

## **Review of BA thesis “White, Blue, Red Flow? Analyzing the Role of English in Slovak Hip Hop” by Damir Daniel Demovič**

Damir Demovič’s thesis on the role of English language in contemporary Slovak hip hop demonstrates some very good work with theory and analysis, and shows great potential as a research project, but also reveals several deficiencies with research design, methodology, and interpretations. I will elaborate separately on each of these claims.

First, the student presents excellent elaboration of most relevant theoretical points related to the thesis research topics of authenticity, globalization, indigenization, appropriation, and hybridity, and perhaps only the latter topic (in the section “Hybrid English”, pages 19-24) suffers from some vagueness in theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, student’s understanding and synthesis of a broad range of numerous relevant authors and theories is congratulatory. Second, student’s analysis of various ideologies (mainly nationalist and liberal) embedded in the lyrics of recent and current Slovak artist is also very skilful as well as quite illuminating. There is also some good work in other analytical parts, which I will mention later in combination with some points of critique.

Moving to the critical part of this evaluation, I need to first mention the problems with the research design. As the student states in their research question, the goal of the thesis is to examine “How does English [language] get utilized by Slovak rap artists in constructing their authenticity?” (28). The emphasis here is both (1) on the use of English language in lyrics (as a very general goal, probably too general) and (2) on the problem of authenticity, but the student also endeavours to achieve several other additional goals in their work: (3) they are attempting to show how Slovak rap progressed in terms of the use of English lyrics, from mainly English use in initial stages, to mostly Slovak language use in its mature stage (1990s and early 2000s), and then after 2013, with the arrival of trap variant of hip hop, they argue that Slovak rap starts moving again into the direction of increased incorporation of English language into rap lyrics (although in different ways, mixing advanced flow with bi- or multi-bilingualism); (4) apart from this general and historical preoccupation with English use in Slovak hip hop lyrics, the student also in some brief sections in the analysis part presents a more focused analysis of language use in Slovak hip hop, as related to the notion of bi- and multi-lingualism, which could potentially offer very promising results, but these sections also appear very short and underdeveloped (see more comments on this below); (5) finally, the student’s focus in the analysis part of the thesis exemplifies a great deal of interest in scrutinizing ideology of various artists and their albums and lyrics, which appears to be major if not primary preoccupation of the whole analysis part (this analytical points are mainly exemplary, as already stated above, even though they are not included into the main research question). The problem with the research design is therefore in my opinion its dispersed and unfocused nature, which offers five potentially interesting directions, instead of one focused one, maybe two, if they would be well integrated. This presents a practical impossibility in the analysis part, where it is not possible to properly address every each of these goals, and the result is that most of these otherwise interesting issues are approached not only too briefly and superficially (except for maybe the ideology focus), but also in a way that is methodologically unsound (also excepting the ideology focus). And this last problem with methodology is also my next point of critique.

In the methodology section itself, the student proposes some valid methodological solutions (e.g., focusing on mainstream artists, with most views on YouTube, which could be treated as most “impactful” in terms of language/music style, 31), but there is a lack of transparency in relation to how further selection of nationalist vs liberal vs Roma artists was conducted (did each of these also have more than 1 mio views? Or was the selection of these following some other logic?). Further, in relation to the goal two (historical changes in

relation to English language use in Slovak hip hop lyrics), as this is more of a quantitative matter, the student would need to do some statistical analysis of how much English is used in each of the songs and albums discussed in the thesis, and for each of the three periods mentioned above. Only in this way would it be possible to claim that current rappers use more English language in their lyrics than old ones. Instead, the student in some cases mentioned only one song as having some mixing of English language with Slovak (e.g., Vec, Majk Spirit, Separ), and for other rappers, the student makes some very vague claims regarding the amount of English used in their lyrics (English used “throughout” the album for Moja Reč, 56; “broader scale” of English use for Samey, 60; “more evenly interspersed” for Dokkeytino, 62; “English-Slovak mixing” on one album, and then “intensification” of English on another, for Gleb, 62, 63). Next, as related, this is also a problem of sampling (not as in hip hop sampling ☺), i.e., to establish such a general claim (of growing English use), the sample of studied artists would need to be large enough to represent the majority of current Slovak rappers. However, Damir discusses only 10 new rappers (if I counted correctly?), out of which 2 represent liberal position, 2 nationalist one, 2 are Roma, 2 multilingual (one multi-ethnic), and 2 additional new rappers who represent “normalization” of English. I would be curious to learn how representative is this sample, in comparison to other rap artists active in Slovakia today (this was not mentioned in the thesis).

