

# Doing ethnicity: Ethnic wordplay amongst youths

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# Doing Ethnicity: Ethnic Wordplay amongst Youths

Childhood

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## Abstract

The article illustrates ethnicity as a social construction by highlighting how students use ethnically based concepts to categorize each other as well as the Other. Although the concepts have ethnic connotations, they are mainly concerned with matters of style and behaviour. They are therefore open, fluid and inclusive because the students can alternate between the categories. The analyses draw on 1 year of fieldwork in two eighth grade classes in which all students have experience of migration within their families.

## Keywords

Education, ethnicity, identity, Import, school, social constructivism

When people communicate, they express more than words. By talking about ethnicity we do something: We create and define categories, confirm, reject, or renegotiate them. This notion is close to the perspective adopted by Austin (1975), where he emphasizes that language includes speech acts or performatives. Speech, according to Austin, is more than a tool for communication or a way to describe our thoughts. Our speech acts affect the world around us, communicating something important about ourselves, the groups we identify with or the Other. Identities cannot exist separate from a social context, as they are the outcomes of social practices and interaction. It is only through interaction with others in the course of daily activities that one's identities become evident and consequential, to oneself and to others (Bucholtz, 2011: 1 ff.). Thus, ethnic categories, like all categories, are neither more nor less than what we make of them, than the way we use them in specific socio-cultural and interactional contexts (Hall, 2000).

People use communicative and linguistic tools to create meaning. The ability to differentiate and categorize our social world is a fundamental human characteristic, and

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stereotypes help us bring order to an otherwise terribly complicated social universe (Eriksen, 1993). Stereotypes allow us to divide the social world into types of people, and these types provide the criteria for classification. Hall (2013) argues that stereotypes reduce people to essential, easily understood characteristics, which appear to have been fixed by nature. Stereotypes give us the impression that we understand society, and they justify privileges and differences in access to a society's resources. Conversely, negative stereotypes aimed at a ruling group may alleviate feelings of powerlessness and resignation, functioning as the symbolic revenge of the downtrodden. The use of stereotypes can be considered a way to create differences between norms and deviations. But they should not be understood as fixed and eternal, as their meanings vary over time as they are challenged and negotiated (Hall, 2013). We constantly adopt new ways of talking about identities and stereotypes, and abandon old ones, thus shifting the way we relate to ourselves and to others. Ethnicity should therefore be viewed as an ongoing social process. We cannot speak of identity categories without mentioning power and agency since there is always an aspect of power. Identity categorization includes a self-image as well as an ascribed identity. Drawing on Austin's speech act theory, Louis Althusser emphasizes the importance of hailing and response. In a classic example, a police hails a man in the street. As the hailed individual turns around, he becomes a subject in an ideology – a process called interpellation (Althusser, 1971: 118). Recognition is central to this process; Butler (1997) adapts Althusser's notion of interpellation as a potential performative and highlights that being called a name is a prerequisite for being recognized. The subject who has been named is able to name another, since the subject has agency (Butler, 1997).

The term ethnicity has become prevalent in the contemporary global political discussion, where it often relates to primordial definitions. Stuart Hall stresses, however, that ethnicity should not be restrictive, but rather permissive and allow a complex array of subject positions and experiences (Hall, 1996b, 2000: 149). In order to differentiate his ideas from the traditional use of the term, Hall coins the term *new ethnicities* – ethnicities that are locally created and related to diversity. In that spirit, in this article I view identities, as well as ethnicities, as neither natural nor predetermined, but as created through social interactions and representations (Hall, 1996a), where the subject, in accordance with the interpellation theory has agency. My focus is therefore on how ethnically based categories such as *Svenne* and *Import* are used in various situations and how they are described, explained, communicated, shared and reproduced from the participants perspective. Hall (1996a) stresses that differences are not absolute or objective facts, but constructs that must be constantly renewed in ever-changing social contexts. Because new ethnicities are by definition locally created, ethnographic fieldwork is a method well suited to studying them.

