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The use of English in the Swedish-language comic strip *Rocky*

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the use of English in the Swedish language comic strip, *Rocky*. Written by Martin Kellerman, *Rocky* debuted in 1998 and is now published daily in *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's largest national newspaper. The comic chronicles the daily life of Kellerman's alter-ego, Rocky, a 30-something single man (albeit in the gestalt of a dog) living and working as a comic strip writer in Stockholm. *Rocky* is a dialog-driven comic strip, depicting the informal, social interactions of Rocky and his friends.

Conversations among the cast of *Rocky* characters feature the frequent occurrence of Swedish-English code-switching. Since Swedish is the dominant language of *Rocky*, switches to English are discursively significant, and not only reflect the in-group linguistic norms shared by the *Rocky* characters –and, presumably, by their real-life counterparts– but can also reflect or even introduce a similar linguistic behavior among the wider Swedish reading public. I argue that the use of English among the *Rocky* characters reflects a stylistic choice, symbolizing assimilation, cultural alignment, and in-group membership – or aspirations thereto. Specifically, the establishment of a native/non-native English speaker opposition as well as the appropriation of a hip-hop vernacular are recurring features in *Rocky*. The occurrence of code-switching as the deliberate use of non-standard English and the reciting of hip-hop song lyrics serve as salient hallmarks of in-group/out-group opposition. I furthermore argue that the use of English itself is responsible for the opposition, and code-switches are exploited as sources of humor, by capitalizing on linguistic incongruities in group member identities.

1 Introduction

The Swedish comic strip *Rocky* first appeared in 1998 in the national edition of *Metro*, a free newspaper distributed at points of public transportation, targeting morning commuters. Since this humble debut, *Rocky* has so far been published in a total of 17 collected volumes, been adapted for the stage, made into a documentary series of short films, and inspired a franchise of products such as t-shirts, skateboards, and calendars. *Rocky* is currently featured as the headlining comic strip of Sweden's largest national newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, and has found distribution in Norway, Finland, Denmark, France, Italy, Slovenia and the USA. The strip's writer, Martin Kellerman, has been awarded a number of prizes for *Rocky*, including the Urhunden award in 2000 from Seriefrämjandet (an association for the promotion and support of comic strips and artists) for his first published volume, *Rocky I*; the Bern's Award in 2009 by Swedish PEN (an international association for Poets, Essayists and Novelists) for his contemporary depiction of Stockholm; and, most recently, the prestigious Bellman Award of 2010, an honorary distinction including a stipend awarded by the City of Stockholm.

Rocky has thus developed into what its publisher, Kartago, likens to an empire, attributing it the status of an institution in Swedish culture. The motivations for the awards and accolades bestowed on Kellerman and his comic strip seem to confirm this assessment: *Rocky* is praised by critics for its accurate and humorous portrayal of the day-to-day life of a young, single man in modern-day Stockholm. Indeed, the comic chronicles the daily life of Kellerman's alter-ego, Rocky, a 30-something single man –albeit in the gestalt of a dog– living and working as a comic strip writer in Stockholm. *Rocky* is thus largely autobiographical, representing a public diary of Kellerman's own life and, notably, an expository documentation of the lives of his friends, also represented by animal figures. Kellerman, now 36 years old, has even admitted in a 2005 interview to being a 'parasite' with regards to his friends and his relying on them for inspiration and material:

They generate a lot of the material. [...] My friends are just such perfect cartoon characters. A lot of times they say things and all I have to do is write it down. Their personalities match and complement each other so well, it's impossible not to write it down. (MacDonald, 2005)

Kellerman's practice of documenting the social interaction of his network of friends in *Rocky* has contributed to it being profiled as a dialog-driven comic strip. In another 2005 interview, Kellerman aligned himself with other dialog-heavy comic strip artists, citing inspiration from Peter Bagge, Joe Matt, och Robert Crumb (Kinn, 2005), whose *Fritz the Cat* also featured anthropomorphized animals as regular strip characters. In yet another interview from 2005, Kellerman explained the conversation-driven aspect of the comic strip as a deliberate choice, claiming he feels that he's 'cheating' if he makes a strip 'with only a few words in it.' (Spurgeon, 2005).

It is precisely the verbosity of the *Rocky* cast of characters that makes the strip an obvious target for a linguistic analysis. But perhaps most interesting to an international audience is the fact that this Swedish-language comic strip is characterized by the interlocutors' frequent use of English. In this regard, *Rocky* can be considered accessible to even non-Swedish speaking scholars of linguistics and comics.

In this paper, I analyze the use of English in *Rocky* in terms of a distinct linguistic code with discursive and humorous functions. More specifically, I approach the use of English 1) as a

manifestation of the assimilation of English in Sweden, 2) as an indicator of in-group identity and 3) as a source of humor in the Swedish comic strip medium.

Since Swedish is the dominant language of *Rocky*, switches to English are indeed discursively significant, and not only reflect the in-group linguistic norms shared by the *Rocky* characters – and, presumably, by their real-life counterparts – but can also reflect or even introduce a similar linguistic behavior among the wider Swedish reading public. I argue that the use of English among the *Rocky* characters reflects a stylistic choice, symbolizing assimilation, cultural alignment, and in-group membership – or aspirations thereto. Specifically, the establishment of a native/non-native English speaker opposition as well as the appropriation of a hip-hop vernacular are recurring features in *Rocky*. The occurrence of code-switching as the deliberate use of non-standard English and the reciting of song lyrics serve as salient hallmarks of in-group/out-group opposition. I furthermore argue that the use of English itself is responsible for the opposition, and code-switches are exploited as sources of humor, by capitalizing on linguistic incongruities in group member identities.

