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Kneecap vs. Rusch-Büeblä – language identity expressed through music in Switzerland and Ireland

1. Introduction

At first glance, there is very little connecting Northern Irish hip-hop with traditional Swiss German *Ländler* music.[1] While Swiss folk music has been historically used as means of expressing ancient traditions and foster a sense of national identity (cf. Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz HLS 2015), hip-hop has traditionally been described as "marginal and revolutionary" (Murray 2004: 5), often with a very strong political focus. Interestingly, however, two bands representing each of these music genres are experiencing a simultaneous und unexpected rise in popularity using the native Swiss German of Switzerland and the native Irish of Ireland in their music lyrics. As Harris Berger states:

> Musicians, listeners, and culture workers must constantly ask themselves such questions as: Which languages or dialects will best express my ideas? […] What does it mean to sing or listen to music in a colonial language? A foreign language? A 'native' language? (Berger 2003: x)

The almost exclusive use of native Swiss German lyrics in the music of the traditional Swiss *Ländler* band Rusch-Büeblä is analysed in this article as a reflection of the confident national identity expressed through their lyrics. The Irish hip-hop band Kneecap on the other hand, employing code-switching in many of their songs, represents the still very strong linguistic dominance of English in Ireland, despite their desire for acceptance of their native Irish tongue.

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[1] This article focuses on the Swiss German version of *Ländler*, a traditional strand of Folk music which became an established genre in Switzerland at the beginning of the 20th century (Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz HLS 2015).

Rather than focusing on an analysis of these two distinct music genres, a close reading of the lyrics of these bands will incorporate an examination of the concept of linguistic identity expressed through music as described by Berger as follows: "Much of our identity in everyday life is achieved through linguistic behavior, and, capitalizing on this fact, singers and songwriters use forms of talk from the social world around them to publicly think about, enact, or perform their identities" (Berger 2003: xv).

This article thus compares the ways in which language and national identity are represented by Rusch-Büeblä in central Switzerland and Kneecap in Ireland in their music, reflecting their language ideologies, how they tie into the wider language developments taking place in these two countries and how this is connected to the rise of nationalist sentiments across Europe. It looks at how a "linguistic belonging" (Wodak 2021: 97) inherent in the rise of nationalism as argued by Ruth Wodak is embodied in the lyrics of these two bands in their native Swiss German and Irish, respectively. The first half of the article looks at the general language developments in Switzerland and Ireland in relation to Swiss German[2] and Irish. The second half of the article then focuses on an exploration of how Rusch-Büeblä's music and lyrics represent the desire to uphold traditional Swiss norms, reflected in the ever more frequent use of the native Swiss German language in Switzerland. It also looks at how this compares to Kneecap's much more controversial music and lyrics and how they represent a fight for linguistic acceptance in Northern Ireland of a language that is in much greater danger of disappearing.

An analysis of the song lyrics of these two bands, sung in the native languages of two countries with very different linguistic backgrounds, both undergoing somewhat of a linguistic shift, makes for a unique comparison. Both languages are in the midst of very interesting developments; in relation to Swiss German this has been described as a linguistic revolution[3] and in terms of Irish as a language renaissance.[4] Swiss German, a conglomeration of Alemannic

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[2] This article focuses solely on the linguistic developments of Swiss German, not looking at any linguistic developments of the French, Italian or Romansh also spoken in Switzerland.

[3] Marina Rumjanzewa spoke about "eine linguistische Revolution" in 2013, highlighting the impact of social media on the transcription of Swiss German in her article: *Die Verschriftlichung der Mundart*, https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/die-verschriftlichung-der-mundart-ld.625584 (last accessed on August 21st, 2024).

[4] This Irish Language Renaissance is mentioned by Rory Carroll in the article: *How Northern Irish rap trio Kneecap rose to fame by subverting the Troubles*, https://www.theguardian.com/music/article/2024/aug/18/kneecap-how-northern-irish-rap-trio-rose-to-fame-by-subverting-the-troubles (last accessed on August 21st, 2024) and by Colin Crummy in the article: 'It gives me freedom': from the Oscars to the Baftas to Sundance – why Irish Gaelic is everywhere,

dialects spoken by just over 60% of the population in Switzerland was historically spoken and not written. However, since the introduction of social media, this has changed significantly and Swiss German is now often being typed, as it is phonetically pronounced. As the linguist and Swiss German dialect expert Helen Christen said in an interview in 2023: "The use of Swiss dialect has even conquered a new terrain in recent times: informal writing. Young people in particular, but no longer exclusively, often write in dialect in chats and on social media" (Benini 2023). The focus is no longer on standard German for the written word and Swiss German for the spoken word, but rather standard German for formal texts and Swiss German for informal communication. While Swiss German has undergone many interesting linguistic developments since the 1800s, its popularity as a language spoken in various different dialects throughout the Swiss German part of Switzerland has remained steadfast throughout the centuries. This popularity is reflected in popular Swiss music and in 2024, for the first time ever, two traditional Swiss *Ländler* music groups were represented at the Swiss Music Awards. One of these groups is the trio Rusch-Büeblä made up of the 22-year-old twins Simon und Cyrill Rusch and their father Roger Rusch who play traditional Swiss music and sing in Swiss German.

