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**Samu Kytölä & Elina Westinen**

**“I be da reel gansta” – a Finnish footballer’s Twitter writing and metapragmatic evaluations of authenticity**

**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the ways in which ‘gangsta’ English features are deployed, evaluated and adopted in two types of social media, the web forum and Twitter, within the domains of hip hop culture and football (soccer) culture, from the dual perspective of authenticity and normativity. Empirically, we aim to break new ground by investigating the intricate interconnections between two social media formats and combining two highly popular but previously seldom connected cultural forms – football and hip hop. Our theoretical aim is to contribute to the current debate on authenticity, normativity, popular culture and social media, and the complex ways in which they are connected. We focus, first, on the Twitter writing of the Finnish footballer Mikael Forssell, specifically his uses of non-Standard English and references to hip hop culture and rap music, and second, on the ways in which Forssell’s stylized writing elicits normatively oriented metapragmatic commentaries, i.e., meta-level discussion, on a major Finnish football discussion forum. Of particular interest here is the emically emerging category of ‘gangsta’ English and its perceived (in)authenticity – when used by Forssell and two other (‘White’) middle-class Finnish footballers. Drawing on the frameworks of authenticity and sociolinguistic superdiversity, we foreground the tension between purist normativity and playful appropriation online. Our discussion highlights the unpredictability of the connections between language use, (popular) cultural forms, ethnicity, country of origin, and the complexity of mediation across online and offline sites of social action.

**keywords:** African American Vernacular English, authenticity, football, hip hop culture, normativity, social media

**1. Introduction**

In this paper we explore the ways in which ‘gangsta’ English features are used, evaluated and appropriated in two types of interactive digital media, the web forum and Twitter, within the intertwined domains of hip hop culture and football (soccer) culture. We do this from the dual perspective of authenticity and normativity in a communicative context illustrative of the contemporary world of mobility and globalization. Empirically, this paper aims to break new ground by investigating the intricate interconnections between two social media formats, one more recent (Twitter), the other older (the web forum), and by combining two highly popular cultural forms, football and hip hop, not traditionally perceived as ‘belonging’ together. In so doing, our theoretical aim is to contribute to the current debate on authenticity, normativity, popular culture and social media, and the complex ways in which they intersect, highlighted in this Special Issue (see introduction).

We focus, first, on the Finnish footballer Mikael “Miklu” Forssell’s Twitter writing, particularly his uses of markedly non-Standard English and his explicit references to (African) American hip hop culture and rap music. Second, we focus on the normatively oriented metapragmatic commentaries, i.e., the ways in which “language users engage in meta-level discussions about the language used in the particular context” (Kytölä 2013: 101; see also Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 8–10), elicited by Forssell’s stylized writing at Futisforum2, the main Finnish online hub

for interactive football discussions. In these metapragmatic evaluations by Finnish football followers, we explore, in particular, the emically emerging category of ‘gangsta’ English and its perceived (in)authenticity – when used by Forssell and two other Finnish footballers who have a (‘White’) middle-class life trajectory.

Next, we discuss definitions of normativity and authenticity *vis-à-vis* our aims and empirical foci as well as in relation to this special issue.

## 2. Normativity and authenticity

*Normativity*, for us, denotes various ways of evaluating, judging and policing (possibly sanctioning) the semiotic conduct of others. Along with explicit, institutionally imposed norms on, for example, language use (see Blommaert 1999), normativity can also be “imposed from below – by oneself or one’s peers” (Varis & Wang 2011: 73). Here, we engage with the specific “micropolitics of language and/or cultural policing that can be found in all interactions in different social spaces and contexts” (ibid.), both physical and virtual. In line with Leppänen and Piirainen-Marsh (2009: 261), we see (micro-level) language policing as “continually evolving, emergent and influenced by norms of specific communities and cultures”. In Internet contexts, rules for communication, sub-culturalization, and identity construction can either be set *a priori* (e.g., specific rules for a discussion forum where moderators control people’s communicative behavior) or they can be emergent, negotiable and co-constructed (Varis & Wang 2011: 75), amongst peers in various online spaces (see Kytölä 2012). Thus, members of a given community “actively and sensitively negotiate the norms and policies relevant to them” (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh 2009: 261). Instead of overarching criteria for normativity, then, we are dealing with *micro-hegemonies*, valid within specific areas of life, according to which individuals modify their behaviour and practices (Blommaert & Varis 2015). Often, normativity and norms both exist *a priori* in communities and societies at large, and, at the same time, are (re)constructed in discourse in a given moment or in the (a)synchronous timeframe provided by online platforms such as web forums (see Kytölä 2012, 2013: 124–125). It is important to bear in mind that “people differ in their normative sense of what should carry where” (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 10), i.e., people have different normative expectations of which sound, word, grammatical pattern, discourse move or bodily movement suits which context (ibid.: 12–13), as illustrated in our analysis. We are therefore dealing with *indexical* distinctions, where linguistic distinctions at different layers of language use become reflected in social, cultural and ideological patterns and values (Blommaert 2007, 2010: 5–6).

*Authenticity*, in the present context, relates to authenticity both as a (well-off) footballer and as a rap and hip hop fan. This is illustrated in this professional footballer’s language use, which, on the level of lexicon and structure, may appear to draw on features of the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ language use of African Americans. However, on a metapragmatic level, as judged by many Finnish football followers online, it severely mismatches social class and, to some extent, also of race and ethnicity. Different views of authenticity are at stake: first, authenticity as unquestionable realness (see Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2003, 2010), such as when some of the online commenters essentialize authenticity and see it as an inherent quality of language or culture; and second, in contrast, authenticity as *authentication*, a discursive process “through

which people can make claims about their own or others' statuses as authentic or inauthentic members of social groups" (Coupland 2010: 105).

Coupland argues (2003: 425–427) that in late modernity, authenticity is "in crisis" (van Leeuwen 2001: 395), and lists a number of observations that have transformed the notion of authenticity over the past decades:

- memberships of communities are increasingly complex
- communities can coalesce around local and/or global activities
- electronically mediated social interaction provides new means for sociality and intimacy
- dialect-styles tend to be used more productively and creatively
- performance functions as a site for the construction of identity and community
- performance implies control and deployment of communicative resources
- identities are "projects in the articulation of life-options" [...] "constructed as developing personal narratives".

These insights resonate with the revisions of the 21st-century sociolinguistic agenda set out by Rampton (2006, 2011) and Blommaert (2003, 2010). With the heightened metapragmatic reflexivity associated with contemporary (late modern) social arrangements (Kytölä 2013), it can be argued that sociolinguistic choices have become more strategic. With this in mind, we describe a digitally mediated communicative context that emerged after Coupland's (2003) retheorization signposts. While these continue to be valid, even in more recent mediation contexts (Twitter and web forums combined), we would like to add that digitally mediated interaction not only provides "new means for sociality and intimacy" (ibid.) but also creates new complex and layered combinations for the circulation of different (in)authenticities and, importantly, metapragmatic evaluations of such (in)authenticities.

Guided by the key themes of this special issue, we first show how authenticity is constructed and negotiated in a specific digitally mediated context. We then discuss how authenticity is normatively regulated by a community of football followers, and end by considering the question of who can be construed as authentic representatives of particular socio-cultural groups. Overall, we pinpoint how identities are constructed in the interplay between the use and uptake (Blommaert 2005: 43) (including the policing) of semiotic resources.

In what follows, we briefly discuss the relevant background contexts for the present case study (polycentricity, football culture, Mikael Forssell the footballer, the two social media platforms Twitter and the web forum, and 'gangsta' English and hip hop culture), and outline how together these constitute a complex and interrelated polycentric and superdiverse social reality.

### **3. Background contexts**

#### **3.1 The polycentricity and transculturality of football culture**

The domain of football (soccer) offers both a rich terrain for the analysis of the mobility and hybridity of cultural and linguistic resources in late modernity and superdiversity due to its highly transnational and polycentric nature (Giulianotti 1999; Giulianotti & Robertson 2009; Kytölä 2013). Actors in this field – players, managers, journalists, fans and followers – often have mobile life trajectories, hybrid sociocultural practices and sociolinguistic repertoires, i.e., biographical complexes of functionally organized resources (Blommaert 2010). The global and

translocal aspects of football culture (Kytölä 2013, in press) exhibit a great deal of mixing of features from various languages and their varieties. This mixing is manifested in the organization and transmission of linguistic features in flows (Pennycook 2007a), and in the growing complexity of mediation, including digital channels such as the internet and social media. Another aspect of football closely related to its transculturality is its *polycentricity*; football as a cultural form has centers and focal points within and across many nation-states and cultural spheres (Kytölä 2013: 17, 178), no one center dominating the others, but a few (e.g., England, Germany, Spain, Italy) attracting the most attention of globally distributed followers and enthusiasts.

