

NÄKÖKULMA

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BEYOND WORK: MIGRANTS' MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FINNISH LANGUAGE

Learning Finnish is often emphasised as essential for migrants to find employment in Finland. But what role does learning Finnish have for individuals, for whom Finnish language is not necessary in their work?

This short paper examines how migrants relate to Finnish language as part of their life courses. As such, it departs from the view that defines migrants' relationships with the language primarily in terms of employment opportunities. Against the backdrop of a plethora of studies examining Finnish language in the context of integration (e.g. Pöyhönen and Tarnanen 2015; Ruuska 2020), a growing body of research has called into question the centrality of Finnish language skills as the primary determining feature of migrants' experiences in the Finnish labour market. The researchers have instead turned their attention to broader socio-cultural and economic issues that shape migrants' work experiences such as the racialisation of specific groups of people (e.g. Näre 2013; Koskela 2019; Ahmad 2020), the myth of Finnish homogeneity (e.g. Pitkänen and Kouki 2002; Heikkilä 2005), and the segmentation of the Finnish labour market which traps migrants into low status jobs (e.g. Bontenbal and Lillie 2021; Ndomo and Lillie 2022; Ndomo 2024). The paper broadly echoes this line of inquiry. Through a focus on migrants' life courses, the paper demonstrates that individual's connections to Finnish language are mediated through their life situations, rather than their (view of) work. I conclude with some speculations as to how such an understanding of Finnish language may open up a different idea about integration beyond the one defined exclusively in economic terms.

The paper is inspired by some migrants' observations about Finnish language I encountered during my fieldwork in May – August 2023 (see below).¹ The purpose of the fieldwork was to identify similarities and differences in language practices in various professions. Out of the interview data collected during the fieldwork, this paper focuses on six interviewees (Interviewees A – F below) who come from different regions of the world including Eastern and Northern Europe and the Middle East. These interviewees were selected because their experiences with Finnish language highlight the multiple relationships with the language beyond work. The paper suggests that the linking of language almost exclusively with employment and using this link as the basis of integration impoverishes our imagination as to how people develop their connections to their surroundings on their own terms, depending on their life stage and personal circumstances.

Integration, in the Finnish context, is primarily defined in terms of employment (e.g. Forsander, 2004; Mäkinen 2017). In this integration model, Finnish language is regarded as an instrumental tool for work. While this may be part of the story about migrants' experiences of living in Finland, it crucially misses the other diverse ways in

1 The interviewees' observations introduced in the paper are summarised in my own words. Quotation marks are used to indicate directly quoted comments from the interviewees.

which people relate to Finnish language beyond work. To be clear, all the interviewees mentioned below were working at the time when I talked to them. Their workplaces ranged from universities, nursing homes, and daycare centres to cleaning companies and government agencies. Since their arrival in Finland, none of them had experienced any significant periods of unemployment. And yet, for these people, Finnish language has little to do with their work. All the interviewees did acknowledge that Finnish language skills can be an additional bonus to improve their work situations mainly in terms of communication with their Finnish-speaking colleagues. However, they were quick to stress that the competence in Finnish remains an additional, not the central, feature of their work experience, in terms of finding a job or doing their job well.

In Finland, there is 'awkwardness of listening to a different type of Finnish.' (Interviewee A)

To use Finnish in a certain professional setting may not be appropriate. (Interviewee B)

The most frightening aspect of starting a new job is to work entirely in Finnish. (Interviewee C)

Finnish is not used at work, but numbers and coding are. (Interviewee D)

'...out of 8 billion people, only 5 million [speak Finnish]'. (Interviewee E)

Speaking Finnish as a non-native native language is reminiscent of speaking a minority language elsewhere. (Interviewee F)

Three of the interviewees (Interviewee A, B, and C) had attained natively like competence in Finnish. What is striking about these advanced language learners is their reluctance to use Finnish in the professional setting. To be clear, the interviewees' use of Finnish at work comes in many shades. For example, Interviewee C has to mainly use Finnish due to the nature of the work. Meanwhile, Interviewee A manages to completely avoid speaking Finnish at work – she understands what is said and written in Finnish, but she only uses English to communicate with her colleagues. Interviewee B sometimes speaks and writes in Finnish and at other times English, depending on with whom she communicates and the language of interaction.

Regardless of the differences, these advanced Finnish learners all share the fear of being judged because of the way they use Finnish, as demonstrated in their observations about the language (see above). Interviewee A is concerned that her Finnish speaking colleagues see her Finnish as too simple and basic. Interviewee B considers that the way she composes Finnish sentences may sound foreign to the ears of native speakers. This makes her hesitant to use Finnish to carry out certain tasks at work. Interviewee C becomes self-conscious of her Finnish when her Finnish-speaking colleagues do not respond to her in the same way as they do to other native speakers. These interviewees' reservation about their Finnish and their unique way of using Finnish informs us of the way in which Finnish language is imagined through the idea of native speakerism. Native speakerism refers to a discourse about languages that creates a hierarchy between native speakers and non-native speakers, treating the former as the only authentic and legitimate speakers of a language (e.g. Holliday 2005, 2006). Unless Finnish language is defined as 'Finnish languages' to appreciate more than one 'authentic' and 'legitimate' way of speaking Finnish, some people remain hesitant to use Finnish, whatever level their linguistic competence is.

