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# Conditions of commodification: Russian as a transient commodity in an Arctic tourism resort

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**Abstract:** Based on an ethnography incorporating interview, linguistic landscape and observational data, this research illustrates how temporary linguistic value is negotiated and how an Arctic tourism destination is made fit for consumption for a specific audience. Set within a tourism resort in the Finnish Arctic during two weeks in Winter when the region habitually receives a large influx of Russian-speaking visitors, we illustrate how Russian is conceptualized as a means of economic practice by stakeholders in the local tourism industry. While some offer services specifically for a Russian-speaking audience as part of a short-term high-risk/high-reward investment, others regard Russian as an expression of a negative niche market that compromises the overall image of the Arctic as a global tourism destination. We discuss these different understandings of commodity value and highlight, how stakeholders in the local tourism economy imagine and discursively construct Russian-speaking tourists. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the conditions of language commodification and the processes involved in the valuation and devaluation of linguistic resources within temporary linguistic markets.

**Keywords:** Arctic; commodification; multilingualism; Russian; tourism mobility

## 1 Introduction

In the makeshift headquarters of Ice Travel<sup>1</sup> at the back of Lumenkylä's spa centre, a tour guide runs one of his several daily sales presentations, this time for a group of Ukrainians who had arrived on a charter flight from Kharkiv the previous night.

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<sup>1</sup> All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

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“Look, you have made the right choice, just a few ever have the chance to see the northern lights, ride with huskies, meet a shaman or see untouched nature. We offer access to the wealth and beauty of the arctic with our experienced tour guides who are all Russian speaking. This is a special place.”<sup>2</sup> Strikingly, everything in the converted office space was temporary – the touristic experiences on offer, and along with them, the Russian-speaking tour guides, sales representatives, and office staff that Ice Travel had recruited. We ourselves had just arrived in Lumenkylä, a tourism destination in the Finnish Arctic, to investigate how a linguistic resource – in this case Russian – is mobilized, circulated, and rejected in a time that is locally known as ‘the Russian weeks’.

It is within this time and space that we became interested in an investigation of Russian as a transient – and potentially lucrative – commodity. Indeed, when we started this research, Russian-speaking tourists were the group with the greatest economic impact on Finland’s economy (Statistics Finland 2017), with most of this tourism mobility centred on the south and east of the country. In the Finnish Arctic, tour operators also began to offer a limited number of Russian-language activities and package tours around the New Year for affluent travellers from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Despite this, Russian remains a speculative commodity and while English, German, French, or Swedish form repertoires readily available or easily mobilized in specific Arctic tourism economies year-round (Dlaske 2016; Kelly-Holmes and Pietikäinen 2014), conditions of possibility to capitalize on Russian continue to be constrained by wider political-economic conditions in post-Soviet tourism markets, fluctuating currency exchange rates, or the availability of visas (Pavlenko 2017). Most recently, the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 further exemplified this volatility.

In that respect, Russian demonstrates what shapes and complicates temporary linguistic markets, as much as it illustrates the impact of wider political-economic conditions on them. To investigate how these processes evolve in the Finnish Arctic, our research draws from interview, media, and observational data from four research sites in Lumenkylä: two tour agencies that facilitate and organize the ‘Russian weeks’, the municipal tourism information, as well as a local hotel. Within these multilingual sites of circulation, this paper illustrates how Russian is either regarded as a lucrative investment and commodity to be mobilized at specific moments in time, or as an expression of a “reject” or “negative niche market” that is too difficult, risky, or compromising to engage in. In that respect, it is our aim to investigate what informs these different understandings of Russian, focusing on processes that illustrate how language becomes a capitalizing moment for some while at the same time being rejected by others. To make sense of these

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2 The tour guide spoke Russian, and his phrases are translated in English in the fieldnotes.

processes, the Finnish Arctic comprises an ideal laboratory. In a space that is undergoing structural-economic change, tourism has emerged as a key economic activity. Here, the North as a place of temporary and cyclical opportunities allows us to observe how linguistic value is discursively constructed (and for whom), and how speculations about temporary commodities describe a pivotal modality of capitalism (Appadurai 1986; Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Pietikäinen 2015).

In what follows, we will first discuss our theoretical foundation that is centred on the notion of language as a form of capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1991) and commodity in a linguistic marketplace (Heller 2010; Heller and Duchêne 2016). We will then focus on scholarship that addresses the commodification of Russian, outline the wider political-economic context of our research, and lay out the role of Russian language in Finland, and specifically within the Finnish tourism industry. As a next step, we discuss Lumenkylä as our research site, characterize our key informants, and outline our methodological approach. We then discuss how Russian is conceptualized as a means of economic practice and outline the ways, knowledge of both Russian language and the desires of post-Soviet travellers add value to tourism products for some. At the same time, we spotlight how other stakeholders deem any engagement with this specific group of tourists as too risky, as this could potentially compromise the image of Lumenkylä as an upmarket winter sports resort in the Finnish Arctic.

## 2 Commodification of language in tourism

Language commodification describes how value is conferred to language and communication skills and illustrates how those skills are converted into symbolic or economic capital. Nonetheless, this goes beyond the economic exchange value of speech and languages as a measurable skill (Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013), but instead also refers to cultural capital as expressed through various forms of knowledge (Bourdieu 1977) employed by speakers and organizations alike. It is within this context that we aim to broaden our knowledge of processes describing the commodification of languages and speakers in late modernity (Heller 2010; Heller and Duchêne 2016) and the ideas, ideologies, and beliefs around languages, in particular pertaining to contexts where multilingualism is positioned as economic opportunity and where language production emerges as work process and product (Cameron 2000, 2012; Heller 2003, 2010; Tan and Rubdy 2008). Within these contexts, commodities are discursively and materially constructed and up for interpretation, potentially speculative, variable, shifting, and at times only manifest themselves temporarily (Appadurai 1986).