Not only is polycentricity a characteristic of cultural forms such as football, but it is also a key characteristic of any human communication. In this sense, a 'center' is understood as an evaluative authority towards which people orient and according to which they behave (in communication). Whenever we communicate with one another, we orient towards various centers of norms; whether individuals (teachers, parents, idols), collectives (peer groups, subcultural groups) or abstract entities (the nation state, the church, consumer culture). In addition to our most immediate interlocutors, there is always what Bakhtin (1986) called a 'super-addressee' present in the interaction. This center, or super-addressee, 'provides' the norms and the level of appropriateness in a given context. There is never a single center in communication but rather multiple norm-providing centers (Blommaert 2007; 2010: 39–40.)

In orienting towards various centers of norms, people operate in different spaces and times (Blommaert 2010; Westinen 2014). In our background discussion below and the analysis that follows, we integrate the intertwined ideas of cultural polycentricity (inherent in football and hip hop cultures) and the polycentricity of communicative norms (how one is supposed to use language in given contexts, with whom, and according to whom). For example, in local contexts, people may see their own close-knit group of friends or a football team as one of the norm centers for their communication, language use and habitus. On a more global contextual level, people may follow globalized (African) American hip hop culture, adopting aspects of related (global) cultural and semiotic expression. In addition to being synchronic, the contexts in which people operate are also intrinsically historical. People always behave with reference to such evaluative authorities, i.e., centers – “an authority over clusters of semiotic features, including thematic domains, places, people (roles, identities, relationships), and semiotic styles (including linguistic varieties, modes of performance, etc.)” (Blommaert 2010: 39). Certain topics and contexts thus become associated with certain styles, roles and relationships.

To return to the domain of football, a footballer (pro or amateur) will speak as an expert when s/he is using a particular football register, thereby indexing his/her membership in this community, while in other contexts, s/he may speak as a novice (see Blommaert 2010: 39–40; Westinen 2014). As Kytölä (2013: 19–20, 180–181) points out, the (cultural) polycentricity of football is also reflected in multilingual, mixed and hybrid linguistic and communicative practices; English constituting only one broad resource among others in the polycentric, transcultural constellations of football culture. As a resource, the compatibility and integratability of English with other linguistic and semiotic resources (such as drawing on elements from hip hop culture) can vary greatly from context to context, depending on the salience and power of particular norm centers in a given communicative situation.

### 3.2 Mikael Forssell the footballer

The Finnish professional striker Mikael Forssell and his Twitter updates have been selected as the empirical focus here for two main reasons. First, he illustrates a typical life trajectory from a European middle-class junior football talent to a full professional with a translocal life, and second, his multilingual Twitter writing highlights the resources of non-Standard English, along with hip hop and 'gangsta' features in a way that directs uptake and reactions in a more language-oriented, metapragmatic direction than we take to be the average in a footballer's online publicity.

Not unlike his generation of professional footballers, Mikael "Miklu" Forssell's (b. 1981) life has been characterized by mobility in search of career opportunities (Alaja & Forssell 2007). His career trajectory took him from his native Finland to England in 1998, after which he played in several clubs in England and Germany before returning to Helsinki in 2012 (and back to Germany again in 2014). He has, therefore, a transcultural professional career and has accumulated transnational circles of acquaintances during his years as a professional. Forssell's life trajectory arguably involves four major languages, and their role in his life can roughly (if incompletely) be classified as follows: 1) *Finnish* – his family, native city Helsinki, childhood and adolescence, his club HJK (Helsingin Jalkapalloklubi), the Finnish national team, contacts with his homeland; 2) *Swedish*<sup>1</sup> – also his family, native city Helsinki, childhood and adolescence, the Finnish national team, contacts with his homeland; 3) *English* – his years in Chelsea FC and Birmingham FC, English as a school subject, an international language, and as a *lingua franca* in a transnational and transcultural circle of friends and teammates, popular culture, especially his interest in (African American) hip hop culture; 4) *German* – born in Germany, studied German in school in Helsinki, his years as a pro in Mönchengladbach and Hannover.<sup>2</sup>

While our observation and tentative analysis established that most of the linguistic components of Forssell's multisemiotic tweets are wholly or partly in English, Finnish, Swedish and German in their different varieties are also firmly present due to his transnational connections.<sup>3</sup> All this is clearly reflected in his polylingual digital writing, which has orientations to multiple centers and diverse audiences across Europe: family members, friends, teammates, fans from different stages of his career and the general public. In this connection, then, it would be interesting to determine more broadly which specific varieties or features (used by the footballer) evoke strong emotional responses (and, possibly, why). However, here we focus specifically on Forssell's use of several recurring linguistic features associated with African American Vernacular English, accompanied by explicit musical and (sub)cultural references to (biographies of) American rap artists. Moreover, we look at the ways in which Forssell's language use becomes a target of critical scrutiny by Finnish football followers, whose major social media platform online has, since ca. 2007, been the above mentioned discussion forum Futisforum2 (see Kytölä 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Finland has two national languages: Finnish and Swedish.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Forssell was transferred to VfL Bochum, the German football club, on 29 Aug 2014, thereby enabling the revigorating and renewal of his circle of German-based contacts; [http://www.vfl-bochum.de/site/home/aktuelles/14709\\_vflnimmtforsselluntervertragp.htm](http://www.vfl-bochum.de/site/home/aktuelles/14709_vflnimmtforsselluntervertragp.htm) (accessed 9 Dec 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Forssell has received more than 30,000 followers in the more than five years he has had his Twitter account (2009–15; last accessed 23 April 2015). Even a cursory glance at the list of his followers suggests a highly multicultural audience, with people from Finland, the UK and Germany as clearly observable main groups. Although we did not attempt to collect any statistics on this, Kytölä's digital ethnographic observation periods over the years support this overview.

### 3.3 Twitter, celebrity practitioners and context collapse

Twitter, an online social networking and microblogging service was created in 2006 (Twitter 2014). The growth of Twitter around the turn of the decade also coincided with the growth of small mobile devices (tablets, touchpads, smartphones, etc.) that facilitated and mobilized internet use and its 'quick' social media applications. In Twitter, registered users can publish *tweets*, entries of up to 140 characters (close to the limit of 'traditional' text messages), as well as photos, videos, emoticons, and topic-defining 'hashtags' (indicated by the character #) in any multisemiotic combinations. Twitter currently has approximately 500 million registered users (about half of whom are active monthly); some 500 million tweets are sent per day (Twitter 2014). Tweets and photos are by default public (anyone online can read registered users' tweets) but users can also send private, direct messages to each other. Users can be 'followed' on Twitter by their closest friends but also by people they have never met. Many celebrities also use Twitter for the purpose of sharing news, doing their public relations, or for general 'socializing' purposes. Thus, Twitter offers them one medium for constructing and performing their image and identity online via multisemiotic discourse. The most followed celebrities on Twitter currently include the pop singers Katy Perry and Justin Bieber, along with the President of the United States, Barack Obama (Twitter Counter 2014).

People's various transnational backgrounds and life trajectories are reflected in their use of Twitter; this Finnish footballer is also a case in point. Forssell's language use in Twitter (and also in other social media), based on our long-time ethnographic observations, can be characterized as polylingual (Jørgensen 2008; Jørgensen et al. 2011), i.e., it makes use of various available (linguistic) features and resources in the same interaction, even if these are associated with different languages, and is polygeneric, i.e., uses multiple communicative genres. One reason for this is that footballers often have diverse audiences in various countries (e.g., family, friends, colleagues and fans), and hence they address (and refer to) multiple contexts and topics via their multisemiotic online activities. This phenomenon, in which "multiple audiences, usually thought of as separate, co-exist in a single social context" (Marwick & boyd 2011: 145), has earlier been described as 'context collapse' (boyd 2008). The fact that diverse audiences can be reached and interacted with by the use of different communicative resources can have direct implications for language practices. Addressing these multiple audiences via one's tweets (and images) can also have an effect on the 'super-addressee' in a given communicative context: there may, in fact, be multiple super-addressees present.

Another relevant insight from Marwick and boyd (2011) is that celebrity in Twitter is "practiced through the appearance and performance of 'backstage' access (drawing on Goffman 1959)", implying a 'free pass' into the personal lives of famous people (Marwick & boyd 2011: 139–140). Celebrities, or *celebrity practitioners*, "reveal what appears to be personal information to create a sense of intimacy between participant and follower, publicly acknowledge fans, and use language and cultural references to create affiliations with followers" (ibid.: 139). In the examples below, we see how Forssell appears to share his personal life with his followers – and how they, in turn, react to this 'backstage access'.

### 3.4 Web forums, Futisforum2 and Finnish football enthusiasts

The other digital communication format discussed here is the web (discussion) forum. These are interactive, multi-authored, participatory websites enabled and automatically, iteratively generated by purpose-built software, and relatively uniform and recognizable in general appearance. They are often organized in thematic discussion areas (or subforums), in which users can initiate discussions (start ‘topics’), read existing discussion threads, or contribute to them (Androutsopoulos 2007; Kytölä 2012, 2013: 113–120, 148–151; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos 2012). Depending on the focus and target audience of each forum, language preferences and a sense of community building may be present (Androutsopoulos 2007; Kytölä 2013), reflected in (loose or strict) rules and moderation procedures for keeping to them.

