LANGUAGE AND NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITIES AMONG YOUNG KURDS IN FINLAND

Abstract

This study looks at the role of language in negotiations of identity among a generation of Kurds, who have grown up in Finland. What strategies and emotional attachments does the use of different languages entail? How are identities constructed through linguistic repertoires? The data consists of twenty-three thematic interviews conducted with Kurds from the Kurdistan region of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, as well as observation data. Language forms a central component for feeling "Kurdish". Belonging to Finland is constructed through mastering the Finnish language, whereas identification with "Finnishness" seems to be out of reach due to racialized notions of physical difference. These (non-)belongings are strategically performed and produced by combining multilingual repertoires with culturally justified codes of behavior.

Keywords

Language • identity • Kurdish • young • belonging

Mari Toivanen*

Department of Social Research/Sociology, University of Turku, Finland

1 Introduction

The number of multilingual individuals is rapidly increasing in Northern European countries. This is particularly the case among children of new minority groups who grow up and operate in environments where multiple languages are used. In Finland, the rise of language diversity is particularly reflected at schools – in some elementary schools in Helsinki up to 40% of all pupils have immigrant background[1] (Riitaoja 2008: 28). Also young adults are clearly over-represented in the demographic statistics of foreign-language speakers. For instance, currently 60 % of all Kurdish language speakers in Finland are under twenty-nine years old. In the region of Southwest Finland (Varsinais-Suomi) the number of young people between ages 15–29 is as high as 42% of Kurdish language speakers (Statistics Finland 2011).

At the backdrop of growing numbers of multilingual citizens, the relationship between language and identity among generations with migrant background deserves further attention.

This phenomenon has been relatively little studied within the Finnish academia (see Iskanius 2006; Lehtonen 2009). Previous studies have mainly focused on language acquisition of minority language children (Latomaa 2010), or on language from the perspective of minority rights and integration (Liebkind *et al*. 2004). The intertwined features between identity and language among young people with diverse backgrounds have been extensively explored in countries with generations of immigration history (see Clark 2009; Valentine, Sporton & Nielsen 2008; Butcher 2008). Furthermore,

postmodernist thinking has introduced fresh viewpoints in studies on language and identity in terms of how embedded power relations, institutional contexts and dominant discourses position individuals and affect their identity negotiations, but also how individuals strategically navigate in regards to given identity categories (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004).

This study looks at the role of language in identity constructions among young Kurdish adults, who in the 1990s and early 2000s migrated from Iraq, Iran and Turkey during various stages of their childhood and who have grown up in Finland. How do they position themselves with and through languages to negotiate belonging between communities and generations? This study aims to explore the role of language in constructing and negotiating identities in contrast to focusing on language skills *per se*. More specifically, I will explore how young Kurdish-speaking adults construct identities through linguistic means and repertoires, and how emotional attachments intertwine with the situational use of linguistic repertoires.

In this paper, I firstly discuss the meanings attached to notions of "immigrant" and "integration" in the Finnish context in relation to which, as I argue, young people with migrant background construct belonging(s) and position themselves. Then, I will proceed to consider the role of language in constructions of "Kurdishness" before presenting the theoretical and methodological background of this study. Finally, the findings of this study will be analysed and discussed in greater detail.

* E-mail: marito@utu.fi

2 About "immigrants" and "integration" in the Finnish context

Migration flows remained low to Finland until the 1990s, when the number of arriving immigrants rapidly increased. However, even today the number of foreign citizens (3.5%) remains relatively low compared to other Nordic countries (Statistics Finland 2011). Kurdish-speaking immigrants formed one of the largest ethnic groups among the arriving refugees in the 1990s and early 2000s (ibid.). The attitudes towards immigrants have become more positive from the recession years of the early 1990s, although the attitude climate towards immigrants from Somalia and the region of the Middle-East, including the Kurds, is still less favourable compared to other immigrant groups (Jaakkola 2009).

In the Finnish context, the terms "immigrant" and "foreigner" are value-laden with an embedded understanding of ethnic hierarchy. The term "foreigner" is most often designated to Somalis, Russians, individuals with refugee status and Turks/Kurds (Säävälä 2008: 119). In other words, "physically" visible immigrant groups, aside from Russians, are often labelled "foreigners" and "immigrants", instead of highlighting the heterogeneity of individuals the categories encompass (see Huttunen 2004: 138–139).[2] Namely, it is argued that since in the Finnish context it might be politically incorrect to refer explicitly to "race" itself, the categorizations of "immigrant", "foreigner" and "refugee" have become racialized and are implicitly employed to construct racial difference (Rastas 2005). Researcher Anna Rastas's study (2005: 152) also suggests that the labels "immigrant" and "foreigner" are used for individuals, who were born or have grown up in Finland. The underlying question seems to be then, when, and more importantly how does an individual stop being viewed as an outsider, and begins to be considered "one of us".

