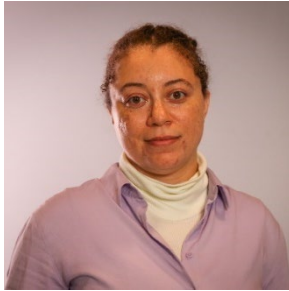


Afro-Nordic Raciolinguistic Landscapes



Amara Frost is graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Linguistics and German with a Scandinavian focus. Amara's research project titled "Afro-Nordic Raciolinguistic Landscapes" was mentored by Assistant Professor of Linguistics Dr. Rachel Weissler and Associate Professor of German and Scandinavian Dr. Michael Stern. Amara will be finishing her bachelor's degree and applying for graduate programs in Fall 2024 through Spring 2025.



Dr. Rachel Weissler has been an Assistant Professor at the University of Oregon since 2023. Dr. Weissler is a raciolinguistic emotion perception researcher and African American English scholar. She uses experimental methods from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. She has a Black Studies affiliation, is a co-director of the Umoja Black Scholars Academic Residential Community, and a co-director of the Black Strategies Group.

Abstract

The Nordic countries, starting in the 2000s, began to shift away from using the term "race" and focused on other identifiers such as ethnicity, which has led to a disconnect between racialized terminologies and their implications. The present research examines racial language use in Nordic countries and explores key themes through a raciolinguistic approach to define race and how the ideas of race may influence language use within this locale. Additionally, this research focuses on the Afro-Nordic experiences around racial language use in Nordic countries. Key themes that were found as a part of the research using academic texts were racial terminology, racial naïveté, and the denial of race. Using these themes, we explore sociolinguistic aspects around race, ethnicity, and identity and the implications of race. The findings of this paper were the complexities around the disuse of race within the Nordic countries and how that relates to identity and the concept of ethnicity when it comes to defining individuals.

1. Introduction

Raciolinguistics examines how language is used to define race and how the ideas of race may influence language and use. Results from a literature review examined race and racial language use in Nordic countries. These Nordic countries included Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland, which have

a shared history of political unions and colonization that united them at various points throughout history. This paper examines research done in the Nordic countries to determine how race has been discussed in academic circles from the 2000s to the 2020s.

For the Nordic countries and many European countries post-WWII, race is viewed as an outmoded biological category without political validity. For example, the Swedish Government bill behind the Swedish Anti-Discrimination Act proposed to exclude race as a determining factor for discrimination, as there is no evidence of race in a biological sense. Using the term race would give legitimacy to racist beliefs and consolidate race as an existing category (McEachrane, 2014/2016). Despite the dismissal of race as a legitimate category, raciolinguistics remains important in Nordic countries. Although the Nordic countries view race as not biologically proven, much of the world still recognizes the presence of race and its influence on identity. A lack of understanding around racialized terms and their impact on non-white ethnically Nordic individuals has arisen within the white ethnically Nordic populations, which has disconnected the concept of race from identity. This paper explores the disconnect by examining key themes found in a literature review: racialized terminology, racial naïveté, and the denial of race. It explores identity and the complexities that extend beyond ethnicity and skin color. These factors influence the Anti-Discrimination Acts in the Nordic countries, which classify people using other identifying factors, rather than by race.

2. Methods

Raciolinguistic landscapes within Nordic countries, focusing on the Afro-Nordic experience, were explored through texts that address terms like race, racism, Afro-Nordic, and black Nordic. After an exploration through the anthology *Afro-Nordic Landscapes: Equality and Race in Northern Europe*, another search was conducted using the racialized terms *blámaður*, *blámenn*, *blökkumenn*, *svörtumenn*, *svartirmenn*, *svertingjar*, *neger*, *Mulatto*, *Negress*, and *negro* with a focus on the use within Nordic countries. These search terms were used to explore their usage from the 2000s to the 2020s and understand the history of their use.

The academic texts were reviewed for relevant uses of the terms, to investigate the language used in the context of the texts, and to understand what academics were writing about when using these terms. The analysis included interviews that the academics conducted with members of the Afro-Nordic diaspora, which provided insight into the use and perceptions around using racialized terms. Additional readings were gathered from references in anthology papers and from searches, which were compiled to form this paper.

