

4 Jonas Hassen Khemiri, *Ett öga rött*

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Two years after Leiva Wenger's debut, Jonas Hassen Khemiri published *Ett öga rött*, known as the first novel, written entirely in MS. Renowned for his peculiar and criticised stylistic and expressive choices, Khemiri was interviewed by Gert Svensson for the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in 2004, where he explained his linguistic choices as follows:

Det gäller att våga vidga och förändra språket så att det står i samklang med den berättelse man vill skriva, det har jag lärt mig av Chamoiseau. Jag hade inte kunnat skriva historien om Halim utan att använda Halims språk. Men många har blivit provocerade, och det är intressant. Den svenska identiteten är på väg att förändras, och det gör somliga upprörd. (Khemiri in *Dagens Nyheter* 2004)

You have to dare to expand and change the language so that it matches the story you want to write, that's what I learnt from Chamoiseau. I could not have written Halim's story without using



Halim's language. But many people have been provoked, and that's interesting. The Swedish identity is changing, and that upsets some people.

Khemiri asserts that language must align with the themes one intends to explore: a novel about shifting identity, set against a difficult relationship with Swedishness, requires a language that embraces change and challenges established norms. His reference to the French-speaking writer Patrick Chamoiseau is not coincidental: just as Chamoiseau employs Creole, Khemiri draws on the pidgin-like speech styles of the suburbs (Kotsinas 1994; 2005). However, rather than aiming for a faithful representation of an existing variety, he uses linguistic hybridity to shape Halim's unique idiolect, termed by Khemiri himself *halimska* (halimic) (Khemiri in Dagens Nyheter 2004; cf. Große 2007, 25). While MS in literature typically reflect real sociolects, in *Ett öga rött*, the idiolectic element takes on a distinctive role, where the deliberate artificiality of language enhances the work's sense of authenticity.

In the cultural divulgation series broadcast in 2021 on State television SVT entitled *Mästaren* (The Master), Khemiri presented an episode about literary creativity: this episode features archive interviews in which the author, after writing *Ett öga rött*, claimed:

Jag är inte invandrarförfattare. Jag är född här och uppvuxen i Hornstull. Jag har svårt för tvättäkta Rinkebysvenska, för Halim är inte tvättäkta. Han är faktiskt född i Sverige och han med flit bryter ner sitt eget språk [...]. Han har koll på grammatiska regler, men han väljer själv att göra fel, för att han inte känner sig hemma i det svenska språket. (Khemiri in SVT 2021)

I am not an immigrant writer. I was born here and grew up in Hornstull. I struggle with authentic Rinkeby Swedish, because Halim is not authentic. He was actually born in Sweden and he deliberately breaks down his own language [...]. He knows the grammar rules, but he chooses to make mistakes because he doesn't feel at home in the Swedish language.

In Bourdieuan terms, Halim's language retains a certain symbolic and cultural capital (Große 2007, 29, 34), as it is supposed to work as a means of protest against the hegemonic assimilation planned by Sweden's supposed *Integrationsplan* (Integration plan), an alleged political plot to assimilate immigrants through a massive process,

defined by Halim as *svennefiering* (Swedenification).¹ However, this linguistic identification stands in contrast to the symbolic and cultural capital of the more desirable ‘standard norm’, the language of those Halim dismissively calls *svennar* (Swedes). Through *halimska*, he both subverts and at times deliberately mimics social models, challenging normative representations of Swedishness in which he does not see himself reflected (Große 2007, 34-6; Ciaravolo 2020, 218).² For such subversion to occur, his idiolect must be recognised as legitimate (Große 2007). Therefore, Halim conceptualises the diary as a repository of his being “äktast möjliga” (as authentic as possible), telling his everyday life “rakt på pucken” (straight to the point). Not surprisingly, he is inspired by the Egyptian realist writer Naguib Mahfouz, who “skulle aldrig skriva historier om annan än sig och sin liv” (2003, 13).³

In his diary, there are typical MS traits, morphological and syntactic deviations as well as foreign words that recall the phenomena previously analysed in Leiva Wenger. The works of Leiva Wenger and Khemiri, as explained by Massimo Ciaravolo, allowed MS to move “da una posizione di marginalità a una funzione iconica, fornendo stimoli agli studi sociolinguistici oltre che a quelli letterari” (2020, 218).⁴ However, Halim’s language is not authentic, because Halim himself amplifies his own expressive modes. In fact, as Roger Källström (2005) notes, it appears that neither a young student of Swedish as L2 nor a speaker of MS actually speaks or writes like Halim.

4.1 Jonas Hassen Khemiri: A Short Profile

Born in 1978 in Stockholm to a Tunisian father and a Swedish mother, Khemiri is one of the most renowned prose and theatre authors of Swedish contemporary literature. Although he was born in Sweden and grown up in Hornstull, central Stockholm, Khemiri is often associated with the well-known category of *förortsförfattare* (§ 2.6.1), probably due to his ethnicity, his portrayal of characters with non-European (mostly North-African) origins, and his use of MS repertoires (Trotzig 2005; Gokieli 2017). Khemiri often resorts to such styles as both a creative and provocative means to convey political

1 Defined as the assumption of habits relatable to the ‘average Swede’, or adaptation by immigrants to typically Swedish habits (cf. Agazzi 2015, 242).

2 Although with different features, this language takes on greater significance in Khemiri’s second novel *Montecore*, where Kadir and Abbas Khemiri speak a French-like, international Swedish called *Khemiriska* (Khemiric), an idiolect in which all languages mix to the point that no stranger can understand it.

3 “Would never write stories about anyone but himself and his life”.