Similarly, in Ireland the Irish hip-hop trio Kneecap from Belfast made up of Mo Chara (Liam Óg Ó hAnnaidh) aged 26, Móglaí Bap (Naoise Ó Cairealláin) aged 30 and DJ Provaí (JJ Ó Dochartaigh) aged 34 is taking the world by storm. They are performing sold out gigs nationally as well as internationally and making cinematic history with their movie *KNEECAP* being the first ever movie in the Irish language to win a Sundance Film Festival award in January 2024. What makes Kneecap unique in the Irish music landscape is that through rapping almost exclusively in Irish, with just the right mix of provocative charm and controversial lyrics, the trio has somehow managed to make the Irish language hip. Irish, a language which, according to the 2022 census in Ireland is spoken very well by only about 10% of the population, has traditionally not been at the forefront of popularity among the Irish youth. Taking second stage to English as a result of British colonialism, Irish remains a minority language in Ireland, despite being a compulsory subject at school and being learned on average for 12-13 years. In spite of this, as is described by Colin Crummy in an article for *The Guardian* in 2024, the Irish language is in the midst of an "extraordinary renaissance":

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https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/13/irish-gaeilge-gaelic-oscars-baftas-sundance-renaissance-paul-mescal-cillian-murphy (last accessed on August 21st, 2024).

[…] Across Ireland, English is playing second fiddle to Irish in emerging arts scenes. Even though fewer than 2% of the population speak it daily, Irish is hip; the preferred language of young poets at bilingual spoken-word nights such as REIC […] or Seanchoíche (meaning storytelling). It is being blared out in metal, techno and hip-hop. (Crummy 2024)

Both Rush-Büeblä and Kneecap use their music to express their identity, sense of place and patriotism, albeit in very different ways. The status of Swiss German in *Kanton Schwyz* in the centre of Switzerland, where Rusch-Büeblä are from, is very different to the status of Irish in Kneecap's hometown of Belfast in Northern Ireland. Yet both bands are using their art as an expression of their linguistic belonging strongly connected to their national roots.

2. Swiss German in Switzerland

Switzerland's multilingualism dates back to when the Romans conquered the Alps and subjugated the Celtic Helvetians in the 2nd Century BC, bringing with them the Latin language. The 6th–8th centuries then saw the arrival of the Alemanni who brought with them their Germanic language and so emerged the beginnings of the Germanic-Romanic divide (cf. Bickel/Schläpfer 2000: 28–44). According to the Swiss linguist Walter Haas, as early as the early Middle Ages a linguistic self-awareness developed within the Germanic part of Switzerland as separate to the Germanic regions outside of the Swiss Confederation. While the Swiss German dialects kept independently developing, between the 17th and 19th centuries, the written German used in the German-speaking countries aligned more and more (cf. Ruoss/Schröter 2020: 13, 14, 21). This resulted in a typical example of diglossia in the Swiss German part of Switzerland, which represents the use of two genetically related language varieties in the same society as well as the distribution of these varieties on the basis of functional, not social criteria. The Swiss German dialects were spoken, and standard German was used for the written word (cf. Haas 2004: 81). The use of Swiss German dialects versus the standard German also spoken in neighbouring countries had nothing to do with social status. Even as early as the 18th century the educated Swiss chose to converse in their local dialects, much to the displeasure of German visitors (cf. Ruoss 2019: 72). The 19th century saw the strengthening of a Swiss national identity very much reflected in the use of language; while the Second World War further reinforced the desire for the Swiss Germans to distance themselves

from being identified as German and the use of language lent itself very well to this process. The popularity of Swiss German has remained quite constant over the decades, despite the shock reverberating through Switzerland following the Pisa results from the year 2000. These revealed a disappointing result in the reading literacy of 15-year-olds, causing a much more widespread use of standard German in kindergartens across Swiss German-speaking Switzerland.