The interviewees' motivation to learn Finnish also varies. For example, Interviewee C, who has been in Finland for about ten years, had a clear intention to obtain a Finnish citizenship when she moved to Finland. This motivated her to study Finnish seriously from the beginning. In contrast, for Interviewees A and B who have been living in Finland for nearly twenty years, their connections to Finnish language grew thicker over the period of the first ten years, as they were interwoven with the interviewees' changing life situations, such as having children, adapting to the children's language learning environment, and assessing their plans to live in Finland long-term. Their life stories suggest that any number of myriad life experiences can prompt a person to learn a new language, and they do not neatly fall into the first few years after their arrival. These interviewees' relationships with Finnish question the somewhat simplified view about language learning reflected in the state-sponsored Finnish language course. The course, which is part of the integration programme, currently uses a three-year-threshold counting from the arrival to Finland (with two years extension) as one of the eligibility criteria (e.g. Ndomo 2024, p.26). While this language-integration model may apply to some people, it does not address the complexity manifested in others, such

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as Interviewees A and B, who originally lacked a clear motive to learn Finnish and whose motives to learn gradually become clearer in response to their changing personal circumstances.

Some interviewees' relationships with Finnish also question the idea that employment prospects are secured after the acquisition of sufficient Finnish language skills. This 'language-first and job-second' approach mirrors the current government-offered integration programme where unemployment is used as another eligibility criteria. Contrary to this approach, some migrants see the reverse – the 'job-first and language-second' approach – because their professional careers have already begun without Finnish before their arrival in Finland (see Interviewee D's description about her work above). For example, Interviewees D and E, who are Finnish learners of beginner and intermediate levels and use English at work, came to Finland initially because they secured professional positions that they saw as helpful for developing their careers. For these migrants, their professional identities carry significant weight. Understandably, therefore, for Interviewees D and E, their precarious employment contracts and their uncertain career prospects in Finland make them hesitant to invest long hours into studying Finnish (see Interviewee E's comment cited above). Whether or not they see the need to study Finnish in their spare time is closely linked to whether or not they are able to retain and, possibly develop, their chosen professions and thus envision their future-selves in Finland. In the case of Interviewees A, B, and C, they all came to Finland as students and began their careers in Finland initially without using Finnish at work. This also begs more nuanced understandings of the way in which some people enter the labour market in Finland without Finnish language skills.

Some migrants are eager to develop connections to Finland, but Finnish language is simply not part of their way of doing so. For example, Interviewee F is eager to absorb Finnish culture in his spare time and has a clear intention to stay in Finland in the long term. At the same time, he wants to identify himself as an English speaker in Finland, rather than as a non-native Finnish speaker, because of his own experience of being a minority speaker in his country of birth. As a minority speaker elsewhere, he knows just too well how minority languages can be used to deny his self-worth. For him, Finnish language acts as a divisive mechanism through which he is implicated into the hierarchy between native/majority speakers and non-native/minority speakers (see Interviewee F's observation stated above).

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In other words, Interviewee F sees his status as a non-native Finnish language speaker as an obstacle to be who he is. Meanwhile, English, and the prominent social status attached to English language in Finland (e.g. Leppänen 2011), provide him with a means to not compromise himself. In the world of English, Interviewee F has more capacity to project his own image of himself to the outside world. He uses English at work in an office-based workplace and, with a limited extent, in a second job, which is manual. At the office-based job, his colleagues speak English without any exceptions. In the job where he performs manual work, some of his colleagues speak neither Finnish nor English. Language is not an essential element of manual work he does. He had a successful and established career before coming to Finland, but he is now somewhat resigned to the idea that it is not possible to continue his profession in Finland because of the language barrier. However,

his professional struggle in Finland neither deters him from returning to his country of birth nor encourages him to move to other countries. The professional struggle also does not prompt him to continue studying Finnish. He briefly attended a Finnish language course earlier but is no longer studying Finnish because of his reluctance to become, once again, a minority speaker, in this case, a non-native Finnish language speaker.

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that people's relationships with Finnish are being shaped by their life stages and personal circumstances beyond work. Contrary to the perception of non-Finnish speakers as economically calculative actors who learn Finnish to secure employment, I have argued that they are more than what this perception suggests. Migrants are instead defined by their relations with people around them such as their families, friends, and colleagues. These human connections shape non-Finnish speakers' emotional distance to Finnish language in deciding when to use the language, with whom, and how. For some people, Finnish has nothing to do with what they do professionally. For them, the desire to learn Finnish lies elsewhere, or comes only after they see their professional-selves thrive in Finland with a more long-term employment status. Thus, according to different life situations, each person's relationship to Finnish language changes its shape and density.

This fluid and elusive affective attachment to Finnish language unsettles the understanding of language as a commodity, or as 'a skill' to possess and use in competition in the labour market. Rather it suggests that language is an invitational space to inhabit, temporality or otherwise (e.g. Derrida, 1996; Chow, 2014; Tawada, 2012). The people I spoke to, implicitly or explicitly, chose a particular language (or several languages) to become their 'first' language(s) at a specific point in life. In this regard, a language is not owned by someone, for example, by native speakers, but is claimed by anyone based on each person's unique relationship to that language. This approach to language invites us to go beyond the divisive view of integration where language becomes a tool to judge who is a more authentic and competent member of society. Rather we are bonded with each other through the sharing of language and our changing connections to languages around us. And perhaps, it is in this flattening ontology of languages that we find a way to live side by side in such a way that each person flourishes beyond citizenship status, beyond migration categories, and beyond where we are born, Finland or elsewhere.

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