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## **Language and spatiality in the study of migrants' integration into Finnish working life: Building bridges between applied linguistics and geography**

### **Highlights**

- The study of the relationship between language and place produces new understanding of migrants' work-life integration.
- Building bridges between applied language study and geography helps to analyze language learning in relation to work and spatiality.
- Spatiality is examined through geographical space and experiential place heuristics to reveal interconnections.



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## Abstract

While several studies have addressed migrants' status at the Finnish job market as well as multicultural and multilingual workplace interaction, there is a lack of research that ties these more closely with questions of spatiality. Through discourse analysis, this article examines the interrelationships of language, work, and place in three data sets collected around Finland. The purpose is to better understand how experiential place and geographical space matter in the discourses construed of and by migrants working or seeking employment in Finland. The findings show that different understandings of spatiality feed into one another and affect employment opportunities, requirements for language skills in the workplace and how the relationship between language competence and professional skills is challenged and negotiated.

**Keywords:** language learning, migration, spatiality, working life

## 1 Introduction

Global talent attraction is an increasing practice for many Finnish companies today. Similarly to other Nordic countries (Heleniak 2018), Finland is faced with a diminishing population rate due to aging and declining birth rates and a consequent lack of workers in many branches, which is why both company and state representatives promote work- and competence-based immigration. Meanwhile, the adult population with an immigrant background already living in the country finds it harder than Finns on average to find a job, especially one that matches with their competence and educational degree (e.g. Larja & Luukko 2018; Pitkänen et al. 2022).

There is considerable regional difference in how easily migrants find employment in Finland (e.g. Rauhut 2023). Furthermore, language plays a crucial role in migrants' job opportunities (e.g. Komppa 2015). To understand the interconnections between these we explore how work, language and place are discursively combined in accounts produced by both people of migrant origin and those who speak Finnish as their first language in interviews conducted in different parts of Finland.

Contrary to popular belief, we argue that language as such is not **the** key for gaining access to working life. Rather, finding employment is a complex process where a certificate or degree is often not enough even for native speakers of the local language. The meaning of local networks may, first, be decisive (e.g. Rauhut 2023: 8) in the case of migrant job seekers, and it is this which marks a difference among job-seeking local peers. Second, language skills are dynamic, and they improve in authentic interaction (e.g. Männistö 2020), which suggests that the level of language skills should not be assessed only based on the job seeker's starting level. Third, once employed, language competence remains important for all: as Strömmer et al. (2023: 354) point out, language skills and other competences may be decisive factors in how tasks are allocated, as well as how well integration to the work community is achieved. Fourth, all of these factors potentially have different local and regional manifestations.

These local and regional manifestations in how languages, places and work interconnect are the foci of our article. We will shed light on how places can create as well as inhibit possibilities for migrant employment through and due to language. In line with Vaattovaara (2012), we conceptually distinguish between space and place to illustrate how discourses tying spatiality with language and work operate simultaneously on two distinct discursive levels. Understanding how both levels are at play in migrant employment would be beneficial for both regional studies and applied linguistics.

In this paper, we zoom in on the issue through a complementary framework of theories and data. We wish to join geographers' discussion about this time as one of migration (e.g. de Haas et al. 2019) and language scholars' tradition, in a similar spirit, of sociolinguistics of mobility (Blommaert 2010). Following Blommaert (2005), we recognize the potential of analyzing discourse to address social scientific questions. Such a framework provides us with a possibility to investigate migrants' integration and employment in relation to language and place at different levels professionally and regionally.

Through the analysis, we address the following research questions:

1. How do interviewees construct the interrelations between language, work and place?
2. What kinds of meanings do interviewees assign to different languages in the working life in different regions?

## **2 Language learning, immigrant workforce and the study of place**

### **2.1 Problematizing language requirements for migrant job seekers**

According to Sutela (2023), although the employment rate of workers with a foreign background is higher in Finland than in the EU on average, their status at the labor market is weaker than that of those born in Finland. They are more typically employed in precarious forms of work (short-term, part-time, and platform work) than the Finnish-born to the extent that Ojala et al. (2024) see reason to describe the prevailing conditions as structural discrimination. Additionally, job seekers with a migrant background also experience personal-level discrimination in working life more often based on their ethnicity (Ahmad 2020), gender (Lehtovaara & Jyrkinen 2021), or the intersection of these (Liebkind et. al. 2016; Castaneda & Kuusio 2023). Typically, migrants are also underemployed, that is, they are engaged in work that does not correspond to their qualifications. It has even been argued that there already is a structurally produced migrant underclass of highly educated migrants working in low-status jobs at the peripheries of the Finnish labor market (Ndomo 2024).

Despite these alarming findings on ethnic inequality at the Finnish labor market, the focus of ongoing public discussion remains what is claimed to be the key reason for migrants' poor professional status: their assumedly insufficient competence in the local language, Finnish or Swedish. Even many migrant job seekers themselves agree on this: Finnish language learners in Scotson's study (2018), for example, believed that Finnish language skills are connected to possibilities for finding employment. In a similar vein, Baumgartner (2023) shows how most migrant job seekers feel the work they do in Finland demands less knowledge and skills from them than their previous work abroad. They also believe their lack of skills in, or poor knowledge of the local language may often hinder them from becoming employed at a more demanding level. Especially for skilled migrants, the lack of (professional) language skills may indeed prevent them from finding employment (Komppa 2015). If migrants end up having difficulties with job seeking in their own field and with integrating to working life, they might not only end up changing careers but may also need to further develop their language skills (Leskinen 2023: 150).

However, a categorical view on the necessity of workers to know the local language begs to be problematized. What is meant by "sufficient" language skills? Is the language skills requirement level the same for all types of tasks everywhere in Finland? Further, are there any support measures available at the workplace to compensate for the assumed "lack" of language skills? Research shows there are plenty (Lehtimaja et al. 2021; Seilonen & Suni 2023; Strömmer et al. 2023), and a general awareness of this needs to be evoked to minimize fear, misunderstanding, and potential prejudice among often monolingual employers (see e.g. Jousmäki et al. 2024).