## Fieldwork

The empirical data are based on 1 year of ethnographic fieldwork and more than 300 hours of audio-recordings. Following two eighth grade classes several days a week for a year, my intention was to capture the participants' own perspectives. The school is situated in a so-called multi-ethnic residential area on the outskirts of Stockholm, as the aim of the

overall research project was to study ethnicity as a multidimensional resource. The analysis focuses on the local level and on the ways in which students exhibit great creativity in combining multiple semiotic resources, thus creating aspects of their ethnicity and nationalism, location and culture (Wiltgren, 2014). Special attention is paid to how these signifiers are comprehended, given form and communicated in everyday interpersonal interactions. In this study, I aspire to uncover emic perspectives (cf. Eriksen, 2010: 40), and my analyses are based on recorded interactions that consist of naturally occurring conversations, participant observations and interview material.

All the students in the two eighth grade classes I followed have experiences of migration within their families, meaning that either they themselves or at least one of their parents have migrated, mainly from countries in the Middle East, or former Yugoslavia, with a minority coming from African countries. Out of 500 students in the school, only one student had two Swedish-born parents. Of the teachers, a majority came from a White Swedish background, and a third had backgrounds outside of the Western countries. I, too, have a migration background, as I was born in Syria but have been living in Sweden since the age of 8. This fact contributed to a close relationship with some students with whom I could speak Arabic, and the students could share their experiences and thoughts in a more relaxed way. All students, parents and teachers were given detailed information about the purpose of the study. They were ensured anonymity and that their participation was voluntary and could be interrupted at any time.

## **‘Fucking Svenne’ as a compliment**

Although ethnicity is – unfortunately – a noun, I aim to show, in line with many other researchers, that ethnicity is better understood as a verb, a social activity and not a ‘thing’ that people are born with or inherit (cf. Hall, 1996b). Therefore, ethnicity is not something predefined, but something that is done. Ethnicities are performed, but they cannot be created in isolation; there must be a contact with something that is deemed different (Hall, 2000). Eriksen (1993) claims that ethnicity is created in the encounter between different groups and that it is not a property of a group, but an attribute of a relation. Ethnicities can only exist in relation to boundaries, but these boundaries are fluid and constantly negotiated and renegotiated in everyday life. The following article will focus on such examples, namely, the two terms the students occasionally use in reference to each other: *Svenne* and *Import*. While *Svenne* (a slang form of *Swede*) is mainly associated with desirable properties, regardless of ethnic or national background, skin colour or place of birth, *Import* is associated with those who have not yet mastered the predominant social codes or those who break them. In this article, I will first focus on the social categorization of *Svenne*, then introduce the *Import* categorization:

It is the annual school photography day, a grand event for the students. The last lesson before being photographed is about to end and most students are excited about the upcoming event. Hair needs to be straightened, makeup needs to be touched up and the students rush out as soon as the teacher ends the lesson. All except for *Esme* who continues to write. *Esme* has on several occasions informed her friends and teachers that she plans to focus on school and earn good

grades. Concentrating on her writing, she asks her classmates to keep quiet while they rush out of the classroom. Her best friend Evin has already handed in her assignment and tries to get Esme to finish: ‘hurry *len!* [Turkish: friend]! Come on!’ Esme responds ‘I want it to be good’. In her restlessness Evin stands next to Esme and starts reading over her shoulder. Her gaze lingers on the word *squint*.

- Evin: Squint?  
 Esme: Mmm  
 Evin: Fucking Svenne! [with a twinkle in her eye]. We’re going to be photographed in 15 minutes. Come on!  
 Esme: I know. I’ll just write this last thing.  
 Evin: It’s a big deal. You need to put make-up on!

Although *Svenne* is preceded by ‘fucking’ [Swedish: *jävla*], it is not perceived as an invective or an insult. Like the majority of her schoolmates, Esme does not let such challenges slip by without opposition, when her other ethnic identities (Kurdish and Turkish) are mentioned in a negative way. *Fucking Svenne* is a form of confirmation of Esme’s high ambitions: Unlike her peers, Esme chooses to work on her text instead of rushing out on break. In combination with Evin noting the word ‘*squint*’, a word that rarely occurs in the students’ vocabulary, Evin calls her best friend ‘*fucking Svenne*’ with a twinkle in her eye. It is what Esme does that enables her to take this position, underscoring the fact that ethnicity is associated with what people *do*, and not what they ‘are’. *Svenne* is associated with what is perceived as proper conduct. The concept of *Svenne* is, however, not clear-cut, instead it is open to negotiation and reshaped every time it is used. Thus, the students subvert the stereotype by claiming it as their own and by claiming the power to decide who gets to belong to the category.

