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Views on “Good English” and “Nordic Exceptionalism” in Finland

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In the Nordic countries, widespread proficiency in English is positioned as a positive and even critical component of overall global competitiveness and competence. Indeed, maps illustrating who speaks the “best” English in Europe show a swath across the Nordic countries, and the number of people in the Nordic countries claiming proficiency in English is only a few percentage points below those in places such as the UK and Ireland. At the same time, the Nordic countries are routinely listed as the “happiest,” the most egalitarian, the most classless, least corrupt, and an epicenter for so-called “tender values.” In recent years, there has been a spate of publications highlighting how Nordic exceptionalism carries with it some unfortunate downsides, including the possibility for people to ignore or fail to acknowledge issues such as racism, sexism, and other social inequalities because of the affordance: “But our society is equal.” There is a parallel in the use of English. The entrenched notion that “everyone is good at English” overlooks that certain segments of the population—such as the elderly, immigrants and rural inhabitants—do not have the same level of access to the symbolic capital represented through facility in English. In this sense, the use of English presents social/class-based barriers that the national languages do not. This article offers a critique of the social realities relating to the use of English in the Nordic Countries within the context of the social welfare system and “Nordic exceptionalism,” focusing mostly on Finland. Making use of examples of discourse in newspapers, previous research and language policy documents, the chapter highlights how aspects of the use of English in Finland parallel other potentially hyped yet unequitable social issues.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, Finland, Nordic countries, education, language attitudes, social welfare model

INTRODUCTION

This submission to the special issue on Englishes in a globalized world offers a critical perspective on values and ideologies about English in a specific setting, Finland, while situating aspects about the use of English within the wider social, economic and political landscape. The submission is thus in line with the overall aims of this collection in offering a critical discussion on the spread and function of English as a global language, including the analysis of public opinions and discourse. Key issues brought to the forefront in this discussion include Finland’s role as one of five nation

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states comprising what is commonly referred to as "the Nordic" countries of Europe¹, discussed further in section Definitions of Nordic Exceptionalism, along with definitions of what is referred to as "Nordic exceptionalism." In recent years, there has been a spate of positive publicity about the Nordic nations and their success in achieving a high level of equality and "happiness." While these notions are widely propped up as desired and even perceived realities, they nonetheless have been questioned in recent accounts, demonstrating that the Nordic states are not without faults, both historically and in the current era. The common adage that "everyone speaks English in Scandinavia²" proves problematic in much the same way, and it is this notion that is explored here, using the concept of Nordic exceptionalism as a window to view the phenomenon of English language use.

The article first lays some groundwork by presenting an overview of the English language profile in the Nordic countries, zeroing in on the particular context of Finland—Finland serving as the main focal point of this discussion. The article then goes into detail describing similarities in the governing and social system of the Nordic countries, as these aspects are considered key elements in understanding the role of English in the Nordic setting, as well as arguments that are raised later in the article. As a final piece of background information, the article offers a summary of literature concerning the colonialism and coloniality surrounding the spread of global English as a foreign language. These elements, too, link to later arguments in the article. The article concludes by offering evidence of the extension of "exceptionalism" to the use of English in Finland in three areas: social class, language attitudes, and social exclusion.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

The widespread adoption of English as a foreign language in the Nordic countries can be seen as an outcome of several concurrent historical occurrences, associated to a large extent with a push toward modernization and the related social reform that emerged in the second half of the 20th century (McRae, 1997; see overview of English in Finland in Leppänen and Pahta, 2012, p. 146–147). In this sense, the concerted effort to introduce English language learning in the school curriculum reflects priorities connected to the education principles of the social welfare state (see section Definitions of Nordic Exceptionalism). At the same time, it would be faulty not to acknowledge that the concerted push toward English language learning was (and still is) a component part of globalization in relation to the outcome of World War II, with America emerging as a major player in global economics and politics, and Great Britain retaining, in part through the

continued use of the English language, at least some of its historical influence (Seargeant, 2012; Piller, 2016; Pennycook, 2017). Thus, the eventual outcome of widespread proficiency and use of English in the Nordic countries can be viewed as a mutually inclusive, if implicit, agreement: engagement in the modern global stage for the Nordic countries and a toehold via language and political and socioeconomic influence for the USA and Great Britain.

The eventual outcome of this marriage of intentions is that, as of the early 21st century, a majority of the population in each of the Nordic countries claims proficiency in English. A highly cited 2012 EU Barometer survey asked European Union citizens which languages they can speak well-enough to have a conversation (European Commission, 2012). The highest self-reports came from the UK and Ireland, with over 95 percent of respondents claiming they can have a conversation in English. The next highest reported score came from the Netherlands at 90 percent, followed by Denmark and Sweden at 86 percent, Austria at 73 percent and Finland at 70 percent³. While the results are based on self-reported proficiency, it is nonetheless of note that citizens of some EU nations, including some Nordic countries, lay claim to proficiency levels only a few percentage points below those of citizens of countries where English is the majority native language. Self-reports aside, demographic facts support the proficiency in English claimed by citizens of the Nordic countries. The English Language Proficiency Index (EPI), a for-profit English language skills company, measures the English language aptitude of people who are interested in knowing their ranking. Therefore, the measure is biased and non-representative—yet it nonetheless serves as an example of a global measure. Since the survey was first made available on the internet in 2012, ~1.7 million individuals have taken the exam. The survey results place countries in Northern Europe, including the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, in the same overall category as countries where English is a dominant mother tongue. In the EPI survey, the highest-ranking country was the Netherlands, followed by Denmark, Finland, Sweden and then Norway.

