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Parental discourses of language ideology and linguistic identity in multilingual Finland

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Parental discourses of language ideology and linguistic identity in multilingual Finland

Abstract

Finland is officially a bilingual country but it is in practice multilingual. In the current study, we examined how mothers and fathers of mixed-language families linguistically identified themselves and others, and how ideological discourses and concepts historically and socially situated in Finland circulated through the parents’ talk. The parents of three families in which at least Finnish, Swedish and English were used on a daily basis were interviewed. A discourse nexus approach showed that the concept of ‘mother tongue(s)’ played a central role and that although all family members were in practice multilingual, there was a strong tendency across the couples to identify themselves and others as monolingual. Bilingualism was identified with Finnish-Swedish rather than other languages and a native discourse expressed bilingual identity as granted by birth rather than acquired later. The discourses could be traced back to official language registration procedures, the educational system in Finland, as well as to parents’ own lived experiences. The study illustrates the intricate relationships between language ideologies and how linguistic identities are created and performed among parents, and it pinpoints the need for further studies on how linguistic identities are passed on to and experienced by children along their life trajectories.

Keywords: language ideology; linguistic identity; mixed-language families; Finland; nexus analysis

Introduction

Finland is a multilingual country with two equal national languages, Finnish and Swedish. The Sámi as an indigenous group and the Roma, as well as ‘other’ language groups and users of sign languages, are also acknowledged in the Constitution of Finland 1999. Multilingualism is further emphasised by migration in Finland even
though the number of migrants is still small compared with the numbers in other Nordic countries (Honko & Latomaa, 2016). There is a conscious education policy of promoting multilingual skills and identities, as reflected in the recently implemented national core curriculum for basic education (FNBE, 2014), and there is a long tradition of formal language teaching: it is compulsory for schoolchildren to study the national languages (Finnish and Swedish), and in addition to these, at least one ‘foreign’ language (English), with the option of studying further languages (e.g. German, French, or Spanish).

As a result of its language legislation, Finland has a system of official registration of the linguistic affiliation of its citizens; each individual is assigned an official language referred to as his/her ‘mother tongue’. At the moment it is only possible to report one mother tongue; the statistics thus say very little about individual multilingualism and societal linguistic diversity (see Moore, Pietikäinen & Blommaert 2010 for a critical account of numerical representations of speakers). Based on the official statistics, 88.3 % of the population have Finnish, 5.3 % have Swedish, and 6.4 % have other languages as their mother tongue. The largest ‘other’ languages are Russian, Estonian, Arabic and Somali (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017). Despite the fact that Finland is multilingual, there is a prominent national identity discourse of Finland as bilingual, which refers to Finnish and Swedish (Halonen, Ihalainen & Saarinen, 2015; also Hult & Pietikäinen, 2014).

In the current study, parents of three mixed-language families in Finland who regularly used (at least) Finnish and Swedish were interviewed. During these interviews, parents made frequent references to other languages as well. The focus is on how the parents discursively co-construct and negotiate their own and their children’s language and cultural identities, and in doing this, how they circulate official language
ideologies. Finnish and Swedish speakers have shared their territory and lived side-by-side for many centuries (McRae, 2007). Therefore, the cultural context can be “imagined as a homogeneous space” involving very close cultural proximity, which is often argued to be “unproblematic or at least less problematic than cultural distance” (Piller, 2002, p. 6). In this sense, the study complements prior research about binational family constellations where parents speak languages of high prestige but where the cultures are only relatively close (e.g. Gonçalves, 2013; Piller 2002; Teiss & Perendi, 2017) or are quite distant (e.g. Okita, 2002; Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2016). This close cultural proximity opens the way for potentially different patterns of family language policy negotiation and experiences of linguistic identity than have hitherto been explored.

The research questions which we examine are the following: 1) How do parents linguistically (and culturally) identify themselves, and negotiate and ascribe identities to each other and to their children? 2) How are the linguistic identities formulated and negotiated by the parents related to their own lived experiences, on the one hand, and to societally situated discourses and ideologies, on the other? The data analysed were semi-structured interviews with the parent couples. In order to identify the discourses and concepts that were foregrounded and negotiated by the participants we applied a nexus analytical approach (Scollon & Scollon, 2004).

