

Blattesvenska: Foreigner Swedish And Its Implications For Language Teaching

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Abstract

Through personal experience, personal interviews, and by reviewing research articles, this paper aims to explain the nature of *Blattesvenska*, an immigrant language born out of the social gaps created by ethnic and cultural discrimination, both in the labor market and in society as a whole. These gaps are created both by the immigrant groups themselves as a way to distance others and by the ethnic Swedish population, by keeping what is not seen as “standard” language or behavior out of mainstream society. This paper will also explain how the popularity of *Blattesvenska* in music and written media has made it not only a voice for the immigrants, who are often of a lower class, but also a commodity that is exploited by the media. Finally, this article discusses how speakers of *Blattesvenska* create a language variety that constantly innovates itself and simultaneously and consciously breaks the “norm.” This environment creates formidable language learners that, like a sponge, absorb whatever they are fed, and spring back with their powerful voices.

Introduction

Blattesvenska (Foreigner Swedish) is a variety of Swedish spoken mainly by immigrants or children of immigrants in segregated *invandrarförorter* (immigrant suburbs) in Sweden. *Blatte* is a derogatory term for immigrant or darker person. In Sweden the expression *invandrar förorter* draws parallels with the English expression “ghetto”; it has a negative connotation. In contrast to the US suburb, in Sweden suburbs are populated by the lower class, mainly immigrants, and the unemployment rate is higher than in other areas of society. According to “The Local, Sweden’s News in English,” an online newspaper, “Today, the employment rate for foreign-born workers in Sweden is 61.8 percent, far below the rest of the population’s level of 76.5 percent. The rate is particularly low among foreign-born women, for whom the employment rate is 56.5 percent [...]” (2011). This paper focuses on the linguistic features that pertain to *Blattesvenska*, how these features make it a variety of Swedish, and how it is used to code switch between standard and non-standard speech. I will also explain why and how *Blattesvenska* was formed, the meaning it has to its speakers personal identity, the status it has in society, and its use in music and media. I will use personal examples from

my experiences, examples heard or written in the Swedish media, scholarly articles on the subject, and personal interviews with speakers of *Blattesvenska* and people knowledgeable in the field. Finally, I will discuss the implications of a variety such as *Blattesvenska* to the teaching of a second language.

In the sections below, I will address mainly two questions: (a) What linguistic features make up *Blattesvenska* as a variety of Swedish? and (b) What are *Blattesvenska*’s status and roles in society? Before a discussion of *Blattesvenska*, it is important to consider the social context of Sweden, which I will describe in the next section.

Background: Social And Cultural Discrimination in Sweden

Politically Sweden has many times received saint-like status since it held its arms open to immigrants for many years and had well-known foreign policies in Europe. But, truth be told, there is much discrimination in Sweden, and, as I will later show, this is not unrelated to the emergence of *Blattesvenska*. According to “The Local, Sweden’s News in English,” “[...] people with foreign backgrounds risk unfair treatment in Sweden’s



courts. [...] Other examples [...] show that those who are foreign-born are sometimes considered less trustworthy than ethnic Swedes” (2008). It has been said that Sweden has ethnic and cultural discrimination, in contrast to countries such as the US and England, which have racial discrimination. According to Rydgren (2004) the job market often discriminates against immigrants based on prejudice and group stereotypes. Also ethnic discrimination can be rather specific (Rooth & Ekberg 2003, as cited in Rydberg, p. 704, 2004):

For those with two parents born in a non-European country, the unemployment risk is 11 percentage points higher than for those with two Swedish-born parents [...] for those with one parent born in a non-European country the risk of being unemployed is 6 percentage points higher than for Swedes with two locally-born parents. Also as regards wage incomes, second-generation migrants with a Southern European or a non-European background are doing significantly worse than Swedes with two Swedish-born parents.

