

# The invisible opponent

## A study about feelings of national belonging, Finnishness and immigration of second generation Finns in Sweden

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### Prologue

In 2002–2003 I participated to a one-year Master of Philosophy course organized by the Graduate School for Humanities, Universiteit van Amsterdam to study Pragma-Dialectics and argumentation theory. In the final thesis I analysed interviews with Finnish speaking Finnish immigrants' second generation in Sweden<sup>1</sup>. These interviews were conducted during the spring and summer 2002 with the aim to gather information about the connection between a minority language- and minority identities of the second-generation immigrants. And, of course, to get a glimpse of their everyday life in a middle-sized city in the area of Mälardalen, one of the most 'Finnish' areas in Sweden. The interviews were semi-structured and the language was either Finnish or Swedish according to the interviewee's wish.

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### A striking phenomenon

There was something strange in the interview recordings. Not in the quality or the content but in the ways the interviewees' speech behaviour changed in the course of the interview. I found myself coming back to certain sequences of the interviews, namely to those where the interviewees' speech behaviour shifts from a typical interview mode where questions are asked and answered to a monolog mode. The interviewees started to argue about the discussed topics with themselves, or as it seemed to me, with some one who was not present – an invisible opponent.

After pinning down the sequences, which are to be found in almost all of the interviews I concluded that it is more the rule than the exception that the negotiating speech behaviour takes place when issues concerning immigrants, Finnishness versus Swedishness and language use were addressed. Where as topics such as education, professional life and social relation were discussed did not cause any remarkable change in the interview. It was striking to find most of the respondents repeating a similar pattern of speech behaviour of reacting to anticipat-

ed criticism when no verbal objection what so ever took place. This technique is similar to ways to acknowledge and refute counter-arguments as described by A.F. Snoeck Henkemans, 1997. I was surprised to find that naive language users confirm a theoretical notion of how rationally defend standpoints in the most effective way. I made the observation from the data that an attack on a standpoint or an argument not only in theory but also in real life affects the argumentation that is to follow, as became clear from the respondent's choices. In the case of this study the attacks or criticisms did not take place, the interviewees only anticipated them to happen and this anticipation was enough to create negotiation upon what was said.

My first interpretation of the sequences was, that the respondents felt uncomfortable with themselves as Finnish offspring in Sweden and needed to defend or at least negotiate upon their views. This they did by reacting to anticipated criticism and arguing with an invisible/imaginary opponent. In this article I will discuss the interviews and explore the nature of the invisible opponent from a qualitative research's point of view.

There is namely much more behind the negotiation than indefinable uneasiness about the immigrant background.

### The inquiry

I decided to get engaged with the phenomenon of the invisible opponent and dived in the deep waters of understanding what really took place in these sequences. In order to achieve a thorough analysis of the argumentative discourse about national belonging and feelings towards the Finnish background I formulated two aims for the thesis. Firstly I wanted to give a structural analysis of sequences of spoken data in which the interviewees defend points of views and arguments by reacting to the anticipated criticism against the standpoints and/or arguments by an imaginary opponent. I laid bare the structure of the arguments and to showed the connections on the one hand between the standpoints and arguments supporting the standpoint and on the other hand the connections between the anticipated criticism and counter-arguments against the standpoint or the arguments supporting it. The structural analysis was undertaken with the tools provided by the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation that sees all argumentation to be aimed at resolution of dispute and to be based on rationality. Secondly the aim was to ask why this phenomenon takes place and to explore the nature of it. To ask the 'why' question is about the social and / or cultural significance of speaking in a particular way. In D. Cameron's words, to try to explain the signifi-

cance of a particular speech event involves relating its characteristics to a broader range of cultural beliefs, practices and values- both those relating directly and specifically to language and those relating to other things, such as the culture's view of what is a 'good person', or in my case a 'proper Finn', or its attitudes towards emotions or conflicts. (Cameron, 2001:57). To answer the 'why' question I used ethnography and conversational analysis. With ethnographic tools I analysed the sequences on the background of Finnish immigrants in Sweden and introduce possible explanations for the defensive speech behaviour based on the ethnographic knowledge from the field. Conversational analysis provided tools to pin down interview dynamics and explore their impact on the outcome.