The use of Swiss German in kindergartens, schools and even universities remains a hotly debated topic throughout Swiss German-speaking Switzerland. Nevertheless, it is clear that Swiss German has very much established itself as the language of choice for any informal type of communication, especially relating to personal matters. Since the end of the 1960s Swiss German-speaking Switzerland has experienced a "Mundartwelle" (Oppenheim 2005: 104), a rise in the popularity of the regional dialect reflected in literature, music, radio and television. According to the media expert Roy Oppenheim, the linguistic provincialization of Swiss German-speaking Switzerland in the age of rapid globalization is in full swing (cf. Oppenheim 2005: 104, 105). The use of social media and the prevalence of writing phonetically in whatever Swiss German dialect one speaks has only strengthened the status of Swiss German in Switzerland. As early as 1993 Konrad Kuoni asked the question of whether in 20 years' time, Swiss German would overtake standard German as the language of personal correspondence (cf. Kuoni 1993: 567). This prediction has very much proved true with the writing of Swiss German dialect becoming the option of choice, not just in social media messaging, but also more frequently in slightly more formal emails. In 2023 the cantonal parliament in the Swiss French speaking canton of Vaud even spoke out in favour of teaching Swiss German, rather than High German in the canton's schools, since Swiss German seems to be spoken more frequently in social and professional life in Swiss German-speaking Switzerland and would therefore be more useful for their school children to learn (cf. SRF 4 News aktuell 2013). Not everyone, however, has reacted to this language shift so positively. In 2010, the Swiss philologist and author Peter von Matt in his article, "Der Dialekt als Sprache des Herzens? Pardon, das ist Kitsch!" (Dialect as the language of the heart? Sorry, that's kitsch!) published in the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger*, argued: "The widespread delusion that only the dialect is the native language of the German-speaking Swiss is based on a mixture of weak thinking, sentimentality and narrow-mindedness" (Von Matt 2010). Like Oppenheim, von Matt speaks of a language provincialization and highlights the dangers of the Swiss German speakers thus

segregating themselves from the entire German language culture. Nevertheless, the popularity of Swiss German in Switzerland remains steadfast, and it comes as no surprise that in the current political climate a band like Rusch-Büeblä singing in Swiss German and embodying traditional Swiss values has become so popular. Already in the year 2020 Thomas Cottier, former Managing Director of the World Trade Institute, spoke of the Covid pandemic strengthening nationalism in Switzerland (cf. Gross/Barmettler 2020). Looking at the music and lyrics of Rusch-Büeblä, hailing from the very centre of Switzerland, below I will discuss how their music ties in with these current Swiss language developments.

3. Irish in Ireland

The Irish language has a very different status in Ireland than Swiss German in Switzerland, largely due to a brutal colonial history. As part of the Celtic family of languages, the first traces of Ancient Irish were found as inscriptions on Ogham Stones from around the 5th century AD. This was replaced by Old Irish around the 7th century AD, by Middle Irish between 900–1200 AD and finally we have the era of Modern Irish starting around 1600. The English language was brought to Ireland as early as the 12th century with the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and English became the language of administration with Irish never filling this role. Nevertheless, during the medieval period Irish remained the spoken language for the majority of the population of Ireland (Mac Giolla Chriost 2005: 64, 83). The plantations which occurred in Ireland during the 16th and 17th centuries with the purpose of settling the land and anglicising the country through the importation of British English speakers, however, had a significant impact on the prevalence of Irish spoken in Ireland. According to Diarmait Mac Giolla Chriost: "Such was the extent of language shift that by the close of the seventeenth century the Irish Language was detached or becoming distanced from all significant language domains and being replaced by the English language" (Mac Giolla Chriost 2005: 86). The loss of Irish from any formal spheres continued into the 1800s and this period saw the linguistic development of Irish as the once exclusive and preferred language of the Gaelic Irish to the status of a shared English-Irish multilingualism. The great famine of 1845–1849 proved a further blow to the Irish language, as many of the native Irish speakers either died or emigrated during this time. While the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 brought with it renewed efforts to revive

the Irish language as the main vernacular throughout Ireland, over the centuries it had become the language associated with poverty, unemployment and illiteracy and was seen to carry very little value for the speaker as English remained the language of administration and education within the state (Mac Giolla Chriost 2005: 96, 97, 101, 117).