In the next section, I review the status and role of English in Sweden, in an effort to reveal why English is actually available as a valid code choice in Swedish society, and thus also within the speech community represented in *Rocky*. In section 3, I prepare for the linguistic analysis of the use of English in Swedish-language *Rocky* by outlining theoretical tenets of code-switching and crossing. In section 4, I present linguistic analyses of selected *Rocky* comic strips, focusing on examples of Swedish, non-native English and hip-hop English. In this section, I also discuss code-switches to English as indicators of an in-group/out-group opposition and realizations of humor. In section 5, I summarize my findings consider the influence of *Rocky* on modern Swedish and the role of English in Sweden.

2 English in Sweden

The Scandinavian and Northern European countries such as The Netherlands and Luxembourg are often identified as exemplary nations in terms of their successful assimilation of English (Haugen, 1987; Labrie and Quell, 1997; Phillipson, 1992). Scandinavians in particular have been recognized as having a high level of English proficiency (Ferguson, 1994), and it has been suggested that English has attained the status of a second language in the Scandinavian countries, ‘rather than a foreign language, as the number of domains where English is becoming indispensable in Scandinavia is increasing constantly.’ (Phillipson, 1992: 25)

In Sweden, English is used not only as a lingua franca in international contexts, but also intranationally, as Swedes can be observed incorporating English words and phrases in their Swedish communication with each other (Sharp, 2000, 2007). This practice of code-switching, attended to in more detail in Sections 3 and 4, reflects the powerful influence English has historically exerted on the Swedish language and, by extension, on Swedish culture.

Ever since the end of World War II, Sweden – like the rest of the world – has been exposed to a steadily increasing influence from the English-speaking world, an influence that takes many forms and uses many different channels, and which has undoubtedly left its mark on the Swedish language. (Ljung, 1986:25)

There are several propositions in the quote above which, nearly 25 years later, are noteworthy for continuing to hold true. First, exposure to the English-speaking world and its subsequent

influence continue to increase. Taking broadcast television as an example, only two channels were officially available in Sweden until the 1980s, when the cable network was expanded. Now, almost three decades later, exposure to the English-speaking world via television and film is commonplace. The subsequent influence on Swedish culture is palpable, as the *Rocky* strips featured in this paper will illustrate.

Second, the ‘forms’ and ‘channels’ of this influence are in no way less numerous today – quite the contrary, with the aforementioned expansion of cable networks, the advent of the Internet, and further developments in information technology. Passive exposure to English increases, as do the possibilities to actively seek out English-language press, programming or other varieties of input.

Finally, the ‘mark’ left on the Swedish language (and on the Swedish speech community) may be even more obvious now than 25 years ago, as the evolution of Swedish increasingly figures as a subject of popular interest: in the past ten years, a number of television series (*Värsta språket; I love språk*), radio programs (*Språket*) and magazines (*Språktidningen*) dedicated to discussions about Swedish have been enthusiastically met by wide audiences.

Today, the use of English in Sweden is a matter of fact, but not an uncontroversial one. On a global scale, English is often accused of being a ‘language killer’ (Graddol, 1996; Josephson, 2004). Its use in non-English speaking countries tends to eclipse the status of other languages, and minority languages or national languages of smaller countries are particularly vulnerable to this fate. In terms of population, Sweden, at just over nine million people, ranks among the smaller countries of Europe; the nation’s tradition of deliberate incorporation of English especially in the domains of education, trade and business (Berg et al., 2001) reflects an awareness of this status and a conscious effort to contribute to its competitive edge internationally (Gunnarsson, 2004; Haugen, 1987; Hollqvist, 1984; Truchot, 1997). It has been claimed that, in the future, English may serve as the only language to be used in high status domains in Sweden, and might even be adopted as the official language of the Swedish government (Hyltenstam, 1999).

While the traditional strategy of assimilating English has not been without economic and social advantages for Sweden and its citizens, it has also caused concern over the fate of Swedish (Holm 2006, Josephson, 2004; Teleman, 1992; Westman, 1996). It is a valid concern, too: the more contact Swedes have with English, the easier it is for them to transition to this language, and to an ever-increasing degree. Research reveals, in fact, that the use of English in Scandinavia is not limited to the elite or within high status domains, but rather has come to characterize social interaction in low status domains as well (Sharp 2000, 2007). For example, Hult’s (2003) research on the use of English in southern Sweden shows that it is ‘in the process of being appropriated and integrated with daily interaction in public and interpersonal domains [and] can be appropriated for use together with Swedish for expressive purposes.’ (p. 60) Preisler (1999) observed a similar development in Denmark, leading him to conclude that the use of English in both high and low status domains exert different influences on the native linguistic system. Specifically, Preisler uses the expressions ‘English from above’ and ‘English from below.’ English from above is provided by ‘the hegemonic culture for the purposes of international communication.’ This can be exemplified by Sweden’s policy of including English in the school curriculum beginning at the elementary levels, and promoting the use of English in the domains of trade and industry. The native linguistic system is minimally affected as influence is often limited to the use of loanwords. The influence of English from below, that is, ‘the informal – active or passive– use of English as an expression of subcultural identity and style,’ on the other hand is attributed to ‘the desire to symbolize subcultural identity or affiliation, and peer group solidarity.’ (1999: 241, 246) The native linguistic system is more vulnerable to influences of

English from below, as evidenced by lengthier code-switches in low-status domains (see, for example Sharp, 2000, 2007).

In Sweden, the influence of English from below can be attributed to the daily and prominent exposure to English in Sweden via popular culture media such as television, film, radio, Internet, video games, printed press, and music. It is important to note that, like many Scandinavian and Northern European countries, Sweden's imported television programs and films are not dubbed. Swedes are thus regularly exposed to original-language programming, of which the majority is imported English-language films and television series. Furthermore, popular music broadcasting in Sweden features predominantly English-language songs, and native music productions are often recorded in English. Swedish websites frequently contain English texts or translations, or are entirely in English. The widespread exposure to English both from above and from below thus serves to secure it as a valid code for communication in Sweden, resulting in an increased use of English such that, in ever-increasing domains, it approaches that of Swedish. In general, it can be said that Swedes have each language at their disposal as a communicative tool, confirming previous assessments of the status of English as a second language in Sweden (Fergusson, 1994; Josephson, 2004; Phillipson, 1992). For this reason, it is increasingly common for the languages to co-exist in one and the same communicative context, logically resulting in code-switching. In the next section, I present some theoretical tenets of code-switching, and consider the specific phenomenon of crossing, focusing on the case of English in Sweden.