Requirements for language skills needed at the workplace are molded by different work tasks and employers' idiosyncratic tastes, that is, they vary greatly across contexts. This means language requirements should be critically evaluated as not all work tasks demand the same level of linguistic competence. Language competence and professional skills cannot be easily separated, which makes the assessment of language skills independent of the actual work tasks very difficult to measure. (Strömmer et al. 2023.)

Moreover, even though proficiency in the local language can facilitate inclusion by easing access to education, employment, and services, it does not automatically solve the problems of inclusion and integration (Bijvoet & Östman 2023: 156). Other way around, placement in workplace (programme) is not a guarantee of language learning and socialization to a society (Flubacher et al. 2016) and having an employment status is not necessarily enough but obtaining a placement that is in balance with migrants' expertise and expectations (Major et al. 2014: 259).

## 2.2 Spatiality as geography and experience

In setting out to build bridges across disciplines, our toolkit is complemented by lessons from geography, human geography in particular (e.g. Massey 2005; Mavroundi 2017). The field is essential in helping us to conceptualize language learning and migration in relation to place physically, socially, and even economically. In sociolinguistics and its subfields, the interest in place already has a long tradition, for example in variationist studies and ethnolinguistics. Earlier sociolinguistic research has also been criticized: Blommaert and Dong (2013), for example, posited that there has been superficial conceptual development of space and time as the focus in earlier sociolinguistic studies has either been on temporal generational transmission or the spatial distribution of languages (or variables) in a given locality. In dialectology, there have been similar concerns, discussed in terms of the undertheorization of spatiality in variationist and folk linguistic research (Vaattovaara 2012: 119). What these concerns share is a reluctance to view space on essentialist terms, to perceive space as merely a backdrop for the studied phenomena. Instead, both traditions adopt a perspective of space that is historical, constantly evolving and permeated by struggle and diverging interests.

Dong (2021), however, notes that spatiotemporality has received more attention in a field called linguistic landscape studies (LLS). Especially interesting for us here are the recent developments where increasing attention has been paid to how languages, their uses and users shape the landscape and the way it is experienced (e.g. Stroud & Jegels 2014; Pennycook & Otsuji 2015). In the Finnish context, Pienimäki et al. (2024) analyze the spatiotemporal construction of linguistic landscapes at three linguistically diverse neighborhoods in Helsinki to show how people discursively construe their relationship and affective stances toward these places, languages and the people that inhabit them. This kind of approach brings to fore space as a site of struggle where both the histories of the people and the landscape combine in the meanings assigned to these neighborhoods (*ibid.*). This study as well as recent research in migration studies draws on a biographical and experiential understanding of place that perceives it as constantly unfolding interaction that brings together the histories of people, places, and processes in an unpredictable manner (Massey 2005; see also Mavroundi 2017). We will utilize this tradition in our analysis to show how our interviewees discursively construe places through their biographical experiences (see also Johnstone 2011: 215) and juxtapose this with an understanding of space that is constructed through geographical stereotypification. This latter construction of space, we argue, draws on established meanings assigned to places, i.e. discourses of place that produce and reinforce the widely shared interconnections between place, work, and language (Johnstone 2011: 211).

In this article we employ two separate yet interconnected conceptualizations of spatiality: space as essentialized, representational and holding the potential to denote widely shared understandings of regionality and its entanglement with languages

and work. This is an understanding of space we label as **geographical space**. For us, the former resembles how Vaattovaara (2012: 138) understands “mental maps” as “maps of cultural knowledge, overt and tacit, and based on shared social and indexical systems”. The other understanding that arises from the analysis is a view of place as experiential, subjective and constantly under negotiation. This we have conceptualized as **experiential place**. For us, this points to an understanding of spatiality that is constantly transforming, individual and can directly contradict the widely circulating shared understandings (Massey 2005; Johnstone 2011). We treat these categories as separate (cf. Massey 2005: 6), although we acknowledge their interconnections. We utilize these categories as heuristics with which we can address the distinct ways in which discourses tie spatiality with language and work on two discursive levels.

### 3 Data and method

The data analyzed in this paper come from three data sets collected for different research projects in three regions around Finland in the early 2020s (see Table 1). Such mixing of data is conscious for the purposes of this paper; as such, the data are not uniform as they were collected for unique research aims by scholars independent of each other. Thus, the aim is not to produce an all-encompassing analysis of the contents of these data. Rather, the interest lies in the similarity found between different sets of data. In addition to sharing the national and time-specific context of collection, the data sets were produced in research settings explicitly focusing on language, multilingualism, and immigration, and, partially, on working life. Most data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Such similarities are enough to embark on a study to address questions more broadly and to reuse data to yield new understandings without impelling vulnerable groups further.

All research participants were informed about the purposes of the research and asked to voluntarily consent to participate in the studies. We do not provide background information of our participants as in one study such information was not collected to adhere to the GDPR minimization principle. All directly identifying personal data has been anonymized and participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

TABLE 1. Description of the datasets used.

Data set number	Project name, host institution	Site and time of data collection	Collection method	Type and amount of data
1	Linguistic and bodily involvement in multicultural interaction (Academy of Finland 2019–2023, Eudaimonia institute 2023–2025), University of Oulu	Northern Ostrobothnia 2019–2020 with supplements by students 2020–2021	Video recordings of pair conversations on experiences on everyday interactions and language choice and possible problems in the interaction	900 minutes of recordings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11 pair conversations with 22 participants</li> <li>• 17 women, 5 men</li> <li>• 16 different first languages</li> </ul>
2	Career mentoring as a gateway to working life in Finland, University of Jyväskylä	Ostrobothnia and Helsinki metropolitan area 2022–2024	Participatory observation in career mentoring groups  Group discussions Semi-structured interviews Participant feedback forms Documents	14  9 (á 10–15 mins) 18 (á 30–70 mins) 20 20
3	Mapping the linguistic landscape of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (Emil Aaltonen Foundation 2020–2023), University of Helsinki	Three distinct field sites in the Helsinki region 2021–2022	Go-along semi-structured walking interviews with one or two interviewees simultaneously on interviewees' relationship to the place, the languages they have seen, heard, and used themselves in the area	404 minutes of recordings 27 interviews with 30 adults 18 women, 12 men

