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Visual accounts of Finnish and Greek teenagers' perceptions of their multilingual language and literacy practices

Abstract: This paper uses visual methods to explore how teenagers in two different European countries (Finland and Greece) personally relate to their first language and to English, which is widely used in the everyday lives of young people in both countries. Our data comprise sets of self-made visualizations in which 14- to 16-year-old teenagers depict their personal relationship to their first language (Finnish/Greek) and to English. Theoretically and methodologically, we subscribe to socio-culturally oriented research on (foreign language) literacy and language learning and recent studies on multilingualism. Overall, by offering a detailed account of the variety of representation forms and meaning-making symbols employed by our participants in their visual products, our analysis in this paper highlights the common but also diverse perceptions, values and attitudes that young people from two different European contexts bring to their practices and their encounters with English and other languages in their lives. By revealing the personal meanings and values attached by teenagers to English, our analysis also provides indirect insights into the multiple ways English is locally encountered, appropriated and drawn upon by young people in two different countries to serve their own purposes.

Keywords: literacy, visual representations, adolescents

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore, through the use of visual methods, how teenagers in two different European countries (Finland and Greece) personally

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relate to their first language and to English, a language which officially holds the status of a foreign language but is widely used in the everyday lives of young people in both countries. Taking as a starting point that visual modes of expression allow for a rich understanding of adolescents' perceptions of language and literacy and provide insights into the values, attitudes and ideologies they bring to their practices, we seek to uncover young people's own understandings of the role that English plays in their everyday realities, particularly in comparison to their first language and, in this way, to get indirect access to the ways that English is locally encountered, appropriated and drawn upon by young people in two different countries to serve their own purposes. To achieve this, we will focus on Finnish and Greek teenagers' visualizations of their personal relationship to their first language (Finnish/ Greek) and to English. The visualization task is in both cases part of larger longitudinal, ethnographically-based research projects on young people's (14–16 years old) everyday language and literacy practices, especially those related to English.

Theoretically and methodologically, our paper subscribes to socio-culturally oriented research on (foreign language) literacy (e.g., Barton and Hamilton 2000; Barton 2007; Street 2003; Gee 2008) and language learning (e.g., Norton 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006; van Lier 2000) and recent studies on multilingualism (e.g., García 2009; Jaffe 2007; Pennycook 2010; Pietikäinen 2010), which seek to dispel the myth of language and literacy as a code, as an autonomous, fixed system or as a set of normative practices. Contrary to such cognitive-based perspectives, these approaches are based on understandings that language (among other semiotic systems) and literacy practices are never independent of the social world, and place emphasis on the ways individuals draw on these resources to make sense of their social realities.

Further, our paper draws on an emerging body of research on literacy, language learning and multilingualism which argues for the use of visual forms of representation as a means of enhancing understanding of the complexity of adolescents' language and literacy practices. Such research – in line with the recent interest in the multimodality of texts (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006) and the increased emphasis on child-centred, "collaborative or participatory research techniques" (Best 2007: 14) – has focused on multimodal and/or pictorial creations as a means to access young people's constructions of literacy (Kendrick and McKay 2011), young children's multilingual practices in indigenous language contexts (Pietikäinen 2012; Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta 2013), young people's multilingual language repertoires (Busch 2010), language practices (Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta 2008), and language portraits (Farmer and Prasad 2014).

2 Theoretical starting points

2.1 Literacy as a social practice

The concept of literacy used here draws broadly on recent work in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, ethnography and sociolinguistics which has challenged cognitive orientations and seeks to study literacy from a socially-based perspective in its context of occurrence (e.g., Baynham 1995; Gee 2008; Street 2003). In such work there has been an increasing recognition that literacy is not only a set of independent, technical coding and decoding skills that an individual possesses and that are learned component by component until a universal skill – applicable in all contexts – is reached (e.g., Gough 1995), but a practice that is "always and already embedded in particular social forms of activity" (Baynham and Prinsloo 2001: 83), and can only be understood when it is situated in its social, cultural and historical contexts of occurrence (e.g., Barton and Hamilton 2000; Barton 2007; Street 2003; Gee 2008). In this broader framework, closely linked to our own understandings of literacy is Baynham's (1995) argument that investigating literacy as a practice involves exploring and understanding literacy as a "concrete human activity" (Baynham 1995: 1); not just the objective details of what people read and write, but also what meanings they associate with what they read and write, how they construct the value of literacy, and the ideologies that surround it within a social context and at a particular place and time (Baynham 1995; Barton and Hamilton 2000). This is precisely the aspect of literacy practices that our paper focuses on.

   In accordance with this contextual nature of literacy, young people's literacy practices with English and other languages are viewed in this paper as socially constructed, locally enacted and negotiated in the various social worlds, domains and spaces that adolescents inhabit (e.g., home, peer groups, Internet cafés, free time or hobbies); they are embedded in young people's often vernacular activities of everyday life and are underpinned by their personal attitudes, concerns, ideologies and values. In addition, in this paper we draw on approaches to literacy that see literacy practices, with English in particular, as grounded in daily life not only within local contexts, but also, due to globalization, digitization and rapidly evolving technological advances, in relation to the *imagined communities*[1] (Anderson 1983; Kanno and Norton 2003) that teenagers aspire to join in the near future: communities that are influenced by global flows

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1 *Imagined communities* refer to "groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination" (Kanno and Norton 2003: 241).

of youth-oriented media and cultivated by products of pop culture (films, songs, magazines, TV shows, etc.), beyond the here and now. Facilitated by the growing dominance of English in digital communication technologies, young people's practices also occur in translocal activity spaces (Leppänen et al. 2009) that offer unprecedented possibilities for contact, communication, action, learning and cultural exchange with teenagers across the globe. These spaces have the potential to offer engagement and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), an entry point into more central participation and an additional way to learn the language through strategies developed by this peripheral engagement (cf. Murray 2008). In relation to this, our participants' visualizations of their relation to English as presented and analyzed in this paper reveal their construction of this global language as infused with symbolic significance – a symbolic capital in Bourdieu's (1986) terms – that opens up for them a new world of international contacts and possibilities of access to a "global imagined community of English users" (Pennycook 2003: 529).

