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# Students' conceptualizations of monolingual Swedish-language spaces and bilingual practices at a bilingual university in Finland

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*This paper aims to analyze students' discourses on language policies and practices in a Swedish-medium study program at the largest bilingual university in Finland. In educational discourse and practice in Finland, the position of Swedish as a de facto minority language has traditionally been understood as secured through institutional language separation. While the declared language policies at the University of Helsinki have witnessed a shift towards the simultaneous use of multiple languages, the structure of the study programs still reflect a policy of parallel monolingualisms (Heller, 2007). By analyzing student interviews using a spatially informed framework, we look at how the students in a Swedish-medium study program negotiate the meaning of the program as a linguistic space and how bilingual policies and practices appear to them in this construct. Our findings show that the familiar discourses of language separation in minority language educational contexts also circulated in higher education: monolingual Swedish-medium programs were seen as "svenska rum" (Swedish rooms or spaces), material and social markers of the status of Swedish at the university and guaranteeing the access to education in the other national language. However, bilingual policies and teaching practices were seen as necessary to deconstruct linguistic and social borders between students in different programs in order to prevent alienation and to improve language skills. Nevertheless, the existing bilingual courses were oftentimes experienced as marginalizing the users of Swedish and careful planning was pointed out as crucial in implementing successful bilingual and multilingual practices in higher education.*

**Keywords:** language policy, higher education, constitutional bilingualism, university students

## 1 Introduction

Higher education language policies in Finland reflect Finnish constitutional bilingualism of two equal national languages, Finnish and Swedish (The Constitution of Finland, 731/1999). However, Swedish is a *de facto* minority language, spoken by approximately 5.5 per cent of the Finnish population. The

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bilingual University of Helsinki and the monolingual Swedish Åbo Akademi University have a national commitment in upholding the position of Swedish and educating Swedish-speaking academic experts for Finnish society (Saarinen, 2020a; Mickwitz et al., 2021). Consequently, the language policies for ensuring language rights and bilingualism are fundamental for the universities, but the question is how the policies are actualized in practice. The premise of organizing education in Finland's two national languages has traditionally been spatial separation. Even if the legislative separation of Finnish and Swedish only applies in comprehensive education, higher education monolingual Swedish-medium institutions, units and programs have also been proclaimed as essential for the Finland Swedes and the Swedish language. In public debate, the monolingual institutional spaces for Swedish-medium education are often conceptualized as *svenska rum*, Swedish rooms, or spaces, which are considered as crucial in maintaining Swedish language in an environment dominated by Finnish. The conceptualizations of Swedish rooms are based on an ideological construct often referred to as Taxell's paradox in the context of Finnish state bilingualism, a view according to which the societal bilingualism in Finland is best maintained through parallel monolingual institutions. As an ideological construct, *svenska rum* entails a historical discourse of endangerment where Finnish language is positioned as threatening the existence of Swedish in educational spaces. However, it also encompasses positive associations to community and cultural heritage (see From, 2020; From & Sahlström, 2019). The socio-linguistic and educational context of this study can be considered as a materialization of what Heller (2007) terms as parallel monolingualisms, a form of bilingualism where Finnish and Swedish are mutually exclusive. However, in recent debates on bilingualism in comprehensive education, the idea of *svenska rum*, monolingual Swedish-medium institutions, and the unconditional separation of Finnish and Swedish have been increasingly questioned (From, 2020; From & Sahlström, 2017). According to a recent study, this shift is also present in university language policies and practices, where the alternate use of both Finnish and Swedish in interaction is supported instead of promoting the separation of the national languages in their respective units (Saarinen, 2020a).

So far, we have rather limited knowledge about how this shift in the policies concerning state bilingualism is manifested in the Swedish study programs. Previous research has shown that the current language situation including traditional monolingual uses of Swedish, new bilingual and multilingual policies and practices, as well as the increasing use of English put pressure on Swedish from many directions and even jeopardize the position of Swedish in the universities (Lindström & Sylvén, 2014; Saarinen & Rontu, 2018). In this study, we analyze how the understanding of bilingualism and language policies is constructed and problematized in interviews with students in a Swedish-speaking study program at the bilingual University of Helsinki (UH).

UH offers teaching in Swedish in five study programs at the bachelor's level and in six programs on the master's level. The Swedish-language degree programs function in conjunction with the rest of the programs in each faculty, except for the Swedish School for Social Sciences, which functions as a separate monolingual unit (University of Helsinki, 2021). In this article, we look specifically at how the students studying in one of these programs construct the understanding of a Swedish-language study program as a linguistic space and negotiate the policies and practices related to bilingualism and multilingualism. We ask how the study

program is positioned in relation to the material and discursive construction of *svenska rum* in education and how the language practices at the bilingual university appear in the students' talk against the backdrop of the declared language policy on bilingualism, multilingualism, and the position of Swedish. The data in this study consists of five semi-structured individual and group interviews conducted with nine students in a Swedish-speaking degree program at UH. The teaching in the studied program is provided mostly in Swedish.

## 2 Theoretical background and policy context

Our theoretical and analytical focus is on the discursive-material construction of the Swedish-language program as a linguistic space in the interviewed students' discourses. This framework enables us to analyze the spatial ideas and representations, through which the identity and value of the study program is created as well as the social and material practices that are enabled and constrained within that spatial construct. Our approach is informed by an understanding of space and spatiality originally developed in the fields of critical and cultural geography (Arias, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). Recently, this kind of an approach has also been applied to the study of language policies in education (From, 2020). Against this theoretical backdrop, space can be understood as socially constructed and reconstructed through discourses as *spatial conceptualisations*, where the identity and value of a particular space is created. Moreover, it is produced as *spatial practices*, which contribute with the construction of everyday spatial orders in a particular institution. Moreover, *lived space* enables the appropriation of space by its users and the negotiation of power relations that govern the use of a particular space (Lefebvre, 1991). Therefore, space is not merely a background for social life but a central component in the exercise of power and political struggle (Kallio, 2005). Moreover, the above-mentioned dimensions of space can be considered as equally central in the construction and reproduction of social identities (Valentine, 2001).