It is important to keep in mind that English is spoken as an additional, foreign language for the vast majority of people in the Nordic countries (excluding a tiny portion of the overall population which has English as a mother tongue). The European Parliament (2017) recommends that European citizens learn their mother tongue plus two foreign languages. In fact, in the Nordic countries at least, the common reality is that the overall population speaks English in addition to a domestic/national language, according to Eurobarometer data from 2006. This statistic is especially telling in the context of Finland, the only Nordic country that has two constitutional languages: Finnish and Swedish. According to Finnish law, Finnish pupils who speak Finnish as a mother tongue are required to learn Swedish

¹Definitions of what constitutes the Nordic region of Europe vary. As sovereign political entities, the most common definition includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Other classifications include the autonomous Faroe Islands (Denmark), Greenland (Denmark) and Åland (Finland). Still other definitions might include Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, or other states in the northern parts of Europe.

²"Scandinavia" is a term often used to refer to the same geographical area as the Nordic. For the purposes of this article, Scandinavia is understood as comprising Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

³Iceland and Norway were not reported in the survey as they are not EU member states. It can be assumed that the overall language profile of Iceland and Norway patterns with other Nordic countries in their overall language profile + English. Notwithstanding, there are individual differences among Nordic countries (see e.g., Kristiansen, 2010).

at school, and pupils who speak Swedish as a mother tongue are required to learn Finnish at school (this is the general law; deviations exist according to region and language setting; Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2013). While in practice this means that Finnish citizens should be proficient in both of the two national languages, this is not the common reality: there is a marked decrease in widespread proficiency in Swedish (see e.g., Vaarala et al., 2017). According to the 2006 Eurobarometer report cited previously, 69 percent of the Finnish people polled report speaking only one language in addition to Finnish, and English is reported as being the main other language, spoken by 63 percent of the population. In Finland, 47 percent of respondents claimed to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue. The main second additional language (after English) was Swedish, at 41 percent.

The general widespread proficiency in English in the Nordic countries has been explained through a number of factors. Common explanations, in no particular order, include: subtitled rather than dubbed English language television programs and films, the relatively small population base, and the fact that most citizens of the Nordic countries speak a Germanic language as their first language (see Peterson, 2019, p. 13–14). An additional explanation is the age of acquisition: Throughout the Nordic countries, formal classroom learning in English begins by Grade 3, with formal learning extensively boosted by informal learning outside the classroom (Norrby, 2015). A 2002 study (in Swedish; see English summary in Norrby, 2015) comparing the English skills of 9th grade students from eight European countries placed the Swedish and Norwegian students nearly consistently in the top tier across the four areas tested, with the Netherlands, Finland and Denmark occupying the middle tier and Spain and France the lower tier.

Each of these explanatory factors, however, can be countered, and therefore cannot be considered to have too much individual explanatory power. For example, many countries in the world have subtitled programs and films and yet do not exhibit high levels of language proficiency in the language of target media. Likewise, not all European countries with small populations exhibit overall high proficiency in English. In addition, Finnish and other languages spoken by Nordic populations (for example Meänkieli, the Sámi languages and Kven) are not Germanic languages (as the Scandinavian languages are), yet speakers of these Finno-Ugric languages are also able to achieve a high level of proficiency in English, despite speaking a genetically unrelated language as a mother tongue⁴. The most plausible explanation for the widespread proficiency is that there is a confluence of various factors, as described so far in this section. And, of course, an additional overarching factor that cannot be dismissed is the

⁴While, overall, Finnish speakers have achieved a high level of proficiency in English according to the measures cited in the article, it is important to note that the overall level of proficiency reported is lower than other Nordic countries where a Germanic/Scandinavian language is the main language. In addition, research in Finland shows that Swedish-speaking Finns exhibit a lower level of nonstandard features in their English than Finnish-speaking Finns, lending credence to the argument that L1 could be a factor (see Meriläinen, 2021 – and thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out).

enormous hegemonic social pressure to achieve high proficiency in English (Piller, 2016).

In Finland, like other Nordic countries, English as a classroom language starts in basic education, currently in grade 1⁵. English is the main (A1) foreign language for 89.9 percent of school children in Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019), especially for Finnish speaking children, who constitute the population majority. For Swedish-speaking children, who constitute about 5.3 percent of the total population of Finland, Finnish is the main A1. A large-scale survey on everyday language use in Finland, including the use of English, was conducted in the early 2000's, with the results published in 2011 (Leppänen et al., 2011). The survey, with responses from 1,495 people in Finland, demonstrated that the majority of people surveyed claim that English plays a significant role in their life; in fact, as many as 80 percent of the respondents said they encountered English in their everyday surroundings (Leppänen et al., 2011, p. 63).

