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Schmidt, Christopher

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Christopher M. Schmidt

# Shaping Identity through the Use of Language

The Finland Swedish Paradox

## 1 Introduction

The relationship between language and identity is manifold. According to Berger/Luckman (1993), identity can be understood as a form of primary socialisation. The relationship between language and identity can also be seen as the use of linguistic register in order to differentiate other users of the same language for the purposes of marking group identity (see Joseph 2004). In the present article, linguistic behaviour is examined from a social psychological perspective while asking in which ways the use of language can be a denominator for building language-based group identity. This has also been referred to as shaping identity through language (see Thim-Mabrey 2003: 2). In this article we will go a step further and ask in what way belonging to a linguistic minority, using the language of that minority and experiencing a vital threat to that minority language can be central to maintaining subjective minority identity. This phenomenon could be likened to two opposite sides of a coin that are facing two different directions while still completing each other, thus constituting a paradoxical whole. The present article examines this in the context of the Finland Swedish discourse surrounding linguistic behaviour in relation to the country's two national languages – Finnish and Swedish, where the Swedish-speaking Finns represent the country's minority. The term “Finland Swedish” is used throughout the article to refer to this minority.<sup>1</sup>

Research focusing on the Finland Swedish minority has partly dealt with examining the use of the minority language – often with respect to local variations

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<sup>1</sup> The term was mainly introduced in Finnish official debate from 1910 to 1914, when the Swedish-speaking minority was searching for a suitable linguistic denominator for its national status. By 1945 it had gained semi-official status (see Mustelin 1983). There is an underlying duality in terms of identity, as Finland Swedes at the same time are part of the Finnish nationality, which makes it rather artificial to separate Finland Swedish history from Finnish history, even though attempts are made (see Stenius 1983).

– as a sign of lived identity (see Ståhlberg 1995; Allardt 1984; Lönnqvist 1984), whether from a historical perspective, as part of a developing Finnish State (see Sundberg 1985; Fewster 2000; Klinkmann 2011), or from a more culturally analytical perspective (see Åström/Lönnqvist/Lindqvist 2001), to name a few. Most of these works have their scientific starting point in ethnological and folkloristic research, both being well-established research domains in Finland.<sup>2</sup> Klinkmann points out that despite the many publications on the topic, the historical description of Finland Swedes has presented difficulties for identifying what exactly “being Finland Swedish” means (see Klinkmann 2017: 31). According to Allardt (1983: 36), the categories of “periphery” and “minority” are problematic for applying in a traditional sense to the Finland Swedes. In terms of location, they live in both urban centres and in rural areas, mostly in the southern and western parts of the country, and at a local level mostly mixed together with the Finnish-speaking majority. Historically, they have played a central role in shaping the governmental and administrative foundations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the emergence of the independent state. Still, in terms of population, they form a minority in the country, and their membership in that minority is defined more by language than by geographic location. According to Sundberg (1985: 2), possessing Swedish-language skills as a denominator for belonging to this minority group differentiates it from most European minorities. It is a specific aspect of Finnish society that the individuals themselves can decide on which group they belong to. This means that the categorisation of belonging to the minority or majority is a personal decision and not up to government authorities. In this sense, it is a self-categorisation. As a consequence, that decision, if the individual wants to make it, can be changed by them through language registration. Based on her empirical studies of the Finland Swedish minority, Sundback (2015: 35) points out that an individual’s decision to change their language registration might also reflect an unwillingness to be categorised as solely belonging to one of the two language groups. According to Allardt/Starck (1981: 42–46), in addition to self-categorisation, the other main individual classification categories are family descent, cultural traits and those social organisations that can serve as communication platforms for Finnish society’s Swedish-speaking minority.

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<sup>2</sup> For a wider overview of research on Finland Swedish culture, history and language, see the introduction in Klinkmann/Henriksson/Häger (2017); from a historical perspective, see Engman/Stenius (1984); under the concept of social capital, see Sundback/Nyqvist (2010).

Regarding the question of self-assessment in terms of belonging to a group,<sup>3</sup> it is interesting to see how the role of language and culture affects the way Finland Swedes view themselves. In a Gallup poll conducted in 2019, 88% of the respondents (n = 1154) claimed that it is very important to care about the Swedish language in Finland (in addition, 9% are somewhat of the same opinion) and 87% stated that it is very important to care about the Finland Swedish culture in Finland (in addition, 11% are somewhat of the same opinion). When asked how significant this culture is to them, only 80% said that it was very important (see Herberts 2019). This poll hints at the factor that linguistic consciousness is stronger among Finland Swedes than their awareness of their culture as a group. The fact that they belong to a minority is crucial for shaping identity in the case of Finland Swedes, which the research institute e2 found after it conducted a survey in 2018 on the identity domains among this group (n = 6746). In the same study, generic values such as childhood, family, education, work life and friends played an insignificant role in shaping the identity of the Finnish-speaking majority (see Bäck 2018).