Investigating the processes of language commodification ties in with a growing interest in circumstances where language serves the purpose of adding exchange value to appeal to global or regional markets (Heller et al. 2017; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Sharma and Phyak 2017). This has varied expressions and is demonstrated by a foregrounding of authentic forms of language and communication to add distinctive characteristics to a product or service (Cavanaugh 2016; Kelly-Holmes and Pietikäinen 2014), through the promotion of English as a language of unlimited potential beyond the boundaries of the nation state (Park and Wee 2012; Sharma 2018; Sharma and Phyak 2017), or through the strategic mobilization of linguistic resources to appeal to small but lucrative target markets and audiences (Muth 2018; Muth and Suryanarayan 2020; Pavlenko 2017). Especially the last aspect ties in with current research addressing the commodity value of Russian in connection with other languages, in this context English and Finnish. To date, research accounts on commodification of Russian are limited in scope and investigate wholesale markets in China (Grigorichev and Guzei 2017) and India (Suryanarayan 2017), hospitals in Lithuania, India, and Switzerland (Muth 2018; Muth and Ryazanova-Clarke 2017; Muth and Suryanarayan 2020), or the linguistic landscapes of tourism destinations ranging from Southern Europe (Cabal Guarro 2017; Pavlenko 2017) to Northern Norway (Olnova 2017). Adding to this scholarship, we offer an ethnographic documentation of the ways, Russian becomes a temporary object of speculation as well as a transient and inherently unstable commodity.

### 3 Russian-speaking tourists in Finland

At present, tourist travel from Russian-speaking countries to Finland has effectively stopped and future outlooks by tourism experts predict a steep decline in visits in 2022 and beyond (Schengen Visa Info 2022). At the time of our research in 2018, prospects were different. Tourists from countries of the former Soviet Union and in particular Russia had discovered Finland as a travel destination since the early 1990s, mainly drawn to unspoiled nature, a well-developed tourism infrastructure and a high standard of living. A common border and proximity to St. Petersburg had made Finland the most accessible, easy-to-reach ‘Western country’ for many Russians. Russia has also played a pivotal role in Finnish history: from 1809 to 1917 the Grand Duchy of Finland was an autonomous province of the Russian empire. Following centuries under Swedish rule, in 1809 the Grand Duchy of Finland became an autonomous part of the Russian Empire and after the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the country became independent (Meinander 2011). Following Finland’s involvement in World War II and the loss of some of its

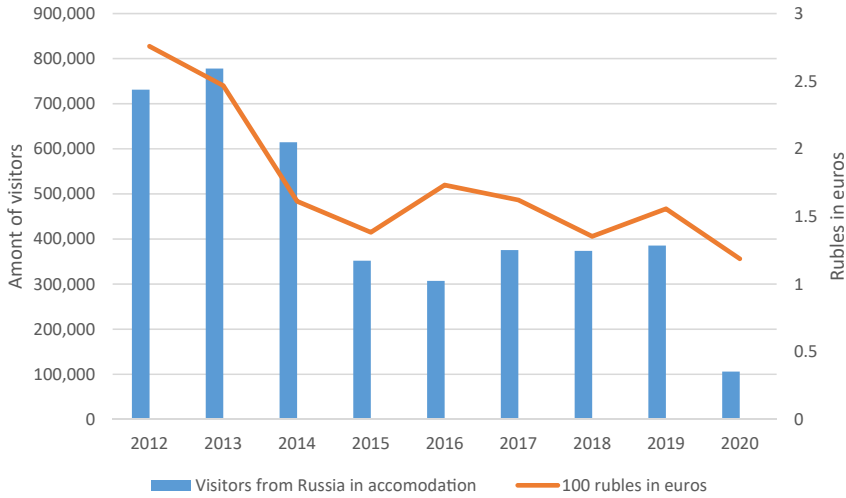
territory to the Soviet Union, the country pursued a non-alignment policy characterized by both European integration and the maintenance of close political and economic relationships with its eastern neighbor. To date, Russian is the third most spoken language in Finland with over 81000 speakers using it as their first language (Statistics Finland 2020), mainly in the Greater Helsinki area (Viimaranta et al. 2017) and in Eastern Finland.

Although tourism from Russia is frequently framed as an economic opportunity from various perspectives (Jakosuo 2011; Maaseudun Tulevaisuus 2018; Yle 2009), even before Russia's war against Ukraine, media and political discourses in Finland suggested an underlying resentment or uneasiness with issues relating to Russia, Russians, or the post-Soviet world at large. In the past this materialized in varied debates on the negative effects of the buying up of real estate on local communities (Kaleva 2008; Ilta-Sanomat 2020), money laundering (Ilta-Sanomat 2018), or organized crime in Finland (Helsingin Sanomat 2017). This was contrasted by the popularity of Finland as a tourism destination among Russians and other tourists from post-Soviet countries: Exemplarily, in 2017 alone, 3.1 million Russians visited Finland, making it the third most popular destination for foreign travel (Visit Finland 2018, 3) and the group with the greatest economic impact on Finnish businesses (Statistics Finland 2017). Despite that, tourist numbers fluctuated even before the war, mostly alongside the exchange rate of the Russian ruble vis-à-vis the euro (see Figure 1), changing visa regulations, and wider geopolitical conditions (Pavlenko 2017). The drop in overnight stays in 2015 can be attributed to the devaluation of the ruble following the Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing economic sanctions by the European Union. Moving forward to 2022, the Russian aggression against Ukraine further illustrates the volatility of this tourism mobility. Hopes for a swift return of Russian-speaking tourists have all but disappeared.

