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# Contesting language policy for asylum seekers in the Northern periphery: the story of Tailor F

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## Abstract

This article is about navigating asylum, employment and language policy in a new country as an asylum seeker. Through the story of one individual, we show that profound inequalities are exacerbated when forced migrants are limited in their choice of language they might study or use. The individual is Tailor F, an Iraqi man seeking asylum, and the country is Finland, officially bilingual, with a majority language (Finnish) and a minority language (Swedish). Finland's official bilingualism does not extend evenly to language education provided for asylum seekers, who are taught Finnish regardless of the region where they are placed. Upon arrival, Tailor F was housed in a reception centre for asylum seekers located in a Swedish-dominant rural area of the country. Through our linguistic ethnography we examine how he navigates multilingually in his early settlement, his current work and his online life. We relate his story to explicit and implicit official bilingualism in Finland and discuss his lived experiences in relation to the contexts of asylum policy and employment. Tailor F's story shows how, through his practices, he has contested implicit language policy for asylum seekers in order to gain membership of the local Swedish-dominant community, achieve a sense of belonging, and potentially realise his aspirations for the future.

**Keywords** Asylum · Bilingualism · Language education · Linguistic ethnography · Rural superdiversity · Finland · New speaker

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## Introduction

In this article we investigate how one individual navigates asylum, employment and language policy in a new country, one where they have the temporary and precarious status of asylum seeker, but are nonetheless hoping to build a new life. The country, Finland, is officially bilingual, with a majority language (Finnish) and a minority language (Swedish). Our argument is that profound inequalities are exacerbated when forced migrants are limited in their choice of language they might study or use. Our insights derive from a team linguistic ethnography *Jag bor i Oravais* (I live in Oravais), located in and around a reception centre for asylum seekers in a Swedish-dominant rural area of Finland, and ongoing since 2015. The project explores the ways people seeking asylum tell about their everyday lives, while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim, and considers these lived experiences in relation to wider political and social structures such as asylum policy and employment. To advance the argument of this article we analyse the significance of the Swedish and Finnish languages in our research participants' lives. We note in particular that asylum seekers in Finland are obliged to undertake language lessons which are predominantly in Finnish, regardless of the dominant language of the region where they are housed. This is inconsistent with the official position on bilingualism: Section 17 of the Constitution of Finland declares that Finnish and Swedish have equal status.

We highlight a single story, and do so to challenge the picture so often presented of asylum seekers as flows, floods, and human cargo (as critiqued by Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; Moorehead 2016, *inter alia*). The focus is upon Fareed, who arrived in Finland from Iraq in 2015, one of a large number of people who fled the Middle East for Europe that year. Fareed had been a tailor in the Iraqi army and now runs a tailor's shop in Finland, and we refer to him as Tailor F. He is categorised as an asylum seeker according to Finnish law (Finlex 2011). This specific status determines and constrains agency in his life. For example as an asylum seeker he is entitled to some health and social services but not others, and has limited opportunities to change his family and work situation. (On the asylum system in Finland, see Wahlbeck 2019.)

We gained our understandings of the experience of forced migration through an approach grounded in linguistic ethnography and with a strong emphasis on narratives. The physical and symbolic act of forced migration, of dislocation and relocation (Baynham and De Fina 2005), generates stories like those of Tailor F. We are conscious of the importance of avoiding superficiality in the study of forced migrants' lives. We are also aware of a tendency for their stories to be reduced, in a 'testifier and witness' model (assessed critically by Thompson 2005: 216ff). Our stance is compatible with the longitudinal approach we adopt in our work (cf. Morrice 2011; Baynham and De Fina 2016). We regard the prolonged engagement inherent in linguistic ethnographic research to be a pre-requisite to the gaining of trust and the development of reflexivity, where the spaces to tell a story (Van der Aa 2017) can be found.

In the following sections we first engage with the relevant sociolinguistic literature on migration and, in particular, displacement. We go on to describe our

research approach, and the sources of data that inform our analysis. Then we outline the explicit and implicit language policies for adults seeking asylum in officially-bilingual Finland, before describing our research area in Swedish-dominant Ostrobothnia and the settings where we carried out our research. Next we introduce Tailor F himself, and discuss his own status, position and point of settlement in Finland. In the analysis that follows we focus on three particular domains of his life and activity: formal education settings in and near the centre where he was housed upon arrival; at work in his workshop; and online.<sup>1</sup> In each case we relate our analysis to language policy in minority settings. We end by discussing how Tailor F's strategic choices, actions and practices surrounding his learning of Swedish contest and challenge the hegemonic use of Finnish as a tool for managing asylum in Finland.

## Forced migration and the sociolinguistics of displacement

The story of Tailor F connects with—and draws together—two strands of research in the study of language and mobility. The first relates to immigration, language learning and identity for new speakers in bilingual minority settings; the second to forced migration in institutional contexts.

New speakers are individuals who did not grow up speaking a minority language (in Tailor F's case Swedish in Finland) but who have acquired it in a formal setting later in life, to a high level of proficiency (McLeod and O'Rourke 2015). The focus of much research in this vein is how to successfully become a new speaker (Puigdevall et al. 2018, referring to new speakers of Irish, Basque and Catalan). The dimensions of this 'becoming' concern (a) language acquisition and use (Jaffe [2015: 38] discusses 'potential new speakers' who are language learners); (b) navigating language policies as articulated in education systems and bureaucratic processes; and (c) issues of ownership and identity relating to the attitudes of local-born populations (Smith-Christmas et al. 2018). New speakers' active use of a minority language is tightly associated with a regional sense of belonging, in the work of Birmingham and Higham (2018), who discuss language and integration for new speakers in Wales and Galicia, and O'Rourke (2018), who likewise attends to belonging for new speakers of Galician. Allied research, though not using the new speaker lens, has a specific focus on forced migrants. Garrido and Oliva (2015) consider identity construction, language learning and belonging for undocumented migrants in Barcelona. They draw on Pujolar's (2009) study of territory, language and immigration to explore the learning of Catalan (as opposed to Castilian), in the context of the development of a translanguaging pedagogy. Also working with forced migrants, Ekberg and Östman's (2020) study of positioning and identity construction is relevant to the present paper, in that their work with the families of Bosnian refugees took place—as did our own—in Swedish-dominant areas of Finland.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to data collected from the home environment is not included in this paper for reasons of confidentiality and sensitivity to Tailor F's ongoing asylum process.