Historically layered and reconstructed through educational discourse, *svenska rum* can be considered as a spatial conceptualization *par excellence*. A spatial practice deriving from this discourse has been the organization of Finnish- and Swedish-medium education in separate institutions, referring to both conceptual and physical space. Thus, when carried out as spatial practices through the policy of language separation, this discourse has material and social implications in the everyday lived spaces of pupils and students in institutional education (see, e.g., From, 2020, From & Sahlström, 2017; Kajander et al., 2015; Szabó et al., 2018). However, Saarinen (2020a) notes that the idea of monolingual institutions or units as supporters of bilingualism in higher education seem to have been increasingly replaced with alternative interpretations of bilingual policies, such as the simultaneous use of Finnish and Swedish in a particular situation. The official language policies and their outcomes at the bilingual UH have been in focus in several studies (see, e.g., Moring et al., 2013; Lindström & Sylvén, 2014; Saarinen, 2020a; Saarinen & Rontu, 2018). The studies have concluded that the declared policies are implemented in different ways and that the aims for promoting multilingualism, for instance, might encounter unexpected obstacles. We can see that even if the declared language policy of UH does not explicitly refer to Swedish-speaking programs as necessary in securing the position of Swedish, the

discourses reproducing *svenska rum* materialize in the organization of programs that offer teaching in Swedish.

Previous studies have pointed out that even if the national languages are legislatively equal, the position of Swedish in the language policy discourses in higher education is “more or less invisible” (Saarinen & Rontu, 2018, p. 25; see also Saarinen, 2020a). However, recent discourses that Saarinen (2020b) considers as having new nationalist tendencies, have raised the issue of the position of the national languages in the face of increasing internationalization and the increased use of English, and rendered concerns regarding Swedish more prominent. The official language policy of UH is stated in the document *Language Policy of the University of Helsinki*, which covers the domains of teaching, research, community relations and services. The general language ideology of UH states that “bi- or multilingualism and internationalism are an asset for everyone” (University of Helsinki, 2014, p. 47), and the university is to support students and staff in their efforts to improve their language skills. In the policy, multilingualism is described as stimulating internationalization, as a pathway to cultural understanding and as a tool for promoting one’s own culture plus can strengthen creativity and community spirit. Moreover, the document defines the statuses of the two national languages, English and “other foreign languages”. In relation to the national languages, UH is committed to securing their position in all the domains of its operation (University of Helsinki, 2014).

At UH, the languages of instruction and degrees are Finnish and Swedish. The administrative language of the university is, however, the majority language Finnish. Moreover, the units may determine their working language according to their needs. In making decisions about the working language, the units are encouraged to promote *receptive multilingualism* as a principle. According to the policy, the term “implies that participants in a conversation both speak their respective native languages but are sufficiently proficient in the language used by their partner to understand it” (University of Helsinki, 2014, p. 64). As a mode of multilingual communication interactants in receptive multilingualism therefore use a language or a language variety different from the other participants but still understand each other without the help of a lingua franca such as English (Rehbeinet al., 2012).

In the language terminology presented in the language policy declaration of UH, also the notion of *parallel language usage* is encouraged and introduced as entailing “language use situations in which two or more languages are equal, and the decision to use a particular language is based on the speaker’s judgement on which language is most appropriate for the specific situation” (University of Helsinki, 2014, p. 64). Parallel language use may according to the policy also mean two events with identical content being arranged in parallel in two different languages. This description of parallel language usage is in line with the broad definition of The Nordic Council of Ministers’ as “the use of two or more languages for the same purpose in a particular situation or in a particular context or within a particular state of society” (Gregersen et al., 2018, p. 14). The language policy of UH can be interpreted very openly both as supporting the flexible use of both languages in particular situations and promoting language separation in social spaces. Hultgren (2014) points out that the notion of parallel language use or *parallellingualism* has been increasingly present in Nordic university language policies since the beginning of 2000s, even if it has acquired different meanings in different language policy contexts (Hultgren, 2014). The term has been

particularly associated with developing skills in the parallel use of one or more local Nordic languages and English, which is increasingly dominant at universities. (Gregersen et al., 2018). In addition to parallel language use, flexibility is presented as desirable in the university's language policies. It assumes "that Finnish-speakers understand Swedish, Swedish-speakers understand Finnish and that everyone understands English, even though individuals may not be fluent in the languages in question (University of Helsinki, 2014, p. 50).

The policy promoting the flexible, simultaneous use of Finnish and Swedish can be interpreted as questioning the idea of separate Swedish-speaking units or institutions as a primary means for promoting bilingualism in higher education (Saarinen, 2020a). In Saarinen's study, the university staff regarded the parallel use of Finnish and Swedish as ideal parallellingualism, whereas additional languages on top of them were considered to lead to confusion. In general, research suggests that implementing parallel language use as the simultaneous use of two languages in education commonly pertains mainly to administrative communication. Bilingualism is thus framed primarily as identical information being provided in two languages rather than the cognitive capacity of humans to interact using two languages (Källqvist & Hult, 2016). While interviewing Swedish-speaking students about the university language policies at UH, Moring et al. (2013) discovered a higher flexibility in the students' language usage than in other language groups as well as an interest to develop their proficiency in Finnish for future professional purposes (see also Saarinen, 2020a). This, however, did not exclude their desire to use Swedish in their studies and an awareness of their linguistic rights as Swedish speakers at the university, such as the right to complete assignments and examinations in Swedish independent of the language of instruction in a course and the right to speak Swedish in using student services (University of Helsinki, 2014, p. 50, 52).