From the perspective of our research site, Lumenkylä's tourism board reported that visits by Russians peaked in 2012 with over 30,000 registered overnight stays<sup>3</sup> while by 2016, this number had halved. By the end of 2016, the exchange rate of the ruble stabilized and along that, numbers of visitors, to Lumenkylä and Finland as a whole. Moving forward beyond the global pandemic that had effectively ended this tourist mobility, hopes were high for an increase in tourist numbers and Russian tourists were eager to visit Finland once travel becomes possible again (Shakhnovich 2021). However, the industry now faces great uncertainty (Schengen Visa Info 2022).

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<sup>3</sup> Overnight stays in holiday cabins and -cottages are not included and the actual number is estimated to be three times higher in Lapland.



**Figure 1:** Nights spent by visitors from Russia in relation to the exchange value of the Russian ruble. Sources: Official Statistics of Finland (OSF): Accommodation statistics [e-publication]. Visitor arrivals and nights spent by country of residence in 2012–2020. Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 19.2.2021]. Access method: [https://www.stat.fi/til/matk/index\\_en.html](https://www.stat.fi/til/matk/index_en.html) Forex Bank: Venäjän rupla (RUB). [Russian ruble] <https://www.forex.fi/valuutta/rub>.

The economic significance of Russian tourism in Finland becomes evident in the efforts of Finnish tourism authorities to explore the preferences and spending habits of Russian tourists (Visit Finland 2018; Shakhnovich 2021). While Russian tourists generally appreciate the same services as other tourist groups, before the war the most popular destinations for them included Eastern Finland (310,000 visitors in 2017) and the Helsinki region (256,000 visitors) (Visit Finland 2018). At the time of our research, far fewer Russian-speaking tourists visited ski resorts such as Lumenkylä (14,000). Despite that, Russian-speaking tourists visiting Northern Finland had spent significantly more and stayed longer<sup>4</sup> than in other destinations in Finland (Visit Finland 2018, 6, 15), which made it worthwhile for stakeholders to develop strategies to accommodate this niche clientele (see also Pavlenko 2017).

The north of Finland itself has been undergoing structural economic change, making additional sources of income necessary, often with the help of temporary migrant workers (Strömmer 2020; Tuulentie and Heimtun 2014). In many communities in the Finnish Arctic, tourism now supplements traditional ways of making a livelihood such as forestry, fishing, reindeer herding, or the extraction of

<sup>4</sup> Russian tourists travelling to Finnish ski resorts stay in Finland for 6 nights on average and spend 356 euros per person (Visit Finland 2018).

natural resources. Within this context, local, national, and global stakeholders now market the region as a peripheral frontier that is characterized by untouched nature, natural wonders, and indigenous traditions (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011). For this form of market expansion, language matters in two distinct yet interrelated ways. On the one hand, indigenous Sami languages add a layer of authenticity to mainstream tourist activities, as in the promotion of traditional handicrafts, artisanal products, or touristic performances (Dlaske 2014; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011; Pietikäinen 2013). On the other hand, multilingual repertoires are becoming instrumental for local tourism economies to serve an increasingly international clientele (Dlaske 2016; Kelly-Holmes and Pietikäinen 2014; Pietikäinen 2018).

## **4 Data and methodology: multisited team ethnography in Lumenkylä**

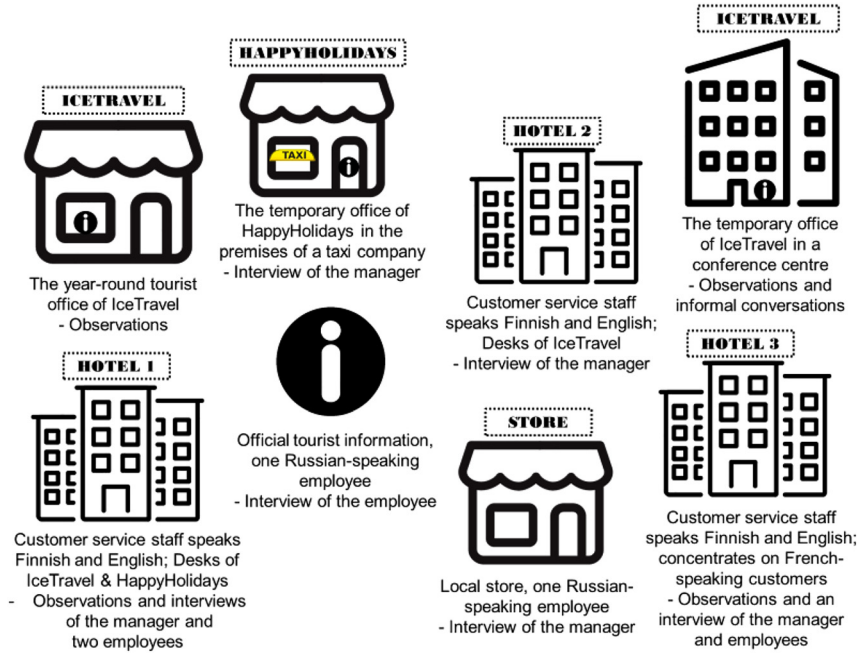
The rationale and motivation for this research is informed by a multisited team ethnography, drawing on ethnographic data collected as part of a larger project that investigated the political economy of language in Arctic regions from 2017 to 2019. For our analytical framework we adopted a critical sociolinguistic perspective, following Heller et al. (2018: 105–116), and their approach of mapping, tracing and connecting ethnographic and discourse-analytical data. We categorized our data along relevant categories and key questions that helped us to establish a descriptive account of the commodity value of Russian language and speakers within our research context. This form of mapping (Heller et al. 2018: 105–111) was instrumental in order to better understand how tourism markets for Russian speakers were regulated and segmented; furthermore, this enabled us to obtain a more refined understanding of the conditions of commodification and how these materialized during a seasonal influx of a particular group of speakers. Further, we combined the linguistic and ethnographic evidence from both our investigation and the larger research project to find out more about these phenomena by tracing additional information about the key stakeholders invested in the “Russian weeks” on various social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and VKontakte (see Heller et al. 2018: 111–113). We established linkages and similarities between our findings and previous research to explain how the conditions and consequences of language commodification observed within our research context connect with concomitant conditions and processes elsewhere (Heller et al. 2018: 114–116).