4 “From a position of marginality to an iconic function, stimulating both sociolinguistic and literary studies”.

messages (Große 2007; Bassini 2009): code-switching, loanwords, compounds, improper morphological declensions and marked syntax challenge the so-called monolingual paradigm.⁵ Published in 2003 for Norstedts, *Ett öga rött* is his debut novel, which represents the outset of MS use as a literary language in a well-structured way, of which Khemiri has made a founding principle in his subsequent works, above all the novels *Montecore. En unik tiger* (Montecore: The Silence of the Tiger) from 2006 and *Jag ringer mina bröder* (I Call My Brothers) from 2012. However, Khemiri abandoned much of his linguistic experimentalism after publishing *Montecore*, as his later works are characterised by a linguistic standardisation rather than subversion. Khemiri has published further novels, such as *Allt jag inte minns* (Everything I don't remember) (2015), which was awarded the prestigious *Augustpriset*, *Pappaklausulen* (The Family Clause) (2018) and *Systrarna* (The Sisters) (2023). In theatre, Khemiri staged the plays *Invasion!* (Invasion!), *Fem gånger Gud* (God Times Five) (both in 2008), *Vi som är hundra* (The Hundred We Are) (2009), *Apatiska för nybörjare* (Apathy for Beginners) (2011) and *≈ [ungefär lika med]* (≈ [Almost Equal To]) (2014). In addition to novels and dramas, Khemiri also wrote a short story for Novellix in 2015, titled *Så som du hade berättat det för mig (ungefär) om vi hade lärt känna varandra innan du dog* (Just as You Would Have Told It To Me (Almost) If We Had Met Before You Died). Renowned for experimental narrative techniques such as autofiction and a multifocal, fragmented storytelling (Ciaravolo 2019, 895), Khemiri frames the postmigrant condition as a dimension able to portray Swedish society as an arena imbued with issues such as integration, intergenerational relations and structural discrimination (Ciaravolo 2020, 220). Although the labels of *invandrar* – and *förortsförfattare* are contested, Khemiri has legitimised this ascribed position in the cultural and political debate thanks to his literary production, linguistic expressiveness and his political engagement. In fact, the author is also known for his open letter *Bästa Beatrice Ask* (Dear Beatrice Ask), published on the 13th of March 2013 in *Dagens Nyheter*, and addressed to the then Minister of Justice Beatrice Ask, who supported the application of the REVA project (*Rättssäkert och Effektivt Verktällighetsarbete*, Legal Certainty and Effective Enforcement). In force from 2009 to 2014, the REVA project aimed at speeding up the expulsion of illegal residents on Swedish soil through unorthodox, if not discriminatory and skin-colour biased, police controls, which affected a large number

⁵ It is no coincidence that, in her essay *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, Yasemin Yıldız mentions *Ett öga rött*, explicitly defining Khemiri as a post-migrant writer (2012, 180).

of non-White Swedish citizens (Gokieli 2017).⁶ In his letter, Khemiri asked Ask to trade skins for a day to make her understand what it is like to live as a non-white citizen in Sweden. Appealing to Swedish society with “denna helhet, denna samhällskropp, detta vi” (Khemiri 2013a; ‘this totality, this social body, this we’), Khemiri exploited transraciality to dismantle the conformity between Swedishness and whiteness, as well as the deformity between Swedishness and non-whiteness (Gokieli 2017; Hübinette 2019, 281).

4.2 *Ett öga rött*

The novel is written in the form of a diary, narrated in the first person by Halim El Boustani, a teenager of Moroccan origin born in Sweden. It was awarded the *Borås Tidnings Debutantpris* in 2004 as best literary debut and had both a theatre (2004) and film adaptation (2007). *Ett öga rött* is divided into four chapters, during which we follow Halim from the end of his summer holiday to Christmas 2000. The time setting is deduced from Halim’s commentary on a live television broadcast about the outbreak of the second intifada, which occurred on the 28th of September 2000: “På fyrans nyheter i kväll dom berättade om nya effekter av Sharons promenad vid Klippmoskén [...] Det är nya intifadan” (2003, 41).⁷ After the traumatic loss of his mother, Leyla, Halim moves with his father, Otman, from Skärholmen to Södermalm. In his new neighbourhood and in a new school, he finds himself in conflict with his classmates and teachers, in particular with the support teacher Alex.

In his sporadic trips back to Skärholmen, Halim becomes acquainted with Dalanda, an elderly woman of Libyan origin who introduces him to Arab history through a blend of myth and fundamentalist ideology. She gives him a diary in which to record his thoughts, which in a “game of metafiction” (Ciaravolo 2020, 222) becomes the content of the novel itself.⁸ It is probably the intimacy of the contents narrated in first person, as well as the linguistic

⁶ On 27 February 2013, the REVA project was also submitted to a European parliamentary question for ethnic profiling in the Stockholm underground (Europaparlamentet 2013).

⁷ “On TV4 news tonight they talked about new effects of Sharon’s walk at the Dome of the Rock [...] It’s the new Intifada”. ‘Fyrans nyheter’ is translated ‘TV4 news’ because it commonly refers to the Swedish TV channel TV4.

⁸ The diary cover is described as richly decorated in gold with a crescent moon and a star on a red background (2003, 11-12), which are the typical symbols of the Islamic religion. The description strongly recalls the cover of the edition published for Norstedts in 2003, thus reinforcing the idea of a metafictional play.

unicity featuring the whole narrative, to intensify the ambiance of authenticity enveloping Halim's diary.

On the one hand, Dalanda's influence prompts Halim to construct a mythical and fabled image of the Arab world but, on the other hand, her influence affects him insofar as she makes him believe in the threats posed by the *Integrationsplan*. When budget cuts force his school to discontinue Arabic lessons under the State's *hemspråksundervisning* (Home Language Instruction) program, Halim gathers evidence of the plan's existence and starts to trust Dalanda, especially after his father's sarcastic reaction:

“Hallå, hör du inte? Arabiskatimmarna är slut. De säger att det saknas pengar”. [...] “Jo... min son... Vad pratar man för språk i... säg... Grekland? Va? Gissa? ”Sluta”. ”Hörde jag grekiska?” Tio poäng. Och... hm... i... Frankrike? Nå? Där gick tiden ut... va? Ja! Tjugo poäng. Franska! Och i Sverige pratar man... nu har du chansen... 10000 kronor om du klarar...”. (2003, 25-6)

“Hello, can't you hear? The Arabic lessons are over. They say there's no money”. [...] “Well... my son... What language is spoken in... say... Greece? What? Guess?” “Stop”. “Did I hear Greek? Ten points. And... um... in... France? Well? Time ran out there... huh? Yep! Twenty points. French! And in Sweden you speak... now you have the chance... 10,000 kronor if you get it right...”.