In this sense, discourses on immigrants, but also on integration closely intertwine with the notions of "Finnishness" and "we-ness". More recently, various political parties from right to left have called for policies of "adopting the customs of the country where you live" (*maassa maan tavalla*), which has commonly been linked to nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric (Keskinen 2012: 75). The official integration policies emphasize the centrality of language, for instance, in the individual integration plans designed for newly arrived immigrants (Act on the Promotion of Integration 1386/2010). Young people of Kurdish origin have received Finnish language education, and in many cases Kurdish language courses have been provided at schools (Opetusministeriö 1999). The institutional context of integration policies provides a setting, in which the mastering of Kurdish and Finnish are valued differently, in addition to other languages that young Kurds may have learnt in the societies of departure, including Arabic, Farsi and Turkish. Overall, it seems that multilingualism in itself is generally a highly valued quality in Finland, but it remains debatable whether the appreciation towards multilingualism extends beyond valuing certain languages deemed most useful, such as English, Russian and German (see European Commission 2012).

I argue that young Kurds construct identities in relation to discourses on "immigrant", which echo racialized constructions of otherness (see also Leinonen 2012; Keskinen *et al.* 2009). On the other hand, it seems that the discourses on integration conceal a dimension of language in the process of "being/becoming one of us". What is relevant in the realm of this study, is that belonging to a community of Finnish-language speakers can provide an additional space for being classified as "one of us", although a sense of belonging to "ethnic Finnishness" can be contested on the basis of individual's physical appearances (see Rastas 2005).

The formation of identity options always takes place within particular discursive and institutional contexts. Young Kurds negotiate belonging also in relation to the perceived constructions of "Kurdishness". The diverse politico-historical contexts in which the notions of "Kurdishness" have been constructed will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

3 Language and Kurdish identities

Kurds in Finland are part of the larger Kurdish diaspora that gained volume in the 1990s and early 2000s mainly from Iraq, Iran and Turkey (Wahlbeck 2005). Kurdish-language speakers form the sixth largest foreign-language group in Finland numbering 8623 individuals, of which one third are young adults or soon adults-to-be (Statistics Finland 2011). Although Kurds from Iraqi Kurdistan[3] are most numerous, several Iranian Kurdish families have spent years in Iraqi refugee camps or in Turkey, before migrating to Finland. As a result, numerous young Kurds are fluent also in the Arabic, Farsi and Turkish languages.

The diversity of Kurdish people is particularly noticeable in terms of language that reflects their transnational dispersion in the Middle-East region. The nation-states' borders are considered to roughly align with regions where different Kurdish dialects are spoken, in Turkey (Kurmanji), Iraq (Sorani, Badini) and Iran (Sorani, Gorani) (Wahlbeck 2005). However, the localization of Kurdish dialects in different Kurdish regions is a much more complex issue,[4] with neither Kurdish identities nor dialects strictly following the nation-states' borders:

> There is no single Kurdish identity, but there are Kurdish identities that defy or transcend borders. Pan-regional relations between the Kurds have always been complex and intimate. The mountain ranges that mark frontiers between nations do not mark breaks in linguistic, cultural or familial continuity (Yildiz & Blass 2003: 107).

The presumed pan-Kurdish identities based on common ethno-national consciousness are in the continuous process of remaking in the region of Kurdistan and in diaspora (see Natali 2005; Gunter 2011). In many cases, the Kurdish language is considered to constitute a central construction block and indicator of "Kurdish identity" (see Kreyenbroek 1991; Hassanpour 1992), including in the cyberspace (Sheyholislami 2010). The use of the Kurdish language can thus have nationalist underpinnings and become an element to construct political projects of collective belonging, particularly in the diaspora.

The institutional and historical contexts of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria where the Kurdish language has become politically intertwined with expressions of "Kurdishness" also need to be considered. Manifestations of Kurdish ethno-nationalism and national identity (*Kurdayetî*) have developed as reactions to the experienced cultural and political domination in the four nation-states over which the region of Kurdistan extends (Natali 2005). Similarly, the politization and institutionalization of the Kurdish language has taken place within ethnicized political spaces, not the least in relation to specific language and cultural policies of each state (Hassanpour 1992).