A main observation in previous research on higher education language policies and their implementation is that the rapid increase of English affects the language landscape in universities and renders Swedish more and more invisible. According to Saarinen and Rontu (2018) policies and practices tend to be motivated and driven by the need for internationalization in English. In their interview study with staff and students at the officially bilingual Finnish-Swedish Aalto University, Finnish and English were seen as self-evident primary languages of the university, whereas Swedish, as the third language, occupied a contested place. This was partly due to unclear practices regarding the use of the national languages and the current language policies seen as expensive and potentially confusing. Similarly, in an interview study with academic decision-makers at UH by Lindström and Sylvén (2014) the decision-makers indicated that English was seen as a "natural" and indispensable, whereas a local minority language is experienced as simply a plain economic cost factor (see also Godenhjelm & Östman, 2011; Moring et al., 2013). Hence, there were tensions experienced between the official language policy of UH, the *de jure* policy, and that of everyday practice, *de facto*. The language policy document for instance declares that bilingualism in Finnish and Swedish within the university community should be omnipresent and functional whereas it was common knowledge that Swedish, and not English, is in the position as the third language. Recent nationalist discourses have criticized the dominance of English in Finnish society and education. However, as Saarinen (2020a) argues, these nationalist

discourses mainly focus on enhancing the position of Finnish rather than Swedish, thus making the position of Swedish even the more invisible in language political debates.

Language practices in higher education appear according to Saarinen and Rontu (2018) to be in a state of flux and the position of Swedish in an increasingly vulnerable position. Insisting on Swedish could, according to the students, create communication breakdown, affect exam question quality and assessment, or the students' access to supervision (see also Moring et al., 2013). Saarinen and Rontu (2018), call for more detailed guidelines to strengthen the position of Swedish. They point out that multilingual aims easily remain sporadic and dependent on individual efforts if everyday linguistic practices are not stated clearly and systematically. Similarly, Lindström and Sylvén (2014) note in the context of the UH Language Policy document, that the policy is limited as it appears as a soft instrument with no explicit steering ambitions or commitments and lack practices for following up its implementation.

### **3 Data and methods**

Our data consists of five interviews with altogether nine students in a Swedish-language degree program at UH. Three interviews (with 2+2+2 students) were conducted on the campus in late 2019, whereas two interviews (with 2+1 students) were carried out via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2020. The interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured and included questions about students' language ideologies and practices in relation to multilingualism in their studies, as students in a Swedish-medium study program. The students were recruited from an elective master's level course. We visited a lecture in the course both in 2019 and 2020 to present the project. We told students we were particularly interested in the perceptions and experiences that students in the Swedish-language program had about bi- and multilingualism in their studies and informed them about the participation being voluntary and not linked to course assessment. The interviewers had no prior contact to the participating students, but we are aware of our academic positions as university staff members having a possible impact on their participation. The interviews were conducted in Swedish by two of the authors of this paper as well as one research assistant and transcribed in their entirety. The chosen data excerpts were translated into English by the authors. The number of participating students is small but so is the program, which only admits 10–15 students a year.

Considering the size of the study program, confidentiality has been a guiding principle in representing the participants and the interview data. All the names of the participants are pseudonyms. Apart from Irina, who had immigrated to Finland from a European country outside Scandinavia and described herself as fluent in Swedish but not in Finnish, all the participants had a rather similar linguistic background: they had gone to a Swedish-medium school in Finland and grown up in homes dominated by Swedish. Some of them identified themselves as monolingually Swedish mostly due to their educational background and having grown up in the Swedish-speaking community but described themselves as bilingual in terms of their linguistic resources, whereas others identified as bilingual or multilingual even if Swedish had been their school language and the language mostly spoken at home. Even if the focus of our analysis is not on the

linguistic resources of the students, it is relevant that all the participants except for Irina suggested that they are capable of attending courses in Finnish even if it would imply extra effort to some of them.

In the following sections, we analyze the interview data along with the following topics that outlined after discourse analytical reading of the data. The analysis was guided by a post-qualitative notion of ‘thinking with theory’ rather than reducing data to simplified themes (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017). Analysis proceeded by what Jackson and Mazzei (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017, p. 725) describe as “plugging in” and “co-reading”: by reading the interview transcripts alongside with the presented theories of space as well as other texts, such as the language policy document of UH and previous research about Swedish-medium education in Finland. This kind of an analytic practice that does not rely on a linear method of categorizing and coding can be considered as a possibility to open up previously unthought perspectives to the power relations in the sociolinguistic environments of higher education. Thus, the analysis does not aim at generalisations of what might be termed as our data but an understanding of how spatiality operates in the interviews as discursive and material practices, creating assemblages with the texts being read.

#### 4 Conceptualizing the Swedish-language study programs as *svenska rum*

We begin by looking at how the Swedish-language study program takes shape in students’ discourse from a language policy perspective and how it is positioned in relation to the university as a bilingual institution. In the interviews, discursive traits typically emerging in the debates of Swedish-medium education in Finland were present, such as an understanding of the importance of separate Swedish-language programs in a Finnish-dominated university.

*Jag ser det mer som ett finskspråkigt universitet med sådana små oaser av svenskspråkig verksamhet. Jag tänker på [de andra svenskspråkiga utbildningsprogram] men jag har inte så mycket insikt i hur de fungerar. Men annars tycker jag det är ganska finskspråkigt. Och sen finns det någo enstaka kurser på engelska, men dom är mest för utbytesstuderanden (Irina).*

I see it more as a Finnish-medium university with small oases of activities in Swedish. I’m thinking about [the other Swedish-medium study programs] but I don’t have that much insight into how they function. Besides that, I think it’s pretty much in Finnish. And then there are some occasional courses in English, but they are mainly for exchange students (Irina).

In the interview, Irina describes the Swedish-language programs small Swedish-speaking oases in the otherwise rather Finnish-speaking environment. The choice of the word oasis brings positive associations but also a sense of being somewhat isolated from the rest of the university. This sense of spatial isolation unfolded also when students positioned their study program in relation to the rest of the faculty.

*Jag känner mej absolut int diskriminerad eller så där liksom marginaliserad på det sättet. Det som jag kanske har upplevt vissa gånger under studierna har vari det att (...) jag har fått höra två gånger att "Va! kan man studera [detta ämne] på svenska vid Helsingfors universitet?" av dom finskspråkiga studerandena (...) och det har ju int gjort att jag har känt mej diskriminerad men det har gjort mej kanske så där att "oj att vet dom på riktigt int att vi har studieprogram på både svenska och finska". (Amanda).*



By no means do I feel like I was discriminated against or marginalised. What I do have experienced sometimes during the studies has been that (...) I have twice heard that "What! Is it possible to study [this discipline] in Swedish at the University of Helsinki?" from Finnish-speaking students (...) and that has not caused a feeling of being discriminated against but has led me to think that "oh, do they really not know that we have study programs both in Swedish and Finnish" (Amanda).

