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# Sociolinguistic upsets and people of color in social media performances

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**Abstract:** Particularly since the refugee “reception crisis” in 2015, Finland has started transforming into a more diverse and multicultural society. These societal changes have also been accompanied by sociolinguistic change, as well as language ideological debates and tensions, often manifesting in explicitly racist and xenophobic bursts of upset. In this article, our focus is on social media as a space where such societal and sociolinguistic upsets are articulated and re-worked. Drawing on recent sociolinguistic and discourse analytic work on transformative and critical popular cultural practices in social media, and studies on rap and belonging, we discuss how, in a mediatized society such as Finland, social media serve as a forum for antagonism and conflict, but also as a site for ‘talking back’. As our illustrative cases, we investigate two heteroglossic social media performances by entertainers and artists of color. In our analysis, we will show how these performances highlight and contest ideological notions of the way particular language resources are considered a key to Finnishness, as well as their role in the racialization and othering of people of color.

**Keywords:** heteroglossia; people of color; performance; social media

## 1 Introduction

For a long time, Finland has been an ethnically and culturally homogeneous country (Tervonen 2014) that, due to its geographical location, strict immigration policies, and relatively small economy, has not attracted large-scale immigration (Rapo 2011). However, since the turn of millennium, and in the aftermath of the refugee “reception crisis” in 2015, this situation has begun to change, pushing Finland in the direction of a multicultural and multilingual society. Alongside

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these changes, new sociolinguistic tensions and language ideological debates have also emerged, revolving, in particular, around the importance of proficiency in Finnish as a means for “integration” (see e.g. *Integration into Finland 2020*) and belonging (see Leppänen and Westinen 2017), as well as negative and prescriptive reactions against new ways of speaking and writing Finnish.

In this article, these societal and sociolinguistic upsets are our starting point: our aim is to investigate how they are taken up at the grassroots level of social media practices. By ‘upset’ we mean here entangled developments of change, turmoil and unrest that encompass several dimensions: societal and structural (racist and xenophobic structures and practices), sociolinguistic (increased multilingualism and new vernaculars), and affective (discourses of and reactions to hate and disparagement). More specifically, we hope to demonstrate how the issues of language proficiency and diversity are critically investigated by people of color (poc)<sup>1</sup> in their heteroglossic social media performances.

Building on sociolinguistic theorizations of performance (Bauman and Briggs 1999; Goffman 1959) and our previous studies of social media (Halonen and Leppänen 2017; Leppänen and Westinen 2017), we use performance as a key orienting concept in our analysis. We see performance as a social act that puts communication on display and objectifies it, thus both entailing and calling for an investigation of the social action in question (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73, 79). In this sense, our cases both feature performers who, by invoking a specific performance frame, index a reflexive position to their acts of expression (Bauman 2011: 710–711). Both of the cases discussed in this paper are also staged performances (Bell and Gibson 2011): they involve self-identified performers in the stage-like area provided by the social media platform aiming and broadcasting their performance to online audiences. In our analysis, we will show how these performances highlight and contest ideological notions of how particular language resources are considered a key to Finnishness, as well as their role in the racialization and othering of people of color. More generally, we wish to show how such mundane social media performances have become a channel for conveying a message about difference, not only as a trigger of antagonistic upsets, but also as an indication of a new kind of Finland that is becoming more multi-voiced.

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**1** Terminology around ethnic and racial minorities and ‘non-white’ Finns is complex and fluid. In this article, we refer to the minority performers as people/persons of color (poc) since this term, which originates in the U.S., has recently gained more ground in the Finnish society, also amongst the pocs themselves. In addition, we use the term ‘racialized’ to indicate how the white majority, often in stereotypical ways, orients to people of color and treats them with prejudice, because of their skin color and/or ethnic background.

## 2 Background

In the same way as the other Nordic countries, Finland is known as a model country: social security, a fully functional societal and parliamentary democracy, equality between the sexes, high-level public education, and general happiness of its inhabitants are staple features of the society (see e.g., Helliwell et al. 2020). This idealized picture of the society is not, however, the whole truth: Finland is also a country marked by discrimination of various kinds, most notably racism.

Historically, compared with for example Sweden and Denmark, the diversification of Finnish society has been relatively recent, with a distinct jump after the refugee “reception crisis” in 2015. According to Statistics Finland (SF 2019b), in 2019 there were c. 420,000 people with a “foreign background” living in Finland, of whom about one-half lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the largest ethnic groups residing in Finland are people from the former Soviet Union or Russia, Estonians, Iraqi, and Somalis. Besides first-generation immigrants, there are some 70,000 second-generation people with “a foreign background” in Finland. The number of “foreign language speakers” has also increased from c. 25,000 in 1990, to c. 200,000 in 2009, and to some 400,000 in 2019. Currently, the top five foreign languages spoken are Russian, Estonian, Arabic, English, and Somali (SF 2019a).