In Turkey and Syria, policies towards Kurds have been described as "ethnocide" and "linguicide", referring to deliberate acts that aim at the extinction of the Kurdish culture and language (Hassanpour 1999;

Skutnabb-Kangas & Fernandes 2008).[5] Particularly in the Turkish case, the Kurdish language and "Kurdishness" occupy a highly politicized position as the internal, orientalized "other" (see Zeydanlıoğlu 2008). Whereas the Turkish policies have targeted forced cultural and linguistic assimilation, Iraqi approach to the Kurdish issue has varied from genocidal measures during the regime of Saddam Hussein to more recent developments towards becoming an autonomous region enjoying full cultural and linguistic rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Fernandes 2008). In Iran, state policies regarding the Kurdish issue and language have been more ambivalent, a betwixt between neither denial nor recognition, although the politico-cultural demands of Kurds have been met with imprisonments and even executions (Alinia 2004; Amnesty International 2008).

Minority policies towards Kurds have become intertwined with the nation-state building projects in countries that include parts of Kurdistan, thus stigmatizing expressions of "Kurdish identity" and creating settings where the Kurdish language is differently valued. Furthermore, it needs to be noticed that not only the past experiences, but also the on-going situation in the region of Kurdistan pertain to the constructions of "Kurdishness" and meanings attached to the Kurdish language in diaspora.

4   Theoretical considerations

This study approaches the notions of identity and language as a matter of *positionings*, thus partially drawing from the theoretical frame presented by Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (2004). In *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*, the authors combine post-structuralist and social constructivist approaches, and consider identities as discursive constructions with a post-structuralist emphasis on the role of power relations. The authors (2004: 13–14) highlight certain characteristics of identities that are relevant in the realm of this study. These include location within particular discourses and ideologies of language; embeddedness within the relations of power; multiplicity and the imagined nature of new identities; and location within particular narratives. Identities, as summarized by authors, are therefore understood as:

> social, discursive, and narrative options offered by a particular society in a specific time and place to which individuals and groups of individuals appeal in an attempt to self-name, to self-characterize, and to claim social spaces and social prerogatives (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004: 19).

The discursive approach allows considering identity and language as mutually constitutive; on the one hand, discourses provide the terms and linguistic means to construct and negotiate identities; on the other hand, ideologies of language and identity influence individuals' use of linguistic resources to index their identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004; see also Pietikäinen, Dufva & Laihiala-Kankainen 2002: 10). Identities are multiple and constructed at the intersections of various axes, including ethnicity, gender, generation, language, geopolitical locale, institutional affiliation and so forth (ibid; see also Anthias 2002). Furthermore, it has been argued that power relations are embedded in language practices, negotiations of identities and how those are valued in particular contexts (Heller 1982; Gal & Irvine 1995).

Stuart Hall (1990) refers to the process of imaginative production of identity, relating to how communities and societies construct collective identities based on imagination (see also Anderson 1991). Collective, imagined narratives play an important role in constructions

of (collective) identities, thus introducing a diachronic dimension "to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall 1990: 225). Collective identities, in this case "Finnishness" and "Kurdishness" are thus approached as imagined narratives constructed by selective perceptions on what has constituted them from past till present and what they should strive to be in the future.

This study mainly focuses on how these positionings and contestations take place both *through* language(s) and *in* language(s) among multilingual youth of migrant background. With the focus on the process of negotiation, Pavlenko & Blackledge (2004: 21) propose a theoretical distinction between three types of identities: "*imposed identities* (which are not negotiable in a particular time and place), *assumed identities* (which are accepted and not negotiated), and *negotiable identities* (which are contested by groups and individuals)". This suggests that multilingual individuals are not merely positioned by their surroundings, but they navigate positionings in their social environment and activate parts of linguistic repertoires to highlight particular aspects of social identities depending on context.

This study looks at the interplay between how young Kurds position themselves with linguistic means towards perceived identity categories and institutionalized discourses on language and belonging, and also how they are positioned by them (see Davies & Harré 1990). Language sites entail embedded power relations, and besides being considered as locations to construct identities, they are approached as sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity and exclusion (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004: 4).