If values related to way of life are of less relevance than language in shaping the identity of Finland Swedes, then at this point one can raise the question of the different ways that the language factor can be so important to Finland Swedish minority identity. Before delving into this question, it is worth looking at the historical context in which the Finland Swedish minority became established in Finland. Finland Swedish identity cannot be fully grasped without first taking into account the historical development of the Swedish language's role within the country. Following Finland's independence in 1917, Swedish was granted second official language status (see Finlex 2003). This development has a long history, as Finland had been part of the Swedish Empire since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, up until it became part of Russia in 1809 following the Swedish-Russian war. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there were Finland Swedes who were highly active in promoting Finnish national identity in areas such as administration, education, culture and economics (see Ekberg 2000: 18–23).

According to the magistrate's self-registration records, the amount of Finland Swedes in the country has decreased since the 1950s. From the perspective of linguistic identity, this development is not without significance. From 1950 to 2000, the number of Finland Swedes has decreased from 348,000 to 291,000. After a short rise from 2008 to 2012, the number has been in steady decline. Today the registered number is around 289,000, which corresponds to about 5.2 % of the total

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, the term “self-categorisation” is used to describe group belonging in terms of language registration. The term “self-assessment” denotes group belonging in terms of minority versus majority group in a broader sense.

population (see Saarela 2021: 13). Most Finland Swedes live in bilingual towns or areas and are thus in constant contact with speakers of the majority language.

## 2 Intersectionality and double bind theory

Due to the constantly changing numbers for registered members among the minority, the ongoing migration in and out of the country, and the tendency towards bilingual marriages in some parts of the country, the number of individuals who belong to the minority is in constant flux. It is important to notice right now that the Finland Swedish minority is not to be understood as a national minority in the conventional sense (see Klinkmann/Henriksson/Häger 2017: 12), but rather as a minority that is defined through its use of Swedish as means of communication, and therefore through its constant quest to safeguard Swedish at the institutional level (see Sundback 2006: 408). This is a crucial aspect because it is also the starting point for an identity dichotomy that is characteristic of this minority, which this article will investigate further. As the distinction from the Finnish-speaking majority is always in flux – mainly due to ethnic self-assessment and bilingual marriages, the language as such cannot automatically serve as an ethnic criterion. However, it is nonetheless this minority's central group criterion (see Sundback 2010: 58). This paradoxical situation shapes the relationship and attitudes that the Finland Swedish minority has towards the Finnish-speaking majority, and in terms of identity, the whole concept of minority becomes very complex when the language has a central function. This is especially the case when the legal right to use the Swedish mother tongue at an institutional level is not always made possible. With regard to this kind of a situation, Klinkmann/Henriksson/Häger (2017: 12) refer to a “experienced minority”. Should one use the language of the majority due to convenience (and thereby weaken the “experienced minority” identity) or should one insist on their legal right? This is not an easy question to answer as it is not merely an issue of language use as such. The scenario of being torn between different choices that influence subjective minority identity also exists at other levels, such as the choice between emigrating to Sweden (and thereby giving up the “minority experience” as an identity marker) or staying in the home country, which is as much a part of their national identity as it is for the Finnish-speaking majority. For this reason, belonging to the Swedish-speaking minority should not to be confounded with having separatist beliefs (see Sundback 2006: 410).

Under the concept of intersectionality, people have also tried to understand the different dichotomies in everyday minority life and its possible consequences

for the assessment of one's identity (see Klinkmann 2017; Strandén-Backa/Backa 2017; Henriksson/Häger 2017). Intersectionality as introduced by Crenshaw (1989; 1991) is the idea that power and social ranking can have different functions when examining the position of women within society. To better understand the social positioning of Black women, Crenshaw (1991) pointed out that it is not enough to only address the issue from a gender-related perspective, but to combine (intersect) this perspective with the dimension of race. This is because white women – even when they are weaker positioned than white men – still have a higher-ranking position than women of other races when it comes to social class. Intersectional categories are not only added, but also seen as intensifying one other. Knudsen (2005) uses the term to analyse Norwegian minority cultures and identities in textbooks. Lykke (2007) discusses implicit intersectionality based on Scandinavian research in the speciality of feminist Marxism, and, more specifically, in that of queer feminism. She widens the theoretical aspect of intersectionality and differentiates between explicit and implicit forms. Here the former term is used to examine explicit use of intersectionality, while the latter is used to examine power systems and identity categories as intersections without naming them as such. In the case of the Finland Swedish minority, intersectionality can be a central aspect when examining the relationship between social position and identity, where self-assessment can be influenced through many factors that can interact and reinforce each other. Klinkmann (2017) discusses intersectionality in the case of the Finland Swedes from a social historical point of view. Henriksson/Häger (2017) discuss the intersectional perspective utilising newspaper debates about regional politics in the healthcare sector as their bases, while only partly touching on the role that language can have. Strandén-Backa/Backa (2017) treat the question of intersectionality from the perspective of subjective minority self-assessment. According to Klinkmann/Henriksson/Häger (2017: 15), intersectionality factors can be manifold in the case of the Finland Swedish minority, which can include such examples as language, social class, individual preferences and living in a certain area. The crucial question for shaping identity is how individuals are coping with different forms of intersectional identity positioning when identity is placed under stress by external factors, such as a perceived penetration of the majority language into areas of daily life where one was previously able to use the minority mother tongue. A more thorough investigation of how language (both as a means of communication and as an identity criterion) can be tied to intersectional identity strategies is still missing in the case of the Finland Swedes, which is why this article will try to shed some light on this question.