3 English in Sweden: code-switching and crossing

Having established the prominence of English in Sweden in section 2, I now briefly present some basic tenets of code-switching and crossing. While there are many terms and over-lapping concepts in the bilingualism and language contact literature, code-switching can for simplicity's sake be considered the umbrella term for the phenomenon of the simultaneous use of two languages in one conversational exchange. Code-switching can be further distinguished as intrasentential or intersentential, depending on where the switch occurs in terms of clausal orientation. In terms of predictability, code-switching predominantly occurs among bilingual speakers sharing the same or overlapping linguistic repertoires (Grosjean, 1982; Li Wei, 2005). The shared linguistic background of interlocutors automatically establishes them as members of an in-group, which code-switching serves to confirm. Thus code-switching frequently functions as a communicative strategy for achieving social goals, including to signal interpersonal relationships (Blom and Gumperz, 1972), to redefine social roles (Myers-Scotton, 1988) or to manage social relations (Auer, 1988).

Similar to code-switching, crossing (or, code-crossing; Rampton, 1995) is also a socially-motivated phenomenon, occurring among speakers with access to two or more linguistic systems. The critical difference between code-switching and crossing lies in the status of the speaker as a legitimate member of the speech community associated with each language. Crossing 'is concerned with switching into languages that are not generally thought to belong to you. This kind of switching, in which there is a distinct sense of movement across social or ethnic boundaries, raises issues of social legitimacy that participants need to negotiate.' (Rampton, 1995, p. 280)

The prominent role of English in Sweden and its consequent spread from high-status to low-status domains has helped encourage an ideological shift in the view of English as a foreign language to English a second language. This shift is significant, as it reflects both the ever-

increasing use of English across domains, and the progression beyond the approach to English as merely a source for lexical borrowing to English as a valid, viable code for communication. In the context of analyzing the use of English in Sweden, the distinction between foreign language and second language is potentially significant: on the one hand, proposing the status of English as a *second language* in Sweden enables a perspective of Sweden as a Swedish-English bilingual speech community. This, in turn, sets the stage for an application of a code-switching framework for analyzing the simultaneous use of English and Swedish, as code-switching commonly characterizes bilingual speech communities (Auer, 1988; Blom and Gumperz, 1972; Myers-Scotton, 1988; Li Wei, 2005).

On the other hand, maintaining that English is a *foreign language* in Sweden invites an analysis of the use of English in Sweden as crossing. The status of English as a foreign language in no way precludes bilingual abilities among Swedes; on the contrary, like code-switching, crossing assumes a bilingual linguistic repertoire. Crossing is thus a type of code-switching, but one that entails a lack of rights to, belonging to, or ownership of a particular language. While it is not productive to categorize conclusively English as a second or foreign language in Sweden, it is useful to bear in mind the distinction as well as that between code-switching and crossing, so as to better understand and interpret examples of English usage and the subsequent social implications.

In this section, I have presented the concepts of code-switching and crossing, establishing each as the concurrent use of two languages, a practice commonly associated with bilinguals. I have also proposed that, despite the widespread use of English in Sweden, the status of English as a second or foreign language is undetermined. While the labels themselves are unimportant, the distinction between the concepts is one of proprietary significance. In other words, the distinction concerns to what extent the use of English is considered to contribute to the national identity of Swedes and Sweden, and whether English is associated with in-group or out-group membership.

4 English in *Rocky*

In this section, I consider examples of the use of English in *Rocky*, analyzing code-switching and crossing as indicators of in-group/out-group membership with humorous overtures. The examples represent two categories of English usage: Swedish, non-native English and hip-hop English.

4.1 Swedish, non-native English

In the early publication years of *Rocky*, that is, 1998-2000, there are very few examples of the use of English. This is, perhaps, not so surprising, as any new publication of this sort initially seeks to find a readership and thus may be keen not to alienate a potential audience by such linguistic means. There is evidence to the contrary, however, of Kellerman taking audience alienation into consideration. While being featured in *Metro*, *Rocky* was repeatedly bounced from various other local newspapers due to reader complaints of impropriety. For this reason, the conspicuous absence of English may instead point to Kellerman's own developing assimilation of English and subsequent penchant for code-switching. Example 1 illustrates the oblique use of English from one of the earliest strips of 1998.

In Example 1, Rocky is calling an American, English-speaking acquaintance in New York, to inquire about the possibility of accommodation while visiting. The text of the strip is in Swedish, but in the first panel, there is an indication that the telephone conversation actually takes place in

English, with Rocky speaking what is labeled in the strip as ‘school English’, presumably referring to a rudimentary variety. The complete translation is provided below; in all examples, the English translations of Swedish are mine; code-switches to English appear **in bold**; standardizations of Swedish-spelled English appear in [square brackets]; extra-linguistic notes appear in (parentheses); cultural explanations appear in *italics between /slanted brackets/*.



Figure 4.1. All figures copyright Kellerman/Kartago, 2008. Used by permission.

Example 1

- (1) Rocky: Hello? Marcus? This is Rocky! From Sweden! Hiiii!
How is it going?*
- (* school English)
- (2) Rocky: Yeah, it's been two years now. But you know I only
get in touch when I need something. Ha ha ha! No,
seriously...
- (3) Rocky: I'll be in New York soon, and I need a place to
stay... Really?! That's great!
- (4) Rocky (to Tiger): What a guy! We've met one time, and
he's letting me stay with him for free as long as I want!
- (5) Tiger (thinking): Good! Then maybe I won't have to sell
one of your kidneys to pay my phone bill...