5   Methodology, data and ethical issues

This qualitative study employs methods common in ethnographic research, including interviewing and observation. The data consists of twenty-three semi-structured thematic interviews conducted between 2009 and 2011 with self-reportedly bilingual young Kurdish adults (aged 18–28). The collected data also included observation notes on the situational use of various languages, collected during cultural and political events with young Kurdish adults. I employed the field notes from observation as a complementary source of data, which helped to "contextualize" language use and meanings attached to it. The respondents were contacted through snowballing technique, through associations and key persons.

The interviewees arrived to Finland in the 1990s and early 2000s as accompanied refugee children from Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan. At the time of migration, they were aged from three to fifteen, and therefore are commonly conceptualized as the *1.5. generation* (Rumbaut 2008). The interviewees spoke Kurdish mostly as a "home language" with parents and friends of Kurdish origin. Finnish was most often spoken outside home environment. In terms of the Kurdish dialects, nineteen interviewees spoke Sorani dialect and came varyingly from Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan, two spoke Kurmanji dialect and came from Turkish Kurdistan, and one was a Badini-speaker from Iraqi Kurdistan. At the time of interviewing, nineteen of them lived in Turku and four in Helsinki. All interviewees identified themselves as "Kurdish", before specifying from which part of Kurdistan they originally came from. The interviews were conducted in the Finnish language, as the respondents reportedly spoke it fluently.

Ethnography is also understood as "a theory of research process" (Skeggs 1995: 192), which accentuates the importance of power

relations and sensitivity to different forms of "otherness" (Honkasalo 2005: 154). During the interviews, my positioning as belonging to the community of native Finnish-speakers and to "ethnic Finns" became visible. The interviewing situations but also the research themes further underlined both my and participants' perceived belonging to different "ethnic groups", and required reflexive positioning and sensitivity to underlying hierarchies throughout the whole research process. The interviewees were enthusiastic to reflect upon their lived experiences, both negative and positive. The interviews were loosely structured as to allow the interviewees to reflect more on particular themes they felt more important for themselves. For ethical reasons, the interviewees' names have been anonymised and the indicated ages at the time of migration and interviewing are approximates[6] to diffuse any recognizable characteristics.

The interview themes included experiences at school(s); friends; working life; self-identification, belonging/home; use of languages; and the following sub-themes; language choice/attitudes with children/spouse; language maintenance; and connections to Kurdistan area/diasporic communities. The collected data was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, which aims to extract and analyze reoccurring, identifiable themes from the transcribed interview data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 93). As interviews contained narrative and autobiographical features, I was interested in both *reflexive* positioning from the part of interviewees (how they position themselves) and reflections on *interactive* positioning (how they perceive others positioning them) (see Davies & Harré 1990). After transcription, the data was inserted to Nvivo data software to manage the distraction of primary themes. Then they were regrouped to more comprehensive themes, which are presented below.

6 Focus and findings

In this section, the general focus will be on meanings attached to the Kurdish and Finnish languages, as well as how those meanings are narrated in relation to the languages' situational use and one's positionings in different language settings. I will discuss the findings, featured in three thematic sections: speaking Kurdish, being Kurdish; visibly 'other', yet audibly 'one of us'?; and multilingual performances of belonging(s). The first theme indicates that values attached to language choices are associated with cultural continuation in the diasporic context as well as political claims-making towards Kurdistan in the transnational context. The second theme suggests that belonging to a language community becomes intertwined with discourses on perceived identity options, also highlighting the relevance of locality and physical visibility in negotiations over identities. The third theme reveals that (multilingual) identities are performed through linguistic means, such as humour, but also re-produced by fine-tuning behavioural codes to indicate belonging to a particular (language) community.

6.1 Speaking Kurdish, being Kurdish

Yes, and then there a lot of adults, who are like, why don't you speak in Kurdish, because you are all Kurds? Then you try to explain that it's hard to start in Kurdish, because it [language] changes without noticing (Rangin, 9/22).

A commonality for young adults belonging to the so-called *generation-in-between* (or 1.5. generation) is that they have grown

accustomed to operating in multilingual environments. In this study, descriptions on language use with friends, siblings, parents and other people indicated that language choices entail normative, strategic and contextual aspects. These include switching languages depending on context. For instance, the respondents referred to "one-language rule" at home to speak only Kurdish, explained to guarantee the continuation of (mother) language skills beyond generations[7]:

Parents have always spoken to us in Kurdish, been really strict about it that you have to learn and know your own culture (Rebuar, 14/28).

