Boosting nationalism through COVID-19 images : Multimodal construction of the failure of the 'dear enemy' with COVID-19 in the national press

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Boosting nationalism through COVID-19 images: Multimodal construction of the failure of the 'dear enemy' with COVID-19 in the national press

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Abstract
Using a multimodal discursive approach, this study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic is constructed and used in press reportage to mobilize intergroup relations and national identities. We examine how press reporting about the development of COVID-19 in Sweden is cast as a matter of nationalism and national stereotyping in the Finnish press. The data consist of 183 images with accompanying headlines and captions published in two Finnish national newspapers between January 1 and August 31, 2020. We found three multimodal rhetorical strategies of stereotyping: moralizing, demonizing, and nationalizing. These strategies construct discourses of arrogant, immoral, and dangerous Swedes sourcing from national stereotypes. The study contributes to current knowledge about the work on national stereotypes by illustrating how they are used in media discourse to achieve certain rhetorical ends, such as to persuade, mitigate, or justify intergroup relations. Furthermore, the study offers insight into the multimodal constructions and functions of stereotypes.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated the news since the outbreak of the virus in late 2019. News stories and images provide people with the ingredients to construct their understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because news stories are often regarded as

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objective information and news images as their visual proof, their impact is considerable (Banks, 2012).

The intense media attention to COVID-19 has also been correlated with the rise in prejudice and discrimination against diverse groups of people, for instance, Chinese and Asian people (Wen et al., 2020) and other vulnerable minorities and immigrants (Bieber, 2020), pointing to the importance of studying the consequences of the pandemic on intergroup relations. Social psychological research has increasingly aimed to address the role of group identities and boundaries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jetten et al., 2020; Templeton et al., 2020; Van Assche et al., 2020). For example, Van Assche et al. (2020) demonstrated that news about fellow (in-group) nationals and other (out-group) peoples breaking coronavirus restrictions elicited stronger negative emotions toward the norm-violating out-groups. This suggests that highlighting salient pre-existing group boundaries and differences between the behavior of in- and out-groups can further increase discrimination (Templeton et al., 2020). These findings are in line with previous studies on diseases – such as HIV, SARS, and Ebola – and the process of 'othering', whereby blame and responsibility for spreading the virus are first assigned to foreigners or out-groups within a society rather than the national in-group (Joffe, 1999; Washer, 2006).

While some scholars have outlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nationalism (e.g. Bieber, 2020; Van Assche et al., 2020), this link remains empirically underexplored. To fill this gap and answer the call to engage in a detailed analysis of coronavirus-related rhetoric (Smith and Gibson, 2020), our study explores how press images of the national out-group are constructed and mobilized in the context of media reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic to boost nationalism.

Discursive formulations of national identity and stereotypes in the national press

Discourse studies approach national identity as the product of discourse that is dynamic and context dependent (Abell, 2011; Wodak et al., 1999). In this view, various discursive constructs of national identity are given different shapes according to the context and group in which they emerge and are identified with reference to their content, strategies, and argumentative functions. For discourse analysts, language is action oriented, which means that nation talk can be used to persuade and mitigate at a micro-social level as well as to perform macro-social functions, such as justify intergroup relations. In other words, discourse analysts (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987) have claimed that the importance of social categories, such as national groups, is how people use them to achieve certain rhetorical ends. Reicher and Hopkins (2001), for example, showed how different formulations of nationalism and national stereotypes can be used to mobilize people to act toward certain political ends. Following this line of research, Reicher and Stott (2020) recently suggested that historical myths provide rhetorical resources that can be drawn upon and mobilized to provide different responses to the coronavirus crisis.

Many critical discourse analysts (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993) have highlighted the power of media in representation. The institutional status of media is shaped

by particular economic and political imperatives, giving privileged access and public voice to individuals and groups that have high social, cultural, and symbolic capital, including experts and elites (Johnson and Milani, 2010; Van Dijk, 1993). Newspapers provide a powerful discursive space for the everyday flagging of the nation and construction of national identity (Billig, 1995). Bishop and Jaworski (2003) studied the rhetorical strategies used to construct nationalism in the British press in relation to the England–Germany football game. Of the three main strategies they found, the separation strategy was predominantly realized in the rhetoric of 'us' and 'them', conflict strategy was largely manifested through the use of military metaphors and war imagery, and typification was used to build stereotypes of the nation as 'timeless' and 'homogeneous'. Those who did not conform were instantly othered and excluded.

The previous work on nationalism and the media has suggested that news reporting shifts during periods of crisis, with media outlets using much more hyperbolic and exclusionary language designed to generate distinct group boundaries between 'us' and 'them' during these periods (Mihelj et al., 2009; Skey, 2014). Mihelj et al. (2009: 70–71) distinguished two key forms of national narration in television news – routine reporting and crisis/celebratory reporting – that were tied to different forms of nationalism and often aroused in different political climates. In routine reporting, explicit national narratives are normally absent, and journalists typically used third-person narration and external focalization to detach themselves from both their audience and the events reported. In contrast, crisis and celebratory reporting are permeated by deictic expressions that are linked to a particular national group. The narrators discursively position themselves and their audience into the same national community, the events are narrated from the point of view of 'us' and 'the nation'. Instead of allowing for the coexistence of competing definitions and identities, such narratives serve to silence dissenting voices.

The COVID-19 provides a particular context for crisis reporting and for the constructing national identities in the press. The previous work has shown the usability of studying the rhetorical functions of national stereotypes in order to approach national identity (Abell, 2011). Similarly to national identities, national stereotypes are constructed to match the specific social context of different groups and social settings (Hopkins et al., 1997).