One outcome of this unprecedented diversification of Finnish society has been the radical amplification of racist, ethno-nationalist and populist attitudes, discourses and incidents. Often, the targets are people of color. As reported in a Fundamental Rights Survey in 2019, they face a lot of racism: almost 63% of the survey respondents had experienced racist harassment because of their skin color. In comparison, in Sweden and Denmark, the corresponding figure is 41% (Being Black in the EU 2019). According to another recent survey focusing on the experiences of African-origin people living in Finland, racism affects all aspects of their lives from early childhood onwards (Selvitys afrikkalaistaustaisten henkilöiden kokemasta syrjinnästä 2020). In the same vein, in a study on ethnic profiling, 65% of the respondents stated that they have been discriminated against in, for example, education or work, due to their foreign origin, religion, or language (Keskinen et al. 2018).

### 2.1 Sociolinguistic upsets

These societal changes are also at the heart of ongoing sociolinguistic change, tensions, and language ideological debates in the society. One indication of these

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<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the population of Finland is c. 5.54 million people.

is the post-Herderian (or, in the Finnish context, post-Snellmanian)<sup>3</sup> ideology of Finnish as the expression of national identity and integrity that continues to be vocally defended in public debates, with a particular emphasis on English, Swedish, and Russian as examples of dangerous multilingualism (Blommaert et al. 2012). Finnish is also widely seen as essential in integration – this is underlined in official policies (see e.g., *Integration into Finland 2020*; Tarnanen and Pöyhönen 2011).

In practice, however, multilingualism has characterized everyday life for centuries in the urban centers, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area. At present, this shows not only in the visibility of English in the Helsinki linguistic landscapes but also in the public and private uses of other languages, such as Swedish, Russian and non-European languages, in the area (Paunonen 2006: 24–26). In addition, new accents and linguistically heterogeneous vernaculars have become audible and visible on the streets, in schools and workplaces and for leisure time and popular cultural activities (Lehtonen 2015). More generally, in mediatized cultural activities and social media activities, linguistic heterogeneity is common (Kytölä 2013; Leppänen 2012; Leppänen et al. 2007). In such contexts, resources provided by various languages are used strategically in situated meaning-making, identity work, and social positioning (Leppänen et al. 2017). Multilingualism is thus a fact of life in urban and mediatized settings,<sup>4</sup> but, at the same time, uses of languages other than Finnish, the new vernaculars and socio-cultural styles of language use have also become targets of disparagement. In populist and racist discourses such uses have been ridiculed as icons of unwanted diversity, such practices of ridicule becoming means for discrimination, exclusion, and harassment (see e.g., Leppänen et al. 2016).

Largely in tandem with the diversification of the Finnish society, social media have evolved into increasingly popular, commonplace and diversified communicative spaces (Kohvakka and Saarenmaa 2019) in which different social voices and languages have found their own niches. On the one hand, they have provided “immigration critics” an outlet for their upset. On the other hand, people of color have their own social media channels, such as alternative online media venues with an explicit “for us, by us” mission (see e.g. *Ruskeat tytöt* [‘Brown girls’] [www.ruskeat.tytot.fi](http://www.ruskeat.tytot.fi)).

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**3** J. V. Snellman, a nineteenth century Finnish statesman and philosopher, was an important figure in the nationalist movement that contributed to the development of the Finnish language and literature. Partly due to his influence, Finnish gained a position of official equality with Swedish, which was then the language of the dominant minority.

**4** In contrast to the Helsinki region, the majority of the smaller provincial communities and the countryside are still mainly characterized by Finnish monolingualism, although there are regions, such as the south-western coastal areas, northern calotte and eastern provinces that are, to an extent, multilingual (see e.g. Kolehmainen et al. 2020).

ruskeattytot.fi), rap music performances, and vlogging (see e.g. Kelekay 2019; Leppänen and Tapionkaski 2021; Westinen 2019). For these groups, social media also serve as a medium of “talking back” (hooks 1989)<sup>5</sup> to the problematic, narrow and disparaging ways people of color have been represented in both mass media and social media contexts. It is these types of social media practices that are examined in this paper: we look at how the societal and sociolinguistic upsets centering on diversity have been taken up in social media performances by people of color.

### 3 Aims, data, and approach

More specifically, we investigate two illustrative cases of critical performances by prominent Finnish social media performers of color.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on two key issues facing persons of color in Finnish society, we will show how these artists 1) interrogate the assumed centrality of the proficiency of Finnish as a key to belonging and 2) counter and contest racists by criticizing their failing language proficiency in their mother tongue.

The material that we will investigate in detail here consists of videos that have been published on Finland-based social media. Our selection of these cases as our focus was guided by our long-term research on Finland-based social media, particularly focusing on identifications, belonging, racism, and hate talk in social media discourse (e.g., Leppänen 2008, 2015; Leppänen and Westinen 2017; Westinen 2019). The two focal videos in their own ways exemplify popular and widely followed social media practices: comedy videos and reaction videos.