The strip in Example 1 leaves the actual form of English used by Rocky to the reader's imagination. Nevertheless, the explicit mention of Rocky's use of English establishes it as an accessible code for him, validating and, in turn, confirmed by subsequent uses of English.

The use of translated English in *Rocky* is limited to the storyline of Rocky's New York séjour, initiated in the strip in Figure 1, and documented in the first months of publication, in 1998. In all subsequent strips, code-switches to English remain untranslated. Much like the reference to 'school English', however, the quality of English used by Rocky or other characters is usually conveyed somehow, for example, by blatant phonetic representations of Swedish accent, or by more subtle grammatical, semantic or pragmatic deviations from idiomatic English. The English conversation in Example 2 illustrates such deviations, thereby establishing a contrast in quality between native vs. non-native English.

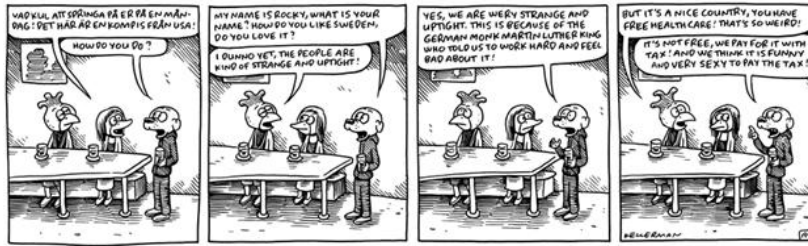


Figure 4.2. All figures copyright Kellerman/Kartago, 2008. Used by permission.

Example 2

- (1) Duck: How nice to run into you on a Monday! This is a friend from the US.
- (2) Rocky: **How do you do?**
- (3) Rocky: **My name is Rocky, what is your name? How do you like Sweden, do you love it?**
- (4) Rooster: I dunno yet. The people are kind of strange and uptight.
- (5) Rocky: **Yes, we are wery (sic) strange and uptight. This is because of the German monk Martin Luther King who told us to work hard and feel bad about it.**
- (6) Rooster: But it's a nice country, you have free health care. That's so weird!
- (7) Rocky: **It's not free, we pay for it with tax! And we think it is funny and very sexy to pay the tax!**

In example 2, Rocky is introduced to an American friend (a rooster) of a mutual friend (a duck). Rocky then initiates a conversation, beginning with the formulaic greeting, 'How do you do?' which comes across as a rather formal expression for this social context. Without waiting for a response to his greeting, Rocky continues his turn in the second panel, stating his own name, asking the rooster's name, and then posing additional, back-to-back questions about how the rooster is experiencing Sweden. There is an awkwardness to this sequence of utterances, deftly conveyed by Rocky's unsophisticated verbosity in the form of persistent questioning and both lexical and structural repetition. In the third panel, Rocky's strategy of repetition persists with his appropriation of the rooster's phrase 'strange and uptight'. Furthermore, there is an indication of a mispronunciation typical of Swedish speakers of English, namely the use of the approximant /w/ instead of the voiced fricative /v/ represented by the spelling of 'very' as 'wery.' Finally, the fourth panel contains a variety of features typical of non-native speech. In addition to further examples of lexical repetition in 'free', 'pay', and 'tax', there is hyper-articulation in 'it is' (in contrast to the previous use of 'it's'), an overuse of the definite article in 'the tax', and, finally, semantic incongruity in the utterance 'We think it is funny and very sexy to pay the tax.' This description of tax-paying as 'funny' and 'very sexy' can be understood as an infelicitous evaluation, as taxation usually conjures up negative associations. Rocky's utterance thus confirms his non-native status both in form and function: the odd lexical combination in fact reflects a decidedly non-native (i.e., non-American) attitude towards taxation.

The overall awkwardness of Rocky’s use of English is even more palpable in juxtaposition with the rooster’s, whose own use of English is more colloquial and idiomatic. Although the rooster says very little in comparison to Rocky, native fluency is suggested by the use of an abbreviated form (‘dunno’) and contractions (‘it’s’, ‘that’s’), as well as the hedged (‘I dunno’, ‘kind of’) expression of a negative evaluation (‘strange and uptight’), countered by the pragmatically felicitous use of ‘but’ followed by a positive evaluation (‘nice country’, ‘free healthcare’), and concluded with the slang expression, ‘That’s so weird!’

The concise representation of two very different varieties of English is evidence of Kellerman’s own linguistic aptitude, awareness, and proficiency. Clearly he has the grammatical and communicative competence to produce correct and pragmatically appropriate English. His deliberate decision to voice Rocky with a Swedish, non-native variety of English reflects a move to align Rocky – and thus himself – with a Swedish, and, significantly, non-American, identity. This particular strip thus serves as an acknowledgment of, and suggests a self-consciousness towards, the Swedish non-native speaker variety of English. Rocky’s awkward English certainly makes a mockery of Swedish English in general, but it is delivered in a self-deprecating manner, as Rocky himself is the perpetrator. As an example of in-group mockery, the portrayal is accepted as a pragmatic move to assert national, in-group identity.

In this section’s final example, the theme of mocking the Swedish English variety is revisited. In Example 3, Rocky is conversing with his friend, a rat, and the rat’s girlfriend, a cat. This strip is part of an on-going storyline, where Rocky and the rat are living temporarily in Berlin, Germany. The cat is visiting, and has recently complained that Rocky and the rat only talk nonsense and trivialities. The strip begins with Rocky addressing this accusation:



Figure 4.3. All figures copyright Kellerman/Kartago, 2008. Used by permission.