Distorted by Dalanda's alarming suspicions, Halim feels betrayed and sees his Arab identity threatened by Swedish authorities. Moreover, the fact that he is not valued by his father Otman, who meets him with derisive indifference, intensifies Halim's pain caused by the recent loss of his mother. Thus, Halim embarks on a journey of self-discovery where Dalanda serves as a maternal surrogate (Nilsson 2010, 92) and refuge from grief, establishing a relationship from which a comforting fascination with a cultural background deemed superior emerges:

Dalanda kan allt om arabernas historia och det är hon som har berättat det är vi som har bäst filosofer och smartast matematiker och grymmast krigare. Också hon har sagt vi araber är inte som andra blattar utan mera civiliserade. (2003, 11).

Dalanda knows everything about the Arabs' history, and she has explained that we have the best philosophers, the smartest mathematicians and the fiercest warriors. She also said that we Arabs are not like other dark-skinned immigrants, but more civilised.

Throughout the story, the diary bears witness to how the mythologisation of Arab belonging leads Halim to assume polarised ideological positions, placing him in constant conflict with his father. For Halim, society is fundamentally divided into two factions: *svennar* (Swedes) and *blattar* (immigrants). The primary distinction between these groups is racial, as Halim defines a *blatte* as a non-white individual (cf. Hübinette 2019, 118). Identifying himself as a *blatte*, he further distinguishes between two subcategories: *knasare* (hooligan) and *duktighetskille* (diligent boy). However, Halim positions himself beyond these binaries – both between Swedes and immigrants and between hooligans and diligent immigrants – by creating a third, self-assigned category: the *tankesultan* (sultan of thought):

Men idag jag har filosoferat fram det finns också en tredje blattesort som står helt fri och är den som svennarna hatar mest: revolutionsblatten, tankesultanen. Den som ser igenom alla lögner och som aldrig låter sig luras. (2003, 38)

But today I have been philosophising about a third type of immigrant, who is completely free and is the one the Swedes hate the most: The Revolution Immigrant, the Sultan of Thought. The one who sees through all the lies and who never gets fooled.

Following the Manichean schemes based on the principle “One language = One identity”, as Ciaravolo also notes, in his role of Sultan of Thought, Halim “rifiuta sia di assimilarsi in modo acritico e servile agli svedesi (*svennar*), sia di attuare una sterile protesta da teppista (*ligist*)” (2020, 225).⁹ Throughout the first part of the novel, Halim attempts to produce a personal identity with a completed meaning, especially through the linguistic style constructed in his diary, which differs from MS: being neither a *svenne* nor a *blatte*, but a sort of superior being, Halim needs a language that is appropriate to his revolutionary identity. In the second part of the novel, Halim embarks on a deconstruction of the values taught by Dalanda that will lead him – at least in part – to redefine his own position in Swedish society (Lacatus 2008). The conclusion of the novel suggests that his quest will result in a conciliatory affiliation with himself, his father and Alex (Gendolavigna 2021b). From this point of view, *Ett öga rött* can be seen as a coming-of-age novel which signals Halim’s transition from a Manichean and ethnocentric view, where he shares an exoticising view of Arab civilisation, to a more open negotiation of his own identity and its complexity, coming to terms with himself

9 “Refuses both to assimilate uncritically and submissively to Swedes (*svennar*) and to engage in a pointless hooligan protest (*ligist*)”.

not only as an heir to Arab culture, but also as Swede who accepts the existence of multiple versions of Swedishness (Nilsson 2010).

4.3 Halim's Repertoire: *Halimska*

Halim's repertoire has been investigated by several scholars, such as Corina Lacatus, who considers Khemiri's *halimska* as the literary attempt to construct a language that overcomes what initially appeared to be irreconcilable dichotomies as a tool in his personal coming-of-age process (2008, 98). When Otman finds out how Halim expresses himself in the diary, he notes that his style has changed compared to the past: "För några år sen pratade du helt perfekt och nu? Ey gussen baxa baxa. Vad håller du på med?" (2003, 215).¹⁰ Halim's excessive use of MS reflects his transitional phase, emphasizing that his language is deliberately constructed. This becomes evident as he adapts his speech to specific characters and contexts throughout the novel, adjusting his style to align with what is perceived as standard in different situations. This shift occurs when he quotes other characters or navigates formal settings where a more refined Swedish feels appropriate. For instance, he adopts an apparently standardized form of Swedish in an episode where he raises money under the pretence of funding a school trip when, in reality, he intends to buy a gun:

Eftersom jag vet hur dom tänker jag använde töntigaste svenneton: "lite tilltugg för att stödja 9B:s klassresa? Tio kronor för en kaka." [...] "Oj, ja absolut. Jag är ny i skolan och ville liksom bara bidra med lite extra till klasskassan. Men i så fall ber jag om ursäkt." För att komma loss jag lånade Alex mesigaste tonfall. (165-6)

Since I know how they think, I used the lamest Swedish accent: "Some snacks to support 9B's class trip? Ten crowns for a cake". [...] "Oh, yes, absolutely. I'm new at school and just wanted to contribute a little extra to the class fund. But in that case, I apologise". To get out of it, I borrowed Alex's cheesiest tone.

In this excerpt, we see how Halim resorts to what he calls "töntigaste svenneton" (the lamest Swedish accent), avoiding the reproduction of broken accent, and showcasing his ability to adjust his language in order to accommodate other characters. It can be argued that Halim wants to pass as a respectable and polite person. However, his

¹⁰ "A few years ago you spoke perfectly and now? Hey chick, fuck fuck. What are you doing?"

parodic mimicry of Swedish could be read as a rhetorical weapon of social critique towards the dominant ideologies according to which, in order to pass as a respectable member of Swedish society, a young guy with migration background must speak perfect Swedish.¹¹

Another instance where Halim resorts to a more refined register is when he addresses the cafeteria council (*matrådet*). He does not report in direct speech what he says, but provides a description of it:

Först jag använde vanliga snacket och sen för att ingen skulle misstolka jag puttade in lite svenneton. Jag föreslog man skulle ha matvecka där det inte bara gavs svennemat utan istället mat från andra länder. (2003, 229)

First I used the common speech and then, so that no one would misinterpret, I put in a bit of Swedish accent. I suggested that we should have a food week where not only Swedish food was given but also food from other countries.