Our work also contributes to sociolinguistic research on forced migration and asylum-related language practices in institutional settings. Tailor F is an asylum seeker, not a refugee, entangled in a new and potentially hostile political and bureaucratic system. A substantial body of work in many countries examines how asylum seekers interact with the ‘state infrastructure governing forced migration’ (Del Percio 2016: 87), and the language-related inequalities (Jacquemet 2009) inherent in asylum systems. The contexts of such studies range from high-stakes courtroom and asylum hearings to informal advice-giving. In their seminal work, Maryns (2006) and Blommaert (2009) note how discourse practices in Belgian asylum procedures can have an impact on decisions about refugee status. In a more informal setting, Simpson (2019) considers lawyer/asylum-seeking client interaction in a drop-in legal advice service in the UK. Hassemmer’s concern (2019) is with the narratives of asylum seekers who themselves are working—as volunteers—in a counselling centre for refugees in Austria. Of relevance to our own study, Sivunen (2019) examines the particular case of deaf asylum seekers in institutional interactions in Finland.

The research cited above either attends to new speakers in minority language settings generally or—where there is a focus on forced migrants—takes place in institutional spaces. New speakers who are asylum seekers, and their interactions in daily life (within and beyond the legal system), have not received research attention. Moreover, the effects of having a very specific immigration status associated with forced migration—in our case *asylum seeker* and as such an outsider in official terms—are little-known, in relation to formal opportunities to learn a minority language, or to use it to access public services. So our study contributes to knowledge about language use in minority settings and forced migration, through an analysis of Tailor F’s strategies for learning and using Swedish rather than Finnish in work and informal spaces as well as institutional ones, while still officially being regarded as an asylum seeker and thus with limited access to formal opportunities to learn Swedish. Next we explain why an ethnographic approach is appropriate for exploring these issues.

## Linguistic ethnography

Our insights derive from a long-term partnership with Tailor F in a team linguistic ethnography *Jag bor i Oravais* (I live in Oravais). The project began in autumn 2015, was funded until 2018, and is ongoing with some of the participants, including Tailor F. Sari Pöyhönen was the Principal Investigator on the project, and James Simpson contributed to the fieldwork on visits to Oravais in 2016 and 2017. Our commitment to principles of linguistic ethnography, such as sustained relationships with participants and the aim of enhancing their agency, supports the warrant for our findings and conclusions, as does our reflexivity in our analysis (see Copland and Creese 2015 on linguistic ethnography). We followed twelve key participants’ experiences of the asylum process from start to finish. This process took around a year on the occasions when the initial decision of the Finnish Immigration Service (known as Migri) was positive. In other cases, it took longer, up to 36 months, comprising appeals to the Administrative Court and the Supreme Administrative Court,

and sometimes leading to deportation. The key participants' biographical, social and cultural experiences varied across ethnic, national, religious, gender, age, language and educational dimensions as well as family circumstances. Tailor F was included as a key participant because he was self-employed and—though his first priority was to gain refugee status—was applying for a residence permit on the basis of his employment while waiting for a decision on his asylum claim.

The data for the present study comprise ethnographic field notes, recordings and transcripts of interviews and conversations, photographs and videos, logs of social media interaction, media coverage and other written material such as policy documents and decisions associated with the asylum system. Data were collected between 2015 and summer 2019. Even though Tailor F is a public figure in his area (his case has featured in local newspapers and social media), we have omitted certain passages of his story to protect his family.

## **Ethnographic knowledge and policy formation**

Tailor F's story relates to the formation of language policy, and (specifically) how language policies are implicated and implemented in the policies of asylum. Policy processes are not linear (from policy to implementation, from top to bottom), but dynamic, involving many actors with potential input into policy creation, interpretation and appropriation, confirmation and contestation in their local practices (Johnson 2009; Pöyhönen and Saarinen 2015). The research with Tailor F demonstrates that while official bilingualism by national decree is one thing, situated language policy formation for adult asylum seekers locally can be quite another. To develop this point, in this section we first outline policy on language education for asylum seekers such as Tailor F, and then describe the specific setting where he found himself upon arrival in Finland.

## **Swedish, Finnish and asylum politics in Finland**

Finland is a bilingual country with two main official languages, Finnish and Swedish; census data suggest that 87.6% of the population use Finnish as their first language, and 5.2% use Swedish, and official status gives users in both language groups an equal right to public services, such as schooling or health care, in their first language. A formal statement of equality in Finnish law, however, does justice neither to the relationship between Swedish and Finnish on the ground, nor to the complexities involved for migrants—particularly asylum seekers—as they attempt to gain access to one, other or both languages in processes of settlement.

In Finland, a requirement for proficiency in one of the national languages is embedded in law for new arrivals hoping to settle in the country. This is not a Finland-specific phenomenon: by 2016, 28 of the 36 Council of Europe member countries (78%) had some kind of legal language requirement for settlement or citizenship, up from 58% in 2007 (ALTE 2016: 9). As with elsewhere also, national programmes of integration and adult language education in Finland do

not take into account people awaiting the outcome of an asylum claim. Such people, in a liminal position without a full official status, are viewed by state policy actors as not yet being members of wider society or even as having embarked upon processes of integration. They are not included in the provisions of the Integration Act (Finlex 2010), and while migrant integration is coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, asylum seeker issues are dealt with by the Ministry of the Interior. Asylum seekers in Finland are nonetheless required to engage in education or to work (Finlex 2011, Section. 29). Education usually means weekly lessons of Finnish language and general information about Finnish society. This low-intensity provision is organised by an initial reception centre with trained teachers or volunteers or by an educational institution mandated by a reception centre. The methods, materials, training background of teachers and overall quality of language education for asylum seekers vary greatly across reception centres, and provision is not bound by the national core curriculum for integration training for adult migrants (Finnish National Board of Education 2012), which is reserved for new permanent residents entitled to participate in integration-related activities.