The importance attached to knowing the Kurdish language was explicitly linked to getting oneself acquainted with "the Kurdish culture" and as a manifestation of being Kurdish. Consequently, not being able to speak in Kurdish with other language-speakers was narrated as a source of shame and embarrassment. The respondents seemed to be under some degree of scrutiny concerning this, particularly when visiting the Kurdistan region. Rating own siblings' Kurdish language skills in contrast to others' families reflected also the values and norms attached to the maintenance of Kurdish language in the context of the diasporic community. Criticism was voiced towards younger Kurds for becoming "too European", particularly in the case of younger Kurds in Sweden, who were claimed to speak Swedish with their parents. Besides being able to speak with grandparents, also teaching children Kurdish meant ensuring the transmittance of Kurdish culture to future generations living in diaspora. This was of great significance in the case of interviewees' own children[8] and commonly linked to collective narrations of the Kurdish people and their history, as well as to personal stories on families' refugee background and war time experiences.

The meanings attached to the Kurdish identity/language can reflect the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion based on belonging to an ethnic and language community in the societies of departure. In some narrations, the use of Kurdish language became intertwined with political undertones. Those respondents, who wrote, published and translated into Kurdish, related the Kurdish language to nationalist aspirations and to politicized claims-making. Although this was the case of only few interviewees, the meaning of Kurdish language as a tool and manifestation of nationalist claims-making added a politicized dimension to narrating belonging through language use:

You know Swedish Finns. They have their own flag, own language, but no country. The Kurds are the same (Rebuar, 14/28).

Politically active interviewees employed social networking tools and digital media (Youtube, Facebook, blogs, online news channels) to distribute information in Kurdish and translate news between Arabic, English, Farsi, Turkish and Kurdish dialects. Online and offline Kurdish-language publishing, translating and distributing' was expressed as a political statement in favour of the Kurdish cause. As a matter of fact, Kurdish diasporans' political claims for linguistic and cultural rights have taken place online and in cyberspace since the 1990s, a phenomenon referred to as *sovereignty in the sky* (Hassanpour 1998).

The claims-making needs to be interpreted in relation to the past and present institutional statuses of the Kurdish language in different states. For instance, prohibitions to name children with Kurdish names, to use the language in public places, or to receive Kurdish-language education have certainly contributed to language becoming a central unifying feature in the constructions of Kurdish identity

(see Natali 2005). For instance, interviewees used particular references to states' minority policies and to collective narrations of "Kurdishness" to assert their identity as Kurdish-language speakers, and to position themselves as Kurds.

To a lesser extent, the local background also resonated in young Kurds' positionings towards national languages and their native speakers in the Middle-East region. The respondents from Iranian Kurdistan tended to foster more positive feelings towards Farsi (Persian) compared with respondents' feelings from Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan towards Turkish and Arabic languages, and the related ethnic groups:

> I think Kurds are smarter than Arabs. They even learn Finnish faster (Bahar, 13/24).

> We spoke Kurdish on class, if the teacher allowed us. Some hit us if we spoke it… I now rarely speak Turkish…when I speak, I have an accent. I hate that language, I prefer not to speak it (Runak, 15/23).

These examples seem to suggest that young Kurds' language choices are often value-laden, depending on contexts and interlocutors. The connection with language and identity was evident in the underlying assumption that language loss entailed a loss of identity. On the other hand, the references to national language policies highlighted the relevance of institutional contexts in negotiations over language use. For some respondents, language was intertwined with political arrangements and as a marker of identity it could strategically become a tool for political claims-making.

6.2   Visibly 'other', yet audibly 'one of us'?

Learning and mastering the Finnish language was narrated in relation to discourses on integration, but also on a more emotional level on belonging to Finland. The characteristics such as mastering the Finnish language, being familiar with the Finnish system, customs and the perceived norms were considered to justify a partial identification as "Finnish" (*new Finn, pirate Finn, Kurdish Finn*). Being central elements also in integration discourses, the process was understood as a two-way path, including knowing one's own cultural background:

> I feel sad when people can't, like children don't speak any [Kurdish], and like that's not what Finland wants, it is not becoming Finnish, if you forget your own mother language. I mean like 'adopt the customs of the country where you live' but it has got limits as well, so you can have your own identity, you know… (Shoresh, 12/25).

The rather common slogan in nationalist immigration debates, "adopt the customs of the country where you live" (*maassa maan tavalla*) had to some extent become an internalized discourse, although several contested the idea of complete assimilation, including the loss of the Kurdish language. In these instances language was closely related to having an identity as Kurdish, since "Finnishness" was considered to be out of reach:

> A child must learn Kurdish as well, teach him, because it reminds him of the fact that he is Kurdish, and that he can't change himself. You have to know of your parents' past, where you come

from, because if somebody asks him where he comes from, he cannot say that he's a Finn, and nobody would probably even believe him (Kawa, 11/18).