Various different language strategies have been implemented over the past few decades to strengthen the status of Irish within Ireland, more recently in the form of the Official Languages Act in 2003 with the aim of improving the provision of public services through Irish, Irish becoming an official and working language of the EU in 2007 and the requirement of all road signs to be displayed in both Irish and English as was enshrined in legislation in 2008. Furthermore, in 2021 the University of Galway launched its Irish Language Strategy in support of reinforcing its bilingual campus and requiring twenty percent of its professional staff to have the ability to conduct business through Irish by 2025. So, while there are clearly attempts being made not only to keep the language alive, but to also bring Irish back into the administrative sphere, Irish has very much remained an antiquated, impractical language segregated to the domain of education, without much value for a large part of the Irish population and certainly not a language that has achieved the status of being hip or trendy. Tomás Mac Síomóin argues that Irish has remained stagnant rather than evolving with the times and that the young people of today, even those living in Irish speaking *Gaeltacht* areas do not have the relevant vocabulary to express themselves while conversing with each other in Irish, and are thus more likely to use English or a mix of the two. This mix of Irish and English he refers to as Géarla, which is a combination of the Irish words Gaeilge and Béarla; Gaeilge meaning Irish and Béarla meaning English (cf. Mac Síomóin 2014: 18–19).

What makes the Belfast band Kneecap so unique is that they have managed to find a way to revolutionise this stagnant language by making it current, explosive and sexy. The linguistic status of Irish in Northern Ireland, where Kneecap are from, is of course much more politicised and more strongly connected to a religious and national identity than in the Republic of Ireland. Since the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922, the six counties in Northern Ireland were separated from the rest of the Republic as part of the UK and by 1991 the census in Northern Ireland showed that only just under 9% of the population identified as Irish speakers. Within this environment, quite remarkably, in the 1960s a small community in Belfast, known as the Shaws Road Community, decided to rear their children as confident Irish speakers despite not being native Irish speakers themselves. Realising the importance of a socially cohesive

linguistic community, eleven families managed to attain a site and build their houses in close proximity to one another, creating Belfast's first urban Irish-speaking community. The first Irish medium primary school was built here in 1971 and survived as a result of being self-funded. What makes this area and the language development here so unusual is that historically the areas where Irish continued to be most widely spoken in Ireland were the *Gaeltacht* areas, home to clusters of native Irish speakers, and these were generally located in rural areas. Furthermore, the odds were stacked against a community led revival of Irish taking place in a city like Belfast, very much part of the UK. As Gabrielle Maguire explains:

> Partition, and the establishment of the Stormont Government in Belfast, tended to undermine the cultural heritage of the minority population living within these new boundaries. Belfast became the official guardian of colonial interest and, by this stage, the English language had taken up a position of total dominance leaving the indigenous language in a position of low status. (Maguire 1991: 10)

The Shaws Road Community demonstrates that with enough conviction, it is possible for a dedicated group of people to revive a language and, as is exemplified by the success of Kneecap, to pass this passion for the language on to subsequent generations. As Tomás Mac Síomóin explained, despite his reticence in the belief that Irish will once more achieve the status of the dominant language in Ireland, he does express the potential of a "historically/culturally aware section of civil society" (Mac Síomóin 2014: 175) rescuing the Irish language. In the appendix of *The Broken Harp* Mac Síomóin states:

> Paradoxically, the only area in Ireland in which a significant resurrection of communal Irish occurred, as a result of community activism, is outside the jurisdiction of the 26-county Irish State: the Shaw's Road area of Belfast, where a small urban *Gaeltacht* bucks, heroically, the overall linguistic trend. (Mac Síomóin 2014: 174)

Móglaí Bap's father was so inspired by this *Gaeltacht*, that he decided to learn Irish and helped establish the first Irish speaking secondary school in West Belfast, which both Móglaí Bap and Mo Chara attended (cf. Rigotti 2024). Many years later, following in his father's footsteps, Móglaí Bap set up an Irish Language Festival where himself and Mo Chara met DJ Próvaí, a secondary school teacher from Derry a few years their senior and thus the foundations for this explosive trio were set (cf. Sawyer 2024). Kneecap's fight for linguistic acceptance through their music and public actions has also, however, been closely tied up with some more exclusionary nationalist tendencies. Unafraid of controversy or the effects of such, D.J. Próvaí ended up losing his job as an Irish teacher at a secondary school in 2020, following the school's

objections to the words "Brits out" being shown drawn on his backside in a Kneecap video. Kneecap's commission of a mural containing a burning police vehicle caused further outrage. When asked about this, Móglaí Bap answered with: "When you have rocket-proof jeeps on the streets and policemen with semi-automatic rifles it doesn't really conjure up that feeling of community policing and love. It creates a real divide between the community and police" (Carroll 2024). While Kneecap are certainly not responsible for causing a political and religious divide in Northern Ireland, which has long been a reality, it is perhaps worth posing the question whether actions such as these have the potential to incite more violent nationalist actions regardless of whether this was intended.