Language education in Finnish is provided even in the Swedish-dominant areas of the country, including the municipality where our research is located. An assumption is made by the immigration authorities that even if an asylum seeker is housed in a Swedish-dominant area, they should not regard this as the final destination; an equal assumption holds that even if the asylum claim happens to be successful the applicant will move to a city such as Helsinki, where the use of Finnish is more widespread. When taken as a whole, the State's purpose in providing language education for asylum seekers in Finland appears contradictory. On one hand their language lessons are not intended to support their integration because as asylum seekers they are not yet on an official pathway to settlement. But the language instruction they do receive is in Finnish rather than Swedish, even if they are housed in Swedish-dominant areas of the country, because—if successful in their asylum claim—it is assumed that they will eventually settle in a Finnish-dominant region. Further reasons for language education to be provided only in Finnish in some bilingual municipalities are a lack of resources, and a misunderstanding by local authorities of the needs for proficiency in Swedish in the area (Helander 2015). What is more, even official literature for migrants discourages the choice of Swedish as the language of integration. The 2012 edition of the Welcome to Finland brochure reads:

Finland is a bilingual country. Its official languages are Finnish and Swedish. Integrating in Finland will be easier, if you can speak the language of the municipality of residence. Learning the language of your new home country is vital. It will be easier for you to find a job if you know Finnish. Some five per cent of Finnish people speak Swedish as their native language. (Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2012: 12).

Since 2012 the tone has changed somewhat, and the 2018 edition of the same document reads:

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

- You live in an area with many Swedish speakers.
- You have family members or relatives who speak Swedish.
- You already speak some Swedish.

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

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

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

### **Swedish-dominant Ostrobothnia**

Everyday life for Tailor F upon his arrival in Finland took place in a reception centre with quite minimal interaction with the outside environment or with local users of the dominant language, Swedish. The Oravais *flyktingförläggning* (reception centre, or *camp* as it is known to residents), is located in the province of Western Finland, in the region of Ostrobothnia, and in the municipality of Vörå (Vöyri in Finnish). Most of Finland's Swedish-dominant minority live in the coastal areas of southern, south-western, and western Finland, and there is also a sizeable population of Swedish dominant Finns in the metropolitan area of the south: Helsinki, Kauniainen, Espoo and Vantaa are all bilingual cities. Oravais (Oravainen) itself, as part of the municipality of Vörå, has a population of 2500, most being local-born Finns, with around 82% of the population claiming Swedish as their first language and 8% claiming Finnish. A small number of other migrants live in Oravais, including some of the 'quota refugees'—people who the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has defined as a refugee—who are received officially in Finland each year. The economic structure of Oravais is based on agriculture and the services that support it, the unemployment rate is lower than the national average, and work is dominated by family businesses.

The Oravais reception centre was established in 1991. It consists of three units, two for adults and families and one for unaccompanied minors. Many residents in the Oravais units when we met Tailor F were housed in a wooded area on the edge of the village, in former factory workers' accommodation which has since been deemed uninhabitable (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Accommodation building at the Oravais reception centre

The official capacity of the Oravais centre is 150 residents, but at its peak in 2015 the number of residents was triple that. Today there is a floating population of between 100 and 120 (Finnish Immigration Service 2019). These people are not included in the census, which is only completed by those with permanent residence status. However, given that they are from all kinds of backgrounds, and none of them claim either Finnish or Swedish as their main or dominant language, Oravais might be regarded as a superdiverse area, albeit not an urban one. Superdiversity, as defined by Blackledge et al. (2018, following Vertovec 2006, 2007) refers to:

increasingly stratified and multiple processes and effects of migration leading to heightened complexity. Across the globe, more people from more varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, subject to more varied conditions of mobility and legal status, come into contact with one another in expanding cities.

(Blackledge, Creese et al. 2018)

Recognition is growing that locally-enacted asylum policies and migration generally can entail movement into rural areas and not just cities; and consequentially, growing too is our understanding of rural superdiversity. For example, Cabral and Martin-Jones (2017) discuss the migration trajectories of East Timorese in the UK, noting that in rural Northern Ireland, migration has led to a diversity across dimensions of difference that goes beyond variety in linguistic, ethnic and national background. In Finland itself, Pöyhönen et al. (2019) document in more detail the superdiversity of the largely rural municipality of Vörå, where Oravais is located, and where Tailor F had been living for 2 months when we first met him in 2015.



## Introducing tailor F: “Scissors are my weapon”

From our first meeting, and over the course of the next 3 years’ ethnographic research, we gained a good knowledge of Tailor F’s life story, as told by himself, his friends in the reception centre, and his local-born friends and supporters in his new surroundings. While we have no reason to suppose that the summary which we present here deviates from the facts as they happened, this story—in part an asylum narrative—is the same one that has been told to immigration authorities, who treated it with mistrust. In short therefore it is a story that has been contested. It is not our place as researchers to decide whether it is true or false, or which parts are true or false; rather, we are satisfied that this is the story that he wanted to tell us.

Tailor F is a Shia Muslim man from Iraq, in his early 40s. He is more of a doer than a talker, and his story has found its form through his practices at least as much as through what he has said. When with a larger group he will follow a conversation but will rarely take the floor unless it is explicitly handed to him. It was therefore a while after meeting him that researcher Sari began to realise that Tailor F was not comfortable speaking English, having not used it regularly in his previous job or in any other sphere of life. When Tailor F was introduced to Sari, it was difficult to recruit professional interpreters, busy as they were with official asylum matters. Besides, Tailor F did not trust outsider speakers of Arabic. His friends at the Oravais centre were more fluent in English than he was, and he encouraged one friend in particular, already recruited onto the project as a key participant, to become his mediator of personal talk. This friend would speak for him, to the extent that he would tell Sari more about Tailor F’s personal life and its challenges than he himself was able to.

So through his talk and that of his associates we understood that he had worked in the Iraqi army as a professional tailor, making uniforms and other clothing accessories. He occasionally made clothes for US army soldiers, rendering him *persona non grata* with the Iraqi military. He was mistrusted by Shia militias even though he was Shia himself. His life was under threat, his relatives were persecuted and some were killed, and he left the country in a bid to protect them. He did not have enough money to pay for his wife and children to leave with him, so they remained in Iraq. In the asylum process in Finland Tailor F’s story was regarded as unreliable, and he was suspected of having taken part in military action in Iraq. He argued that even though he had gone through obligatory military training, he did not use a gun. His asylum hearing record notes that he said “Scissors were my only weapon.”