Example 3

- (1) Rocky: We can talk seriously, but at four in the morning after four bottles of wine, we’re not exactly Adaktusson in *Are You Smarter than a Fifth-Grader!* / Adaktusson is a Swedish television journalist/
- (2) Cat: But you guys babble all day long, too! You’re so afraid of things turning serious that it’s pathetic!
- (3) Rocky: Jeez, there were 30,000 serious assholes talking seriously in Copenhagen for three weeks, what’d we get out of that? Nothing! Reinholdt raised his hand and was all, ‘Uhh, we in Sweden think it’s very cold and wet all

- the time. We plan to set up a goal for 2012 to order the poor countries to let us come there in the wintertime!]**
- (4) Rat: They're all, 'No, we're talking about lowering the temperature on Earth and that...'
- (5) Rocky: Ookay, right. Then it's nothing... Is anyone headed north?
- (6) Rat: Share a jumbo-jet? I've got room for 748 if anyone's going my way?

In this strip, it is Sweden's Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt who is targeted by Rocky as a speaker of Swedish, non-native English. The aspect of non-nativeness is represented primarily by the use of Swedish spelling to approximate a non-native accent; the transcript above includes a standardized spelling of the English utterance. Similar to the strip in Figure 2, this strip capitalizes on in-group membership. Here, however, in-group membership can be understood to exist on two levels. First, there is an in-group consisting of Rocky and the rat; second, there is an in-group consisting of the Swedish population, all of whom are potential speakers of the Swedish, non-native variety of English. On the one hand, Rocky's use of the personal pronouns 'we' (vi) to refer to himself and the rat and 'they' ('dom') to refer to the delegates at the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference establishes an in-group/out-group distinction. This distinction is, in effect, further secured by the explicit naming of Prime Minister Reinfeldt as one of the 'assholes' in Copenhagen, accompanied by an overt mocking of him via an exaggerated Swedish, non-native variety of English. On the other hand, the targeting of a fellow Swedish national in this way can also be interpreted as self-targeting, suggesting the existence of another, larger in-group, namely, the in-group of Swedes and their associated speech community. Rocky, his interlocutors and Reinfeldt are mutual members of this in-group, which is further established by Reinfeldt's voiced use of the first-person pronouns 'we' and 'us'. In this way, Rocky, his friends, and Reinfeldt can all be aligned with this in-group based on national identity, and characterized by the common use of a Swedish, non-native variety of English.

With the exception of Figure 1, the source of humor in these strips can be attributed to the use of non-native English, specifically, the use of a Swedish, non-native English variety in contrast to standard or native English. As such, there is incongruity resulting from a native/non-native opposition. Incongruity is generally acknowledged as a basic prerequisite for linguistic humor:

At the basis of much linguistic humor are the various types of linguistic units and their interrelationship. The notion of incongruity is crucial to such humor. It involves the disarray of phonological and grammatical elements, the twisting of the relationship between form and meaning, the reinterpretation of familiar words and phrases, and the overall misuse of language. (Apte, 1985, p. 179)

Each occurrence of English in Figures 1-3 illustrates code-switching (as opposed to crossing) for the purpose of communicating with non-Swedish speakers. For this reason, the switches can be further categorized as situational (Blom and Gumperz, 1972), since they are direct responses to a situation requiring the use of a specific language, i.e., English. In each example, the use of Swedish, non-native English is presented as incongruous in its opposition to a standard or native variety. In Figure 2, the incongruity develops out of the opposition to the rooster's native-speaker English, while in Figure 3, the incongruity can be attributed to the implied opposition of a standard English variety to the run-on structure and orthographical representation of the Swedish,

non-native accent of the Prime Minister (although, in this strip, humor can also be derived from the proposition of seasonally exploiting ‘poor’ countries).

Critical to the recognition of this incongruity and thus the appreciation of humor is the constant status of Kellerman and the character Rocky as members of an in-group consisting of the Swedish, non-native English speech community. The mockery resulting from the exploitation of the native/non-native opposition is acceptable, and ideally even humorous, precisely because it is restricted to other in-group members with regards to its source and target. In this way, it can be considered a form of self-deprecating humor capitalizing on a personal quality that other in-group members might recognize in themselves.

Finally, these examples indicate that situational code-switches to English invoke an ‘English from above’ variety, indicated by institutional usage (‘school English’), a more formal register (‘how do you do’), and associated with international communication in a high-status domain (the UN’s Climate Conference 2009). In this regard, the variety of English employed in native-speaker or lingua franca interaction suggests a perceived distance to the language on the part of the speaker, further suggesting that, in these and similar contexts, English is approached as a foreign language.

4.2 Hip-hop English

In the previous section, I illustrated how the use of Swedish, non-native English is variably represented in Rocky, namely, as translated English and as a non-standard variety in terms of phonetic, lexical, structural, semantic or pragmatic features. I suggested that the use of Swedish, non-native English contributes to establishing an in-group identity by highlighting a native/non-native opposition, the incongruity of which is exploited for humor. Code-switching to English was shown to be situational, motivated by interaction with non-Swedish speakers. Situational code-switching of this kind thus emphasizes the native/non-native opposition, resulting in an incongruity which, as was shown, is exploited for humorous purposes for an in-group audience. In the examples presented in this section, the notions of in-group membership and incongruity are revisited, as switches to English are shown to highlight an alignment with a sub-cultural identity normally associated with the other, namely, a hip-hop identity.

Hip-hop culture is a recurring element in *Rocky*, stemming from Kellerman’s own interest in hip-hop music. References to hip-hop are often in the form of singing or reciting lyrics, as shown in Example 4. In this strip, the dialogue is almost entirely in English, and features the lyrics to the song *Gimme the Loot*, by hip-hop artist Notorious B.I.G. Rocky has recently had his license revoked, and is driving illegally with two friends in the car. He is understandably nervous about seeing a police car pull up alongside.



Figure 4.4. All figures copyright Kellerman/Kartago, 2008. Used by permission.