2.2 Language, language learning and multilingualism

As our focus here is on adolescents' relationship to their first language and to English, we need to acknowledge that these young people are also learners of English and that they spend a considerable proportion of their time at school, also in English lessons. They thus encounter English both in their everyday activities and in the formal institutional environment; they are both language users and language learners. Therefore, we also draw on theories of language learning that are connected to the social approaches to literacy described above. Sociocultural (e.g., Norton 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Dufva et al. 2011) and ecological (van Lier 2000) approaches to language learning see learning as both an individual and a social process, but so that the individual and the social are inherently connected, each shaping and being shaped by the other. Both language and literacy are always embedded in a social context, and learning languages is inextricably bound to participation in the activities of particular social communities. In line with these approaches to language learning, it is vital to focus on the learner and the learner's subjective experiences of languages in various contexts (Kramsch 2009: 2). To understand how the individual (in his/her social environment) learns languages, we need to look at affective aspects of the learner's experiences and examine how the individual relates to languages in his /her daily environment. Subjectivity is thus "associated with the cognitive and emotional development of the self" (Kramsch 2009: 16). One important way to access the emotional aspects of language learning and use is

through visual methods, which have hitherto been widely used in studying literacy practices (e.g., Barton and Hamilton 2000) and language learning and use (e.g., Busch 2010; Kalaja et al. 2013; Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta 2014).

In this article, and in our projects more broadly, we also adhere to a dynamic view of language and multilingualism. Rather than compartmentalizing languages into separate entities, we see languages as resources that people draw on in their social activities (Pennycook 2010; Canagarajah 2013; Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta 2013, 2014). The constant flows of people and the rapid technological developments have transformed ways of meaning making in profound ways: communication today involves various multimodal means of meaning making, such as text, icons, graphics, images, and video (e.g., Lytra 2011), which make it possible to cross language boundaries (Canagarajah 2013: 2). These new developments and new emerging connections across local and global spaces also promote the creative use of all available language resources and, as discussed above, they have changed literacy practices in fundamental ways. Young people especially are creative in mixing and meshing languages, symbols and modalities (e.g., Leppänen et al. 2009). Kramsch points out that when online, people seem to set aside language boundaries and "comprehensibility online trumps accuracy and appropriateness" (2014: 300). These new ways of using languages have consequences for conceptualizations of languages. The traditional categories of, for example, first, second, or foreign languages (L1, L2, FL) seem no longer valid in describing the languages we relate to in our everyday lives. The categories of L1, L2 and FL are based on the ideals of native speakers and nation states, which both seem obsolete in current societies. These categorizations also reflect a monolingual and static orientation, which is in contradiction to current language practices. English in particular has become a resource that is locally appropriated (Pennycook 2012) to various kinds of instrumental and symbolic uses and can no longer be seen as "the English language", located within certain geopolitical spaces. Still, at the same time, our institutions in particular continue to categorize languages, for example into school subjects, and languages are mostly learnt in isolation. Thus everyday and school practices might differ quite substantially and languages are at the same time dynamic and mixing as well as static and bounded (Pennycook 2007: 8). In this article, too, we talk about "Finnish", "Greek", and "English", as this was the layman's way we approached languages with our participants, but despite the categorizations we were able to see how young people's perceptions move across language boundaries.

When we approach languages as dynamic resources, an alternative, dynamic view of multilingualism suggests itself. This dynamic approach to multilingualism also moves away from the notion of languages as bounded

and separated entities and from the view of multilingualism as *parallel mono-lingualism* (Heller 1999), i.e., a full competence in a number of isolated and bounded languages. Instead, multilingualism is seen as a social practice (García 2009; Jaffe 2007; Pennycook 2010; Pietikäinen 2010). Multilingualism is not seen as competence or skills in several separate languages, but as the ability to move between languages and to take up various linguistic (and semiotic) resources to accomplish individual, personalized and social goals. Multilingual people draw on whatever resources are available to them to navigate complex linguistic situations, to find a voice and to create their multi-lingual subjects. Multilingualism takes on various forms, not only the tradi-tional idea of bilinguals who grow up with two first languages. According to Kramsch (2009: 16–17), any use of more than one language in one's life makes one multilingual. When this dynamic view of multilingualism is connected to language learning, we can no longer assume that the learners' goal is to learn a whole system categorized as one language with native speakers, but must consider rather that their goal is to become "*resourceful speakers"* (Pennycook 2012: 170, italics in original) with a rich repertoire of various multimodal resources on which they draw in meaning making.

To sum up, our theoretical starting points, outlined in the previous sections, challenge and disrupt mainstream conceptualizations and prevailing under-standings of language and literacy and language use. Our aim is to bring together insights and approaches both from literacy research and from research on language learning and multilingualism, which together provide us with a broad framework from which to examine how young people make sense of their own everyday practices related to literacy and language.

3 Research contexts

This paper focuses on sets of data drawn from two longitudinal, ethnographi-cally-oriented research projects on young people's everyday language and lit-eracy practices, especially those related to English. The young people in question were aged 14–16 and included both boys and girls. These larger projects were carried out in two locations on the edges of Europe: Finland in the north and Greece in the south. To our knowledge, they are two of the few ethnographically-based projects, in Europe and beyond, which empirically explore – from a social point of view – young people's everyday literacy in settings where English holds the official status of a foreign language. Further, while the Finnish and Greek studies were conducted in quite different European

contexts in terms of cultural, linguistic and historical characteristics, they had similar motivations, theoretical understandings and methodological stances, not least in terms of their approach to developing a more nuanced understanding of the role of English in young people's everyday lives. We note here, however, that several years elapsed between the two studies: the Finnish one was conducted in 2007 and 2008 and the Greek one was conducted in 2010 and 2011. This follow-up-construction, although not intentional, turned out to be particularly helpful since it allowed us to examine how the phenomena observed may have changed for one reason or another, for example as a result of the rapid technological changes taking place at this time.