The paradoxical role that language can have as a criterion for the Finland Swedish minority becomes evident when one considers that, on the one hand, a

growing number of bilingual individuals feel like they belong to both the Swedish-speaking minority and the Finnish-speaking majority, which in turn can lead to a greater acceptance of using Finnish in daily life. But at the same time, this tendency is also seen as a threat coming from the “outside” that undermines the traditional tendency to use Swedish and weakens the Swedish-speaking way of life (see Sundback 2010: 55). As the Swedish language has gradually had a less prominent role as an identity criterion at the individual level, at a collective level it has nevertheless kept its central role as a minority criterion (see Sundback 2010: 59). It is on the collective level that the concept of a language-based “threat” against the minority is kept alive through different narratives, of which the Moomin narrative is central (see Rönholm 2001; Ruusuvoori 2005; Henriks-son 2010; Klinkmann 2011). Here, the fictional characters of (the Finland Swedish author) Tove Jansson’s tales from Moominvalley are viewed as communal points of identification at a collective level. According to this narrative, the Finland Swedish community inside the imagined Moominvalley is under a constant threat from the outside. Interestingly enough, the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy implies a paradoxical relationship between both categories, which Klinkmann describes as the double bind phenomenon: in order to be able to criticise the Finland Swedish way of life from the outside, one needs to be part of it from the inside, to be part of the conceived group identity that Klinkmann in turn refers to as the “mental landscape” of the inside group (see Klinkmann 2011: 284).<sup>4</sup>

Klinkmann uses the concept of *double bind* as introduced by Gregory Bateson in order to describe a fundamental communication dilemma where an answer to a question can serve as a double bind that simultaneously points in different directions, thus forming a paradox (see Klinkmann 2011: 284). The Finland Swedish minority status already entails a double bind, as this group forms both part of a different national culture as well as an ethnic-cultural minority. This dilemma for identity self-assessment gets even more complicated when one considers that the Finland Swedish minority is not a homogeneous group, as there are considerable local cultural differences between the Finnish-language Swedish-language population areas (see Sundberg 1985: 19–22). In the case of the Finland Swedish minority, one can assume that both intersectional factors (such as national belonging, language identity, minority group, minority culture, language skills, regional identity, perceived threats of exercising mother tongue) and the potential double bind between these factors entail possible contradictions at a psychological level when the minority tries to cope with these factors in everyday life.

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<sup>4</sup> Klinkmann is not alone with this view. For an overview of other authors on this matter, see Klinkmann 2011: 283–285.

This potential implicit contradiction for self-assessment crystallises most clearly in the narratives about the usage of the group's mother tongue. It arises out of the dichotomies involved in Finland Swedish self-assessment for language proficiency: Swedish-speaking as being non-Finnish; being non-bilingual versus being bilingual; living a language register as a dialect or sociolect as opposed to academic Swedish (see Strandén-Backa/Backa 2017: 90). Even if these dichotomies do not necessarily and automatically have to entail contradictions for minority identity, they might still lead to paradoxes in the search for identity self-assessments. The problems with language-based identity might even be imposed from the "outside" through narratives in society of the kind that "Finland is Finnish, not Finnish and Swedish, and there is the idea of a nation state that is more or less predominant when it comes to language: one country and one language" (Strandén-Backa/Backa 2017: 92). The present article will show the psychological implications that this can have for minority identity and the strategies that are employed to cope with it.

Both intersectionality and double bind are aspects that can serve to understand the paradoxical situation in which a language-based minority can find itself. In the case of the Finland Swedish minority, this article will examine different kinds of materials in order to elucidate the interconnectedness between intersectional aspects and possible double binds linked to these aspects when examining the role of language for the dimensions of Finland Swedish identity. In order to do so, different types of documentation will be used; both Finland Swedish experience-based media comments (as primary sources) and results from other investigations on language attitudes. I will also take a look at the ways in which they are interpreted within a Finland Swedish perspective. By combining primary as well as evaluated material from "inside" the Finland Swedish perspective (see Klinkmann 2011), a more complex qualitative picture can be drawn with regard to the role that language has with respect to Finland Swedish minority self-assessment. In order to also preserve the inside perspective in the empirical data evaluations, the article will take into account the ways in which Finland Swedish scholars have evaluated empirical data on the subject matter dealt with in this article.

### **3 Linguistic self-assertion and its realisation**

The media coverage of issues having to do with the Finland Swedish minority always focuses on linguistic aspects, which in itself shows the importance of language for this minority. Since the advent of new media, these experiences have



also been documented and are accessible in a variety of media. In this section I present quotations from the media discourse that have been translated from the original Swedish.<sup>5</sup>

As shown in the introduction, when one considers the consequences that can arise out of possible double bind situations that speakers from the minority group can find themselves in, there is a very high level of awareness of the minority's mother tongue advocacy. The inside perspective refers to phenomena that arise from the inner scope of the minority and that are defined by minority-related criteria or can be triggered by their own minority-induced logic. This means that they can be explained from this perspective.