DEFINITIONS OF NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

Definitions of what comprises the Nordic region vary, but many accounts include the five countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, all sovereign nations in Europe which lie above a 55 degree north latitude. While historically these nations have by no means constituted a consistently unified political bloc, there are nonetheless reasons to view them as sharing similarities in the current era (Vik et al., 2018). All of these countries are characterized by relatively small populations, especially in relation to the amount of geographic territory (most) occupy, and the governing system in each country is a social welfare democracy. Denmark, Norway and Sweden all have a constitutional government and a monarch as head of state. Iceland and Finland, as former territories of Denmark and Sweden, respectively, have a constitutional government with presidents as head of state. A governing union between Denmark and Norway ended in 1814. The sovereign nation now known as Finland was an eastern territory of Sweden for several centuries, until 1807. Iceland became a sovereign nation in 1918 but shared a monarch with Denmark until 1944.

As pointed out in the previous section, there are two main language families represented among the populations of the Nordic countries—although clearly there are many more languages among the total population due not only to migration but also with respect to long-standing minority groups, such as speakers of Russian, Romani and Tatar (Latomaa and Nuolijärvi, 2002). The most heavily represented languages population-wise are the Scandinavian languages, a subset of the Indo-European/North Germanic language group, further divided into Old East Norse (Swedish and Danish) and Old West Norse (Icelandic and Norwegian). The second most represented are Balto-Finnic languages, including Finnish and the Sámi languages. Obviously, linguistic boundaries do not coincide with national borders. Finland, for example, can be considered part of

⁵Grade 1 since 2020; prior to 2020, the A1 language was introduced in Grade 3. The numbers reported here are from 2017.

the Scandinavian speaking area (Norrby, 2015) due to its shared history with Sweden, the fact that Swedish is a constitutional language, and part of its population has Swedish as mother tongue. Likewise, there are Balto-Finnic-speaking populations outside of Finland, for example in the northern regions of Norway, Sweden and Russia, as well as longstanding heritage language speakers throughout Sweden (see e.g., Sundberg, 2013 for more information).

In terms of alliances and official associations, three Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, are in the European Union (EU), but all five countries, including Iceland and Norway, are part of the European Economic Area (EEA). In recent decades (as well as historically; the Kalmar Union existed from 1397 to 1523), the Nordic countries have purposefully enhanced their cooperation and cohesiveness through a shared Nordic cooperation⁶

It is important to establish this shared set of both real and potentially imagined factors that combine the nations of the Nordic area into a logical and self-evident bloc. For the purposes of the arguments presented in this article, this is a crucial foundation in viewing the concept known as *Nordic exceptionalism*, a term that seems to have been circulating roughly since the early 2000s⁷.

Exceptionalism is a collective (often self-held) belief that a group or community, for example a nation state, possesses inherent characteristics that distinguishes it and makes it more special than other groups or nations. The term *exceptionalism* has often been used in conjunction with ideologies of the United States: *American exceptionalism*, which has been defined as "a political doctrine as well as a regulatory fantasy that enabled U.S. citizens to define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity" (Pease, 2009, p. 11). Further fuel for America's sense of exceptionalism draws from its dominance on the world stage after World War II, its historical lack of a feudal system, and its unique historical background (among other factors; see e.g., Fredrickson, 1995; Pease, 2009). It is crucial to note that a shared sense of exceptionalism makes it possible for the groups who consider themselves "exceptional" to avoid responsibility or blame due to the overriding ideology that they are a special group to which the "usual" rules do not apply, thereby allowing the group to eschew culpability or avoid compensatory action for systemic racism, colonization, or genocide, for example (for an overview on the context of Finland, for example, see Hoegaerts et al., 2022).

Within the context of the Nordic countries, exceptionalism is treated, at least for the purposes of this article, as emerging from two distinct but overlapping directions. One set of ideologies is borne out of the current era, relating largely to the outcome of the social welfare model and discourse surrounding the "success" of the Nordic countries with respect to social equity. The second

set of ideologies relates to colonial exceptionalism. Within the Nordic context, colonial exceptionalism is perpetuated through the belief that the Nordic countries were not actively involved in the colonization of the Americas, Asia and Africa to the extent or in the same manner as other European nations, thereby affording an overall notion that Nordic countries are in some ways "innocent" (see Keskinen et al., 2019). In some Nordic countries, including Finland, such ideologies are further enhanced by the historical absence of a monarchy and an elite ruling class (compare to exceptionalism in the United States and the historical lack of a feudal system).

The Social Welfare Model in the Nordic Countries

While the typical system of governance in much of Europe is the social welfare model, a system dependent on taxation of citizens for the redistribution of goods and services, the Nordic countries stand out as being particularly well-known for this model. In fact, many would consider the Nordic countries to be exemplars of the social welfare model (Hilson, 2008). For most people in the Nordic countries, education, health care and childcare are provided by the state, either free of charge or heavily subsidized (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013, p. 66). Unlike in countries that do not utilize the social welfare model, or enact it to a lesser extent, these services are not just available for the lower socioeconomic classes, but for everyone. The availability of these services for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic class, is in fact a key equalizing component of the model⁸. Assistance is also available for certain non-citizens, for example new migrants who are not yet employed.

Citizens in the Nordic countries can be taxed as much as 80 or 90 percent, depending on income. The average taxation rate in Finland is about 40 percent, compared to a global 34 percent [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021]. Sweden and Denmark were the first Nordic countries to adopt this particular social welfare model relying on taxation, with Finland adopting the system later on (for more, see Kangas and Palme, 2005; Kvist et al., 2012). Social services expanded from the post-World War II period into the 1960's, peaking in the 1970's (ibid) concurrent, incidentally, with changes to the education system, including the introduction and subsequent dominance of English as a foreign language in the education system.