Theoretically and methodologically, we draw on recent sociolinguistic and discourse analytic work on heteroglossia (Androutsopoulos 2011; Bailey 2007; Bakhtin 1981; Vigouroux 2015), rap and belonging (Leppänen and Westinen 2017), and on transformative and critical popular cultural practices in social media (Häkkinen and Leppänen 2014; Halonen and Leppänen 2017; Leppänen and Elo 2016). Following Bakhtin (1981: 276–277), we argue that heteroglossia does not simply refer to the simultaneous use of different chunks of named languages or registers. Importantly, it addresses how, during their history of use, linguistic signs have attracted social and historical associations from more than one context and

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5 “Talking back” refers to how marginalized people take up and challenge the surrounding discourses and the ways in which the majority categorizes, defines and places them – and to how they find and use a voice, words and narratives of their own (hooks 1989: 9).

6 We are very grateful to the producers of the two videos who all gave us their permission to use their videos as our data.

value system (Bailey 2012: 500). Heteroglossia thus inscribes speakers and their addressee(s) within a history of language use, of social stratification and ideological relationships (Vigouroux 2015: 244). As a result, it can be used to evoke situational identities and the various social voices attached to them (Peuronen 2013: 301). In heteroglossic language use, there is thus a potential tension in the use of a particular linguistic sign in a specific context; by drawing on heteroglossic resources that are available to speakers they also construct their unique subject positions (Lähteenmäki 2010: 23).

In our analysis, heteroglossia makes it possible to discuss the ways in which social media performers of color mobilize heteroglossic resources available to them – specifically, standard and vernacular Finnish, as well as linguistically heterogeneous urban slang – in constructing social positions that allow them to reflexively index their simultaneous belonging and non-belonging to the social and sociolinguistic realm of contemporary Finland. In this sense, in the same way as the French stand-up comedians of African descent analyzed by Vigouroux (2015), the Finnish social media performers of color in this article draw on heteroglossia to create “a new ‘subject’ defined as urban, which both encompasses and transcends racial or ethnic categories” (Vigouroux 2015: 245; see also Nørreby and Møller 2015) in the sociopolitical context that takes whiteness and Finnishness as the ideological cornerstones of the nation.

## 4 Social media as a space for performative interrogations of upsets

### 4.1 Case (1): The (im)possibility of understanding: heteroglossic urban vernacular meets monolingual Finnish

Our first example showcases a clash between the normative ways of speaking in mainstream white society, and the urban vernacular, often associated with migrants or people of color. It features a short online comedy, *Lähiökielenkääntäjä* (‘The Suburb Translator’), which centers on a particularly critical moment in the life of a person of color, a job interview. The video was created by Luyeye Konssi and Hanad Hassan in 2016. Originally, it was produced in collaboration with a Finnish company providing telecommunication and digital services for SLUSH 2016, an international startup and tech event organized in Helsinki. While its original purpose was to highlight the company’s aims in broadening their services to entertainment for its own network TV channel and to advertise the SLUSH event, it is possible that, by involving these two artists in it, the company may have intended to flag its inclusive and non-discriminatory policies of hiring and broadcasting. After its publication in connection with the SLUSH event, the video

continued its life online on various platforms and sites, gathering a considerable number of views over the years (in September 2021, 74,300 views on YouTube). Despite the fact that its purpose initially was a promotional one, in terms of its style and content the video resembles other informal and freelance videos by the two comedians. Most significantly, like in many of their other online sketches and comedies, the humor in this particular video derives from clashes and contrasts between white and poc Finns.

Both Konssi and Hassan are of non-Finnish descent. Konssi (better known by his stage name Seksikäs-Suklaa, i.e. ‘Sexy Chocolate’) came to Finland as a refugee from Angola in the early 2000s, while Hassan (Doslada) has a Middle Eastern background, but was born in Helsinki. Beginning their social media broadcasts in 2012, they are nowadays among the best-known creators of poc comedy in Finland.

The video under investigation here depicts a job interview for an unspecified position, with three characters: a poc job seeker (Konssi), a white employer, and his poc colleague (Hassan). All the participants speak Finnish, but their Finnish is of very different kinds. The white employer speaks standard Finnish, while his poc colleague uses spoken vernacular Finnish, and the poc job seeker a heavily accented and linguistically mixed (Helsinki) slang. This the other two characters do not appear to understand at all. The job seeker, in contrast, seems at ease with all the linguistic resources used in the interview – he is thus presented as a genuinely multilingual person. The source of the humor in the video is his refusal to accommodate his speech in any way to how his interviewers speak. Extract 1<sup>7</sup> illustrates some of these differences between the characters’ ways of speaking:

Extract 1. The job interview

00:11 JS



Wassup chief, kiitos.  
*Wassup chief (Eng.), thanks.*

<sup>7</sup> Besides the original talk, the transcripts also include their English translations. In the transcript, the following abbreviations are used: JS = (poc) job seeker, IR = (white) interviewer, TR = translation app(lication), and PC = (poc) colleague of the interviewer.