**Ideology and identity in multilingual families**

In the case of multilingual families in Finland, the system of language registration imposes parental agency, since the parents choose the official mother tongue of their child and also the primary language of instruction in school. The registered mother tongue can, however, be changed at any time without explanation. The school system
has parallel Finnish and Swedish tracks providing education in either of the two languages from early childhood to university level. In the current study, all three families had made an informed choice (cf. Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2016, p. 19) of Swedish-track early childhood education for their children. They also employed a multilingual language policy and multilingual practices at home. Hence, their family language policy involved explicit and overt planning in relation to language use (King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008) as well as more implicit and covert planning and practices (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Fogle, 2012; King & Fogle, 2017, Palviainen & Boyd, 2013).

Beliefs and attitudes about languages and language development play a significant role in mixed-language families. By way of example, on the basis of these beliefs, parents may employ certain language practices which they think will lead to a certain result (e.g. De Houwer, 1999; Piller, 2001; Schwartz & Verschik, 2013). Ideology, which in this article is seen as “a set of beliefs” and as “the underlying thought system that is expressed through discourse – language in action” (Määttä & Pietikäinen, 2014, p. 8), therefore interacts with agency in the complex web of actions that mediate family language policy (King & Lanza, 2017). Beliefs indicate that individuals or a community accept something as true, and they are at the same time context-dependent, dynamic and possibly even conflicting (Kalaja et al., 2016, p. 10).

‘Mother tongue’, as mentioned above, is an example of a socially and historically constructed concept (Hult, 2015) that can play out in complex ways as ideological discourse. In one sense, the mother tongue can be very emotionally loaded and closely connected with personal lived experience and identity. In another sense, as Liebkind, Tandefelt and Moring (2007) point out, it can also be merely a bureaucratic term with little content: “people [in Finland] are quite used to the concept of ‘mother tongue’
because that is a concept that is the expression used in several official registers and
documents” (p. 5). The Finnish system, in which everyone is allocated ‘one mother
tongue’, was originally developed in order to serve as a numerical basis for deciding
whether a municipality or local authority was bilingual and therefore obliged to provide
services in both Finnish and Swedish (or Sámi). As we will argue, however, this system
also has profound implications for how parents identify themselves and their children
(see also Bergroth 2015).

Identity is constructed and negotiated in a socio-cultural context and refers to
“people’s understanding of their relationship to the world” (Norton 1997, p. 410). As
identities are socially and discursively (co-)constructed (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), they
are also dynamic and shifting and can serve as a site of struggle and negotiation of
difference and ambivalence (Block, 2007; Piller, 2002). Piller (2002) contends that
identity is not “a matter of labels and categories but rather one of performance” (p. 12);
therefore, from a linguistic perspective, she argues that language and social identity are
mutually constitutive. We argue that it is important to place the notion of linguistic
identity as the focus of analysis and to ask, on the one hand, who has the agentive right
to claim a certain linguistic identity as their own in a multilingual family and, on the
other hand, who has the agentive right – and on what grounds – to deny another’s
bilingual or multilingual identity within the same family.

Our focus in this article is on the meaning-making processes parents use when
constructing their linguistic identity and how these connect with language ideologies.
We aim to capture linguistic identities as they are performed and negotiated by parents
through their talk. We will also explore how the linguistic identities are constructed as a
function of the parents’ personal language ideologies and their personal trajectories of
language learning, and how these align with larger cycles of public discourses.
Data collection and participants

The present study was a part of a larger ethnographically informed research project focusing on mixed-language families in Finland in which there were children between 3-5 years of age attending Swedish early childhood education (ECE). The families were recruited via the ECE centres. As a criterion for participation, the parents had to have different languages (Swedish or Finnish) registered as their official mother tongue. The data used was from interviews carried out with the parents in three of the families, who lived in two different cities. The Pitkänen and the Kuusisto-Lindström couples lived in Weston, an officially bilingual city, while the Kivistö couple lived in Middleton, an officially monolingual Finnish city (see Table 1). In Weston, 69 % of the population had Finnish, 23 % Swedish, and 8 % other languages as their registered mother tongue whereas in Middleton, 95 % of the population were registered as Finnish speakers and 5 % as speakers of other languages (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017.)