Futisforum (ca. 1997–2008) and Futisforum2 (since 2006) have been key sites for constructing Finland-based football following and fandom for the past two decades (Kytölä 2013). Their memberships are around 40,000 each (including shared members), of which some thousands of members have been active writers. Whereas the original Futisforum thrived in the first years of the 2000s, Futisforum2 has been the main online hub for Finnish football enthusiasts since 2006. The careers of Finnish professional players have been a passionate focus of interest in both Futisforums; and Mikael Forssell, owing to his development at an early age and professional success, has been one of the most eagerly followed footballers. This article focuses on discussion topics devoted to Mikael Forssell in Futisforum2, and particularly sequences related to his idiosyncratic use of language.

Due to their earlier emergence in the late 1990s, web forums are not always included in the narrower definitions of ‘social media’ or the markedly-21st-century phenomenon ‘Web 2.0’ (or social networking sites). However, they share many of the tenets and premises of the newer inventions: they can provide a reference point for community construction and translocal identifications; they allow rhizomatic, translocal and transcultural traffic of cultural and multi-semiotic material with their associated identifications, styles, normativities and ideologies (Leppänen et al. 2014; Kytölä in press). Furthermore, as seen in the analysis below, social action on web forums can be organically interwoven and interlinked with social action in the newer social media: they can be part of the same rhizomatic networks of digital discourses in circulation.

Although our main focus here is on written linguistic features, in most digital communication platforms multimodal aspects can be significant. For instance, images posted by Forssell in his Twitter account or emoticons and pictures posted in the forums’ discussion threads, as we will see in the analysis below, can be important contextualization cues as to how to interpret the indexical connections of the co-occurring linguistic messages (e.g., whether or not they are ironic, jocular, serious, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

### **3.5 ‘Gangsta’ English and hip hop culture**

By ‘gangsta’ English, a key notion in the present study, we refer to an emically coined term deployed in the Finnish Futisforum2. This ‘gangsta’ English is to be understood as the ‘gangsta’ kind of talk (or slang) that partly draws on features of African American (Vernacular) English (AAVE). It is stereotypically associated with people of African American background, in particular, and often mediated through celebrities, such as rap artists. According to Mufwene

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, Forssell (like many professional footballers) is an active user of Instagram, a photograph- and video-based social media platform that allows cross-connections to Twitter and other social networking sites.

(2001: 35), “the most common characterizations of ‘talking Black’ by lay people include: particular terms, ‘Black cultural items’, specific way of pronunciation, structural and syntactic features as well as talk about the events of the (neighbor)hood amongst family and friends”.

In relation to hip hop culture in particular, Morgan (2001: 188) argues that its “language ideology is consciously and often defiantly based on urban African American norms, values and popular culture constructed against dominant cultural and linguistic norms”. This language ideology is intrinsically intertwined with the knowledge and use of African American English (*ibid.*). Within hip hop culture, “the unequal black-white binary is subverted; blackness emerges as normative and authentic and whiteness—usually the unmarked invisible category—becomes visible and marked” (Cutler 2003: 229). In fact, Cutler (2003: 211–212) argues that white, middle-class hip-hoppers, whose racial and class background can distance them from African American experiences, nevertheless aim to construct themselves as authentic language-wise by appropriating features of African American English. However, studies comparing Cross-Racial African American Vernacular English (CRAAVE) (Bucholtz 1999), i.e., the ‘non-Black’ usage of African American English, with the AAE of African Americans show that while the CRAAVE speakers may wish to affiliate and identify with African American culture, their lack of linguistic skills in AAE results in their being perceived as inauthentic (Higgins 2009: 97). Thus, despite their wish to be seen as affiliating with the specific culture and as legitimate, ‘authentic’ users of AAE, ‘non-Blacks’ are often, in a rather essentialist way, not perceived as such, because their resources do not match the original ‘native’ ones. Consequently, the use of CRAAVE by many speakers might, in fact, be seen as ‘crossing’ into a language(s) “not generally thought to belong to you” (Rampton 2005 [1995]: 280; see also Higgins 2009: 97). In the case of Mikael Forssell, as we see below, it is the mismatch between his ethnicity, class background and linguistic resources (or crossing) which results in heated (and sometimes also essentialist) metapragmatic discussions and normative evaluations.

Importantly, then, whether using “other’s resources results in inauthenticity or not depends on the *interpretation* of the linguistic performance by members of situated linguistic communities” (Higgins 2009: 97, *emphasis added*; see also Westinen 2014). Here, we can see that the uptake of the performance is crucial to the process of *authentication*, i.e., discursive and social *processes* in which authenticity is ‘claimed’, ‘imposed’ or ‘perceived’ (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 498, *emphasis added*). Authenticity or authentication is thus not an “inherent essence” of an individual (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 601), but rather is “discursively verified” (*ibid.*). Consequently, the notion of authenticity is “available for the analysis as the outcome of the linguistic practices of social actors and the metalinguistic practices of sociolinguists” (Bucholtz 2003: 398–399).

The concept of *authenticity* is often seen in connection with tradition, with ‘original’ contexts and features, and with ‘links’ to these, as this “tracing back to an original [...] validates the contemporary” (Moore 2002: 215). Furthermore, authenticity, or ‘keepin’ it real’, is a concept and an expression – a mantra – often encountered in talk and research about rap music and hip hop culture. In fact, rap music is often seen as *embodying* authenticity (Huq 2006: 113). In rap music and hip hop culture, it is considered important to stay true to oneself and one’s roots, and not pretend to be something one is not. The uptake of authenticity by different audiences, then, often determines whether this true-to-oneself behavior is discursively verified (or not) in a given community. As rap music and hip hop culture have ‘gone global’, the (original) notions of authenticity have become questioned and more versatile, depending on each new local context (e.g., Pennycook 2007a, 2007b; Westinen 2010, 2012, 2014). In fact, as Pennycook (2007b: 103)

argues, there is often a tension between, on the one hand, the global dictate and order of hip hop culture (the 'global spread of authenticity'), and, on the other, the local contexts – what matters in each locality.

So-called hip hop English (alternatively, AAVE) is spreading in various forms across the globe through popular culture (movies, television, music, etc.) in general, and hip hop culture in particular. Bucholtz (1999: 445) sees AAVE as “a symbolic marker of African American youth culture” and as “a commodity that [...] youth can easily appropriate, at least partially and imperfectly”. According to Androutsopoulos (2009: 60), 'hip hop English' appears as a “universal' strategy of hip hop identity marking”, creating “a symbolic connection between verbal art, media and fan discourse, on the one hand, as well as between various localized hip hop discourses on the other”. Forssell's language use on Twitter, along with his followers' appropriations of it (see 6.3), arguably draw on features of 'hip hop English'. This is unsurprising in light of recent research (Leppänen et al. 2009; Leppänen et al. 2011): globalization processes have contributed to the fact that for many (young) Finns in their free time, hobbies and subcultural groups, the key English resource is often non-standard spoken vernacular.

### **3.6 Multiple centers of normativity and superdiversity**

In this section we have thus far outlined the most salient contexts of the present study. While researching any one of them individually would already reveal a great deal of diversity, investigation of the ways in which this translocally oriented individual uses his linguistic resources by orienting to a range of normativity centers, together with the complex chains of uptake and evaluation, highlights an even more complex and polycentric social reality – recently conceptualized under the notion of superdiversity.

Such an analysis as presented in this paper thus contributes to the current debate in the study of superdiversity, a research agenda which attempts to capture socio-politically the rapid change in diversities in a complex, late modern world of migration, mobility and globalization. While the applicability of the superdiversity paradigm to sociolinguistics has been insightfully discussed (Creese & Blackledge 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011), digital communication has played a minor empirical role until now (but see Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012, and the papers in Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014).

Whilst the already established key concerns in the sociolinguistics of superdiversity include the increasing mixing/blending of features from various languages/varieties, the organization and movement of linguistic features in flows, and the complexity of mediation – in sum, a great degree of unpredictability – we aim to highlight how such unpredictability is also manifest in the relations between (popular) cultural forms, language use, ethnicity, country of origin, and age. Moreover, we draw attention to the “mobility of semiotic and linguistic resources, how they travel, how they are taken up and appropriated for specific socio-cultural purposes” (introduction, this issue; see also Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014).

With these various framings and insights in mind, we now turn to Mikael “Miklu” Forssell and his Twitter activity, with a focus on his usages of non-Standard, African American, and 'gangsta' English.

#### 4 The emergence of “Twiklu” – setting the scene

Open-endedness and the lack of clear-cut boundaries are among the methodological and epistemological challenges of using online data for research purposes. For instance, when researching individual Twitter profiles, where single messages, tweets, come and go, shunning the scope of traditional search engines, it is challenging to ever ‘have it all’ so as to meet systematic analytic objectives, or to locate the most appropriate samples for one’s research aims. While still remaining partial and incomplete in our collection, we made deliberate moves towards systematicity and good coverage by, first, sporadically following Forssell’s Twitter account (as well as links to his Twitter contacts and interactions visible to any web viewers) as a part of Kytölä’s larger project on online football discourse, and second, by devoting considerable time to retrospectively relocating (some, if never all) key moments in tweeting by Forssell that engaged in hip hop culture and the use of ‘gangsta’ style English.<sup>5</sup> By these means, we aim to have gained a sufficient foothold to argue that while such references and stylistic choices are definitely not the only stylistic options in Forssell’s repertoire, they are clearly exemplary of his online persona and linguistic behavior.