The theme of physical appearances (see Andersson 2003; Säävälä 2008) emerged frequently in narrations as an explanation to why the interviewees could not identify themselves as "Finnish", even though having grown up in Finland and speaking Finnish as mother language. In some instances, otherness was constructed in terms of audible difference, for instance in terms of dialect or accent if the interviewees spoke broken, albeit fluent Finnish (see Hopkins 2007; Leinonen 2012). Even though bilingual, it seems that young Kurdish adults face contestations over belonging to what the researcher Laura Huttunen (2002: 130) has named "the white landscape of Finland". In this sense, the intersecting attributes of ethnicity/race and language indicate that the simultaneous effect of perceived visible differences position them as not belonging to Finland. In many cases, this changed when they started to speak flawless Finnish without any perceivable accent:

> Finns don't usually talk a lot, but when I start to talk Finnish, fluent Finnish, then they get it, and start to talk, hell yeah, he is one of us (Shoresh, 12/25).

The visible difference was overcome by audible sameness, thus repositioning them as "belonging to us". The positionings seem to be, therefore, constructed at the axis of visible/audible difference/sameness. Audible difference also positioned Kurdish youth in situations where they were advised not to use the Kurdish language at working places as it might "disturb some people". This way they could fit better into the "audible landscape of Finland". In case of contestations over one's belonging to Finland, the Kurdish background was considered to provide a more secure basis of identification:

> One should pay extra attention to the fact that a child learns Kurdish, because I consider it important that a child has the background, the identity that makes him stronger. That identity brings support and security…And one day if he encounters discrimination, it not because of language or his actions, but because he looks different from Finnish kids. Then he asks himself, who am I…then he needs the strong identity, own cultural background (Armanji, 12/25).

Based on this, one might conclude that the Finnish language was merely considered a functional necessity for coping in the Finnish society. However, several interviewees also expressed strong identifications as Finnish-speakers, which provided a justification to identify oneself at least as *partially* Finnish. Most respondents also wished their children to learn the Finnish language, regardless of where they would be raised.

Cultural and language identities are often associated to a territorial reference point of nation-states or regions. However, during the migration process, cultural identities and a sense of belonging are de-territorialized and re-territorialized (Fortier 1999). This suggests that the membership criteria for belonging are not merely based on birth rights or *jus solis* sort of justification. Instead, a sense of belonging can also be constructed from individual's experiences, memories and social networks in a locality, which is then displayed through mastering the local language, or yet the local dialect:

Many people say that you must come from Turku, because you speak Turku dialect, and I tell them, that yes I do (Rebuar, 14/28).

Alternative identifications with the city (Toivanen 2013) or as simply "foreigner" (Haikkola 2010) can provide youth of migrant background with more flexible identity options than "Finnishness", which the respondents often related to having biological roots in Finland. It seems that similarly respondents' local identification with cities (Toivanen 2013), linked to being a speaker of local dialect can offer an additional space to negotiate belonging, in addition to belonging to the community of Finnish language speakers. The respondents also reflected on their positionings in relation to speakers of other Kurdish dialects and Kurds from other regions:

They stayed and lived there [refugee camp]…and they had no education, no schools, day-care or anything, and they learned nothing there, and people say that the Kurdish they speak is a bit wrong Kurdish (Rojin, 3/21).

Respondents' positionings towards different Finnish and Kurdish dialects demonstrates the intersections of locality and language in their constructions of belonging. However, being a Finnish language speaker rarely seems to suggest a sense of cultural identity linked to it, in contrast to being Kurdish and speaking Kurdish. Instead, respondents identified themselves as Finnish-speaking Kurds, who can make partial claims as "Finnish" (*new Finn, pirate Finn*) on the basis of mastering the Finnish language and knowing the system, but not on the basis of their physical appearances.

6.3 Multilingual performances of belonging(s)

Studies on linguistic means of negotiating identities have mainly concentrated on language strategies such as *code-switching* and *crossing* (see Auer 1998; Rampton 1995). They refer to the strategic use of linguistic repertoires to navigate between different settings. Individual's use of verbal codes to affirm membership to a language group is known as *switching*, while challenging social categories is referred to as *crossing* (see Butcher 2008). Besides the alteration of linguistic means, multilingual individuals also "translate" cultural codes that are embedded in language in order to foster a sense of belonging, or contest belonging to a certain group.