Example 4

- (1) Rocky: Damn is he ever staring at me! Is he going to pull me over now when I'm driving without a license?!
- (2) Crocodile: Relax. You haven't done anything.
- (3) Rocky: He can tell that I'm driving illegally!
- (4) Crocodile: **Be cool, fool! He ain't gonna roll up, all he wants is fuckin donuts!**
- (5) Dog: **Then why the fuck he keep lookin!?**
- (6) Rocky: **I guess to get his life taken! I just came home, I ain't trying to see central booking!**
- (7) All: **Oh shit, now he lookin in my face! We better haul ass cause I ain't wit no fuckin chase! So lace up your boots, cause I'm about to shoot! A real mother fucker going out for the loot!**
- (8) Rocky: Damn it! He's still staring!

The code-switch in this strip is triggered by the topic of whether the policeman is staring at Rocky. It is not a communicatively necessary switch, as the situational switches in examples 1-3 are. This is instead an example of what Blom and Gumperz (1972) termed 'metaphorical' code-switching, relating to 'particular kinds of topics or subject matter rather than to change in social situation.'

At this point, it is worth pointing out the obvious, namely, that the switch to English occurs early in the strip, and persists almost until the end. In other words, nearly the entire strip features hip-hop English. Kellerman's decision to devote a strip of this length—a longer, Sunday edition double-strip—to featuring the lyrics to a hip-hop song reflects a deliberate and prolonged move to align himself/the character Rocky, and his/Rocky's friends with a particular in-group, namely, one defined by an interest in and familiarity with hip-hop music. In so doing, he automatically implies an out-group, consisting of those who do not share the same affinity for hip-hop. In this

strip, it is the police who visually and conceptually represent the out-group. Two oppositions are thus featured in this strip –Swedish/English and in-group/out-group– from which humor is derived based on incongruity. First, the switch to English is unexpected and thus incongruous in terms of lacking situational motivation. This is not humorous per se, but the persistence of the switch, which ultimately features all of the interlocutors simultaneously engaged in a refrain crescendo, may be considered incongruous enough with respect to an expected progression of conversation to be humorous.

Second, the hip-hop in-group/out-group opposition creates an incongruity with respect to expectations of behavior. This strip suggests, for example, that for Rocky and his friends, it is expected behavior to relate on-going experiences to known hip-hop music in this way, showcasing their expertise, aligning with a hip-hop identity, and thereby reaffirming their in-group membership. Such behavior can, however, be regarded as unexpected from the perspective of an out-group member, and thus would understandably warrant conspicuous, curious, or, in the case of the policemen, even suspicious observation. That Rocky seems surprised that the policemen continue to stare even after the interlocutors' collaborative, impromptu recital confirms the group opposition and creates the necessary incongruity from which to derive another source of humor.

In example 4, the physical representation of the characters enclosed in their respective cars contributes to establishing the group opposition, pitting the two sets of characters against each other. Rocky and his friends are enclosed in their own hip-hop world, while the police are enclosed in another, conflicting, non-hip-hop world. In hip-hop culture, it is not unusual for artists and law enforcers to be presented as having an adversarial relationship. In light of this context, Rocky and his friends can be considered authentic members of the hip-hop community, as they, too, are experiencing harassment (real or imagined) by the police. The physical boundaries depicted in this strip serve to confine the characters and events, thereby emphasizing the opposition, which in turn facilitates an acceptance of Rocky and his friends as ratified representatives of the hip-hop community.

In example 5, Kellerman again trades on the in-group/out-group distinction, this time using it to call into question the authenticity of Rocky's hip-hop in-group membership. Rocky and his friend, a bird, are observing some sheep at a farm; the bird has apparently referred to goats as 'male sheep', to which Rocky reacts with indignation.



Figure 4.5. All figures copyright Kellerman/Kartago, 2008. Used by permission.

Example 5

- (1) Rocky: Goats aren't male sheep, goats are goats! Sheep have their own rams, but they're not goat-rams. Don't you know anything?
- (2) Bird: As if you know anything about sheep!
- (3) Rocky: Hey, we had 300 sheep when I was little! I know a whole fucking lot about sheep, goats and everything in between. I could make your sweater from scratch if I wanted to!
- (4) Bird: This sweater isn't made of sheep's wool, it's from Supreme in Tokyo, and not from some local history association on Gotland! */Gotland is a small island off the east coast of Sweden known for sheep raising/*
- (5) Rocky: What the hell do you think yarn is you stupid ass?!
- (6) Bird: Well, it sure the hell isn't wool at any rate, pea-brain!!!
- (7) Rocky: Man, I've gotten up at 6 a.m. and fed sheep, I've shoveled a hundred tons of sheep shit, shepherded sheep in a cowboy hat, I've ridden sheep, slept with sheep, sheered sheep, washed and carded wool, spun and colored yarn and knitted many a tightly-pulled pot-holder!
- (8) Rocky: So **don't step to me talking about yarn, nigguh!** (singing) **Watcha (sic) know about that? You don't know about that!**

In Example 5, the setting is the decidedly un-hip-hop environment of a countryside field with grazing sheep. Rocky and the bird engage in a heated argument about sheep and goats, prompting Rocky to conduct a diatribe on his experience with sheep as proof of his expertise. His rant is similar to showboating or bragging; it is the kind of shameless self-promotion which figures as another key characteristic of hip-hop discourse (Forman and Neal, 2004).

Similar to example 4, the code-switch to hip-hop English in the last panel is metaphorical, although motivated by discourse style, i.e. establishing credibility, as opposed to topic. Rocky's first utterance is not a recital of any particular lyrics, but it does feature lexical items associated with the hip-hop vernacular, such as 'step to' and 'nigguh'. His second utterance is reminiscent of hip-hop artist and producer Timbaland's song *Whatcha know about this*, but it is not a verbatim recital.