The empirical analysis starts from where we identified the beginning of the ‘gangsta’ phenomenon in focus, but before that, let us take a brief look at the visual aspects of Forssell’s Twitter. Below is a screenshot of Mikael Forssell’s Twitter page (Figure 1). The left-hand column features a picture of Forssell; this part is customizable by the owner of the account. While our main focus here is on verbal language, a study with a greater focus on multisemiotic analysis would pay attention to the affordances and meaning-making potentials of the different elements and their aggregate effect, as well as aspects of their resemiotization and entextualization (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Iedema 2003; Leppänen et al. 2014). Forssell’s choice of a picture of himself clearly reflects key themes that also reoccur in his writing: sportsmanship (an athlete’s body), sex appeal (the undressed torso and the visible muscles), laid-back attitude (relaxing on a patio/balcony?), hedonism (enjoying good drinks and company?), possibly also the preference for a suntanned skin (Forssell is naturally blonde and pale).

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<sup>5</sup> All the Twitter data were collected on desktop and laptop computers, which, in our view, are more suitable and handier for long-term research purposes than mobile phones or tablets (popular tools for Twitter activities). We acknowledge that this may be an individual or generational preference rather than a universal research-methodological recommendation for practice.

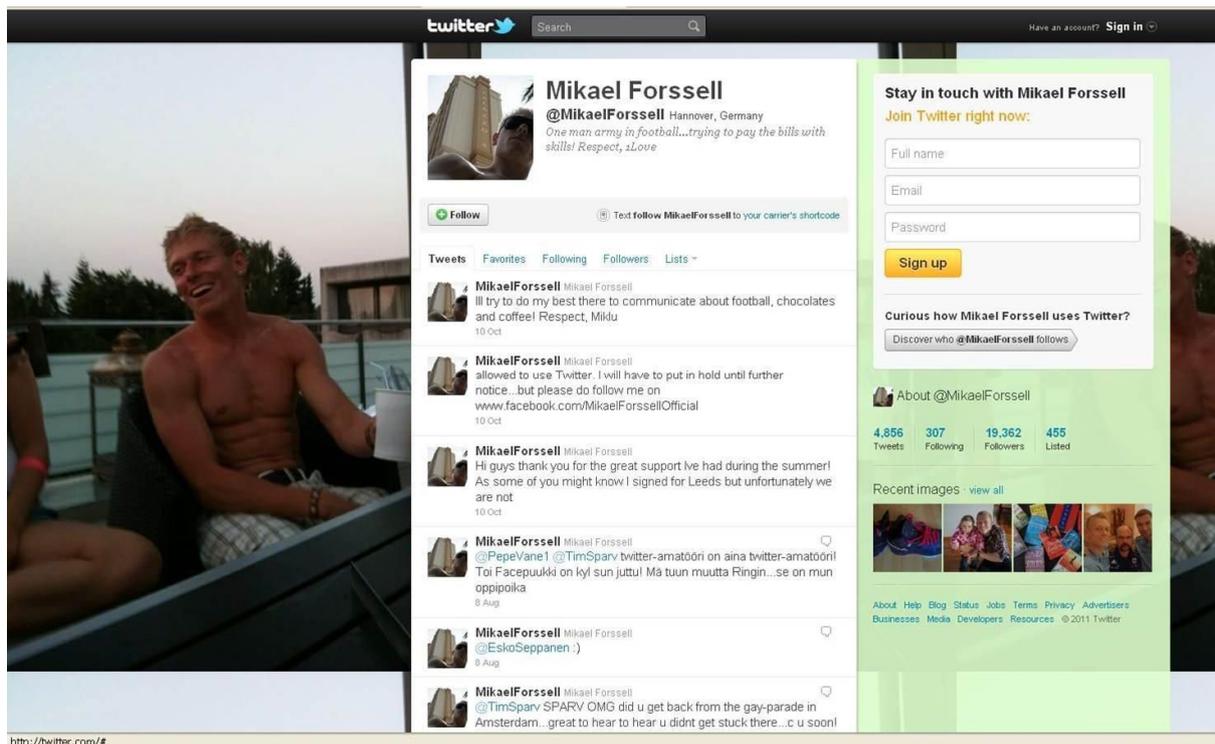


FIGURE 1. A screenshot of Mikael Forssell's Twitter page (October 2013). (<https://twitter.com/MikaelForssell>)

The middle column is the tweet 'feed', with the most recent tweet on the top. This is where the account holder's writings (and 'retweets') appear, together with tweets directed at him. One can scroll down and click further to earlier tweets, up to several years back in time, although this is relatively clumsy and time-consuming for an average reader (yet often the researcher's job). The top part of the middle column contains another picture chosen by Forssell, as well as a location and a general description (or a motto). The right-hand column contains technical information about Forssell's Twitter account (number of tweets, number of followers, etc.) as well as the interactive, participatory options of signing in or signing up.

Based on Kytölä's long ethnographic observation and data collection periods across diverse football sites on the internet, as well as purposeful retrospective searches that we conducted for the present study, we identify one of the earliest tweets by Forssell as a key moment for 'setting the scene' for the recurring hip hop and 'gangsta' discourse that actively followed for years. That tweet is featured below in Figure 2. In this 'twitpic' we can see an example of how Forssell portrays himself dressed in a black hoodie and 'cool' sunglasses, with the related caption.



**Mikael Forssell**

@MikaelForssell

One man army in football...trying to pay the bills with skills! Respect, 1Love



Watching Notorious BIG -film with an attitude...

1,477 1411 days ago

## 2 Comments

Realtime comments disabled

**LaauraFI** 1411 days ago

Gangsta!! =)

FIGURE 2. "Watching Notorious BIG -film with an attitude..."

In the above image on his Twitter account, Forssell comments on how he is "[w]atching Notorious BIG -film<sup>6</sup> with an attitude...". The first interactive comment on this update is:

<sup>6</sup> *Notorious B.I.G.* (or, alternatively, Biggie Smalls), i.e., Christopher Wallace, was an American rapper, killed at the age of 25 in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles. He was a central figure in the East Coast hip hop scene and increased New York's visibility in the genre at a time when West Coast hip hop was dominant in the mainstream. He was also himself heavily and notably involved in the growing and highly public East Coast vs West Coast hip hop feud, which may have

“Gangsta!! =)”. This suggests Forssell’s self-projected identity category, as he shows himself concentrating on this film about the famous US gangsta rapper, makes a clear cultural reference to it, and is watching it ‘with attitude’, i.e., with ‘appropriate’ clothing, accessories and facial expression. A follower ascribes to him a ‘gangsta persona’ and, later on (see examples below), many more followers, with differing views of appropriateness, deconstruct that identity category. Another communicative practice that Twitter (like other social media) offers celebrity practitioners such as Forssell is the creation of “strategically managed self-disclosure” and *intimacy*, defined as “a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers”, by posting personal images and videos, as well as by sharing personal information (Marwick & boyd 2011: 147).

We follow the digital mediation chain to a prolific web forum of a community of Finnish football followers (Kytölä 2012, 2013), who initiate and maintain metapragmatic, often sarcastic commentaries and debates on the acceptability and authenticity of the language used in Forssell’s *tweets*.

## 5 Forssell’s Twitter writing as a topic in Futisforum2

### 5.1 Overview of the dataset

Above, based on a prolonged period of observation and retrospective online ethnography, we identified a key starting point for our investigation of the phenomenon of interest in this article. Below, we introduce the most essential meta-information of our overall dataset, which consists on the one hand of Mikael Forssell’s tweets and on the other, Futisforum2 discussion threads that deal with Forssell’s career moves and tweets. We begin with an overview and a brief numerical breakdown of the overall dataset before turning to the data samples below (section 6) that have been drawn from it as representative and sociolinguistically interesting cases.<sup>7</sup> (A list of the discussion threads used here is found under ‘Primary sources’ before the Bibliography.) The primary data we use here as illustrative examples date from 2009–2010; however, our observations show that both Forssell’s Twitter writing and the tone of the metapragmatic discourse in Futisforum2 have changed little in the following years in the 2010s. This means that the analysis remains ‘contemporary’ even in the light of the rapid pace of change in digital communication. Forssell actually stopped using Twitter during his 2011–12 season in Leeds (it was prohibited by his manager), but reactivated his account when he returned to Finland in autumn 2012.