To be more precise, the Finnish data reported in this paper are part of a larger ethnographically-oriented project which ran over a period of eighteen months in 2007 and 2008 in a mid-sized city in Central Finland and examined how Finnish adolescents perceive and make sense of their English-related language and literacy practices (see Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta 2008; Pitkänen-Huhta and Nikula 2013). The subjects were 15–16 year-old boys and girls and the data were collected by means of multiple methods and data sources, including individual interviews, group discussions, adolescents' self-made recordings of their everyday language use, and a collection of their perceptions of English in the form of written and oral diaries, photographs and visualizations.

The Greek data come from an ethnographically-oriented multiple case study which theoretically and methodologically drew on understandings from New Literacy Studies, discourse analysis and ethnography (Rothoni 2015). The study extended over a period of eighteen months in 2010 and 2011 and employed a combination of multiple data collection tools and data sources (i.e., interviews, field notes, literacy diaries and checklists, in-home observations, text and document collection, photographs, visualizations and drawings) to document and provide an in-depth account of the everyday literacy practices in English of fifteen teenagers (14–15 year-old boys and girls, both private and state school students) living in Athens, Greece. In this paper, we focus on the visualizations collected in both studies.

Finland is a northern European country with ca. 5.3 million inhabitants. The country has two national languages: Finnish, and Swedish (spoken by just 5 % of the population). In addition to the two national languages, Sámi, Romani and Finnish Sign Language have an official status. The number of immigrants in Finland has been increasing steadily. English is not among the principal migrant languages, which are Russian, Estonian, and Somali, and English has no official status in Finland, yet it could be called a domestic language as its use and functions in Finnish society are quite deeply rooted and the level of skills in English is very high in all but the oldest generation (Leppänen et al. 2011).

English has been widely studied at school since the 1960s, even though it is not, even today, a compulsory school subject. In practice, however, almost 100 % of pupils in the third grade of primary school nowadays choose English as their first foreign language and continue studying it until the end of compulsory education and beyond. Moreover, most schools do not offer any options in the third grade, although it is possible to start learning another foreign language in the fifth grade.

Similarly in Greece, a southern European country with a population of 11 million, English has no official status in either administration or government but it is considered a prerequisite for surviving in today's globalized world. English is a compulsory school subject from the third grade of primary school (*Demotiko*) through senior high school (*Lykeio*) and holds a unique position among the languages taught in compulsory education in Greece in that it can be taught from the first grade of primary school onwards, whereas other languages (French or German) are not taught until the fifth grade (Dendrinos 2013). What is unique in the Greek context, however, is that English is also formally learned, encountered and acquired in out-of-school settings. Owing to a lack of trust in state education and the widely held belief that English language teaching at school is of low quality, Greek parents enroll their children in foreign language centres (called *frontistiria*) or, if they can afford it, arrange private lessons at home, with the aim of improving their competence in English and eventually obtaining language certificates from acclaimed standardized examination boards, at least to the B2 level (see e.g., Griva and Chouvarda 2012; Karavas 2014; Sifakis 2009). This increased emphasis on certification has a dual purpose: first, so that young people can strengthen and develop their English literacy skills and, secondly, so that they can enhance their future job prospects. This kind of activity is not found in Finland.

However, English plays an increasingly visible role in both European countries not only in education but in various other domains as well. As a result of wider changes, such as the rise of Anglo-American popular culture after the Second World War and the widespread use of English in science, diplomacy, media and commerce, travel and tourism, technology and higher education (Berns et al. 2007: 17–19), English – while not an official language in either of the two countries – now occupies a central position in a range of key societal domains, acting in many cases as the "de jure" lingua franca of both countries (Sifakis 2009; Leppänen and Nikula 2007). For example, and importantly for the findings reported in this paper, in both countries, English is highly promoted on films, and in television and radio broadcasting. This has strengthened the learning of English (Phillipson 2008) and exerts a significant impact on teenage audiences and hence on culture and society at large. Then again, English now

has an increasingly prominent role on the Internet and in contexts involving new media (e.g., online games, websites and social networking sites), hobbies and youth lifestyles (e.g., hip-hop music). Thus, while the domain of formal schooling has traditionally been considered, and indeed has clearly functioned as, teenagers' main entry point to the English language, over the years the presence of the language in young people's daily lives in both countries (as well as elsewhere in Europe and the world at large) has been established via other means as well.

4 Data and methods

In this paper, the sets of data we focus on consist of 37 self-made visual products entitled "English and me" and "Finnish and me"/"Greek and me"; these visual texts are summarized in Table 1. These sets of data were produced by young participants on the basis of the quite similar visualization task which was used in the final stages of both studies.[2] The particular task invited the participants to visually portray and express their reactions to the titles "English and me" and "Finnish and me"/"Greek and me" through two different hand-made drawings, photo collages or computer-generated artefacts, or any other means of expression they liked that suited the purposes of the task. Following the completion of the task, in both projects their visual products were further used as prompts for focused discussions with the participants, with the aim of accessing the young people's subjective meanings and interpretations of their products (cf. Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta 2008: 176). Generally, starting from the premise that participants' verbal and visual choices reflect personal values and beliefs, and project the matrix of dispositions underlying their language and literacy practices, the aim of this task was to empirically explore how young people identify

Table 1: Participants' data sets across studies.

