri's 2003 novel *Ett öga rött (An Eye Red)*, the protagonist's Moroccan-born father finds his son's secret journal and reads the boy's own narrative of his life. Shocked that his son, born in Stockholm, is writing in non-standard Swedish, he points at the open notebook and asks if the family's recent move from the suburbs to the central city has been in vain:

*"Tror du jag är dum i helt dum i huvudet?" han frågade med tandraderna nästan helt stängda. "Varför skriver du så där? Varför varför varför? Fett skönt, shunnen, gussen. Va? Vem känner du som pratar så där? Varför tror du vi flyttade?"*

*"Vad vill du egentligen? Vill du att ja ska snacka svennesnack? Jag vet i alla fall vem jag är och var jag kommer ifrån."*

*"Men är du helt dum i huvudet? Tror du inte jag vet att du kan bättre svenska än så där? För några år sen pratade du helt perfekt och nu? 'Ey gussen baxa baxa.' Vad håller du på med?"<sup>30</sup>*

*"Jag är i alla fall ingen svikare. Jag har i alla fall inte glömt kampen..."*

"Do you think I'm a complete idiot?" he asked with his teeth clenched.  
"Why do you write like that? Why why why? *Mad phat, homie, chick.* What? Who do you know who talks like that? Why do you think we moved?"

"What do you want? Want me to talk like a Swede? At least I know who I am and where I come from."

"But are you complete idiot? Don't you think I know you know better Swedish than that? A few years ago you spoke perfectly and now? '*Yo homie fuck fuck.*' What are you doing?"

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<sup>30</sup> Khemiri 2004 p.214-5

“At least I’m no failure. At least I haven’t forgotten the struggle...”

Though Khemiri’s project is explicitly not to depict a monolithic second-generation experience, his evocation of lexicon in this passage as marker of identity is an interesting counterpoint to the elderly high-school teacher on the streets of Malmö who promised to write to the Swedish Academy to protest the inclusion of *keff* and *guss*. Amongst all that separates the various parties in the debate over these words, there is startling agreement about the power of vocabulary to *perform* belonging, whether to hegemonic or subaltern imagined communities. The debate over Rinkeby Swedish has jumped out of a two-dimensional continuum of inclusion or exclusion, to reach into other axes of discourse. The progressive prescriptivism of Åsa Mattsson and Ebba Witt-Brattström is suddenly forced to confront an expanded national imaginary it is ill-equipped to engage with, on either linguistic or social levels. Whether other such collisions will occur in Sweden along the lines of the debate in March and April 2006 probably depends on the collective attention paid to understanding socially- and culturally-situated knowledge, rather than tripping over the words themselves.

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