TABLE 1. An overview of the most relevant Futisforum2 discussion threads dealing with Forssell’s Twitter activity.

heading of discussion topic	subpages (each page contains 25	messages (rounded to the	time span
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led to his death and also to that of another US rapper, *Tupac Shakur*, six months prior to B.I.G.’s death. In fact, the rap poses of these two ‘enemies’ are often accused of the deaths of the ‘opposing side’. In his music, Notorious B.I.G. told realistic and tough narratives about life on the streets and was highly appreciated as a skillful ‘storyteller’. (Peterson 2007; Price 2006.)

<sup>7</sup> Figures as of October 24, 2013; rounded to the nearest 10: 5630 tweets, 27,600 followers.

	postings)	<i>nearest 10)</i>	
“Mikael Forssell” (Hannover)	114 pages	2840 messages	2008–2009
“Mikael Forssell” (Hannover/unemployed)	164 pages	4080 messages	2009–2011
“Mikael Forssell” (Leeds/unemployed)	121 pages	3000 messages	2011–2012
“Twitter”	23 pages	550 messages	2010–2013
TOTAL	422 pages	10,470 messages	

In August 2010, as shown above in Table 1, a new discussion topic was opened on Futisforum2 with the simple heading “Twitter”. The first message framed this new topic as:

“Tänne noi paskat sekottamasta pelaajien topikkeja.”  
 “That shit here so that it won’t spoil the players’ topics.”<sup>8</sup>

This was an ironic attempt to ‘cleanse’ the forum’s discussion threads devoted to Forssell’s (and Mika Väyrynen’s; see 6.4) careers of meta-discussions on their (non-Standard English, AAVE, ‘gangsta’) English usages, and points to a high degree of metapragmatic awareness among the followers. Twitter writings continued simultaneously to be an ‘off-topic’ in the player-specific threads. The thread was popular for a time in 2010–11 but fell inactive in 2011–12 when the two were playing at Leeds, where the team’s players were prohibited from using Twitter. Following the principles governing the steps to be taken in the collection and selection of online ethnographic data and their documentation (Kytölä 2013: 146–155), the first author followed most of the Futisforum2 discussions on Forssell listed above in real time or with relatively short intervals. For present purposes, most (but not all) of the around 10,000 messages in four threads were revisited cursorily in 2013–14, cross-checking with his older fieldnotes. Our claims and justifications for the validity and representativeness of our findings, reported below, stem from this groundwork; however, we acknowledge the benefits and triangulative insights that an even more rigorous, quantitatively aided research method could have brought to the study. Thus, the present findings should be taken as ethnographically informed insights rather than definite facts about any totality of the data. This limitation is compounded by the fact that the research design did not include examination of all the tweets by Forssell (about 6,000 at the time of this study; 7,650 as checked on 24 April 2015); rather, in addition to the Twitter material which was directly referenced by the discussants at Futisforum2, we drew smaller samples and made spot checks on Forssell’s Twitter account between June 2013 and February 2015. Ultimately, the core analysis below (sections from 6.1 to 6.5) only includes Twitter samples that were explicitly the target of metapragmatic commentary at any of the listed Futisforum2 threads.

## 5.2 Ethical considerations

Both Forssell’s Twitter account and the discussion threads from Futisforum2 that are discussed here are open and public (relatively asynchronous) CMC for any web user to view retrospectively; however, ethical considerations still apply. While we do not consider informed

<sup>8</sup> All translations of the primary data into English are ours.

consent necessary for quoting extracts for research purposes such as the present ones, we acknowledge that researchers should be ethnographically informed about the communities 'behind' their datasets and sensitive to issues that may be controversial to the community of practice. Moreover, rather than following the practice of anonymizing each screen name found on the datasets, we opted for giving full credit to the online personae for their contributions (see the discussion on 'no disguise', 'light disguise', 'moderate disguise' and 'heavy disguise' in Bruckman 2002; see also Kytölä 2013: 72–74). Although there is a degree of hostility and mockery concerning the use of 'gangsta' English in our dataset, we do not regard our data as overtly sensitive or controversial to be analyzed openly. In a context where more controversial or more personalized topics were being discussed in an open, publicly available online platform, more precautions would of course be needed. (For a more thorough discussion of the ethical issues in internet research, web forums, and the Finnish Futisforums in particular, see Kytölä 2012, 2013: 69–76).

Having presented this overview, we now turn to a close micro-level analysis of what we identify as key points in the months of negotiation over, and evaluation of, Forssell's use of 'gangsta' features manifested in Futisforum2.

## **6. Forssell's tweets and normative evaluations of their authenticity**

Mikael Forssell launched his Twitter account in October 2009, a time of rapid increase in the opening of Twitter accounts by public figures (rock/pop stars, athletes, celebrities, politicians). By then, the communities of practice at Futisforum and Futisforum2 (Kytölä 2013) had a firmly established practice of following Finnish players' careers abroad; Mikael Forssell's career had in fact been a hot topic for about a decade. Unsurprisingly then, Forssell's contract with Hannover 96 (from July 2008) was also a topic with frequent (and provocative) contributions. In what follows, we analyze Forssell's usages of African American (or 'gangsta') English *vis-à-vis* the reactions and meta-comments on it by 'Futisforumists' (emic denotation) in five data samples. The samples are selected purposefully from the entire data pool, which contained around 10,000 forum messages related to Forssell, of which hundreds dealt with his Twitter writing and/or his hip hop devotion. We justify the selections ('key moments' or 'telling cases') with contextualizing descriptions of the discourses around them and how they fit the 'storyline', i.e., the emergence and growth of Forssell's language use as a new 'hot' topic and the forumists' construction of a subsequent "Twiklu"-influenced writing style.

### **6.1. Forssell as a "chocolate munching wanabee rapper" - a mismatch of two incompatible worlds?**

As far as our fieldwork and archive searches can reveal, the first time that Forssell's Twitter activity was introduced as a discussion topic on Futisforum2 was in November 2009. In a post on Futisforum2's topic on Forssell in Hannover, the forum member quotes Forssell's Twitter update on "drinking the best coffee in the world and dreaming about scoring". Comments on Forssell's playing and on his new Twitter profile then follow. A meta-communicative comment is posted a few days later (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. “Chocolate munching wanabee rapper, you’re out.”

According to our retrospective searches on Futisforum2’s publicly visible archives, this short forum post is the first to take a critical stance towards both Forssell’s hip hop enthusiasm and his Twitter activity. For us, it is an early key moment, representative of the phenomenon of interest here, as it encapsulates the tone of ‘the critical camp’ in a discussion that ensues for years. It contains a reference to Forssell’s indulgences (chocolate, coffee, Nutella, etc.) as well as his fondness for rap, and finally, the critical, disapproving stance taken by many of the Futisforumists towards these characteristics (and their combination). With respect to authenticity, we should note the premodifier ‘wanabee’ [sic], which suggests that Forssell can only fail to be a ‘genuine’, ‘authentic’ representative of hip hop culture, mostly because of his middle-class background. He can only be a ‘wannabe’, i.e., fake rapper. This normativity aspect is highlighted in the commenter’s final phrase “ei jatkoon”.<sup>9</sup> As becomes clear from the surrounding communicative context, for the Futisforum commenters Forssell neither meets the norms of a pro footballer (= he focuses on PR and joking on Twitter rather than just training) nor those of a rapper/rap fan (= he is not authentic). Here, we can thus already see how Forssell’s followers (tend to) draw on and make visible their essentialist notion of authenticity.

Compared to ‘traditional’ kinds of authority and language policing (curricula, teachers, parents...), this is a grassroots, peer-to-peer, organically emerging type of normativity (Kytölä 2012: 228–229; 2013: 124–125). However, even such grassroots normativity may still be rooted in aspects of participants’ life histories related to traditional authorities (e.g., ‘the grammar’ taught at school), but now with the additional layers of community norms, norms of digital writing, and various cultural norms simultaneously at work on different domains (football, ‘Finnish-ness’, international English, non-Standard or hip hop English, digital communication, etc.)

## 6.2. “...but Ive been knifed more than 50Cent” - unintentional humour or skilled performance?

After the point described above, Forssell’s Twitter language use triggers regular meta-comments within the flow of the main discussion on his career. We now move to our next example from August 2010, the pre-season of the 2010–11 season in the German Bundesliga. Forssell, who by now had been dubbed “Twiklu” (Twitter + “Miklu”) by the Futisforumists, tweets:

<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to find an optimal English translation for the idiomatic expression “ei jatkoon”. This expression is currently used in television contests and ‘reality’ TV shows at a dramatic point when the jury decide on whether a competitor is to be allowed to stay in the contest or be eliminated after a certain round. In some comparable English-language contests one hears phrases like “you’re eliminated” or “it’s a no for me”.



FIGURE 4. "...but Ive been knifed more than 50Cent".