The regions where the data were collected share some similarities but also differ from one another in certain ways (see Table 2). To start with, the most striking difference between the Uusimaa region, of which the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (HMA) is a part of, and the two regions in Ostrobothnia is that, firstly, the total population, including the migrant population, is bigger in Uusimaa. At the end of 2023, there were 674 500 inhabitants in the city of Helsinki alone. Also, as Table 2 shows, the population of the Uusimaa region is much more diverse in comparison to Ostrobothnia or Northern Ostrobothnia. Secondly, the number of inhabitants with a migrant background follows this division. (Statistics Finland 2023a.) Language-wise, thirdly, it is possible to handle one's daily life in English in the Helsinki city center, but not necessarily in other parts of the city (Pienimäki et al. 2024), let alone in the more rural areas in Ostrobothnia or

Northern Ostrobothnia where the number of foreign language speakers is still small in contrast with the Uusimaa region (Statistics Finland 2023b). The use of English in business life is most frequent in HMA compared to the other parts of the country, and the need for customer service in English is emphasized in the big cities (Laitinen et al. 2023: 46, 60).

TABLE 2. Description of the population in the three regions studied (31 December 2023).

Region	Total number of inhabitants	Number of inhabitants with a foreign background <sup>1</sup>	Number of foreign language speakers	The overall percentage of foreign language speakers and inhabitants with a foreign background (%)
Uusimaa	1 759 537	321 084	316 358	18
Northern Ostrobothnia	418 205	18 240	17 873	4
Ostrobothnia	177 602	18 213	17 207	10
Finland in total	5 603 851	571 268	558 294	10

Fourth, the degree of urbanization in the three geographical areas differs: In Helsinki, most interviewees lived in highly urban areas whereas in the two Ostrobothnian regions, the interviewees included individuals from both urban and more rural areas. As to industry, fifth, it is notable that the size of companies is bigger around the Helsinki region whereas Ostrobothnia and Northern Ostrobothnia have a more substantial representation of small and medium-sized companies.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on discourse analysis of interviews and pair discussions which are both semi-structured and thematic by nature (on semi-structured theme interviews, see Tiittula & Ruusuvuori 2005: 11) as well as go-along walking interviews (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009). We use discourse analysis as a “linguistic technique to answer social-scientific questions” (Blommaert 2005: 237), in our case as means to identify and analyze the construed interconnections between space, work and language. Our analysis draws on two discourse analytical traditions: the first on the study of established, regimented and historically enduring discourses that have power over the ways in which phenomena are understood in the Foucauldian

1 The category of foreign background involves persons whose both parents, or the only known parent, have been born outside of Finland. Hence, it involves both persons born outside of Finland and born in Finland. (Statistics Finland 2024, [https://stat.fi/meta/kas/ulkomaalaistaus\\_en.html](https://stat.fi/meta/kas/ulkomaalaistaus_en.html).)



sense (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 33) that we address through the heuristic of geographical space. At the same time, we engage in the discourse analytical tradition that approaches the construction of meaning through particular positions, individual histories, i.e. through layers of contextuality (Blommaert 2005: 153). Although spatiality carries with it certain shared and enduring connotations, these can also be called into question or disregarded completely. As Blommaert (2005: 131) notes, “[t]he different layers of historicity to which people can orient, and from which they can speak, create enormous amounts of tension between continuity and discontinuity in meanings, between coherence and incoherence in discourses.” We observe how the experiential place is open to negotiation and contestation, and how individual biographies can play as significant a role as the more established meanings assigned to particular nexuses of place, work and language. Throughout our analysis, we consider discourse as a context-bound social and linguistic practice (Fairclough 2003), understanding that language use is never neutral but connected to the values and conventions of the language user as well as societal norms more widely (Kalliokoski 1995: 13–14). People use language as a resource to create meanings and in doing so, make sense of reality and (re)shape the social world (Fairclough 2003; Foucault 2005).

We are using discourse as a theoretical and methodological concept to analyze the meanings that the interviewees construct in connection to our research topic (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019). In order to do so, a rough selection of relevant extracts of our data was made, that is, the parts in which our interviewees referred to the themes of language, work and place. Preliminary analysis of these extracts suggested that our interviewees utilized two distinct orientations to how the interconnections between place, work and language were construed, and these orientations represent our conceptual categorizations that distinguish between geographical space and experiential place. Using these categories, we analyzed the meanings the interviewees construe on (un)employment and their interconnectedness with language and place: especially various combinations of languages, work(places) and regions emerged in the descriptions by our interviewees. Finally, we selected examples that represent the ways in which interviewees construed experiential place and geographical space to make sense of the entanglements of place, work, and language. As Stokowski (2002) points out, place and sense of place can be seen as discursively created: rather than geographical sites, they are socially constructed, dynamic contexts of social interaction. Our aim in the analysis is to better understand how the notion of place features in migrants’ (un)employment and if and what kind of insight the concept may offer to applied language study.

## 4 Analysis: language, work, and place

Across the data, interrelations are introduced between language, work, and place. While language and work are negotiated in a rather similar manner in all three data sets, the case is somewhat different with the notion of place. The structure of this chapter follows from this – although the distinction between the two is at times artificial as we will point out. The first analytical category, denoting the construction of the more widely shared meanings assigned to regions, is geographical space; the second, forefronting individual experience, is experiential place.