Similarly to Amanda in this excerpt, the interviewed students seemed to hesitate to describe themselves as discriminated against based on their language of study. Rather, they talked about the ignorance of Finnish-speaking students as causing a sense of passive marginalization of the Swedish-language program in the faculty. However, aligned with a typical discourse of language endangerment in minority contexts (Duchêne & Heller, 2007) multilingualism in general was sometimes presented as a potential threat to Swedish as a *de facto* minority language. This kind of a rhetoric about Swedish disappearing due to increasing multilingualism is also present in the following excerpt:

*Det är lite farligt dendär att har man sådär mycket flerspråkigt så att, vilka andra språk sen tar över svenska, att är det sen finska som tar över och sen klär man det mer sådär fina flerspråkighet och sen egentligen går allt på finska och man kan bara skriva essän på svenska (Irina).*

It's a little dangerous, that if there's a lot of multilingualism then what other languages are then taking over Swedish, is it then Finnish that takes over and then it gets disguised as fine multilingualism, and then actually everything goes in Finnish and one can only write their essays in Swedish (Irina).

In this excerpt, Irina presents multilingualism as potentially harmful while entailing a risk of Swedish being overpowered by other languages. The interviewee articulates a fear that the domination of the majority language in bilingual study contexts could be masked as desirable multilingualism, even if it would lead to decreased use of Swedish. In this scenario, Swedish would be used only in final assignments. Interestingly, the discourse of endangerment almost systematically seemed to intertwine with a solid interest in bilingual practices. As an implication, the power relation between Finnish and Swedish was under constant negotiation in the interviews and typically emerged as balancing between monolingual and bilingual practices. The students' reflections on the potential risks of bilingualism implied a linguistic ideology present when arguing for monolingualism and language separation in comprehensive education (see From, 2020; From et al., 2022), such as the rhetoric of other languages taking the upper hand over Swedish. Aligned with a common discourse on Swedish-speaking educational institutions in Finland, some interviewees mentioned a separate program in Swedish as a central structure in managing the threat.

Intervjuaren: *Tycker ni att det sku vara bra om det sku vara mer flerspråkigt i studierna eller användas flera språk på kurserna?*

Henrik: *Kanske jo och nå alltså. Jag tycker det är bra att det finns liksom en svenskspråkig linje att man håller liksom ändå svenskan i liv på det sättet att det är säkert ganska självklar sak att det finns på svenska men liksom ändå lite liksom linje men det kanske inte kommer så vara alltid i framtiden.*

Interviewer: Do you think it would be good if the studies were more multilingual or several languages would be used in the courses?

Henrik: Maybe yes and no. I think it's good that there's a Swedish-medium program to keep the Swedish language alive and it's surely a rather self-evident thing to have but it's still a small program and it is maybe not going to be like this always in the future.

Like in this excerpt, the discussion of multilingualism in education often creates a juxtaposition between the position of Swedish and the use of several languages. Henrik considers the Swedish-language program as a central factor for promoting and making visible the status of Swedish at the university and a reminder for people to keep using Swedish. For Henrik, abolishing the system of separate programs in both national languages would therefore risk the status of Swedish in higher education. This resembles a typical discourse in the debates of Swedish-medium education in Finland, where a unit or an institution conceptualized as a monolingual space is considered as an ideal means for promoting and safeguarding the use of Swedish and the inclusion of other languages in the same space as a potential threat (From, 2020). Within this rationality, the declared policy of parallel language use might be problematized for placing the responsibility on individuals for maintaining bilingualism at the university through their daily language practices instead of material structures (see also Saarinen & Rontu, 2018). This presumption of individuals as supporters of the position of Swedish also emerges in the following interview excerpt:

*Jag glömmmer själv ibland kanske att hålla upp den där svenskan och att man måste nog liksom komma ihåg att tala det och att hålla sina rättigheter så att säga, för att människor sen glömmmer och sen tar den där finskan eller något annat språk kan så småningom krypa in och ta mera plats. Därför är det jätte viktigt att det finns på universitetsnivå. Om svenskan sku försvinnas från universitetet så det skulle vara katastrofalt för att det är så stort institution och viktigt institution (Henrik).*

I myself sometimes forget to speak Swedish and that one has to remember to speak it and stick to one's rights so to say, since people otherwise forget and Finnish takes over or some other language starts crawling in bit by bit and taking up more space. That's why it is very important that Swedish does exist on the university level. If Swedish disappeared from the university it would be a disaster since it's such a large and an important institution (Henrik).

As a spatial conceptualization, this excerpt constructs an idea of the Swedish-language programs as bounded spaces that are being "squashed" from the outside. Henrik describes the minority position of Swedish at the university through painting an image of how Finnish or some other language might gradually crawl in and take up more space in the *svenska rum*. In this scenario, fixed institutional structures help in maintaining the position of Swedish by setting boundaries that are not subject to constant renegotiation. However, as Henrik points out in the beginning of the excerpt, the key for the preservation is not only considered to lie in the structures but also in the speakers. Swedish-speaking university staff in Saarinen's (2020a) study had similar ideas of the obligation of the language minority to stick to using Swedish systematically and they sometimes termed their own failure to do so as "bad bilingualism". To Henrik, the structural presence of Swedish at the university institution is also a question of representation (see From, 2020).

In the discourses of Swedish-language educational spaces in comprehensive and secondary education, the role of physical space has shown to be central (From, 2020; From & Sahlström, 2017). In this context, physical space can be understood

as spatial practices, through which the spatial conceptualizations deriving from policy discourses are implemented into institutional and everyday spatial orders, such as the organization of particular spaces at the faculty. The interviews promote a similar understanding of how the discursive representations and material qualities of space intertwine in the construction of minority language educational spaces, even if the spatial practices at this particular faculty do not promote a language separation in terms of formal and informal spaces but all of the rooms are mutual.