Our ethnographic data was surveyed in January 2018 during a time that is considered the prime winter holiday season for post-Soviet tourism markets, commencing in the week before New Year and lasting until Orthodox Christmas that is celebrated on January 7. Throughout this time, stakeholders referring to ‘Russian’ (as language, origin, or cultural background), in fact included speakers from other post-Soviet countries beyond Russia but where Russian is a language of wider communication for many. To explore how places, sights, and experiences, were marketed for incoming Russian-speaking tourists, we mapped to what extent and by whom tourism services for Russian-speakers were promoted, organized, and provided, and what discourses circulated that described the archetypical Russian-speaking traveler during their presence in Lumenkylä. We first identified the two key protagonists that facilitated travel from countries of the former Soviet Union and that we call Ice Travel and Happy Holidays. Unlike other agencies that aimed for an unspecified local and global clientele by promoting touristic products in Finnish and English year-round, these two focused their attention on the Russian season: Ice Travel maintained a scaled-down permanent presence and offered services in English through the year while Happy Holidays exclusively focused on Russian-speaking markets and only retained a temporary walk-in booking office in Lumenkylä from mid-December until mid-January.

As a second step, we established the interconnections and linkages between them and local stakeholders in the tourism industry such as Lumenkylä’s tourism office, different hotels, ski schools, shops, restaurants, supermarkets, as well as various local and regional tourism attractions by conducting semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and by collecting promotional material in Russian. Both observations and interviews ( $n = 11$ ) focused on recruitment practices of Russian-speaking workers, the overall value and function of Russian and other languages, as well as the interviewees’ own professional experiences and trajectories. To supplement this, we collected linguistic landscape data in and around Lumenkylä to gain an overview of the visibility and function of signage in Russian and identified several key sites where Russian-speaking tourists congregated, where tourism products were marketed in Russian, and where services in this language were readily available. This explorative approach to linguistic landscaping also enabled us to verify the interconnections between different key sites we had established earlier and to identify additional stakeholders who had made investments in (or acknowledged the presence of) Russian-speaking tourists. The insights from this explorative fieldwork are illustrated in a map of key research sites in Figure 2.

As a third step we focused on Ice Travel and Happy Holidays by visiting popular tourism sites, participating in sales talks and promotional events, and by witnessing pivotal moments when Russian as a linguistic resource was mobilized and when tourism products were tailored to the imaginative post-Soviet traveler.



**Figure 2:** Key research sites and overview of the data.

To add to our perspective on the conditions and temporalities of Russian as a temporary and potentially valuable resource, we interviewed stakeholders at Happy Holidays and observed promotional events at Ice Travel. Throughout this research, we followed the ethical guidelines provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. To protect participant anonymity, the names of individuals, companies and places used in this article are pseudonyms. Given the limited number of companies in the area, they may be recognized by people who know the resort well. This possibility was raised with and accepted by the participants before obtaining their consent.

## 5 Conditions of commodification

In a remote but globally connected tourism destination such as Lumenkylä, the natural wonders of the Arctic in winter are central to the promotion of touristic services. Nonetheless, activities such as snow mobile safaris, skiing, souvenir shopping, dog sledding, visits to reindeer farms, shamans, ice castles, or even encounters with Santa Claus must be linguistically mediated in different ways for

potentially different audiences with different expectations. Within this multilingual context, language and communication share several interrelated purposes. In a broad sense, multilingual repertoires – and in particular English or any other language that bridges communication barriers to cater to niche markets – ensure that there is a potentially wide range of consumers of tourism products to accommodate linguistically (Gao 2012; Muth 2018). Further, both Finnish as the national language and Samí indigenous languages are strategically employed to highlight “authentic” forms of language production, linking unique geographical and cultural space with specific touristic activities and tourism products (Budach et al. 2003; Heller et al. 2017; Macleod 2006; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011; Shepherd 2002).

However, authenticity and uniqueness do not always or necessarily entail the mobilization of indigenous languages like Samí, nor do they foreground Finnish language and culture; instead they take various shapes according to the tastes and preferences of different tourism markets, while retaining unique and authentic features that set a destination such as Lumenkylä apart from others in the first place. Here, language and culture take centre-stage to signal both competence and wider understanding, in our case within the compressed time of Lumenkylä’s ‘Russian weeks’ where Happy Holidays and Ice Travel have effectively reorganized the local linguistic market. For two weeks, both speculate on Russian as a commodity and valuable skill, albeit one that comes with an expiration date. Along this process of temporary valuation, ‘understanding’ the market emerges as a key condition that makes language commodification possible. This entails the ability to mobilize the right speakers at the right time as much as it suggests authority to read and understand a specific audience that shares a common language and cultural background. ‘Understanding’ takes on several different meanings beyond Russian language as skill; it refers to discerning the desires and expectations of this group of speakers as well as to understanding the dynamics of volatile post-Soviet tourism markets. However, as others shy away from investing in a market where preferences and language skills are apparently not easy to predict, “not understanding” Russian becomes a precondition for further capitalization.

## 5.1 Understanding Russian(s)

Indeed, the importance of understanding Russian speakers from various post-Soviet tourism markets requires knowledge of what a holiday in the Finnish Arctic ought to be like for them. In his pop-up office full of brochures in Russian, Sergey, the manager and owner of Happy Holidays confirms just that. Sitting in front of a banner that reads “Activities and services from local travel company” in both English and Russian, he is quick to suggest that Russian is central to his entrepreneurial success. “Speaking Russian is natural, it’s in their brain you know [...]

they see our signs in Russian and come in here”, he outlines in fluent English. In that respect, even an increasing number of Russians equipped with English skills make no difference as they appreciate using “their own language while travelling abroad”. As such, Sergey’s own trajectory suggests that viewing multilingual resources as instrumental to entrepreneurial success is not alien to him – born in Russia but raised in Finland, he sees both his bilingualism and his knowledge of “the best and worst of both worlds” as strategic advantages.