*Svenne* may in this case be compared to ‘grind’, which refers to someone who engages in an overall positive activity, but in a manner that may be perceived as excessive. I am unsure of my interpretation of the meanings Evin fills the concept with, and ask for a clarification during a later interview. I ask why and what Evin means, calling Esme a *Svenne*:

- Evin: Because she’s good at Swedish. Therefore, I call her *Svenne*.  
 Layal: But when you say it, is it a compliment or an insult? Do you understand what I mean?  
 Esme: [laughs] She means it is something good or bad? What does it mean?  
 Evin: *Jani* [Arabic: it means] she should be happy, she knows good Swedish.  
 Layal: She should be happy?  
 Evin: Yeah, a compliment.  
 Layal: It’s a compliment then?!  
 Evin: *Evet!* [Turkish: Yes!]

Creative forms of address alluding to ethnic and national backgrounds are often heard in class as well as during recess. Talking about ethnicity was not considered a taboo in the local context. During my 1 year of fieldwork, I could not detect any gender differences,

rather, there were gender similarities between how boys and girls deploy ethnic categories to define themselves and each other. These forms of address often function as invitations to teasing interactions, the aim being to meet the challenge with an equally or even more creative uptake (Wiltgren, 2016). However, this does not apply to the concept *Svenne*. In all of the uses of *Svenne* I observed, the response from the recipient was in the form of either laughter or silence. The silence should, however, not be interpreted as a form of resistance, in line with much work in the field of youth culture (cf. Johansson and Lalander, 2012), since the silence in this case was often combined with a smile. Rather it is a form of confirmation, similar to a situation where one is being complimented. I interpret the concept's meanings as overwhelmingly positive, which Evin confirms. When Evin calls Esme *Svenne*, it is a way of confirming Esme's language skills and means that 'she should be happy, she knows good Swedish'.

Several studies have shown that language ideologies characterized by the absence of phonetic and grammatical deviations and the use of a standardized form of Swedish are consolidated and reinforced at both an institutional level and in the social interaction in peer groups (Evaldsson and Cekaite, 2010; Milani and Jonsson, 2011). It is a position associated with being, or rather acting like, a *Svenne*.

It is stated in the Swedish national curriculum that schools are obliged to mediate knowledge as well as the basic value system, in Swedish called *Värdegrund*, which includes democratic values, human rights and the concept that all humans have equal value. However, in everyday life in school, the equal values criteria are constantly challenged, since school management, teachers, and students fall into essentialistic traps, where identity categories are hierarchically valued, and Swedishness is associated with proper conduct. This is in sharp contradiction to *Värdegrunden*, as the next section will illustrate.

## Proper conduct

At the end of class, I inform the students that since I won't be joining their class everyday, I'll write down which days I'll be spending with them on one side of the whiteboard. Evin, one of the girls, then asks me to write down my husband Filip's phone number as well:

- Evin: Ey, could you write Filip's phone number on the board, too? [Evin and her best friend Esme burst out laughing]  
Tanja: No respect! No respect! Idiots!  
Evin: Ay, true *Svenne*!  
Tanja: [Laughs]

In this case, it is a reproof that leads to someone being called *Svenne*, and it concerns what is appropriate or inappropriate to say. In Evin's request for my husband's phone number there is a certain spirit of fun, but Evin fails to persuade me or her peers to laugh. The only ones laughing are Esme and Evin, while Tanja refers to them as disrespectful and idiots. It is for her reprimand that Tanja is called a true *Svenne*. This makes Tanja laugh, and the class proceeds to discuss other things. My analyses show that the word *Svenne* is used as a reaction to proper behaviour, thus behaviour that is desired and

rewarded by adults. Svenne is someone who has understood the social codes. Calling someone a Svenne is therefore a kind of compliment, as Evin stated earlier. When the teacher Osman, one day, compliments Esme for her enthusiasm and engagement during an assignment that most students did only because they had to, her classmates call her a Svenne. Esme smiles and the discussion moves on.