3. Racialized Terminology

3.1. Exploration of Historical Terminology

Early concepts of identity, race, and otherness within the context of the Nordic countries were identified. These concepts led to the finding of the terminology of *blámaður*, *blámenn*, *blökkumenn*, *svörtumenn*, *svartirmenn*, and *svertingjar*, which were later racialized. During periods before the 19th century, there was no concept of racial hierarchy, but rather concepts that could be considered equivalent, such as the sense of nation. The term *blámaður*, translated to “blue man,” dates back before the sixteenth century and was commonly used towards strange people living outside of Iceland. However, *blámaður* exists in other Old Norse texts, suggesting that it reflects an early notion of race. For example, a character present in Old Norse texts is the *blámaðr* ‘black man,’ a character that was viewed as “fantastical or demonic.” Yet, there are moments where *blámaðr* is used with ethnic connotations, indicating that the roles of demon, monster, and racial others were not mutually exclusive with the use of *blámaðr* in Old Norse. *Blámenn* is similar to the former, as it is used in juxtaposition with both the fantastical and racial otherings, depending on the author of the Old Norse works (Cole, 2015).

In Icelandic folklore, *blámaður* was often negatively associated with the dark skin color of trolls and giants (Loftsdóttir, 2013). However, family relations with giants were not necessarily perceived as unfavorable in old Icelandic texts, as some great men of history were characterized as having such relations (Jakobsson, 2001 as cited in Loftsdóttir and Pálsson, 2013). Initial representations of Africa were diverse and not consistently negative, as it was not until later that *blámaður* gained the racialized meaning associated with “black.”

In Iceland, the racialization of black and blue when referring to people of Africa was likely caused by the creation of the Icelandic national identity in the 19th-century and early 20th-century, forging of racial hierarchies with European “white” men at the top. Racial hierarchies in Iceland came from the journal *Skírnir*, published by *The Icelandic Literature Association*, as the primary source of engaging with news related to Africa. The most common terms used by the journal to describe African “black” people originated by using various combinations of black, dark, blue, and man: *blámenn*, *svörtumenn*, *svartir menn*, *svertingjar*, and *blökkumenn* (Loftsdóttir, 2014/2016). All of these terms fell out of use around the 20th century due to the implications of racism. However, despite the racial connotations, some terms continue to be used through the 20th and 21st centuries.

3.2. Exploration of Modern Terminology

Terms like *neger*, *Mulatto*, *Negress*, and *negro* remain in use through the 20th and 21st centuries when referring to groups of the African diaspora within the Nordic countries, despite having older roots and racist implications. The term “Mulatto” was used as early as the 1600s to reference mixed-race individuals and often involved implications of slavery. In the 20th century, a group called Queendom, a Norwegian/African art collective, had a manifesto explained they did not wish to be referred to by racialized terms like *negro*, *Negress*, or *Mulatto* (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2014/2016). The request from Queendom indicated these terms continued to be used despite objections from the impacted groups.

The term *neger*, as Kennedy-Macfoy explains, is equivalent to the North American counterpart “nigger.” In the Swedish context, *neger* is used more often and is more criticized, compared to *nigger* (Hübinette et al., 2023). *Neger* is similar to *negro* but is treated more like *nigger*, despite *nigger* appearing in the language of post-war Sweden, because Swedish speakers do not distinguish between the two. The term *Negress* is seen as a feminine determination, inferred by the -ess suffix at the end of the word that typically denotes femininity. References to the word “negro” can be found in 2007 when a nursery rhyme titled *Ten Little Negros* was republished in Iceland; a song that was first named *Negrastrákarnir* (The Negro-boys). The republication of this nursery rhyme sparked debate in which many ethnically Nordic people of color spoke out against the use of this racialized term. In contrast, many white Nordics argued that it caused no harm, attributing the term’s use to past ignorance rather than racism. Additionally, many believed those who were non-white and spoke out against the term being used in the republication were immigrants.

3.3. *Innvandrer* “Immigrant”

Another term used about individuals within the Nordic populace is *innvandrer*, which was examined in a Norwegian context within academic texts and translates to “immigrant.” The term relates to identity and race due to the perceptions of otherness that it conveys. As a result, *innvandrer* is not just a word but a rhetorically powerful concept (Gullestad, 2004, as cited in Kennedy-Macfoy, 2014/2016). From this Norwegian context, *innvandrer* has different meanings and connotations in media, popular, and political discourse. Within discussions in media, the meaning oscillates between implying a “Third World” origin, different values from the majority, “dark skin,” working class (skilled or unskilled), and a dictionary definition where these characteristics are irrelevant (Gullestad, 2004, as cited in Kennedy-Macfoy, 2014/2016).