### Vacuums to be filled

Some of the defensive talk and negotiation in the data can be explained by analysing the listener's response or in many cases the lack of it. Listener's response is in simple terms are small vocalisations participants of a conversation employ when they are listening to a speaker. Brief responses such as "hmm", "aha" and "yes" are commonly used in every day conversations and signalise mainly that the listener has understood what the speaker is saying, approves the content and wishes the speaker to go on. The lack of response seems to create a 'vacuum' within the turn and the speaker holding the turn employs different techniques to fill the vacuum. Usually

the speaker keeps on talking, employs hyper-explanations<sup>2</sup> and recycles contents until the listener takes over the turn. When speakers do not get minimal response or non-verbal reactions from the listener they will not proceed to the next unit but persist in reiterating the same point if no response occurs: reformulate the question or the story they are telling, lower the level of abstractions and also used hyper explanations. (Günther, 1993) The technique of recycling information and the use of hyper explanations in transition-relevant places applies also to the interviewees: in the following sequences the respondent provides more arguments to support his argument because I do not react when he shows signs of being willing to give over the turn<sup>3</sup>:

#### Example 1<sup>4</sup>

- 1 L: What about the language then? Is it important?
- 2 A: The knowledge of Finnish cannot be the most essential thing in being a
- 3 Finn.
- 4 There are for instance also Swedish speaking Finns in Finland
- 5 and they are Finns just like the Finnish speaking are.
- 6 (Pause, several seconds)
- 7 I think that people who are so fussed about the language have
- 8 not considered other features of Finnishness at all.
- 9 It really isn't necessary to speak the language in order to be a Finn
- 10 (Pause, several seconds)
- 11 No, I do not think so.
- 12 (Pause, several seconds)

- 13 Sure it would be nice if my  
child would speak a couple of  
words of
- 14 Finnish, but it doesn't make  
him more or less a Finn  
whether he
- 15 does or not.
- 16 But it would be nice if he could  
talk to my parents in Finnish.
- 17 (Pause, several seconds)
- 18 But they speak Swedish  
anyway.
- 19 (Pause, short)
- 20 My parents I mean
- 21 (Pause, several seconds)
- 22 So they will be talking to each  
other anyway.
- 23 L: ...yeah...
- (Male, born 1973, 4/2002)

The first transition-relevant place, where a turn-take could happen, is in line 6, where the respondent has given a brief explanation about Finns who do not speak Finnish to argue for the possibility to call oneself a Finn even though not mastering the language. In line 10 he has finished his explanation and probably expects me to give some kind of verbal confirmation, but as this does not take place he repeats himself in line 11 by saying "*Nø, I don't think so*". This repetition is followed by the next transition-relevant place, and when I again do not show sign of taking the turn he starts in line 13 a new line of arguments. This argument has frequently transition-relevant places: lines 17, 19 and 21. Finally in line 23 I respond with a quiet "yeah", that was enough to switch the roles of the speaker and the listener.

Günther (1984) notes, that if the expected minimal responses do not appear at syntactically or pro-

sodically marked listening-response relevant moments the speaker probably interprets the absence as a clue for understanding problems or for not being convinced and reacts by paraphrasing and recycling ("*it is not important because*", "*and because*") the same content in different words ("*they*", "*my parents*"). I do not say anything during the sequence, add no questions, give no minimal response, show no signs of active listenership nor do I give verbal signs of taking over the turn. Probably I nodded my head or looked the interviewee in the eye, but on the verbal level, what the recording tells, no active listening can be recognized. The interviewee adds more information until I finally express understanding or acceptance in uttering a "yeah". The sequence ends with my brief "yeah", which seems to be sufficient enough to end his turn. After this sequence the interviewee spoke about the somewhat problematic relationship between grandparents and grandchildren when a common language is missing. So even though he obviously was waiting for me finally to utter at least the "yeah", he was willing to continue on the subject and introduced a new topic touching the language issues we spoke about earlier.

The reason for my silence can be analysed to be due to immature interview techniques. I was in no means of the term disinterested in his contribution, on the contrary very excited to hear more. Probably I thought it would be better not to signalise any response that could be taken for sign of willingness to take over the turn. Of

course I was not thinking in terms of turns or listener's response, but incidentally those are the key aspects in creating the sequence.