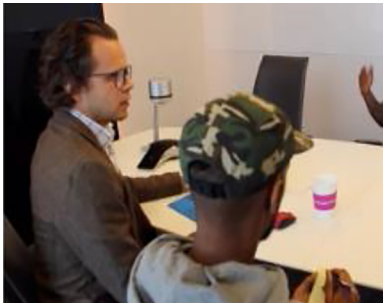


00:13 IR



Miksi meidän pitäisi valita juuri sinut tähän rooliin?  
*Why should we select you for this role?*

00:16 JS



Warya big boss, mä hoitasin nurkat tääl cleanisti, mun jääkaappi warya näyttää silt et se on tullu suoraa Gigantist, hommaa mut man tähän mestaa you know what I mean my n\*\*\*a.  
*Warya (Som. Hello boy!) big boss (Eng.), I'd take care of the corners here in a clean way. My fridge warya looks like it has come straight from Gigantti [a home appliances store], man (Eng.), get me into this place you know what I mean my n\*\*\*a (Eng.)*

The job seeker initiates the conversation with a greeting that sets the tone for the whole of the interview (“wassup chief”) which is not only more informal than expected in a job interview, but also in a language (English), and style (American “gangsta” slang) that are not conventionally associated with this kind of high-stakes situation. The unexpectedness of his language choice and style is further accentuated by how the white interviewer responds to his greeting: he asks a question in standard Finnish (“Miksi meidän pitäisi valita juuri sinut tähän rooliin?”, ‘Why should we select you for this role?’). The job seeker then launches into an explanation that is thoroughly mixed. Firstly, he uses language forms that are associated with different languages (English, Finnish, and Somali). Secondly, his justifications for why he should be hired are expressed in a way that is not comprehensible to the interviewer (‘taking care of the corners in a clean way’; ‘having an empty fridge’), but which are likely to be idiomatic and transparent to his own social circles. Significantly, his response serves as an index of a particular way of speaking associated with multilingual young migrants and persons of color in urban Helsinki (Lehtonen 2015). In other words, the linguistic forms as well as the non-Finnish

accent used by him are widely perceived as emblematic for a particular socio-demographic context (Silverstein 2003). In this interview, these ways of speaking are clearly used to stylize the job seeker as a person who appears as recognizably ‘foreign’ to the interviewers.<sup>8</sup>

The next phase in the video consists of the introduction of the language-translation app(lication), the ‘Suburb Translator’:

Extract 2. The Suburb Translator translates the urban vernacular into standard Finnish

00:27 IR



En ymmärtänyt mitään tuosta äskeisestä. Ymmärsitkö sinä?  
*I didn't understand anything he just said. Did you?*

00:31 PC



En. Mut mul on näit tilanteit varten yks äppi minkä mä oon kehittäny: Lähiökielenkääntäjä. Kokeillaa sitä nytte. Ihan pikku hetki.  
*No. But for these situations, I have an app that I've developed: The Suburb Translator. Why not give it a try now? Just a moment.*

<sup>8</sup> The alternation of languages is accompanied by equally indexical shifts of background music in the video. When JS speaks, we hear American rap music by Dr Dre (“Keep their heads ringin”), and when the two other characters speak (the IR more standard and the PC more colloquial) Finnish, their talk is accompanied by an iconic Finnish pop song “Mä joka päivä työtän teen” (‘I work every day’) by Matti & Teppo.

00:44 TR



Hyvä työnantaja, minä olisin juuri sopiva henkilö tälle firmalle. Olen erittäin intohimoinen tekemään töitä, ja teen kaiken loppuun asti ja valittamatta. Minulla ei tällä ole tällä hetkellä työpaikkaa, ja siitä syystä minun jääkaappini on tyhjä.

*Dear employer, I would be just the right person for this firm. I am extremely passionate about work, and I finish everything and without complaints. At the moment, I don't have employment, and therefore my refrigerator is empty.*

Extract 2 illustrates how the video mobilizes a range of linguistic resources to further accentuate subtle contrasts between the characters and their identities. First, the white interviewer – a speaker of formal standard Finnish – and his poc partner – a speaker of vernacular Finnish – are shown to communicate with each other without any difficulty. Thus, it is implied that they operate on the basis of a shared sociolinguistic understanding of what counts as appropriate language behavior in this situation. Second, their styles of speaking indicate that there is little social distance or power difference between them. This is further emphasized by the fact that it is the poc partner who has invented ‘The Suburb Translator’ – a Deus ex Machina kind of solution to the problem of incomprehension (or even discrimination) of the urban vernacular of migrants and persons of color who are not (yet) linguistically integrated. The app is then switched on, and what follows is a translation of the job interviewer’s speech into grammatically correct formal

Finnish. Comprehension is thus ensured, to such an extent that the job seeker is hired.