Halim uses the so-called *vanliga snacket* (common speech) adding some *svenneton* (Swedish accent) as part of his communicative repertoire (Rymes 2014). As we can see, depending on the contexts, Halim is able to consciously activate (and perform) specific linguistic and behavioural patterns, which are easily associated with Swedishness. The linguistic contaminations displayed in his *Halimska* are thus complemented by constant metalinguistic reflections. Consider, for example, the excerpt in which Halim guesses several of Alex's answers to a class test and fantasises about making fun of him by alternating two distinct versions of himself: first imagining himself giving him an answer in polite tones, and then one in far more aggressive tones resorting to MS:

Länge under lektionen jag satt och filade på grym förolämpning. Med svenneton: "Oj, jag visste att du inte kunde något om din historia men att du inte heller kunde något om din nutid var en överraskning." Eller kanske blatteversionen: "Du ser, len, jag knäcker gulingar som spelar hiphopparnegrer. Kåkar er som kex". (2003, 111)

During the lesson I sat and thought about a cruel insult. With a Swedish tone: "Wow, I knew you didn't know anything about your history but that you didn't know anything about your present was

11 For similar evidence in more recent (post)migration-related literature, see the novel *Inte din baby* (Not your baby) written by Seluah Alsaati in 2020, on which Rydell and Ganuza (2024, 14) carried out a study on this aspect.

a surprise". Or perhaps the blatte version: "You see, len, I smash gooks who play hip-hop negroes. I chew you up like cookies".

In this sense, Halim's mimicry is not unconscious, as his goal is not to assert his belonging to Swedish society, but rather to reach his own purposes: in the first quotation, Halim fakes this accent to convince people funding the school trip; in the second one, he performs the reliable and polite guy to have his proposal for a multi-ethnic food week accepted; in the third one he displays his ability to perfectly master two slightly different registers. Depending on the situation, Halim is skilled at modulating his register, proving that MS (or his self-developed variant) is not the only language available to him. His usage of different styles is in itself a linguistically and culturally conscious performance that cannot be labelled as a result of ethno-cultural otherness (cf. Jonsson, Franzén, Milani 2020), but rather a process of writing back to the very social construction that, what is generally known as 'standard' Swedish, is an abstract model used by speakers to assess their own and others' language.

This is also demonstrated in another episode, in which Halim comments on his own style when writing a recommendation letter for his father's friend Nourdine, composed "på finaste svenskan så ingen skulle misstänka jag kände Nourdine mer personligt" (2003, 235-6).¹² Curiously, in this episode Halim believes that writing in a rather elegant form of Swedish can reduce the suspicion that he already knows Nourdine. Furthermore, he signs himself as Håkan Kjellman, a made-up and perfectly Swedish-sounding name to give his letter an authoritative and reliable touch. In fact, he notes: "det är konstigt hur annorlunda allt blir bara med lite namnbyte" (235-6),¹³ pointing out that switching to elegant Swedish, and choosing a Swedish name instead of an Arabic one, lends it greater symbolic capital, just as blue eyes and blond hair do in Leiva Wenger's *Elixir*. In doing so, Halim's transit, at least on paper, towards a standardised language, signing himself with a Swedish name, highlights the banality of linguistic and name-giving prestige as powerful tools in the construction of Swedish identity. Furthermore, there are several episodes in which Halim writes in correct Swedish, such as when he reports dialogues in Arabic with Dalanda, providing a sort of translation of service through processes of translational mimesis: "Jo, visst har han berättat, det var bara för länge sen" (2003, 31);¹⁴ "Förut läste han

¹² "In the most elegant Swedish so no one would suspect I knew Nourdine more personally".

¹³ "It is strange how everything changes with just a small name change".

¹⁴ "Yes, he did tell me, it was just a long time ago".

en massa andra böcker. Men nu läser han nästan bara Omar” (31).¹⁵ Both in the transition from *Halimska* to Standard and in the mimesis of Arabic into Swedish, a switching in repertoire is demonstrated that highlights how Halim navigates multiple linguistic landscapes (Behschnitt, Willems 2012, 13).

4.4 Morpho-Syntactic Features in *Ett öga rött*

Drawing on studies about syntax in MS carried out by Natalia Ganuza (2008; 2011), it appears that missing verb-subject inversion is one of the most stereotypical phenomena, both in oral and written production (2008, 96). As Roger Källström (2010) also demonstrates, the lack of verb-subject inversion in writing pertains more to literary multilingualism, particularly in Leiva Wenger and Khemiri’s texts, where syntactic markedness is accentuated in comparison to other authors who use MS in their fiction. The fact that Khemiri writes a novel with systematically marked syntax may have contributed to the judgement that it is a novel entirely written in MS and, therefore, a clear sign of linguistic incompetence (Ganuza 2008, 142). There are countless examples in the novel, including the title, *Ett öga rött*, which literally means ‘One Eye Red’. Moreover, just as in Leiva Wenger’s *Borta i tankar* and *Elixir*, the very first sentence of the incipit contains a V3 structure (verb-at-the-third-place): “Idag det var sista sommarlovsdagen och därför jag hjälpte pappa i affären” (2003, 3), whereby “Idag det var” should have been constructed as “Idag var det”.¹⁶

Halim’s language is also characterised by omissions in the construction of final sentences: “jag behövde åka till stan för köpa böcker” (2003, 3);¹⁷ “för få pappa ute på gatan” (2003, 203),¹⁸ where the preposition *för* is used instead of *för att*. Propositions are omitted also in cases such as “lida sitt slut” instead of “lida mot sitt slut” (coming towards the end) and “han var god humör” instead of “han var på god humör” (he was in a good mood) (2003, 223), where the prepositions *mot* and *på* are missing respectively. Concerning prepositions, deviances also occur through systematic distortions of collocations, resulting in malapropisms such as “eld i lågor” (fire in flames) instead of “eld och lågor” (fire and flames), or “rakt på pucken” (honestly),

¹⁵ “He used to read a lot of other books. But now he almost only reads Omar”.

¹⁶ “Today was the last day of the summer holidays and therefore I helped dad in the shop”.

¹⁷ “I had to go to the city centre to buy books”. Literally transposed into English, the sentence reads “I had to go to city centre for buy books”.