In other words, the more dissimilar your culture is to the Swedish culture the lower your status will be in Swedish society and the more discrimination you will suffer. To further prove this point Rydberg states that immigrant adoptees who often do not racially resemble ethnic Swedish but have been adopted by Swedish parents have the same amount of success that ethnic Swedes have in the labor market, the reasons being, “they usually have a Swedish-sounding name, they speak Swedish fluently, they have been educated in Sweden, commonly live in neighbourhoods dominated by native Swedes, and they have social networks comparable to those of native Swedes” (2004, p. 704-706). In contrast, Somalis who are culturally and ethnically Muslim and African and are therefore quite far from the Swedish “standard,” are often generally highly discriminated in Swedish society. Also

according to “The Local, Sweden’s News in English,” Somalis living in the small town of Farserum feared taking their children to school because of apparent racism, “It’s a serious situation with racist aspects. This is nothing new, but rather appears to have been going on for a long time. Last year there were 160 Somalis there and many have moved away because of xenophobia” (2012). It is in this context of cultural and social discrimination that *Blattesvenska* emerged.

Data

To draw the essence of what *Blattesvenska* is and what it means to its speakers, in addition to reading the literature, I interviewed three people through email, on Facebook messenger, and over the phone. The interviewees included two old friends of mine who are speakers of *Blattesvenska* from Gothenburg Sweden. Interviewee #1 is a young rapper with Chilean heritage from *Angered*, and Interviewee #2 is an immigrant from Iraq who grew up in *Hammarkullen*, an immigrant-dense area in *Angered*. Interviewee #2 also served as an actor in a TV mini series called “*Hammarkullen*,” which centers on an immigrant neighborhood and its citizens and aired in Swedish television nationwide. Finally, I also interviewed my father, Interviewee #3, an Uruguayan immigrant living in Sweden since the late 70s, residing most of the time in *Hjällbo* and other parts of *Angered*, towns with high unemployment and mainly immigrant population. Interviewee #3 has also been very politically active and worked in projects to integrate immigrants living in Sweden into Swedish society.

Blattesvenska’s Linguistic Features

Blattesvenska is a variety of Swedish spoken by immigrants or children of immigrants, or *Blattar* as they also are called, or by people living in *invandrar förorter*, outside of mainstream society. *Blattesvenska* is clearly a mixed language with loan words from languages such as Turkish, Spanish, Arabic, Somali, Serbian, Kurdish, English, etc. In recent years, it has received many loan words from English, especially from American rap music and

African American English (AAE). The reason for this influx of words is mainly because of the sense of familiarity young immigrants in Sweden have with African American's situation in the US, such as their lower status in society and the desire to have a language that breaks the norm. Another reason is simply the large amount of media coverage Rap music receives in Swedish radio and TV. According to Interviewee #1, "*blattar*," or

foreigners, in Sweden are very influenced by American media such as movies and music. He also added that he uses several English derived words in his speech. Table 1 shows a list of English-derived *Blattesvenska* words with their English derivation and their meaning. These are words from my own vocabulary that I commonly used when speaking *Blattesvenska* with my friends in Sweden.

Table 1
English-Derived Words in Blattesvenska

Blattesvenska	English	Meaning
najs	nice	nice, good looking
softa	soft	taking it easy
baila	bail	to leave
chilla	chill	to take it easy
chok	choke	many, a lot
cutta	cut	cut, stab
bull	bullshit	talk nonsense
Taytish	tight	Swedish person

According to Ganuza (2008, p. 148, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 6) it is common to find grammatical differences between the standard language and the language of multiethnic teenagers. These are some of the differences that Ganuza mentioned:

- Subject deletion: *för att [-] tittar på henne* (because [I'm] looking at her)
- Article deletion: *jag måste hitta svenskalärare[-]* (I must find [the] teacher)
- Abnormal preposition: *Hon började gå i den där disco* (She started to go on that disco)
- Abnormal congruency: *den där arbete* (that one job)
- Non-idiomatic expressions: *många i klassen ska skolka bort för är ont om tid* (many in the class will skip away class because not enough time)