### 4.1 Geographical space

In this section, our interviewees construct spatiality in stereotypic, abstract and essentialist terms that draw on shared understandings of regionality and its interconnectedness with work and languages in Finland. In analyzing language and work geographically in this section, we do not detach ourselves fully from the notion of experiential place. Rather, we bear in mind the essentially social nature of language and integration while recognizing in the data references to geographical settings through place names. In the analysis, we focus on the kinds of meanings the interviewees assign to different languages in working life in different areas. We first examine the two national languages Finnish and Swedish and then move on to English, the so-called third national language in Finland (on the role of English in Finland see Leppänen & Nikula 2008; Leppänen et al. 2011; Laitinen et al. 2023: 124).

Example 1 (from data set 2)<sup>2</sup> below features an interviewee who recalls participating in a work trial at a distinctly monolingual Finnish school, a basic education institution in Northern Ostrobothnia. Here, the potentially diverse language resources Zarifa, the interviewee, had accumulated became irrelevant at the face of the necessity to use Finnish with the students.

(1) Zarifa: *Joo on joo mä olin [koulussa] ja minun työtehtävät olivat työtehtävät olivat, mä suunnittelin opi oppituntia ja sitten mä esittelin ne esitin esitystä. Joo se oli hauskaa. Oli 500 opiskelijaa ja 55 opettajaa*

*Interviewer: Tosi iso koulu*

Zarifa: *Joo iso koulu ja se oli vähän outo olla maahanmuuttaja siellä kaikki there was a lot of staring joo*

*Interviewer: Okei*

Zarifa: *Ja heillä oli niin paljon kysymyksiä minulle mutta se oli hyvä koska silloin mä harjoittelin minun suomen kieltä ja nyt mä olen kehittänyt paljon joo*

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2 All the data extracts were originally produced in Finnish and have been translated into English collaboratively by the authors.

- Zarifa: Yeah, I was [at school]<sup>3</sup> and my work tasks, my work tasks were, I planned les-lessons and then I presented them, presented a presentation. eah it was fun. There were 500 pupils and 55 teachers.
- Interviewer: A really big school
- Zarifa: Yeah, a big school and it was a little strange being an immigrant there, everyone, there was a lot of staring, yeah
- Interviewer: Ok
- Zarifa: And they had so many questions for me, but that was good, because then practiced my Finnish language, and now I have developed a lot, yeah

Example 1 illustrates what was apparently a novel type of encounter at a school in Northern Finland. In the example, Zarifa admits *it was a little strange being an immigrant there*. It seems that, despite the school's relatively big size, the students perceived the new staff member as visibly different from everyone else and thus an object of an othering gaze (*there was a lot of staring*). The meaning of the geographical space in this example is more than the demographic and ethnic reality, however. The interviewee praises the students for asking her a lot of questions and states, *then I practiced my Finnish language, and now I have developed a lot*. This language use initiated by people in Zarifa's workplace helped her to build a form of capital she now finds highly valuable in the Finnish job market. Here, Zarifa construes a discourse where knowing Finnish is a "must" in working life in Northern Ostrobothnia, thus echoing the official Finnish integration policy discourse – yet negotiating her own role and agency as a language learner and a language user (see also Grasz 2023: 176–177, 189).

Example 1 demonstrates a necessity to master the local language to be able to continue working in the context described above. The workplace may and should indeed provide staff with opportunities for language learning and use as well as wider possibilities for integration in and outside of work. Zarifa's experiences illustrate the situation in a small municipality, while the next example 2 (from data set 1), situated in a city, lends more understanding towards how interviewees assign meaning and importance to Finland's other national language, Swedish.

- (2) Justyna: *Mun, kokemuksesta mä en osaa ruotsia ollenkaan, ja mä tiedän että töissä jos mun pitää hoitaa jotakin (ruotsin kielellä), mulla aina pitää pyytää apua, työkaverilta näin [...] ja sitten mä, ku mä opiskelin täällä, [kaupunki]:ssa, [ammattiin], ja sitten, sitte tuli vähän puheita että, no entä sitten kun tulee joku asiakas, pitää puhua ruotsia, tai se asiakas ossaa vain ruotsia sitten mun opettaja aina sanoi joo mutta, sä voit aina, sovita työkaverin kanssa ja vaihtaa vuorot, tai sitten toinen, voit periaatteessa aina, kysyä asiakkaalta että osaako hän englantia ja näin että ainakin täällä [kaupunki]:ssa, ei oo, ei oo mitään iso*

3 The use of square brackets [at school] denotes anonymized information.

Claudia: Joo

Justyna: *painoa että, pitää osata ruotsia. Mä luulen että jos mä asuisin sielä, länsi tai, no, alueella ehkä, vielä enemmän mutta.*

Justyna: my, from my experience I don't know Swedish at all, and I know that at work if I have to do something (in Swedish)<sup>4</sup> I always need to ask for help, from colleagues [...] <sup>5</sup> and then I, when I studied here [city] for my profession and then, then we started talking about what happens when a customer comes, I have to speak Swedish, or the customer only knows Swedish, then my teacher always said, yeah, but you can always settle things with a colleague and take turns, and then the other, you can practically always ask the customer if they speak English, and so at least here in [city] it's not, not a big

Claudia: yeah

Justyna: thing that you must know Swedish, I think that if I lived on there on the west side, or, well area maybe, even more but

In example 2, Justyna construes an understanding of geographical space by adopting a stereotypical understanding of the connection between language skills, work and the region in question, Northern Ostrobothnia. She describes her lack of sufficient competence in Swedish as an issue in the field she works in (*I don't know Swedish at all [...] if I have to do something [in Swedish] I always need to ask for help, from colleagues*). Here, she assesses the Swedish skills she learnt in vocational school as insufficient – which Suurniemi (2019) observes is a recurring discourse on school language learning. From the perspective of her current employment, the interviewee reflects on the information on language needs she gained in the vocational school as conflicting with her work life reality. On the one hand, the need for language skills was emphasized in education (*I have to speak Swedish*) and here the discourse is constructed around the notion that language learning is something that individuals can control and choose to do and hence, recognizing one's responsibility in the matter and obligation to act (Miller 2010). On the other hand, the teacher advised that there will be room for flexibility in the working practices (*you can always settle things with a colleague and take turns*) or language practices (*you can practically always ask the customer if they know English*). In her experience, flexibility holds more true than strict language policies and she can rely on her colleagues' help with Swedish.