The interviews followed a structured protocol (Mann, 2016), each one including the same set of questions, which dealt with the participants’ language background, languages studied at school and used at work, language choices at home, definitions of bilingualism, and multilingual contacts in the family’s daily life. The interviews were between 45 and 60 minutes long and were carried out by the second author, who is multilingual. The participants could choose which language(s) to use in the interviews: the Pitkänen and Kivistö couples used mainly Finnish and the Kuusisto-Lindström couple used Swedish as well as Finnish. The interview excerpts below are provided in the original language as well as translated into English.
Table 1. Participants, their reported language backgrounds, place of residence and children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Home and schooling language(s)</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Other languages</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Children (years;months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pitkänen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tuija</td>
<td>Finnish/ Swedish</td>
<td>Weston</td>
<td>Eva (4;11) younger sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaakko</td>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td></td>
<td>English, German</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitkänen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuusisto-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Finnish, English</td>
<td>Weston</td>
<td>Ella (3;9) older sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindström</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kivistö</td>
<td></td>
<td>Heikki</td>
<td>Finnish/ Swedish</td>
<td>Middleton</td>
<td>Tindra (4;1) younger sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English, German</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leena</td>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data analysis

The interviews were analysed as a part of a larger set of data with a nexus analytic approach. We see interview material as rich data to tap parental discourses about language ideologies and linguistic identities and a nexus approach makes it possible to disentangle and analyse complex layers of discourse (Palviainen & Boyd, 2013). At the
core of nexus analysis is a social action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), which in this study is the parental co-construction of linguistic identities in talk. A social action is situated at the intersection of the historical body of the individuals, the interaction order which they mutually produce among themselves, and the discourses in place that enable that action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 153–154). In our analysis, we therefore carried out mapping and circumferencing discourse analysis of the lived experiences and language learning trajectories of, and beliefs held by, the individual parents (the historical body); norms of interaction and expectations about social roles – or – participants and their significance (the interaction order); and the situated context in which action took place, including ideologies, socially and historically situated concepts and norms of interpretation (the discourses in place) (Hult, 2015). With the two research questions in mind, we mapped relevant people, places, discourses, objects, and concepts (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 159–160) in the parental talk and analysed how these were negotiated between the parents. We also identified connections with larger cycles of societal and historical discourses.

Notably, neither of the concepts ‘ideology’ or ‘identity’ were mentioned in the interviews by either researchers or parents, yet they are an integral part of the individuals’ historical body and of the discourses in place. The concepts also play out in interaction orders and they therefore functioned as tools facilitating our analysis and understanding of the social action at hand. In the following sections, we present the results of the nexus analyses of the three families in turn: the Pitkänens, the Lindström-Kuusistos, and the Kivistös.

Results

The Pitkänen couple
Jaakko and Tuija Pitkänen both grew up in Finnish-speaking homes in the Weston area, but whereas Jaakko went to a Finnish-medium school, Tuija attended a Swedish-medium one. Jaakko had studied Swedish, English and German at school, and he was now enrolled in a Finnish-English university programme. Both Jaakko and Tuija used Finnish, Swedish and English in their work. With these backgrounds they were what Kramsch (2009, p. 17) refers to as ‘multilingual subjects’.

The concept of ‘bilingualism’, for both of them, referred explicitly to (speakers of) Finnish and Swedish. For example, in the following excerpt, Jaakko reported “this bilingualism” as being the natural state of affairs in the Weston surroundings where he grew up (Excerpt [1]; transcription conventions to be found at the end of the article):

[1]

Jaakko: Mä oon ihan täysin suomenkielisestä perheestä. Oon ihan paljasjalkainen Westonlainen. Eli mä oon ikäni asunu täällä. Et se on periaatteessa tähän kosketus tähän kakskielisyteen. On ollu se on ihan luontevaa että jotkut puhuu suomea ja jotkut puhuu ruotsia. I was born and bred in Weston into a totally Finnish-speaking family. I have lived here all my life. So that’s basically my connection to this bilingualism. It has been completely natural to me that some people speak Finnish and some speak Swedish.

Tuija had a Swedish-speaking father but Finnish was the home language during her childhood. When Tuija described her linguistic identity, she revealed its complexity (Excerpt [2]):

[2]

Tuija: Mä en oikeastaan tunne itseäni ihan ruotsinkieliseks, mä en I don't really feel that I’m really a Swedish speaker, and I don't
She thus initially stated that she felt that she was neither a Swedish-speaker nor a Finnish-speaker, but then announced that Finnish was the language of her heart because she had inherited it from her own mother. Later in the interview, she ascribed a similar identity to her 4-year-old daughter: bilingual, but more Finnish than Swedish (Excerpt [3]).

According to Tuija, Eva also had a strong emergent interest in English: *Evalla on just se englanti nyt joku vähän sellanen vaihe et hän sanoo että ‘thank you’ että ‘mä tiedän mitä se tarkoittaa’* (“as for English, Eva is now at the stage when she says ‘thank you’ and ‘I know what that means’”).