¹⁸ “to get dad out on the street”.

resulting as a mixed up form of “rakt på sak” (straightforward) and “raka pucker” (plainly, unadorned) (2003, 30, 13).¹⁹

In *Ett öga rött* we also see a peculiar declension of verbs, as in the case of *riva* (to tear), declined in the weak participle (*rivda*) instead of the strong declension *rivna* (2003, 151). In other cases, Halim mistakes adverbs of negation, as in “Jag tänker ingenting på Marit” (lit. I think nothing of Marit) (2003, 163), using *ingenting* (nothing) instead of *inte* (not/don’t).

4.5 Lexical Peculiarities in *Ett öga rött*

Contrary to the claims that his vocabulary is poor, Khemiri himself stated: “Halim är inte okunnig. Han konstruerar sig själv med hjälp av sin halimska, han expanderar svenskan, krokas till den och klamrar sig fast vid skevheterna för att försöka hitta sin identitet” (Khemiri in Dagens Nyheter 2004).²⁰ Through his *halimska*, Khemiri distances himself from MS, with which he only minimally converges, as the former is an idiolect constructed in a literary text, while the latter is a set of languages recorded in everyday life (Große 2007, 25). The effect of *halimska* works as a caricature of the salient features of MS in which the lexical boundaries of Swedish are expanded and deterritorialised.²¹ Quoting Anne Grydehøj:

Halim’s conscious choice to break the grammatical rules of Swedish [...] forms part of his rebellion against the pressure placed upon him to become Swedish and forget his Arab roots. Halim’s creative use of broken syntax and invented vocabulary is an example of a subversive productivity arising from imposed cultural constraints. (2020, 150)

In the novel, there are numerous instances in which elements from Swedish slang and foreign languages appear, with a strong presence of loanwords, resemantisations and neologisms. The vocabulary of the novel is analysed below in three sub-sections: typical MS elements, non-typical elements and new-words.

19 These linguistic behaviours coincide with findings from a study by Julia Prentice and Emma Sköldberg (2010), in which young speakers of Swedish as an L2 often recombine conventionally used figurative expressions.

20 “Halim is not ignorant. He constructs himself using his Halimish, he expands Swedish, hooks it and clings to the obliquities trying to find his identity”.

21 This concept of deterritorialisation is perhaps most visible in Khemiri’s second novel, *Montecore*. As Ciaravolo notes, in *Montecore*, the figure of Kadir frenchifies Swedish with a “linguistic destabilisation and carnivalisation” (2021, 211) that makes the Swedish used in the text hybridised.

4.5.1 Typical MS Elements in *Ett öga rött*

Typical MS words and expressions are frequent in the novel.²² These items are shown in Table 3, divided by parts of speech:

Table 3 Typical MS Elements in *Ett öga rött*

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives / Adverbs	Interjections
<i>aina</i> (7) (b, c, d); ¹	<i>axa</i> (11) (b, c, d); ¹⁰	<i>fet</i> + noun (4) (b, c, d); ²¹	<i>ey</i> (3) (b, c, d); ³¹
<i>bangare</i> (p. 116) (b, c, d); ²	<i>baxa</i> (4) (a, b, c, d); ¹¹	<i>fett</i> + adj. (45) (b, c, d); ²²	<i>inshallah</i> (2) (b, c); ³²
<i>flous</i> (14) (b, c, d); ³	<i>baza</i> (6) (b, c, d); ¹²	<i>keff</i> (12) (a, b, c, d); ²³	<i>jalla</i> (3) (b, c, d); ³³
<i>guss</i> (64) (a, b, c, d); ⁴	<i>beckna</i> (b, c, d); ¹³	<i>lack</i> (3) (b, c, d); ²⁴	<i>sho</i> (p. 177) (b, c, d); ³⁴
<i>jidder</i> (9) (a, b, c); ⁵ <i>knas</i> (19) (a, b, c, d); ⁶	<i>gitta(-ish)</i> (20) (b, c, d); ¹⁴	<i>maricon</i> (2) (b, c, d); ²⁵	<i>walla</i> (2) (b, c, d); ³⁵
<i>knasare</i> (2) (b, c, d); ⁷	<i>jiddra</i> (11) (a, b, c, d); ¹⁵	<i>maxad</i> + adj./noun (13) (b, c); ²⁶ <i>skum</i> (19) (a, b, d); ²⁷	
<i>len</i> (4) (b, c, d); ⁸	<i>kapish</i> (p. 202) (b); ¹⁶	<i>tjock</i> + adj./noun (19) (b, c, d); ²⁸ <i>total</i> + adj./noun (22) (b); ²⁹ <i>värsta</i> + adj./adv./noun (36) (b, c, d); ³⁰	
<i>shunne</i> (20) (b, c, d); ⁹	<i>lacka ur</i> (7) (a, b, c); ¹⁷		
	<i>planka</i> (5) (a, b); ¹⁸		
	<i>spela bonanza</i> (2) (b, c, d); ¹⁹		
	<i>spela mangas</i> (b, c, d); ²⁰		

¹ Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.

² Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.

³ Variant of *floos* (cf. Leiva Wenger 2015). Occurring in three compounds.

⁴ Variant of *guz* (cf. Leiva Wenger 2015). Occurring in eight compounds. Cf. Bakhtiari 2012.

⁵ Noun from Romani, from the Sanskrit root *jīv* (to live) (Carling, Lindell, Ambrazaitis 2013, 177). Attested in Swedish since 1970s (cf. <https://svenska.se/so/?sok=jidder&pz=1>). Attested in Kotsinas as ‘quarrel’ (1998, 93). Attested also as agent noun *jiddrare* (quarreller) (Doggelito, Kotsinas 2004, 95).

⁶ Troublesome situation. Attested in three compounds; cf. Leiva Wenger 2015.

⁷ Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015.

⁸ Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015.

⁹ Occurring in one case in the compound *knarkarshunnar* (drug dealers, literally drug guys) (2003, 84).

¹⁰ Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Bakhtiari 2012.

¹¹ Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.

¹² Occurring also in the compound *bazmusik* (lit. sex music) (2003, 170). Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.

¹³ Occurring twice in the compound *nybecknade* (recently sold). Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.

¹⁴ Occurring in one case as *gittish* (2003, 98). Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.