Contemporary Swedish studies emphasizes that the notion of Swedishness has a prominent appearance-based dimension, where a 'Swedish look' is equated with being blonde and blue eyed. These beliefs inexorably exclude some people from the category of Swedish, regardless of self-identification (Bunar, 2010; Eliassi, 2010; Moinian, 2009). The link between being Swedish and being White is to be found on many different levels, but not in Evin's and her peers' definition of Svenne. Although Svenne is an ethnic marker, the concept refers to a behaviour and not to skin or hair colour, family name, country of birth or ethnic background. This is reminiscent of how the youth in Yon's (2000: 74) study could categorize each other by style, language and behaviour, rather than by skin colour or national origin. A 'White' person could be perceived as 'Black' if he behaved, dressed and spoke in a way that was characterized as 'Black'. In the school that is the focus of this study, the door to the category Svenne was always ajar, available to those who mastered the proper linguistic and social codes.

However, the position as Svenne is not unproblematic. Students neither deny nor protest being called Svenne, they usually laugh and the conversation topic changes. Although the term Svenne is loaded with positive connotations, I never heard anyone express gratitude or thank someone for being called Svenne, as one usually responds to compliments. Neither is the term followed by a discussion or argument, in contrast to when the students' other characteristics are mentioned in a negative way. Rather, the discussion dies out and a new topic is introduced.

Esme is one of those considered to have cracked these codes, and her peers occasionally call her a Svenne. She is a frequent user of the local, linguistic youth style, but she is also considered to have mastered a standardized form of Swedish. She devotes herself to her schoolwork, gets good grades in Swedish, corrects her peers' linguistic mistakes and is praised by the teacher. Although Esme has cracked the necessary codes in the local context, which allows her fit into different categories, she faces trouble when she gets a part time job at a fast food restaurant in the centre of Stockholm. Among her workmates with Swedish-born parents, Svenne has different connotations than those Esme associates with the concept. During a break, she mentions her concerns to the class teacher Stefan:

Esme: Listen Stefan, I would like to ask you something. At my job, they tell me, when you call us Svenne, we get offended but we say nothing, but when we Swedes call *blattar* [Swedish slang: immigrant, e.g. darkie (pejorative)], *blattar*, they get really offended. I was like, 'do you know why? Do you know why?' I was like: 'Swedish, Svenne, there is no difference, it's almost the same letters, but *Blatte* and immigrant, it's completely different'.

Stefan: But that's not quite the point. It's more about which group is considered to be the stronger. [...] Let's put it this way, white Americans, they are the majority, they are rich, they are perceived as stronger, they may not be racist against blacks, but blacks are perceived as a minority group, I mean, as

a weaker group, then it's more accepted for them to be racist against whites. But I mean, when I started working here, and someone called me Svenne, I got angry, but now I have become jaded ... now you can call me whatever you want [waves his hands and laughs].

Esme: [In a serious voice] I mean, Svenne, when I use the word Svenne, you may be wondering what I'm thinking of, but I mean no harm, Swedish – Svenne, do you understand?!

Again, this shows that the term Svenne is not associated with negative connotations in the local context. The term is, however, not perceived as a compliment by Esme's workmates. Similarly, Stefan demonstrates how he initially took offence at the term, but that with time he became jaded and with a sweep of his hand he shows that his students are now allowed to call him whatever they like. For Esme, who has little understanding of her workmates' reactions to the term, it seems important to establish neutral associations by equating the term Svenne with the term Swedish. The differences in the associations made by Esme and her workmates are not only due to their different perceptions of the term Svenne but also due to who has the power and who is hailing whom (cf. Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997).

As we have seen in the previous section, Esme is sometimes ascribed the role of Svenne in the local context, and in some situations she incorporates the role by choice. But among her Swedish workmates in the inner city, Esme is ascribed the role of *Blatte*, a derogatory name for immigrant. When her workmates say 'when you call us Svenne, we're offended' it is clear which of the two groups Esme and her workmates belong to. In the inner city, Esme loses her position as Svenne and lacks legitimacy for using the term. The gate to the imagined community of the Swedish (cf. Anderson, 2003) closes, and she is not allowed to enter and exit as she pleases. This links to the theoretical framework of this study, which states that ethnicity is contextually created and changing from moment to moment. A person who may in one context be interpellated as a Svenne, may in another be excluded from the category, even losing her legitimacy to use the term. She is instead being interpellated as a *Blatte* (cf. Althusser, 1971).

