**Official bilingualism, monolingual integration training and multilingual lives –
challenges for integration policies**

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**[Slide 2]**

Bilingual Finland has an international reputation as something of a model country with well-functioning bilingual legislation. It is quite common to start a country report or a research paper by stating that according to Finnish legislation, Finland is a bilingual country with two national languages, Finnish and Swedish. Ofﬁcial bilingualism, as featured in the Finnish Government programmes for over 100 years, is deﬁned as **societal bilingualism** rather than individual bilingualism. The state, the nation and the bilingual municipalities consist of two groups of speakers – of Finnish and Swedish - which are inherently **monolingual**.

A formal statement of equality in Finnish law, however, does justice neither to the relationship between Swedish and Finnish **on the ground**, nor to the complexities involved for migrants – particularly asylum seekers – as they attempt to gain access to one, other or both languages in processes of settlement.

Therefore, what also counts is how official bilingualism policy is interpreted, confirmed and, most importantly, contested in various domains and by various stakeholders.

In this paper, I focus on asylum seekers, who are awaiting the decision on their asylum claim in Swedish-dominant Finland. By focusing on asylum seekers’ lived experiences I interrogate themes of official bilingualism and majority/minority language use bearing in mind that migration in general, and forced migration and settlement in particular, are inherently complex individual, social, societal and political processes.

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My insights derive from linguistic team ethnography *Jag bor i Oravais* which took place in and around a reception centre for refugees seeking asylum in Finland (2015–2018, and still ongoing), a country that received over ten times more asylum claims in 2015 than the previous year. We have two larger aims in the project:

* Firstly, we explore the ways people seeking asylum tell about their everyday lives at and around the reception centre, while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim (usually around a year),
* Secondly, we analyse the significance of Swedish and Finnish and discuss these lived experiences in relation to wider political and social structures such as asylum policy and employment.

Why are we doing this? Our first priority is to to prevent *ad hoc* decisions, which have serious consequences for individuals’ lives. In addition, people working with asylum seekers need help and information, which is based on research. This is why we work closely with the Oravais reception centre.

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The reception centre is located in a small rural municipality in North-West of Finland in a Swedish-dominant region, far away from the populous Helsinki Metropolitan area. It is also one of the oldest reception centres, established in 1991.

**[Slide 5]**

In Finland, a requirement for proficiency in one of the national languages is embedded in law for new arrivals hoping to settle in the country. This is not a Finland-specific phenomenon: by 2016, 28 of the 36 Council of Europe member countries (78%) had some kind of legal language requirement for settlement or citizenship (ALTE 2016: 9). As with elsewhere also, national programmes of integration and adult language education in Finland do not take into account people awaiting the outcome of an asylum claim. Such people, in a liminal position without a full official status, are viewed by state policy actors as not yet being members of wider society or even as having embarked upon processes of integration. They are not included in the provisions of the Integration Act (Finlex 2010). Asylum seekers in Finland are nonetheless required to engage in education or to work (Finlex 2011, section 29). Education usually means some weekly lessons of Finnish language and general information about Finnish society. This low-intensity provision can be organised by an initial reception centre with trained teachers or volunteers or by another educational institution, mandated by a reception centre. The methods, materials, training background of teachers and overall quality of language education for asylum seekers vary greatly across reception centres, and provision is not bound by the national core curriculum for integration training for adult migrants (Finnish National Board of Education 2012), which is reserved for those who are permanent residents entitled to participate in integration-related activities.

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Language education in Finnish is provided even in the Swedish-dominant areas of the country, including the municipality where our research is located. An assumption is made by the immigration authorities that even if an asylum seeker is housed in a Swedish-dominant area, they should not regard this as the final destination; an equal assumption holds that even if the asylum claim happens to be successful the applicant will move to a city such as Helsinki, where the use of Finnish is more widespread, even though the city is officially bilingual. When taken as a whole, the State’s purpose in providing language education for asylum seekers in Finland appears contradictory. On one hand their language lessons are not intended to support their integration because as asylum seekers they are not yet on an official pathway to settlement. But the language instruction they do receive is in Finnish rather than Swedish, even if they are housed in Swedish-dominant areas of the country, because – if successful in their claim for asylum – it is supposed that they will eventually settle in a Finnish-dominant region. Further reasons for language education to be provided only in Finnish in some bilingual municipalities are a lack of resources, and a misunderstanding by local authorities of the needs for proficiency in Swedish in the area (Helander 2015).

**[Slide 6]**

What is more, even official literature for migrants discourages the choice of Swedish as the language of integration. The 2012 edition of the Welcome to Finland brochure reads:

Finland is a bilingual country. Its official languages are Finnish and Swedish. Integrating in Finland will be easier, if you can speak the language of the municipality of residence. Learning the language of your new home country is vital. It will be easier for you to find a job if you know Finnish. Some five percent of Finnish people speak Swedish as their native language.

(Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2012: 12).

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Since 2012 the tone has changed somewhat, as can be seen in the 2018 edition of the same document:

Swedish-language integration may be a good choice for you, if:

• You live in an area with many Swedish speakers.

• You have family members or relatives who speak Swedish.

• You already speak some Swedish.