In Finland, asylum seekers awaiting the outcome of their claim are entitled to work after three months in the country (or after six months if they arrive without documentation). As we explain below, Tailor F was able to employ himself by setting up shop as a tailor in the small town of Vörå, 20 km from the Oravais centre. His rationale for opening his workshop lay in a desire to do something meaningful, to continue his trade, and to save money for his hoped-for family reunion. Unlike many migrants who do not have the communicative resources and other forms of capital to successfully navigate the labour market (Schmiz 2013; Bradley and Simpson 2019), he was not forced into precarious entrepreneurship. Rather, his trade as a

self-employed maker and mender of clothes was appropriate for himself and for the needs of those in the area. He found a perfect venue for his workshop with help of people working in family businesses, right in the heart of Vörå, at the crossroads of the main street and the highway. It is a well-chosen site, and since he has installed his sewing machines in the shop window, people can watch him working as they walk or drive by. There are no other tailors in the village, but plenty of potential customers who need their clothes repaired or made. He has now opened a second workshop, in another town a little way north of Oravais. In the next parts of the paper we meet Tailor F in educational and workplace settings, and in online digital environments.

## Language use in three domains

In what follows we intertwine discussion of structural issues with Tailor F's individual story, together with examination of extracts of data. In his physical domains of practice (first his formal language education settings, and then his tailor's workshop), and in his digital mobile communication, we see how, through his actions, he has developed in his ability to contest official language policy and a monolingual asylum regime.

### Oravais Flyktingförläggning and Norrvalla Folkhögskola: Asylum and language education

Adult migrant language education is enmeshed with migration and integration policy, and there are frequently tensions between the goals of learning as defined by policy actors, and those defined by learners themselves (Pöyhönen and Tarnanen 2015; Pöyhönen et al. 2018; cf. Cooke and Peutrell 2019). Official language policy in most places is also at odds with grassroots superdiversity (Simpson and Whiteside 2015). For Tailor F, these tensions were most obviously identifiable in the language education which he encountered upon his arrival in Finland. At the Oravais reception centre, the asylum-seeker residents received four obligatory 45-min lessons per week of Finnish language education. The aim of these language classes, as stressed above, is not integration. When Tailor F was living at the centre, there was just one teacher of Finnish, who had no interaction with other teaching colleagues. The content and teaching approach were not designed to equip residents with the competence which would support communication in daily life in this Swedish-dominant region, being traditional, with a focus on grammatical structure, simple functions, classroom lexis and accuracy. The extract below is from fieldnotes written by Sari on a visit to the Finnish class, in October 2015.

*Extract 1 Finnish class: What is your name?*

Two Iraqi men in their late 40 s attend the Finnish class for the first time. They arrived in the reception centre in September, but only recently passed a medical examination, and are now allowed to attend class. The teacher greets them by saying “Hei!” (Hello!) The teacher gives both of them a textbook, a booklet, a pen and a rubber. She says the names of these items aloud in Finnish and the men repeat them after her. The teachers says in English: “My name is N.N. What is your name?” She then writes the word ‘name’ on the whiteboard in Finnish and fills in the sentence with her own name. “Minun nimeni on \_\_\_\_\_.” (My name is \_\_\_\_\_). She then asks the men to repeat the sentence and add their names. Speaking is taught through reading and writing. The teacher notes to me that it would be easier to say “Minun nimi on”, but this would be “spoken Finnish”, and she wants to teach “written Finnish.” (22 October 2015, Sari Pöyhönen, original in Finnish)

The teacher’s comments suggest that she views language learning as involving the development of competence in the written variety of a language, and one moreover that is barely used in the local area. Residents at the centre find themselves by definition in a waiting period, and isolation and a lack of belonging pertain. This can be exacerbated by the language education on offer: they cannot draw on Finnish, the language they are learning, to communicate with others who live there, as most locals and reception centre employees have usually only studied Finnish as a school subject and do not use it regularly. Gaining membership of society is complicated without a shared language, and there is a sense that the centre’s residents and the people of Oravais live parallel, monolingual lives. It is hardly surprising then, that upon receipt of a successful asylum decision, most of the centre’s residents actively try to find a new home in the Finnish-dominant regions in the south of the country, which are more densely-populated and where the labour market is more vibrant.

Tailor F did not regard himself as a quick language learner, and found learning Finnish at the centre difficult and demanding, not least because of the lack of opportunity to practice. Further pressure lay in being an adult whose school experiences were 20 years behind him. After four months at the reception centre, however, Tailor F and a number of his fellow residents were given the chance to follow an intensive eight-week Swedish language course at the Norrvalla *Folkhögskola* (Folk High School or adult education centre) in Vörå. This project was funded by the Swedish Cultural Foundation of Finland rather than directly by the state. The distance from the Oravais centre to Norrvalla prevented those with children at kindergarten or at primary school from attending, so participation was restricted to people with older children or who were unaccompanied, such as Tailor F. At first he was reluctant to take up the offer of lessons, but then, feeling he had not much to lose, and wanting a change of scene from the centre, he joined the class.

*Extract 2 Swedish class: What time is it?*

There are about 15 adults in the classroom, the youngest are in their early twenties and the oldest ones in their sixties. The lesson begins with revising how to tell the time on a clock. The teacher holds a big analogue clock, she moves the hour and minute hands to different times and asks the students to answer to the

question in Swedish: “What time is it?” A young man is so eager that he shouts the answer before he has been given permission. The teacher says in a gentle voice in Swedish: “In school in Finland we usually put our hands up. It is also quieter in class. It will be harder for me to know who can and who cannot. You forgot to put up your hand again. Girls there from Vietnam, what are you doing? I know you can do this.” The lesson moves on to writing tasks. The teacher circulates around the classroom and checks the answers. They progress very slowly under the teacher’s guidance, at the same tempo. An Afghani young woman asks for permission to move on. The teacher replies in Swedish: “Wait, I’m coming.” (9 December 2015, Sari Pöyhönen, original in Finnish and Swedish)

Swedish was far more accessible than Finnish for Tailor F, helped by his (admittedly limited) knowledge of English. Though the course was short in length, his teachers at Norrvalla were sensitive to his needs as a Swedish learner in the area, and the content was appropriate. The teachers were not working in isolation either, and were able to discuss their professional concerns and those of their students with colleagues. Tailor F was also able to interact with people on other courses at the *Folkhögskola*, including spouses of the local residents, and also quota refugees who were able to choose Swedish for their language of integration.