All the more astonishing is a phenomenon that comes from daily experience, one that runs counter to this awareness in concrete linguistic action. This is the change from the minority mother tongue to the national majority language, although – and this is the main reason for a paradoxical situation against the backdrop of documented language awareness – there need not be any external reason for changing one's language:

- (1) When a Finnish speaking person joins a group that consists of Finland Swedes, many Finland Swedes change the language into Finnish. In Southern Finland in particular, this is an everyday experience. (Berg 2018)

This behaviour is all the more astonishing, as the relationship between minority and majority in these kinds of groups is the opposite of what is normally found at the national level. The paradoxical dimension of this kind of behaviour, which arises from its double bind implications (a gesture meant to be nice is at the same time perceived to be its opposite), is even more evident, as the representatives of the Finnish majority do not necessarily consider this to be something positive. This can be seen in the case of the Finnish speaker quoted below:

- (2) It is a typically Finland Swedish thing, at least in the region of the capital, to switch the language into Finnish, when a Finnish speaking person joins a group. The gesture that was meant to be nice quickly gets the opposite effect for the Finnish speaking person. (Berg 2018)

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<sup>5</sup> In order to render the original conceptual ways of expression so that they are discernible to the reader, the quotations do not use idiomatic translation into English or orthographically corrected modes of writing. This is important for grasping the kind of underlying conceptual and/or emotional dimension attached to the utterances. All translations from Swedish in this article are mine.

The tendency to abandon one's own Finland Swedish mother tongue not only occurs in group dynamic settings as shown above, but also in those cases where a representative from each language group is present. However, this language behaviour is not always to the liking of the Finland Swedish speakers themselves. One respondent (woman, anonymous) in a survey of 1000 participants documented in Herberts 2019 expresses the intersectionality between the moral implications of this action and the subject's physical condition as follows:

- (3) I speak fluent Finnish and by that I get the errand quicker done. That is wrong of me but the health condition is sometimes bad and you can't cope with it. (Herberts 2019: 49)

Still, Finland Swedes do make the effort to have conversations in Swedish. Although guaranteed by the country's Basic Law, this is seen as especially problematic in the healthcare sector, as the following answers from different respondents in Herberts' documentation show:

- (4) The nurse at the reception told me off, because I was speaking Swedish. I complained about it and her boss phoned me later and reprimanded me, because I did not appreciate their "best nurse". (Herberts 2019: 34)
- (5) I have also experienced to be directly laughed at when I had asked a nurse something in Swedish. (Herberts 2019: 34)
- (6) In the hospital at Seinäjoki a young male nurse said that we in Finland speak Finnish. I got angry, but still answered him calmly in Finnish that Finland is a bilingual country and you can also learn Swedish! (Herberts 2019: 37)

Quotations 4–6 are examples of the different types of double binds that are involved. In (4) the basic legal right to use the mother tongue leads to its sanctioning; in (5) it leads to one being ridiculed and in (6) the arbitrary suppression of this right leads to mental stress in spite of the calmness of the speaker's outside appearance. As can be seen in the above quotations from different respondents, they all refer to their mother tongue as "Swedish". An implicit intersectional dilemma might occur when speaking about Swedish as the language of the Finland Swedes, as the Finland Swedes speak regional variants of Swedish that dominate their linguistic landscape. Reuter et al. group the Finland Swedish language somewhat unspecifically next to dialects, slang and sub-variants as a sub-form of standard Swedish (see Reuter/Hällström-Reijonen/Tandefelt 2017: 18). The classification of Finland Swedish in the grey area between dialect and standard language pushes the subliminal dilemma regarding the formation of a Finland Swedish linguistic identity to the extreme. It is little surprising then that Wikner

(2019) comes to the following conclusion in her survey on Finland Swedish linguistic behaviour in the capital region:

- (7) A general finding regarding the respondents' views on Swedish in Helsingfors is that it is difficult to describe. Many of the respondents could not find a name for their language. They say they don't know what it is: it's not a dialect, it's not standard Swedish – so what is it then? (Wikner 2019: 50)

The results expressed in Wikner (2019) show that the language status that the mother tongue can give its speakers (according to (7) above) can imply a possible double bind between being a “language” in form of a mother tongue (“standard Swedish”) and a language that is only viewed as a dialect. This can potentially imply that it is a paradoxical linguistic identity.

And yet it is nonetheless necessary to regard Finland Swedish as a linguistic means of identification. When the Finland Swedish daily newspaper Östnyland (ÖN) asked its readers what it means to be Finland Swedish, they got 250 answers. The paper quotes from these to demonstrate that for its readers, language and identity are interconnected:

- (8) It is important to support the Swedish language and culture so that it can continue to live. It means a beloved mother tongue in a bilingual country. (Kurri, 5th of November 2018)

The different kinds of double binds in which Finland Swedes live as a minority within the framework of their own linguistic identity give rise to different dimensions of paradox that I will discuss in the following chapter.