Svenne is the norm and as such it cannot exist unconditionally. Norms require and presuppose deviance. A norm without an antithesis lacks boundaries; it can neither be defined nor distinguished and becomes pointless. Everybody cannot be part of the norm. If they could, the norm would evaporate – a norm without anything to differentiate itself from becomes meaningless. Norms are often taken for granted, and normative categories such as Swede may easily appear to be static and naturally given, unless one takes into consideration the casual negotiations and renegotiations happening daily in every social context. Thus, the concept of Svenne in the local context is an example of a continuum of ethnic identity construction.

## Imports

One of anthropology's most important contributions to the study of ethnicity is the notion that ethnicity is created in encounters with others by highlighting differences (Barth, 1994), and that it is negotiable and changeable (Eriksen, 2010). Likewise, identities are

neither fixed nor rigid, but hybrid and fluid (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 2000). Ethnicity may be in a state of flux in situations where it is hard to detect from the outside. One example is the categorization of Import, a term widely known in regard to products, services and computer software, but not when it comes to people. To call someone an Import is a way to redefine boundaries and renegotiate group affiliations. Ethnic boundaries usually include an aspect of power, defining and identifying some as the Other. Even those identified as the Other can create their own Other, which is referred to as the *hierarchy within the Other* (Youdell, 2003). Defining Imports is not easy, as the term is unstable, fluid and not easily defined. My analyses of the explanations I get when I ask about the term show that its definition is diffuse. This diffuseness is important, as it allows the term to remain fluid and usable in various situations. The term's very usability lies in its indistinctness:

During an art lesson, I find myself surrounded by the boys in the class. Although I have spent more than a semester in their school, it is the first time I follow this particular class and the boys are eager to engage me in conversation. They want to know where I come from and Milad asks '*btihki Arabi?*' [Arabic: Do you speak Arabic?]. I nod and he asks if I know his mother, since both of us were born in the same country. There is no doubt that Milad is joking, and everybody laughs. Davud then informs us that Milad's mother works in the school canteen, and Simon adds that this is not true: 'his mother's a cleaner'. Milad responds by punching Simon. They both laugh. Even though the boys are teasing each other, they seem to share a friendly community that can tolerate a great deal. Outside the window, they see their classmate, Firat, who is wandering aimlessly in the schoolyard. Firat should of course be attending the lesson, the boys inform me, and I can sense a hint of reproach in their voices. Milad turns to me and says:

- Milad: That guy over there is a slacker. He lives in the village. His name is Firat. He comes from Kurdistan. Import in boxes. Chiquita banana, *walla* [Arabic: I swear!]. He came in a Chiquita bananas box, Import to Sweden.
- Layal: Is it only people from Kurdistan who come as an Import? [Everybody laughs]
- Davud: Imports? Everywhere. If you're not born in Sweden, you're an Import. That guy over there is an Import.
- Layal: Are you an Import then?
- Davud: No! I was born in Sweden.

Like most of his friends, Firat was also born and raised in Sweden. What distinguishes Firat from his peers at that particular moment is their physical presence in relation to the school building, where his classmates are inside and Firat is not. What the boys are doing with their story about people being imported in banana boxes is giving me their self-presentation. At the same time as Milad and Davud call Firat an Import, they depict what they themselves are not. When I ask Davud whether he too identifies as an Import, he refers to Sweden as his country of birth.

The social categorization of Import can be explained as parodying the Other, those newly arrived and presumably different. The students reuse a preexisting discourse about the Other, but fill it with new meanings. In this way, they create something unique, their own Others, but this creation is not decoupled from mainstream society. The students do not exist in isolation; they are highly influenced by their local and regional society, the

media, their families and so on (Bucholtz, 2011: 36). To describe someone as an Import is to redefine boundaries and renegotiate group affiliations. Numerous studies have shown that by talking about a group one does not belong to, one simultaneously says something about the groups one identifies with (Back, 1996; Clifford, 1986; Hall, 2000).