	Finnish study	Greek study	Total
"English and I" visualizations	10	9	**19**
"Finnish and I" visualizations	10		**10**
"Greek and I" visualizations		8	**8**

2 The task used in the Greek study was an adaptation of the original task first used in the Finnish study.

with and relate to English, particularly in comparison with their first language, whether Finnish or Greek.[3]

In analysing the data, our methodological resources stem from the broader area of social semiotics and multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006) and discourse analysis, our main aim being to explore the meaning potentials opened up by the two modalities – visual and verbal. Drawing on these approaches, our sets of visual data were, on the first level, analysed in their own right as artefacts in terms of the visual information they provided and the meanings they communicated. Rather than seeking to provide a complete multi-modal analysis of the teenagers' visual data, we concentrated first on a description of their visual products, approaching them as multimodal indicators of teenagers' connections to English and their first language, respectively, and of the way teenagers view themselves in relation to the two. By focusing on the key symbolic images through which participants described their relation to the languages and by bringing in insights from the interviews to complement our analysis, we were then also able to identify commonalities and discrepancies across the data sets and to develop broad, thematic categorizations in terms of the content of the data. On the second level, the sets of visual artefacts and the related discussions were analysed discursively, i.e., we sought to explore how the multimodal and verbal elements might be connected to broader discourses in the global and local contexts. In other words, our interest lay in the way teenagers' representations both through visual means and in oral discussions might also index more general social structures, values and ideologies relating to the role of English in both countries – particularly in comparison to the first language of the participants in both contexts.

5 Findings

In this section, we present and discuss our participants' "Finnish and me"/ "Greek and me" as well as "English and me" visual products, considering how teenagers relate to and view themselves in relation to languages and how their multimodal representations might relate to and/or differ from each other. Apart from the visualizations themselves, however, we also draw upon participants' oral interpretations of their multimodal texts when necessary, as they are

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3 All the participants have given their consent to the use of the data for research purposes, including publications. The anonymity of the participants has been protected in all stages of the studies.

equally revealing of the personal meanings and broader values attached by teenagers to each language. We will first look at the "Finnish and me"/"Greek and me" visualizations, in Section 5.1, and then the "English and me" visualizations, in Section 5.2.

5.1 "Finnish and me"/"Greek and me"

Generally, the participants' sets of data under the titles "Finnish and me" and "Greek and me" tell a fairly similar story: they are mostly dominated by visual elements signifying the cultural values and symbolic importance attached by teenagers to their first languages. In other words, as our discussion will illustrate, both Finnish and Greek – typically depicted through different, yet personally significant national, historical and cultural symbols – mostly feature in young people's visualizations as representing the 'local culture'. Our discussion will also highlight that through their meaningful manipulation of image and text, young people construct representations of their first languages (but particularly of Greek) as being closely related to schooling and education.

First, in more than half of the visualizations, teenagers drew upon a variety of key symbolic images and well-established representational resources which interact and work together to 'tell a story' of Finnishness or Greekness, as appropriate. Such resources include, for instance, the Finnish or Greek flag, typical Finnish or Greek landscapes, renowned Finnish or Greek personalities and typical Finnish or (Ancient) Greek elements and symbols, which are clearly connected to the concepts of culture, history and tradition and serve to highlight Finnish and Greek not only as languages but also as resources imbued with local cultural and historical meanings.

In the first two examples from Finland (Figures 1 and 2), Siiri and Eeva chose to visually represent their relationship to their first language by capitalizing upon readily available national symbols, whereby they stressed the cultural values Finnish holds for them. The most prominent of these symbols is the Finnish flag, which is present in half (five out of ten) of the visualizations, including Siiri's and Eeva's collages (Figures 1 and 2). Apart from the flag, other symbolic elements used by Siiri and Eeva in their visual products include a character in a popular Finnish soap opera and Miss Finland, a couple dancing the Finnish tango and, finally, a typical Finnish countryside scene and a Finnish ice-cream wrapper. Interestingly enough, these allusive images are accompanied by a number of emotionally loaded linguistic and phrasal elements, such as the opening words of the national anthem (*oi maamme Suomi*) and the name of a former female Finnish President (*Tarja Halonen*), as well as the words *kieli*

Figure 1: Siiri's visualization "Finnish and me".

'language', *sota* 'war', *kylmä* 'cold', *kesä* 'summer', *turvallinen* 'safe', *lumi* 'snow', *uniikki* 'unique', and, finally, *pikkumaa* 'small land', which all readily connect to the local Finnish culture and environment. Some of these are given positive value in the discussions (Eeva: *I think that Finland is very beautiful in the summer;* Eeva: *Finland is kind of an equal country*) and some negative values (Eeva: *Finland is a very small place, I'd like to have something more international*). Placed together, these icons and their accompanying lexical and phrasal elements constitute symbols that work together to connect Finnish to local, culturally situated meanings and are largely indicative of the cultural and historical values attached by young people to their first language.

Figure 2: Eeva's visualization "Finnish and me".

Other representational resources related to local cultural meanings employed by young Finns in their visualizations include symbols from the realm of home life and family traditions (the photo of family members doing ice fishing during winter in Figure 3), friendship (the drawing of two happy children embracing each other in Figure 4), personal hobbies and interests (the photo of a Finnish singer and songwriter, the logo of a popular Finnish radio station, two images related to Finnish hip-hop), and finally, communication and personal relations (drawings and images of mobile phones and of young people interacting). Overall, the inclusion of these resources together with the repetition of certain lexical elements (e.g., the words *äidinkieli* 'mother tongue' and *kaverit* 'friends' used in four of the visualizations) serve to construct Finnish as a personally
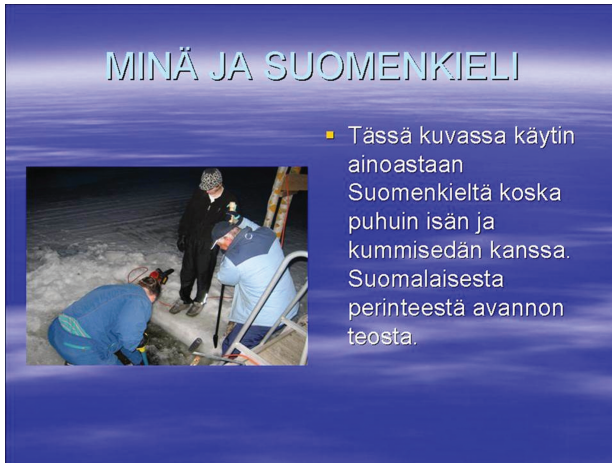
Figure 3: Samuli's visualization "Finnish and me".

relevant and meaningful resource closely related to interests, personal relations as well as family life and traditions, and as a way of expressing these.