## 4 Paradoxes of identity

Based on the previous remarks on the role of the Finland Swedish mother tongue as an identity-forming characteristic of the minority, and on the simultaneous tendency to avoid using the mother tongue in bilingual interactions with representatives of the majority, one form of paradox can be discerned. Characteristic of this paradox is that linguistic self-confidence and pride in one's own language both seem to remain intact, as can be seen in the reader comments of the daily Finland Swedish newspaper Östnyland:

- (9) My identity and my [Finland Swedish] business card.  
That's the best, I mean Finland Swedish with its wonderful words and dialects. (Kurri 2018; reader comments)

The crucial role of this language awareness for the Finland Swedish minority was also made clear during an opinion survey (carried out by Aula Research Oy) on the role of language and culture among Finland Swedish speakers, as mentioned in the above introduction:

- (10) The survey engaged Finland Swedes in a rare way and aroused enormous interest. It was felt that the topic was extremely interesting, topical and important. Several interviewees contacted Aula and wanted to discuss the position of Swedish in today's Finland. The survey also encouraged respondents to provide a record number of comments on their own experiences of the language climate. (Herberts 2019: 13)

However, this linguistic interest and awareness does not necessarily translate to linguistic behaviour. The following remarks are symptomatic of the latent need to speak one's own mother tongue, yet also show that one sometimes chooses not to speak it:

- (11) I often speak Finnish, but I'm glad if someone speaks Swedish. (Herberts 2019: 34)  
 (12) I stopped speaking Swedish, but sometimes I get surprised, for example by pharmacists, when they suggest to speak Swedish. (Herberts 2019: 36)

The paradox resulting from the contradiction between the needs of a mother-tongue life in the public sphere and its simultaneous non-realisation in interactions with speakers of the majority language reflects the nature of the Finland Swedish paradox as a whole. Although it cannot be assumed that this paradox applies unilaterally to all representatives of this minority, the mental strain that results from it are obvious in the respondents' answers to the survey documented in Herberts (2019):

- (13) Although I'm bilingual, I do suffer from the fact that I cannot exercise my right to use my mother tongue, which is enshrined in the Basic Law. (Herberts 2019: 37)  
 (14) I speak fluent Finnish and by that I get the errand quicker done. That is wrong of me but the health condition is sometimes bad and you can't cope with it. (Herberts 2019: 49)  
 (15) Not directly discrimination, but many people have an incredible negative attitude towards Swedish speakers and I am completely fed up with it. (Herberts 2019: 65)  
 (16) The Finland Swedes feel a collective sadness and disappointment about a bad or deteriorating language climate. (Herberts 2019: 82)

A second form of paradoxical linguistic behaviour is rooted in a special kind of intense feeling about oneself. When people try to learn Finnish, they may feel hatred or shame, or both at the same time:

- (17) Learning Finnish is still a big burden. I want to, but it's difficult and veery [sic!] inflamed with all the hatred and shame. (Öhman 2012; reader comment, signed Hannasvirrvarr)
- (18) It's almost like I'm ashamed that I don't speak Finnish "like everyone else"; I don't really know where that feeling comes from. Sure, I'd rather speak more Swedish out there in town. (Öhman 2012, reader comment, signed Anonymous)

A third form of paradox concerning the self-perception of Finland Swedes is based on a socially conditioned intersectionality brought on by attitudes within this minority. In this case, regionally rooted cultural differences are combined with the language-based view of other representatives of this minority, which can lead to a paradoxical attitude. This refers to unpleasant avoidances or even harassment by other Finland Swedes that some Finland Swedes have experienced because of their linguistic behaviour. From the perspective of group identity, it becomes paradoxical if the representatives of the minority group express dislike of other members of the same minority or harass them, or if group members experience a feeling of shame among one other because of their linguistic behaviour:

- (19) The most unpleasant harassment regarding my own linguistic identity I have experienced was by Swedish-speaking Finns. They believe that bilingual or inhabitants of Helsinki are no genuine "Finland Swedes". (Öhman 3 October 2012; reader comment, signed Smilla)
- (20) I really believe that the category "I'm ashamed of my fellow Finland Swedes" occurs more often than the situations when a Finnish speaking person would have said something negative about me (Öhman 3 October 2012; reader comment, signed Anonymous)

## 5 The role of language in the Finland Swedish paradox

While paradoxes of Finland Swedish linguistic behaviour and reactions to it have so far been primarily presented via a logic that can be classified as subjective or a group-internal self-perception (endogenous perspective), the paradoxical role of language with respect to group identity is now widened with an exogenous dimension. The terms endogenous and exogenous are understood here from a group-specific perspective where endogenous phenomena are induced by the group's internal perception of the minority and an often contradictory logic, as Chapter 4 has shown. Conceptually, the term exogenous in this context aims at the identity-forming behaviour of the minority, which in turn is influenced by events or attitudes that are induced by representatives of other linguistic groups.

In order to fully understand the logic of the intersections of daily life that can be involved in the behaviour relevant to the Finland Swedish minority's group identity, we shall now look at an exogenously triggered event that has led to chain reactions. Using an event in Finnish politics from recent years as an example, the significance of the exogenously anchored intersectionality variables for the question of minority identity can be illustrated further. This event was triggered by political power that conflicted with the needs of the minority.