Swedish language skills could be useful when you look for work. However, please note that most jobs require proficiency in Finnish. Even if you choose Swedish-language integration training, you should also study Finnish at some point. […] According to law, you have the right to choose Finnish or Swedish as your integration language.

(Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018: 29).

The position on Swedish is ambivalent, and the language is still presented as the second and more risky choice.

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I would also like to add that the concept of *‘integration’*, so often used in policy-making, is a tricky one. It bases on assumptions that migrants are refugees are aliens who need to adjust into the receiving society, which in these representations is understood as monolithic, monolingual and monocultural. Sociologist John Urry (2000) has noted that various types of mobility raise the question concerning integration, namely*: integration into what?* Societies are increasingly complex, and migration is one of those phenomena that makes us rethink the meanings of typical social categories and identity inscriptions such as gender, religion and language.

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I will now focus on lived experiences of Mohammad, whom I met with for the first time in September 2015. He’s around 50 years old, sunni-muslim, from Iraq. He fled from Iraq with his oldest child, who was around 15. His wife and two younger children had to stay in Iraq. Mohammad is a car mechanic and he’s been also working in an international organization which helped Kurdish refugees with housing in Iraq. He and his whole family were being persecuted, because he also worked as a salesman in the United States military camp.

**[Slide 9]**

At the Oravais reception centre, residents receive the four lessons per week of Finnish language education to which they are entitled as asylum seekers, the rest of the weekly hours, hundred and sixty four, they were killing time. Mohammad felt it really difficult to learn Finnish. He didn’t seem to have any real contact with the language, and the future was nothing but unclear. Would he be able to stay in Finland after all? All residents and co-workers called Finnish lessons “a school”. It was a very good name, because the teaching methods reminded us researchers and residents from old school practices. Anyone can recognize this by looking the whiteboard. The content and teaching approach of the classes was traditional, with a focus on grammatical structure and accuracy.

Gaining membership of society is complicated without a shared language, and there is a sense that the centre’s residents and the locals live parallel, monolingual lives. It is hardly surprising then, that upon receipt of a successful asylum decision, most of the centre’s residents actively try to find a new home in the Finnish-dominant regions.

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There have been, however, attempts to change the system. In early years, Oravais reception centre offered Swedish, but very few residents took part in the lessons. Perhaps they had internalized the risk discourse that goes around Swedish, including fewer possibilities to live in the whole country with only Swedish in the pocket. When we were doing our field work, there was a development project in a local educational institution Folkhälsan Norrvalla. It is a folk high school, located 20 km from the reception centre, and offers teaching of Swedish and Finnish along with physical education. Many adults learnt to swim during the Swedish course. Mohammad took part in this course, which lasted for 8 weeks. The course was very short, because the organisers wanted to give a chance for as many residents as possible to learn Swedish. The course was funded by Svenska kulturfonden. Thus, a private non-governmental organisation was financially supporting official bilingualism in Finland instead of the state agency.

Mohammad had a chance to go to the Norrvalla course, because his child was big enough to stay at the reception centre after his school day. This was not possible for those residents, who had little children or who wanted to be at home when their children came from school. Mohammad enjoyed learning Swedish, even though he sometimes felt that he was too old to go to school.

Gradually**,** Mohammad felt welcome in Oravais, and the feeling became stronger after he learned some Swedish, and was able to communicate with the locals. Mohammad’s example shows the need to challenge the current language education policies regarding asylum seekers. Without privately funded Swedish course, he would not have had similar access to the everyday life of the locals. “Feeling human”, is something everyone is striving for.

**[Slide 11]** To sum up, I present this figure to illustrate Mohammad’s everyday multilingual life in the reception centre and local venues and his language use in various domains.

**[Slide 12]**

Finnish Immigration Service [MIGRI] has a lot to say in funding teaching for the residents. Four lessons was the maximum to be used for teaching Finnish in this particular reception centre. To put it bluntly, teaching Finnish at the reception centre looks like a perfect exit strategy. This is in striking contrast with the situation of quota refugees in the same region, even the same municipality, who usually start learning Swedish and continue later on in Finnish, if they wish so. Thus, language education policies put new arrivals in unequal positions.

Finland has introduced new policy initiatives in order to make adult migrant language education more effective (Pöyhönen & Tarnanen 2015), but education for asylum seekers is still not a high priority, and if it is, the discourses around adult migrant language education are focused on issues of internal security and social cohesion. Language education for asylum seekers has also been interpreted as a waste of resources by the state, since only about a third of asylum seekers will receive a decision which will allow them to remain in Finland.

Nevertheless, a range of linguistic repertoires were available in the daily lives of the residents – including Swedish.

**[Slide 13]**

**[Afterword]**

Mohammad and his son received a positive decision on their asylum claim after awaiting for a year. Mohammad navigated through a very complicated process of family reunification, and his wife and two children arrived in Finland in autumn 2017. They are currently living in a bigger bilingual town in Ostrobothnia. Mohammad made the choice to move from Oravais in order to provide better educational opportunities for his children and get a job for himself. Right after his residence permit, Mohammad was put in an integration training course (in Finnish) for beginners. He has also volunteered in a local charity organisation, where he uses Finnish and Swedish along with English and Arabic. His children go to a Finnish-medium school, and his oldest son plays football in a Swedish football club. Life goes on.