From the Greek data, Alexandra's and Vassilis' computer-generated collages, presented in Figures 5 and 6, encompass a plethora of representational resources infused with local history, tradition and culture, signalling a collective sense of national pride. In particular, in Alexandra's collage (Figure 5) the ancient Greek statues (Nike of Samothrace, the Caryatids), the drachma coin, the stamp illustrating Homer, the naming of some of the most renowned Greek poets (Seferis, Cavafy, Elitis and Ritsos) and the two foregrounded extracts from poems by Seferis and Elitis celebrating the rich history of the Greek language constitute symbols which have largely shaped and formed the basis for collective Greek identity and civilization and thus communicate an overall cultural account of 'Greekness' (Alexandra[4]: *These are things that all remind us of Greece. All this, let's say, symbolizes Greece and the Greek language as though something is trying to remind us that there is a very qualitative aspect inside all of us Greeks*). The same representations are also partly traceable in Vassilis' collage (Figure 6) featuring the Acropolis and a part of an ancient pot, which point directly to the sense of culture that the Greek language holds for him (Vassilis: *our culture evolved along with our language, that's why the Acropolis and the rest*). In sum,

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4 We have added extracts from the discussions on the illustrations in brackets at relevant points in the analysis. The discussions were conducted in either Finnish or Greek and the extracts are rough translations of the original by the authors.

Figure 4: Linda's visualization "Finnish and me".

through such iconic symbols Greek is constructed as being strongly connected to local cultural and historical meanings which imply positive values and evoke a sense of national pride (Alexandra: *All of this I think is very [...] perhaps they are those things that make us Greeks so proud because they relate to culture*).

Finally, another finding that emerged from the analysis is the presence in the young people's visualizations of elements from the world of school and formal education. In fact, the "Greek and I" data are, in large part, dominated by representational resources derived exclusively from the school space, as four of the nine Greek teenagers chose to visually depict their relationship to Greek almost exclusively by means of school-related symbols. Among a plethora of such symbols depicting traditional learning tools, print media or spaces of formal learning, the most important include a Greek novel used in Literature classes, a

Figure 5: Alexandra's visualization "Greek and me".

Figure 6: Vassilis' visualization "Greek and me".

ΤΑ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΑ ΚΙ ΕΓΩ
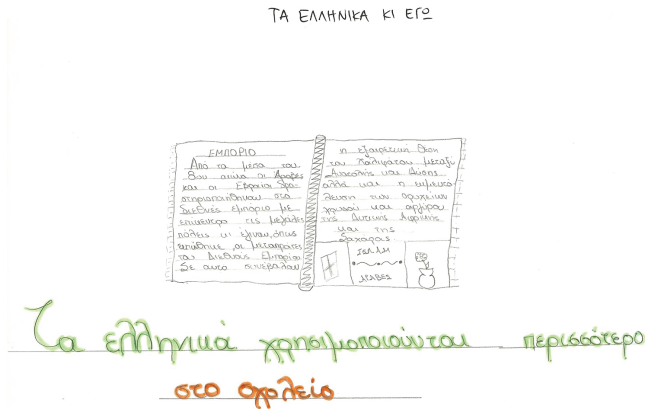
Figure 7: Aggeliki's visualization "Greek and me".

traditional Greek classroom with a whiteboard, a history course book accompanied by the caption *Τα ελληνικά χρησιμοποιούνται περισσότερο στο σχολείο* 'Greek is mostly used at school' (Figure 7) and, finally, various books needed in studying (Figure 6). By employing such school-related resources, the young people constructed an image of Greek as directly related to their school-based experiences, a representation further reinforced even by symbols seemingly not directly related to education per se. Indeed, in two of the visualizations (e.g., Figure 6), not composed exclusively of elements from the world of education, participants included images of students interacting with their friends during the break in the schoolyard, thereby framing informal communication between friends as a school-based event (Vassilis: *it [Greek] is also related to children's communication in the schoolyard*). Taken together, what these images signify is young people's construction of Greek as related to formal schooling and education, a resource which, paradoxically enough, is drawn upon in school contexts and is portrayed as being largely irrelevant to their everyday social activities and out-of-school interests (Vassilis: *the school as I said is connected with our language*). On another level, what they could perhaps be seen as indicative of is, on the one hand, the key position that Greek expectedly holds as a school subject in the formal Greek education system and, on the other hand, the high priority and overriding emphasis laid over the past decades by Greek families on their children's education and literacy learning in order to prepare them for the future (cf. Mitsikopoulou 2007; Koutsogiannis 2007, 2009).

Quite similarly to Greek teenagers, young Finns also chose to portray their relationship to Finnish through a number of icons depicting print media and school-related texts. These include depictions of a literary history book (Figure 1)

and a dictionary page with a list of Finnish words (Figure 4), the image of a novel and the drawing of a girl reading a book. Yet, unlike in the Greek data, where resources highly representative of school-based literacy were found to be dominant, in the "Finnish and I" visualizations these symbolic images are but one set among the various representational resources employed by teenagers to construct their products.

5.2 "English and me"

As was the case with the "Finnish and me"/"Greek and me" visualizations, there is a very similar underlying tone in most of the "English and me" visualizations, but there are also differences both within the two locations and between them. Generally, English seems to be connected to international connections and communication, popular culture, technology, future aspirations and also friends and other groups the young feel close to. Three aspects of these visualizations seem particularly salient and relevant here, and enable us to make comparisons both within and across the locations. The first of these is social relations and communication, the second the international imagined community of which the young feel themselves to be members through English, and the third is school and the learning of English.