The example to be discussed here was triggered during the 2015–2019 government term in Finland, when the then head of the Finnish government, Juha Sipilä, initiated a healthcare reform plan that was hotly debated in everyday political life. The idea was to unite the existing healthcare responsibilities of 309 municipalities into a network of 12 larger supra-regional districts in order to be able to have a more centralised state healthcare mandate. This plan was motivated by financial savings, since various areas of medical expertise could thus be more centralised in a given network. As the reform aimed at combining cost saving and bigger health units, it at first glance seemed to be a logical proposal.

However, the undertaking was planned in such a way that the regional distribution of the Swedish-speaking minority was deprioritised. Among other things, the district hospital for the bilingual town of Vasa (Region of Ostrobothnia), including its surrounding predominantly Swedish-speaking regions, was to be transferred to the Finnish-speaking town of Seinäjoki, which in itself forms part of a predominantly Finnish-speaking region. This would have had corresponding consequences for the service offering, which was linguistically geared toward Finnish speakers. It was feared that Swedish as a daily language at the hospital would suffer greatly from this. As healthcare is a pillar of modern societies, this plan led to strong backlash in the (mainly Swedish-speaking) population. The political explosiveness of these plans was above all made clear by the fact that there were also parliamentarians in the governing parties who found the Prime Minister's decision to be incomprehensible (cf. Suominen 2017: 13–14). From the minority perspective, the intersectional dimensions that emerged in this case were (among others) the creation of bigger administrative units, the need to save expenses, the regional demographic differences among the population, the securing of health services and the need for services in one's mother tongue. Among these five intersectional dimensions, only the last one was linguistic.

When examining the discourse that followed, it was the last dimension that dominated it. The extent to which the question of regional reorganisation as part of healthcare reform was also a question of language existence is clear from the reactions that came from the heads of both Finland Swedish circles within the Finland Swedish Party (Svenska Folkpartiet SFP), but also from other parties and

officials. At the same time as the Vasa case there was another case on the agenda that pertained to the Finland Swedish language. This concerned the closure of a Swedish-speaking school in another town in the Vasa region (Ostrobothnian town of Pedersöre), but these plans were put on hold in light of the situation around Vasa; allegedly in order not to give too much weight during that period to the debate about the Swedish language's position. Thus, healthcare reform, and with it the relocation of hospitals, was to be carried out in an accelerated procedure:

- (21) Malicious tongues claim that one reason for the fast timetable is to delay the debate about the position of the Swedish language for a longer period of time (Suominen 2017: 10)

The extent to which the Vasa case was foremost an existential language issue and only secondarily a logistical healthcare issue is shown by the further reactions across language and party boundaries over the course of these events:<sup>6</sup>

- (22) The right to use one's own language, Finnish or Swedish, is a right guaranteed by the Basic Law (President Sauli Niinistö, 29/12/2016 in connection with the municipal reform and the relocation of the emergency hospital from Vasa to Seinäjoki)
- (23) How can the basic linguistic rights be secured if the Swedish-speaking inhabitants of Ostrobothnia in the future can no longer rely on receiving such services in their mother tongue that they really need?  
It concerns the principles of rule of law and fundamental human rights, but it also concerns good administrative tradition and political culture (Ville Niinistö, leader of the political party the Greens)
- (24) The basic language rights require that national languages are equal, both formally and in practice. This has not been taken seriously by the government. (Peter Östman, spokesman for the Christian Democratic Party KD)
- (25) Fundamental rights, including basic language rights, are not a matter of opinion. Either fundamental rights do exist or they do not exist (...) Now we are talking about life and death and the right of a person to receive nursing care in his or her mother tongue (Maarit Feldt-Ranta, member of the Social Democratic Party)

The reform decision also impacted a wide range of individuals within the population at an emotional level. A survey of the population includes their reactions to it:

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<sup>6</sup> All of the following four quotations are documented in Suominen 2017: 9–13.

- (26) A personal insult and hurtful. A wet rag right in the face. Indifference to the Finland Swedish situation against better knowledge. An attitude that hurts. (Suominen 2017: 5)

The extent to which this reform issue was perceived as part of a long historical process of weakening the cause for Finland Swedish language was also made clear by reactions from prominent Swedish-speaking figures. The existential need for self-realisation in everyday life and an identity shaped by language use go hand-in-hand here:

- (27) The decision on the emergency hospital became a symbolic question for Swedish in Finland. It became the drop that broke the camel's back. (sociologist Kjell Herberts; quote taken from Suominen 2017: 5)

In the party-political lobby of the Swedish-speaking minority, a statement made by member of parliament Mats Nylund to the government during a parliamentary session reflected the outrage at the Vasa decision. The rhetoric, formulated at a purely emotional level, dispenses with factual arguments and instead expresses the painful emotions that the plan had caused for the Swedish-speaking. It became a viral hit for this very reason, which also demonstrates his statement's symbolic relevance for the Finland Swedish side:

- (28) How can you have this impudence? How on earth can you? And yes, you can! (Mats Nylund 2006; quoted from Suominen 2017: 86)