In discourse studies and linguistics, stereotyping is generally approached as dynamic and multi-faceted, rather than as a fixed or static phenomenon. Common to these approaches is the focus on the role of language and discourse in the production and reception of stereotypes (Lazar, 2017a). Following this approach, Reyes' (2007) study on Southeast Asian American youth shows how widely circulated media stereotypes about Asian Americans can provide youth with resources for constructing interactional identity and diverse social actions, including, for example, merging and dividing different Asian ethnic and national groups. The study demonstrates how the teens positioned themselves and others in relation to dominant stereotypes to achieve specific social actions, including building social relationships and resisting oppressive practices. This points to the multiplicity of rhetorical functions, including scapegoating, justification, and differentiation, that national stereotypes may hold (Cinnirella, 1997). As such, they have an intergroup function, as they enable groups to warrant their behavior and group members to distinguish 'us' from 'them', positively or negatively (Cinnirella, 1997; Lazar, 2017a).

Similarly, Abell's (2011) study on English and Scottish football supporters shows how the construction of national stereotypes serves the rhetorical functions of legitimizing, blaming, and producing national groups. To the best of our knowledge, prior research has not elaborated the multimodal functions of national stereotyping, but based on our previous work on multimodality (Sakki and Martikainen, 2020), we assume that multimodality may provide subtle ways for expressing negative national stereotypes.

The aim of this article is threefold. Firstly, drawing on the principles of the multimodal discursive approach, this paper explores how the coronavirus is constructed and used in press reportage to mobilize intergroup relations and national identities. To do this, we examine how press reporting about the development of the COVID-19 situation in Sweden is cast as a matter of nationalism and national stereotyping in the Finnish press (its neighbor). Secondly, in doing so, we contribute to current knowledge about the work on national stereotypes by illustrating how they are used in media discourse to achieve certain rhetorical ends, such as to persuade, mitigate, or justify intergroup relations. Thirdly, we offer further insight into the multimodal constructions and functions of stereotypes, an aspect that has remained underdeveloped in the previous research on national stereotypes. In the following section, we give a brief outline of Finnish–Swedish relations and national stereotypes in their socio-historical context.

Context

The asymmetric power relationship between superior Sweden and inferior Finland – often described as a big brother and little brother relationship – has historical roots (Beijar et al., 1997; Liebkind et al., 2008). Finland's and Sweden's long historical entanglement goes back to the Middle Ages, when Sweden was formed as a kingdom out of the kingdoms of Svea and Göta and simultaneously incorporated the provinces of what is now known as Finland. This Swedish rule enabled Finland to develop as an administrative and cultural entity and involved the immigration of Swedes to the western and southern coasts of the country. Consequently, Finland's western provinces were tightly integrated into Sweden politically, demographically, and culturally, while its eastern provinces remained more weakly tied to Sweden. In Finland, the elites in all parts of society were Swedish speakers throughout the early modern period (Halonen et al., 2015).

When Sweden lost Finland to Russia in 1809 and Finland became part of the Russian empire as an autonomous Grand Duchy, Sweden's role did not vanish, as Finland continued to be administered in practice by its Swedish-speaking upper class. The Russian period and transnational influences gave rise to a Finnish nationalist movement called Fennomans, the core of which was the question of the Finnish language. Swedish-speaking elites played a key role in promoting this Finnish nationalist movement; for example, many leading elites changed their language and family names from Swedish to Finnish, as the creation of a Finnish-speaking elite was seen as necessary for nation-building. At the same time, Swedish remained an important language of the upper class in Finland (Boyd and Palviainen, 2015).

Finland gained independence in 1917, following the Russian revolution. Although Swedish was the first language of only about 13% of the population, due to the continuing influence of Swedish speakers, in 1922, Swedish and Finnish were given equal status

in the Finnish Constitution, which allowed all citizens to communicate with authorities in their mother tongue. In the era of independence, Swedish speakers have retained their legal right to services in Swedish, even though the proportion of Swedish speakers has dropped to about 5.4% of the total population (Boyd and Palviainen, 2015; Halonen et al., 2015). Language disputes occur occasionally, mostly when nationalists and populists call for an end to both the equal status of the two languages and the obligatory teaching of Swedish in Finnish schools (Boyd and Palviainen, 2015).

Also, Sweden has a large population of Finns, called Sweden Finns, and Finnish is an official minority language of Sweden. Immigration began during Swedish rule in the Middle Ages, and some localities in northern and central Sweden have had Finnish populations for several centuries. The other variety of Finnish in Sweden is Meänkieli, a minority language that emerged at the beginning of the 19th century when, following the 1808–1809 war between Sweden and Russia, the new border drawn along the Torne River divided the linguistically and culturally homogeneous region of the Torne Valley between the two states. Consequently, the Finnish-speaking population on the Swedish side of the Torne Valley region became a linguistic minority (Ridanpää, 2017). In the early 20th century, Sweden developed rapidly socially and economically and was said to have the world's best standard of living. Unlike Finland, which fought two wars against the Soviet Union during the Second World War, Sweden was spared that war's atrocities and developed into one of the world's richest nations. During the Second World War, about 70,000 Finnish children were evacuated to Sweden, and after the war, about half a million Finns emigrated to Sweden in search of work and a better life. In Sweden, these Finnish emigrants were sometimes denigrated as being 'low-class' (e.g. Lainio, 1996; Weckström, 2008.). Although the average income level today is about the same in the two countries, the asymmetric relationship is concretized in national stereotypes of Finns' perception that the Swedes look down on them (Liebkind et al., 2008). Elmgren (2008) has studied stereotypes of Sweden and Swedishness in the Finnish press and characterized Finland's relationship with Sweden as its 'most beloved enemy'. During times of crisis in Finland, the stereotypes of the beloved enemy tend to be more negative, which emphasizes that stereotypes vary according to context. Sweden is the historically constructed 'significant Other' for the Finns, and thus, it is important to examine how national self-images are constructed through the images of the 'significant Other'.