Ganuza (2008, p. 148, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 6) also mentioned that it is difficult to tell if these dissimilarities are due to the speakers' difficulties in learning standard Swedish or if it characterizes the language of multiethnic teenagers. According to Stroud, "Syntax and morphology can be different in

multiethnic teenage language during choice of gender and propositions and congruency, where even direct mistakes are committed" (2004, p. 340, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 5). Ganuza explained that because many languages lack reverse word order after words that are not a subject, which can affect acquisition rate, this straight word order is also a defining factor for multiethnic teenagers (2008, p. 141, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 5). Incorrect Swedish grammar is not only accepted but also encouraged by speakers of *Blattesvenska*. Growing up hearing and speaking *Blattesvenska* I am familiar with errors such as deletion of articles. Differences such as these are exaggerated within the *Blattesvenska* speaking community, which inspires new innovations.

The Users of *Blattesvenska*

In Sweden, immigrants or people with foreign heritage can be said to fall between two or more cultures. Take someone like myself for example; I was born in Sweden but with a father from Uruguay and a mother from Argentina. My brother and sister were both born in Argentina. In my home we only spoke

Spanish and never Swedish. Outside of my home, most of my friends spoke Spanish. What is interesting is that I had a lot of friends who had rather recently arrived from Uruguay and did not necessarily speak *Blattesvenska* and identified more with being Uruguayan than being a *Blatte*. I also had friends who were born in Sweden or arrived in Sweden at a very young age. They understood Spanish but spoke mainly *Blattesvenska* and considered themselves to be *Blattar* with a Latin heritage. Because they could not fully identify with their own Latin culture, at least not in the sense that innate Latin people do in Latin America, and because their home country was a faraway place and they never identified themselves with the Swedish culture, they found refuge in *Blattesvenska* and the culture surrounding it.

Blattesvenska is at its richest and most distinct among multiethnic teenagers who crave a place in society and give much importance to identity. *Blattesvenska* was first examined in the 1980's among teenagers living in *Rinkeby*, in Stockholm; this is when the term *Rinkebysvenska* was brought to life, a subvariety of *Blattesvenska* specific to the area of *Rinkeby*. Teenagers in this area, who had many different mother tongues, shared a common language, "a type of modified Swedish" (Kotsinas, 2005, p. 238, as cited in Löwgren, 2009, p. 3). These teenagers also incorporated into their speech words from languages all over the world. These teenagers also had a different grammatical structure, pronunciation, slang expressions and discourse particles compared to the speech of regular Swedish teenagers (Kotsinas, 2005, p. 238, as cited in Löwgren, 2009, p. 3).

Codeswitching is another phenomena often employed by the *Blattesvenska* speaking community. Codeswitching between *Blattesvenska* and standard Swedish is very common and is sometimes employed to show solidarity within the group (Park 2004, p. 299, as cited in Lovgren, 2009, p. 3). Spanish speakers can add more Spanish words when speaking to other Spanish-speaking immigrants or second-generation Spanish immigrants to show that they belong to the same group. For example, right before and

after I asked Interviewee #1 and Interviewee #2 the interview questions, we communicated using *Blattesvenska*, this indicated a mutual understanding, and that we had similar backgrounds. At the end of the interview with Interviewee #1, I said "tack brosh" (thanks bro), and he responded "denada homie." This serves as a prime example of the creativeness of speakers of *Blattesvenska*; "de nada" is Spanish for you are welcome, Interviewee #1 used this expression most likely because he knew both of us spoke Spanish, it created solidarity. It could also indicate an extension of his Spanish-speaking heritage. "Homie" is a loan word borrowed from AAE and indicates that Interviewee #1 is influenced by American Rap culture breaking the norm.

According to Park (2004, p. 299, as cited in Löwgren, 2009, p. 6) code-switching occurs uncounciously and can happen within the same context of speech, within a sentence, or even within an expression. I believe it occurs consciously, at least most of the time. Teenagers especially are aware that they speak *Blattesvenska* and very aware when they switch to standard speech since this is only acceptable when one is speaking to non-members of the group or for mocking the Swedish language. In societies where several languages coexist closely and bilingualism is common, people can choose to use one of the languages to show solidarity or rejection such as toward people with opposing religious or political views (Kotsinas 2000, p. 19, as cited in Löwgren, 2009, p. 3). It is also common for people to use 'stylemarkers', which can include change in intonation, or change of language variety (Kotsinas 2000, p. 19).