The healthcare reform plan, which had become a language-based existential question for the Finland Swedes at the national level, beyond Ostrobothnia, also drew reactions from the Finnish-speaking population. In addition to the statements across certain party lines (see above), there were also (unexpected) signals from the Finnish side regarding the impairment of language identity in the Finland Swedish areas:

- (29) I meet Swedish speaking children who are afraid to use their mother tongue in public places. The government knows about it. What does it do? (tweet from the children's ombudsman Tuomas Kurttila one week after the Vasa decision; documented in Suominen 2017: 6)

The broad spectrum of reactions found in the discourse on the closure of the hospital in Vasa made it clear in this case how the language aspect served as a combining factor for the five dimensions of intersectionality summarised above. Due to its central function as a denominator of identity, the language factor even started to



“emigrate” into other societal domains, such as the life and behaviour of children in public places – as the quotation above shows. This emigration enlarged the dimensions of explicit intersectionality so that it took on implicit dimensions.

The real political tragedy and short-sightedness of the Sipilä government was that it failed to recognise the special interdependence between basic healthcare needs and basic language rights, although that link became obvious in the discourses that followed. In the spring of 2019, the government wanted to legitimise its political decisions through a new election, but lost the election by a significant margin.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the interconnectedness between language and everyday life demonstrated so far, and due to earlier experiences with shut down hospitals in the country’s Finland Swedish regions, the Vasa case and its reactions are to be understood as more than just historical coincidences in light of previous hospital shutdowns. A birth hospital was closed down in Ekenäs (2010) and in Borgå (2016), respectively; both of them having been situated in the country’s Swedish-speaking regions and having mainly served as popular hospitals for Swedish-speaking mothers. This was due to their innovative methods, their local proximity and their comparably small sizes in terms of average number of patients. The closing down of these (and other) institutions in Swedish-speaking regions has contributed to a growing awareness of possible intersections with other dimensions of daily life, mostly in terms of the interconnectedness of language and identity, which is why it is of no surprise that the linguistic dimension of the Vasa case was brought forward in the debate regarding the hospital closure.

At this stage one can ask whether linguistic identity as such can imply a double bind in the Finland Swedish case, and if this double bind can be resolved? This question is all the more relevant because it influences the overall situation of the Finland Swedes in terms of the logic behind their identity. Here, two dimensions of alienation seem to emerge in the Finland Swedish case. One of these dimensions refers to the endogenous self-perception on the question of identity-determining factors. In this context, the writer Tove Jansson’s Moomin characters can be mentioned. According to a common Finland Swedish self-stereotype, the

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7 After some significant changes in the tasks and composition of the healthcare reform plan under the newly elected Prime Minister Sanna Marin in 2019, the reform was finally passed through Parliament with a significant majority on 23 June 2021. It widened the final number of healthcare regions to 22 (see Merikanto 2021). For the district of Vasa, the final law meant a decisive change, as it retained the existing healthcare system within its own region, with Vasa as the administrative centre. However, this final development was by no means predictable during the innumerable societal and political debates on the subject that occurred during the Sipilä government.

situation of being a minority is often likened in a self-reflective way to that of a Moomin family (see Nikolajeva 2000; Rönholm 2001; Klinkmann 2011). This is also the case in an evaluation by sociologist Kjell Herberts of the experiences with healthcare reform described above:

- (30) When the sociologist Kjell Herberts was asked to choose the most typical Finland Swedish person of all time, he chose Tove Jansson. This took place during the plenary assembly of the young Finland Swedish Social Democrats, who had gathered in December 2017 due to the threat against the Swedish language. Tove Jansson gave us a picture of ourselves: “*The Moomin family lives on their island and Moomin dad goes and waits for the great catastrophe, which is a very Finland Swedish thing: to wait for a catastrophe that never comes.*” (Suominen 2019: 84; emphasis in the original)

The fact that these kinds of experiences are palpable existential questions is repeatedly made clear in the comments about the healthcare reform campaign:

- (31) The dispute over the central hospital in Vasa is rapidly becoming a symbol of the government’s attitude to issues that affect the Swedish [language and identity], and drama is in the air as the reform proposal reaches the boardroom. “We are talking about life and death”, Maarit Feldt-Ranta (SDP) explains when the question is put to the vote in Autumn 2016. (Suominen 2019: 85)

The double bind and the implicit “drama” (see quotation above) in this case is that the structural healthcare reform cannot be addressed through population statistics alone (which had previously been attempted), as it led to identity issues of the most serious kind. Regarding the possible dissolution of the underlying contradiction between securing basic health needs and jeopardising language rights, one could now think that the Spring 2019 elections would prevent the healthcare reform plan from being put into action and that the contradiction between exercising political power and securing the minority identity of Finland Swedes would be overcome. However, the way in which the healthcare debate took place shows that the Vasa case was treated as just one episode in a constant struggle for language-based identity. Also, if one applies the Moomin quote mentioned above to the discussion about the experiences of earlier hospital shut-downs, the fact that the Moomin dad is waiting for catastrophe (event though it seemingly “never comes”) emphasises the perceived ongoing existence of the problematic situation as a whole. The irrevocability of the contradiction expressed here is presented as symptomatic of the case of the Finland Swedish minority, which seems to shrink over time due to the constant flux in language self-registration (see part 1). This thereby possibly endangers its right to exercise its

mother tongue. In her assessment of the overall situation, the journalist Anne Suominen summarises the perceived situation of the Finland Swedes as follows:

- (32) The wolf is coming – but not yet for good. (Suominen 2019: 84)

The feeling of powerlessness and alienation in the debate about linguistic reality (i.e. the constantly diminishing population of the minority and due to that the constantly growing role of the mother tongue as a means of internal and external self-assertion) is also expressed by the following publication on the Finland Swedish side, which characterises the emotive implications for the minority:

- (33) About the linguistic climate in Finland: Like riding on an escalator in the wrong direction. (Herberts 2019: 1)

If we look at Finland Swedish language from an alienation point of view, the self-alienation is further reinforced by an exogenous perspective when one's own language, a minority language (which in the Finland Swedish case serves as the central aspect of identity as shown in this article), is denied its mother tongue status in a foreign environment:

- (34) The own mother tongue Swedish [Finland Swedish] is not identified as a mother tongue in Sweden.<sup>8</sup>

The Finland Swedish identity dilemma with respect to one's own native language status from a foreign perspective is summarised below from an ethnological point of view:

- (35) Having Swedish as one's mother tongue but at the same time being regarded as a foreigner; at least in Sweden ... [A] Finn who has Swedish as his mother tongue is not exotic, he is at most a cousin from the countryside. But for the Finland Swede, it can be considered insulting when he hears that he "speaks Swedish well", i.e. that this question is reduced to language competence instead of language identity. (Åström 2001: 43)

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<sup>8</sup> From an interview with the Finland Swedish professor Markus Jäntti, currently living in Sweden. Quote taken from Jens Berg 2018.

## 6 Finland Swedish conclusions concerning the paradoxical role of language in the relationship between minority and identity

The above discussion has shown that the Finland Swedish situation as a minority is anything but one-dimensional due to the explicit and implicit intersectionalities involved in the Finland Swedish minority case. As has been shown so far, Finland Swedish identity is fundamentally linked to the question of language/choice of language both in principle and in everyday life. Symptomatic in this context were the paradoxes under which linguistic life is shaped. These paradoxes got expressed through different kinds of double bind, where both sides of the double bind were equally relevant. This was shown in the inter-group choice of language (Quotation 1), in possible social consequences when choosing to use the minority language (Quotations 4–6), and, for example, with regard to the opaque language status of Finland Swedish from either an endogenous (quotation 7) or exogenous (quotations 34–35) perspective. As the Vasa hospital case has shown, the problematic double bind implications for the minority are not limited to the use and role of language as such, but form part of an existential self-assessment where, for example, securing basic health needs and jeopardising one's language rights are in conflict with each other.

In this context, it is interesting to note the positionings among the Finland Swedish minority concerning the discourse on the healthcare reform campaign, as reported in Suominen (2017; 2019). Although the reform's worrying aspects were eventually defeated (see Footnote 7 above), this minority group lives under the constant expectation of renewed attempts to curtail their own linguistic rights. This was expressed by both the Moomin comparison and the wolf metaphor quoted above. Repelling a threat and *at the same time expecting* this threat to arrive represent two poles of an identity-creating double-binding relation that is over time marked by constancy, thus forming two logical identity-marker poles. In the Finland Swedish case, the coherence of this double bind is timeless, a seemingly (!) never-ending story. From this point of view, one understands that the government managed to safeguard the interest of the minority when the healthcare reform legislation was ultimately passed, yet the safeguarding itself was still called into question. It is assumed that the next threat to language-based identity may come at any time. And then perhaps the “great catastrophe” will come as well (see Suominen 2019: 84)?

From a purely logical point of view, there is no indication that the endogenous or even the exogenous dimension of this case's linguistic self-determination

paradox could be resolved. This is not just a theoretical dilemma. As it turned out, the Finland Swedes' own linguistic-cultural identity must be lived in order to survive, yet at the same time, it is not consistently being lived, as media discourse and socio-political developments have shown. The special feature of the Finland Swedish paradox is therefore its constancy, which eludes any kind of final dissolution. Therefore, even the withdrawal of plans to close Vasa hospital is not a solution to the problematic implications it had for the minority. However – paradoxically enough – it exemplifies the constant need to deal with the possibility that the “wolf is coming” (Quotation 32).

The Finland Swedish paradox is a paradox shaped by a time continuum. This paradox is anchored in the social discourse by the tension of a linguistic identity that is on the one hand expressed and talked about, and on the other hand lived differently. It lives through and due to the constancy of its own intersectionalities, which results in different double binds. As this article has shown, these double binds contain certain contradictions. Although this kind of situation in a way threatens the minority language status, it also – paradoxically enough – reinforces consciousness of the minority status. Therefore, one can ask whether this minority group does not draw the strength for its identity as a minority from the implicit contradictions that are precisely *due to* its (endogenously as well as exogenously) established language-based paradox?

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