Justyna notes, however, the impact of the geographical region she works in. Swedish is not essential in her current area but might be a requirement in other places; here, she refers to Swedish-dominated areas in the west part of Finland. In the same way, across different data sets, Swedish-speaking areas are referred to by

4 The use of brackets (in Swedish) denotes interpretation or explanation by the researchers.

5 The marking convention [...] means the extract has been shortened.

mentioning names of regions, cities, towns, and less precise geographical locations by connecting them with the need of knowing Swedish to act in working life. Example 2 demonstrates how the interviewees are aware of different geographical areas and their linguistic situations. It illustrates well the evidence in the data on the currency of Swedish skills in working life in the bilingual, Swedish-dominated Western Finland.

The previous examples 1 and 2 constructed a discourse on the need to learn and use the local language for working life purposes in certain areas using Swedish language and for enhanced integration using Finnish language. By contrast, in example 3 (from data set 3) from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (HMA) the language with the most capital is (said to be) English. However, also Swedish and Finnish prove themselves valuable.

(3) *Interviewer: Oot sä huomannu et minkälaisii kieliä tai kuuluuko paljon erilaisia kieliä ja näkyykö kieliä?*

*Raita: No kuuluu töissä ainakin. Mä oon siis töissä semmoses paikassa missä käy hyvinkin paljon erikielisiä ihmisiä mut pääasiallisesti englannin kielellä hoituu asiat.*

*Interviewer: Ja tuntuuko et on helppo heidänkin kommunikoida englanniks sillä kielellä vai kaivattaisko jotain muita kieliä sit siinä? Onks mitään ollu koskaan sellasta tuntumaa siihen?*

*Raita: Ei oikeestaan. Englanti mun mielestä tuntuu soljuvan kaikilta enemmän tai vähemmän ja sitten ne ulkomaalaiset jotka on asunu ehkä vähän pidemmän aikaa täällä nii ne opettelee suomea ja just haluuki puhuu sit suomeks. Mut sitten ehkä taas mä koen että ruotsin kieli on semmonen mitä pitää ehkä enemmän olla. Tai monilla on sit ne jotka tulee Ahvenanmaalta tänne tai rannikolta nii heillähän on vahva ruotsi ja he ei välttämättä taas puhu suomee mut haluis puhuu ruotsia. Täällä sit taas kaikki ei puhu ruotsia. Mut he puhuu englantia ja me nii se englanti yhdistää jotenki mä oon kokenu.*

*[...]*

*Interviewer: Ooks sä huomannu siellä et minkälaista ihmisryhmää käy? Kuuleeko siellä muita kieliä tai*

*Raita: Kuulee. Kyl mun mielestä jatkuvasti kuulee englannin kieltä. Helsinki on sellanen paikka mis on mun mielestä enemmän. Siis jos menee Turku tai mikä tahansa muu kaupunki nii eihän siel oo sellasta massaa jotka puhuu jatkuvasti englantia. Varmaan kaikki jotka on jotenki töissä tai monien ystävien työpaikoilla kans eihän se oo vaan niin että on vaan suomenkielisiä vaan et siel on monesta paikasta ihmisiä. Sen takia se englanti on semmonen*

*Interviewer: Have you noticed what kind of languages or do you hear a lot of different languages and do you see languages?*

*Raita: Well at work I hear them. Because I work in a place where a lot of people who speak different languages come but mostly we handle things in English.*

Interviewer: And does it feel like it's easy for them to communicate in English with that language or do you think other languages would be needed there? Have you ever had that kind of feeling about it?

Raita: Not really. I think everyone is more or less fluent in English and then those foreigners who have lived here for maybe a bit longer they are learning Finnish and want to speak Finnish. But then I maybe feel like the Swedish language is something that is needed more. Or many people have those who come here from Åland or the coast they speak Swedish and they don't necessarily speak Finnish but would like to speak Swedish. And here not everyone speaks Swedish. But they speak English and we do too so the English sort of unites us, that's how I feel about it.

[...]

Interviewer: Have you noticed which kinds of groups of people come there? Do you hear other languages or

Raita: Yes. I think you always hear English. I think Helsinki is the kind of place where there is more. I mean that if you go to Turku for example or to any other city, there is not such a mass of people who speak English all the time. I'm pretty sure that everyone who's somehow working or in the workplaces of many of my friends as well it's not like there are only Finnish speakers there but there are people from many different places. That's why English is something like

In the extract, HMA is pictured as a special setting in terms of the currency that English has in working life. Here geographical space is constructed via comparison between different areas with respect to population and language. Raita describes HMA as the only place in Finland with a large *mass of people who speak English* even when compared to other larger cities in Finland, such as Turku. English is, after Finnish, the second most used language in public administration, business and industry, higher education and science. It is worth noting, however, that Swedish is also needed, especially in public administration. In business, English mostly serves the needs of the industry and the service sector and is used in large and medium sized businesses, particularly in the Helsinki-Uusimaa region. (Laitinen et al. 2023: 125.)

In example 3, people's diverse linguistic backgrounds are constructed as a motivation for using English as a shared language at work, even between Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking Finns. Raita does also recognize the value of knowing Swedish to facilitate interaction with the Swedish-speaking *from Åland or the coast* who she construes as not knowing Finnish. Raita also acknowledges some migrants' desire to practice the linguistic capital they are building, Finnish. Yet, Raita construes a discourse on English as being "enough" – on English as a lingua franca and as a normal and regularly employed resource. According to Raita, English is not just occasionally used, but a part of everyday practice (*all the time*) in HMA.

## 4.2 Experiential place

In this section, we concentrate on the social and negotiable aspect of place; the examples here represent individuals' experience of place rather than a geographical, essentialized entity. Experiential place is derived from an understanding of space as social in a bottom-up sense, i.e. in a way that derives meaning from an individual's subjective and biographical social experience. Here, interviewees renegotiate the professional status of themselves and of others as well the social aspects and networks through which migrants gain access to work and society.