Löwgren (2009, p. 17-18) gave an example of a situation where codeswitching occurs in a schoolyard during a break, the multiethnic teenagers switch to their mothertounge when an adult approaches. On another occasion one of the teenagers responds in standard Swedish when the adult asks him a question. According to Löwgren (2009, p. 17-18) the teenagers choose to switch to their mothertounge to exclude the adult from their group, but when the adult incorporates a stricter tone the teenagers switch to the standard. According to Löwgren (2009, p. 17-18) they

do this to show that they are willing to cooperate and to show that they are not opposing the adult. As soon as the adult leaves they switch to *Blattesvenska* to alienate the standard language and reinstall and strengthen a sense of group belonging (Löwgren, p. 17-18). In this situation three different languages were used, each serving their own purpose.

***Blattesvenska's* Social Status**

Blattesvenska is generally considered having a lower status than standard Swedish. Interviewee #2 said, “[...] if I would speak to Swedes then I would probably make my Swedish better, be more professional in the vocabulary.” The fact that Interviewee #2 mentions Swedes as a group dissimilar from himself serves to further prove the distinction made in Swedish society between immigrants and people of Swedish heritage. Growing up and living in Sweden for the major part of his life Interviewee #2 should be able to consider himself Swedish. *Rinkebysvenska* has received a lower status than standard Swedish in Swedish society. Speakers of this variety of *Blattesvenska* are seen to be at a lower linguistic level than speakers of standard Swedish, and their language is seen as improper or incorrect (Kotsinas, 2000, p. 166, as cited in Löwgren, 2009, p. 6).

Interviewee #2 further said that he speaks *Blattesvenska* “with friends who also speak it...otherwise I tend to sharpen up at school and when we speak with our teachers and stuff.” The fact that Interviewee #2 says that he sharpens up at school in terms of his language, almost behaving in a sense, indicates the low status of *Blattesvenska* in society; in school it is not considered appropriate to speak *Blattesvenska*. This non-acceptance of the ‘other’ is deeply rooted in Swedish society.

Interestingly, although high status is sometimes attached to the standard variety among immigrants, generally, and especially among multiethnic teenagers, feelings of disloyalty might be triggered by the use of overly standard language, and speakers of the standard variety are often disliked within the group. Foreigners who speak standard

Swedish can be referred to as, *låtsas-svenne* (fake Swede) since they will not be accepted as “real” Swedes even if they speak the standard language (*svenne* is a derogatory term for a Swedish person and can serve to counter the term *Blatte* (Fraurud & Bijvoet 2004, p. 404, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 9).

The role of *Blattesvenska* as a reflection and a creator of social segregation in Swedish society was well described by Interviewee #3:

On one hand there is a social process of alienation, product of the economical development of [Swedish] society. That development generates poverty and exclusion/segregation. The 'others' are seen as different, so different that a social rupture is created. Those conditions generate identities that help sustain the differences. These identities invent references that on one hand help increase the differences but on the other hand hide part of the social space and make it semisecret, unreachable for 'the others'. *Blattesvenska* hides signification, invents secret codes, secret games. It is irreverent and tries to subvert the norms (like all slang) similarly to slang. What *Blattesvenska* does so well is to play with the exotic, taking advantage of it like the colonial relation with 'the other' cultures (Translated from Spanish).

For its speakers, *Blattesvenska* is used to form group identity and solidarity within the group that falls outside of the norm and with *förorten* (the suburb). Doggelito and Kotsinas further explained this phenomenon, “In immigrant rich neighborhoods with people of different heritage, religions, culture and mother tongues, language is a unifying factor and significant identity marker. No group is seen as more valuable than the other” (2004, p. 22, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 9).