*Om man går dit ner till det därän bibban till exempel så de-, man hör svenska liksom på riktigt ganska mycke. Och just med tanke på hur mycke färre vi ändå är som pratar svenska så är det faktiskt roligt att man liksom får känna en såndärn gemenskap också svenskspråkiga studenter emellan (Tara).*

If you go downstairs to the library or something, you can like for real hear quite a lot of Swedish. Considering how many fewer we are who speak Swedish, then it's in fact nice to be able to have such a sense of community among the Swedish-speaking students (Tara).

To Tara, to study in mutual physical facilities with other Swedish speakers strengthens the sense of linguistic community. Specific places on the campus become spatial nodes, where the representation of the *de facto* minority language group appears more prominent than the actual numerical status, since Swedish can be heard regularly. However, rather than being an implication of a determined spatial practice, the sense of belonging seems to emerge from the students' lived space (see Lefebvre, 1991), since the students display agency in coming together in a shared space at the campus. In this sense, *svenska rum* can be reproduced through students' lived spaces also in an environment, which does not rely on language separation as a spatial practice but students' own efforts to build a linguistic community in the prevailing conditions. This kind of an appropriation of space can also be considered as a means for identity-construction and linguistic belonging (Valentine, 2001).

Even if there was a sense of the Swedish-language program as a space for protecting Swedish, its terms and existence was constantly renegotiated in students' talk. The expressed flexibility in terms of language policies seemed to imply that the justification or existence of *svenska rum* was not necessarily taken for granted. In a similar manner, the criticism towards the negative experiences of studying in Swedish was typically pointed out very cautiously.

*Såklart är jag alltså jättetacksam över att jag får studera på svenska, men ibland känner jag mej lite bortglömd som svenskspråkig kanske. Det var kanske här väl i förra perioden vi sökte efter kurser och så var man så här 'åh det sku va så mycke lättare om man sku bara studera på finska' för att utbudet är så mycke större. Det känns liksom som att, jag vet int va det där ordet är jag söker men att man är lite så där, bortknuffad eller liksom insatt i ett hörn (Amanda).*

I am obviously very thankful for being able to study in Swedish but sometimes I feel like, as a Swedish speaker I'm slightly forgotten. It might have been in the previous period we were searching for courses, and we were like "oh it would be so easy if one would just study in Finnish" since the supply is so much bigger. It feels like, I don't know which word I am looking for but it's a sense of being pushed away or being put in a corner (Amanda).

In this excerpt, the criticism towards the language policies becomes filtered through the gratefulness for being able to study in Swedish, considered as a privilege of its kind. Amanda phrases her thoughts carefully and brings forth that it is not easy to find the right words to describe her feelings. In their critique,

however, Amanda points out that the restricted supply of courses makes them feel like being pushed in a corner for opting to study in Swedish. Therefore, the mere existence of *svenska rum* as an institutional space does not make up for the experienced lack of equal study opportunities in comparison with the Finnish program.

## 5 Identifying structural and social language borders

In this section, we look at the construction and positioning of the *svenska rum* through the students' language practices and social encounters. In the interviews, the contact between the students in the Swedish- and Finnish-medium study programs was described as very limited, using terms such as *none*, *very little* and *non-existent*. The students who had contacts with the students outside the Swedish-speaking study program had mostly established them outside of formal studies, either in student events or student unions. Amanda reminisces about the student events of the first year as a rare experience of bilingual activities organized by the university.

*Det som fick mej att känna att Helsingfors universitet är flerspråkigt var det att när vi på gulisåre hade alla våra aktiviteter tillsammans med dom finskspråkiga, och det på någo vis den här gemenskapen skapades på ett helt annat sätt. Att det var int så där att "oh du talar svenska och du talar finska" utan man var liksom en grupp som börja på ett nytt ställe, och då skapades det att hej att det här är faktiskt att alla språk får ta plats och alla språk beaktas (Amanda).*

What made me see the University of Helsinki as multilingual was when we during the first year had all the activities together with the Finnish-speakers, and there the sense of community was created in a completely different way. It was not like "oh you speak Swedish and you speak Finnish" but we were one group that had started in a new place and an understanding was created that hey, here all languages have the right to take up space and all languages are taken into account (Amanda).

To Amanda, these bilingual events contributed to an exceptional sense of community, where the structural boundaries between the programs were temporarily dispelled and the language of the study was not used as a means for creating divisions. This experience has shaped Amanda's idea of UH as multilingual. In general, it seems that the bilingual practices are easier to apply outside the formal courses, where the students are not necessarily positioned in relation to their language of study or study program. This suggests that the major dynamic constructing linguistic boundaries are the structural ones and the informal gatherings take place outside the *svenska rum* as a spatial conceptualization, spatial practice or lived space. Moreover, it might be easier to interrupt the language boundaries in the beginning of the studies when their social construction has only recently begun. Language courses organized by a separate unit, the UH Language Centre, were mentioned as central places for building contacts outside the study program.

*Sen hade jag också en engelskakurs som jag gick, och där var vi blandat finskspråkiga och svenskspråkiga, och där fick man ganska mycke kontakt faktiskt och det var många som ville diskutera så där utanför lektionen också om, om hur det är att studera på svenska. Men, men just som att man har bara gått två tre kurser på finska så int, det är ju kanske int som att man kommer och är, är svenskspråkig och tar mest plats i klassen [skrattar] utan man sätter sej kanske lite längre bak (Amanda).*

I also took a language course in English where Finnish- and Swedish-speakers were mixed and there we had quite a lot of contact and many wanted to discuss outside lectures also about what it is like to study in Swedish. But, having taken only two three courses in Finnish, it's not like one enters as a Swedish-speaker, and takes up the most space in the classroom [laughing] but rather being seated a bit further back (Amanda).