However trendy remote work may be in the 2020s, in this context of migrant job seekers especially it cannot be overemphasized that the concept of work is situated at the nexus of industries and social networks. To access work, the applicant needs therefore to access and become accepted in their immediate surroundings – in the contemporaneous co-existence of others, in Massey's (2005: 10) relational terms. This entails that the "stories-so-far" used to constitute the place and its power dynamics are subjected to renegotiation that could enable the existence of difference and heterogeneity (ibid.: 9–10). This negotiation of difference and evaluation of others' linguistic resources is apparent in the account below, example 4 (from data set 3), by one of our interviewees. Here the interviewee constructs a delegitimization of the authority of his doctor and their medical advice on the basis of the doctor's linguistic competence. The interviewee constructs an experiential place where the traditional roles can be disregarded if the interlocutor cannot display a stereotypical medical personae through their linguistic performance.

- (4) *Mauri: No tossa on sitte toi terveysaseman [...] Nii siellä on kyllä on hoitsussa ja lääkäriässä siellä on kyllä niin aikamoinen sekamelska. Niitä on joka puolelta.*  
*Interviewer: Taustoiltaan siis?*  
 [...]
 *Mauri: On.*  
*Interviewer: Mut et siellä kans sitten ainaki itse voit asioida ihan kaikkien kans suomeks vai*  
*Mauri: No siinä kato onhan niillä sen verran et niitten on pakko pystyä puhumaan suomee. Mutta muutamia on jotka se on aika siinä ja siinä.*  
*Interviewer: Ahaa. Okei.*  
*Mauri: Nii. Ja tässä kun mä kerran menin sinne sattuu semmonen varmaan suomalaisen kanssa naimisissa mutta vähän iäkkäämpi naislääkäri. Joku [vieraskielinen etunimi] olikohan se nyt [suomalaiselta kuulostava sukunimi] vai mikä niin aika onnetonta se kyllä oli jo taito. Se mulle puhu esimerkiksi jostain ruokailutottumuksista. Sinä ei syö sikaliha. Kala on hyvää ja kana on hyvää mutta sikaliha ei ole hyvä. Täällasta.*  
*Interviewer: Nii justiiinsa.*  
*Mauri: Nii nii mut että siinä tuli jo siinä pieniä (virheitä). Se anto mulle vähä väävät lääkkeitä mutta ei se mitään. Mä menin [kaupunginosaan] ja sain oikeet lääkkeet.*

Mauri: Well there's the health care center [...] So there's quite a mix of nurses and doctors. They're from everywhere.

Interviewer: You mean their backgrounds?

[...]

Mauri: Yeah.

Interviewer: But you can use Finnish with everyone when you visit it or

Mauri: Well, they have to be able to speak Finnish. But for some, they're not quite there yet.

Interviewer: I see, ok.

Mauri: Yeah. And once when I went there I had a doctor who was an older woman probably married to a Finn. Like [foreign-sounding first name] maybe [a Finnish-sounding surname] or something and her skills were pretty bad. She talked to me about eating habits or something like that. You not eat pig meat. Fish is good and chicken is good but pig meat is no good. Like this.

Interviewer: Right.

Mauri: Yeah yeah so there were already small (mistakes). She gave me medicine that was slightly incorrect but that's ok. I went to [a part of the city] and got the right ones.

The health care center represents an interesting mix of expectations for interaction. Health is a sensitive topic in general and medical treatment is often based on the interaction that takes place between the doctor or nurse and the patient. Moreover, the understanding developed of the patient's condition could literally be a matter of life and death. This understanding develops through the unfolding of the medical interaction through linguistic means. Here, in the interviewee's account, the medical staff's competence in Finnish does not evoke such trust, which the patient construes frightening or frustrating (*There were already small (mistakes). She gave me medicine that was slightly incorrect*). Neither does the linguistically simple manifestation of the doctor's nutrition advice (*You not eat pig meat. [...] Pig meat is no good.*) evoke appreciation or trust in the patient that the doctor could be able to provide eligible advice.

Mauri construes the doctor's lack of linguistic (Finnish) competence to denote their insufficient medical competence at seeing to his health needs. Here the traditional asymmetrical relationship between the patient and the doctor during the service encounter – the traditional power dynamics assigned to healthcare stations as places – is juxtaposed with the asymmetry of the interlocutors' linguistic competence. Because of their linguistic asymmetry, Mauri challenges the stereotypical power imbalance, i.e. the traditional hierarchy between the doctor and the patient typical of the health care setting. In other words, Mauri constructs his local healthcare center as an experiential place where he can renegotiate the traditional power hierarchies that come with the roles of doctors and patients due to linguistic sovereignty. The interaction between Mauri and his doctor brings together the histories of and meanings assigned to the health care station as an institution, power relations between migrants and the local population, the legitimation of authority through linguistic means, and opens them up for renegotiation.



While example 4 represents a professionally asymmetrical relationship between the users of different languages, example 5 (from data set 1) involves a discussion between two peers. Here, the interviewees Katja and Marju evoke a notion of experiential place in relation to Katja's previous working environment from the perspective of language and integration.