In the context of self-identification, Swedish research stresses that 'Swedishness' is a distinct social and symbolic position that provides certain people with exclusive opportunities and access to contexts that are closed to others (Behtoui, 2006; Eliassi, 2010; Moinian, 2009). The young people in this study use Swedishness as a resource that enables movement in the social hierarchy. It is an existing hierarchy in society that is very likely to turn against them when they one day start looking for a place to live or work (see, for example, Behtoui, 2006; Bunar, 2010). It is, however, crucial to highlight the empowerment that exists among those who are considered stigmatized (Sernhede, 2011). In the multi-ethnic neighbourhood, Swedishness seems open enough to be used as a power resource, highlighting that the students are active agents in their local context, since the norm is open for them to inhabit. Swedishness is not, however, totally inclusive; it cannot be, the newly arrived are being excluded:

School is over but a lot of students still hang around. When I leave the school building I hear Esme calling my name. Esme is one of the tough girls, and she often seeks my company. Now she is sitting on a bench, observing a few newly immigrated children, with a background from the same area as Esme's parents, playing with a ball. As I sit down next to her she tells me:

- Esme: Layal, I'm surrounded by Imports. They're all Imports.  
 Layal: What are you then?  
 Esme: I'm a Swedish citizen. I was born here and I've lived here my entire life.  
 Layal: What about me?  
 Esme: You too!  
 Layal: But I wasn't born here.  
 Esme: But you know Swedish, you've lived here for a long time.  
 Layal: Do you think it's good that Kurds are coming to Sweden?  
 Esme: No.  
 Layal: Why not?  
 Esme: Because, then, I wouldn't be special. GO DRESS YOURSELVES PROPERLY! [Shouts at the children]

The children are dressed in jeans and sweaters, and at first glance, it is not easy to see any noticeable difference between them and Esme. Looking closer, one can, however, find that the kids, unlike Esme, are not wearing popular designer clothes and designer shoes. Some of them have long-sleeved sweaters tucked into their waistband.

So what is the difference that makes Esme Swedish and the children she observes Imports? Besides the fact that they threaten her self-image as someone special, Esme mentions citizenship, place of birth and lifelong residency, but when I point out that I only match one of the criteria, Esme immediately changes her criteria to language skills and long residency. The boundaries change rapidly so as to remove me from the position of Import and to include me in the imagined community of Swedes (cf. Anderson, 2003). Esme then directs our attention to the children's clothing as a marker of difference.

Both the ethnicity and identity research have stressed the fact that individuals position themselves in descriptions and namings of the Others (Eriksen, 2010; Hall, 2000). Identities are usually associated with how people answer the question ‘who am I?’ but are by implication also related to the question: ‘who am I not?’ (Back, 1996; Hall, 2000). One of the main purposes of the concept of Imports seems to be to set oneself apart. By this process of highlighting differences and similarities in relation to various groups, the students are actively engaging in the creation of new forms of social identities. Import is largely about defining a group to which one does not belong, but the student may also talk about their parents as Imports. During my year of fieldwork, I never heard any adult use the term, and thus it seems to be a local youth style.

The concept of Import can be compared to the term *Fresh off the boat* or *FOB*, a term ‘popular’ upper-middle-class students with Asian backgrounds call schoolmates who have not mastered the upper-middle-class codes in terms of style, language and behaviour – codes that constitute the prevailing norm in a school in California. Similar to the concept of Import, the concept of FOB is commonly used to distance oneself from the perceived negative attributes connected to social class and the mastery of cultural and linguistic codes (Shankar, 2008; Talmy, 2009). Both terms can be understood as a local, social parody of the Other.

The opposite of Imports is a normative position associated with Swedishness, a socially created category that helps young people to define themselves as well as their group affiliation. This process of inhabiting and vacating social identities manifests itself daily in peer relations (Back, 1996), creating and enhancing differences that enable young people to form new kinds of identities. Identification and belonging are always about positioning oneself within or outside various identity categories in order to express something about oneself as well as others (Hall, 2000), but these borders are not self-generating. They exist because the students create and recreate them, and this creation is in itself a social skill instilled between students and learnt from social discourses.