Method

The data for this study were collected from news stories that included images related to COVID-19 in Sweden that were published in two Finnish newspapers with nationwide circulation, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat*, between January 1 and August 31, 2020. A total of 183 news stories with images were published during this time span (101 in *Helsingin Sanomat* and 82 in *Ilta-Sanomat*). The analysis focuses on images with accompanying captions and headlines. With a daily distribution of 339,437 copies in 2019, *Helsingin Sanomat* is the largest circulated newspaper in the Nordic countries (Media Audit Finland, 2019). *Ilta-Sanomat* is the largest tabloid newspaper in Finland, with 2.65 million readers each week (https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000006442856. html). It can be argued that these media have an almost institutional position in Finnish

society. Although Finland's mainstream media have traditionally had a close relationship with decision-makers, they have stringently detached themselves from party politics (e.g. Tommila and Salokangas, 1998) and have attracted both the bourgeoisie and the working class (Lounasmeri, 2013). The role of these outlets has been characterized as stabilizers of society and national unity rather than as challengers of existing power structures (Lounasmeri, 2013). Because of their institutional positions, nationwide readerships, and large circulations, these two outlets can reasonably be assumed to publish news and images that influence people's perceptions of COVID-19 issues, including Sweden's pandemic policy.

To examine how images, captions, and headlines interact to create meaning in news stories, we used a multimodal discourse analysis, paying close attention to the ways linguistic and visual resources integrate to communicate ideas, values, and identities (Jones, 2014; Lazar, 2017b; Machin, 2013, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2005). We also drew from the systemic functional approach by building on Halliday's (1994) systemic functional theory to show how the composition of multimodal – linguistic and visual – resources (textual metafunction) constructs meanings (ideational metafunction) and interaction with the audience (interpersonal metafunction) (O'Halloran, 2009; Royce, 2007). When applying the systemic functional approach, we agreed with prior research (e.g. Kress, 2010; Machin, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 1999) on its limitations and with the critique concerning the juxtaposition of various semiotic resources and divergent organizational principles (e.g. sequential language and spatial image). However, we regard the multifunctionality of the approach as useful for the purposes of our study because embracing the composition, meaning, and interaction of a multimodal message provides the means for exploring the construction of rhetorical strategies in multimodal communication: how a multimodal message is constructed to communicate certain meanings and serve certain social objectives, including persuading and mobilizing people.

Recontextualization is a central concept in discourse analysis, and it can be argued that discourses always recontextualize social practices through, for instance, deletion, addition, substitution, and evaluation (Blommaert, 2001: Machin, 2013, 2016; Pennycook, 2007; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999) as well as contextual and intertextual linkage/embedding in terms of 'selectively drawing upon orders of discourse – the particular configurations of conventionalized practices (genres, discourses, narratives, etc.)' (Fairclough, 1992: 194; see also Fairclough, 2003). In our study, we are interested in identifying how COVID-19 is recontextualized in Finnish newspapers and what types of stereotypic conceptions are drawn upon intertextually. Liu and O'Halloran (2009) and Royce (2007) conceptualize recontextualization differently. For them, re-contextualization is a multimodal strategy whereby semantically divergent multimodal resources recontextualize or modify each other's meanings in terms of meaning expansion. They use the term co-contextualization to refer to meaning expansion created through the juxtaposition of semantically convergent multimodal resources. In our study, these two conceptualizations of recontextualization provide the means for studying both the intertextual and intratextual (Jones, 2014) construction of multimodal communication.

When exploring the rhetorical strategies used in multimodal communication, we focused on their contents, forms, and functions. We approached our material from a data-driven perspective, exploring the images, captions, and headlines separately and in

relation to each other. First, we scrutinized the images and verbal elements based on their content and identified the convergent and divergent semantic orientations of images and captions/headlines, which led us to utilize the concepts of co-contextualization and re-contextualization (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; Royce, 2007). We then focused on the expression stratum by analyzing the visual construction of the images as well as word choices and typographical characteristics to understand how the visual and verbal semiotic resources were used to create the contents in images, captions, and headlines. Whereas the first two phases of the analysis focused on the ideational and textual meaning, the third phase focused on interpersonal meaning and how multimodal resources interact with the audience. Based on the analysis of the contents and forms of the multimodal resources as well as their ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, we identified three multimodal rhetorical strategies that served three discursive functions. We named the rhetorical strategies based on the perception of the intersemiotic choices at the level of textual metafunction (e.g. word choices in headlines and subject matter in images) and at the level of the ideational metafunction constructed of Sweden, its people, and its COVID-19 policy. The appendix includes headlines and images representative of each rhetorical strategy.

Findings

We identified three multimodal rhetorical strategies – moralizing, demonizing, and nationalizing Sweden – that construct discourses of an arrogant, immoral, and dangerous Sweden and generate distinct group boundaries between the Finns and Swedes.