- (5) Katja: [...] paikalliset (kollegat) oli suurin osa kans ruotsinkielisiä mutta oli jokunen suomenkielinen, mutta ne [...] tietysti osas molempia. mut siellä oli semmonen mukava yhteisö. [...] oltiin töissä yhdessä vapaalla ajalla yhdessä ja
- Marju: tää antaa
- Katja: semmosta
- Marju: mä uskon niin ku mielettömän paljon sinne kielen kehitykseen että tavaltaan sut otetaan mukkaan ihan sama millä kielellä, mutta se että otetaan mukaan
- [...]
- Katja: niin se oli varmasti, niin ku se [työpaikan pomo] [...] nii hän järjesti, omassa niin kui, suomenruotsalainen nii, kaunis talo, [kaupunki]:n keskustassa nii hän järjesti grillijuhlat pelkästään ulkomaalaisille (työntekijöille) [...] että saada, ihmisiä pysymään
- Marju: elikkä hän tosiaan
- Katja: yhdessä
- Marju: yritti niin ku integroida
- [...]
- Marju: työyhteisöä
- Katja: se tarjosi niin ku kouluttamismahdollisuuksia ja ku sä menit syömään jos hän tuli syömään näki et sä syöt nii hän istui viereen miten sä viihdyt ootko sä tyytyväinen
- Marju: vitsit ku tää on tärkeää muuten
- Katja: voinko mä vielä tehdä jotain, se on niinku äärettömän tärkeä
- [...]
- Katja: sitten meidän kautta tuli seuraavat, että minutki toi virolainen [kollega] että [...] se rekrytoi minua, se puhui että tää on niin kaikki mahtava hyvä hyvä hyvä, ja tule tänne, ja, järjesti mulle kaikki ja, paremman palkan kuin [kaupunki]:ssa ja paremmat olot ja kaikki
- [...]
- Marju: se verkosto on kyllä tosi tosi tärkeä se verkostoituminen
- Katja: joo, joo
- Katja: [...] most of the local (colleagues) were also, Swedish-speaking but there were some who were Finnish-speaking, but they [...] naturally could speak both, but there we had such a nice community [...] we were together at work, and together during our free time and
- Marju: that gives
- Katja: such

- Marju: I believe so much to the development of language skills that you're kind of included whatever the language, but that you are included
- [...]
- Katja: yeah it really was, like the [manager] [...] they organized, in their own like Finnish-Swedish yeah, beautiful house in the center of [town] they organized a barbecue only for foreign employees [...] to make people stay
- Marju: so they really
- Katja: together
- Marju: sort of tried to integrate
- [...]
- Marju: the work community
- Katja: they offered like opportunities for retraining and, when you went to eat, if they came as well, they sat next to you, how are you doing, are you happy
- Marju: oh boy, this is really important by the way
- Katja: is there anything else I can do, it's like so incredibly important
- [...]
- Katja: and then the next ones came through us, even I was recruited by that Estonian colleague, they said that everything is so wonderful here, good good good and come here and organized everything for me, and a better salary than in [city] and better conditions and everything
- [...]
- Marju: the network is really important, the networking
- Katja: yeah, yeah

Central to Katja's way of constructing an experiential place, a specific working environment, is the co-constitution of the integration process where the immigrant worker does not simply adjust to the workplace. Instead, the process was bi-directional from the beginning: Katja was recruited by a countrywoman who told the organization is a good place to work in, and the employer was told that Katja is worth recruiting. Secondly, Katja emphasizes the role of other employees in offering one-on-one support (*there we had such a nice community*) and together with Marju they conclude that the boss's way to create togetherness was special and beneficial for the community (*really tried to integrate*). Katja told how the management takes extensive measures to familiarize the newcomer with the others and with local surroundings (*they organized barbecue for foreign employees [...] to make people stay*). Personal engagement with employees as well as interest in their well-being and training needs is constructed here as contributing to enhancing the integration of international employees to the organization. These measures may be a conscious act to try to strengthen the "pull" quality of the organization and to increase employees' feeling of place attachment.

According to Katja, multiple languages intertwine with everyday work encounters between colleagues in a place (*most of the local (colleagues) were also, Swedish-speaking, but there were some who were Finnish-speaking, but they naturally could speak both*). The interviewees construct together the ways how inclusivity in general along

with accepting (linguistic) diversity at a workplace creates a favorable atmosphere for language learning (*that gives [...] so much to the development of language skills*), which they seem to connect with wider inclusion and integration coming from the direction of the work community (see also Laitinen et al. 2023: 124; Leskinen 2023: 153, 159). The most essential thing is that the migrants feel included and what the linguistic resources utilized to create this sense of belonging are is trivial (*you're kind of included whatever the language*). The working community is bilingual in Finnish and Swedish to start with and the interviewees construct this place as open to negotiating one's other linguistic resources, as well.

Integration is closely intertwined with language and building networks in place, as interviewees affirm in the example 5 (*network is really important, the networking*). In example 6 (from data set 2), the interviewee, Adaya is highly committed to learning Finnish and thus becoming integrated, fulfilling both her own personal as well as societal expectations (see e.g. Miller 2010; Ronkainen & Suni 2019). Here, the interviewee's path to working life is somewhat more complicated, however. Example 6 is extracted from an interview conducted with a highly educated migrant who started networking during stay-at-home parenting.

- (6) Adaya: *Joo tai kun olin kotona lasten kanssa minulla oli tämä pitkä aika melkein kuusi vuotta silloin minä menen erilainen paikkaan että esimerkiksi kun menin leikkipuistoon siellä on ryhmä äitille menin sinne sieltä tutustuin joku naisia suomalainen vähän puhun koska kun olin koulussa jotain oppinut minä sinä ja ihan mitä kuuluu minä menen sillä tavalla minä (yritin) puhua heidän kanssaan*

Interviewer: *Joo tosi kiva*

Adaya: *Joo se sitten tuli pikkuhiljaa minulle verkostoa että kun en ole koko ajan kotona koska lasten kanssa ajattelin pakko mennä ulkona [...]. Sitten menin ja kun menin yksi paikan sieltä sain tietoa että tässä on kielikahvila okei menen sinne sieltä luki tässä on Luetaan yhdessä okei menen sinne eli kun menee yksi paikka sitten avautuu pikkuhiljaa että mitä tämä on sitten yksi kerta sanoi joku että okei maahanmuuttajaisille oli tämä Mannerheimin lastensuojelu heistä saa ystäväksi maahanmuuttaja äidille. Olen hakenut sitä sitten okei tuli yks ystävä hyvä sitten kun muutin sieltä taas olin hakenut kun muutin sieltä sitten sain toinen ystävä ja hän oli vähän kiinnostanut aasialainen kulttuurista tai jollain tavalla [...] hänen kanssa puhunut minun tutkinnosta mutta joka kun minä menin joku tutustunut aina vähän puhunut että miten millainen työelämä on Suomessa tämä [ammattiala] tai liittyviä asioista sitten hän sanoi yksi päivä että hän puhui hänen naapurin kanssa minun koska minä kysyin että minä haluan työskennellä sama ala mutta minä miten minä pääsen se oli tosi epäselvää että mitä minä teen on kun joku (hyötyä) minun tutkinnosta tai meneekö kaikki pois se*

[...]