### **Situational variables: setting, language and ethnicity**

Due to the small amount of interviews (20) it is useless to put much weight on the impact of the interview language, but it would not be too surprising to find a correlation between the interview language, interviewer's ethnicity and the answers to questions concerning national belonging and feelings of Finnishness or Swedishness. In the Netherlands H. van 't Land analyses in her dissertation '*Similar Questions; Different meanings*' the impact of situational variables, such as the language in which the interview was held and the ethnicity of the interviewer, on the kind answers Moroccan immigrant respondents gave to survey questions. She observes significant ethnicity-of-interviewer effects for questions referring to ethnic-related issues that left room for interpretation, such as "*Do you consider yourself Moroccan or Dutch?*" or "*Do you have Dutch friends?*" Van 't Land notes that respondent who were interviewed by a Dutch interviewer reported to significantly less Moroccan and to have more Dutch friends than respondents interviewed in Dutch by a Moroccan interviewer. Also the question "*Do you go to the Mosques now and then?*" showed a significant language effect: respondent who were interviewed Arab-Moroccan language by a Moroccan interviewer

reported to go significantly more often to the Mosques than respondents who were interviewed in Dutch by a Moroccan interviewer (van 'tLand, 2000:101). Other questions, that she calls non-ethnic-related did not show any significance to the interviewer's ethnicity or the interview language. She closes her analysis by the notion that future research should reveal why for some questions referring to ethnic-related issues only ethnicity-of-interviewer effects were found where as for others only significant language effects were found. It seems reasonable to me to conclude that the power relations between the interviewer and the respondent and the pre assumptions about the interviewer's goals and expectations from the respondent's side play a determining role. If the same questions I asked would be addressed by a Swedish speaking Swede it could be, according to van 't Land's observations, possible that the answers for example for the question about defining oneself as a Finn or a Swede would have a bias towards feeling-more-Swedish-than-Finnish.

### A Happy Swedish Life?

I do not think that the respondents perceive the fact of being Finnish in Sweden as a "bad thing" as such. The reactions are more likely to be due to the general discourse around 'immigrant hood' in Sweden. The generous immigrant policy of 70's and 80's did not take into account that a large number of the labour immigrants would stay and be a permanent part of the society. Partly as a consequence of this policy-making, the Swedish

society is dealing with not only the benefits of having immigrants contributing to the economy but also to the more problematic sides of living in a multi cultural society. Being an immigrant contains also aspects of alienation and experiences of being rejected. This applies to large groups within the Swedish society, not only to the Finns although they create by far the largest immigrant group.

Even though the second generation did not, on average, express any special need to talk about their parent's generation's traumatic experiences about the immigration to Sweden, the general feeling of being obliged to defend one's views of being a happy, successful member of the Swedish society seemed to be present and take expression in the negotiating form of talk during the interviews. The second generation seems to feel pressure by the Finnish community: when looking at my data it seems to me that they experience confusion between the group of their parents (the first generation Finnish immigrants) and the rest of the society. They seem to ask themselves if it is acceptable for a second generation Finn to feel balanced and happy in spite of the parental background. This might sound irrational to an outsider, but when looking beyond the surface and taking in consideration the history it is not irrational at all. The term "second generation immigrant" alone is something the interviewees rejected. They did not identify themselves with the term and stressed that their parents were immigrants but that they themselves were born in Sweden and therefore not immigrants.

### Example 2

- 1 L: What do you associate with the term immigrant? Do you feel like
- 2 belonging to the group of immigrants?
- 3 A: No. I do not feel belonging to that group. My parents belong to the group,
- 4 but not me. I am not an immigrant, I was born here, and I never moved
- 5 anywhere. That is the way I see it. They moved from another country, but me,
- 6 I am not an immigrant.  
(*Woman, born 1974, 6/2002*)

### Conclusion

As it has hopefully become clear in this article, a lot of the negotiating speech behaviour can be explained by my role and choices as an interviewer. Though the fact that the respondents reacted defensive to certain topics whereas other topics did not cause the same speech behavioural pattern, remains. There were interviews that were experienced as easy by all participants. Respondents expressed their feelings about the interviews: "it didn't feel like an interview, more like talking about stuff with some one at the pub" or "it was normal, like a normal chat". Defensive behaviour and negotiations upon identity and immigrant issues took place also in these interviews.

Therefore I conclude from my data, that in addition to being caused by interview techniques the defensive speech can be taken as evidence for the fact that the second generation Finns background is not completely unprob-

lematic. The concept of being something else than the majority of the members of the society, in this case not being completely Swedish but a Finnish immigrant by origin seems to provoke negotiation upon identity. It would be very unlikely to be a coincidence that almost all respondents decided to negotiate upon their identities as members of Swedish society if there would be nothing to negotiate upon. I believe the respondents would express their willingness to negotiate upon certain issues also in future interviews or conversations where these topics may rise again.