In the following excerpts [4a and b], Jaakko and Tuija were discussing whether they count as bilingual, still assuming that it is about Finnish and Swedish:

[4a]

**Tuija:** Eva on kaksikielinen. Mutta ehkä mä sanoisin enemmän että suomen, myös sitä sydämeltään suomenkielinen. Jos mä niinku itteeni kuvalisin näin niin tällä hetkellä ehkä Eva on myöskin näin.

Eva is bilingual. But maybe I would say more Finnish, also in her heart Finnish speaking. If I describe myself like that, she is perhaps like that too, at this point.
Tuija: Mää koen että mä oon kakskielinen ja mä huomaan sen siinä, että mä en osaa kumpaakaan kieltä kunnolla. I feel that I’m bilingual and I notice it in the sense that I don’t know either of the two languages properly.

Jaakko: No en mää osaa sanoa että mä oisin ainakaan kovin vahvasti kaksikielinen, en mä nyt tässä iässä. Täs tavallaan on lainausmerkeissä joutunut opettelemaan sitten kielen. Well at least I can’t say that I would be very strongly bilingual, not at this age. I so to speak in inverted commas have had to learn the language.

Whereas Tuija acknowledged her bilingualism by virtue of not knowing either of the two languages (Swedish and Finnish) properly, Jaakko declared that he was not “very strongly” so. He pointed out that he had learned Swedish (“the language”) only when he was older. Tuija had a very definite opinion about Jaakko’s bilingualism (Excerpt [5]):

Tuija: Niin ja mä näkisin ettei Jaakko millään lailla kakskielinen. As I see it, Jaakko is not bilingual in any sense. As I see it Jaakko is a Finnish speaker but he knows Swedish and can use it at work. And in that he knows well, he has learned English that he knows English as already in school when he was younger, still, in the same way as with Swedish, you can’t say that you are like bilingual in English and Finnish in that way. At least I

Niin ja mä näkisin ettei Jaakko millään lailla kakskielinen.
Että mä näkisin et Jaakko on suomenkielinen mutta se osaa ruotsia ja osaa käyttää töissä. Ja sillä lailla että osaa ruotsia ja sillä lailla kun ajattelee että osaa englantiakin, englantia on oppinut jo koulussa nuorempana. Ni tavallaan ku ruotsia sä esimerkiks etkä sä silti voi sanoo että sä oot niinku englantiilais-suomenkielinen kakskielinen siis sillälaila. Niin mä ainakin ajattelen sen
jotenkin sillälailla että sitten see it that we live in a
ruotsinkielisessä ympäristössä Swedish-speaking
elää, no joo tavallaan joo, mutta environment, yes, but I see it
että kyllä mä näksisin että=
Jaakko: =kyllä mä niinku yksieliinen =yes, it’s like, I’m
oon, kun se on niinku tosiaan se monolingual, because it’s, it
on=
really is=
Tuija: =sä osaat ruotsia ja englantia ja
näin mutta mun mielestä sä oot English but in my opinion
tää on niinku mun näkemys you are like-
Jaakko: Joo että se on niinku Yes it's like a part that has
tavallaan tänne päälippaan been glued onto the brain,
niinku semmonen something that has been put
päälleliimmattu osio että se on there later.
niinku tuotu sinne
jälkeenpäin.

In this exchange, Tuija disqualified Jaakko as a bilingual: he was, rather, a Finnish
speaker who knew Swedish and English. Jaakko, who first appropriated bilingualism as
something relative (cf [4b]) eventually abandoned this interpretation and aligned with
Tuija’s conception of bilingualism as a question of either-or. In this way they ended up
with a co-constructed identity for Jaakko as a Finnish speaker (even yksieliinen,
“monolingual”) who had some time later learned and added Swedish and English to his
repertoire. The cognitive metaphor that Jaakko used for this process, “glued onto the
brain”, stands in stark contrast to the emotional heart metaphor Tuija used to describe
herself and her daughter. This passage shows that not only is linguistic knowledge
interactively assessed (Piller, 2002, p. 103), but so too is who has the right to be called
bilingual and on what grounds (cf. O’Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo, 2015). In this case, it
seems as if the spouses agreed that Tuija’s childhood, and being born into a family with
Finnish- and Swedish-speaking parents and attending a Swedish school, put her in a
special position and made it legitimate for her to be called bilingual, whereas Jaakko was not in such a position.