¹⁵ Verbal form from the aforementioned *jidder* (see footnote 205). Attested as ‘to talk shit’. Attested by SAOB since 1994; in Carling, Lindell, Ambrazaitis as *jiddra*, *jìdra*, *jida*, *jidda* as ‘to live’ and ‘make noise’, from the same aforementioned Sanskrit root *jīv* (2013, 177). In MS, the verb undergoes semantic shift, taking on the meaning of ‘to quarrel’. (Kotsinas 1998, 93; Doggelito, Kotsinas 2004, 95). Cf. Sattarvandi 2008.

¹⁶ From Italian *capire* (to understand); in Doggelito, Kotsinas attested as *capish* (2004, 53).

²² Measuring the frequency of typical MS elements in relation to the total number of words used in the novel would be very interesting. However, this kind of research is beyond the scope of the present work.

- 17 Attested by SAOB since the seventeenth century as ‘to seal’, ‘to stick’, but also ‘to blame’, (cf. https://svenska.se/saob/?id=L_0001-0050.zvVI&pz=5). When used with the preposition *ur* (out) its meaning becomes ‘to fly into rage’ (Kotsinas 1998, 117; Doggelito, Kotsinas 2004, 102; <http://www.slangopedia.se/ordlista/?ord=lacka+ur>).
- 18 Occurs in one case as *plankish* (2003, 30). Attested by SAOB since 1885 meaning ‘entering an event by evading controls’. Today it is used almost only for ‘jumping the turnstyles’ (cf. Kotsinas 1998, 53; Doggelito, Kotsinas 2004, 53). *Planka* should not be confused with the homograph noun, meaning ‘plank’.
- 19 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015.
- 20 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.
- 21 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015.
- 22 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.
- 23 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.
- 24 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Bakhtiari 2012.
- 25 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015.
- 26 It requires an adjective in seven cases, a noun in six; attested as ‘strong’, ‘big’, ‘fast’, ‘good’ in Kotsinas 1998, 129. Cf. <http://www.slangopedia.se/ordlista/?ord=maxat>.
- 27 Occurring in one case as *skummish* (2003, 134). Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Bakhtiari 2012.
- 28 It requires twelve times an adjective, one time a noun. Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.
- 29 It requires four times an adjective, sixteen times a noun, and two times one verb; Kotsinas attested it as a strengthening form for adjectives and nouns (‘totally’) (1998, 223).
- 30 It requires two times an adjective (*värsta kameleontiskt* and *värsta rasisten*, 2003, 102, 241), 34 times a noun. Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Bakhtiari 2012.
- 31 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Bakhtiari 2012.
- 32 Arabic expression for ‘if God will’ (Doggelito, Kotsinas 2004, 90): <http://www.slangopedia.se/ordlista/?ord=inshallah>; Cf. Bakhtiari 2012.
- 33 Arabic word meaning ‘let’s go’, ‘hurry up’; cf. Kotsinas 1998, 92; Doggelito, Kotsinas 2004, 92.
- 34 Used by Halim in the greeting *sho len*. Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Sattarvandi 2008.
- 35 Cf. Leiva Wenger 2015; Bakhtiari 2012.

Concerning nouns, the elements in Table 3 show a strong coincidence with the more classical MS terms: words such as *guss* stand out for a high frequency compared to other rather frequent terms such as *fous*, *knas* and *shunne*. Most of these words constitute a common vocabulary with Leiva Wenger and Sattarvandi’s works. Verbs also show little change compared to *Till vår ära* [tab. 1] where elements such as *axa*, *baxa*, *baza*, *beckna*, *planka*, *spela bonanza* and *spela mangas* reinforce the constitution of a shared, intertextual lexical ground. Compared to Leiva Wenger, however, Khemiri’s novel is distinguished by the use of verbs such as *lacka ur*, *kapish* and *jiddra*. Concerning adjectives, Khemiri shows many similarities with those used by Leiva Wenger and Sattarvandi, especially *fett* + adj./noun, *keff* + adj., *tjock* + adj./noun, and *värsta* + adj./adv./noun. *Fett* + adj. is the most recurrent structure in *Ett öga rött* (45 hits), followed by *värsta* + adj./adv./noun (36 hits). Consider constructions such as “värsta horror”, “värsta ugglan”, “värsta trimmade mopeden”, “värsta kamaleontiskt” (nastiest whores; most horrible owl; worst

rigged moped; awfully chameleonic) (2003, 94, 95, 102), in which the superlative form *värsta* is used as a strengthening agent in both positive and negative senses (Sundgren 2010, 303). It is worth noting that, when translating constructions involving *värsta*, depending on the nouns or adjectives that follow, *värsta* in English is almost never translated with a simple (and easily predictable) 'worst'. Rather, it takes on a wide variety of meanings, depending on the nouns that determine the construction.

Differing from the other authors, Khemiri employs the adjective *total* as a superlative prefix, e.g. *totalhora* (total whore) (2003, 192) and *totalotagbara* (totally uncatchable) (2003, 212). Strengtheners also include *maxad* (maximised), e.g. *maxad mjuka* (maximally fluffy) (2003, 210). Even with regard to interjections, the novel differs not so much from *Till vår ära* [tab. 1], except for the Arabic interjections *inshallah*, *jalla* and *beshuaya* spelled in dialogues in Arabic between Dalanda and Halim as clichés of selective reproduction (Sternberg 1981, 225): "Just precis. Jag vet att med Allahs hjälp kommer du snart kunna skriva arabiska lika bra som du pratar. Inshallah!" Jag svarade också 'Inshallah'" (2003, 9);²³ "Hon såg inte på mig, bara tog tag i Dalanda och sa: 'Jalla, det är dags att gå hem'. Eftersom jag tyckte hon var lite respektlös som avbrutit mitt i samtal jag sa 'Beshuaya, beshuaya' men tjejen verkade inte höra" (2003, 24).²⁴ One of the ways in which Khemiri tries to lend a touch of (fake) authenticity to *Halimska* is the overabundance of *-ish* occurrences to build adjectives. Consider the following excerpt: "Men, om hon är så grymmish braish som du säger varför hon är inte kändish?" (2003, 93),²⁵ where *grymmish braish* replaces *grymt bra* (awesome, literally 'terrifically good'), while *kändish* replaces *känd* (famous). Further *-ish* occurrences are in adjectives such as *skummish* (from *skum*, strange), *lögnish* (from *lögn*, lie, instead of *lögnaktig*, mendacious), and *klokish* (from *klok*, clever). Consistent with its use in MS, *-ish* also acquires a verbal function in Halim's speech: *gitta* becomes *gittish* (to leave, to run away), *ragga på* becomes *raggish på* (to catch up). As indicated above, *-ish*, recurs in everyday speech in very specific and well-motivated cases, such as camouflaging words or actions referred to crime and/or violence. In Khemiri, on the contrary, the suffix expands its use, joining common sense words in a symbolic-aesthetic rather than referential function. Indeed, the overabundance of *-ish* words in Halim's speech is a clear

²³ "Exactly. I know that with Allah's help you will soon be able to write Arabic as well as you speak it. Inshallah!". I also replied 'Inshallah'".