Adaya: *Joo sitten sieltä yksi opettaja sanoi hei meillä on yksi ryhmä tulossa ja tämä [verkosto] ja siellä autetaan tämä työelämän liittyviä se ei vain kieli. Sitten sieltä tulin tänne eli yksi paikasta sain tietoa sitten toinen*

Adaya: Yeah or when I was at home with the children I had this long time, almost 6 years, then I went to a different place that for example when I went to the playground there was a group for mothers, I went there and got to know some Finnish women I speak little because I had learned something at school, I, you, and like how are you, I go like that, I (tried) to talk with them

Interviewer: yeah, very nice

Adaya: Yeah, then I build a network little by little so that when I'm not at home with the children all the time I thought I must go outside. [...] Then I went and when I went some place I got information that there is a language café here, ok I will go there, there it said this is Let's read together (a language learning group for beginners), ok I went there, so when you go some place then it opens little by little that what this is, then one time one person said they had for migrant women this Mannerheim league for child welfare (an NGO that promotes the wellbeing of families with children) who provides friends for migrant mothers. I have applied for that then and ok one good friend came, when I moved from there I applied again and when I moved I got another friend and she was a little interested in Asian culture or in some way [...] I talked with her about my degree, but when I went and learned to know someone I always talked with them a little about what working life is like in Finland and this [field] or related things then she said one day that she talked with her neighbor about me, because I asked that I want to work in the same field but how do I get, it was really unclear what do I do, if I (benefit) from my degree or does it all go away [...]

Adaya: Yeah then one teacher from there said hey, we have a group starting and this [network] and they help with things about working life not only language. Then I came here from there, so I got information from one place and then another

Example 6 portrays how one's journey to working life may involve multiple, consecutive or simultaneous, trails for navigating the complexity of services and local networks distributed across various kinds of places. The interviewee talks about these places and people in them as a chain of experiences (*so when you go some place then it opens little by little what is this; I got information from one place then another*), and work is constructed as a part of it. Adaya describes her way through a biographical path of different social relations which are connected to language use: gaining access first to a group of parents in a playground with her limited Finnish skills (*I tried to talk with them*). Later, seeking to engage actively in places for language learning works as a tool to proceed in the chain of places and social relations. In this way, Adaya grows her networks starting from language cafes and joint reading groups to peer support

groups for migrant mothers and, interestingly for us here, finally to a mentoring group introducing migrants to working life in Finland. To introduce a spatial metaphor, the people Adaya meets, and who then guide her along the way, can be characterized as bridges carrying her to the next person in the chain of experiential places. She collects language skills, social relations, and knowledge on her winding pathway, working actively towards reaching her ultimate goals regarding working life in Finland.

Examples 5 and 6 demonstrate our interviewees' spatial understanding as relational; as fused with meanings which they assign to their own and others' participation, and with the linguistic resources used to integrate into these places. They show how the process of becoming integrated and finding one's place in working life is not merely about learning the local language but pre-necessitate a much more complex path of navigating between social relations and places. The interviewees explicitly mention support networks for integration, networks and reaching out to different groups in various kinds of places, which highlights the importance of these aspects as part of their experience. While doing this, they are also reproducing a discourse on the good migrant as an active promoter of their own integration (see also Henry 2015; Lehto 2023).

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have described various types of interrelations between language, work, and place around Finland. The analysis proceeds on the two, non-categorical levels of experiential place and geographical space. Experiential place, first, is subjective and negotiable and does not follow pre-established discursive worlds. Here, place is created in relation to personal biographies. Geographical space, second, is essentialized and representational of shared discourses on language and work. According to these discourses, people are placed in specific contexts that necessitate the deployment of specific language resources. This fixed understanding of geographical space can be challenged and contradicted at the level of experiential place.

It is here that the distinction between the two conceptualizations of spatiality comes to show. The essentializations constructed of the interconnections of places, languages, and work in examples 1–3 are a combination of our interviewees' personal, biographical experiences and shared meanings circulated to make sense of place-language-work relations. The wide sharedness of these discourses gives them validity, power to turn stereotypical understandings into reality. The wide circulation of such discourses does not make them universally true, however, as our analysis of Examples 4–6 suggests. There are always exceptions, surprising turns of events, people who can bridge competences and resources as well as people and places in unexpected ways.

In this article, we set off to build bridges between disciplines and data. The analysis shows advantages in doing this: the discourse analytical findings valorized in terms of experiential place and geographical space put forth a new understanding in the context of language and work. Geography and place still matter for socio-/applied linguistics, especially in the study of second language learning as well as the study of language and work. Particularly interesting for applied language study is the notion of experiential place where language users talk against conventional discourses on place. It is in such instances where they become empowered to challenge the traditional, stereotypical ways of speaking about a place and claim at least a part of it as their own, as part of their histories.

Spatiality can further be examined against the backdrop of Darvin and Norton's (2015) notion of investment in language learning. While learners make individual choices on whether they deem it worthwhile to engage in complex and time-consuming language learning processes, the material contexts where they make these decisions play an important role. Therefore, finding resonance between data from around the country is relevant for future studies as well as for practitioners. A yet more nuanced picture can be painted on whether cities and regions can utilize migrant job seekers' skills and competences, and if there is any difference between their capabilities to do so. For those in need of labor, understanding how to attract and retain talented workers and implementing that knowledge into company practices may be essential to boost their business. It is also essential for working towards more sustainable and equal working life in Finland. From individual workers and job applicants' perspective, this should be the minimum requirement.

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