The narrations indicate that besides switching languages in different settings, the respondents also adjusted their behaviour to appear more "Kurdish" or "Finnish" (see Toivanen 2013). The theoretical term *switching*, which suggests a binary option between on/off-modes, is inadequate in this case to capture the complex deployment of various linguistic and behavioural modes. As a matter of fact, one respondent employed a metaphor to grasp the subtlety of this phenomenon:

When I have been with a Kurdish person, I have adjusted the frequency to Kurdish, like the same as the Kurdish one has… when I'm with a Finnish person, then I act Finnish (Azad, 4/21).

The description of "adjusting frequencies" was used to name the process of fine-tuning language, cultural codes and expected norms of behaviour in relation to the interlocutors whether they were parents, friends with similar background or "mainstream" Finnish

friends (see also Toivanen 2013). The "adjustment of frequencies" was also narrated to take place in interaction with recently migrated Kurds and those who had stayed longer in Finland. Being familiar with the Finnish system, the role of cultural navigators also meant helping recently arrived Kurds, who lacked the sufficiency in Finnish, to integrate: *I am the one who integrates, because I have been integrated as well* (Shoresh, 12/25).

The way of acting "Finnish" and "Kurdish" seemed to require adjustment in terms of what kind of humour to use, which would match the linguistic repertoires and norms of other interlocutors. On the other hand, this process of adjustment spurred various reactions from their surroundings:

Then you can speak more freely…and then the Finnish humor and our humor are on different wave length. When we go to Kurdistan, so we speak with the Finnish humor, and they look really surprised, and when we come back, we have the Kurdish humor (Shilan, 7/20).

I talked with another friend, a Finn, and we joked a lot. So this guy was listening, and laughing, and then said: "Now I understand that you are joking, and that's why you foreigners speak so loud. Now it doesn't bother me anymore" (Azad, 4/21).

This brings us to the performative aspect of belonging, suggesting that identities are constructed and embodied through performative acts, which also have social and political consequences (Bell 1999). It is argued that the forms of performative acts also produce identities, through "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1988: 519). In this manner, the performative belonging includes "citing" the norms that constitute a community or a group (Fortier 1999), including unspoken rules of how to utter, behave and respond to one's interlocutors. Besides humour, belonging was performed when addressing the elderly Kurds in Kurdish, with lowering one's voice and avoiding cursing. Showing respect in this way was explained to be an "essential facet of Kurdish culture":

And otherwise with elderly people too, with Kurds, of course I speak in Kurdish, even though they would know Finnish. Yeah, I don't know, it's sort of like, is it like respecting the culture or whatever, but it's more natural (Murad, 4/21).

Some indicated that youth were *literally* carrying their parents' name, which should not be tarnished by children's disrespectful actions. This could result to a loss of reputation, and the literal retribution of this border-crossing would be the loss of honour (Toivanen 2013). In relation to this, several interviewees expressed criticism towards gossiping within the community, which has been argued to be a form of social control (Küçükcan 1999). Some respondents expressed that the state of "in-betweenness" was rather exhausting, and it was with youth of migrant background, regardless of their ethnic and linguistic background that they felt the most comfortable with.

Young Kurds also narrated pride attached to their multilingual background. Diasporic Kurds have quite often a multilingual background for having lived in countries, which have official languages other than Kurdish. Furthermore, having stayed in refugee camps in an Arabic-language environment or in Turkey before entering Finland had resulted to several interviewees mastering also Turkish and Arabic, besides Farsi or other Kurdish dialects. In this sense, Kurds constitute a particular immigrant group having such multilingually diverse background. Most interviewees had strong

attachments to other languages besides Finnish and Kurdish, and they stated a conscious choice to transmit those language heritages (Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, different Kurdish dialects) to their children. The complexity of multilingualism was reflected in examples, where interviewees' writing and reading skills were most fluent in Farsi (Persian), but verbal skills in Kurdish and Finnish languages:

> In Persian, I am good at both, writing and speaking, but in Kurdish I am good at speaking…and lying (laughing)…The child must learn at least three, four languages, combine good things of the Finnish culture, and good things of the Kurdish culture. In that way, it will be a good child to the society (Rebuar, 14/28).