Language courses were conceptualised as meeting places, which implied an interruption in the established language policy structures normally enacted in the faculty. Since many in the Swedish-language program is bilingual, they often speak Finnish in their encounters with the students in the Finnish language program also in these courses. The language courses offer a meeting space where the content of the study is not predominantly Finnish and thus the linguistic power relation might be experienced as less dominating or relevant. However, as Amanda points out, in attending a regular subject-specific course in Finnish, a Swedish-speaker would not draw attention to themselves but blend in and adjust to the monolingual norm of the course. Thus, mutual language courses can be considered as a spatial practice, which has the potential to temporarily interrupt the dominance of Finnish as the primary language of knowledge construction at the faculty. However, understanding this potential would require a more nuanced analysis of the practices implemented at the language courses.

Quite surprisingly, intentionally bilingual courses at the faculty did not prove to be successful as a spatial practice aiming at promoting inclusive language policies. Some of the introductory courses including mass lectures, are common for students in both the Finnish-language and the Swedish-language programs. For many, these courses served as examples of unsuccessful implementation of a bilingual policy, that ends up marginalizing Swedish either by isolating or ignoring it in the common parts of the course.

*Dendär första kursen vi hade då med både finska och svenska studeranden så det var ju allt på finska. Vi som är på svenska sidan är ganska tvåspråkiga men man borde på något sätt lyfta fram för dom här finskspråkiga studeranden att hej här finns det här gänget att ta in åtminstone tvåspråkiga powerpoint, fast än [lektorn] skulle tala bara på finska men att den här gruppen finns (Heidi).*

The first mutual course we had back then with both Finnish- and Swedish-speakers, everything was in Finnish. We in the Swedish-language program are quite bilingual but it should somehow be pointed out to the Finnish-speaking students that hey, our group is present, at least use bilingual powerpoints, even if [the lecturer] would speak only Finnish (Heidi).

The view promoted by students implied that even the bilingual courses organized for students in Finnish and Swedish language programs ignore the Swedish content in the common parts. In the course, which Heidi and later also Isa refers to, the lectures in Finnish are accompanied by monolingual small groups that are separate for students in both programs. This spatial practice creates a monolingual Swedish space by reproducing a policy of parallel monolingualisms for the group work instead of aiming at integrating Swedish in an equal position throughout the whole course. According to Heidi, the representation of Swedish in the common parts of the course, for example in materials, was marginal, which seems to be connected to an assumption that all Swedish-speakers have a high proficiency in Finnish and can manage the content provided in Finnish. Moreover, the quality of the translations of course assignments was said to be so poor, that the students had to rely on the original Finnish material to cope. The poor quality

of Swedish materials in bilingual courses conflicts with that course instructors often reminded the Swedish-speaking students of the importance of high linguistic quality in their performance even when they had chosen to carry out their assignments in Finnish instead of Swedish when participating in courses in the Finnish-language program.

*Jag har den här erfarenheten från finska kurser att det är jätte viktigt med grammatiken att den skall vara jätte bra. Där [på tvåspråkiga kursen] hade vi jätte mycket problem med som här översättningarna att vi förstod inte riktigt för de var översatta till svenska så dåligt så vi måste alltid läsa den där finska uppgiften (...) Det har jag kanske varit lite förvånad över att alla dom här lärarnas på finska sidan att deras språkkunnande har varit ganska dåligt, att just med att lämna in uppgifter eller översätta (Isa).*

I have an experience from the Finnish-medium courses that it's very important that the grammar is correct. In the bilingual course there were very many problems with the translations, we did not really understand them since they were translated to Swedish so poorly that we always had to read the assignment in Finnish (...) what has been a little surprising is that the language proficiency of all the teachers in the Finnish-medium program has been quite poor, when it comes to us submitting an assignment or translating something (Isa).

Saarinen and Rontu (2018) and Moring et al. (2013) have pointed out similar problems in terms of the implementation of the right to receive all relevant documents in Swedish. Against this backdrop, the linguistic quality required from the Swedish speakers while carrying out assignments in Finnish appears as a double standard. All in all, the Swedish-speaking students' experiences of the bilingual lecture courses indicates that bilingual in this case means the presence of students from both Finnish- and Swedish-language study programs rather than bilingual instruction or even bilingual study materials. Instead of any attempts to negotiate inclusive bilingual practices, the courses seem to reconstruct a system of parallel monolingualisms through monolingual small groups and, as Irina reports in the following excerpt, an assumption that all the Swedish-speaking students can participate also in Finnish.

*Där önskar jag att det skulle ha varit kanske ännu mera tvåspråkigt så där kanske mera parallellt, för att man tar för givet att alla som studerar vid Helsingfors universitet är tvåspråkiga och det är inte alltid fallet. Vi var ju kanske två tre antingen som kommer från Sverige eller nån som inte vuxit upp här, som inte är tvåspråkig. Så det var lite krångligare att följa med, att nog förstod vi en stor del men inte allt, när det talades bara på finska. Kursen var, så att säga tvåspråkig, men när alla samlades så talades de finska och sen nå i mindre grupper så kunde vi tala svenska så det var mera så där, tvåspråkig på finskans villkor eller på det sättet inte riktigt så där jämnt (Irina).*

I wish it had been even more bilingual, maybe more parallel, since it's taken as given that everyone who studies at the University of Helsinki is bilingual and that is not always the case. We were maybe two or three who come from Sweden or have not grown up here and who are not bilingual. So, it was a bit more complicated to follow, sure we did understand a great deal but not everything when only Finnish was spoken. (...) The course was, like, bilingual, but when everyone gathered Finnish was spoken and we could speak Swedish in some of the smaller groups (...) So it was more like, bilingual on the terms of the Finnish language or not equal in that sense (Irina).

Irina, who has an immigrant background and has chosen to study in Swedish instead of Finnish, sums up the bilingual policy as one-way bilingualism (Laponce,

1987): functioning on the condition that all the Swedish-speakers can manage the Finnish-medium content, whereas the Finnish-speakers are not expected to be bilingual (see also Vänskä & Mickwitz, 2020). For a person without a sufficient proficiency in Finnish, the preferred bilingualism might in some cases mean sticking to a policy of parallel monolingualisms, whereas the situation Irina describes rather relies on the notion of receptive bilingualism. Due to the domination of Finnish in the courses that they term as “so-called bilingual”, Irina considers bilingual practices as more inclusive when the content is delivered parallel in both languages.