3.4. Racial Naivety

Claims of ignorance of racism have allowed the continued use of racialized terms in the past, due to a homogenous society with no interaction with people of other races. The

1977 article published in Iceland, "Negro in Þistilfjörður ['θi:stɪlfjœrðʏr]," was referred to as the most famous headlining piece written in Icelandic history. In this article, a news reporter informed readers he had seen an 'African-negro' from Ghana working the farms (Loftsdóttir, 2014/2016). Loftsdóttir further indicated that they received the email in 2008, which showed that the reflective self-criticism of Icelanders revealed a sense of the past. Icelanders were unaware of what was appropriate to say, though their intentions were not racist.

The disconnect of racial terms stems from the idea that racism is associated with the Nazi ideology, apartheid in South Africa, and the segregation laws of the southern states of America (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2014/2016). Defining racism in this way suggests anything that else can fall outside of that definition. Consequently, past statements without understanding they could be racist are considered innocent. This disconnect is present in many texts written in the anthology and other academic texts used in the literature review.

In addition to the disconnect from and rejection of racism due to ignorance, there is the concept of "colorblind Sweden." Swedish colorblindness permeates Swedish society and is often equated with antiracism in the Swedish context (Hübinette et al., 2023). While the concept of a colorblind country primarily only applies to Sweden, per Hübinette et al., the use of these racial terms remains in use and is considered to be harmless. For example, Loftsdóttir (2014/2016) analyzed the blog pages and interviews produced during the debate around the republication of the nursery rhyme *Ten Little Negros* or *Negrastrákarnir* (The Negro-boys). His analysis found that many sources expressed that the book was not racist because Icelanders were unfamiliar with racism. The analysis also notes that people with dark skin are seen as a distinct group but does not address the historical and ongoing issues of racism and hegemony. The nursery rhyme was not seen as perpetuating harmful racial terms because that term was used in the past and Icelanders were not familiar with racism when it was first published. According to Loftsdóttir, there seems to be a need to posit racism as external to Iceland, a philosophy that can be applied to the Nordic countries. Unlike other European countries, the Nordic countries do not feel the burden of guilt around colonialism and slavery due to the perception that they were not perpetuating the slave trade.

3.5. Comparisons of Circumstance

A trend arose in Sweden between 1945 and 1972 where comparisons were made between the *neger* experience prevalent in the United States – specifically the black American experience with segregation and disparaging treatment – and the experience of white Swedish women and later white Swedish workers and laborers (Hübinette et al., 2023). This comparison was used against many groups, not just the white ones, perpetuating the use of this racial term without fully addressing its impact on the black individuals

whom *neger* describes. The trend was denoted as the “Swedish Negro issue” that overlooked the historical harm that racism and segregation caused.

The first use of the comparison between the *neger* experience with Swedish white women’s experience occurred in the article “Our Swedish Negro Issue,” written by Richard Sterner in the weekly called *Vi*. Sterner writes that whites have a superiority complex in the United States compared to Negros and relates that to Swedish men believing they have superiority over Swedish women; they turn them into worse people (Sterner, 1945, as cited in Hübinette et al., 2023). Hübinette et al. indicate that while this comparison was done before Sterner’s work, it was this article that led to the linguistic, popular, and political breakthrough of the discourse on the “Swedish Negros.” Many more instances followed of similar usage, primarily focusing on the issues faced by white Swedish women. The comparison between women and *neger* appropriated the black experience while continuing to fuel the usage of negro, which coined the term “Swedish Negress.” As mentioned previously, the use of Negress in Norway continues to be perpetuated into the 2000s.

The other group, while not the last that used this term to compare their circumstances, was the workers and laborers. A writer under the alias Phocas noted a phenomenon that certain restaurants would not admit male customers who were collarless and not dressed formally – typically being working-class men and men in the military or naval services. This was argued to be a parallel of racial persecution in other countries (Phocas, 1946, as cited in Hübinette et al., 2023). The working-class men began identifying and writing about themselves as “Swedish Negroes” (Hübinette et al., 2023). Although, they did not face any ethnic or racial discrimination as they were Swedish, they felt that the class discrimination was equivalent to how the United States treated black Americans.