The Kuusisto-Lindström couple

Kalle Kuusisto also grew up in a Finnish-speaking family in Weston and went to a Finnish school. He described himself as *ihan westonlainen* and *ihan täysin suomenkielinen* (“a born and bred Westoner”; “definitely a 100% Finnish speaker”). Jessica Lindström, his wife, also claimed to be *riktigt Weston-bo* (“a true Westoner”) but, in contrast to him, to be *fullständigt svenskspråkig* (“a 100 % Swedish speaker”) (Excerpt [6]):

[6]

*Jessica:* Jag är också riktigt Weston-bo. Jag är då fullständigt svenskspråkig. Jag ha inte kunna finska före jag har varit vuxen. Jag ha inte behöva, behöva använda överhuvudtaget […] Nu klarar jag nog mig men på jobbet behöver jag inga finska som men att så-. Jag är nog bara fullständigt enspråkig å int nå andra språk, engelska-

*I am also a true Westoner. I’m in turn a 100 % Swedish speaker. I didn’t know Finnish until I was a grown-up. I didn’t need to use [Finnish] at all […] Nowadays I manage in Finnish but at work I need no Finnish so -. But I am like completely monolingual and no other languages, English -*

*Kalle:* Mut sähän oot tänäpäivänä parempi suomes ku minä, mä veikkaan.

*But nowadays I’d say you are better at Finnish than I am.*

*Jessica:* Jaa så sådär ja.

*Well, kind of yes.*

*Kalle:* Kieliopillisesti ainakin.

*At least grammatically.*

Although it was evident that Jessica and Kalle could speak both Swedish and Finnish –
Kalle even pointed out that she outperformed him in Finnish – they both insisted on describing themselves as 100% speakers of either-or. In the following excerpt [7], Jessica elaborated on her interpretation that she was good at Finnish, but not good enough to count as a bilingual:

[7]

Jessica: Jag är inte ännu tvåspråkig eftersom jag kan inte finska så bra. Människor runtomkring mig säger att jag är duktig på finska men jag själv har såhär att vissa dagar kan jag inte producera en ord, everything goes wrong. But some days I’m quite fluent.

I’m not bilingual yet as I don’t speak Finnish so well.

People around me say that I’m good at Finnish but I sometimes have days when I can’t produce a word.

Her conclusion is that she is a Swedish speaker who is good at Finnish, but not good enough to count as a bilingual. In contrast, Jessica considered that their daughter was bilingual: Ella är tvåspråkig eftersom hon är född i både finskt och svenskt (“Ella is bilingual because she was born into both Swedish and Finnish”). According to Jessica, bilingualism thus comes with birth, if both languages are represented by the parents. This nativeness ideology was strong in all three families. Later in the interview the parents mentioned that Ella had an emerging and strong interest in English, too, partly mediated by her older sister: När hon är här och sköter så ser de på filmerna på engelska för att hon skulle lära sig (“When she [the sister] is here and takes care of her [Ella] they watch films in English in order for her [Ella] to learn it”).
In addition to proficiency and nativeness discourses, Jessica suggested that appropriation of cultures and traditions was an essential part of bilingualism. In the following excerpt [8], Jessica reflected on whether her husband qualified as bilingual:

[8]

Jessica: Kalle tycker jag att börjar snart bli tvåspråkig. Han har varit ganska tvåspråkig länge för vi har haft den där kulturen vi har den där svenskspråkiga kulturen som han är som ändå från början. Han har nu levt i den i 21 år med alla traditioner o sånt att du är nu som, du är tvåspråkig, tycker jag att du- Nå jag definierar å fast nu har du ju vissa ord som du int kanske-

Kalle: Joo. ((tvekande))

Jessica: Men att nog, jag tycker det för att som med den där kulturen att jag uppfattar int mig som till exempel överhuvudtaget som att jag med de här finska traditionerna och leverlåda och vet du alla era konstigheter ni har, vet du så här. ((skrattande))

Kalle: Yeah. ((hesitant))

Jessica: Men att nog, jag tycker det för att som med den där kulturen att jag uppfattar int mig som till exempel överhuvudtaget som att jag med de här finska traditionerna och leverlåda och vet du alla era konstigheter ni har, vet du så här. ((skrattande))

But that - I think that, because about that culture, for myself I don’t feel at all for example that I have these Finnish traditions and liver casserole and you know all these peculiarities you have, you know. ((laughs))

Kalle: Yeah. ((hesitant))