²⁴ "She didn't look at me, I just grabbed Dalanda and said: 'Jalla, it's time to go home.' As I thought she was a bit disrespectful interrupting in the middle of conversation I said 'Beshuaya, beshuaya' but the lady seemed not to hear".

²⁵ "But, if she is as awesome as you say why isn't she famous?". The literal translation would be: "But, if she is grimly goodish as you say, why isn't she a celebrityish?".

example of what Ben Rampton defined *stylization* (§ 1.2.1), i.e. the employment of specific words or expressions by which a speaker, here Halim, shapes an iconic feature producing “specially marked and often exaggerated representations of languages [...] and styles that lie outside their own habitual repertoire” (2009, 149).

4.5.2 Foreign Influences Not Typical of MS in *Ett öga rött*

In addition to the elements analysed, *Ett öga rött*’s vocabulary also consists of foreign influences, presented here, for their limited quantity, without using tables. Many of these words are part of the everyday language or stand for individual foreignisms associated with a certain culture (Anglisms and Arabicisms above all). These do not include the noun *kalabalik* (four hits), which SAOB attests in Swedish since 1713, which is widely used in everyday language.²⁶

There are lesser-known Arabicisms such as *tsbahallsher* (good night, three hits), occurring in Arabic dialogues between Halim and Otman, highlighting other instances of selective reproduction. Additionally, we also find nouns for food and traditions, such as *abolit djadj* (2003, 73), *samak mashwi*, *tabboule*, *honus*, *kafta mahlife* (2003, 247). Although these words do not contribute to the discussion under investigation, they represent further multilingual traces and cultural references to other traditions and places, which contribute to deterritorialise the reader from exclusively Swedish coordinates. The novel provides entire dialogues in English, such as in the moments when Alex proposes Halim to do some language training by having conversations in English: “Fattar du hur grymt bra det här är? Är du med mig, mannen? Va? Are you with me? Don’t front, man, you bezzer recognize!” (2003, 95);²⁷ “Jag fattade att det var du typ i september. Just for your information” (207);²⁸ “Men what the fuck man! Är du seriös nu? Driver du med mig?” (208).²⁹ Another example is “Jag trodde vi hade en deal du och jag?” (206).³⁰

However, there are also individual loanwords adapted to Swedish morphology: consider the verb *rusha* (2003, 144; ‘to rush’), or *dissa* (to dis/diss), from which Halim also derives compounds such as

26 Cf. the link: <https://svenska.se/tre/?sok=kalabalik&pz=2>.

27 “Do you realise how awesome this is? *Are you with me*, man? Huh? *Are you with me? Don’t front, man, you bezzer recognise*”. Here and in the following footnotes 241 and 242, the English text has been italicised in order to separate the linguistic content translated from the content untranslated.

28 “I realised it was you like in September. *Just for your information*”.

29 “*But what the fuck man!* Are you serious now? Are you making fun of me?”.

30 “I thought we had a deal you and I?”.

disssrim (dissing rhyme) (2003, 93), *fetdiss* (big dissing) (2003, 109) and *hårddiss* (heavy dissing, two hits). These examples also indicate the context in which the characters in the corpus act: a ‘glocal’ context, where the languages of immigrant groups play a dominant role locally, combining with the global vehicular language: English.³¹

4.5.3 Creative Compounds and New-Words in *Ett öga rött*

One of the most interesting elements in Khemiri is lexical creativity. Examples are given in Table 4, divided by part of speech.

Table 4 Creative Compounds and New-Words in *Ett öga rött*

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives/Adverbs
<i>bazmusik</i> (p.170); ¹	<i>rasthångla</i> (p. 44); ³⁰	<i>cp-miffo</i> ; ³² <i>joksostor</i> ; ³³
<i>blattefråga</i> (p. 76); ²	<i>totalknäcka</i> (2); ³¹	<i>miljötönt</i> (p. 230); ³⁴
<i>blattemärken</i> (p. 36); ³		<i>servitörtönt</i> (p. 166); ³⁵
<i>blattesort</i> (3); ⁴		
<i>blatteversion</i> (p. 111); ⁵		
<i>drottningguss</i> (p. 184); ⁶		
<i>falskguss</i> (pp. 160-161); ⁷		
<i>fikaflous</i> (p. 36); ⁸		
<i>flouskontrakt</i> (p. 249); ⁹		
<i>flousstrategi</i> (p. 163); ¹⁰		
<i>fulguss</i> (p. 38); ¹¹		
<i>ghettoguss</i> (2); ¹²		
<i>ghettotuttar</i> (p. 97); ¹³ <i>gussilago</i>		
(p. 107); ¹⁴ <i>horstefan</i> (p. 192); ¹⁵		
<i>hästsvanssnubben</i> (p. 129); ¹⁶		
<i>knashot</i> (p. 161); ¹⁷		
<i>knasrisk</i> (p. 172); ¹⁸		
<i>ligistblatte</i> (3); ¹⁹		
<i>lyxsvennarna</i> (3); ²⁰		
<i>Magdatönten</i> (p. 151); ²¹		
<i>mickesnubben/-killen</i> (5); ²²		
<i>mulattguss</i> (p. 95); ²³		
<i>revolutionsblatte(filosof)</i> (3); ²⁴		

31 Glocal describes the process in which global and local are mutually connected and co-constitutive (Featherstone, Lash, Robertson 1995).