4. The Denial of Race

In exploring the Afro-Nordic raciolinguistic landscape and how things have changed in the last twenty years, the government's role in the perception of race must be considered. The *Afro-Nordic Landscapes: Equality and Race in Northern Europe* indicated that in 2009 the Swedish government and the Discrimination Act excluded the term race. The Act aimed to combat discrimination and promote equal rights and opportunities to all regardless of race, sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, or sexual orientation. Additionally, the Act defines ethnicity as the national or ethnic origin, skin color, or other similar circumstances. In the Finnish Non-Discrimination Act and the Norwegian Anti-Discrimination Act, race is not mentioned, but discrimination based on ethnic or national origin and ethnicity is prohibited (McEachrane, 2014/2016). Although the government characterizes ethnicity as national or ethnic origin, this definition does not encompass what ethnicity can be or how individuals may define it.

4.1. Defining Ethnicity

The Oxford Languages Dictionary defines ethnicity as belonging to a population group or subgroup with a common cultural background or descent. However, given Sweden's diversity, many people born in Sweden do not look like the typical Swede – conceptualized as having fair skin, light eyes, and blond or light-brown hair. Based on the original definition, anyone born in Sweden to Swedish citizens who do not match the stereotypical perception should be ethnically Swedish. However, they may face discrimination based on their perceived ethnicity or other individual factors. Discrimination could manifest from being perceived as an immigrant or being subject to slurs based on the perceived immigrant status. Contrasting the dictionary definition of ethnicity with a sociolinguistic view, ethnicity is not simply about the shared cultural background or descent. Fought (2014) indicates that the construction of ethnic identity is not simply influenced by or correlated with factors like gender or class independently. Hence, ethnic identity consists of many factors beyond nation or ethnic origin. A crucial principle of the modern sociolinguistic theory is that individuals often index polyphonous identities through language use (Barrett, 1999, as cited in Fought 2014). The speaker's utterances reflect the nuances of identity in multilayered ways that cannot be broken down into smaller components (Fought, 2014). *Polyphonous* comes from polyphony, a simultaneous combination of two or more tones or melodic lines in music. In this context, polyphonous identities signify many aspects of an individual's identity, or voice, coming together. These concepts indicate that ethnicity is more complex than the nation or ethnic origin as was defined by the Anti-Discrimination Acts. Every country is diverse, with communities that shape individual identities, and language often reflects these distinct communities.

4.2. Structuring of Identity

Comparing ethnicity through both the dictionary definition and the sociolinguistic view shows that identity formation is complicated and depends on the individual. This contrasts with the definition of ethnicity by the Nordic governments and adds complexity to the concept that ethnicity is solely characterized by national or ethnic origin. McEachrane explains that referring to people as black, white, or any other feature goes beyond just skin tone. It generally encompasses an individual's appearance and ancestry, with skin tone being a factor that may or may not be decisive. In talks of anti-discrimination, using skin tone literally can be socially useless because skin tone often does not refer to where one originates. People are frequently categorized as black, white, or non-white, which does not capture the full context. We can also add polyphonous identities and language to the structure of identity. Curzan et al. (2023) explain that language connects to identity, culture, and community. Judgments about how individuals use language are linked to groups of people, particularly those connected by race, ethnicity, gender identity, social status, geographic location, and education. These judgments may contradict an individual's self-identity. By focusing solely on ethnicity, as

the Nordic governments define it, an ethnically Nordic person can still be perceived as an *innvandrер* due to their outward appearance, even if they speak a language fluently.

The term *innvandrер* and the concept of what comprises the perception of who an immigrant is plays a role in structuring identity. If identity comprises a facet of many different factors, including details such as skin color, then the term *innvandrер* may be applied to someone of a different skin color. The term has come to reference many different perceptions due to its use in popular media, which includes the idea of “dark skin.” Referring back to the conversations with members of the group Queendom, they struggle with the perception of being seen as Norwegian. They struggle with the burden of proof to show they belong in the Norwegian space. They want to eliminate the need to prove their worth by demanding recognition as equal Norwegians rather than an ethnic minority (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2014/2016). The need to prove that one belongs immediately classifies one's identity as separate rather than as part of the whole, based on skin color and not one's nation of origin. Gullestad (2004) explains that immigrants could be classified as people who, or whose parents, come from regions considered ‘non-Western.’ Nine out of ten majority Norwegians use the word immigrant to refer to people with what is perceived as “dark skin color.” Perhaps it is because, unlike America, children born in the Nordic countries do not automatically gain citizenship and are considered forever immigrants. However, even if a parent has citizenship, their child could still fall into this category of immigrant, which contributes to the challenges that members of Queendom experience. The perception of identity is distorted because nine out of ten Norwegians, per Gullestad, assume skin color automatically indicates immigrant status, which creates a gray area not addressed by the anti-discrimination laws.