Explanations for the "success" of the social welfare system in the Nordic countries vary. It has been pointed out, for example, that the Nordic countries "went on to reproduce their already existing value systems: the emphasis on moderation, egalitarianism and uniformity [...]; the emphasis on individual responsibility" (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013, p. 66) in many ways carried on functionalities and ethos of the region's most dominant religion, Lutheranism. The outcome is that the Nordic countries are those in Europe to demonstrate most precisely the

⁶ Available online at: <https://www.norden.org/en/information/official-nordic-co-operation>.

⁷ Searches for the term *Nordic exceptionalism* yielded zero hits on corpora such as the BNC and COCA at the time this article was being written. However, research on the topic indicates that the term began circulating in academic circles in perhaps the early 2000s; (see, e.g. Delhey and Newton, 2005).

⁸ An anonymous reviewer points out another important equalizing factor: the "freedom to roam" laws, entitling every person to access nature even on privately held lands – for example hiking, fishing, and picking mushrooms and berries. This freedom to roam law exists in all of the Nordic countries except Denmark.

principles of the social welfare system, and, in relation, they are generally regarded as having made the greatest efforts to curb social inequity (Kvist et al., 2012, p. 5). The properties play a key role, for example, in the selection of the Nordic countries as the "happiest," according to rankings reported by Cambridge, Gallup, and the World Happiness Report.

In 2012, the United Nations launched its first World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2012), a ranking carried out by several group and independent experts. Denmark was ranked in the number one position in the report's 1st year, with Finland and Norway in second and third positions, respectively. In the ensuing years, the Nordic countries have been ranked consistently in the top positions, with Finland being ranked first for the past 4 years, 2018 to 2021. The ranking is based on scores across several different areas, including gross domestic product per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make one's own life choices, generosity of the general population, and perceptions of internal and external corruption levels (Helliwell et al., 2021). An interesting twist to the World Happiness Reports is the extent to which Anglo-centric notions of "happiness" map—or rather, don't map—onto to existing notions in the Nordic countries (Levisen, 2012, 2014). A range of reactions, from the academic to the journalistic (e.g., Savolainen, 2021) venture that "happiness" in the Nordic is more accurately described as being content with what one has, a concept that relates back to the overall tendencies described previously. Levisen (2012) demonstrates compelling evidence that the Anglo concept of "happiness" does not accurately translate into Danish, nor other languages, rendering it a vague or even misleading measure. Indeed, backlash commentary about the "happiness" rankings tends to refer to the relatively high rate of depression and suicide in Nordic countries, compounded by the darkness and harsh weather that exists much of the time (e.g., The Guardian, 2018).

As a summary, then, the "success" of the social welfare model in the Nordic countries has fed into numerous reports and discourse which actively indulge ideologies about Nordic exceptionalism, contributing to a sense of pride and positive branding (Levisen, 2012). This is a contemporary manifestation of exceptionalism that, prior to the 1970's, could not have existed in what were, for the most part, relatively poor, marginalized and peripheral populations. At the same time, it should be noted that there is a decided backlash and what could even be considered a counter ideology to the "happiness" reports.

Colonialism and Exceptionalism

In the current era, a great deal of research has treated issues of colonialism, migration and language in the Nordic countries (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012; Aaltonen and Sivonen, 2019; Keskinen, 2019; Keskinen et al., 2019; Kujala, 2019; Ranta and Kanninen, 2019), highlighting the tension between a sense of exemption—also termed *exceptionalism*—on the one hand, and a history of colonialism as well as contemporary racism on the other. For example, Finland, the "happiest" country for 4 years running, has also been named the most racist country out of 12 EU countries studied (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018).

Finland and the other Nordic countries were never colonized by Britain or the United States, although Iceland was occupied by British, Canadian and US troops during World War II. Some of the Nordic countries, namely Denmark and Sweden, were involved in the European colonization of the Americas and Africa, with the other Nordic countries engaging in involvement through their governing affiliation with Sweden and Denmark, or through religion and missionary work (see Keskinen et al., 2019). In addition, there are both historical and contemporary examples of colonialism in the Nordic region involving, for example, Danish rule of Norway and parts of Sweden, Swedish rule of Norway and Finland, and Danish rule of Iceland, not to neglect the ongoing Danish control of Greenland. A discussion of colonialism in the Nordic countries would be remiss not to highlight the exceptional mistreatment of Sámi territory and people, and the attempted erasure/integration of the indigenous languages and cultures (see e.g., Kuokkanen, 2020), as well as the segregation and attempted erasure of linguistic groups such as the Kven in Norway (Lane, 2016).

A comprehensive description of many of these colonial relationships can be found in a volume by Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012), who also use the term *exceptionalism* to refer to a pattern of exemption or non-culpability. For example, drawing on discourse about "happy" and "peace-loving" people (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012, p. 2) note that exceptionalism can refer to "current forms of internationalism" (ibid., also addressed in section The Social Welfare Model in the Nordic Countries of this article), as well as nation branding and contemporary activities since the 1970's that pose anachronistic conflicts with a history of domination and conquest during the colonial period.

