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Everyday discourse as a space of citizenship: the linguistic construction of in-groups and out-groups in online discussion boards

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze online discussion threads related to national belonging in Finland, Denmark, and France. These discussions are all related to immigration and the definition of 'legitimate' citizens. Our approach is empirical: the goal is to show how in-groups and out-groups are construed linguistically and discursively in the data and how the interactants negotiate membership categories and express their opinions regarding them. The most important in-group in the datasets consists of the nationals born in the country, whereas the out-group par excellence is formed by Muslims. The data show how the boundaries of national communities are performatively constructed through the everyday discourse of online fora, which constitute an important arena of societal debate today. This discourse draws its force from the reiteration of stereotypical generalizations and the power attached to the written word in a communication environment enabling an efficient dissemination of ideological discourse.

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Introduction

In this paper, we will examine the ways in which Finnish, Danish, and French internet users discuss the composition of social groups that have a legitimate right to reside in their country and that can be genuinely regarded as being part of the 'people'. By studying the linguistic and discursive properties of everyday online conversations, our paper aims to provide an empirical description of how participants of online fora understand and discuss issues related to citizenship and national belonging and how dominant ideologies and attitudes about migration and migrants are being shared and transmitted. We show that the discussions concerning citizenship often revolve around the division between native-born citizens, who are regarded as legitimate residents, and the so-called foreigners, who are typically perceived as illegitimate residents or intruders. The emergence of Muslims as the 'Other' par excellence is one of the outcomes of our empirical analysis, the goal of which is to examine the micro-level linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which people use language to construct representations (see Hall 1977) of in-groups and out-groups. Often,

the posts included in the online discussions of our data can be characterized as hate speech, illustrating the notoriously complex nature of this phenomenon (Baider, Millar, and Assimakopoulos 2020; Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas 2021, 218).

The polarization of opinions, grouping of citizens, and Islamophobia are phenomena clearly linked to public discussions about citizenship in Finland, Denmark, and France. In the context of current citizenship debates, Denmark and France index specific phenomena and events related to anti-migrant sentiments and especially Islamophobia, as well as a long series of clashes between free speech, secularism, and blasphemy (Asad 2013). For example, the mention of Denmark evokes the polemical depiction of the prophet Mohammad in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and the subsequent controversy (Mahmood 2009). As to France, the clash between secularist ideology and Islam has materialized in several debates and events, including the Islamic scarf controversy of 1989, the formal prohibition of covering the face in public space in 2010 (Abdelgadir and Fouka 2020; Bowen 2010), and the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in 2015. The aftermath of these shootings and the November 2015 attacks in Paris were followed by increased Islamophobia (Alicino 2016; Najib and Hopkins 2019) and re-evaluations of the intersections between free speech, secularism, and religion (Balibar 2018). While these debates revolve mostly around the clash between secularism and religion, secularism itself can be regarded as the fuel igniting the conflict, ‘erroneously depicted as a standoff between “religious taboos” and “secular freedoms”’ (Mahmood 2016, 207). Regarding Finland, the current political climate has been shaped by the emergence of a nativist, populist party with openly anti-immigration and often anti-Islam agendas. In all three countries, such political movements have had a decisive influence on both traditional political parties and the public opinion (Mudde 2007; Reynié 2016; Heinze 2018).

Political and social debates have largely moved from traditional to digital media, where information spreads fast and may have consequences far removed from the original intention of the user. In this conjuncture, it is important to reflect upon the seemingly minor yet unpredictable role of everyday social debate (cf. Beveridge and Koch 2019, 153) and especially the force this everyday discourse may have in transforming the perception and representation of social reality. Our paper aims to contribute to critical citizenship studies by highlighting the micro-level linguistic workings of everyday discourse as an important and meaningful space of citizenship. We argue that everyday discourse constitutes a nurturing ground and a source of inspiration and information for normative discourses, such as law or political discourse (in the meaning of governance based on party politics), and a site where ideologies are naturalized. With this insight, which we will develop further in the following paragraphs, we hope to build a bridge between critical citizenship studies and linguistics.