Blattesvenska unifies its speakers and simultaneously pushes away non-members of the group. According to Gomer (2008, p. 9-10) the language of multiethnic teenagers, or *Blattesvenska*, expresses a protest against society as a whole, against authority figures,

and against the older generation. Gomer (2008, p. 9-10) calls *Blattesvenska* an “antilingual,” and explains that it serves as the polar opposite of standard language. “The multiethnic teenager language is perceived negatively by the majority of [Swedish] society, while the use of standard Swedish is disloyal to the group” (Fraurud & Bijvoet 2004, p. 394, 403, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 9-10). As the example about code-switching above shows, for teenagers who speak *Blattesvenska*, standard Swedish is used mainly with authority figures such as teachers at school but it is distrustful to use standard language with other *Blattar*. Any innovation that breaks the established norm is welcomed. According to Leiva Wenger (2008, as cited in Gomer, 2008, p. 9-10) the language of these multiethnic youngsters is a protest against the segregation they encounter in Swedish society.

***Blattesvenska's* Status As A New Voice of Anti-Discrimination**

One of the first musical groups with a *blatte* background to become noticed in the media was *The Latin Kings*. The Latin Kings exploited *Blattesvenska* and the *blatte* culture in the sense that it drew from it all that was possible and presented it in compact form to the public. Using vocabulary that was not mainstream and dressing up like American rappers they shocked and challenged the norm. Their lyrics talked about how it was being a *blatte* or living in *förorten* or *betongen* (the concrete, after the concrete buildings that predominate immigrant neighborhoods) as they called it. The group also explored topics such as racism and segregation and made it hard for Swedish society not to at least consider the existence of these problems. *The Latin Kings* gave a voice to young immigrants who had no say in Swedish society. One of their songs “*Snubben trodde han var cool*” (The Latin Kings, 1994) includes a short musical sample from popular Swedish TV series “*Emil i Lönneberga*” which told the story of a traditional Swedish family living in the agricultural times. In the background, the song also plays the voice of a Swedish politician who has a clear anti-immigrant belief, the voice and song then

blends in with a strong modern hip hop beat and the rap is sung in strong *Blattesvenska*, or *Rinkebysvenska*, as I mentioned earlier a subvariety of *Blattesvenska* spoken in Rinkeby in Stockholm. The following is an excerpt from the song “*Snubben trodde han var cool*” (The Latin Kings, 1994) which addresses discrimination in Sweden, “Hur länge ska jag vara tolerant, och hur länge ska du vara ignorant” [how long will I be tolerant, and how long will you be ignorant], which basically is saying that immigrants are tired of discrimination, a discrimination that is based on the Swedes’ ignorance. Today Dogge Doggelito, one of the members of the group, is a celebrity in Sweden, and often appears on TV shows and radio speaking with a strong *Blattesvenska* accent.

Another more recent group that addresses similar issues in an unapologetic way is Advance Patrol, in their song “*vi laddar*” (2007) the group spoke bluntly about racism in Sweden and parallels were drawn between Ku Klux Klan and Swedish mainstream society, the average middle class Swede, and the political party *Sverige Demokraterna* which is known for its anti-immigrant beliefs. Following are selected segments from “*vi laddar*” (2007), with English translation:¹

- (1) “Tjenare, hejsan, ni blir inte av med oss”
Hello, hi there (in standard Swedish language), you won't get rid of us.
- (2) “Inget hemligt att Skåne är främlingsfientligt, Håll i hatten (Swedish saying), här kommer Sveriges favoritblatte. Jag slåss tillbaks på diskrimineringen”
It's not a secret that Skåne (a district in Sweden) is discriminatory against aliens, pay attention (literally “hold your hat”), here comes Sweden's favorite blatte.
- (3) “[...] döms efter etnisk bakgrund.”
I'm being judged by my ethnic background.
- (4) “Det här är mitt land, här ska jag få mina tio barn.”
This is my country, this is where I will have my ten children.

The last sentence is expressing two things, the fact that foreigners are never accepted as part of Swedish society and the need of

expressing that Sweden is “our” country too. Secondly it parodies with the attitude that many Swedish people have about foreigners having too many children. The lyrics play with the Swedish language purposefully code-switching between traditional Swedish proverbs and expressions and *Blattesvenska*, creating a clear contrast to mock the Standard language and the mainstream ideology.