Tailor F did not struggle in the Swedish lessons at Norrvalla in the way he had in the inappropriate Finnish classes (extract 1), and he began to resist the hegemony of Finnish in asylum-seeker language education. It is important to note though that the Swedish lessons, despite taking place in a Swedish-dominant area, are not a mandated requirement (as the Finnish classes are) but an optional extra, provided by non-governmental actors and offered ad hoc to all-comers, by happenstance including Tailor F. Despite the dominance of Swedish in the immediate region, it remains a minority language setting as far as policy at national scale is concerned.

Tailor F’s experience of the Swedish programme at Norrvalla was a turning point in his life in Finland. After the eight-week course he had no wish to simply wait for a decision on his asylum claim, sitting out his time at the Oravais centre as just one more asylum seeker. He began swimming in a different direction. He had noticed that Vörå would make the perfect location for him to carry on the tailoring trade he had practiced back home. It seemed to him a good place to live: peaceful, but with all the services a family would need. He felt it would make a suitable home, first for himself and then, hopefully, for his wife and children.

### **Skräddare Al Fareed—Räätäli Al Fareed: employment and learning**

The signs in Tailor F’s workshop windows read *Skräddare Al Fareed—Räätäli Al Fareed*: that is, *Al Fareed Tailor*, in Swedish and Finnish. To establish himself as the town tailor in Vörå, he had to become adept at drawing upon the networks and resources to hand. With the help of Vörå-based entrepreneurs who became his loyal supporters, he opened a bank account, set up a Facebook profile, and paid to advertise his services in the local paper. His teacher at Norrvalla suggested Swedish language learning activities that might support interaction with customers, helped

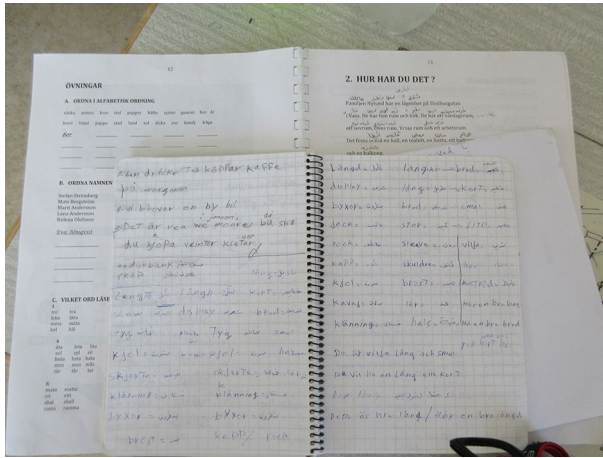


Figure 2 Tailor F’s study material in Swedish

him to find his first clients, and spread the word about the new tailor in town. He achieved minor celebrity status for a Swedish-language newspaper profile article entitled “Äntligen för jag jobba. At last I can work.” This was a way into the local community. Not only was he willing to stay in the area and to learn Swedish, but he worked hard for his living. He progressed in his trade: beginning with dress-making and alterations, he expanded into services for furniture and marine upholstery.

Much of our research with Tailor F took place at the Vörå workshop, an open space with customers coming and going, where a researcher could easily be. We observed that once established in the shop, he continued to learn Swedish, on his own now, and in a determined way. His self-study centred upon the type of Swedish that he could use immediately in his work. Next to his sewing machine he kept his Swedish language workbooks and an exercise book in which he wrote phrases that were particularly appropriate, and even crucial, for use in his workplace: *Du vill ha en lång eller kort* (Do you want it long or short); *Detta är bra längd* (This is a good length) (Figure 2).

This was language he could use immediately, perhaps even with the very next customer. He also kept a notebook of Swedish/Arabic vocabulary specific to his trade, consisting of words for clothes and accessories: *byxor* (trousers); *kavaj* (suit jacket); *klänning* (dress); *kjol* (skirt). He added new words as he learned them through interaction with his clients. In the workshop a radio played, tuned to a local Swedish-language station, and he listened to the news and accrued language knowledge while working. His shop also became his office. Paperwork included forms to fill in for the Finnish Patent and Registration Office, the Tax Office and the like, which he completed in Swedish with help of his supporters.

In the workshop therefore, Swedish and Arabic dominated. The typical pattern of language use was that Arabic would be used with Arabic-speaking friends, and Swedish with other people, friends and customers. If they were not confident with Swedish, they turned to English. Finnish was barely present. If a customer with ability to communicate only in Finnish was to drop in, Tailor F would go to the nearby handicraft shop to ask

his friend to interpret. He also recommended this shop to customers needing zippers and other accessories, who could then have them fitted in his workshop. This was usually all done in Swedish and through other semiotic modes such as pointing and gestures.

Customers, upon entering the shop, would typically start their interaction in English. It is far from taken for granted locally that an asylum seeker will know Swedish, partly because the existing language policy of the asylum system privileges the learning of Finnish, and partly because locals themselves may have experienced situations elsewhere in Finland where Swedish was little understood and where they would be obliged to speak Finnish or English. We noticed that it came as a pleasant surprise to many clients that Tailor F preferred to speak in Swedish.

In extract 3, Tailor F is meeting a new customer. Upon entering the shop she immediately shows Tailor F a leather item with metal fittings, which appears to be equipment for an animal. Tailor F takes a closer look at it. Sari (S) and James (J) are following what's going on, and Sari speaks to the customer in Swedish. Turns are numbered, translated text is in *italics*; commentary and description of non-linguistic communication is in (brackets).