At the time of our research in January 2018, his travel- and tour agency employed Russian-speaking staff as tour guides, ski instructors, marketers, salespersons, and drivers and as such, left little room for cultural and linguistic uncertainty. Out of its main premises, the pop-up space within the building of the local taxi company as well as at strategic locations throughout Lumenkylä, Happy Holidays offered numerous services and activities for tourists to make customized bookings or as packaged sets of experiences. These included skiing lessons, snow mobile safaris, dog sledding, ice fishing, but also events that were specifically conceptualized for post-Soviet audiences such as encountering contemporary adaptations to fairy tale characters like the ‘Snow Queen’ (Rus. *Снежная королева*)<sup>5</sup> in her ice castle outside Lumenkylä. According to Sergey, what is desired are “[...] travel experiences in Russian that are easy, comfortable, and safe for them”. This foregrounding of Russian is also reflected in Happy Holiday’s promotional discourses, as shown for instance in the two posters that list a choice of touristic services on offer (Image 1). The posters were part of a pop-up booking desk that Happy Holidays had set up in Lumenkylä’s ski complex and similar to those that had appeared elsewhere in Lumenkylä, for instance in hotel lobbies. While the audience is defined by the flags of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, the other provides a summary of some of their services and activities (ski school, excursions, transfers), and – below – explicitly highlights that their whole range of services is available in Russian (Rus. *Полный спектр услуг на русском языке*).

In fact, the forms of delocalized language practice employed to sell the natural wonders of the Arctic in Russian are no obstacles to capitalize on them. Instead, the practices to employ Russian as a linguistic and cultural skill serve their purpose well as they mediate and control what tourists with a post-Soviet background prefer and what they should regard as part of an authentic experience of place.

Meanwhile, in a rented annexe of Lumenkylä’s spa complex, Ice Travel was casting its own understanding of authenticity on potential consumers. The agency adhered to a similar business model throughout the Russian weeks, seeing their

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<sup>5</sup> A fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen that is widely known throughout post-Soviet countries, in particular since the 1957 acclaimed animated film of the same name by Soviet director Lev Atamanov.



**Image 1:** ‘Whole range of services in Russian language’ – advertisement by Happy Holidays. Picture taken by [author 1] in the ski centre of Lumenkylä, January 3, 2018.

linguistic and cultural expertise in understanding post-Soviet tourists as a precondition for entrepreneurial success. During the time of our fieldwork, one of the company’s tour guides was tasked to deliver 30-min power point presentations in Russian along a fixed schedule in a conference room, typically up to 10 times a day.

Example 1      Fieldnote excerpt (fieldnotes written in English), January 5, 2018.

Then there is some promotional talk (quite hard-sell): ‘You should make the most out of your stay here. There are unique opportunities in Lapland, ‘see what no one else usually sees’, ‘experience the nature, exotic animals’, ‘these are chances that don’t come back easily’. ‘Our principle is quality and to get you a classy, high-quality experience’. ‘Try our program, you’ll like it, you will see what many dream to see, you are here and can profit from that now. We have an office here in this building, near the main village square, one in the [...] hotel, one at ski center and one at [...] hotel. We are open from 9 in the morning until the last customer and we all speak Russian.’

Certainly, the audience had chosen wisely in coming to Lapland and during their stay can be sure that during excursions and activities, communication problems won't be an issue. The event portrayed the tourists' brief time in Lumenkylä as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity they should profit from, either through tailor-made individual experiences or through group activities led by Ice Travel's Russian-speaking guides. Lumenkylä and its surroundings were portrayed in two distinct ways, as an amalgamation of natural wonders waiting to be discovered, and as a place of luxury and leisure that could be anywhere (Image 2) on the global circuit of renown winter holiday destinations and where everything from restaurants to souvenir boutiques to sports activities are within easy reach.

Following the presentation, attendants were invited to ask questions and to discuss individual tours with dedicated Russian-speaking sales staff in a meeting room that had become the operational headquarter of Ice Travel. Apart from sales spaces, also speakers remained temporary. Both our interview data with Sergey, the owner of Happy Holidays, and conversations with Ice Travel staff suggest that virtually all workers of the two agencies were Russian speakers from either Russia or Ukraine (as guides, sales representatives, animators, or ski instructors), Estonia and Latvia (as drivers), or Finland (as guides or managers). Based on our observations, most sales staff were not conversant in English or Finnish and had no specific knowledge about Finland or the Arctic region beyond what was depicted in their own travel brochures and -catalogues. Instead, they were recruited because of their ability to perform touristic work for Russian speakers.



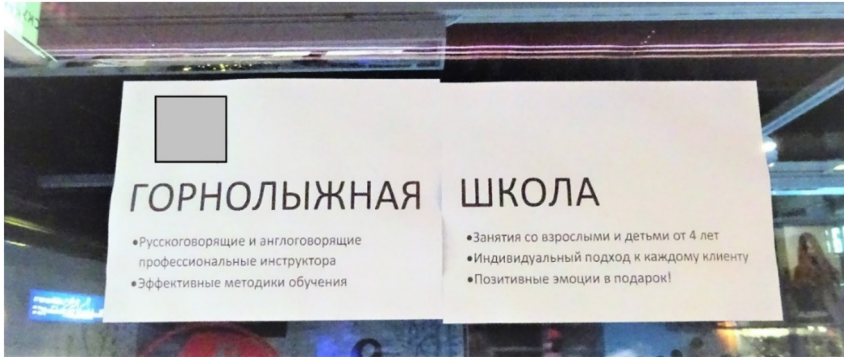
**Image 2:** 'The atmosphere of an Alpine village' – a sales presentation by Ice Travel. Picture taken by [author 1] in Ice Travel's temporary office/meeting space in a conference centre, January 5, 2018.