***Blattesvenska*'s Spread to Mainstream Swedish Culture**

Recently Swedish society has seen a rise in the acceptance of *Blattesvenska* as something “cool,” something exotic and “hip” that is much copied by Swedish youth, much similar to the rise in popularity of AAE in middle class “white” youth in the US. Several *Blattesvenska* words, such as *guz*, *keff* etc have now even been incorporated into the Swedish dictionary or *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista*. According to the SVT.se website (2005) one of the explanations for this acceptance of *Blattesvenska* words might be due to the popularity of its use by a large number of writers. On TV, I have heard speakers of mainstream Swedish using words, such as *jalla* or *fett*, that were originally *Blattesvenska* words. *Blattesvenska* can now be seen as something that is exploited by the media, a product that has a market and therefore, sells.

Conclusion

Blattesvenska serves many purposes for its speakers. It expresses a protest against the mainstream culture and gives power to the powerless while at the same time keeps and encourages the differences that create prejudice. It gives an identity to people who are living between two or more cultures, one being their native culture and the other the Swedish culture. *Blattesvenska* is indeed the product of discrimination. Discrimination is what gives it fuel to keep reinventing expressions and keep growing. In a paradox it creates hope and group identity but at the same time it further creates disparities. Speakers of *Blattesvenska* often do not want to fully integrate into the Swedish community because this would entail losing the only

thing that is truly theirs and that they identify with fully, their *blatte* identity. The word *blatte* itself, which started off as a racist remark, has come to mean everything to multiethnic teenagers in immigrant suburbs in Sweden. They use it to address each other as comrades coexisting under the same oppression, expressing “we are different from them [the norm], but me and you, we are the same” and therefore reinvent the word's meaning.

In recent years, *Sverigedemokraterna*, a political party often considered to be quite racist, won a seat in the Swedish parliament. This has changed things to the worse in Sweden, creating more pride and resistance among immigrant groups and more antagonism towards them. As it seems, as a natural reaction to discrimination, *Blattesvenska* will only grow and increase in dissimilarities with the standard.

Language teachers can draw some interesting points from the case of *Blattesvenska*. *Blattesvenska* is essentially language acquisition “in the wild” because its speakers constantly adopt new words and structures into their own vocabulary and expressions. Not only are *Blattesvenska* speakers simultaneously aware of the rules of several languages but they are able to grab new rules, change them, and adapt them to the rules of their own language variety, *Blattesvenska*. This ability to be creative with multiple languages could be an asset when it comes to language learning. I suspect that the *Blattesvenska* speaking youth is extremely adept at learning new languages, especially English, a language they are very familiar with and often draw from to form their unique variety. This, of course, needs to be confirmed by further research.

Another interesting implication that *Blattesvenska* has for language teachers is that second language users can create and play with language in ways that suit their needs, desires, and purposes. The imposition of a standard language form may not succeed unless the second language user finds that this form is in alignment with their identity construction and social positioning. Deviations from the standard language, as in the case of *Blattesvenska*, may not be a failed attempt at acquiring the target language, or a

lack of competence, but is an expression of identity and a demonstration of a sophisticated ability to manipulate linguistic resources. On the other side of the coin, in language teaching, if learners are encouraged to find ways to express themselves with the affordances of the second language (van Lier, 2000), perhaps their interlanguage will blossom and thrive, as *Blattesvenska* does.

Finally, *Blattesvenska* shows that language learning is deeply embedded in the learner's social, historical, and political context (Young, 2009). What is learned and what is not learned is very much influenced by these social factors, and language teachers should go beyond the activities and exercises inside the classroom walls and reach into the learner's worlds in order to help them succeed.

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Notes

¹ The type of *Blattesvenska* used by Advance Patrol is sometimes called *Blattesånska*, being the language of *blattar* in *Skåne*. Although the words are mostly Swedish, they are pronounced with a *Blattesvenska* accent.

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