This tweet again reflects Forssell's publicly displayed rap fandom. His first sentence, whilst elliptical, is in rather Standard English, but the second sentence moves toward a more informal register ('Gonna'; 'tough'). However, the clause beginning with 'but' is a clear switch to 'gangsta' content, emphasized by the cultural reference to 50 Cent<sup>10</sup> and the closing exclamation 'BANG'. The activity of 'knifing' here can, ironically, refer to two things: surgery that an often-injured footballer such as Forssell has had to undergo, or 'stabbing' in a metaphorical sense (i.e., receiving harsh criticism from media and fans). Moreover, the third meaning is literal, as stabbing was part of 50 Cent's life experience in the violent world of US gangsta rappers. In this sense, then, Forssell's 'comparison' of having been knifed *more* than 50 Cent suggests, in a somewhat humoristic tone, that he is even tougher than the gangsta rapper, albeit in a different context. In spite of the macabre verbal imagery, the tweet ends in a jocular and highly optimistic, tongue-in-cheek note ("Ill pull through!BANG"). One overall function of Forssell's tweeting seems to be to entertain his followers, including old friends in Finland or other football players; here, the entertainment derives from a simultaneous orientation towards the norm centers of competitive football and 'gangsta' culture.

Next, we turn to look at the uptake and meta-commentary that this particular tweet arouses in the Futisforum2 discussion thread devoted to Forssell (Figure 5).

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<sup>10</sup> 50 Cent, i.e., Curtis James Jackson III, is an American rapper, actor and entrepreneur. In somewhat stereotypical gangsta rap fashion, also he was shot at (and struck by nine bullets) in an incident in 2000. At the time, he was heavily involved in the drug business. His themes revolve around his actual, lived ('gangsta') experiences of drugs, crimes, imprisonments, stabbings – and shootings. Since, 50 Cent has been accused of 'selling out' (i.e., losing his 'authenticity') by making crossovers to the genre of 'pop rap'. (Price 2006; Birchmeier (n.d.))

<p><b>ZacPalmer</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Poissa</p>	<p><b>Vs: Mikael Forssell - Hannover 96 - 09/10/11 - Hyvä laukaus kohti yläkulmaa</b> Vastaus #564 : 07.08.2010 klo 01:46:26</p> <hr/> <p>Lainaus käyttäjältä: RQ - 07.08.2010 klo 00:53:28 Kyllä Twitterissä ainakin oli melko kovaa tykitystä ennen ottelua: <i>Off to play Osnabruck in the last pre-season friendly! Gonna be a tough game...but Ive been knifed more than 50Cent so Ill pull through!BANG</i></p> <p>Ei jumalauta 😂</p>
<p><b>jjonez</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Poissa</p> <p>Suosikkijoukkue: Honka,Huuhkajat,Chelsea sekä Kunkku.</p>	<p><b>Vs: Mikael Forssell - Hannover 96 - 09/10/11 - Hyvä laukaus kohti yläkulmaa</b> Vastaus #565 : 07.08.2010 klo 02:36:17</p> <hr/> <p>50centtiä on toisaalta ammuttu, Miklua ammuttu vaan The Real Wolfin unissa.</p>
<p><b>absessi</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Poissa</p>	<p><b>Vs: Mikael Forssell - Hannover 96 - 09/10/11 - Hyvä laukaus kohti yläkulmaa</b> Vastaus #566 : 07.08.2010 klo 10:33:21</p> <hr/> <p>Gangsta miklu. Tahattoman komiikan helmiä.</p>
<p><b>Rikkiviisas</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Poissa</p>	<p><b>Vs: Mikael Forssell - Hannover 96 - 09/10/11 - Hyvä laukaus kohti yläkulmaa</b> Vastaus #567 : 07.08.2010 klo 11:31:13</p> <hr/> <p>Lainaus käyttäjältä: absessi - 07.08.2010 klo 10:33:21 Gangsta miklu. Tahattoman komiikan helmiä.</p> <p>Vaiko sittenkin tahallisen...</p>

FIGURE 5. “A gem of unintentional humour.”

Translations:

Quote from RQ: “At least in Twitter there was full blast before the match: *Off to play Osnabruck in the last pre-season friendly! Gonna be a tough game...but Ive been knifed more than 50Cent so Ill pull through!BANG*”

**ZacPalmer:** [(ei) jumalauta’ – a swear word referring to God] [+ a ‘laughing out loud’ smiley]

**jjonez:** “50cent has been shot at in reality, Miklu has been shot at only in The Real Wolf’s dreams.”

**absessi:** “Gangsta miklu. A gem of unintentional humour.”

**Rikkiviisas:** [quoting the previous comment] “Or intentional, after all...”

Here, user “jjonez” (reply #565) displays knowledge of the US hip hop culture (“50cent has been shot at”). In writing “(...) Miklu has been shot at only in The Real Wolf’s dreams”, he is referring to “The Real Wolf”,<sup>11</sup> a prolific Futisforum2 writer, whose nickname also contains a reference to authenticity, someone who is ‘more real’ than others (see also Westinen 2014). The next two short responses, discussing the intentionality of “Miklu” Forssell’s humour, reflect the ambivalence of the reception of his tweets. While the language used by Forssell, his ‘tough’ attitude, as well as his identification with the gangsta world, seem exaggerated, no one preferred reading of them is dominant (the researchers may share this feeling); there is no contextualization cue in Forssell’s tweets at this point which would unambiguously lead the followers to a single warranted interpretation of his ‘gangsta’ intertextuality. Here, as in his other tweets, Forssell orients towards two domains and thereby two centers of norms: football and ‘gangsta’. This is, however, done with rather ‘minimal’ contributions from the celebrity

<sup>11</sup> The latter member had chosen this name after his original nickname “The Wolf” was poached by another user in the early days (2006–2008) of Futisforum2, when many Futisforum members emigrated to Futisforum2.

himself: it is the uptake, the extensive discussion amongst forum members that explicitly and implicitly constructs and adds to these norm centers. “Determining whether readers are watching an ‘authentic’ individual or a performed ‘celebrity’ persona is not entirely the point; it is the uncertainty that creates pleasure for the celebrity-watcher on Twitter” (Marwick & boyd 2011: 144).

As illustrated above, the metapragmatic commentaries in Futisforum2 raise issues of authenticity, accompanied with reflections on tolerance (on different cultures and ways of using language), our next topic. Forssell’s authenticity as a speaker of a ‘hip hop language’ seems to be questioned by most Futisforum2 responses; however, some of the contributing forumists appear to share Forssell’s ironic sense of humor, while others show a lower level of tolerance.

### 6.3. “I be da reel gansta, from da ghetto!” - the appropriation of ‘gangsta’ by the Futisforum2 community

Still in August 2010, the beginning of the European club football season 2010–11, we identify the ‘next stage’ in the chain of the emergence of the Forssell-induced ‘gangsta’ style among the Futisforum2 community. Key to this stage is that the Futisforumists themselves now begin to make use of a similar, exaggerated, non-Standard style, with notable recurring ‘gangsta’ features, while also explicitly mentioning the ‘gangsta’ category.



**Max Headroom**  Poissa

**Vs: Mikael Forssell - Hannover 96 - 09/10/11 - Hyvä laukaus kohti yläkulmaa**  
Vastaus #782 : 25.08.2010 klo 12:24:40

Noh, eiköhän Miklu ammu itseään jalkaan pian, niin päästään twitteröinnistä. Kirjallimellisesti:

**Uutinen**

Double-sesh behind me...great feeling...now off to the **shooting-range** so that I can feel like Tupac and 50Cent! about 17 hours ago via web

AIGHT! I be da reel gansta, from da ghetto! M-FO, bitches

FIGURE 6. “I be da reel gansta, from da ghetto!”

Translation:

“Well, I think Miklu will probably shoot himself in the leg soon, so we’ll get rid of the twittering. Literally:

**News**

Double-sesh behind me...great feeling...now off to the **shooting-range** so that I can feel like Tupac and 50Cent! about 17 hours ago via web

AIGHT! I be da reel gansta, from da ghetto! M-FO, bitches”

Forssell’s tweet, here in the quote box, expresses his pleasure in the training (“sesh”, i.e., session) and plays with the double meaning of ‘shooting range’; for a football striker such as Forssell shooting from different ranges is obviously an essential special skill. With his recurring

references to hip hop stars (here: Tupac<sup>12</sup> and 50 Cent) Forssell crafts ambiguity: is ‘shooting’ kicking a football or firing a gun? Moreover, Forssell uses the verb phrase “feel like Tupac and 50Cent”, suggesting a point of identification with the hip hop world and rap artists.

The part of the response that follows below the Twitter quote (the pink box) is the first Futisforum response to Forssell’s Twitter writing that we identify as adoption and appropriation (Hill 2008: 158–174; Bucholtz 2011: 69–80; Kytölä 2012) of the stylistic features used by Forssell. From this point on, the overt (or explicit) metapragmatic evaluation (see Kytölä 2013), offering opinions on Forssell’s language, is intertwined with covert (or implicit) metapragmatic commentary, imitating and modifying Forssell’s style. This short comment includes several colloquial items, itemized in detail in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Features in Forssell’s ‘shooting-range’ tweet.

type of feature	‘gangsta’ English	Standard English
exclamation	AIGHT (‘cool’ variant)	all right, alright
verb conjugation	I be	I am
definite article	da (twice)	the
spelling of adjective	reel	real
variant of noun	gansta*	gangster
word choice	bitches	[female]

\* This could also be ‘gangsta’; we do not know if the omission of the second ‘g’ was an accidental typing error, a spelling mistake, or a deliberate stylistic choice.