4.3. Issues of Ethnicity

Since the Nordic governments no longer use race when shaping the Anti-Discrimination acts, it raises the question of ethnicity and the issues that arise from its use, especially when referring to national or ethnic origin, skin color, or other similar circumstances. During the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the UN Committee indicated that the lack of acknowledging race may lead to further discrimination. McEachrane references a 2013 report that warns people that deleting race from the Swedish Anti-Discrimination Act may complicate the processing of racial discrimination complaints, hindering the victim's access to justice. Replacing race with the term ethnicity, which includes "skin color and other similar circumstances," leaves no clear terminology when referring to people as white, black, East Asian, and more. The change prevents accurately addressing and redressing what is the most widespread form of discrimination within Sweden and the other Nordic countries, aside from gender. This shows the complexity of defining someone purely within the category of ethnicity and illustrates how identity is made up of many parts to form a whole. Discrimination can still occur when defining someone by the broad category of ethnicity, as skin color or these “other circumstances,” cannot

always reflect someone's origin when the assumption is made that a non-white skin color originates from anywhere other than a Nordic country.

Given these assumptions of ethnicity based on skin color, judgments may be made for people who do not fit into the model of what someone may consider as part of the whole, such as the typical characteristics of a Nordic individual. This creates a gap where race is considered a valid identifier, allowing non-white individuals who are ethnically Nordic to face discrimination simply from the perception of being an "other" in the country or as an immigrant. On the other hand, the individual perpetuating the discrimination may not consciously discriminate against the individual, but instead, they may have a bias in their perception of an ethnically Nordic person. Revisiting Kennedy-Macfoy's piece on Queendom, these black individuals are not perceived as Norwegian. Specifically, the director of the Norwegian Language Council believed that outsiders could not enter Norway and tell Norwegians how to speak their language. However, given the definitions of ethnicity and identity, this is problematic as the people speaking out against racial language use are ethnically Norwegian, but do not stereotypically appear that way. This is a form of discrimination where black individuals do not fit in the whole, with their perception of ethnicity skewed by the biases of skin color and the prevailing stereotype of what makes one Norwegian. If individuals are Norwegian but not recognized as such due to the color of their skin, the anti-discrimination act would struggle to support their voices in addressing the use of racialized terms.

The disconnect occurs when someone is ethnically Nordic due to their citizenship and birth in that country, but their appearance does not align with the stereotypical image of a Nordic person.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the raciolinguistic landscape for the Afro-Nordic diaspora reveals there is a lack of understanding around the harm that many of these racialized terms perpetuate. It is hard to disconnect these terms from their history of harm, especially when they align with terms commonly used in the United States' history of slavery and segregation. One cannot claim that because a term was used in the past out of ignorance and racism, it is acceptable to continue using the term now. Afro-Nordic groups seek to prevent the use of terms that align with the harm done by slavery; however, their voices are largely ignored due to assumptions of their ethnicity and origin. They are told they should not enter a country to tell others how to speak their language.

Individuals born in Nordic countries to parents with Nordic citizenship are ethnically Nordic and can have skin colors that do not align with the stereotypical view. This can cause them to fall under the category of *innvandrere*, rather than ethnically Nordic. The disparity makes it hard for the Anti-Discrimination Laws to be enforced when claims are made that the discrimination is not based on their ethnicity. Discrimination becomes

more challenging to identify when the definitions of ethnicity and discrimination are vague, though the laws attempt to consider all aspects of how someone may experience these disparities.

Upon reflection, there was an apparent lack of black voices on the topic of race in the Nordic countries, which is likely because the term race is no longer used within these countries as an identifier. A lack of black voices in this space reduces the representation and experience with the issues discussed. More voices lead to more diversity, a chance for change for the better, and more inclusivity.

Future research into the raciolinguistic landscapes will be broadened to explore how the term *innvandrere* is applied to groups of non-white ethnically Nordic people. It would be interesting to contrast this with the Sámi people and their navigation with racialized terms over the 2000s to the 2020s. Similar to people of the Nordic countries, the Sámi people have a vast history of discrimination and segregation.

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