**Image 3:** Advertisement for a Russian-language kindergarten/nursery run by Ice Travel. Picture taken in Ice Travel's office by [author 1], January 3, 2018.

The reliance on Russian-speakers in the marketing of touristic products and in running various tourism-related activities became visible in the linguistic landscapes of central Lumenkylä as well, in particular around the offices of Ice Travel and Happy Holidays. Exemplarily, Ice Travel promoted various services (uniquely) in Russian, for instance childcare (Image 3), ski lessons (Image 4), fishing trips to Norway, or New Year banquets. While Image 3 suggests that the 'Kid's club' (Rus. детский клуб) operates in Russian, lessons at the ski school (Rus. горнолыжная школа) are offered by 'professional instructors' who are both 'Russian-speaking and English-speaking' (Rus. Русскоговорящие и англоговорящие профессиональные инструктора) and who offer 'positive emotions' (Rus. Позитивные эмоции) on behalf of Ice Travel (Image 4).

Such activities were also the only ones at the ski school that required English or any other language skill apart from Russian. In fact, while Image 4 illustrates how Ice Travel was promoting their own ski instructors, Sergey at Happy Holidays confirmed why it is also important for them to seek instructors who can be



**Image 4:** Advertisement for ski lessons outside of the main office of Ice Travel. Picture taken in Ice Travel's office by [author 1], January 3, 2018.

marketed as English-speaking – “English means that they [instructors] have an international experience. Like having been an instructor in the Alps and not just Sochi”. While not necessarily of particular use value in Lumenkylä during the Russian weeks, English nevertheless converts into exchange value as it comes attached with the global outlook of the speaker. It ties in with discourses on the unlimited potentiality of English as a matter of prestige (Park 2016); it indexes professionalism and international experience and as such bridges the gap between Russian as a convertible, essential, yet delocalized language skill and the expectations associated with Lumenkylä as a prestigious global winter sports hub.

Sergey’s choices for the most fitting ski instructors presuppose a profound understanding of post-Soviet tourism markets, what linguistic skills they require, and how these possibly link to professional trajectories of a temporary workforce. In the context of external factors such as diminishing currency values, changing visa regimes, competition from other destinations, or the larger geopolitical situation, an understanding of the value of those skills and the appeal they can add to tourism products, remains key. How this understanding of market, language, culture, and wider political-economic conditions links to entrepreneurial practice can be illustrated by what at the time of our fieldwork had been the latest addition to the set of countries that Happy Holidays and Easy Travel became engaged in. While in previous years, the numbers of tourist who flew in on charter flights from several Russian cities stagnated or even declined, Ukraine had emerged as a new opportunity that – according to Sergey – did not require any change in strategy, linguistic or otherwise. This opportunity had materialized when Happy Holidays



teamed up with Ukrainian tour companies to market charter flights from several cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odessa: “There is a market, the Arctic is exotic and new for them. And now Ukrainians can travel to Europe visa free”.

## 5.2 Not understanding Russian(s)

Visa-free travel for Ukrainian passport holders to EU member states such as Finland<sup>6</sup> was a development, other stakeholders in Lumenkylä were not aware of yet, as evident for instance at the municipal tourism bureau, Lumi Travel. Lumi Travel is responsible for the marketing and branding of Lumenkylä as a global tourism destination, it rents out cottages, and provides other touristic services through its website. At its walk-in tourism office that is open year-round, it hands out multilingual brochures about Lumenkylä, offers free maps of the area, and provides advice on culinary specialities, activities, and local attractions. Its website provides a “weekly programme” that lists different touristic activities offered by local entrepreneurs. Lumi Travel brokers these tours online and at the tourist information desk for a commission. Notably, Happy Holidays and Ice Travel are excluded from this scheme.

Lumi Travel did not attempt to capitalize on predictable tourist flows during the Russian weeks; nor did the official tourism bureau bother to specifically promote Lumenkylä in post-Soviet tourism markets. Instead, Russian speakers are accommodated in the tourism office by Tatiana, a native Russian speaker who moved to Lumenkylä from Russia in the 1990s. In an interview at her office that we conducted in English, she elaborates on her own understanding of Russian-speaking tourists:

- Example 2      SE:    so what do the Russian tourist want to do here when they are in Levi (.) what do they usually do
- TA:    ah what they do \$ they do everything \$ no actually they ask at first (.) reindeers and huskies and you mean Russian or (.) tourist or
- MA:    Russian speakers (.) like in (–)
- TA:    Okay so at first they ask about huskies and reindeers and also about snowmobiles (.) they don’t like snowshoeing (.) and winter walking \$\$ only some fun experience they want to do (.) also they uh (.) down ski (.) down skill (.) downhill skiing [...]

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<sup>6</sup> Since June 2017, Ukrainian citizen are exempt from visa requirement for short stays within the European Union [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_17\\_363](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_17_363).