Moralizing

The multimodal rhetorical strategy of moralizing constructs the understanding of Sweden and the Swedes as indifferent and arrogant in relation to COVID-19. The newspaper images in this strategy include portrayals of Anders Tegnell, who is the state epidemiologist of the Public Health Agency of Sweden, as well as depictions of people leading active social lives and ignoring COVID-19 safety measures.

Figure A1 shows a spread from a news story related to Anders Tegnell and COVID-19 in Sweden. The news story discusses the rapidly increasing number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Sweden as well as the criticism against the liberal COVID-19 policy orchestrated by Tegnell. The caption 'Ebola taught a hard lesson' delivers an ominous message, and the verbally communicated fatality of the Ebola virus is reinforced through the use of the color red for the word 'Ebola', connoting threat and danger. Hence, the verbal element communicates meaning both through its linguistic and visual (typographical) features (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2005): whereas the word 'Ebola' conveys the denotative meaning (virus, disease), its bold font and red color convey the connotative meaning (threat, danger). The text referring to Ebola is related to the image on the left depicting a person who died of Ebola in Zaire in 1995 (Figure A2). Even though the intertextual connection between Ebola and the coronavirus is not mentioned explicitly, the context of the news story and the inclusion of items referring to both diseases strongly imply the connection.

In the aforementioned spread, Tegnell's image is the largest visual element (Figure A3), which indicates its communicative primacy compared to the other images (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Tegnell faces slightly to the left and does not look straight at the spectator, which creates the impression of avoidance (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Royce, 2007). The low viewing angle of the half-length image acts as a multiplicative visual strategy (O'Halloran, 2008) fostering a sense of detachment and furnishes the avoidance of direct eye contact with arrogance (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), echoing the stereotypical conception of Swedes as arrogant (Daun et al., 2001). Hence, in terms of interpersonal metafunction, there is no direct communication between Tegnell and the audience. Additionally, the relation between Tegnell (superior) and the audience (inferior) appears hierarchical due to the low viewing angle (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Royce, 2007). Together with the small text reading 'Anders Tegnell says he still believes the choices made by his country are correct', the visual rhetoric of the image seems to suggest that Tegnell does not listen to criticism or advice.

The divergent meanings of the juxtaposed visual and verbal elements re-contextualize each other (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; O'Halloran, 2008), and their joint ideational meaning adheres a moralizing overtone strongly questioning the rationality of the liberal COVID-19 policy in Sweden and suggesting it might prove to be fatal, as exemplified by the news headlines: 'Self-Sufficiency Got Expensive' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, May 30) and 'Sweden is Blind and Deaf' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, June 24). In terms of interpersonal metafunction, neither verbal nor visual elements directly address the audience. According to Royce (2007), in the absence of a direct address, interpersonal metafunction can be understood as the delivery of information. In this case, however, the visual and verbal resources of the news story seem to address the reader in a more indirect way – namely in terms of communicating appraisal and attitude (Martin and Rose, 2003) to persuade Finnish readers to agree on the irrationality of Sweden's COVID-19 policy and adopt a negative attitude toward it.

Several newspaper images portray active social interaction in Sweden. Figures A4 and A5 depict people on an outdoor terrace enjoying refreshments. The relaxed atmosphere is communicated through their cozy chat over a drink and the bright sunshine. These images of socializing Swedes echo the stereotypical understanding of the Swedes as more sociable people compared to the more reserved Finns (Daun et al., 2001). However, the accompanying headlines 'The Corona Policy of Sweden Astonishes' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, May 1) and 'Swedish Way Would Have Caused Deaths' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, June 11) turn the images from depictions of cheerful social interaction into those of neglect and moral indifference. Hence, the verbal component communicating astonishment and condemnation casts a moralizing shadow over the positive atmosphere of the images. In terms of the multimodal construction of meaning, the controversial semantic contents communicated by the image and text re-contextualize each other, contributing to the expansion of meaning (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; O'Halloran, 2008). This joint ideational meaning communicates condemnation of people's seemingly careless behavior in relation to COVID-19.

Even though the photos discussed above depict Swedish people and scenes in Sweden, the accompanying verbal elements frequently compare the COVID-19 situations in Sweden to Finland. Without exception, the Swedish coronavirus policy is regarded as too

liberal and ineffective, with the high number infections and deaths presented as evidence. *Ilta-Sanomat* (April 22) published a news story titled 'Images Show the Stark Difference between Finland and Sweden' accompanied by a pair of images illustrating people's different behaviors during COVID-19 in Finland and Sweden (Figure A6). Whereas the photo taken in Finland (top) features two people sitting in the Helsinki Cathedral with no one else nearby, the image taken in Sweden (bottom) shows a group of people queueing in front of an ice cream kiosk. The caption on the Finnish photo says that strict safety restrictions were quickly introduced in Finland, but the caption on the Swedish photo cites the lyrics of a well-known Swedish pop hit glorifying partying. The images and related captions simultaneously source from and strengthen the stereotypical understanding of Finns being more (law) obedient than the Swedes (Daun et al., 2001). In terms of ideational metafunction, in both examples the images and captions communicate congruent meanings and strengthen each other's semantic potentials, as is typical of co-contextualization (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; O'Halloran, 2009). It becomes apparent that the co-contextualization of visual and verbal resources is used as a multimodal rhetorical device to emphasize the differences between the virtuous and responsible Finnish people and the vicious and irresponsible Swedish people. The moralizing and even accusatory overtone toward the Swedes is further reinforced by a diagram of death rates in the Nordic countries (Figure A7), which shows that the death rate is the highest in Sweden and lowest in Finland. The divergent message delivered by the diagram re-contextualizes (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; O'Halloran, 2008) the meanings of the Swedish photo and caption, turning them from celebrations of socialization into manifestations of immoral behavior.