But categorizations are not carved in stone, nor are the positions of Svenne and Import fixed and immutable. This is reminiscent of the ideas of the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who argues that it is not possible to speak of uniform cultures because what we call Swedish or Kurdish or English are translations with no original. Bhabha claims that hybridity is a way to destabilize categories that are considered rigid. With a departure from the colonial period, the colonial subject, through attempts to copy the colonizer, shows the lack of authenticity of the original. Thus, hybridity shows that the alleged original is itself only a copy open to repetitions and negotiations, thus dissolving the distinctions between distinct identities (Bhabha, 1994). The term hybridity cannot, according to Bhabha, be traced back to two originals from which the third emerges. Rather, hybridity is the *third space* which enables other positions to emerge. The third space constitutes a process of identifying with and through another object, where the subject itself is ambivalent, because of the intervention of the otherness.

## Elusive boundaries

Social boundaries are not static. The students in this study negotiate and alter the meaning of their social boundaries; they create and reproduce them through social interaction

as part of a social discourse. During one conversation, Sandra highlights that identity categories are taught and learned, which the next episode will illustrate:

- Sandra: You know what they are like, all those Imports.  
Layal: Yeah, I know, what does Import really mean? I know what it means, but what do *you* mean by Imports? A lot of people use it.  
Sandra: Uh, those who are newly arrived, so if I came here two months ago, then I'm an Import. Do you understand?  
Layal: So when do you cease to be an Import then? Or how long do you have to have lived here?  
Sandra: I don't know [laughs]. Five years! When you get your citizenship.  
Layal: Then one is no longer an Import?  
Sandra: Yes.  
Layal: [laughs] So you and I are not Imports?  
Sandra: Yes.  
Layal: Okay.  
Sandra: My cousin used to say, 'look at those disgusting Imports!' Those ugly, Import guys who used to stare at us. She went like 'look at those disgusting Imports, they're checking us out like crazy'. I was just like, 'What Imports? We're also Imports'. She said to me 'hush, be quiet!'  
Layal: [laughs]  
Sandra: And then I have learned that.

This definition does not include residence or nationality, but is based on behaviour. Sandra was initially not sure about the definition, wondering whether she and her cousin were also included in the category based on their migration 5 years ago; Sandra's cousin immediately muzzles this information. Defining Import, its contents and meanings, is also a way for Sandra to define herself. It is worth stressing that the position of Swede seems open; it is the territorial boundaries that constitute the obstacles.

Perceptions and descriptions of people do not stem from sovereign entities or self-chosen identities. It is rather a process of identification in which certain behaviour is expected and mandated, while other behaviour is attributed to a different role (Hall, 2000). When Sandra says, 'I have learned that' there is an identification process that has taken place. Back (1996) argues that it is not simply that young people 'learn to belong'; they are also involved in playful interactions and an active process that explores the meaning of belonging. This is true in Sandra's description as well: She learns how to use a term whose meaning she has learned to discern. The blurring of boundaries in young people's definition of Imports is essential, because the ambiguity plays a crucial role in making the term useable in many different areas.

One day, Esme invites me to join her in the study room and help her with a school assignment. After some time, she takes a break from her writing and says,

- Esme: I've met a guy, he's an Import.  
Layal: When you say Import, what do you mean?  
Esme: Someone who hasn't lived in Sweden for a long time.

- Layal: When do you stop being Import then?  
 Esme: Like Adem, he's not an Import anymore.  
 Layal: How long has he lived here?  
 Esme: 4-5 years and he has changed style and he acts like ... a normal human being.  
 Layal: So it's about how long you've lived here and how you act!?  
 Esme: Yeah, and how you dress, how you dress is the most important.  
 Layal: How does that differ between Imports and non-Imports?  
 Esme: Imports, first of all, their behaviour, they look at girls as though they haven't seen girls before. And second, the clothes. Just go down to school, to where all the Imports are, you will see the differences.  
 Layal: But how do you see the differences? Explain it to me!  
 Esme: The style and the hair. Pink trousers. Skirts up to here. Their hair like this. Rotten. No style. They watch like this [gives me a look]. Those looks. I mean I don't know. IMPORTS!  
 Layal: So describe the clothes.  
 Esme: Yeah, trousers up to here [puts her hand under her bust]. Pink. Disgusting shoes. Flower print sweater. The trousers go like this [waves her arms around her legs]. And then, a t-shirt that you immediately see is a copy. Dolce & Gabbana with pink print. Or Hugo Boss. And then hairy [touches her arm].  
 Layal: What? Hair on their arms? What about the others? Don't they have hair on their arms?  
 Esme: Well, yes, but those, I don't know, it feels disgusting.  
 Layal: Well, anyhow, you met an Import, what happened next?  
 Esme: He was gorgeous. He was stunning. The first Import that looks good.