svennealkis (p. 98);
svennefamiljer (p. 61);
svennefittor (p. 49);
svenneföräldrar (p. 108);
svenneguss (p. 33); svennekillar
(p. 157); svennekund (p. 96);
svenneland (p. 104); svennemat
(2); svennepappa (5);
svennepjäs (2); svennepolitiker
(2);
svenneroll (2);
svennesjuan (p. 230);
svennesnack (p. 215);
svennesnubbar (pp.
175-6); svennesort (p.
37); svenneton(fall) (5);
svenne-tv (p. 35); svennevis
(p. 36);²⁵ teaterguss (p.
251);²⁶ Thailandguss
(p. 227);²⁷ totalknas (p.
125);²⁸ tönstvennefilosof (p.
80);²⁹ vimmelkanter (p. 143);²⁹

- 1 Sex(ual) music.
- 2 Immigrants' question.
- 3 Immigrant Brands.
- 4 Kind of immigrant.
- 5 Immigrant version.
- 6 Literally 'queen girl'.
- 7 Literally 'false girl'.
- 8 Money for coffee.
- 9 Literally 'money contract' (remunerative contract).
- 10 Strategy to make money.
- 11 'Ugly girl'. Instead of the analytic form *ful guss*, Halim creates one compound.
- 12 Literally 'ghetto girl'.
- 13 Ghetto boobs.
- 14 Pun between *guss* and *tussilago*, scientific name for coltsfoot, a kind of herbaceous plant.
- 15 Literally 'whore-Stefan'. Compound formed by *hora* (whore, shortened *hor*) and by the name Stefan.
- 16 Literally, 'the ponytail guy'.
- 17 Trouble threat.
- 18 Risk for problems.
- 19 Criminal immigrant.
- 20 Luxury Swedes.
- 21 Literally 'Dumb-Magda'.

- 22** In four cases it recurs as *mickesnubbe*, in one *mickekille*. Halim combines the proper noun Micke (Mikael) with *snubbe* and *kille*, which refer to a male person, in this case translating as Mike-dude or Mike-guy.
- 23** Here too, as in the case of *fulguss*, Halim summarises the concept ‘mulatto girl’ in one word.
- 24** In two cases occurs as *revolutionsblatte*, in one *revolutionsblattefilosof*.
- 25** From *svennealkis* to *svennevis*, in order: ‘drunk Swede’; ‘Swedish families’; ‘fucking Swedes’; ‘Swedish parents’; ‘Swedish girl’; ‘Swedish guys’; ‘Swedish customer’; ‘country of Swedes’; ‘Swedish food’; ‘Swedish dad’; ‘Swedish politician’; ‘Swedish play’; ‘Swedish role’; ‘the Swedish of the seventh [class]’; lit. ‘Swedish speech’ (i.e. Swedish language); ‘Swedish guys’; ‘Swedish kind’; ‘Swedish accent’; ‘Swedish TV’; ‘Swedish way’.
- 26** Literally, ‘theater girl’.
- 27** Literally, ‘Thailand girl’. Khemiri shows affinities with the expression *svergekillar* attested in Leiva Wenger (2015: 36), where the structure ‘country name’ + ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ shapes ethnonyms.
- 28** Total chaos.
- 29** Compound formed by the adjective *tönt* + nouns *svenne* and *filosof*. Literally ‘stupid Swedish philosopher’.
- 30** Noun variant of the adjective *vimmelkantig* (‘dizzy’): “På morgonen jag vaknade med hela skallen full av vimmelkanter” (“In the morning I woke up with a head full of vertigo”) (2003, 143).
- 31** Make out during the break.
- 32** Totall distroy.
- 33** Literally ‘abortion with cerebral paralysis’. *Cp* is an abbreviation for *cerebral pares* (cerebral paralysis), while *miffo* is a slang abbreviation for *missfoster* (abortion) (Sjödén 2017, 121). Kotsinas attests to 21 hits with *cp* + adj./noun, in which *cp* serves as a strengthening expression, but none of these bear the *cp-miffo* composition, which was apparently coined by Halim (1998, 29–30). Cf. Bakhtiari 2012; Sattarvandi 2008.
- 34** Literally ‘Jokso-sized’.
- 35** Literally, ‘environment-nerd’; the term describes a student obsessed with environmental issues.
- 36** Literally, ‘dumb-waiter’.

As logically expected, compared to verbs and adjectives or adverbs, the category of nouns is the richest in this table. First of all, we observe creative strategies for different compounds with rather recurrent prefixes or suffixes: we can see the repeated use of *blatte* – and *svenne* – as prefixes, despite the fact that these are semantically independent nouns, usually not used in compounds. Of particular interest is the toponym *svenneland* (country of the Swedes) which replaces the official name *Sverige*.

While Halim also invents new words such as *gussilago* and *vimmelkanter* (cf. Leonard 2011), most of the terms attested as new-words are creative compounds, by which Halim tries to explain more complex concepts with minimal effort: *flousstrategi*, *håstsvanssnubben*, *miljötönt*, *svennesjuan*. Among the adjectival

neologisms in the table, one compound that deserves special consideration is *joksostor*, mentioned in the sentence “Curre stod längre bort och gömde joksostora kroppen bakom liten björk” (2003, 47).³² Exploring sources to understand the meaning of this compound, we notice that the word-prefix *jokso* is neither found in dictionaries, glossaries, scientific studies, nor in online sources. Further investigation into news reports from the past decades in Stockholm’s suburban communities has led to the person, from which the adjective would originate: Dragan Joksović, known as Jokso, a famous Serbian mafia gangster based in Sweden, murdered in 1998. Joksović was famous for his imposing physical size, which made him a feared street fighter (Aftonbladet 1998; Sveriges Radio 2018). Hence Halim’s expression *joksostor*, an uncommon adjective and thus probably a veritable neologism, which is found exclusively in *Ett öga rött*.³³

32 “Curre stood further away, hiding the Jokso-sized body behind small birch”.

33 It is not yet known whether this invention originated from MS speakers. The lack of occurrences in the sources known to this study suggest that it was an invention of Khemiri, who in fact never really intended to write a novel faithful to such styles. The adjective *joksostor* is evidence of it.