Even though the job seeker is clearly not invested in ensuring that his linguistic resources are the expected ones in a job interview, or even in making sure that he is understood correctly, his character is shown to be the most multilingual person in the situation depicted in the video. His talk is also distinctly heteroglossic in the sense that his use and integration of a range of linguistic resources of different types indicates his complex positionality as a speaker of an urban vernacular. Thus, his style of talk indexes his belonging to a linguistically diverse socio-demographic group of 'new' multilingual urban Finns of color. Further, by refusing to conform to the linguistic norms normally associated with a job interview, he is also indexing a social persona that is not the expected one: he is not making any effort to present himself as having the makings of an integrated and socialized employee. The white interviewer and his poc partner are, in contrast, distinctly monolingual, and firmly rooted in their social and institutional positions. This social and linguistic incompatibility of the job seeker and the two employees of the company, is, in fact, the problem that the translation app is designed to solve.

In this respect, the role of the employee of color is interesting: he is presented to us as someone who is indeed both fully integrated and socialized into the normative linguistic order of the workplace. As the inventor of the translator app, he nevertheless has the capacity to act as a mediator between monolingual Finnish speakers and multilingual people of color. In a way, it could be argued that, on one level, this is exactly what the video performance is also trying to do – mediational work, showing its (various migrant, poc, white Finnish) viewers that mutual understanding is possible, albeit via a technological solution. The role of technology in the video could be taken to highlight how (ethnic, racial, linguistic) differences do not always need to be taken as a cause for upset, but how they can also be overcome. In its own way, the video suggests that technology is a solution not only to the challenge of incomprehension, but also to pervasive social and societal problems – such as discrimination in hiring practices and in the workplace.

Significantly, the suggestion in the video that technology can ensure perfect understanding and acceptability is, in fact, not that farfetched: translation programs and applications are being developed (also of urban youth vernaculars, [Stæhr and Malai Madsen 2017]), and they are widely promoted as the

next step in making communication possible in situations where no shared language exists. However, besides this techno-optimism, it seems that the video also gives rise to interpretations that are much less positive. For one thing, by not making it clear who is the butt of the joke (it could be none of the characters, or, alternatively, one or all of them), the performance is deeply ambivalent. Like many other YouTube comedies dealing with ethnic or racial otherness (see e.g. Leppänen and Elo 2016), it is not simply offering us disparagement humor explicitly denigrating and ridiculing the linguistically opaque other. At the same time, it makes us question what its message about the possibilities of multilingual and multicultural workplace practices really is. Is it, for example, suggesting that none of the characters depicted in the video – the monolingual employees and the multilingual, but unaccommodating job seeker – can learn to understand each other and communicate without any technological mediation? If this is the case, its message is far from being an optimistic one. Rather, it can imply that technology in a way ensures a status quo: given the right technology, no one or nothing else has to change.

Or, alternatively, we could ask whether the technological solution to the problem of the poc job seeker's heteroglossic multilingualism in the monolingual workplace is no more than a make-believe and temporary escape from the structural inequalities and practices of exclusion that people of color face in practically all areas of their life. In this sense, the comedy of 'The Suburb Translator' could even be argued to give us a performance of how the order in a normally regimented and exclusionary workplace is temporarily dismantled. In this respect, it is not unlike a carnival, as delineated by Bakhtin (1984a: 122–123, 130, 1984b: 10), in which unlikely people can be brought together in fleeting alliances in ways that temporarily encourage their interaction, unity, and free expression, and that make it possible to come to terms with and even celebrate normally unacceptable (language) behavior.

In sum, it seems that, on one level, the video is giving us a humorous and optimistic story of how technology can help us understand and interact with people who, because of their ethnicity, skin color, and/or language, are, more or less stereotypically, perceived as fundamentally different from white Finns. On another level, the video could be argued to be deeply pessimistic. Despite his multilingualism, the person of color is shown to be completely incapable of making himself understood without a mediator that translates his language to the hegemonic language of mainstream society. As a result, he remains without a voice of his own, and his language is not genuinely heard or understood.

## 4.2 Case (2): Commenting on hate messages and educating the racists

As our second case, we investigate a YouTube performance by the rapper-vlogger Hassan Maikal. The performance has the form of a dialog in which Maikal reads comments that he has received and responds to them. Like Konssi and Hassan, he uses social media as a platform for an entertaining interrogation of a specific language-related issue. In his case, the problem is the language used by racists and their attempts at wording how Finland should essentially remain white. In focus in his performance is thus an extreme form of affective upset – racism – targeting people of color. In doing so, he takes advantage of social media as a space that, besides providing a platform for hate speech (e.g., Saresma 2020), also offers affordances for arguing against it.

Hassan Maikal was born in Tampere, Finland in 1996. Both his parents are originally from Somalia.<sup>9</sup> He has published several records and music videos (Westinen 2019), and worked as a vlogger, anti-racist activist and youth coach, gaining wide recognition for his work. Maikal's artist persona, "Kontulan Hassan" ('Hassan from Kontula', a suburb in Eastern Helsinki), which he has created and sustains on social media, explicitly represents him as a multicultural person from Helsinki.