Jessica thus made bilingualism into an issue of biculturalism. The culture of Swedish speakers was opposed to that of Finnish speakers, the latter here to be represented by cultural artefacts (the dish leverlåda, “liver casserole”). She claimed that at the same time as Kalle was being socialised into the traditions of Swedish speakers, she was not
being socialised into Finnish traditions. She even opened up the idea that Kalle could eventually legitimately claim to be bilingual. In response to Jessica’s claims, Kalle said:

[9]

Kalle: No en mä nyt ihan vielä tunne että mä olisin kaksikielinen. Well, I don’t think I quite yet feel that I’m bilingual. But Mutta tietysti varmaan it’s of course for sure as sillälailla niinkuin Jessica Jessica says that there are noin sanoi että varmaan se on those traditions and I’m se näär perinteet ja tää ja mä fairly sure that I’ve become oon varmaan ruotsalais- Swedishiz- – no – I’ve – ruotsinkielistynyt kyllä aika become Swedish-speakerized pahasti varmaan tässä vuosien to quite an extent during varrella. these years.

It is not clear whether he agreed with Jessica that bilingualism equals being bicultural, but he did express the idea that he had been socialised into many Swedish cultural traditions over time. Discursively, he made a self-correction: instead of saying that he had been ruotsalaistunut (“Swedishized”, become a Swede) – which refers to Sweden as a nation state and to Swedes – he said that he had been ruotsinkielistynyt (“Swedish-speakerized”, become a Swedish-speaker), referring to Swedish speakers in Finland.

Kalle had thus incorporated the norms of interaction of Swedish speakers (in Finland) and had become successfully assimilated into their linguistic and cultural community. This negotiation of cultural identities includes elements of pointing out differences and contains discourses of transformation and assimilation (Block, 2007; Kramsch, 2009).

**The Kivistö couple**

The third family lived in Middleton, a city heavily dominated by Finnish. Leena grew up in a small village in the countryside. She described herself as *aika täysin suomenkielinen* (“pretty much 100 % Finnish speaker”) (Excerpt [10].)
Leena: Äidinkieli on suomi ja niin mä oon lapsuuttani viettänyt Lakesidellä. Mä oon syntynyt Lakesidellä ja ja tota niin niin mä oon aika täysin suomenkielinen (nauraa) ja mä oon aina kokenut et mä en oo ees kielissä mitenkään hirveän lahjakas. Mä oon lukenu ihan normaalisti englanti ruotsi koulussa. My mother tongue is Finnish and I spent my childhood in Lakeside. I was born in Lakeside, and ehm, I'm pretty much 100% a Finnish speaker ((laughs)) and I've always had the feeling that I'm not very gifted when it comes to languages. I studied English and Swedish at school, as usual.

Leena thus had a very strong identity as a Finnish speaker and stressed Finnish as her mother tongue. An important aspect of Leena’s language learning trajectory and lived experience (i.e., in nexus terms: her historical body) was that when she studied English and Swedish at school, she felt that she was not good at them and that they were too difficult for her. She mostly used Finnish in her daily work and only on very rare occasions did she need to use English or Swedish. Leena’s husband Heikki had a different background, as he had lived in Sweden for some time during his childhood.

When the family moved to Finland, he went to Swedish-medium schools (Excerpt [11]):

Heikki: Ja minä oon myös suomi äidinkieli virallinen äidinkieli on suomen kieli mut oon asunu lapsuuteni ruotsissa kakskielisessä ympäristössä ja sitteko on muutettu suomeen niin oon kaikki koulu oon käny ruotsin kielellä. Vanhempani ovat kylläkin suomenkielisiä mut et And my mother tongue too is officially Finnish, that’s my official mother tongue but I lived in a bilingual environment in Sweden during my childhood and after moving to Finland all my schooling was in Swedish. My parents are also Finnish speakers but I would
In this excerpt, two intersecting discourses can be found: the first one indexing Heikki as a Finnish speaker by virtue of his official mother tongue and Finnish-speaking parents, and the other one pointing to his being Finnish-Swedish bilingual by virtue of the linguistic, sociocultural and educational environment. He further reported the regular use of English at work. One theme with this couple, pursued particularly by Leena, was that Heikki had a rich repertoire of language resources whereas Leena’s repertoire was restricted. She even joked about it, awarding Heikki an international identity: "I always joke that we’re that kind of couple that he’s international and I’m from Lakeside (laughs).” Lakeside here stands for a rustic village, which gives strong connotations of Finnish (monolingual) speakers and Finnish culture (cf. also Excerpt [10]). Lakeside is thus a geographical place foregrounded by Leena as relevant (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 162) in explaining her identity.