As far as the first of these is concerned, English appears to be an important medium in keeping up social relations, both immediately, in one's close environments, and internationally and translocally (Vassilis: *It's a language /It opens doors mostly, with the outside world, people you already know. I mean, for example, with music, your interests and such*). Many visualizations depicted friends either by directly writing the word "friend" or having pictures of people communicating. Technology plays a key role in maintaining these relations as an overwhelming majority of the visualizations included some form of communication technology, mobile phones and computers in particular. There were also various icons for technology-enhanced communication, such as the internet and social media. The latter was especially prominent in the Greek data, much less so in the Finnish data, which reflects the time of data collection: the Finnish data were collected as early as 2007 and 2008 and the Greek data in 2010 and 2011 (see Section 3). The phenomena are the same, but social media such as Facebook, Twitter and myspace were not available or used in 2007. Via the internet, however, Finnish young people used irc-galleries and other discussion forums, which they mentioned in the discussion around the visualizations. An illustration of the prominence of social media can be seen in the Greek Vassilis' visualization in Figure 8, while the presence of a computer is significant in the

Figure 8: Vassilis' visualization "English and me" (from the Greek data).

Finnish Samuli's visualization in Figure 9. This latter image is further explained by the adjacent text: *Tässä kuvassa käytän englannin kieltä, koska olen tekemisissä tietokoneen kanssa* 'In this picture I use English because I'm dealing with the computer'. The computer and the internet were, of course, not only used for communication; they were also an important source of knowledge and information that was relevant both for personal interests such as hobbies and for school work.

The use of English for maintaining social relations was also characterized by idiosyncratic in-group language, which is often mixed, truncated and hybrid. Greeklish[5] and the mixed use of English and Greek, characteristic of vernacular communication among peers, were visible in the visualizations of the Greek data (e.g., *Geia sou! Ti kaneis?* 'Hello! How are you?'), while the mixed use of English and Finnish also came up in discussions with the Finnish teenagers (Taavi: *the mother tongue or Finnish is used among friends but of course there's English and*

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5 Greeklish, that is, Greek typed in the Roman alphabet, is a form of Internet slang used in communication among young people in digital environments.

Figure 9: Samuli's visualization "English and me" (from the Finnish data).

Swedish and also German that sometimes come in between). What is more, the use of English was clearly connected to the idea of its being fun, "cool" and enjoyable. The word *fun* can be seen in many of the visualizations in the Finnish data and there are also other icons, such as smileys and smiling faces, that depict the pleasure of using English.

Our second aspect is young people's construction of English as being connected to international imagined communities (Anderson 1983), which they aspire to identify with. These imagined communities are very often related to hobbies, especially sports, and other, common, young people's activities, connected, for example, to music and other forms of popular culture. A good example of sports appearing strongly is the visualization by Taavi in Figure 10. In Taavi's image, there are various icons representing sports (which was very important to Taavi and his friends): a skateboard, basketball, football and the word *sports*. In the discussions, Taavi and others said that they read English magazines related to their favourite hobbies rather than Finnish ones, for example, because the English magazines were much more advanced and up-to-date, in their opinion (Eerik: *in America it's [skateboarding] a lot more advanced and then of course you rather read stuff that are at the forefront — in Finland we're a little behind in this*).

Figure 10: Taavi's visualization "English and me" (from the Finnish data).

Music was also present in a number of visualizations, and it materializes in many ways: as notes and bits of lyrics, as names of favourite bands, as DVDs and as pictures of favourite artists. English was seen as something that connects people through music, something that unites and is an asset. In one visualization (by Eerik) in the Finnish data, there was a text that said: *Eri maiden muusikot, laulajat, bändit yms. voivat laulaa ja tehdä musiikkinsa englanniksi. Näin heidän on helpompi menestyä ulkomailla* 'Musicians, artists and bands etc. in different countries can sing and make their music in English. So it is also easier for them to be successful abroad'. Movies and TV often appeared as well, another indication of the powerful position of English popular culture in the lives of these young people and of an international community with which the young wish to identify. In one visualization in the Greek data (Figure 11) there was just a graffiti tag to illustrate this young person's relationship to English (Thodoris*: [I thought of graffiti] because of the English letters [...] it's, ok [...] that's how I combine those. You won't find graffiti in Greek, there's none in Greek.).* Overall, his selection and appropriation of a global cultural resource, that is, graffiti, as being most personally relevant to him is yet another indication of the global communities that these young

TA AΓΓΛΙΚΑ ΚΙ ΕΓ°
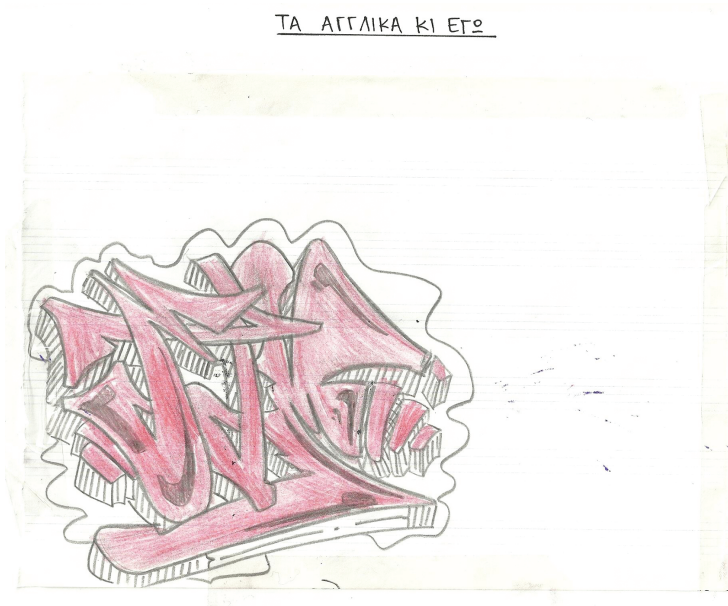
Figure 11: Thodoris' visualization "English and me" (from the Greek data).

people wish to identify with, and this is a subculture in which English is inherently present.