4. Holding on to a time and place – the music and lyrics of Rusch-Büeblä

Never having had to fight for the acceptance of their linguistic expression, the family trio Rusch-Büeblä represent the love for their language using a much more traditional style of music and much less politically charged lyrics. They have released three albums in total, the first one being *Rusch-Schtimmig (Die Erscht)* [Rusch-mood (the first)] in 2018, the second one titled *Zämästah* (Standing together) in 2020 and the third one *Meitli tanz!* (Dance, girl!) in 2023. While most of the songs on all three albums are instrumental, they all also contain songs sung in their Swiss German dialect. What Kneecap's music offers in the form of their provocative, explicit, politically charged lyrics often containing references to sex and drugs*,* Rusch-Büeblä's music and lyrics reflect, on the other hand, the image of a wholesome, intact, rural Switzerland resistant to change and eager to hold on to the local way of life as it has long existed. While the use of Swiss German in their lyrics certainly limits their international appeal, the choice of their traditional music genre would also traditionally not have garnered national mainstream popularity. *Ländler* never had the status of being hip or trendy in recent Swiss music history, and it comes as no surprise that until 2024 it had never been represented at the Swiss music awards. The rise of nationalism in Europe and a general inward turn towards traditional norms and traditions, however, contextualises the success of not just one but two *Ländler* groups at the 2024 Swiss music awards; Rusch-Büeblä won the award of Best Breaking Act and the *Ländler* music group Stubete Gäng won the award of Best Streaming Artist.

Looking at some of Rusch-Büeblä's lyrics we are transported to a utopian vision of rural Switzerland, a world of almost saccharine perfection. In their song "Ich dänkä zrugg" (I think back) from the album *Rusch-Schtimmig (Die Erscht)* they reminisce about the type of life lead in their beautiful alpine region. They sing:

> Mer muess scho früh si Platz verlah, gaht uuserhalb de Arbeit nah
> (You have to leave your place early, to go elsewhere to find work)
> So gahts fascht allne miteinand i üsem schöne Alpeland
> (That's the reality for almost everyone in our beautiful alpine country)
> Ich denke zrugg a mini Heimat mit Liebi und mit Stolz a üüses Dorf unter de Bergä im schönä Fichtä Holz
> (I think back to my home, with love and pride to our village under the mountains in the beautiful spruce forest)
> […]
> Nur wer das Bärgler-Läbä kennt weiss au warum mis Herz so brennt
> (Only those who know mountain life know why my heart burns so)
> Da obä gältet anderi Wärt, das hät d'Natur üs so beschärt.
> (Other values apply up there, that is what nature has given us)[5]

Their national identity is expressed not only by the sole use of their native Swiss German in these lyrics, but also by the content. Contrary to a wild life of sex, drugs and rock n' roll in the big city, the two young Rusch-Büeblä boys sing of their desire to lead a simple life in their beautiful mountainous hometown. Singing about the traditional values defining the community in their hometown, there is very much an inward focus illustrating their proud Swiss identity. Staying true to this ideal of a utopian homeland is further reflected in the image of their intact, harmonious family unit. The album contains a song with the title "Am Grosi zum 70." (For my grandmother's 70th birthday) and another song titled *Mamma Maria*. With a song in their album *Zämästah* titled *Lisa* (the name of their sister) and the inclusion of her on the album cover of *Meitli tanz!* the depiction of their perfect family is complete. Their unabashed Swiss patriotism is also reflected in this album, in the song *Uf d'Ewigkeit* (To eternity) with the lyrics:

> Mir stosed ah uf d'Ewigkeit, uf alli da us Dankbarkeit
> (We toast to eternity, to everyone here out of gratitude)
> Ja wills mir da so schön chönd ha i üsem schönä Schwiizerland
> (Yes, because we can have it so nice here, in our beautiful Swiss country)
> Und alli händ jetzt sgliichä Ziil, eifach lustig und zfriidä zsi
> (And everyone now has the same goal, simply to be happy and satisfied)
> Mir freued üs i dene schöne Moment, weil mir das gar nöd anders chänt
> (We are happy in these beautiful moments, because we don't know any other way)
> Hüt nimmt sich jede nomal Ziit, Ziit zum eifach zämmä si
> (Today everyone is taking time again, time to just be together)
> Jetzt will i alli no einisch zämä ha, well de Zämmähalt isch wichtig da
> (Now I want to have everyone together again, because solidarity is important here)

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[5] All of the translations from Swiss German to English are my own.