It can be summed up, that the invisible opponent consists of interview techniques<sup>5</sup>, different constellations of interview settings and power, in these cases a mixture of the situation as such and the participants' age, gender, level of expertise, to name some. I myself as the interviewer turned out to be a very visible, flesh and blood opponent although it was not my intention to embody one. This assignment of the role happens against my will, but it cannot be denied that my presence and interview techniques play a crucial role in the negotiation. There fore it can be concluded that the invisible opponent consist on the one hand also of the wider discourse about being an immigrant in Sweden, how immigrants are ought to live and feel belonging to the society without forgetting their language and cultural background.

## Future

I will not have the possibility to give a deeper gaze in to the prob-

lematic definitions of formations of minority groups and identities within this article, also different ways to talk about national images, whether they were Swedish or Finnish are aspect that will be examined in the PhD. It can though be briefly noted, that it was very common for respondents to make reference to highly clichéd national images. In the case of Swedes the most common clichés were neatness, diplomacy, good looks, the femininity of men and references to the royal family. When the clichés were about Finnishness and Finland the most frequent images were 'sisu'<sup>6</sup>, going to the sauna, being more independent and reliable than a Swede, being hard working, wearing a jogging outfit and carrying a knife. S. Condor (2000) reports cliché employment in her data conducted with British people formulating an account of their own country in an interview. She notes, by making reference to the work on discrimination by van Dijk (1984) and prejudice talk by Wetherell and Potter (1992), that many commentators have shown how interviewees may mobilize clichés to enhance the common sense status of the speaker's words, thereby avoiding problems of accountability. (Condor, 2000:186). In the case of my data it appears that speakers often used clichés of national character to ironize their utterances. By using irony they mark the accounts as knowingly funny, exaggerated or, as Condor observed in her data "as reports of common sense beliefs which the speaker did not necessarily endorse". When a speaker make fun of her own utterances it can be difficult to assess whether she means what she says or is mak-

ing reference to the cliché character of the utterance. Some of the respondent's usage of clichés as parts of their characterisation of Finns indicated their awareness of the cliché-content of their utterance and, as Condor concluded, it is a way to take distance from the clichés. Always, when the respondents used clichés attached to certain nationalities, to Swedes or Finns, they laughed and pointed out the absurd nature of many clichés.

### Example 3<sup>7</sup>

- 1 K: Like the neon-coloured jogging outfits! (laughter) And partner look (laughter)
- 2 terrible (laughter).
- 3 That was in the eighties how you recognized Finns, also the tourists from
- 4 Finland came in their horrible jogging outfits (laughter) no one else would have done
- 5 that. And Finns are a bit round, yes, like me (laughter) that is how we are (laughter).
- 6 L: So you would recognise me as a Finn, not because I would ever wear a
- 7 neon-coloured jogging outfit but because I am a bit round (laughter)
- 8 K: (laughter) maybe I would (laughter).  
(*Woman, born 1973, 6/2002*)

The Mphil thesis is a prologue to my PhD thesis and as stated before serves as a pilot project for it. The field research area in Köping with all the informants introduced in this thesis will play a role in the future as well. It is my plan to return to Sweden and conduct more spoken data with Finnish-speak-

ing immigrants' second generation. In addition to single interviews also group conversations are to be conducted. The situation of a group conversation where the interviewer is not actively participating or not present at all can give interesting insights to the participants' views and to ways of arguing for these views. It would be very interesting to find a Swedish research partner to conduct some of the interviews. It could turn out that the situational variables, as introduced by van 't Land (2000) play a crucial role in the outcome of the interviews and change the general picture of the situation. Due to the fact that the data I have used for this Mphil thesis is relatively small the conclusions can only be suggestive. A new series of interviews and group conversations will give me the possibility to look deeper into the defensive speech behaviour and make more solid conclusion about the nature of the need to negotiate.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am narrowing the interest group down to *Finnish* speaking Finns. During the mass immigration also Swedish speaking Finns migrated to Sweden but the language issue did not touch them as strong as it touched the group of non-Swedish speakers.
- <sup>2</sup> To repetitiously explain an already explained issue.
- <sup>3</sup> Turn-taking means in simple terms the giving and taking of a talking turn.

<sup>4</sup> In the examples the capital letter "L" refers to me as an interviewer and another capital letter to the interviewee.

<sup>5</sup> Although I employed different techniques mostly unconsciously, their impact cannot be denied.

<sup>6</sup> The prototype Finnish mentality of not giving up and going through fire if needed. The term embodies also the glorification of the Winter War 1938–1939 when the Finnish army defended the country successfully towards the Russian troops.

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