Demonizing

The multimodal rhetorical strategy of demonizing Sweden is constructed through images and verbal elements that communicate threat and danger due to the high rates of infections and deaths. This is done by visually and verbally emphasizing the high infection rates and constructing an understanding that the Swedes could spread the virus to Finland.

Several images depict dozens of Swedish people gathered together without face masks or social distancing. In Figures A8 and A9, the free composition, diverse positions of the people, and their close proximity construct a sense of carelessness (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) about the coronavirus. Simultaneously, the images remind readers of the stereotypical conception of the Swedes as outgoing people who express their feelings more easily than the Finns (Daun et al., 2001). The headlines of the accompanying news stories declare 'Red Exception' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, June 30) and 'Sweden Glows Red in the Corona Map' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, June 26). In addition to its linguistic properties, the (typo)graphical form – a large, bold font and red color – of the words 'red exception' communicate danger and threat (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), stigmatizing Sweden as a COVID-19 hotspot. In addition, the map (Figure A10) attached to the news story concretizes that at the end of June, Sweden was the most affected country per capita in Europe. By communicating danger, the headline and map re-contextualize (Liu and O'Halloran 2009; O'Halloran, 2008) the image from one of carefree leisure to a depiction of Sweden as a ticking timebomb. This re-contextualizing interplay of visual and verbal resources

demonizes Sweden as dangerous and threatening. In fact, the image and headline are interconnected through consequential relation (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009), where the behavior of the people depicted in the image is presented as the cause of the pandemic's spread.

Imagery and vocabulary related to war are used to reinforce the idea of Sweden being in a state of emergency due to COVID-19 (see also, Bishop and Jaworski, 2003). The demonizing strategy generates associations of war, threat, and danger posed by Swedes infected with COVID-19. The headline 'The Swedish Government Proposes Emergency Powers Act' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, April 6) and the accompanying image of three Swedish ministers in a press conference co-contextualize (Liu and O'Halloran, 2009) each other's meanings to reinforce the sentiment of crisis (Figure A11). The ministers' serious facial expressions, their dark clothing, the blue background, and the presence of the Swedish flag act as multiplicative visual devices (O'Halloran, 2008) communicating authority, severity, and officiality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), strengthening the verbally communicated message of emergency. In addition, the declining diagonal (from left to right) formed by the heads of the ministers communicates a weakening or loss of power (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) convergent with the sentiment of crisis.

The aspect of war is communicated through images of field hospitals and army troops helping to construct them (Figures A12 and A13) accompanied by headlines and captions such as 'Sweden erects field hospitals' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, April 4), and 'Hundreds of sickbeds photographed in a field hospital built in Stockholm's fair center' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, May 2). The images of field hospitals depict large, spacious rooms packed with tens or hundreds of sickbeds side by side. In terms of textual metafunction, the austere space, monotonous rhythm formed by the sickbeds, and ascetic colors create a nightmarish 'calm before the storm' atmosphere as the space waits to be filled with victims of the coronavirus war. The association with war is fostered through headlines and captions repeating words such as 'crisis', 'threat', 'the virus hits/attacks', and 'fear/terrified'. The multimodal complementarity in terms of intersemiotic repetition (Royce, 2007) provided by the visual and verbal modalities communicating war, threat, and danger foster the ideational meaning of crisis and bombard the reader with powerful images and word choices propagating the pandemic as a battle or war. Simultaneously, the multimodal resources of the news coverage suggest that the Swedish front is not capable of defending itself in this warfare.

The aforementioned examples construct a notion of Sweden under attack by the coronavirus. The danger caused by high infection rates in Sweden is further communicated through headlines questioning whether 'Swedes Remain in Isolation' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, May 22) or stating that 'Nordic Borders Will Be Opened but Not for Swedes' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, May 30), with images showing border patrols between Finland and Sweden (Figure A14). Together, the images and texts construct an understanding that Swedish people infected with the virus threaten Finland. For instance, one headline in *Helsingin Sanomat* (July 8) announced that 'Viking-Line Does Not Sell Cruises to Turku for Swedish People'. Surprisingly, 2 weeks later (July 24) another headline in the same newspaper declared 'Hundreds of Swedish Travellers in Turku' and featured a photo of people walking down a glazed gangplank after departing a ferry (Figure A15) with the caption 'Tallink Silja Princess brought passengers to Turku on Wednesday. One-fourth of

them were Swedish'. The controversial information communicated by these headlines and images in an antonymic relationship (Royce, 2007) suggests that border patrols cannot prevent Swedish people from arriving in Finland. The image portrays anonymous, barely visibly human figures walking behind glass walls, which furnishes the image with an air of secrecy (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and makes the Swedes appear to be infiltrators illicitly and secretly entering Finland, which is a typical strategy of scapegoating (Cinnirella, 1997).

Mood and attitude are aspects of interpersonal meaning used to address the audience rationally and emotionally (Martin and Rose, 2003). The notion of Sweden as Europe's coronavirus hotspot, the multimodal resources communicating war and crisis, and the suggestions that the Swedes might spread the virus to Finland construct a threatening mood in the news coverage. Even though we do not study the reception of the images, it is highly probable that this threatening mood may generate feelings of fear and anxiety and contribute to attitudes of mistrust and hostility toward the Swedes.