The pastoral setting combined with an argument about sheep among two Swedish males creates an obvious opposition to the conventional hip-hop environment of urban America populated by African-American males comparing gangster credibility. The incongruity is equally obvious. Although a member of the hip-hop in-group would recognize Rocky's rant as a discursive trigger and thus expect a switch to hip-hop English, Rocky is actually presented as an out-group member, who only appropriates the code of an in-group to which he aspires. The switch is therefore more accurately labeled a case of crossing. Rocky's failed claim to membership is visually suggested by his flailing arms as an attempt to simulate hip-hop gesturing, as well as the bird's disengaged posture and blasé facial expression. Furthermore, his potential in-group membership is linguistically threatened by his use of Swedish 'garn' instead of 'yarn', and the (mis)use of 'nigguh.' The humor thus derives from the incongruous use of hip-hop English as a pragmatic move by Rocky to align himself with an in-group of which he is not recognized as a legitimate member. Kellerman has himself addressed the inherent incongruity of white, middle-to-upper class Swedish males aligning themselves with the African-American hip-hop culture:

When a Swede says something like Jay-Z would say, that's automatically funny. It's still white here, but in Sweden, it's funnier. Most of my friends have grown up on hip-hop, but it's like a joke—we're so not gangsta. (MacDonald, 2005)

The (mis)appropriation by whites of the hip-hop vernacular is an acknowledged and controversial phenomenon (Armstrong, 2004). Historically, hip-hop is rooted in African-American culture and represented by a distinct vernacular, African-American Language (Smitherman, 1997). Authenticity is a recurring theme in hip-hop texts and central to its culture, because it 'becomes a node through which flow arguments about who is capable, or not, of legitimately interpreting a culture, and therefore, participating in its most esoteric forms of antecedent oral and aesthetic culture...' (Jones, 2006, p. 2) In the past, Whites have managed to participate in hip-hop by appropriating the hip-hop vernacular to confirm their out-group status, mock their whiteness, and call attention to their cultural shortcomings (Fraley, 2009). In effect, Rocky is doing precisely this in Example 5, appropriated the hip-hop vernacular (appropriated via lyrics) to express his White European background. It is an incongruity played upon for humor, but which may be misunderstood as a mockery of the hip-hop culture.

The final example features Rocky and his friend, a wolf, at a music festival, where Rocky is due to conduct interviews with some hip-hop artists.



Figure 4.6. All figures copyright Kellerman/Kartago, 2008. Used by permission.

Example 6

- (1) Wolf: So, what's the plan for today?
- (2) Rocky: The plan is to [**get drunk, get crunk, get fucked up!**]
- (3) Wolf: Isn't there anyone you're supposed to interview?
- (4) Rocky: No, Kjelis (sic) cancelled her tour because she couldn't find a cat-sitter, so I'm off today!
- (5) Wolf: Aren't there any concerts we should see?
- (6) Rocky: No, we don't want to see concerts today, today we just want to [**get drunk, get crunk, get fucked up!**]
- (7) Rocky: (singing) **I want a girl I can fuck in my hummer truck, apple bottom jeans and a big old butt! Shake that ass fo me! Shake that ass fo me!**
- (8) Wolf: You got **fucked up** at least...
- (9) Rocky: **Stop the violence in hip hop, y-o!**

In this example, the code-switch to hip-hop English can be understood as both situational and metaphorical at once. On the one hand, the presence of Rocky and the wolf at a hip-hop music festival, invites switches to hip-hop English. In other words, it is the situation in which they find themselves that triggers a code-switch. On the other hand, one can consider their presence at the festival to prime them for, as opposed to triggering, code-switches to hip-hop English, and instead it is the subject matter of the wolf's question which invites Rocky's code-switch. Despite Rocky's persistent code-switching, the wolf refrains from using English until the last panel, switching intrasententially, triggered by Rocky's previous use of the phrase 'fucked up.'

Whether situational or metaphorical, the switch nevertheless reflects group alignment. Membership in the hip-hop in-group is attributed Rocky and the wolf by virtue of their attendance at the festival. It is furthermore secured by the explicit mention of Rocky's interview assignment and the naming of Kelis, a well-known hip-hop artist. The first code-switch to English is in the form of lyrics to the Eminem song, *Shake That*, recited as an answer to the wolf's question about the plan for the day. Familiarity with the song and the ability to recite its lyrics appropriately with regards to the context are other indicators of hip-hop in-group membership. Nevertheless, there are aspects of Rocky's turns that instead establish the now familiar in-group/out-group opposition. Similar to example 2, Rocky's first and second code-switches to hip-hop English, as well as the artist name 'Kelis' are written in non-standard spelling, suggesting a Swedish, non-native English pronunciation. The switch in the third panel, however, is written accurately; here, the in-group/out-group opposition is instead created via the presence of a third party, the bird (female) walking by. Despite the accurate recital of lyrics (or, perhaps, because of this), Rocky's

code-switch is apparently not accepted. This can be attributed to the taboo and sexist content of the switch, which is perhaps made all the more offensive if the bird does not acknowledge Rocky as a legitimate in-group member. The fourth panel suggests this to be the case, as the representation of Rocky in an overturned position, complete with the tell-tale cartoon star signaling dizziness or unconsciousness allows the reader to assume the bird physically assaulted Rocky. In the fourth panel, Rocky's out-group member status is confirmed. The wolf appropriates the phrase 'fucked up', originally used by Rocky in his first two code-switches, to assess Rocky's condition, and in so doing, emphasizes the in-group/out-group opposition. 'Fucked up' can have two meanings, referring to either an alcohol- or drug-induced state, or to being physically beaten. By invoking the latter connotation, the wolf also rejects Rocky's overtures towards asserting a hip-hop identity. Recalling Apte's (1985) assessment of the role of incongruity in humor, it can be said that the wolf's appropriation of the phrase 'fucked up' is humorous in its incongruity resulting from 'the twisting of the relationship between form and meaning.' The strip concludes with a final effort by Rocky to assert a hip-hop in-group member identity, now reciting from Boogie Down Productions's *Stop the Violence*.