The video we analyze here is called "Reagoi vihakommentteihin!" ['I react to hate comments!'].<sup>10</sup> As already mentioned, Maikal presents his social media audience's antagonistic comments which he discusses and criticizes in Finnish in humorous terms, basically 'teaching/preaching' pluralist diversity to them and to other members of his audience.<sup>11</sup> The origins of these hate comments are not specified but, based on their appearance, we can assume that they originate in the comment sections of his other vlogging videos.

In Extract 3,<sup>12</sup> we see Maikal reading one of the hate comments and reacting to it.

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<sup>9</sup> As stated above, Somalis are amongst the top four ethnic groups living in Finland: in 2019, there were some 22,000 Somali speakers (SF 2019a).

<sup>10</sup> Published on Maikal's YouTube channel Aug 11, 2017; the video is no longer available.

<sup>11</sup> Videos reacting to hate comments is a popular online genre. Famous examples include a British vlogger KSI and an American vlogger Emma Chamberlain. In Finland, another well-known vlogger like this is Lakko.

<sup>12</sup> In our transcript, the second column includes the screen caption of the video. The third column shows the original Finnish comments which were sent to Maikal and which are displayed on his video, as well as our translations of these comments into English. The fourth column depicts what Maikal says out loud on the video and our translations of this.

## Extract 3

0:51



Niko Nikotiini: Vittu näitä suvakkeja rajat auki ne pitäis laittaa kiinni ei se yhteiskunta sillä tavalla pyöri ei noi mitään sotaa karkuu tuu rahan takii ne tulee ja pillun tietty jos ei saa nii ottavat väkisin ei helvetti iha propagandaa tää

*Nico Nicotine: Fuck these tolerants open the borders they should be closed the society doesn't work that way those are not escaping war they come for the money and for the pussy of course if they don't get it they take it by force hell this is pure propaganda*

Ouu... taas sama jäbä. Lukee: Vittu näitä suvakkeja rajat auki ne pitäis laittaa kiinni ei se yhteiskunta sillä tavalla pyöri ...

Tietsä mitä yhteiskunta ei pyöri noil sun suomen kielen taidoilla. [Nauraa]

Mis on pilkut, mis on pisteet, mis on isot alkukirjaimet. Teit ei voi ottaa tosissaa, jos te ette edes kirjoita hyvin. Siis come on, opiskelkaa lapset, opiskelkaa.

*Oh, it's the same guy.*

*Reads: Fuck these tolerants open the borders they should be closed the society doesn't work that way ... You know what. Society doesn't work with those skills of Finnish you have. [Laughs]*

*Where are the commas, where are the full stops, where are the uppercase initial letters. You cannot be taken seriously if you do not even write well. Come on, study children, study.*

Maikal reads and responds to a comment by Niko Nikotiini who has been commenting on his videos previously ('it's the same guy'). In his comment, which is basically one long sentence without any punctuation marks, Niko Nikotiini is echoing a more general racist discourse and voicing his upset about the tolerant people ("suvakki", short for *suvaitsevainen*, i.e., 'tolerant, liberal, open-minded') who (would like to) open up the Finnish borders for people from elsewhere. Niko Nikotiini is also notably angry about people who, in his view, lie about their reasons for coming to Finland: according to him, they are not refugees fleeing from war zones, but are instead after money and women. What we see, in Maikal's response, however, is a shift of focus away from this 'close the borders' discourse, onto the language skills of the commentator. This is a crucial shift, also in terms of hierarchy and power, as it is typically migrants and poc people who are the target of accusations about the lack or insufficiency of their language skills (in Finland, see e.g. Tarnanen and Pöyhönen [2011]). What Maikal showcases here is his upset about the commentator's lack of knowledge of the correct way to use Finnish. At the same time, his comment displays his own knowledge of the conventions of formal, standard written Finnish: 'Where are the commas, where are the full stops, where are the uppercase initial letters', and hence his native speaker expertise, level of education and metapragmatic knowledge about what kind of language should be used in public in order to be understood and taken seriously. In a way, Maikal is thus urging that even hate talk on social media should follow (some of) the rules of standard Finnish, instead of a spoken register that is often seen as typical of social media discourse (see e.g. Zap-pavigna 2012).

In his commentary, Maikal is clearly evoking a complex situational identity and social voice (Peuronen 2013: 301). With his categorical directives, such as 'study children, study',<sup>13</sup> he could be seen as orienting in a teacher-like way to those not in the know – the barely literate and incoherent racists. By repeating Niko Nikotiini's argument 'society won't work' and modifying it, he turns the original racist discourse upside down: while Niko Nikotiini implies that society will not function if the borders are open, Maikal emphasizes that it is really the proficiency in standard Finnish without which society cannot function. By this, he also seems to imply that in this specific case the other is actually the white Finn who is not knowledgeable enough in his own language, while Maikal himself seems fully integrated linguistically.