Multilingualism was appreciated to the point that some respondents wished their children to grow multilingual, regardless of mastering any particular language. Furthermore, multilingualism seemed to be considered as "part of who I am", which would suggest the respondents to foster *multilingual identities* (see Clark 2009). Mastering several languages was also considered a valued individual quality for the society, thus suggesting that integration discourses had been partially internalized in narrations on multilingualism.

7   Conclusion

This research attempts to shed light on the role of language in identity negotiations among young Kurds in Finland. These negotiations can be differentiated in two, albeit intertwined dimensions. On the one hand, there is the ongoing construction and performance of identities that emphasize one's membership and belonging to a linguistic group. On the other hand, negotiations also take place when given identity categories are contested (see Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004: 20). For these purposes, various linguistic means were employed by young Kurds to contest, affirm or enact certain identity categories, including one-language rules, code-switching (or *adjusting frequencies*), choice of language and dialect, performative acts, and translating.

Kurdish and Finnish languages are valued differently depending on context, particularly when the language use is understood in relation to options of cultural identities. Language choices are always embedded in socio-political and cultural contexts, and entangled with questions of power and identity. Discourses on integration, immigration and cultural identities, as well as the institutional and politicized status of the Kurdish language echo in young Kurds' identity negotiations, as they adopt different positionings towards given identity categories. Emphasis not to categorize oneself as "immigrant" nor "refugee" demonstrates a strong wish to claim one's place within the Finnish society, justified through studying, language skills and long-term living in Finland. These claims resemble (internalized) integration discourses, particularly to the nationalist discourse on "adopting the customs of the country where you live" (*maassa maan tavalla*).

Furthermore, young Kurds' narrations demonstrate that identities are constructed at the intersection of different axes such as race/ ethnicity, language and generation. In this sense, perceived physical differences, but also audible difference/sameness position young Kurds, and in some cases, allow them to reposition themselves through mastering linguistic repertoires. However, reference to physical difference was narrated as the most common explanation as to why young Kurds could not identify themselves as Finnish, in contrast to "mainstream Finns". Having grown up in Finland and mastering the Finnish language (or dialects) seemed to

provide justification for identifying oneself as *partially* Finnish, hence echoing the racialized boundaries of perceived identity categories.

The findings suggest that contestations over identity categories had produced alternative venues for identifications among young Kurds. Although most respondents identified themselves primarily as Kurdish, also identifications as Finnish-speaking Kurds and habitants of certain localities were narrated. Kurdish language maintenance and transmission were closely linked to ensuring the continuity of cultural identities, although there was variation regarding this, particularly among those who had arrived to Finland fairly young. Nonetheless, multilingualism was generally considered a positive value to the extent of wishing to transmit the cultural-linguistic heritage to future generations.

Acknowledgement

Mari Toivanen has graduated from Paris IV Sorbonne and is currently a doctoral student at the Department of Social Research/ Sociology at the University of Turku. Toivanen's PhD research focuses on various aspects of negotiating belonging among young Kurdish adults in Finland, intending to contribute to the growing body of academic literature on identity issues among young adults with migrant background in Northern Europe. Her research interests include identity, belonging, transnationalism and Kurdish youth.

Notes

1. The multilingual background of children and youth does not come across in statistics, as one can only list one mother language (Latomaa & Suni 2010).
2. For instance, Estonians and Swedes belong to the largest immigrant groups in Finland, but are not considered "immigrants" or "foreigners" as readily as individuals of Somali or Middle-Eastern origin (Säävälä 2008).
3. I refer to the geographical location of Northern Iraq and North-Western Iran as Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan. It has to be mentioned, however, that the interviewees often employed the geographical references of Southern Kurdistan (for Iraqi Kurdistan), Eastern Kurdistan (for Iranian Kurdistan) and Northern Kurdistan (for Turkish Kurdistan). I employ the first form, which is quite common in Kurdish studies (i.e. Natali 2005).
4. For the linguistic composition of Kurdistan, Institut kurde de Paris: http://www.institutkurde.org/images/cartes_and_maps/ linguistic_composition.jpg
5. The authors refer to the linguistic and cultural genocide according to the definitions of genocide in articles 2(b) and 2 (e) in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.
6. The interviewees' age varied greatly at the time of migration. I have indicated their age at arrival and then an approximate of their age at the time of interviewing in the excerpts.

7. This also seems to be particular to Somali-speaking families (Latomaa & Suni 2010), whereas Russian-speaking families tend to emphasize learning Finnish (see Iskanius 2006).

8. Only two interviewees had own children, but other respondents reflected upon how they would do once they would have own children.

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