- MA: and do you see any differences between like (.) Russian and Ukrainian or (.) like
- TA: Russian Ukrainian maybe not (.) maybe not between them (.) between Russian and for example from Britain (.) yes because they they need more nature than (.) Russian (.) Russians want to and the (-) want to do some (.) fun experience (.) and not like relax or nature experience
- MA: mhm mhm (.) and we noticed that there are groups staying in hotels here and then in cottages so ho- how do you see (.) are there some preferences like why to go to hotel or (-)
- TA: because more (.) Russian speaking (.) people come (.) through (.) [Ice Travel] and [Happy Holidays] (.) uh with charter uh so they (.) are staying in hotels because [Ice Travel] and [Happy Holidays] do bookings more (.) with hotels (.) so but uh (.) also clients prefer apartments in alpine style houses and maybe (.) maybe in cottages too but not far away from center because they have no car here

What characterizes ‘Russian’ to some extent deviates from the preferences and tastes of the more predictable others, such as tourists from the United Kingdom who in Tatiana’s opinion seem to be more appreciative of the natural beauty of the Finnish Arctic. Contrary to snowshoeing, Russian speakers prefer snowmobiles, they don’t relax but instead seek ‘fun experiences’ and overall, tend to structure their time in Levi differently than tourists from Western European countries. However, while Tatiana is certain about what mundane activities Russian-speakers desire, she concedes that Ice Travel and Happy Holidays are effectively in control of this group of tourists in terms of what they do during their time in Lumenkylä. This approach to ignore and not attempt to capitalize on the sudden influx of post-Soviet travellers around New Year became evident during visits to Lumi Travel’s walk-in tourism office as part of our fieldwork. The space that, by virtue of being the ‘official’ tourism office in town should normally be a first point of reference to visitors, had considerably fewer walk-in customers compared to Happy Holidays or Ice Travel. For Lumi Travel, economic returns from this clientele are not certain, given the relatively short time frame of the Russian weeks and lack of resources and interest in following up on the latest developments in post-Soviet tourism markets, such as the end of visa requirements for Ukrainian visitors to the EU. Furthermore, promoting mass tourism that caters to a group of speakers who are at times portrayed as problematic because of their lacking English skills and their demanding, unpolite and uncivilised behaviour (Pavlenko 2017: 400) might not be desirable for a tourism destination that seeks to bring together nature-centred tourism with various winter sports activities.

Other stakeholders were well-ahead, even without having to compromise on exclusivity and their own promotional discourses and branding strategies. Keskusta Hotel in the heart of Lumenkylä was one of them. During the time of our fieldwork there was an audible presence of Russian throughout its restaurants, bars, and common areas; in addition, both Happy Holidays and Ice Travel had set up temporary information- and tour-booking desks in the hotel's lobby. These were staffed with young Russian and Ukrainian women who – based on our observations – were not always proficient in English and hardly ever in Finnish. In its own marketing, the hotel regards itself as one of Lumenkylä's more prestigious locations, attracting middle- and upper-middle class customers. It operates throughout the year, but between Christmas and early January relies on the Russian weeks to fill hotel beds. It is part of a chain that operates throughout Finland and some neighbouring countries, and – per corporate guidelines – offers most of its brochures and other written information in Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian, and Estonian. Most of its front-desk workers master Finnish and English.

Keskusta Hotel does not offer or broker any touristic activities but is a key stakeholder in the Russian weeks because most of its rooms were booked by Happy Holidays and Ice Travel for their incoming tour groups as a mid- to top-end accommodation option. In an interview, Timo, the managing director of the hotel characterizes the Russian weeks as an extraordinary phenomenon and a “very tight time”. We further learn, how both Ice Travel and Happy Holidays were instrumental in managing the sudden increase in Russian-speaking tourists through their presence in the hotel's lobby.

- Example 3      MA:    And you said that you can (.) kind of (.) advantage from (.) from the two operators who are hanging around so how is this kind of happening (.) for how long do they come and (.) where like
- TI:      Well the Russians they are actually only these two weeks now (.) after (.) I think was it (.) 28th of December and (.) next (.) Wednesday I suppose it's going to be (.) over (.) the Russian season (.) if you can call it like that (.) but of course there's all the time there's a little bit (.) Russians coming around year (.) but the biggest season is for these (.) two or three weeks (.) after Christmas um and a bit (.) it's a very (.) tight (.) time (.) and then it's kinda over (.) before them are British (.) and then is the Russians (.) and then it's a little bit of quiet and then comes the Finns (.) and also people from (.) Central (.) Central Europe

- SE: And the um (.) do the tour (.) operators like (.) [Ice Travel] (.) and the other one (.) do you have an arrangement with them so for them to being able to position themselves in the lobby
- TI: Yeah yeah
- SE: Do you have like a (.) contract or how does it work
- TI: Yeah well (.) we (–) we have these two companies (.) [Ice Travel and Happy Holidays] (.) and they do have their own tables and (.) during the season they have their own (.) workers over here and there and of course we have these (.) [Sergey] and I don't remember the other guy's name but we can (–) they have their own office just around the corner over here so (.) it's working quite fine (.) and (.) people who come this far (.) from Russia (.) I say they are a little bit (.) it's not the same people that go to for example to Lappeenranta (.) in the eastern part Finland because they are coming (.) by bus so they are mostly for the shopping (.) these people are coming to holiday here (.) and of course (.) this is not the cheapest place (.) for them to come (.) and I see they are little bit more (.) well (.) at my point of opinion is that when I have a discussions with them (.) they are little bit more uh (.) highly educated little bit uh (.) the social status economical status is higher so (.) I see them little bit more (.) skilled in English speaking than those who are coming in the southern part of Finland

Not understanding Russian is no obstacle during the Russian weeks as the hotel seemed to be lucky enough to be dealing with the “highly educated” segment of Russian-speaking holidaymakers and not the stereotypical shopping tourist who travels to Eastern Finland by bus. The added sophistication that Timo observes among this clientele is tied in with their social class and for him materializes in an advanced knowledge of English. Tourists without this knowledge became the responsibility of Happy Holidays and Ice Travel – representatives of the two agencies were available for help in the lobby and during our fieldwork we observed a number of instances when they provided practical advice to Russian-speaking tourists. In this constellation, there is no need for Keskusta Hotel to accommodate speakers of Russian. On the contrary – despite a lack of matching linguistic resources and with only little understanding of the social stratification or cultural backgrounds of Russian speakers, the hotel became part of the tour agencies' narrative of a linguistically unproblematic encounter with the Finnish Arctic, while

at the same time successfully reproducing the impression of Lumenkylä as a prestigious global destination. In the following, Timo illustrates how not understanding the specifics of other markets and cultures could be in line with their own corporate imagery:

- Example 4      MA: [...] do you um require any kind of intercultural communication skills or
- TI: Uh (.) of course we talk about it (.) but I because there's so many different (.) way of (.) people (.) communicate with each other if we are working with Japanese or if you are working with Chinese and there's so (.) it's of course we have to think about it (.) all the time (.) and yeah time meeting a lot of uh (.) we have negotiations with uh (.) other tour operations who are around the world and so (.) yes we do pay attention for the (.) of course of course (.) yet we have people who are quite experienced because there's always these older (.) people (.) have been working last season they've all (.) to teach the younger one (.) the newer one's how to work (.) but yet (.) we are still (.) well our opinion is that we are Finnish hotel we are polite Finnish people (.) and we work the Finnish way (.) and we don't change our (.) behavior for (.) (–) this is what we are and this is how we do it (.) of course

While this excerpt highlights the uncertainty involved in dealing with tour operators from a variety of cultural and linguistic contexts, it also frames incomprehension of language or cultural norms (of Chinese, Japanese, or Russian tourists and tour operators) as unproblematic. It further illustrates, how Timo does not regard it necessary to make any concessions that would require Keskusta to compromise on its impression of a local, Finnish hotel that does work “the Finnish way” and that, in any communication, can expect its guest to either use English or Finnish. In fact, this understanding of linguistic value works well for all stakeholders involved – for Happy Holidays and Ice Travel, the added sophistication the hotel provides to their tourism products also plays out through English as an expression of authentic language practice that is to be expected in an international winter sports destination. In addition, for Keskusta Hotel, authenticity also manifests itself in doing things “the Finnish way”, thus adding another layer of localized language practice to be appreciated by tourists. Within this context, Happy Holidays and Ice Travel mediate these experiences, manage tourists' expectations, and ensure that in the end, everyone is understood.

## 6 Conclusion

As a final point of service, tour guides from Happy Holidays and Ice Travel assist Russian-speaking tourists during their-in for a flight to Kharkiv in north-eastern Ukraine. Flights to Russia had left the previous day carrying most of the temporary Russian-speaking workers. It is the final day of the Russian weeks and the combined departure and arrivals hall at Lumenkylä's small airport is full of travellers waiting for one of the five flights that were about to depart that day to various Ukrainian cities. In between, guides in winter jackets with the logos of Happy Holidays or Ice Travel take selfies with tourists, wish them well and, in case it is needed, provide language help during check-in and at security. The guides remain in Lumenkylä for some days to clear out the operational headquarter in the spa complex, dismantle the booking desks at Keskusta Hotel, remove the advertising banners at the ski center, collect the belongings of the Snow Queen from her ice castle, or empty the rented space at the taxi company. Ice Travel will scale back its operations and switch to English and Finnish signage once again, while Happy Holidays left Lumenkylä for the time being.

Set within the boom-and-bust economy of the Finish Arctic, in this case study we have illustrated how tourism experiences are made fit for consumption for a specific audience and – more broadly – discussed the conditions and constraints around the valuation of a temporary linguistic resource (Cavanaugh 2016; Heller 2010; Muth 2018; Sharma and Phyak 2017). Given the complexity of the organizational structures that underpin this form of tourism mobility that we observed, language is a decisive factor that ensures that investments pay off. In that respect, language and communication not only serve as instruments that make the Finnish Arctic accessible for a certain group of speakers, but also as tokens that signal a deeper understanding of their preferences, tastes, and desires while abroad. The opportunity to capitalize on language was made possible by an overall reluctance of others to engage with tourists that are complicated to understand, both literally and metaphorically. In fact, ‘we leave this to the Russians’ became a recurring theme in conversations with hotel administrators, sales staff and at Lumi Travel. This effective rejection of any direct involvement with this particular group of speakers in turn opened up possibilities for Happy Holidays and Ice Travel to speculate on a ‘negative niche’ or ‘reject market’ others found too difficult, specific, or volatile to engage in.

The roles and responsibilities of those in charge of staging the Russian weeks were not exclusively defined by the provision of touristic services in Russian. Instead, apart from the obvious valuation of Russian as “the natural thing” that tourists appreciate, its appeal is not universal and depends on sites and

circumstances even for a Russian-speaking audience – Russian is good enough to perform theme-based shows, talk to Santa Claus, or guide a snow mobile tour, and as such, performing them in Russian adds value to these experiences, at least from the perspective of Happy Holidays and Ice Travel. Nonetheless, being monolingual Russian is not desired in other circumstances as we have illustrated in the example of the ski instructors. For them, English mattered insofar as it indexed international experience and established a link to the imagination of the Finnish Arctic as a global tourism destination. Here, what was desired were English and Russian speaking instructors who could communicate in Russian but who – as professionals – capitalized on the indexical value of English as a language of unlimited potential (Park 2016; Park and Wee 2012). It is not necessary for Timo to understand Russian, the manager for whom Russian could potentially compromise the corporate image of his hotel, possibly even in the eyes of his Russian-speaking clientele as observed elsewhere in the context of medical tourism (Muth 2018). We have also shown how these limitations do not compromise the overall commodity value the two tour agencies ascribe to Russian; in their view, some form of localized language practice was expected and – in some instances – even desired by tourists. Given that Happy Holidays and Ice Travel continued to monopolize the market they had initially set up, Sergey’s strategy to speculate on language and communication as vital parts of his enterprise had paid off. In that sense, uncertainty around language may create possibilities; what is seen as temporal, fluctuating, unstable, and potentially not lucrative nevertheless can also mean a capitalizing moment for others.

## Transcription conventions

(.)	pause
[...]	removed speech
[name]	changed names for anonymity
underlined	emphasis
\$ \$	laugh or smile
(-)	unidentifiable speech
(( ))	analyst’s comments

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