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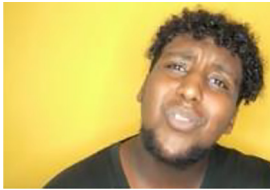
<sup>13</sup> The old, recurring infantilizing stereotype of black Africans as "childlike" (e.g. Hall 1997) is here reversed.



Prior to the monologue of Extract 4, Maikal has been reading out loud numerous comments, all of which he reprimands for their poor grammar. Below, he elaborates on the poor language skills of his commentators:

## Extract 4

02:34



Tietsä mikä on läppää. Sit ku ne sanoo et sä oot se mamu, sä oot, painu omaa maahan, painu omaa kotimaahan. Mut sähän jopa osaat suomen kielt paremmin ku ne. Sä jopa osaat paremmin suomen kieltä ku ne. Mitä täs on... Mite tää on mahollista. Jos mä meen sanoo muille tää on mun kotimaa, mee takasin kotimaahas, mä ees ootan iteltäni et mä osaan ees oman äidinkielen. 2017. Jopa somalit osaa paremmin teidän äidinkieltä. Hävetkää. Oh my god. Oh my god, brah.

*You know what is a joke. When they say that you are the immigrant, you are, go to your own country, go to your own home country. But actually you know Finnish better than they do. Actually you know the Finnish language better than they do. What is this ... How is this possible? If I go and say to other people that this is my home country, you go back to your home country, I at least expect of myself that I know my mother tongue. 2017. Even Somalis know your mother tongue better than you. Shame on you. Oh my god (Eng.). Oh my god, brah (Eng.).*

In his comments, Maikal is suggesting here that, according to the racists, there is an ideological link between the nation, ethnicity and the national language. He notes that the racists' comments seem to build on the assumption that, since he is not white and does not therefore presumably know the Finnish language, he should return to his 'home country'. This is of course in stark contrast with Maikal's biography: he was born and has lived all his life in Finland and is a native speaker of Finnish. In the same way as in Extract 3, here too, the hierarchical roles between Maikal as the person of color and the white Finnish commentators seem to be reversed: he positions himself as the one able to use the Finnish language,

knowing it in fact better than the white Finns. Therefore, he can afford to educate and criticize them ('shame on you') for this lack of investment in their language, and even in their own moral and intellectual education.

In this extract, he represents Somalis as the ultimate other ('even Somalis') who know 'your mother tongue' better, indicating that, in principle, the Finnish language does not belong to him, but to the white Finns.<sup>14</sup> Even though he himself belongs to the group of Somalis who, linguistically speaking, can pass as a native speaker, in this comment Maikal implies that Finnish is not his language, but the language of the racists. In other words, his performative reading and commentary of the hate posts seems to say that in this language of the racists, he is the true master, while the 'real' and 'original' owners of the language are failing in it. Through this discursive positioning of himself and the Finnish-speaking racists, it could be argued that the racists' lack of proficiency is an icon (Irvine and Gal 2000: 37) of the racists themselves – their racist project is failing, too.

Linguistically, the complexity of his position shows in the subtle heterogeneity of his speech style. In his responses to the hate comments, he uses vernacular Finnish (e.g., "Mut sähän jopa osaat suomen kielt paremmin ku ne. Sä jopa osaat paremmin suomen kieltä ku ne.", 'But actually you know Finnish better than they do. Actually you know the Finnish language better than they do.'). peppered by occasional English slang words and phrases ("oh my god, brah"). At the same time, he engages in a metadiscursive display of his knowledge of the conventions of standard written Finnish to claim that he, a Somali, is a more knowledgeable user of the Finnish language than the racist white Finns. In essence, all of this is, again, heteroglossia in action: his commentary of the failing Finnish of racists stems from a position of ambiguity, tension, and different voices, from a space between socio-ideological contradictions, in and between languages, cultures, and identifications (Bakhtin 1981: 291).

In sum, Maikal is using social media as a platform for talking back to the racists and claiming an equal position (with the white Finns) to talk about the significance and value of language in the Finnish society. He is thus upsetting and challenging the racist, ideological order (i.e., the supposed normative hierarchy between white Finns and the racialized non-white Finns), reversing the roles about who can say what to whom regarding language and claiming his right to speak (about) the Finnish language and to belong to the Finnish society. At the same time he is condemning the racists for failing in their own language, and he is doing it in a way

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**14** In general, Somalis self-identify as competent speakers of Finnish. According to a recent study (Pitkänen et al. 2019: 21–22), out of the five biggest minority language groups in Finland (Russian, Estonian, English, Somali, and Arab), the number of speakers who are on the 'native-like' level of proficiency in Finnish was the highest among Somali speakers (29%).

that never lets his viewers forget that he is a Finnish Somali who both identifies with and dis-identifies from Finnishness and the Finnish language, and who both belongs and does not belong to Finland (similar themes characterize his rap; see Leppänen and Westinen [2017]).