Moreover, the forum message ends with another exclamation playing with ambiguity: “M-FO”. This seems to play with the contemporary colloquial English practice of creating an acronym from the initial letters of one’s names. J.Lo (Jennifer Lopez) is the most famous example of this formula (the musical styles she represents are mainly R’n’B, pop and Latin, but this formula arguably fits hip hop practices too (see Potter 1995; Androutsopoulos & Scholz 2002). Significantly, “M-FO” might also evoke the ‘tough’ noun ‘motherfucker’ (or its various spellings) combined with Mikael Forssell’s initials.

This message, which incorporates several non-Standard, even ‘gangsta’ features in a short space, is the first example of the emergence of a way of writing imitating Forssell at

<sup>12</sup> *Tupac* (2pac) refers to Tupac Amaru Shakur, who was an American rap artist and actor. 2pac was a vocal participant in the so-called East Coast – West Coast hip hop rivalry, becoming involved in conflicts with other rappers, most notably with (the previously mentioned) Notorious B.I.G. and his label Bad Boy Records. In 1996, 2pac was shot multiple times in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles and the ‘posse’ (gang or group) of Notorious B.I.G. was accused of his death. The case remains unsolved. Their deaths showed, in a very cruel and dramatic way, how the contents of (gangsta) rap lyrics became reality. The themes of most of 2pac’s songs revolve around the violence and hardship in inner cities, racism and other social problems. Both 2pac and Notorious B.I.G. also served time in prison – their music was thus ‘authentically gangsta’ in this respect, too. (Price 2006; Morrison & Dangerfield 2007.)

Futisforum2. When other forumists start responding in much the same style, incorporating both recurring and one-off ‘gangsta’ features in their forum messages, we find a parallel with Hill’s (2008) ‘Mock Spanish’ and Rampton’s (2006) ‘stylized Posh’ or ‘stylized Asian English. (Kytölä (2012, 2013), in his work on the language practices of Finnish football forums, has also found other similar parallels).

#### 6.4. “Fucking ghetto gangstas” and ‘teenage’ style – evaluations, metapragmatics and indexicalities

The last empirical point we include in this analysis is the emically motivated addition of *age* as a factor in the emergence of the ‘gangsta’ style. When discussing and imitating Forssell’s tweets, the Futisforumists frequently raise the issue of age: for many commentators, this ‘gangsta’ English is characteristic of youth or teenage rather than grown-up language (Figure 7).



FIGURE 7. “he insists on writing like a 13-year-old”

Translation:

#### [quote from Le Dog]

This mostly makes me laugh [‘lol’ emoticon]. As far as I’m concerned, let everyone write as they wish, but at the same time I can laugh with good conscience at riplu’s [sic] record reviews and twitter writings. It gets all the funnier as we know that riplu would know how to write sensibly if he wanted to, but he insists on writing like a 13-year-old [thumb down].

Reply: “Few of us know how to write gangsta English so well. And it’s very cool.” [thumb up]

This is a telling example of the negotiation and the co-construction of ambivalence in Forssell’s public writing. Although it is impossible to always pinpoint which writers are being serious and who are being ironic or tongue-in-cheek, with repeated and persistent comments such as these we can identify an emergent meta-discourse, that of the ‘enlightened’ advocates of diversity. These writers acknowledge that Forssell *actually masters* this ‘gangsta’ style, and the normativity interpretation takes a turn of 180 degrees: in fact, Forssell, by displaying that he can master this register, *meets the norms* – despite his middle-class Finnish background (and, possibly for some commentators, despite his ‘Whiteness’). This is another clearly identifiable sub-topic that emerges in the discussions on Forssell and his public author persona.

For reasons of space, we do not describe all the connections and relationships made publicly conspicuous in Forssell’s digital networks via Twitter, but the most relevant two ‘co-tweeters’ merit an introduction here. Mika Väyrynen and Tim Sparv, also Finnish football professionals and prolific tweeters, become co-authors of Forssell’s ‘gangsta’ style (flagging their groupness)

at several points and a salient part of the overall Finnish professional footballers' jocular multi-authored discourse online (see the last example of the analysis). Väyrynen and Sparv engage in a Twitter dialogue with Forssell, deploying the same or similar 'gangsta' (or other markedly non-Standard) English features; these particular instances of language use were interwoven in the Futisforum2's metapragmatic debate in what we identify as key moments in the discourse events described below.

In the above example, along with several others in these discussion threads, the age factor was introduced into the discussion. This writer (along with others) refers to Forssell's (and Väyrynen's) style as a teenage style ("like a 13-year-old"). In the same vein, another Futisforum2 member after a while comments:

"Vittu tätä nykynuorison kieltä"

"Fuck this language of today's youth"

Ironically, Forssell and Väyrynen (both born in 1981) were both in their late 20s, nearly 30, at the time of these tweets (2009–2011), and on the basis of the Finnish football forums' participant frameworks (Kytölä 2013), (it can be assumed that) many of the participants in the metapragmatic commentary are about the same age, some even younger. Ironically, when Tim Sparv's (b. 1987) related tweets are frequently brought into the discussion, they contain much less non-Standard English than those of the other two 'bros' (the term of address they use with each other on Twitter), six years senior to Sparv. In this very small sample, the age factor seems less decisive than personal, aesthetic or stylistic preference. On the issue of authenticity, however, age is clearly raised as a factor that requires appropriate, 'authentic' verbal expression; i.e., 30-year olds are 'inauthentic' or 'fake' if they write in a way associated with 13-year-olds.

When Väyrynen and Sparv join Forssell in the social activity of Twittering, the three players' tweets are often explicitly directed at each other (while simultaneously maintaining their personal, specific online audiences); one of the tweets directed at Forssell by Väyrynen elicits a negatively framed criticism of 'ghetto gangsta' among the Futisforumists (Figure 8).



FIGURE 8. "So, what fucking ghetto gangstas"

Translation:

Väyrynen [alternating between colloquial English and Finnish]:

“wtf bro?rarely heard ya happy if you haven’t scored or played...still keep ya head up n c ya next week “

The forumist Slater74’s response:

“So, what fucking ghetto gangstas do our internationals think they are. Does Litti [Jari Litmanen] tweet equivalent shit with, say, [Edgar] Davids and [Nwankwo] Kanu?”

In the tweet by Väyrynen which is quoted in the forum message above, there is little to suggest a ‘gangsta’ or a ‘ghetto’ style. Rather, the non-Standard features “wtf bro” and “...n c ya...” are in general use across the English-speaking world in various formats and contexts of informal writing. However, ‘bro’ can also be considered (as originating in) AAVE (see e.g., Cutler 2003), something to which the forumists are apparently relating their comments. Indeed, the comment by Slater74 explicitly associates this sample with ‘ghetto gangsta’, in line with Forssell’s public image (and his overt references to African American hip hop culture) already established in this online community. Alternatively, it could be a personal, aesthetically motivated negative attitude towards features of ‘gangsta’, African American and/or non-Standard English. In any case, Slater74’s verbal expression is strong and he clearly disidentifies with these linguistic features as well as their ‘ghetto gangsta’ cultural indexicalities.

Similar meta-discussions abound in the Futisforum2 threads related to Forssell, Väyrynen, Sparv and to Twitter in general: the main criticisms targeted at the writings of these players are their ‘gangsta’ features, which are deemed incompatible with and inauthentic to Finnish well-off sport pros, and the unsuitability of such ‘immature’, ‘teenager’ features to the language of grown-ups (which would never be used by more ‘appropriately’ behaving footballers, such as Jari Litmanen in the example above). At the same time, there is clear evidence on the Finnish football forum of (a rather carnivalistic) adoption and appropriation of – playing around and fooling with – ‘gangsta’ features. The main message of that tendency seems to be that the use of ‘gangsta’ by Finnish sports pros (who have lived all their lives far from ‘real’ authentic gangsta contexts) in digital writing is ‘ridiculous’ and entertaining at the same time. The overall interpretation of authenticity and normativity related to such language use remains ambivalent.

## 6.5 Analytical reflections

Guided by the foci of this special issue, our analysis contributes to it in the following ways. First, considering how authenticity is constructed and negotiated in this case, we observe that Forssell does not attempt to portray himself as (an) authentic (rap artist or user of ‘Black’ English), but ‘only’ as a fan of American rap music. He distances himself somewhat from the question by means of humorous stylization (Rampton 1999; Coupland 2007: 154; Bucholtz 2011; Lehtonen 2011). However, many Finnish football enthusiasts in the Futisforum2 community take issue with this behavior, strongly questioning his authenticity. As to how authenticity is normatively regulated, we notice mismatches when we compare Forssell’s language use to ‘original’ (= African American) (re)sources. The forumists may not necessarily see ‘gangsta English’ as an inferior style/variety *per se* – although such voicings can also be observed – but it is construed as inferior when used by Forssell (and his footballer colleagues). How authenticity is normatively regulated is manifest, in particular, in the features used in the followers’ meta-commentary with its overtly negative overtones. Finally, in considering who are construed as authentic representatives of particular socio-cultural groups, we can observe in relation to ‘gangsta’ English that the ‘legitimate’ users of this variety, according to some

forumists, ‘must be’ African Americans, and perhaps teenagers, as opposed to Finnish (‘White’, middle-class-background) professional footballers in their late twenties. Finally, we can show how identities are co-constructed in a dialogue between the use and the uptake (and the policing) of semiotic resources.