## 6 Framing the conditions for bilingual practices

Previous studies have pointed out how the structural separation of the national languages in education plays a central role in the construction of Swedish-language educational spaces (From, 2020; From & Sahlström, 2017; From et al., 2022). In the student interviews, language separation gained multiple, and sometimes controversial, meanings. The institutional structure based on language separation was on one hand considered as guaranteeing the linguistic rights in both national languages but on the other hand as hindering multilingual practices. Being asked about if and how multilingual practices should be developed in the Swedish-language program, Tara ponders on the individual effort that is required to create a more multilingual study environment in the present system.

*Kanske mera det att det sku int finnas på samma sätt lika strikt att vilka kurser hör till det svenskspråkiga proramme och vilka kurser hör till det finskspråkiga programme utan att en del av kurserna helt enkelt sku vara till både det finsk- och svenskspråkiga. Att det int sku bli den där tröskeln att man enbart själv gör ett val att nu går jag in på en finskspråkig kurs eller nu går jag in på en engelskspråkig kurs utan att det sku vara mera normalt eller att det sku höra till (Tara).*

Maybe that it would not be so strict that some courses are a part of the Swedish-medium program and some of the Finnish-medium program but some of the courses would simply be for both the Finnish- and Swedish-speakers. That there would not be the kind of threshold that one has to alone make the decision of attending a Finnish-medium course or attending an English-medium course, but it would be more normal or even expected (Tara).

Tara’s words imply that attending a course in Finnish is not a self-evident choice but requires an active decision to cross the language border. Despite the rather disappointing experiences of the bilingual courses, common courses for students in all programs were often presented as a way to overcome language barriers. In the current system, the crossing of language borders constructed by the institutional structures was considered an individual student’s responsibility and demanding not only in social but also in linguistic terms. In the following excerpt, Amanda (as Isa above) talks about how they have experienced the language-related requirements on Finnish-medium courses rather strict, which might affect the Swedish-speakers’ participation. However, some students considered that crossing the border from the Finnish-language study programs to the Swedish ones was more encouraged than vice versa. One of the interviewees even mentioned that the presence of Finnish-speakers in Swedish-medium courses is often explicitly noted by the teachers as a positive thing.

Based on the interviews the Swedish-language study program is not constructed as an exclusive linguistic space but primarily a welcoming one. Thus, bilingualism is understood as a possibility to use both languages in a single course instead of parallel monolingualisms and the presence of Finnish on courses organized in Swedish is not considered as problematic *per se*. However, to be more inclusive the Swedish-speaking students tend to switch to Finnish instead of sticking to Swedish in these courses. Here, again, the expectations related to flexibility and the justification to use Swedish, offered by the administratively monolingual space, become opposed.

*I en grupp som jag var i så bytte alla automatiskt till finska för att en tala finska och tre andra tala, tre stycken tala svenska och en tala finska och då bytte alla till finska. Och jag vet att jag själv också är skyldig till det många gånger, men man borde inte göra det, har jag fått höra. Man borde hålla sej till svenskan och den som talar finska, för att den har valt att den är på den där svenska kursen, så kanske vill lära sej svenska. Och den säger nog om den inte förstår (Amanda).*

I was in a group where everyone automatically switched to Finnish since one spoke Finnish and three others Swedish and then everyone switched to Finnish. I know I am also myself many times guilty of doing that, but I have heard that one should not switch. One should stick to Swedish and the one speaking Finnish, having chosen the Swedish-medium course, might want to learn Swedish. They will let you know if they do not understand (Amanda).

Thus, building on the idea of *svenska rum* as a spatial practice aiming to protect the use of Swedish, the Swedish-speaking courses can be seen as institutional spaces that serve as a justification to use Swedish also when Finnish-speakers are present. On the other hand, Amanda's words also reflect a thinking where a monolingually Swedish policy can be motivated through the linguistic needs of the Finnish-speakers, who are attending the courses to learn Swedish. This sheds light on the sometimes-contradictory negotiations of power in the *svenska rum* at the university. Nevertheless, this points out to the significance of Swedish-language programs in making visible and even altering the dominant power relations between the national languages at the university.

Even if their experiences were not very encouraging, the students saw the idea and potential of bilingual courses as promising. In the interviews, the students did not explicate what would ideally be the declared language policy of these courses but pointed out the necessity to plan multilingual practices carefully (see also Saarinen, 2020a; Mickwitz et al., 2021).

Mona: *Om en kurs är välplanerad så kan man ju lätt ha den på många olika språk tror jag nog. Att det handlar också hemska mycke om planering och sånt.*

Amanda: *Och det sku säkert stärka gemenskap över språkgränserna, över utbildningsgränserna.*

Mona: If a course is well-planned it is easy to have it in many languages, I think. It has a lot to do with planning and such.

Amanda: And that would for sure strengthen the community over language borders, over the borders between the study programs.

In the ideal case, described by Mona and Amanda, well-planned bilingual courses would also strengthen the sense of community between the study programs with different languages of instruction. However, simultaneously also the right to receive instruction in the declared language of the program was considered important.



*Jag har liksom sökt hit till ett svenskspråkigt [program], liksom att skulle jag känna mig lurad om obligatoriska kurser skulle gå på ett annat språk (...) kanske de här valbara kurserna skulle kunna vara och många är ju flerspråkiga där på de här valbara. Men att kanske det är lite svårt just för att det finns en svenskspråkig utbildning och det finns en motsvarande utbildning på finska. Att skulle det vara en utbildning så då skulle det kanske vara lättare att fundera på hur man gör den flerspråkig att alla hänger med, men... (Isa).*

I have applied to this Swedish-medium [program] so I would feel fooled if the obligatory courses were in another language (...) maybe the elective courses could be and many of them are in fact multilingual. But it is maybe a bit tricky since there is a study program in Swedish and a respective program in Finnish. If it was a single study program, then it might be easier to think about how to make it multilingual so that everyone is included but... (Isa).