In the following quote [12], Leena reflected on who counted as a bilingual:

[12]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leena:</th>
<th>I’m not bilingual and in my opinion the definition of bilingualism is somehow that one has mastered it like, I can’t say on what level. Heikki talks about grammar and so on, but somehow it means though that one has</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minä en ole kaksikielinen ja mun mielestä kaksikielisyyden määritelmä on jotenkin se hal- hallitsee niinku mä en osaa sanoa sitä mil- millä tasolla. Heikki puhu tosta kielio- kielioista ja muusta, mutta mut</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In her view, in order to count as bilingual, in addition to the mother tongue (in the singular) you need to know another language sufficiently well. According to her, Tindra met these criteria. Heikki made a mild objection, that it is possible to have more than one mother tongue (Excerpt [13]). After hearing Heikki’s arguments, Leena came up with this interpretation.

[13]  

Heikki: Jollainhan se voi olla äidinkieli voi olla molemmat että toi se voi tulla niinku taustalta sieltä että se on molemmilla äidinkieli. Mutta jonkinlainen määritelmä voi myöskin olla et se se ei oo niin kuin opittu kieli siis siinä mielessä et se tulee sieltä niinku luonnostaan et pystyy niinku vaihteleen kielitä tosta noin että et se on niinku synynn-synynnästä. Et ei silleen että on kaksymppisenä oppinu jonkun kielen ja sit totee et mä on kolmikielen.

Leena: Niin joo ei. Yes, you’re right.
Whereas Leena’s reference to a mother tongue in the singular is a common discourse in the Finnish context due to the bureaucratic system of registering one official mother tongue, Heikki recycled another discourse, where the mother tongue has emotional connotations and is not necessarily restricted to just one. In defining what it takes to count as bilingual, Heikki presented a complex aggregate of different discourses (Scollon & Scollon, p. 14): he saw bilingualism as rooted in one’s early years, he thought that bilingual means that you can switch effortlessly between the languages, and he thought that the languages are not ‘learned’ or ‘foreign’. Heikki’s ideas were grounded in his own historical body and lived experiences, and he ascribed to Tindra a similar identity to his own. Both parents also joyfully reported Tindra’s interest in languages such as German and English: *Tindra kysyy hirveen usein, että ’mitä kielä toi on’ [...] et hän tietää että se on saksaa ja on englantia ja niin niin se on niin hauska tosissaan.* (“Tindra very often asks, ‘what language is that’ [...] so she knows that it’s German and that there’s English and so on, so that’s really nice.”). Still, she was defined as bilingual (rather than multilingual). The reasoning here reminds us of what we found in the Pitkänen family: one can add languages to one’s repertoire as one gets older (cf. Excerpt [5] above), but one is bilingual first and foremost by virtue of being born into it or, alternatively, of having attended school in another language than the one spoken at home.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we have analysed linguistic identities as (co-)constructed in parental discourses in three multilingual families. In response to the first research question – how parents linguistically (and culturally) identified themselves, and negotiated and ascribed identities to each other and to their children – we found that all the families and their members were constructed as multilinguals. Although the term ‘multilingual’ itself
was not explicitly employed by any of the parents, it was evident that different languages (Finnish, Swedish, English, German) played significant roles in their own as well as in their children’s everyday lives. However, to identify oneself or one’s partner as bilingual or multilingual was not straightforward and required negotiation between the parents.

Rather contradictorily, whilst being multilinguals with rich repertoires of inherited as well as acquired language skills, most parents were firm about identifying themselves as a speaker of only one language: *olen ihan/aika täysin suominkielinen* (“I am definitely/pretty much 100 % a Finnish speaker”) or *fullständigt svenskspråkig* (100 % Swedish speaker). This means that identity was primarily defined in terms of belonging to a single (imagined homogenous) group of speakers of a certain language (cf. the concept of ‘speaker- hood’ in Moore et al., 2010). Moreover, whereas traditions and habits were put forward by one of the couples (Lindström-Kuusisto) to distinguish Finnish speakers from Swedish speakers, ethnicity was not an issue. This stands in contrast to other studies of binational couples, where ethnicity plays a potentially significant role in negotiations of linguistic identity (e.g., Okita, 2002; Piller, 2002).