*Extract 3 At the tailor's workshop*

- 
- |     |         |   |
|-----|---------|---|
| 1.  | S:      | Vad är det för nånting?<br><i>What is it?</i>   |
| 2.  | C:      | Det är det är hästens benskydd<br><i>It's a horse's leg protection</i>  |
| 3.  | S:      | Oj! Fint!<br><i>Oh! Fine!</i><br>(C & S laugh)<br>(F turns the leg protector in his hands examining the damage) |
| 4.  | S to C: | Är det din häst eller?<br><i>Is it your horse or?</i>   |
| 5.  | C:      | Jo<br><i>Yes</i>  |
| 6.  | F to C: | Jag kan inte nu<br><i>I cannot now</i>  |
| 7.  | C to F: | Inte nu? Jo jo men men ingen bråttom<br><i>Not now? Yes yes but but no hurry</i>                                |
| 8.  | S to J: | It's for the horse to cover the horse   |
| 9.  | C:      | legs horse (laughs)   |
| 10. | J:      | Alright   |
| 11. | C to F: | How much?   |
| 12. | F:      | Vet inte<br><i>I don't know</i><br>(C laughs)   |

- 
- |     |    |   |
|-----|----|---|
| 13. | F: | Kanske tio euro<br><i>Perhaps ten euros</i> |
| 14. | C: | Jo-o (slowly)<br><i>Ye-s</i>                |
- 

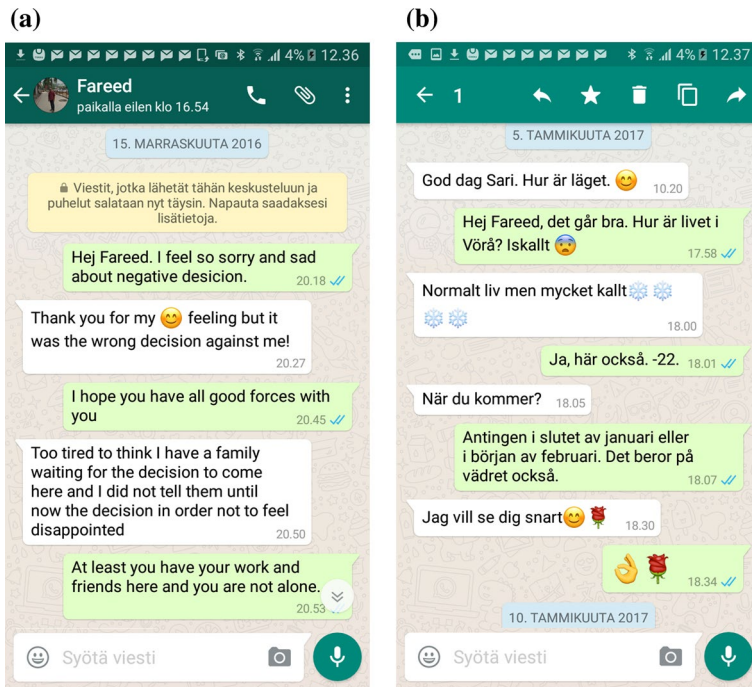
The customer is sensitive to the languages present in the room. Tailor F speaks in Swedish (turn 6), and she likewise responds in Swedish. In (11) she asks ‘How much’ in English: she has been following and contributing to Sari’s explanation to James of what is happening, in English (8–10). Perhaps she supposes F too will want to speak English. He however quietly persists in his use of Swedish (12, 13) and the customer’s final response is in Swedish too. In this exchange Swedish is present all the time, alongside English. Tailor F knows he can rely on Swedish, which has become his professional language. Even though he has some knowledge of English, he is not at all familiar with its specialised vocabulary of the tailoring trade. Finnish is not an option either: on another occasion around the same time he explicitly asked that Swedish rather than Finnish be spoken.

So for Tailor F the domains of self-employment, language education and immigration policy intersect in the space of the workshop in Vörå. His trajectory certainly requires resilience, having taken an active decision to open a workshop, and settling—to the extent that immigration law allows—in a Swedish-dominant town. He is learning the functions and lexis of Swedish that enable him to operate as a small-business owner. In so doing, he inserts himself into the daily life of his surroundings. He is learning one of the national languages, the one that dominates where he lives. Language learning for most new arrivals, though not asylum seekers, is typically framed in policy as being in the service of social integration: one needs access to the dominant language to operate effectively in work and social life in the new home. This though highlights the contradiction associated with Tailor F’s status as an asylum-seeker, someone whose political belonging is far from certain, and for whom Finnish was the language he was required to learn. His learning of Swedish (not Finnish) is inextricably linked to his own efforts to do business in Swedish with Swedish-speaking customers. Because of his resistance to the official policy that affects him as an asylum seeker (i.e. by focusing on Swedish and not Finnish) his efforts to integrate are more successful than they would otherwise be.

Notwithstanding this, he has not lost sight of why he set up a business, any more than he ever mistook his long-term language learning purpose. The ultimate aim is to get himself into a position where he might be reunited with his wife and children, as we see below.

### **Digital mobile communication: family and social life online**

Tailor F’s social media use is integrated into his daily communicative practice: he uses a range of social media platforms for work, and also to manage and navigate the complexities of his personal and social relationships in turbulent circumstances. Tagg et al. (2018), discussing what they refer to as *trans-media meaning-making* in migration contexts, observe that individuals’ identity performances and relational



**Figure 3** a and b WhatsApp conversation

work in their online interaction tend not to be restricted to one media platform, but involve the meaningful selection of affordances, the combining of different media, and a great deal of movement between platforms. Tailor F's digital practices follow this pattern: they extend across platforms, and he typically uses specific social media apps (mainly on his smartphone) for particular purposes, each one occupying a niche in his communicative repertoire. So while Tailor F uses Facebook to advertise his business, he makes extensive use of WhatsApp, a free text and voice messaging app, to converse with friends and family, locally and trans-nationally. He also uses WhatsApp to communicate with researcher Sari. The ability to save a record of mobile phone messaging allows digital literacy practices to be 'reconstructed in post hoc fashion' (Tagg and Asprey 2017: 6) for the exploration of repertoires. In our case we can study the interaction of Tailor F and Sari as a means to understanding the significance of social media in his life, and the way it shapes his communicative practices and relationships.

Tailor F and Sari started using WhatsApp in spring 2016 to discuss a formal dress that he was making for Sari, for an event at her university. Later they began to use it to plan research meetings. The screen-shots from Sari's smartphone show interaction between herself and Tailor F from November 2016 (Figure 3a) and January 2017 (Figure 3b).