As shown above, the imagined communities were often related to hobbies and other personal interests, to popular culture and youth subcultures. They were, in addition, often related to future aspirations. An example of this is the visualization offered by Eeva (a Finnish girl) (Figure 12). Eeva was very keen on fashion and beauty, especially in the international sphere. Her visualization includes clippings from fashion magazines with pictures of hairstyle and make-up, the latest trends and celebrities. There are also two words that further underline her interest and aspirations: *tulevaisuus* 'the future' and *kansainvälisyys* 'internationalism'. In the discussions she expressed a wish to work abroad in the international beauty and fashion industry (Eeva: *and in the future I've been kind of thinking that maybe when I'm older I'd go and work somewhere abroad [...] maybe something related to fashion anyway [...] maybe somewhere in Italy*). Through English she felt she had access to this imagined community and, hopefully in the future, to a real community.

The third aspect in the visualizations to which we wish to draw attention is school and learning. Even though English clearly played a very significant and personal role in their everyday lives and they seemed comfortable in making use

Figure 12: Eeva's visualization "English and me" (from the Finnish data).

of English to reach personally meaningful goals outside school, there is no escaping the fact that these young people were also learners of English. Considering the prominent role English has as a school subject in both study locations and the long time these young people had been learning English at school, it is not surprising that school and icons related to schooling and learning were present in many of the visualizations. It has to be noted, however, that references to learning were not present in all the visualizations. What is, however, interesting when comparing the Finnish and Greek data, is that in a couple of the Greek visualizations the school is the only image that the teenager has chosen to use to represent his/her relationship to English. In the Finnish

Figure 13: Aliki's visualization "English and me" (from the Greek data).

data, icons related to schooling were present but always as one aspect among many others not related to school or learning. When we look at Aliki's visualization (Figure 13), we see that there is a school building and a page from a notebook as well as the text *English = School!!*. So, for the Greek girl Aliki, English is exclusively connected to school *(because it isn't my mother tongue, I associate it with school. Or frontistirio, class and such)*. In contrast, if we take a look at Veera's visualization (Figure 14), produced in Finland, we notice that there is the word *koulu* 'school' and under that it says *Englannin tunnit koulussa* 'English lessons at school', but there are also several other ideas that Veera relates English to in her life. Thus, for Veera school and English are connected, but so are English and popular culture and the internet, for example. This difference in the two data sets might be explained by the differing emphasis the two societies place on English language education. Although clearly important and valued in both locations, Greek families invest more in the formal learning of English, which can be seen in the prominent position of *frontistiria* in Greek society. As was mentioned in Section 3, the quality of English language teaching and learning in the state system is openly doubted, both for its content and aims and in terms of assuring competence and certification. Parents therefore try to support their children's learning of English by enrolling them in *frontistiria*, and this emphasis also shows in some teenagers' relationship to English. In Finland, in contrast, there are no such private language schools and
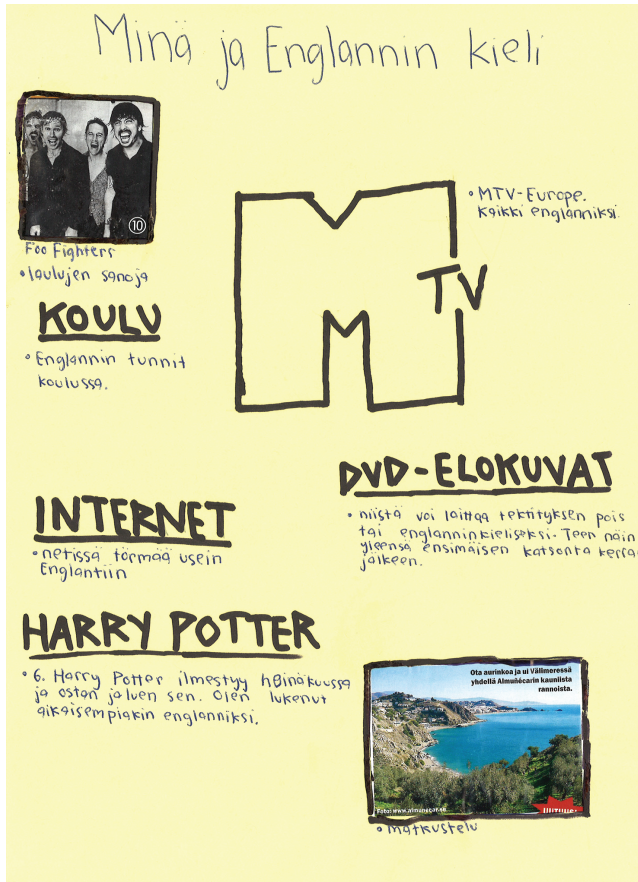
Figure 14: Veera's visualization "English and me" (from the Finnish data).

the state school system is practically the only available one, which perhaps explains why, in a way, a more neutral and instrumental relationship to learning English is present in the visualizations. Icons of schooling and learning were clearly present in many Finnish visualizations, but as noted above, as one aspect among others, not as the only or the most prominent one.

There is one further school-related aspect in the visualizations that we would like to discuss as it was so prominent in many of the visualizations. This is not related to learning exactly, but we would connect it to school discourse more broadly. Many visualizations had the British and/or the United States flags in them. Two examples can be seen, in Figures 15 and 16. Flags are one way of locating where in the world English is spoken. The ones that are

Τα Αγγλικά και εγώ

Music

Stars

London

Cinema   **NY**

Figure 15: Marilina's visualization "English and me" (from the Greek data).