Nationalizing

The multimodal rhetorical strategy of nationalizing Sweden emphasizes the national dimension – the Swedishness – of the choices made regarding COVID-19. Ultimately, this rhetorical strategy acts as a means of creating a competitive relationship between Finland and Sweden, whereby Finland's superiority in dealing with COVID-19 is implied by pointing out the weaknesses and failures of Sweden's COVID-19 policy. The competitive setting reflects the historically constructed stereotypical conception of Finland and Sweden as rivals (see Daun et al., 2001; Liebkind et al., 2008). Hence, discursive means are used to construct national identities and groups of people (e.g. Breazu and Machin, 2018; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999).

One clear constituent of nationalizing strategy is formed by news stories and photos of the Swedish royal family. For instance, *Ilta-Sanomat* (June 6) published a news story titled 'National Day in the Shadow of the Pandemic' featuring images of the royal family (Figure A16). The national costumes worn by the Crown Princess and her children emphasize the dimension of Swedishness. Even though the headline refers to the shadow cast by COVID-19 on National Day celebrations, the visual expression of the images (e.g. happy facial expressions, an idyllic group portrait, and luminous colors) does not communicate a dark mood (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Even though these images do not contribute to the competitive relationship between Finland and Sweden typical of nationalizing rhetorical strategy, they establish a powerful nationalizing connection between the royal family as the central symbol of Swedishness and COVID-19.

One linguistic device of the nationalizing strategy is provided by the headlines and captions personifying Sweden. Sweden is likened to a human being with senses – 'Sweden is blind and deaf' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, June 24) and 'Tegnell outlines, Sweden listens' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, August 19) – and represented as a linguistic subject acquiring features of an active agent in headlines such as 'Sweden Follows Its Own Policy' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, March 24), and 'Finland Recommends the Use of Face Masks Soon, Sweden Does Not' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, August 13). According to McGraw and Dolan (2007: 317), personification of a state is one rhetorical means of representing a nation as a

coherent collectivity, which could consequently result in 'stronger attitudes that are resistant to change, increased level of stereotyping . . . intensified group identification, and polarized images of the "Other"'.

Another linguistic device emphasizing nationality is the labeling of COVID-19 policy as the 'Swedish strategy', 'Swedish way', and 'Swedish policy'. This kind of attributive use of the nationality as an adjective suggests the choices are not made by diverse experts and institutions in Sweden but rather by the Swedish nation collectively. In addition, the singular noun implies that the strategy, way, or policy is consistently supported by the Swedish nation and excludes the possibility of alternatives or disagreements. Simultaneously, the expression 'Swedish strategy' anchors the strategy to Sweden and implies that other nations follow their own strategies that differ from that of Sweden. Hence, the use of the national adjective can be understood as a strategy both typifying Sweden and separating it from other countries and nations (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003).

Interestingly, headlines used this as an affordance to question the decisions made by Swedish authorities and to create a competitive relationship between Finland and Sweden: 'Why Swedish Policy Differs Completely from Others?' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, March 24) and 'Finnish or Swedish Policy?' (*Ilta-Sanomat*, April 15). The rapid rise in the infection and death rates in Sweden during the summer of 2020 is presented as evidence of the unsuccessfulness of the 'Swedish way'. In addition, news headlines focusing on failures and mistakes (e.g. 'Corona Revealed Two Casting Defects of Swedish Society', *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 27; 'Sweden Has Abandoned Elderly People', *Ilta-Sanomat*, May 4) suggest that Sweden does not care about coronavirus deaths and judge the Swedish policy as a failure. Hence, in this context, the national adjective 'Swedish' becomes an attitudinal stance adjective (see Martin and White, 2005) conveying a negative evaluation of Sweden.

A powerful visual device of nationalizing rhetorical strategy is the use of images of the Swedish (and Finnish) flag. The Swedish flag appears in the background of images of Swedish authorities and ministers (see Figure A11). Even though the depiction of Swedish authorities and ministers is a nationalizing rhetoric device, the national flag in the image is a multiplicative visual element (O'Halloran, 2008) highlighting the status of the authorities as representatives of the nation. Second, images of flags are attached to news stories comparing Swedish and Finnish COVID-19 policies (Figures A17 and A18). In these contexts, the flags embedded in the image seem to wave in the wind. These images of waving, side-by-side Finnish and Swedish flags encourage association with the athletic rivalry that has existed between Finland and Sweden since 1925. This intertextual association of the long-running – and stereotypical – setting of rivalry may increase the aspect of competition between Finland and Sweden in terms of COVID-19 policy. In fact, COVID-19 was discussed in both newspapers in relation to the Finland–Sweden athletic rivalry when it was speculated whether a match could be arranged during the pandemic. The Finland–Sweden athletic rivalry and COVID-19 pandemic are directly linked to each other in a caption in *Ilta-Sanomat* (March 7): 'Until Friday afternoon there were 94 fatalities of Corona confirmed in Sweden and 15 in Finland.. . . At last a Finland–Sweden match, in which it is very nice to lose, absolutely!' (2020). As the caption shows, the text operates in terms of comparison and competition, but its sarcastic tone implies that Finland's defeat in the Finland–Sweden coronavirus competition is actually a victory for Finland.

The multimodal rhetorical strategy of nationalizing uses stereotypical national imagery (e.g. the royal family and flag) in connection with verbal expressions emphasizing the Swedishness of the COVID-19 policy. This multimodal complementarity (Royce, 2007) integrating national symbols with COVID-19 makes the pandemic appear to be a national concern and coping with it a matter of national capability. The comparison between Swedish and Finnish COVID-19 policies and infection and death rates constructs a competition – reminiscent of Finland's and Sweden's athletics rivalry – between the two nations, where evidence of Sweden's defeat and Finland's victory is presented visually and verbally.