The fact that nearly all of Rocky's switches to hip-hop English are in the form of verbatim recital of song lyrics gives weight to the powerful influence of music as an example of English from below. It should be acknowledged that consumers of music may memorize and recite lyrics to songs without understanding or reflecting on the meanings. At the same time, it can be proposed that non-native speakers interested in a musical genre may be particularly keen on learning and understanding lyrics. This may be the case for Kellerman, a hip-hop devotee. Code-switches to hip-hop English allow Kellerman/Rocky to showcase a familiarity with hip-hop lyrics via an ability to apply lyrical content to interactional contexts in a semantically and pragmatically appropriate way. This practice of metaphorical code-switching suggests an intimacy with the language that would normally be associated with English as a second language. As such, the examples from Rocky ultimately indicate a dichotomy which assigns an approach to English from above as a foreign language, and to English from below as a second language. I discuss the significance of this identification in the next, and final, section.

5 Discussion

In this paper, I have set out to analyze the use of English in the Swedish-language comic strip, *Rocky*. I have first presented evidence of the widespread, cross-domain use of English in Sweden, in order to establish English as a viable language choice in the Swedish speech community, in both high- and low-status domains. The increasing presence of and exposure to English in Sweden reflect influences of English from above and English from below (Preisler, 1999), and contribute to a dominance of the English language such that it rivals the use of Swedish in Sweden.

The practice of code-switching as the concurrent use of both Swedish and English reflects the status of both languages as viable codes of communication. I have furthermore suggested that English can be considered at once a second language and a foreign language in Sweden, proposing that this distinction may be significant in terms of how Swedish speakers relate to or identify with their use of English. If English is considered a second language, then this can reflect a proprietary stance toward the language, with the rights that this status entails. An approach to English as a foreign language, on the other hand, implies a distance to the language and, accordingly, a lack of rights. I maintain that the labeling is unimportant, but the fact the examples

in this paper suggest an ideological shift in the status of English. On the one hand, English from below in Sweden seems to be assuming the status of a second language while English from above is maintained as a foreign language. This distinction may be significant to the analysis, reception, and interpretation of code-switches to English, which ultimately will affect the role of English in Sweden, further spread, and its affect on Swedish.

That English in Sweden is proposed to reflect influences from above and below calls to mind the fact that English, like any other language, is itself realized as different varieties or codes, and that native and non-native speakers alike switch between these codes. The examples from *Rocky* suggest that institutional, or 'school' English is used in situational code-switching, where the use of English is necessary to communicate with non-Swedish speakers such as native speakers of English or speakers of English as a lingua franca. Metaphorical code-switches result in the use of English from below; in the *Rocky* examples, such switches are in the form of English appropriated from hip-hop. I have argued that English has been established in Sweden as a valid choice of language for communication, thus enabling both situational and metaphorical switching. It does not follow that crossing should be disabled, as different varieties or codes of English may not belong to or be accessible by the Swedish non-native speech community. The use of school English is for this reason not an example of crossing – this is a non-exclusive code – while the use of hip-hop English does constitute crossing, since it is a code associated with an in-group.

Examples of code-switches to English in the Swedish-language comic strip *Rocky* were presented against the background of the language of *Rocky* as a manifestation of the assimilation of English in Sweden. The examples were then analyzed to reflect two approaches to the use of English: as an indicator of in-group/out-group member identity, and as an indicator of incongruity and, as such, a source of humor in the Swedish comic strip medium. The examples invite a number of interesting conclusions. Situational code-switching (Blom and Gumperz, 1972) as exemplified in examples 1-3 suggest a national Swedish awareness of –and perhaps insecurity about– a native/non-native opposition with regards to speaking English. In *Rocky*, this opposition is exploited for humor by appealing to an in-group, non-native identity. As a comedy-inducing strategy, this has proven to be successful strategy since, according to Kellerman, his readers 'recognize the situations and how the characters behave. A lot of people just laugh at the characters because they think they're stupid and pathetic, but I don't think they would laugh if they didn't recognize themselves.' (Spurgeon, 2005)

Metaphorical code-switching (Blom and Gumperz, 1972), as illustrated in examples 4-6, was also shown to create an opposition from which incongruity and humor were derived. Similar to examples 1-3, in which code-switching created an in-group/out-group opposition based on native speaker status, the examples of metaphorical code-switching establish an in-group/out-group opposition based on ratified membership in a hip-hop speech community. These examples illustrate how an expression of cultural alignment, in particular with the US American hip-hop culture, can be triggered discursively by conversation topic. Switches to hip-hop English take the form of reciting song lyrics, allowing the speaker to showcase familiarity and expertise which serve to assert a legitimate in-group membership. There is nevertheless an inherent incongruity to the appropriation of the urban, African-American hip-hop vernacular by Swedes, which encourages an interpretation of switches to hip-hop English as examples of crossing (Rampton, 1995). Again, it is an in-group/out-group opposition which establishes incongruity and an opportunity for a humorous resolution.

The apparent popularity of *Rocky* in terms of production, distribution, marketing, and accolades suggests an appreciation of the characters, their experiences, and, significantly, the

discourse and the linguistic expression of humor. *Rocky* thus contributes to bringing the practice of Swedish-English code-switching to the Swedish linguistic mainstream. In so doing, *Rocky* ultimately contributes to securing the comic strip medium as a host to linguistic trends and language change in Sweden. Indeed, the influence of *Rocky* on spoken Swedish has already been predicted. In a national newspaper article from 2007 summarizing the findings of a research project on the linguistic future of Sweden, a journalist was prompted to make the following statement: In short, we are all going to talk like Martin Kellerman's *Rocky* in one hundred years, and no one will think there's anything strange about it. (Håkansson, 2007) (Original quote: Kort sagt kommer vi alla tala som Martin Kellermans Rocky om hundra år och ingen kommer att tycka det är något konstigt med det.)

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