mostly used in school books are those of Britain and the US, and the English variants most prominent in classroom practices are British and American accents. These are also the ones most often encountered on TV. Other variants of English are present both in school books and in the media, but there is no doubt that these two hold the most prominent position. In a nationwide survey covering all age groups, conducted in Finland (Leppänen et al. 2011), the respondents rated British and American accents as the most valued and trustworthy ones among the seven variants of English that were presented. This is a further indication of the position of British and American variants as the best known and most acknowledged ones, at least in the European context. It is no wonder, then, that these wider prominent discourses enter the visualizations of teenagers when they are representing their relationship to English.
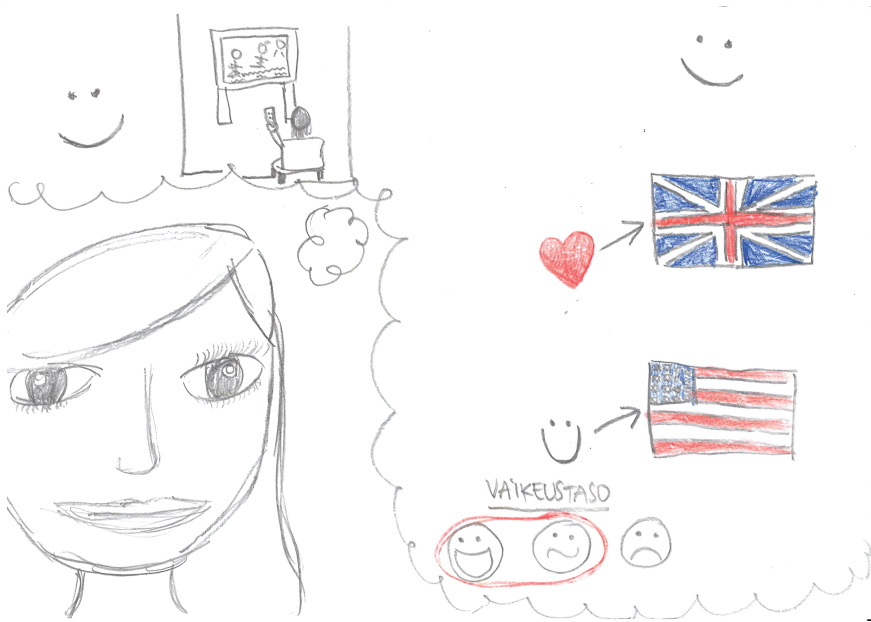
Figure 16: Alisa's visualization "English and me" (from the Greek data).

6 Discussion

The findings presented here afford a detailed picture of the perceptions, values and attitudes that young people from two different European contexts bring to their practices and encounters with English and other languages in their lives. It has also offered insights into the common but also quite often diverse representations and meaning-making symbols and resources employed by these teenagers when producing visual data to depict their relationship to English and their first language. Quite similarly in both sets of data, the "Finnish and me"/ "Greek and me" visualizations can be seen as acting as conduits for culturally situated meanings, providing a space for articulations of collective Greek and Finnish experiences and values. Yet interestingly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, since the young people's backgrounds and the local contexts and realities are different, these articulations take on different forms. That is to say, while both groups of participants portray their relationship to their first language as being shaped by symbolic images rooted in local cultural and historical spaces and times, the realizations are quite different: Greek functions for this particular group of young Greeks as a resource connected to history, grand culture and

formal education, and it bears a significant emotional load due to its ancient historical and cultural connotations. Finnish, on the other hand, is for the young Finns participating in the study more related to their local culture and tradition and it permeates various aspects of their everyday life, such as day-to-day communication, personal interests, family life and home experiences. On the whole, however, what needs to be stressed is that both sets of visualizations reflect mostly positive values, feelings and attitudes: they construct images of Greek and Finnish respectively – the native and dominant language in each local context – as a familiar resource, the mother-tongue, to which they are attached and of which they feel proud from a very young age.

Interestingly, the analysis has also revealed common ways of emotional expression in teenagers from both countries regarding their relation to English. To these young people English is clearly a personally meaningful and relevant resource, one that perhaps no longer feels as if it is a foreign one, even though English holds no official status in their country. The young do, however, give it a status as a normal part of their lives: English has a clear position as a language of social relations and communication. It is both an insider in-group resource, which is localized and appropriated according to young people's own personal needs and interests, and a language opening doors to international communication. What is more, these international connections are often related to imagined communities to which the young wish to be connected. The imagined communities relate to hobbies, sports and other personal interests as well as to popular culture through music, films and games. But they also have implicit ideological meanings as they connect the young to international spheres and to advanced and up-to-date information. More importantly, the imagined communities that English provides access to are part of young people's future aspirations and even career plans. In addition to the everyday uses and functions of English, however, school-based literacy and various icons of formal learning are also part of the visualizations, and more prominently so in the Greek data. This is perhaps understandable, given our participants' background as students and the emphasis placed in both contexts – but more so in the current Greek context – on English language study. The visualizations thus connect to the social discourses, structures and values placed on formal education in the two locations, showing that the individual and the social are connected and that people's personal values are rooted in the histories and cultures of their immediate societies.

From a methodological point of view, the analysis in this paper provides evidence of the importance of visual methods in accessing young people's experiences: they enable a deeper understanding of the complexities of language use and the concept of language more generally. Such perspectives would have remained obscure if the analysis had been limited only to interviews. Thus,

they stress the importance of complementing adolescents' personal accounts of languages and their experiences with them, as derived from self-reports, check-lists, and/or interviews, with visual methods. These visual methods are also important in that they indirectly – albeit quite powerfully – indicate how language and literacy practices (including values and attitudes) are rooted in broader social discourses and how they arise from historical and cultural values. From a pedagogical point of view, our findings challenge us to move beyond strict categorizations of bounded languages as "first/native", "second" or "foreign" – underlying much of language education today – and instead, to acknowledge them as much more than just languages to be learnt. Our analysis shows that for the young participants in our research, languages are rather dynamic resources that carry various meanings and values and that they encounter and pick up in a range of different contexts. In particular, young people's representation of English as a personally relevant resource which is employed in multiple ways in their everyday life urges teachers to acknowledge the necessity for English language teaching that focuses not only on the formal properties of the language but also on the various meanings attached to lan-guage use and on the more vernacular uses of English, capitalizing on young people's personally meaningful engagement with English. In view of the above, the challenge is for educators to focus on raising learners' awareness of the strong presence of English in their lives and the possibilities it offers along with other (multimodal) resources for meaning making and individual creative expression, the ultimate aim being to develop "*resourceful speakers* rather than some vague notion of native competence" (Pennycook 2012: 170, italics in original).

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