The first exchange occurred when Tailor F had just received the first negative decision on his asylum claim. Before this there had been no WhatsApp



conversation between them on topics other than the technical details of textiles and dress-making. The language on the screen is English, apart from Sari's salutation (*Hej—Hi*), in Swedish, and the system-generated text on the screen (e.g. *Syötä viesti—Type a message*) in Finnish. It is likely that Tailor F is using the machine translation tool Google Translate to render his turns in English. At the outset of the extract, Sari immediately positions herself as a sympathetic interlocutor, commiserating with Tailor F about the unsuccessful outcome to his asylum claim. Sari had been staying in Vörå, and this mobile chat is the continuation of a face-to-face conversation which they had been having in Tailor F's shop earlier that day, when Tailor F told Sari about the negative decision. At the time they had not had the privacy to talk about this news in depth, and Sari had not been able to extend her sympathy to the extent that she had wished to. Here, then, she uses the opportunity of the social media text chat conversation to explain that she really does care about his predicament.

By January 2017, when the second conversation was written, their chat—entirely in Swedish now—has taken on a friendlier, more familiar tone. The first four turns are greetings and chat about the weather (translated text in *italics*):

*Extract 4 weather*

God dag Sari. Hur är läget

*Hello Sari. How's it going*

Hej Fareed, det går bra. Hur är livet i Vörå? Iskallt

*Hi Fareed, it's fine. How's life in Vörå? Ice cold*

Normalt liv men mycket kallt

*Normal life but very cold*

Ja, här också. -22

*Yes, here too. -22*

Given their accuracy, we might suppose that Tailor F is using Google Translate to compose his turns here as well. Notably, however, the language of the conversation is Swedish, not English (or indeed Finnish). Tailor F, rather than Sari, was the first to deliberately use Swedish in their online written conversations. This reflects his progressive orientation towards Swedish, and his increasing use of that language on any possible occasion when he is able to practise it, now that he is in Vörå. The use of Swedish here also suggests that he is positioning himself as an equal in relation to Sari. He knows Sari speaks Swedish and is happy to use it. Yet previously in the workshop their conversation has typically been in English. Tailor F appears to have realised that he has learned enough Swedish along the way to enable his communication with Sari to be in Swedish. Alongside the use of Swedish in place of English, he is increasingly content to take the initiative in a conversation. This can be seen above, and it is also evident in the second exchange of the extract, which concerns making plans for Sari's visit:

*Extract 5 När du kommer?*

När du kommer?

*When are you coming?*

Antingen i slutet av januari eller i början av februari. Det beror på vädret också.

*Either in late January or early February. It depends on the weather as well.*

Jag vill se dig snart

*I want to see you soon*

Tailor F initiates the discussion of Sari's next trip to Vörå. Sari replies that she will come in January or possibly February, depending on the weather conditions, and Tailor F's response suggests that he is keen for her to visit. The exchange concludes with two turns of emoji use with no written text. Androutsopoulos (2010: 208) notes the tendency towards integration in social media discourse, 'the co-existence of various communication modes on a single platform'. While Sari and Tailor F do not make use of the voice message option in WhatsApp, their conversation is characterised by the use of emojis, particularly clear in the second extract. Emojis have become a prevalent—and hence for most participants an unremarkable—feature of written conversation. They may in some cases represent attempts to render text chat speech-like, and they frequently serve more than a simple disambiguating or clarification role. In this extract, the exchange concerning the weather includes a 'cold' smiley and ice crystals, perhaps indicating a light-hearted response to the extreme temperatures. As the plans for Sari's trip to Vörå are being made, Tailor F's turn comprises a smiley face and a red rose, indicating happiness at the visit in prospect, and also friendship. Sari's reciprocal response is the 'OK' hand sign and also a red rose. Rintel et al. (2001) refer to this type of reciprocation in text-based computer-mediated discourse as 'adornment matching', and suggest it is used for the establishment of intimacy as well as the foundation of turn sequencing. In our case, we gain a sense of a researcher-participant relationship moving from support and sympathy (in the first extract) to friendship and affection (in the second).

In the physical surroundings of the reception centre, Norrvala and the workshop, there was no personal space in which Tailor F and Sari might have had a conversation about—for example—a negative asylum decision. It was also, at that time, inappropriate for Sari to visit Tailor F at his new home in Vörå. Text messaging, in this case WhatsApp, afforded the privacy that a public space could not. WhatsApp supported their communication as well, through its affordances as a text-based platform which is *near-synchronous*. Because a short or even quite long lag between turns is accepted as normal by participants, Tailor F had time to phrase what he wished to say, including the time it takes to write the turn in Arabic and process it via Google Translate. No-one put words into his mouth, as might have been the case in a face-to-face conversation. It is also possible that he was quite emotional while he was composing the turns of Figure 3a. The fact of not being face-to-face was to his advantage here: he could carry on the conversation about a delicate, difficult personal matter without losing face by being seen to cry. It was also in some ways easier for Sari to communicate via WhatsApp, not knowing what to say or how to say it when she had first received the difficult news.

These extracts of text messages are the visible traces of informal, online interaction. Their relevance to language policy lies in how they enable the fine-grained

examination of the actual communicative practice of those navigating such policy. This combines with the affordance of linguistic ethnography to explore motives behind particular utterances and exchanges. From the perspective of linguistic ethnography, language is no longer a bounded entity that pre-exists use, or something that one can have more or less of. This is a different understanding from the one familiar from official articulations of national language policy ('most jobs require proficiency in Finnish'; 'Swedish-language integration may be a good choice if you ... already speak some Swedish'). Rather, it is made visible as something actively done, a process of *linguaging* (Becker 1991). In this case, the analysis shows that as with much online discourse, the authors of the messages subvert the norms of written interaction by combining non-linguistic with linguistic features of the communicative repertoire; otherwise orthography and some punctuation are quite conventional, attributable to the use of translation tools (in Tailor F's case) and (in Sari's) a desire to be understood as easily as possible. We note also how the interaction shifted, over a few weeks, from English to Swedish, associated with Tailor F's active learning of Swedish and desire to use it. Once more we hold that this represents the subversion of official language policy, to the benefit of social integration.

## Discussion

This article set out to investigate how one individual navigates asylum, employment and language policy in a new country where they are hoping to build a new life. In doing so, we have attended to how inequalities are exacerbated when forced migrants with particular immigration statuses are limited in their choice of language they might study or use. Tailor F is a specific type of 'new speaker' (MacLeod and O'Rourke 2015) in a minority language area. Like others in his position, a sense of identity and belonging are paramount. He is also a precarious asylum seeker navigating a difficult, monolingualising system. His wellbeing is affected too by the inability of Finnish language lessons to support his activities, in tension with his determined will to live in Swedish. Our contribution is thus to enable a dual perspective: accounting for the cross-cutting factor of immigration status in the analysis—and what that entails for an individual—enables attention upon how some are allowed to be on a pathway to settlement while others have to wait.