According to Isa, a study program that is proclaimed as Swedish speaking should provide obligatory courses in Swedish, whereas attending multilingual courses ought to be voluntary. Thus, students desire agency over how their lived spaces are linguistically formed: if they want to “expose” themselves to other languages or reside in the *svenska rum* in a conventional sense. Here, the institutional system of parallel monolingualisms justifies the favoring of a monolingual policy.

In the students’ view the requirement for successful bilingualism is language management promoting the equal use of both national languages. Compared to the flexibility promoted in the declared language policy of the bilingual UH the dominating discourse among the interviewees seems to opt for stricter language management through policy and practice, for the sake of guaranteeing the necessary conditions to study in Swedish. However, flexibility seems to be required from the Swedish-speaking students to be able to cope in the present system (see also Moring, 2013; Saarinen, 2020a):

*Jag är också en jätte-så här flexi-, jag försöker att int göra så mycke problem av onödiga saker. Jag tar nu lite liksom dagen som den kommer och ordnar det, men ska man nu va såndärn periaatenainen så då har vi ju nog ett sämre utgångsläge än dom finskspråkiga om man, till exempel som jag int alltid är så stark i finska så ibland kan, om det är en svår kurs så kan det nog bli liksom jobbigt att allt går på finska. Men, som sagt nog klarar jag ju igenom det, men jag har ju ändå valt den svenska riktlinjen av en orsak (Amanda).*

I am also very flexi-, I am trying not to make too many problems out of unnecessary issues. I take the day as it comes and handle it, but if one wants to be kind of a woman with principles [in Finnish] then we do have a weaker starting point than the Finnish-speakers have, for example if one, like me, is not always that fluent in Finnish then sometimes in a difficult course it can be tough if everything is in Finnish. But as I said, I do manage it, but I have however chosen the Swedish-medium program for a reason (Amanda).

For Amanda, the requirement of flexibility in language policy is not a major problem from a practical point of view even if they consider Finnish-language courses as potentially more difficult or laborious. However, as a matter of principle, and having chosen the Swedish-language study program, they consider that they should be able to take their courses in Swedish. Therefore, the meaning of Swedish-language programs as spaces where the dominant power relations at the university become altered in the favor of Swedish, becomes central for the students. However, granted that the *svenska rum* will remain as an institutional

structure and a spatial practice, they also see a potential in developing bilingual practices towards more equal parallellingualism.

## 7 Conclusions

This study shows that even if the declared language policies of UH promote flexible language practices and move away from the idea of separate units as markers of bilingualism (see Saarinen, 2020a), and do not rely on language separation as a spatial practice in the organization of the faculty's physical space, the students in a Swedish-language program most often seem to experience bilingualism as parallel monolingualisms or simply the ignoring of Swedish in practices that might be expected to be bilingual. These patterns emerge both in explicitly bilingual courses and in informal student life on campus. In this constellation, *svenska rum* is a space that appears as a matter of symbolic representation and acts as a concrete marker of the status of Swedish at UH. The students show awareness of its relevance as a component for (language) political struggle (Kallio, 2005) as well as a space for identity construction (Valentine, 2001). It is reconstructed in the sometimes tense relationship between the national languages, whereas multilingualism, understood as the presence of other languages than Finnish and Swedish, is rarely present in the debates of *svenska rum*, neither as something desired nor as a threat. Our findings support the previous studies of the position of Swedish in language policies and practices of higher education (Saarinen, 2020a.; Saarinen & Rontu, 2018, Mickwitz et al., 2021; Vänskä & Mickwitz, 2020) but also bring forth characteristics that specifically relate to separate Swedish-language programs as an institutional structure.

In our data, the students bring forth both a need for monolingual spaces as well as for more developed bilingual and multilingual teaching practices, of which the former can be seen as somewhat fulfilled through the present institutional structure whereas the latter seems in many places inadequate. The students' ideas of functional or sustainable bilingualism at the university rely on planned bilingual and multilingual course structures rather than a policy of everyone using their own language, now promoted in the language policies of UH and in language policies of higher education in general. Throughout the data, however, the interviewed students also displayed flexibility in their ideologies and practices. The expectations related to flexibility can promote equality through multilingual practices but also "justify" undermining students' equal language rights. In this constellation, the Swedish-language programs, as institutional spaces, can be considered as counterforces that set boundaries for the policy of flexibility.

Even if previous research (e.g, Saarinen, 2020a) shows that the overt and covert language policies at UH have begun to deconstruct the idea of bilingualism as parallel monolingualisms, this discursive-material practice does shape the social and linguistic spaces of students studying in a Swedish-language program. Based on our findings it is fair to state that the protectionist discourses on Swedish-medium education in Finland (see Boyd & Palviainen, 2015) are to some extent circulated also in higher education in the context of Swedish-language study programs. In these discourses, a separate study program is presented as a means for guaranteeing the position of Swedish at UH and in higher education in a broader sense. However, the interviewed students do not appropriate the

monolingual Swedish space as a spatial conceptualization in a similar manner that is typically done in other educational contexts: quite the opposite, they seem to acknowledge that stepping out of *svenska rum* is necessary for them to get the most out of their studies. Therefore, the students also call for inclusive bilingual and multilingual policies that would contribute to shared linguistic and social spaces at the university.

It is evident that the pandemic has had an impact on the spatial practices and students' lived spaces at the university, but further analysis is needed to understand its influence on the reconstruction of *svenska rum*. As Massey (2005) poses, places only exist in relation to other places. If we consider the *svenska rum* of higher education as a place constructed in continuous relation to the majority language programs, we might ask what kind of an interdependency there has been in relation to the Finnish- and Swedish-medium online learning environments being used during the pandemic. Have the digital platforms enabled a linguistically more diverse participation or reinforced linguistic separation as a spatial practice? Moreover, the impact of the temporary absence of physical meeting places to the students' sense of linguistic belonging needs to be further analyzed.

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