Such notions are perhaps especially interesting when applied to the context of Finland. Historically, a common ideology among Finnish people has been that they are an oppressed people, even victims (see Hoegaerts et al., 2022; see also Keskinen, 2019). Such an ideology is the outcome of several historical factors, including the fact that Finland did not gain independence until 1917, after more than 100 years as a Grand Duchy of Russia and hundreds of years as a territory of Sweden before that. Finland has been a relatively poor, agrarian country, with what was for much of its history considered a marginalized vernacular, Finnish, along with a majority population who were in some accounts considered racially inferior (ibid.). It was only in recent decades that Finland has emerged on the world stage as a competitive force. These factors may contribute further to a sense of exceptionalism: it can be difficult to critically observe inequity and oppression when an overriding ideology is that of succeeding in spite of being a victim.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COLONIALITY

English is not and never has been an empty vessel of a language, devoid of historical and cultural baggage. On the contrary, the language itself is permeated with and has been created through conquest and exploitation. A foremost fact that should underlie any discussion of the "success" of English is exactly how English

came to occupy this rarified status (see Saraceni, 2019). While in the current day and age it is not uncommon to hear arguments that English is a "neutral" choice (Lemberg, 2018) this is in fact not a straightforward assessment. Rather, as with the discussion of exceptionalism in the Nordic context, it is an assessment that clouds over the fact that present-day widespread use and accessibility of English is entrenched in historical injustices and domination (see also Pennycook, 2017). Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that the English language norms that make their way into foreign language textbooks and guides in English-speaking settings around the world are based on the standardized forms of English, which are directly linked to the English language use of elite, white, upper-class speakers (see e.g., Lippi-Green, 2012; Peterson, 2019, p. 17–27; Peterson, 2020; see also Pennycook, 2017).

These ideals of English are ideals of English are so successfully transferred to foreign language settings that so far it is unattested for English to undergo stabilization in the same way it has, for example, in some post-colonial settings (Buschfeld and Kautzsch, 2017). The prescriptive transference of norms and ideologies has been attributed to a number of factors, including not only ideologies present in language teaching materials, but further reinforcement of exonormative ideals through English language media (ibid 118). What this means in practice is that places with no direct colonial history with Great Britain or the United States adopt the English language ideologies that are established by the norm-providing countries, although ostensibly it should be possible to not do so. Of the numerous different perspectives on the development of English as a global language, some posit that it would actually be highly unlikely for English to be anything other than exonormative (that is, norm-following, to use terminology from Kachru's classic 1982 delineation) in foreign language settings, in large part because it is an additional language rather than a widespread first language. Therefore, it is mostly a learned language rather than a language acquired from intergenerational transmission or a speech community. In other words, language settings such as Finland do not create the right conditions for endormativity and might even, in fact, preclude this possibility, making the adherence to external norms of English a necessity (see Leppänen and Nikula, 2008, p. 21)⁹.

COMBINING THE THREADS: EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN FINLAND

So far the discussion in this article has concentrated on first establishing shared characteristics in the Nordic countries that led to a phenomenon best described as Nordic exceptionalism, followed by an overview of coloniality in relation to the English language itself. For the remainder of the article, these broader notions are applied to a much narrower focal area: Finland. The purpose of this exercise in effect demonstrates that a sense of

exceptionalism with regard to the use of English runs parallel with a sense of exceptionalism in other areas.

In a discussion of English use at the level of the individual speaker, I have argued (Peterson, 2019, p. 76) that a foreign-language user of English has an opportunity (aptitude notwithstanding) of stylistic choice and identity through English—for example, by espousing a New York City accent—that first and second language speakers might not possibly have access to, in part for ethical reasons. The same level of choice and freedom does not likely apply at the national level; for example, when it comes to the teaching of English, basic accessibility of materials and pedagogical practicality point toward the adoption of a standardized, prescriptive variety of English (Young and Walsh, 2010). A possibility that can be espoused through a national curriculum, however, is that of tolerance and education about the rich expanse of varieties of English, as well as imbuing learners with an understanding of the sociolinguistic underpinnings and relative esteem placed on these varieties. Put in another way: does increased proficiency in English cause a population to become more tolerant and accepting of the multiple ways of using English, or does it induce even further instantiation of prescriptivism and coloniality of language use? These are the notions that are explored in the remainder of the article. The exploration concentrates on three main areas: social class, language attitudes about English speakers, and social exclusion.

Social Class and English

An outcome of the ideology of equality in the Nordic region, in this discussion Finland in particular, is that it is not a class-based society (see e.g., Erola, 2010). With regard to spoken English, particularly in Great Britain, it is well-established that accent is a strong indicator of social class (see Hughes et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2019). Here, the term *accent* refers specifically to pronunciation and prosodic features. In Finland, accents of spoken Finnish are generally more perceived as indexing region than socioeconomic class, although clearly these factors can be closely connected (Nuolijärvi and Vaattovaara, 2011)¹⁰. When it comes to English accents and social class, however, Finnish people nonetheless can exhibit a high degree of awareness of the social capital of certain accents over others (see Bourdieu, 1977), as demonstrated here.

For example, Peterson (2022), presents a journalistic sample obtained from an article in Finland's major daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*. The newspaper article, which describes the spoken English language skills of then-Minister of Finance, Katri Kulmuni, begins with the headline and subheading "Katri Kulmuni's delightful British English dropped jaws on social media—we asked linguists if she would be an upper- or lower-class Brit" (*Helsingin Sanomat* 2020, January; author's own translation). The article goes on to describe how an assessment from various linguists confirmed that the Finnish Minister of Finance, a native speaker of Finnish and a foreign language speaker of English, spoke English like an upper-class [sic]

⁹Thanks to an external reviewer for highlighting this perspective and for the example from the literature.