Discussion

This article explores how the Finnish press constructs and mobilizes images of Sweden/ Swedes – the historical out-group for the Finns – in the context of media reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributions of this paper are threefold. Empirically, this study provides new knowledge about how national stereotypes are constructed and employed vis-à-vis COVID-19 to generate distinct group boundaries between 'us' and 'them' and to legitimize national COVID-19 policies. Theoretically, our study advances the understanding of the functions of national stereotypes as tools of identity building and collective meaning-making in times of crisis. Methodologically, by building upon the multimodal discourse analysis, we examine how different semiotic resources can be used together to facilitate the subtle use of national stereotypes in the generation of distinct group boundaries and nationalist discourse in the context of coping with the pandemic.

We found three multimodal rhetorical strategies: moralizing, demonizing, and nationalizing. These strategies construct discourses of arrogant, immoral, and dangerous Swedes and foster confrontation between Finland and Sweden. The first two multimodal rhetorical strategies create a negative image of Sweden and Swedes in relation to COVID-19 by drawing on the deep-rooted stereotypes formed during the course of history, which is typical in times of crises (Mihelj et al., 2009; Reicher and Stott, 2020; Skey, 2014). Hence, the discourse of arrogant Swedes sources from the stereotypical understanding of self-confident and conceited Swedes who look down on the Finns (Daun et al., 2001; Liebkind et al., 2008). The discourse of immoral Swedes, in turn, stems from the stereotype of socializing, outgoing, and talkative Swedes (Daun et al., 2001) who cannot be alone despite the threat of becoming infected with the virus or infecting others. The aforementioned stereotypes are related to the discourse of dangerous Swedes, whereby self-confidence, disobedience, and an outgoing character are seen as risky behaviors in terms of the spread of the virus.

The multimodal rhetorical strategies of moralizing and demonizing Sweden indirectly imply the superiority of moral and virtuous Finns. The third multimodal rhetorical strategy – nationalizing – is a permeable aspect also used in the first two rhetorical strategies in terms of explicit and implicit comparison and competition between Finland and Sweden. The direct and indirect presentation of Finland and Sweden as rivals arises from the historically constructed stereotype of the relationship between these countries that is akin to a competition between a big brother (Sweden) and little brother (Finland) (Liebkind et al., 2008). Simultaneously, the rhetorical strategy of nationalizing fosters the understanding of the pandemic and policies related to it as a national enterprise where national

capability, expertise, and spirit are manifested between Finland and Sweden. The rhetorical strategies criticizing Sweden implicitly construct an understanding of Swedish defeat and Finnish victory in this coronavirus competition. It becomes apparent that the rhetorical design was based on recontextualization (Blommaert, 2001: Machin, 2016, 2016; Pennycook, 2007; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999) and intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). In other words, the rhetorical strategies constructed through the selective interplay of multimodal resources serve as vehicles of recontextualization, drawing upon widely known national and historical stereotypes and persuading newspaper readers to perceive COVID-19 in Sweden through this intertextual lens of stereotypes.

The rhetorical ends of national stereotyping are manifold (Abell, 2011; Cinnirella, 1997; Reyes, 2007). Besides legitimizing intergroup relations and boosting Finnish national feeling and identity, constructing an image of Sweden as a warning example of misguided COVID-19 policy and deploying well-known and powerful cultural stereotypes in the multimodal rhetoric work to criticize and condemn Swedish coronavirus policy are an indirect means of legitimizing Finland's strict COVID-19 regulations and persuading Finnish people to obediently follow them. Since a persistent stereotype about the Finns is their modesty, rhetorizing the success of Finnish COVID-19 policy by criticizing others could be a more powerful means of persuasion in Finland than self-glorification.

Our multimodal analysis allowed us to further expose how national stereotypes were constructed and used in the interplay between visual and verbal semiotic resources (see e.g. Jones, 2014; Lazar, 2017b; Machin, 2013, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2005). According the Cheong (2004), contextualizing relations (co-contextualization and re-contextualization) between multimodal resources creates an interpretative space where meaning potentials of different modalities expand in the process of meaning construction. On the one hand, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* create co-contextualizing relations between corresponding visual and verbal elements to strengthen the understanding of COVID-19 policy and cope with the pandemic as a national enterprise. Co-contextualization emerges as a means of emphasizing Swedishness, which is portrayed in opposition to Finnishness; this method is related to the strategies of typification and separation (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003). On the other hand, both newspapers (but especially *Ilta-Sanomat*) deliberately created re-contextualizing relations between images and verbal elements when constructing an understanding of Sweden's misguided COVID-19 policy and an image of the Swedes as arrogant, immoral, and dangerous.

Whereas convergent meanings in co-contextualizing relations resonate with and mutually intensify each other's meaning potentials, re-contextualizing relations bring together antonymous multimodal resources with divergent meanings (O'Halloran, 2008). Interpretative space (Cheong, 2004) in the re-contextualizing relationship between divergent visual and verbal resources constructs ambiguity, which might persuade readers to utilize culturally and historically constructed stereotypes as the resource of sense making. As Reicher and Stott (2020) suggested, historical myths provide rhetorical resources that can be mobilized to provide different responses to the coronavirus crisis. In this way, multimodal co-contextualization and re-contextualization function as powerful means of a multimodal rhetoric capable of appealing to and recreating national stereotypes and constructing a divide between the two nations.