The difference between Imports and non-Imports is, according to Esme, their mastery of social codes. Until those codes are learned, the position as Import is quite visible. But it is hard to verbalize what is obvious and taken for granted. Even the hair on their arms is seen as different without Esme being able to explain why. When Esme has difficulties explaining the difference she asks me to 'go down to school, to where all the Imports are', that is where the classes for newly arrived immigrants are located and where she thinks the differences will be obvious through differences in style. Several studies have shown how young people use style to mark affiliation and create identity (Bucholtz, 2011; Hebdige, 1979; Shankar, 2008; Yon, 2000). Style is something that is done and made and, thus, open to anyone who is knowledgeable about the codes and has the economic means. But style is a continuous effort that requires mastery of social codes, and it is here that, according to Esme, the Imports fail. But the special guy that Esme met is described as both gorgeous and stunning. Thus, he becomes the exception that confirms the rule.

### **Not exclusive categories**

The discourse about the categories *Svenne* and *Import* shows that we are all, in different ways, part of the post-colonial rhetoric, where the definition of the Other is central to one's own self-understanding (Hall, 2000). A power similar to that which is used to

address newly arrived students or those who break social codes is evident in how Esme was not able to use the word *Svenne* at her work-place, because her workmates with Swedish-born parents took the power to define ethnic categories and to fill them with meaning (cf. Butler, 1997). *Imports* as the Other, however, is not an immortalized or ancestral concept, as many testify that the concept of immigrants can be inherited from one generation to the other. Unlike *Import*, immigrant is a much more difficult position to get out of. Many studies have shown that the immigrant label does not fade away with time (at least not for non-Whites and for those with non-Swedish names), and it affects people's perceptions (Bunar, 2010). The category of *Import* is more negotiable, in that the mastery of social codes provides an exit from the position and access to other, more advantageous positions. The exit of the position of *Import* is, however, not entirely self-chosen. Others have to accept and acknowledge the exit (cf. Butler, 1997).

*Svenne* and *Import* should not be understood as each other's opposites, or as essentially different and exclusive categories. The position of *Swede* is in fact open to *Imports*, though it does require a certain amount of time and effort to master. Likewise, the position of *Import* is open to those who in other contexts call themselves *Swedes*.

Identities do not exist unconditionally. Young people are constantly working their way into different identities in order to identify themselves with, or disassociate themselves from, various groups (Back, 1996; Youdell, 2003). The categorical concepts of *Svenne* and *Import* are used to define boundaries, identities and relationships. The position of *Import* is temporary; it is a transitional identity in which the ultimate goal is to leave the position.

The ambiguity and the different meanings inherent in the concept make it useful. The category of *Import* is often used to speak about others and position oneself as *Swedish* in relation to them. This article illustrates this by showing how some students, like Sandra, were not quite sure about their own position.

Both *Svenne* and *Import* function as forms of address, but in contrast to *Import*, *Svenne* is positively charged and perceived as a form of compliment, although not entirely unproblematic. *Svenne* is also a position that is preferable to *Import*; most of the students in this study would position themselves much closer to *Svenne* than to *Import*. What these concepts illustrate is that ethnicity is something created and should therefore be a verb, open to negotiation and change. The concepts of *Svenne* and *Import* are therefore examples of what Hall (1996b, 2000), Back (1996) and their successors call new ethnicities. Should this view, that ethnicities are fluid and open to everyone, be commonly accepted, it would hold the potential to mitigate the harsh political climate towards the Other currently present in many parts of the world.

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