¹⁰As this article focuses on English in Finland, second-language accents of Finnish are not discussed. The topic of migrants in Finland is addressed later in the article.

Brit—which she asserted she learned in part from watching the television series *Emmerdale*. The fact that a report of this nature was deemed newsworthy in a daily newspaper in Finland merits further inspection. First, it demonstrates a high-level of awareness and, whether intentional or not, complicit compliance with socioeconomic class divisions and their relation to British English accents. This fact is further emphasized by its presence in a major daily newspaper: while it impossible to validate, it is unlikely the story would have been deemed newsworthy if the minister in question spoke working class British English (an unlikely but still plausible scenario), or, indeed, “Finnish” English.

The reactions to this politician’s way of speaking English show a high level of regard for a prestigious variety of British English, a level of awareness which is directed toward an external model of English (as discussed in section The English Language and Coloniality). In comparison, there is evidence of a low level of regard for an internally influenced way of speaking English, or in other words English that is perceived as exhibiting strong influence from L1 Finnish. Indeed, there are a few names, all derogatory, for English used by Finns that is perceived as exhibiting strong influence from Finnish, including *rallienglanti* and *tankeroenglanti*. The former term comes from Finnish rally competitive drivers and their use of English in media interviews. The latter term is associated with a former Finnish prime minister who was reported to mispronounce the English word *dangerous*, instead uttering something that was heard as “tankeros.” While they can hardly be considered representative of everyday Finns and their attitudes toward English, it is nonetheless noteworthy that an informal survey of English majors at the University of Helsinki shows a preference to speak with a “British” accent if possible. None of the students polled expressed a desire to speak English with a “Finnish” accent. English majors are likely a biased group of English language users, and in contrast, research of workplace English in Finland indicates a high level of negotiability and context sensitivity to the use of language, including English pronunciation. That is, there seems to be a level of acceptance in practice of Finnish-accented English (Oksaharju, 2021), although the examples used here show that politicians, no doubt due to their public status, can be held to a higher level of scrutiny.

Moving beyond the level of pronunciation, it is telling to note the relationship between the English language—indeed, certain foreign languages in general—and social class. Historically, knowledge of foreign languages has been a marker of higher socioeconomic class and intelligentsia in Finland. With the Finnish nationalist movement, starting at the end of the 19th century “authors, poets, writers and journalists ... resembled the archetype of a French intellectual. They were academically educated, well-traveled individuals, skilled in languages— virtual renaissance figures, who participated in artistic circles and were interested in various social, political and cultural issues. The resemblance to France was not coincidental” (Kortti, 2014, p. 7). An overview of the history of the study of English in Finland (Pahta, 2008) demonstrates a clear connection between the characteristics described with the intelligentsia of the nationalist movement and the establishment of English as an academic field of study in Finland. In the current era, the relationship of

foreign language access and social class continues. For example, compared to municipality-owned schools, the number of foreign languages learned in private and state-owned schools is higher, 41 percent compared to 20 percent. Research shows that students from higher socio-economic rankings are more likely to study multiple foreign languages other than English, while students from poorer and more rural areas are likely to have access only to English (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; see also Vaarala et al., 2017).

Whose English Is “Best”?

A topic related to social class and pronunciation of English is the social hierarchy imposed on varieties of English. English, of course, is the very definition of a pluricentric language (Clyne, 1992); given its colonial history and subsequent emergence as a global language and lingua franca (Crystal, 2003)—it is a language with many homes and different kinds of speakers. An issue raised earlier in this article questions if populations who use English as a foreign language are inclined to be relatively accepting of different varieties of English, or rather if they enact language attitudes mirroring those of inner circle, aka native-speaker settings (see Peterson, 2019). An openness toward varieties of English would be in keeping with ideologies of equality which are for many perceived to be part of Nordic exceptionalism. Indeed, tolerance toward variation of domestic languages in the Nordic countries is a hallmark of overall equality (but see, for example, Røyneland, 2009). It is therefore interesting to observe if the tolerance and acceptance of varieties of English is in evidence, or rather if externally modeled attitudes against certain varieties of English manifest.

As early as the 1990’s, research on immigration to Finland highlighted the linguistic allowances afforded to English speakers from certain countries, for example the United States (Latomaa, 1998). English-speaking immigrants from inner-circle settings (Kachru, 1982) to Finland are stereotyped and indeed are demonstrated to be in a privileged position, hinging in large part on their language capital (Latomaa, 1998; Latomaa and Nuolijärvi, 2002; Koskela, 2020). What this means in practice is that an English-speaking migrant, especially one from a rich nation, is in a more amenable social position than an immigrant from a poorer nation, especially one who does not speak English.