The official policy of bilingualism in Finland is interpreted in national and local regulatory and bureaucratic circles as favouring a standard variety of the most-used national language, Finnish, even in a Swedish-dominant region. For example, in the language classes for asylum seekers at the Oravais centre, Finnish rather than Swedish is taught, despite Finnish being barely used in daily interaction in the area or amongst staff. Moreover tuition focuses on written accuracy, rather than the oral fluency that would be appropriate for those preparing for settlement in one of the larger cities of the Finnish-dominant south. But the Finnish lessons on offer are not classes for people who are being encouraged to settle: asylum seekers are not viewed in policy as potential new citizens. We note that UN quota refugees housed in Swedish-dominant areas are allowed a choice of Finnish or Swedish for their mandated language education, and typically see value in learning Swedish, not least because their

children attend Swedish-medium education. For asylum seekers though, a decision on a claim often takes more than a year, and even if positive, they have usually considered moving to other regions, partly due to a lack of knowledge of Swedish and a corresponding lack of a sense of belonging. So even though asylum seekers are not entitled to access integration activities, their complex integration process starts while they are waiting, and constraints imposed at the outset shape their possible future decisions.

We have seen, nonetheless, that spaces can be found, fissures in structure where the hegemonic use of Finnish as a tool for managing asylum is challenged. Tailor F's choices, actions and practices around his learning of Swedish suggest that his language use is associated with the place he wants to be. Our emic perspective enables us to highlight too that the agency that Tailor F claims—as with that of other asylum seekers—can only be defined with reference to the system. So he moves in and out of languages, between languages, and between modes of semiosis online and off, as he makes his world and challenges mechanisms of exclusion. Yet his use of Swedish is only evident at times when agency is possible, when he is able to choose: for example when he actively learns the language of tailoring, or when he requests official communication in Swedish, including the letter bringing him the negative decision on his asylum claim. This is not to downplay the crucial presence of Swedish in his communicative repertoire. Through his learning of Swedish at classes run by a non-state actor, and more informally, in his shop, at home, from the media and online, he establishes the networks through which he sets himself up as a tailor, and as a new local, worthy of respect. We have also noted that rural Vörå has hosted refugees and asylum seekers for 25 years. Recognition of its cultural and linguistic superdiversity might have no place in top-down policy formation, but is distinctively present in daily life. Residents of Vörå might have met people from the Middle East in ethnic food outlets or barber shops, and now they know a self-employed tailor catering for a local need.

## Conclusion

Claire Kramersch observes that:

To survive linguistically and emotionally the contradictions of everyday life, multilingual subjects draw on the formal semiotic and aesthetic resources afforded by various symbolic systems to reframe these contradictions and create alternative worlds of their own.

(Kramersch 2009: 29)

This appears to be the case with Tailor F. Swedish, and his ability to demonstrate that he can speak Swedish, affords communication across discourses and domains, and navigation in the world, with customers in his workshop, with new friends in the town, with journalists and researchers. Despite his official status as an asylum seeker, he is increasingly able to do what he wants to do, as he amasses social capital as the town tailor. Nonetheless, when considering his relative success in navigating the system, we should recall that his motives for his hard work lie in the hope of

reuniting with his family. He is the tailor, but is also a husband and father to a distant wife and children, one of whom has already grown too old to be entitled to family reunion according to Finnish law.

Tailor F applied for asylum in September 2015, and opened his workshop in May 2016. In November 2016, he received a negative decision on his asylum claim. His case for appeal was considered weak, so he understood, and he also applied for—and in October 2017 was granted—a 1-year work permit. In May 2018, he applied for a continuation of his residency on the basis of employment, but this was rejected in June 2019 on grounds that he was not able to demonstrate ‘secure means of support’. Since Migri had already rejected his asylum claim, the regional authority could not override the national state authority’s decision. In July 2019 Tailor F’s supporters launched a campaign to halt his deportation process. At the local level, in an act of solidarity, the community of supporters, customers and friends resist asylum policy: Tailor F has learned Swedish, is engaging fully with local life, and this is appreciated. But as yet he remains an asylum-seeker in limbo.

We end with a comment on our own positionality. As socially-engaged scholars we needed to include, in our analysis, human rights concerns and implications. Doing research with people who have much to say but are not necessarily audible is a conscious choice, and our article attempts to incorporate research-and-activism into academic culture. We as researchers reach towards linguistic hospitality (Phipps 2012) and active solidarity (Rymes 2014), as we attempt to understand more fully the struggles of Tailor F, his separation from family, his attempts to build a life in a new country, and the role of language in this. Our stance contrasts with the lack of hospitality shown in the official asylum process, even when communication from the authorities is provided in Swedish. We have seen for example how Tailor F’s use of Swedish extends to his interaction and growing friendship with researcher Sari, in their online communication. The communicative resources in his repertoire transcend physical, national, linguistic and cultural boundaries, as support is offered and accepted. This suggests a further point about emotion. Throughout this paper we have included reference to the researchers in the study, in particular to Sari’s emotional work. It would be unethical not to: we cannot simply bleach ourselves out of the research process, and as Askins and Swanson (2019) argue, emotions are critical to academic research with people in liminal positions. James’ situation is slightly different: as an outsider, knowing Tailor F but not intensely, he was able to ask questions that Sari could not ask without appearing hostile. For example his neutral position enabled the question ‘Why did you come to Finland specifically?’ to be asked naively, with no particular implicature.

Together, and acknowledging our privileged positions, we aimed to give back (Huschke 2015), to show solidarity and support Tailor F in his attempts to seek justice. Tailor F is a newcomer in a rural minority language region, and our work considers how a stranger, in this case a person seeking asylum, is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion. This leads to our final point, that policy-making is multi-sited, not only top-down or bottom-up, but a complex, organic and situated system, which regulates individuals’ lived experiences and highlights inequalities in the social structure. Are refugees welcome? Who is welcoming them? And in which language(s)?

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