

Introduction: Diversity in Communication

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This issue of *VAKKI Publications* explores the theme of Diversity in Communication (Moninaisuus viestinnässä / Mångfald i kommunikation / Vielfalt in der Kommunikation). This very “diverse” topic can be understood as encompassing different language forms, modes of expression, people and voices, as well as their profound impacts on inclusion, participation, and the quality of discourse in both societal and professional contexts. Diversity, citing the philosopher Hanna Arendt (1968), calls for preservation of otherness: the intact uniqueness of members in human communities. On a discursive level, drawing on the influential literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, diversity in communication can be understood as *polyphony*, meaning the simultaneous presence of differing voices and the intertwined or conflicting points of view they bring to the text (e.g. Bakhtin 1984). Polyphony can be opposed to monologic discourse, where only one perspective and ideology prevail, silencing all others. Preservation of otherness and polyphony are relevant to contemporary media-societal participation, where diversity is a key component of political futures and requires intercultural connectedness and technological and literacy-based accessibility beyond easy solutions to complex societal problems, as stated by social scientist Zizi Papacharissi (e.g. 2021). By exploring the various viewpoints, roles, identities, agendas, languages, and abilities seen in and relevant to communication, researchers address fundamental questions such as equality.

The six peer reviewed articles of the issue are based on research presented during the XLIV International VAKKI Symposium, organised in Vaasa, Finland, on 8–9 February, 2024. In addition, the plenary talk given at the Symposium by Professor Christiane Maaß is published here in its original form. As always, *VAKKI Publications* is committed to supporting linguistic diversity in academic publishing. This year’s contributions are written in English, Finnish, and Swedish. In the following, each contribution is introduced in more detail.

Multilingualism and linguistic variation are key perspectives to diversity in communication. It is a matter intimately connected to social justice (Piller 2016) and human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 2022): linguistic minorities frequently face significant barriers in accessing essential services, participating in civic life, and asserting their

voices within dominant cultural narratives. In this issue, two articles focus on multilingualism in Finland and Sweden. Sanna Heittola and Veera Mäkitalo examine the linguistic landscape of nature trails on a UNESCO World Heritage site at the Finnish-Swedish border. Their study focuses on the language of signage on the trails and how it affects the accessibility and inclusiveness of the site. They find that while multilingualism exists on the site, the signage excludes users of minority and immigrant languages, in particular. Adding multilingual signage and signs in plain language would help to better serve marginalised groups, they argue. Pauliina Sopanen and Mari Bergroth, in turn, address the topic of education of multilingual children, who are often disadvantaged in terms of equal opportunities, well-being and knowledge development. Specifically, their research analyses early childhood education plans from twelve bilingual municipalities in Finland. The study shows that municipalities have diverse ways of addressing linguistic diversity and multilingual children in their local policy documents, which may suggest that multilingual children's rights are not being equitably upheld throughout the country. However, further study regarding actual practices in daycare centres is needed.

In addition to multilingualism, this issue considers specific forms of communication developed to enable accessible communication for diverse communication partners. As mentioned in the plenary talk of Christiane Maaß, expert in easy language and accessible communication, disabilities are but one of many reasons accessible communication may be needed. In the talk, Christiane Maaß introduces her seminal work in the area of easy language translation and addresses the possibilities of using artificial intelligence as a tool for such translation. So far, she finds, new AI tools may help, but are in no way able to replace expert human translators, whose work is critical to ensuring social inclusion and equitable participation. The issue further expands the discussion on accessibility and communicative inclusion with an article by Laura Marie Maaß, who investigates the cooperation between hearing sign language interpreters and their deaf clients. Her study empirically examines how the lack of sign language interpreting resources influences the cooperation of sign language interpreters and their clients. The study shows how this blatant shortage has an impact on the sensitivities of the two groups and their relationships with each other. In the context of growing demands for participation and inclusion, it produces tension between the two groups.

Furthermore, the articles in this issue address the diverse rhetoric present in communication. Hans Landqvist analyses how Swedish municipalities try to influence seniors to take advantage of offers of free ice cleats as a means to support their health and well-being. By focusing on discursive legitimation strategies (Van Leeuwen 2008), he finds that some means of addressing senior citizens involve an authorial tone as a way of "speaking from above", while other means suggest a more equal relationship. Hanna Limatius and Merja Koskela analyse how the U.S. government employed diverse voices

and rhetorical techniques during the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on rhetorical arena theory (RAT) (Frandsen & Johansen 2017) and exploring communication of the U.S. Department of State (DoS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), they argue that third-party voices were selected and positioned to support governmental aims in the U.S. crisis communication. The uses of discursive and rhetorical techniques in these contexts were strategic choices by the authorities, forming essential tools for their crisis communication.

Recent decades have seen a multiplication of new forms of digital media; this has also expanded the diversity in communication. In this issue, Niina Nissilä and Merja Koskela focus on how podcasts offer a distinct alternative to traditional text-based methods of conveying expert knowledge. In their conceptual article, they consider how the ways of categorising and presenting podcasts relate to traditional models of expertise and expert communication, and how expertise is described in the context of podcasts. They find that the traditional models still function for describing the podcast offerings at large, but users' perspective is not present in them. The intended use of the podcast defines the relevance of expertise and suggests who is deemed an expert.

In addition, the contributions in this issue utilise and introduce varied empirical methods of communication and language studies in exploring diversity in communication. By addressing diversity in communication through these perspectives, this issue of *VAKKI Publications* aims to inspire further research and practical approaches that contribute to the ability of all individuals to meaningfully participate in society.

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