## 5 Conclusion

With the help of the two illustrative cases of social media performances by artists of color, we have discussed how, in a highly mediatized society such as Finland, social media often function as a forum for voicing affective upsets, but also how they are increasingly used as means for countering and interrogating structural, societal, and sociolinguistic upsets. In our analysis, we showed how the issues of language proficiency and diversity are investigated by people of color in their heteroglossic social media performances.

In our analysis, we showed how social media performers of color mobilize various linguistic resources – specifically standard and vernacular Finnish, as well as linguistically heterogeneous urban slang – in constructing social positions that enable them to reflexively index their simultaneous belonging and non-belonging to the social and sociolinguistic realm of contemporary Finland, in the tension-ridden sociopolitical context that takes whiteness and ethnic Finnishness as the ideological cornerstones of the nation.

More specifically, our first case, ‘The Suburb Translator’, was shown to convey an ambivalent story of the role of language in making integration, socialization, and belonging possible for those who are racialized in white mainstream society. The most obvious message it conveyed, we argued, was a seemingly optimistic story of how technology can literally make us understand the otherwise incomprehensible language of the other, without any extra effort or investment by the mainstream workplace (or, by extension, society). On the other hand, the video was also shown to be deeply pessimistic, giving us a carnivalistic and illusory solution to how the normally unacceptable and incomprehensible mixed language use can be temporarily understood, and even rewarded. From this perspective, the urban multilingual Finn of color in the video appeared as incapable of making himself understood without mediation, and thus remained voiceless.

In the analysis of our second case, we showed how Hassan Maikal, a Finnish Somali artist, gave his magisterial condemnation of the different ways in which racists are failing in their own language, thus temporarily reversing the stereotypical hierarchy of proficiency assumed to hold between white ‘native’ speakers of Finnish and non-white speakers of the language. While doing this, he nevertheless made it clear that he remained a Finnish Somali who both identified with

and dis-identified from Finnishness and the Finnish language. His performance, displaying his effortless fluency in vernacular Finnish and English slang, as well as his knowledge of the conventions of appropriate written standard Finnish, thus highlighted and contested ideological notions about how particular language resources are considered a key to Finnishness, and their role in the racialization and othering of individuals and groups, as triggered by their skin color, ethnic background, and cultural affiliations. In essence, his commentary of the racists' posts was argued to be deeply heteroglossic in nature. His critique of the racists' failing Finnish was shown to stem from a position of ambiguity and tension: from a space between socio-ideological contradictions, in and between languages, cultures, and identifications.

As social media performances both videos no doubt have positive power. Their power derives from how they can enable and encourage those traditionally kept in the margins to claim a position at the center of the stage, with the possibility for choosing themselves how people of color can use their voices and be represented. Interestingly, in both cases under investigation in this article, this choice involved ambivalence and in-betweenness: the persons of color were shown to be both inside and outside hegemonic white society.

Both videos thus highlighted how societal and sociolinguistic diversity is not only about the acceptance and appreciation of difference, but also how it is deeply entwined with divisions and dominant societal discourses about diversity, multilingualism and belonging. In this sense, our first case could be argued to show that the multilingual workplace is, in the end, an impossibility and that, for it to function well, employees and workers need to use (standard) Finnish only. In the same vein, our second case could also be taken to emphasize, for persons of color, in particular, the importance of proficiency in standard Finnish as a key to integrity and equality or, as far as their orientation to racists is concerned, even superiority over the racists and their choice of not to (learn to) use standard Finnish.

Seen from this angle, both our cases reflect a more generally shared ideological stance towards the management of diversity in Finnish society. Most explicitly, this stance is visible in the legal and official discourses and policies in which the Finnish state has conceptualized and formalized the policies related to immigrants (e.g. the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration 2010; the database for information and services for immigrants, <https://kotoutuminen.fi/en/frontpage>). In Finland, discourses and policies like these build on the idea that integration, rather than assimilation, is the main objective in managing diversity. What this means is that, on the one hand, they posit that immigrants need to be provided with measures and services, such as studies in one of the two official languages, Finnish or Swedish, that promote and support their integration. On the

other hand, they emphasize that immigrants also need to receive support, so that they can maintain their own culture and language (Pöyhönen and Tarnanen 2015). Although not explicitly centering on immigrants, a similar vision is replicated in both social media performances in focus in this paper. This they do by exemplifying and advocating social and linguistic plurality and diversity, while, at the same time, suggesting that the proficiency in standard Finnish is nevertheless the key to access and belonging to the mainstream society. In this way, the tensions related to this dual vision they highlight tell of a society, in which, social relations and the sociolinguistic system are changing and in motion but, to cite Jan Blommaert (2015: 83), in which “complexity, hybridity, and ‘impurity’” are not yet considered “‘normal’”.

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