We are presented with the vision of a time and place where everything is exactly right just as it is and as long as everyone from this idyllic region sticks together and nothing changes, all is well. While this is certainly not the reality for everyone living in Switzerland, there seems to be no space for diversity in this time and place with a communal obligation to uphold the traditional Swiss way of life. Their sense of belonging and strong sense of identification with the environment into which they were born is demonstrated by their focus on it being "their beautiful Swiss county" and singing on behalf of everyone in their community in their native dialect. As Berger argues: "From the mass media to educational institutions to everyday spheres of social interaction, we are surrounded by discourses that depict particular languages as sophisticated or crude, native or foreign, appropriate or inappropriate" (Berger 2003: xiv). The Swiss German language has certainly enjoyed a very positive status amongst the native Swiss German speaking population throughout the centuries, however, the commercial appeal of a young band focusing on their rural roots and the everyday pleasures of a very simple way of life is quite novel.

The image of themselves they portray in their music videos and interviews further reinforces their confident national identities. In a short clip shown in the Swiss docu show *Gesichter & Geschichten*, we are transported to their home, where we are greeted with an imagine of Cyrill playing the *Schwyzerörgeli* (Swiss accordion), Simon playing the *Handörgeli* (Hand organ) and Roger playing the Double bass. Explaining their musical beginnings, influenced by their love of the music they heard their dad play as young boys, they themselves decided to try out these traditional Swiss instruments lying around at home. The image of the peaceful country life is further reinforced with a shot of the boys playing the Swiss card game *Jassä*[6] with their parents and grandparents at their home, focusing on life's simple pleasures (cf. Gesichter & Geschichten 2023). Cyrill still works as a carpenter, Simon as a metal worker and father Roger as a roofer. They were so sure that they had no chance of winning at the Swiss Music Awards that only Cyrill was there to represent the trio as his brother and father were busy performing elsewhere (cf. Gisler 2024). Perhaps as an accurate reflection of how tame the *Ländler* music scene in Switzerland really is, despite their wholesome lyrics and matching outfits, Cyrill and Simon are often described as the young wild ones of the *Ländler* music scene. Given the rise

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[6] This is a very traditional Swiss card game dating back to the 1800s and is so popular that it is often referred to as Switzerland's national card game.

of populist sentiments across Europe, it is perhaps not surprising that music like this is gaining in popularity. Beating US musician Travis Scott's album *Utopia* and the Barbie soundtrack to the top spot of the Swiss music charts in 2023, Rusch-Büeblä's third album *Meitli tanz!* is their most popular album to date. When asked how they celebrated this success, they stayed true to their squeaky-clean image, maintaining they toasted to their success within their family in favour of having a big party to celebrate (cf. Imhof 2023).

5. Sex, drugs and politics – the music and lyrics of Kneecap

The boys from Kneecap fit the description of being young and wild much more accurately, shocking with their lyrics and their provocative statements. One can argue, however, that they are fundamental in bringing about a much-needed transformation of the Irish language by using it to address topics of relevance in a hitherto unknown fashion to the youth of today. While Kneecap have managed to achieve far more international success than Rusch-Büeblä, their decision to rap in Irish certainly could not have predicted this success. Similar to the surprising popularity of Rusch-Büeblä within Switzerland, Kneecap are experiencing unexpected acclaim by utilising their native language in just the right way at just the right time. In an article by Una Mullally for the New York Times in 2022, she speaks of how:

> Even a decade ago, the notion of Irish-language rap seemed fantastical. But something is happening in Ireland — north and south — which lately finds itself in the midst of a so-called Celtic revival, with questions of identity, place and culture being interrogated across the arts, politics, fashion and even spirituality. (Mullally 2022)

Kneecap are very much at the forefront of this revival in the Irish language music scene. In Mullally's article, Móglaí Bap is quoted as saying that Kneecap's members came from "probably the first generation coming out of the Irish-language education system that developed their own sense of identity within the language" (Mullally 2022). Looking at some of their lyrics, however, it is perhaps no surprise that their music was initially banned from the Irish-medium radio station *RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta* in 2017. They have since released two albums, *3CAG* in 2018 and *Fine Art* in 2024, as well as a number of singles with most songs containing a mix of English and Irish. In their single *Gael-Gigolos* released in 2019 they shock with lyrics such as:

Old dick? I just lick it and spit
Sean-phit? Mate for *airgead* I eat that shit
(Old pussy? Mate for money I eat that shit)
[…]
Yes Miss, twenty extra for a tongue with a kiss
Agus caoga eile I'll let you slip the fist
(And fifty more I'll let you slip the fist)
[…]
Gael-Gigolos, *ag freastáil ar na mammy hoes, na daddy hoes*
(Gael-Gigolos, attending to the mammy hoes, the daddy hoes)
Mar tá mé chomh bocht le mo serotonin
(Because I'm so poor with my serotonin)
But even *seandaoine* need to get a boning
(But even old people need to get a boning)[7]