As for the second research question – how the constructed linguistic identities were related to the parents’ own lived experiences and to societally situated discourses and ideologies – we found certain concepts that frequently circulated, such as ‘mother tongue(s)’, ‘bilingual(ism)’, and ‘foreign’ and ‘learned language(s)’. These are socially and historically situated concepts known from Finnish national language policy and education policy discourses, as well as colloquial discourse. In the interviews, ‘mother tongue’ was referred to by some of the parents in terms of the official mother tongue, and hence conceptualised in the singular. Others challenged this concept, attached emotional content to ‘mother tongue’ and distinguished it from ‘foreign language’, and
provided alternative definitions, including the possibility of naming more than one
mother tongue as part of one’s individual identity.

The parents seemed to conceptualise ‘bilingual’ as an identity that comes at
birth: a child born into a mixed language family had the right to claim and be granted
bilingual identity, regardless of their language proficiency or bilingual practices.
Moreover, parents were surprisingly firm that a bilingual or multilingual identity could
not be achieved or claimed over time, no matter how much they had studied languages
formally, or what multilingual practices there might have been in their family or
working life as an adult. Identity in this sense, rather than being dynamic and subject to
change over time, becomes a matter of essence: it is something you have (i.e. are born
into) rather than something you do (i.e. using or acquiring new languages). There were,
however, two exceptions to this ideology of nativeness: Tuija and Heikki were both
born into families where Finnish was spoken but they attended Swedish-medium
schools. In Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977, p. 42-43) terms, while the primary habitus
acquired at home in their early years was monolingual, the secondary habitus acquired
at school served to give them a bilingual identity as adults. The importance of going to a
Swedish school in Finland for the development of a minority language identity on the
national as well as the individual level has also been acknowledged elsewhere (e.g.
Lojander-Visapää, 2008).

Despite the fact that all the subjects were in practice multilingual, the main
discourses circulating in the parental talk can thus be summarised as ascribing to
themselves (and others) a monolingual identity unless they had been born into a mixed-
language family (or attended a minority language school), in which cases they could be
(ascribed a bilingual identity. Moreover, the societal discourse equating ‘bilingualism’
with Finnish-Swedish bilingualism in Finland (Halonen et al., 2015; Hult & Pietikäinen,
2014) was strongly present in all the arguments. This discourse was most likely grounded in the fact that each citizen is identified with one official mother tongue, in combination with a general conception that there are two distinct language groups in Finland. This concept can be traced all the way back to the Constitution of Finland (1919/1999), where it is stated that “the public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an equal basis” (§17) (cf. Ihalainen & Saarinen, 2015). On the whole, although it was obvious that the participants knew several languages, multilingualism was given only a background role in the discussions.

**Conclusion**

The parental talk around the couples’ language backgrounds and what it takes to count as bi- or multilingual revealed hybrid identities and multiple discourses (cf. Gonçalves, 2013; Piller, 2002). Across the couples, we could identify a number of co-occurring discourses based on such aspects as proficiency, order of acquisition, affection, nativeness, inheritance and cultural appropriation. Although revealing a tendency to label and categorise identities and pin them onto themselves as well as onto others, essentially seeing identity as something set from birth – hence pursuing a nativeness ideology – the couples also actively negotiated identities and in some cases modified their conceptions while interacting. We further found that all the families applied multilingual language practices within and outside their bilingual homes. However, we also found an equally clear tendency to describe languages learned later as additional, separate pieces glued onto the original identity, rather than being an integral part of it.

Ideologies held by individuals or a community mediate – and are mediated through – language use (cf. De Houwer, 1999; Piller, 2002). This study highlights the
need to further explore the intricate connections between identities, ideologies and agency (Kalaja et al, 2016, p. 18; King & Lanza, 2017). The study illustrates how systems of social organisation and societal language planning discourses of supporting or safeguarding linguistic rights at a bilingual/multilingual national level can at the same time force monolingual identities onto multilingual individuals. Along with individual lived experiences, societal ideologies and discourses affect how parents define the linguistic identity of their family and its members. We need further research to find out what implications this has for how linguistic identity is passed on across generations. A relevant question to ask in the future is how young children – like Eva, Ella and Tindra, who were all given a bilingual identity by their parents – will identify themselves as adults and how that, in turn, will affect their own language practices, ideologies and life trajectories.

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i Transcription key:
[...] some content left out
[   ] content added for clarity
((() non-verbal content
underline stressed content
word- interrupted speech
=word= latched utterances