These characteristics were reported in a recent PhD thesis (Koskela, 2020) on migrant “elites” to Finland. An example from the researcher’s fieldnotes described an incident when a Finnish migrant from Kenya, a Black man, needed to defend himself against the unwanted verbal abuse of two (intoxicated) Finnish men who approached him on the street in Helsinki. The Kenyan man, who spoke good Finnish, nonetheless chose to respond to the two harassers in English, thereby switching not only the language of the exchange but also the content. Through speaking English, he was able to present himself as an educated, skilled migrant—and he was thus able to distinguish himself from other Black migrants, who are often associated with refugee status (Koskela, 2020). In fact, when asked by the researcher about his choice to switch to English during the exchange, the man explained, “if you’re black and you speak Finnish, it’s more likely that you came as a refugee. If the person speaks fluent Finnish,

the person has gone into the integration plan" (Koskela, 2020, p. 6). With this observation, the person in question refers to the language skills programs that are typically made available for refugees who arrive as asylum seekers, with the aim to help them integrate into the work force and to participate more fully in Finnish society. For various reasons, clearly including race but also language, migrants from African and Asian countries to the Nordic region have been less successful at gaining employment than those from other regions (Gerdes and Wadensjö, 2012, p. 192). Overall, these systematic disadvantages lead to increased levels of poverty, crime and lack of access to public goods and services.

While there do not appear to be scientific studies of this phenomenon, there is evidence in the current era that some workplaces, even English-speaking workplaces, prefer to hire English-speaking Finnish people rather than English-speaking migrants. If demonstrable, this tendency would point toward an acceptance of Finnish-English on par with that of a native speaker from an inner circle setting. An example from my own field notes (personal communication, November 12, 2021) serves as an illustration. In an interview from an ongoing project on English in the workplace, a migrant, highly skilled worker in the field of professional communication explained that they applied for a job at the headquarters of a multinational Finnish-based company. The job description they responded to called for applicants who were native speakers of English, specifying that the work would be carried out 100 percent in English—as English was the workplace language for the company headquarters, in Finland. The job applicant was a native speaker of US English and did not speak Finnish. The person was highly qualified with many years of experience in the relevant field. However, the applicant was informed by a human resources director that the company was going to hire a Finnish person who could speak Finnish as the social language of the company and working group—despite the fact that the job description explicitly requested a native speaker of English who would work totally in English.

The previous examples in this section indicate that there is high social value placed on "native"-like accents produced by Finnish people when they speak English. The latter examples indicate, at the same time, a preference for a Finnish speaker of English over a native speaker of English—even one from an inner-circle setting—for certain workplace settings. A recent study by Peterson and Hall (2017) likewise demonstrates a tendency to place Finnish L2 English (and other Nordic Englishes) on par with inner-circle Englishes within the context of institutions of higher education. This study observes data from Nordic universities' admission requirements for international MA programs in English. Higher education in Finland is free of charge for EU citizens and EEA member states, but since August 1, 2017, tuition fees have been in place for students who are not EU or EEA member states citizens (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Individual universities and university programs differ with regard to not only their fee rates but also their admissions criteria, which extends to language requirements, as well. In recent years, there has been

an upsurge in the number of English language medium programs in institutions of higher education in the Nordic countries, as detailed, for example in Hultgren et al. (2014). In 2020, English medium programs in Finnish Institutes of Higher Education received a record number of applications from foreign applicants, 8000 – more than 2000 more than received the previous year (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2021). The language medium of education, as well as the content, is indicative of the changing role and related tensions of achieving global competitiveness while at the same time serving the needs of the nation and welfare state (Hultgren et al., 2014; Saarinen and Taalas, 2017; Saarinen, 2020).

An analysis of English language requirements from 25 universities in five Nordic countries (Peterson and Hall, 2017) demonstrated that applicants to English medium programs from six English speaking countries—Australia, the Republic of Ireland, English-speaking Canada, the USA and the UK—are exempt from having to submit proof of proficiency in English, for example through a standardized test such as the TOEFL. While in one way this allowance seems straightforward, it nonetheless draws a concerning line dividing relatively more privileged English speakers from those who are less privileged. While these six English-speaking nations were uniformly exempt across settings, exemptions for other English-speaking regions varied widely. For example, in Icelandic universities, citizens of English-speaking countries throughout the Americas and the Caribbean are exempt from proving proficiency in English, whereas universities in Sweden offer certain kinds of exemptions for citizens of India, Pakistan and 17 different English-speaking African nations. Narrowing the focus to Finland, the language requirements of the University of Helsinki—the highest ranking and biggest university in Finland—specify that English-language exemptions are offered to applicants who finished upper secondary school in the Nordic Countries, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK or the USA. In addition, exemptions are made for applicants who have a university degree in English from an EU/EEA country or Switzerland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK or the USA. While various other exemptions are made—for example, a diploma from an International Baccalaureate program—the details already supplied merit further inspection. Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that across Nordic universities, there are two kinds of English speakers who are uniformly exempt from demonstrating language proficiency through standardized tests: assumed native speakers who come from so-called inner-circle settings, and foreign language speakers of English from Nordic countries (and, in some instances, from EU/EEA countries).

From a purely practical standpoint, it can be considered reasonable that Nordic universities would favor applicants from their own citizenship, especially considering the role of universities in contributing to nationhood and also Nordic cooperation. English, being the language currently most used in higher education, plays an obvious role in the global viability of any university. What is noteworthy about this study, however, is the evidence it supplies about Nordic countries not only mimicking but reinforcing inequity with regard to varieties of

English. It might be argued that this is a price to pay for being competitive on the global front, but at the same time a more critical stance would acknowledge the benefits of participating in coloniality through the use of English.