Resonating with Billig's (1995) observation that banal nationalism enables the nation to be reproduced in daily life as natural and inevitable, nationalism provides an everyday ideology that guides the Finnish press reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden. These everyday ideologies, which take the form of national stereotyping through a purposeful use of multimodal resources, serve various functions: differentiation and typification, boosting one's national self-image (Abell, 2011; Bishop and Jaworski, 2003; Cinnirella, 1997), and legitimization and persuasion of coronavirus-related policies. Most importantly, nationalism provides a historically grounded rhetorical resource to guide sensemaking and collective coping when confronted with a new, threatening situation (see Moscovici, 1984).

Even though the stereotypes developed between two groups can be consensual (Henning-Lindblom, 2013), they are not fixed but rather dynamic and dependent on the context and perspectives of the parties involved (Haslam et al., 2002; Lazar, 2017a). Indeed, stereotypes labeling Swedes as arrogant, self-confident, outgoing, and talkative (Daun et al., 2001) might gain different meanings and serve different functions depending on the situation. In the context of Finnish news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are used to criticize and condemn Swedish coronavirus policy and remind the Finns of the threat caused by Sweden's high rates of infections and deaths, which could spread to Finland. The stereotypes were used to indirectly celebrate the success of Finnish COVID-19 policy. In addition, as part of a multimodal rhetoric, they were used to create a strong divide between Finland and Sweden, fostering the positive perception of the in-group (Finns) and negative perception of the out-group (Swedes). The COVID-19 pandemic is a contemporary issue that can fuel intergroup tension (Jetten et al., 2020; Van Assche et al., 2020) and problematize people's interactions not only in the present but perhaps also in the future. Since news images and stories shape our understanding of the world and people around us – often without us being aware of it – studies exploring and displaying their constructed nature and rhetorical mechanisms are of vital importance during the ongoing pandemic.

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Appendix

Figure A1. Ilta-Sanomat, 2.5.2020.
Photo: TT/Reuters.

Figure A2. Ilta-Sanomat, 2.5.2020.
Photo: Reuters.

Figure A3. Ilta-Sanomat, 2.5.2020.
Photo: TT/Reuters.

Figure A4. Helsingin Sanomat, 1.5.2020.
Photo: Anders Wiklund/AFP.

Figure A5. Helsingin Sanomat, 11.6.2020.
Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP.

Figure A6. Ilta-Sanomat, 22.4.2020.
Photo top: Antti Hämälainen/IS; Photo bottom: TT News Agency.

Figure A7. Ilta-Sanomat, 22.4.2020.

Figure A8. Ilta-Sanomat 30.6.2020.
Photo: Stina Stjernkvist/AFP/Lehtikuva.

Figure A9. Ilta-Sanomat, 26.6.2020.
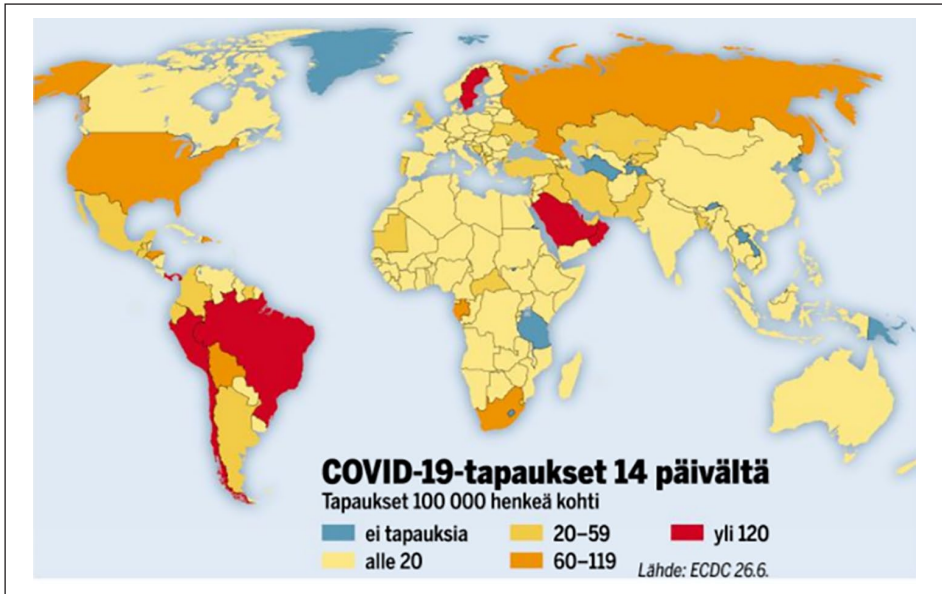Photo: Stina Sjernkvist/AFP/Lehtikuva.

Figure A10. Ilta-Sanomat 30.6.2020.

Figure A11. Helsingin Sanomat 6.4.2020.
Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP.

Figure A12. Helsingin Sanomat, 22.4.2020.
Jonas Ekstromer/TT.

Figure A13. Ilta-Sanomat, 3.4.2020.
Photo: Jonas Ekstromer/TT News Agency.

Figure A14. Ilta-Sanomat 27.8.2020.
Photo: Timo Heikkala/Lehtikuva.

Figure A15. Helsingin Sanomat, 24.7.2020.
Photo: Vesa-Matti Väärä/HS.

Figure A16. Ilta-Sanomat 8.6.2020.
Photos: Linda Broström/Kungl. Hovstaterna & Fredrik Sandberg/TT News Agency/Reuters.

Figure A17. Ilta-Sanomat 16.4.2020.
Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP/Lehtikuva.

Figure A18. Ilta-Sanomat 27.8.2020.
Photo: no information of the photographer.