However, this lack of quantitative analysis is not the biggest problem of the work. We can still believe that Slovak rap artists use more English today, but it would be more relevant to learn about the nuances behind a variety of different uses of English mixed with Slovak (and other languages), including about bi- or multi-linguistic mixing and code-switching in lyrics (as related to goal no. 4). There is very little of such socio-linguistic and close analysis of lyrics in the work. I counted only four examples of more close reading of code-switching in Slovak rap lyrics (Ego on page 42, Separ on 54, Moja Reč on 56, and Dokkeytino on page 61), albeit in each case, only one line from one song per artist is discussed. This is a very promising avenue of research for this thesis, but also very underexplored (as already mentioned above, in relation to goal 4). Part of the problem is also too broad sample of artists and works in this regard (in fact, too small for quantitative analysis, and too broad for qualitative). The thesis would thus benefit from a narrower focus and more close reading of albums and songs by only a couple of artists (if the focus of the work would lean toward goal no. 4).

Finally, I also need to mention some problems with interpretations in the thesis (which also relates to the goal no. 2, i.e., issues of authenticity, which I haven't discussed yet). The student establishes a very useful theoretical approach for the study of authenticity in the theory section, but then they miss the opportunity to properly follow up with more rigorous analysis of authenticity in the analysis part (also due to too many goals and issues that are competing for attention there). For example, on page 50-51, Damir talks about what “seems inauthentic to rappers [...] in *their* understanding” (see Quote 1 in Appendix), without actually considering what *their* perspectives are on the notion of authenticity in their songs. This shows a general lack of engagement with emic perspectives in the work, which could help with the analysis and interpretation of authenticity issues in the thesis. Furthermore, the student mainly focuses on the notions of local and translocal (linguistic) elements as signifiers of authenticity, on the expense of other aspects of authenticity (for example, DIY values, street values, and hard masculinity). In one quote on page 51 (see Quote 2 in Appendix), the student argues there are no street values present in the works of the more “liberal” current Slovak rap artists, but I find this observation questionable, especially in the face of general lack of engagement with ethnographic and performance analysis (as well as with emic perspectives) which would probably show more levels of authenticity in the works of these artists, including street authenticity (but also in the lyrics of some of these artists there are

examples of possible street values, for example, use of marijuana, or use of slang, that would potentially also count as examples of street values for these artists; however, this is also a problem of lack of definition in the thesis of what counts as a street value, especially in emic terms).

In sum, while this thesis, on the one hand, shows some great potential in terms of research goals, and provides some excellent theoretical analysis, and some very good analysis of ideology in lyrics, on the other, it lacks more focus in the analysis part, in addition to other problems mentioned above (mainly in relation to methodology and interpretation). Therefore, I recommend grade 2 for the work.

David Verbuč (opponent)

### **Appendix. Two examples of problematic interpretations (quotes).**

Quote 1: “All these rappers attempt to construct (or reconstruct) a Slovak identity, the shape of which is determined by the rappers’ individual ideological and political predispositions. Using English would, therefore, *seem inauthentic to these rappers*, as English *in their understanding* is not a ‘native’ of Slovakia, even though they cannot seem to be able to shy away from indexicals such as ‘yo’” (50, 51; emphases added).

Quote 2: “Furthermore, while all the liberal rappers profess translocal solidarity—and root their love for rap in, if not understanding, then at least sympathy for the marginalization of people of color—their *individual authenticity forgoes adherence to many staples* (e.g., street values, raw expression) *in order to remain staunchly socio-spatially localized* (in terms of topics and language)” (51; emphases added).