The use of vocabulary such as "dick" and "pussy" commonly featured in English language hip-hop has been lacking in Irish language music and constitutes part of Kneecap's appeal. Modernising the language to reflect their everyday conversational vocabulary, they started translating the names of drugs into Irish. Cocaine was translated as *snaois*, a joint as *dúid* and *3CAG* (*3 chonsan agus guta*), which means 3 consonants and a vowel, became the Irish word for the drug MDMA and is the title of their first album (cf. Rigotti 2024). In an interview with Miranda Sawyer for *The Guardian*, Móglaí Bap explained: "[We were part of] this weird first group of young people in an urban setting in Belfast to really speak Irish together socially […] sharing the words and the youth culture, and taking recreational drugs, and all that melded together" (Sawyer 2024). Rather than focusing on English to express their everyday experiences, they created new Irish words to suit their linguistic needs, and their national identities found expression in these lyrics. This is resonating strongly with a lot of young people in Ireland today and what has been termed the "Kneecap effect" is being accredited with promoting Irish language popularity (cf. Ó Caollaí 2025).

Growing up in a very different reality to the Rusch-Büeblä boys, they want to use their music as a way of creating a better life for themselves, not just in terms of linguistic acceptance, but also in terms of social status and lifestyle opportunities. Their musical journey began after Móglaí Bap's friend had been caught by the police as they were spray-painting the Irish word *Cearta*, meaning rights, around the time of an Irish Language Act march in Belfast in 2017. His friend spent a night at the police station refusing to speak English. This incident inspired their first single *C.E.A.R.T.A* and their music continues to contain politically charged topics

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[7] All of the translations from Irish to English are by Liam Pearce.

47

affecting their everyday lives. Despite their staunch republicanism and desire for a united Ireland, the theme of friendship and acceptance between the two sides repeatedly creeps up in their music. Mixing romance with politics in their 2019 single *Fenian Cunts*, far from the simple life portrayed in rural Switzerland where all it takes is the courage to ask a pretty girl to dance in Rusch-Büeblä's song *Meitli tanz!*, we get a humoristic insight into the potential minefield of dating in Northern Ireland, where religious backgrounds come into play. At the same time, however, the lyrics of this song show how far things have come in the North relating to the sectarian divide and the overcoming of divisions. What better way for the youth of today to pave a new path forward and let go of long held hostilities than through the lens of romance.

> Are you a Fenian *a dúirt sí liom*
> (Are you a Fenian she asked me)
> You should have told me that before I let ya smack my bum
> *Ach an oíche ar fad* you're tellin' me I'm the one
> (But all night you're tellin' me I'm the one)
> Well, I've got no time for Republican scum
> What the fuck that's racist or something
> You didn't mind when my face was in your muffin
> Stop huffin just *mar gheall gurbh as Bóthar na bhFál domh*
> (Stop huffin just because I am from the Falls Road)
> You can call me King Billy if you want to

The politically charged environment infiltrating the personal sphere of these young men fighting for linguistic acceptance shines through in the multilingual representation of this interaction. It clearly highlights the linguistic differences between the two parties, one of them representing a member of Kneecap and the other one a unionist love interest. The sections of the dialogue spoken by the unionist counterpart are in English, whereas the Kneecap member's responses demonstrate the classical code-switching between English and Irish featuring prominently in their lyrics. They speak freely about the topics continuing to affect the young people of Northern Ireland through the medium of Irish in their music, often pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable. Keeping up their explosive, provocative personas, they arrived at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah in January 2024 at which their movie *KNEECAP* was nominated for an award, on the roof of a Northern Irish PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) Land Rover with the word Kneecap spray painted across the side. While these kinds of stunts have been instrumental in garnering them international publicity, their controversial antics have also, at times worked against them. They were awarded a £30,000 pound grant from the Music Export Growth Scheme, supporting British music exports abroad,

only for it to be rescinded by the British Government with the explanation: "We fully support freedom of speech, but it's hardly surprising that we don't want to hand out UK taxpayers' money to people that oppose the United Kingdom itself" (Sawyer 2024).