As shown in the analysis, in Finnish football forums, football followers initiate and maintain metapragmatic, reflexive and at times ironic commentaries on the value, acceptability and authenticity of Forssell’s use of language, the labels ascribed to his register/style ranging from ‘wannabe rapper’ and ‘unintended comedy’ to ‘pathetic’ or ‘retarded’. In these metalinguistic debates, the English used on Twitter by Forssell (and Väyrynen) is repeatedly characterized as ‘ghetto gangsta English’ and its evaluation ranges from ‘laughing out loud’ to ‘sense of shared embarrassment’. All in all, the uptake and responses show varying forms of conventionality, purism, and normativity. As the emic categories emerging in these metadiscussions are often essentialistic, extreme and black-and-white (bad–good, wrong–right), and ‘pure’, we argue that Standard and monolingual language are articulated as ideals. However, to counterpoint that, some readers are also skillful languagers, showing strong awareness of genre/register differences and a readiness to play around with these by appropriating similar ‘gangsta’ features in their own online forum writing. There is a clearly observable friction between the purist normativities (arguing that the identity of a professional, possibly ‘White’, middle-class footballer cannot authentically be combined with that of a ‘gangsta’ English user) and playful appropriation of the same (or similar) digital writing styles in yet another layer of circulation – as when many Futisforumists begin to adopt gangsta English features not directly from their ‘authentic’ users of US origin but by following Forssell’s example, and in some cases with the added twist of parodying Forssell’s *already mediated and appropriated* ‘gangsta’ English rather than that of an ‘authentic’ source, such as a famous gangsta rapper or character in a film. It is this tension between normativity (followers distancing themselves from Forssell’s language use) and appropriation (followers adopting features of Forssell’s style) that we have showcased here.

We can notice a degree of open-endedness and rhizomaticity in these “Twiklu” discourses. By no means limited to Twitter and the major Finnish football web forums, these metapragmatic discourses about Forssell’s twittering also spread and circulate across other online and offline spaces; we have found online examples of Finnish football followers’ critical “Twiklu” discourse, for instance, in Finnish football blogs, in the comment sections of the more formal institutional (digital) media, and even in articles *in* the institutional media (although in such cases, the journalists have felt the need to frame and explain the “Twiklu” moniker and the associations it may give rise to).<sup>13</sup> The uptake of Forssell’s stylization of ‘gangsta’ English is by no means clear-cut: some of the comments in the discussion forum remain vague, as do the social functions of the appropriation of Forssell’s ‘style’ by the forumists. In general, specific and definite interpretations and conclusions can only be tentative.

Whatever Forssell chooses to write on Twitter, his public image is always at stake; and the same applies to his colleagues. We can also observe here that various online activities and

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<sup>13</sup> Examples: blog: <http://siististicool.blogspot.fi/2011/09/twiklun-ghettostoorit.html>; institutional media news: [http://www.iltalehti.fi/jalkapallo/2010111712719497\\_jp.shtml](http://www.iltalehti.fi/jalkapallo/2010111712719497_jp.shtml); meta-news about the fake Forssell Twitter: <http://www.iltasanomat.fi/veikkausliiga/art-1288561320785.html> Article in English at YLE: [http://yle.fi/uutiset/forsell\\_looks\\_for\\_form\\_and\\_fitness\\_in\\_finland/6576863](http://yle.fi/uutiset/forsell_looks_for_form_and_fitness_in_finland/6576863) (All accessed 28 April, 2015.)

communication entail as much social control as any other (offline) human activity. Thus, we can make an ethnographic point on the relation between the online and offline worlds: the negative evaluations of Forssell's online linguistic performances presuppose offline knowledge of his identity as a hard-working, focused footballer. For famous athletes, their fans' and followers' expectations of their public online (e.g., Twitter) performance is often to communicate about the sport. However, followers may not be indifferent to *how* such communication is done. Here, we have showcased the highly reflexive nature that audiences' uptake can exhibit with regard to linguistic styles and specific features associated with those styles. In addition, a fairly recent development relating to celebrities, such as football stars, and social media has to do with the previously mentioned 'backstage access'. To a greater extent than before, fans are invited into the informal 'real' life of (and by) celebrities. This can intensify the authenticity debate: the 'backstage pass' may lose value if the multisemiotic material it gives access to is experienced as 'unreal' or simply unimportant. Perhaps this also explains the interest generated around Forssell's (and other celebrities') tweets.

Forssell's adoption and appropriation of features of 'gangsta' English is one conspicuous feature of his overall polylingual performance, characterized by ('unremarkable') hybridity (Pennycook 2010), polycentricity (orientation to multiple centers and audiences) and jocularity. In fact, when gangsta features are adopted (in clusters; see Auer 2007: 11–12; De Fina 2007: 59), we can even talk about 'a style', i.e., a way of speaking/writing (Auer 2007; Coupland 2007, Bell 2007, De Fina 2007, Bucholtz 2011). In light of Rampton's (2005 [1995]) argument, Forssell's language use can be seen here as crossing, i.e., switching into a language (or a variety) generally not thought to 'belong' to the speaker. We can also see how the audience (re)negotiates the relation between speaker, place and language – in seeking to determine who has the right to use which linguistic resources to whom and where. Authenticity and normativity (correctness, appropriateness and expertise) become key issues in these negotiations.

## 7. Conclusion

Drawing on the recent literature, we conceptualized authenticity in this article as *authentication*, as a negotiable, discursively verified process where different social actors make different claims about others' belonging, legitimation or 'passing' in different social formations or groups. Another key concept we deployed was normativity, which entails evaluations, judgements and policing others' semiotic conduct. Here, we attempted to underline the ways in which normativity in many informal digital contexts is primarily imposed 'from below', negotiated and co-constructed in the flow of discourses, and locatable in different layers of language use (or the use of other semiotic resources such as pictures and emoticons in social media).

We documented and discussed several axes of metapragmatic debate: the Finnish followers' negotiations on whether Forssell's language is 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' (gangsta) English, whether it is 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' for a professional footballer such as him, and the ways in which this stylized language matches or mismatches with aspects of Forssell's social and cultural background. In addition, we discussed his multiple audiences "co-existing in a single social context" (Marwick & boyd 2011: 145). This 'context collapse' (boyd 2008; Marwick & boyd 2011), typical of social media, can be discussed together with the 'discursive verification' (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 601) of authenticity or authentication, which can no longer be seen as an "inherent essence" of an individual. Instead, the diversity of audiences for the

same pieces of discourse (the diversity of Forssell's audiences and followers in Twitter as well as the diversity of second-order audiences in the related Futisforum2 discussion threads) leads to the discursive verification (or denial) of some authenticities by some (but not all) audiences.

What can also be seen here are the "several different layers of normativity" (Varis & Wang 2011: 72), most notably those of 'hip hop normativity, authenticity and polycentricity' versus those of 'pro footballer's normativity, authenticity and polycentricity'. In this case, a professional football player and his language use sometimes do not, from his followers' viewpoint, quite 'match' the essentialized norms and authenticity of a rap enthusiast / hip hop head. Questions of authenticity are indeed made relevant by his followers, not so much by Forssell himself. Significantly, then, both hip hop and football cultures are polycentric in nature: people affiliated with these always orient towards multiple centers of norms instead of just one (see also Westinen 2014; Kytölä 2013, respectively), as we see here.

Our discussion of Mikael Forssell's Twitter writing in African American and/or 'gangsta' English, along with its adoption and appropriation by Finnish football followers online can also be read as a contribution to the current debate on superdiversity (see 3.6 above), where digital communication has been acknowledged but has nonetheless remained empirically under-researched (but see Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014). In this article, we have complemented the existing insights in the sociolinguistics of superdiversity concerned with the increasing mixing, organization and movement of linguistic features in flows by highlighting the unpredictability of the connections between language use, (popular) cultural forms, ethnicity, and country of origin, as well as the complexity of mediation across online and offline sites of social action.

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(all last accessed 24 April 2015)

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<http://twitter.com/MikaelForssell> (Forssell's Twitter account)

### **Futisforum2**

<http://futisforum2.org/index.php?topic=54498.0>

("Forssell - Hannover 2008-09")

<http://futisforum2.org/index.php?topic=83064.0>

("Forssell - Hannover 2009-11; unemployed")

<http://futisforum2.org/index.php?topic=127020.0>

("Forssell - Leeds 2011-12; unemployed")

<http://futisforum2.org/index.php?topic=107799.0>

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