Exclusion From English

To date, the only large-scale survey on the use of English in Finland (Leppänen et al., 2011; discussed in section English Language Proficiency in the Nordic Countries) was conducted nearly 20 years ago. A similar survey today would likely gain at least some different results, considering the wide reach of English-based social media even to peripheral areas in recent history (see e.g., Laitinen et al., 2020). Considering the survey as an output of its time, it is of note to recognize that it demonstrated a clear divide in terms of region and age. English tends to be a more a part of the everyday experience of people in urban regions of Finland compared to rural regions. Given the relatively recent history of widespread education in English as a foreign language in Finland, it is not surprising that the survey showed that many Finns aged 45 and above (at the time of the survey) had not studied English at all, and that older people rated their own English skills considerably lower than younger people (Leppänen et al., 2011, p. 94, 97).

In the context of Finland, the main urban region is the capital city area, Helsinki, geographically located in the southern portion of the nation. The greater urban Helsinki area is home to some 1 million inhabitants. The overall population of Finland is 5.53 million. In addition, there are several relatively larger municipalities serving as local urban centers; for example, Oulu, population 200,000, situated in the west central region of Finland (see Vaattovaara and Peterson, 2019). Research on the use of English language borrowings into Finnish has demonstrated that such borrowing are more associated with urban speech, and survey data also demonstrates that urban dwellers are the most likely to claim using the English language borrowings tested. For example, research on the borrowing *pliis* "please" in Finnish indicated that it is indexical of an urban style (Peterson and Vaattovaara, 2014), especially younger, urban women. Likewise, a survey investigation of English-language swearword borrowings into Finnish demonstrated that many of the respondents associate English swearword variants, for example *damn*, as more regionally neutral, whereas the Finnish swearword variant, *perkele* "damn" was more associated with rural (and male) speakers. Note, however, that while open (written) comments from the respondents supported the notion of an urban/rural division of use, regression analyses of the claims of usage of *damn* and *perkele*, modeled against demographic features, did not show significant differences for region. In fact, age was the only factor consistently significant in the regression analyses of *damn* in comparison to Finnish variants *perkele* and the mild swear word *hitto* "darn." Other demographic features, such as region, level of education and gender were not consistently significant across the models.

Such findings point toward intersectionality, but also toward a reality in which certain segments of the overall population, including the elderly and those who live in rural areas, do not have the exposure to English that would ensure their inclusion

in many aspects of contemporary linguistic life in Finland. Such a reality is detailed, for example, in an ethnographic investigation of an elderly married couple, a man and woman, who live in rural Finland (Pitkänen-Huhta and Hujo, 2012). The elderly woman in the study, whom the researchers call Aino, relates that when she and her husband go into town, they "bump into" English words that come up, words they do not understand. The same couple also reflect on the fact that it is more likely to need English in bigger towns, where there are more foreigners. At the same time, however, the couple reveal that they have learned a few English expressions from television, for example "I love you."

CONCLUSIONS

The social aspects explored in the article—social class and its relation to the English language, attitudes toward varieties of English and social divisions—are certainly not specific to Finland, nor is it a realistic or an intended aim to point the finger at Finland as a particularly problematic case. While a cross-setting analysis is beyond the scope of this article, it can be assumed with a high level of certainty that such divisions and inequities with regard to English can and do exist in other settings. The critical stance taken here is not intended to push Finland into a critical or damning light, but rather, as the author's academic home and research setting, Finland has been utilized as a case study to explore the relationship of Nordic exceptionalism and the use of English.

Such an exploration is revealing for several reasons. For many people around the world, the Nordic states, including Finland, serve as highly regarded models of social equity, education, and other desired societal affordances. In various global rankings, these countries top the list of "most equal" in the world. An outcome of this level of recognition is a phenomenon termed *Nordic exceptionalism*. The same term is used in application to a historical disavowal of colonialism or even colonial complicitness—in essence, an assumed innocence. These notions are not entirely borne out in reality, neither in the past nor in the present. The role of English in itself becomes a telling tool for further inspection of these properties. That is, contemporary English is the outcome of the colonial history of Great Britain, and the vastness and varieties of English hold testament to the fact that not all Englishes hold equal prestige across settings. Indeed, certain varieties of English are demonstrated to be associated with grave social injustices levied against people who speak them, for example in the workplace, in schools and in courts of law (see Peterson, 2019).

A question posed earlier in this article is reintroduced: does increased proficiency in English cause a population to become more tolerant and accepting of the multiple ways of using English, or does it induce even further instantiation of prescriptivism and coloniality of language use? These possibilities are of unique application to the context of the Nordic countries. As established earlier in this article, the populations of the Nordic countries are among those in the world that exhibit some of the highest levels of overall proficiency in English. At the same

time, these are also some of the countries in the world which are most regealed and recognized for their efforts to promote equity and equal opportunity to social benefits such as education. What then, about equality and English? The evidence presented in this article, stemming from the setting of Finland, suggests that equity and the use of English are not, unfortunately, a straightforward pairing. However, to address this imbalance, some policy makers and educators in Finland are actively working to take into account the special properties of the English language today, namely its wide variability and multiple uses, such as English as a lingua franca. For example, the most recent version of the New National Curriculum for basic studies (Finnish National

Board of Education, 2016) calls for increased exposure to varieties of English.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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