Very much in contrast to the peace, stability and financial security at the heart of central Switzerland, the members of Kneecap grew up in areas defined by violence, division and financial hardship. In the song *I'm Flush* also from the album *Fine Art* expressing their want for a better life, they sing: "*Níl mé ag iarraidh bheith chomh bocht le m'athair*, (I don't want to be as poor as my father) that's not what I'm after." Contrary to the strong linguistic status of Swiss German in central Switzerland, Irish speakers in Belfast have had to fight for the right of their language to be recognised. Irish only achieved a legal status equal to English with the passing of the Identity and Language Act in Northern Ireland in 2022, which also features as a storyline in their film. A further reflection of their struggle to be taken seriously as Irish speakers in Norther Ireland is a scene in which Mo Chara refuses to respond in English while being interviewed by the police and demands to have an Irish interpreter. While this did not happen to Mo Chara himself, it reflects the lived experience of his friend used as the inspiration for their song *C.E.A.R.T.A*. This fight for linguistic equality is described by Mac Síomóin with the words: "The reality is that Irish-speakers, who insist on their constitutional right to deal through Irish with the State apparatus, for example, are too often regarded as cranks, second-class citizens and just a plain bloody nuisance" (Mac Síomóin 2014: 63). While Northern Ireland has come a long way since then in terms of language policy, Kneecap continue to express their republicanism and desire for a united Ireland in the language once native to its population.

While the lyrics of Rusch-Büeblä paint the picture of an idyllic rural Switzerland, surrounded by an intact and supportive family environment, the Kneecap lyrics tell a very different story of their urban Northern Irish reality. In the words of Berger:

> In many parts of the world, for example, native languages or regional dialects may be iconic of the colonized peoples or marginalized groups that speak them; songs set in such languages may function as a powerful affirmation of identity for their singers or listeners. (Berger 2003: xiv)

Their single *Mam*, in honour of their own mothers, as well as mothers in general, was released in 2020, just after Móglaí Bap's mother died by suicide. It offers an insight into the realities

shaping their identities in a beautiful dedication to the strong women facing the challenges of an often less than perfect life:

> *Grá mo chroí, mo mhamaí, cé go raibh mé cineál scanraithe*
> (Love of my heart, my mom, even though I was kind of scared)
> *Nuair a tháinig sí abhaile's an teach go hiomlán salach*
> (When she came home the house was completely dirty)
> *Níl mé ag iarraidh tabhairt amach, no, níl mé ag iarraidh troid anocht lad*
> (I don't wanna give out, no, I don't wanna fight tonight lad)
> *Tá an cheann seo duitse, mo mhamaí cliste*
> (This one is for you, my smart mom)
> […]
> And never complained, it brought me the knack of knowing how trauma impacts
> Kids who whacked-out without thought for their mam when she's giving them all that she can
> Trapped in that cyclical process of all that they lack when they're missing a bond with their dad
> But you played dad when the job was his, so I want to say thanks for all you did

Their lyrics provide a labyrinthine portrayal of the highs and lows of a generation of young men, fighting for their right to make a better life for themselves. While their native Irish forms an important part of their lyrics representing their republican identities, the code-switching between Irish and English very accurately reflects the linguistic reality of native Irish speakers in Northern Ireland.

6. Conclusion

Irish and Swiss German have undergone very different historical linguistic developments but are both experiencing revivals reflected in popular culture. Kneecap are expressing their fight for linguistic acceptance, demanding a change in Northern Ireland, reflected in their explosive Irish lyrics. Rusch-Büeblä on the other hand, in their music and lyrics, are portraying a wholesome, patriotic image of rural Switzerland, straying true to their roots, holding on to their language and their cherished way of life. The linguistic shift happening in Switzerland is very much connected to the form in which Swiss German is expressed and the move to written Swiss German becoming more and more normalised, particularly in informal communication, rather than a need to establish a linguistic dominance. The move towards the strengthening of an already uncontested status of Swiss German in Swiss German-speaking Switzerland over the last few years is very much reflected in the popularity of Rusch-Büeblä. This is not just due to

their Swiss German lyrics, but also because they personify traditional Swiss characteristics. In 2022 the reporter Deborah Stoffel spoke of this particular trend of turning 'inward' in Switzerland: "First the pandemic, then the war in Europe, the climate going crazy. Looking at the big picture makes your heart sink. You feel the need to make the world smaller, to define an 'us' and an 'here with us', for yourself and for your family"[8] (Stoffel 2022). Kneecap, on the other hand, using the medium of hip-hop, are demanding their right to linguistic acceptance in the native language of their native country. Simultaneously, they are bringing the Irish language into the 21st century and making it modern and sexy in their very own, unique way, albeit utilising more than a few controversial actions to do so. We are at the cusp of these language revivals in both countries and there are sure to be many more exciting developments reflected linguistically in the arts in the years to come.

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