Recent critical scholarship argues that citizenship is best understood as an *everyday practice* consisting of particular routines and habits through which the elements of the ‘common’ are constructed, transformed, and negotiated (Puumala and Shindo 2021; Caglar 2015; Lazar 2015). In our view, *everyday discourse* is an essential component of this everyday practice. Foucault (1972, 56) characterizes discourses as ‘*practices* that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. Examples of discourse in this sense include semiotic practices linked to particular institutions, such as legal, religious, political, or therapeutic discourse (Foucault 1972, 225). Alongside such discourses having a more or less pronounced connection to the institutional sphere, much

discursive activity pertains to the constant ‘murmur’ of the everyday discourse of mundane interactions (Maingueneau 1991, 21). This everyday discourse is situated in the *interdiscursive space* where the boundaries of different discursive formations are constantly transformed (Foucault 1972, 32, 97–99, 158–59, 172). Hence, the interdiscursive space constitutes a reservoir and a transitory zone having the potential to transform any discursive formation and its discourses. In particular, everyday discourse functions as a site in which dominant ideologies are naturalized and rationalized as common sense (Simpson 1993, 5–6). The everyday language mobilized in such *mundane discourses* can also normalize hate and hate groups (Pascale 2019, 909). As a result, hate can become a normal practice in institutionalized, normative discourses, such as political discourse.

The theory of performativity provides further insights into the impact of everyday discourse on normative discourses. Institutional, normative discourses, such as legal or administrative discourse, allow the enactment of performative speech acts, namely acts that not only describe the event but also perform it (Austin 1962). The solemn formulation by which citizenship status is granted to a person in a citizenship ceremony or an administrative decision denying international protection in an asylum case illustrate such performative enactment. At the same time, utterances that describe reality are performative to a certain extent. Such descriptive, constative utterances construct our reality and the conditions in which ‘real’ performatives become possible (Fish 1980, 198). Following this hypothesis, we consider digital discussion boards to be sites in which people co-construct reality by means of constative speech acts describing, narrating, and qualifying events, groups of people, and societal phenomena. Hence, this everyday discourse systematically defines its objects as well (cf. Foucault 1972, 56), namely migrants, migration, and ‘legitimate’ citizens.

Interdiscursivity is also a key concept in critical discourse analysis, which highlights the open and hybrid nature of discourses (Wodak 2001, 66). Through the interdiscursive space, everyday discourse maintains a symbiotic relation with media and political discourse and has an impact on legally binding norms; political discourse shapes and transforms authoritarian discourses such as legal and administrative discourses where the normative enactment of citizenship in performative speech acts takes place. Thus, the construction of the Nation as an imagined community (Anderson 1991, 5–7; Balibar 2002) entails a keystone formed by everyday discourse.

The article is anchored in critical sociolinguistics (Blommaert 2005, 1; Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2017). To a certain extent, it is also inspired by Wodak’s (2001, 2015) approach to critical discourse analysis, when it comes to the intertextual and interdiscursive construction of belonging. Our analysis focuses on the linguistic phenomena that are observable in the textual data because, as linguists, we can claim that a certain phenomenon exists only when this existence is backed up by the linguistic analysis of actual language use. In the context of Islamophobia and hate speech, the analysis allows us to indicate the existence of the phenomenon and unpack how it is produced by language use. This is important if we aspire to understand everyday acts of exclusion as scenes of citizenship and to analyze the online fora as sites where language, citizenship, and community-making intertwine in problematic ways and with concrete consequences to those who are cast as outsiders (see also Puumala and Karim 2021).

In order to understand the dynamics of everyday discourse in the interdiscursive space of online discussion boards, a detailed linguistic and discursive analysis is necessary, because these sites of citizenship debates draw on implicit and explicit definitions of in-groups and out-groups through the medium of language. Our analysis concentrates on the identification of phenomena that emerge from the data and starts from the lexical level: we analyze which groups of people are represented in the data and how they are being named and referred to in short excerpts from discussion boards in three languages – Finnish, Danish, and French. The lexical analysis enables us to show how meanings and citizenship categories are construed in discourse with the aim of closing certain individuals from the sphere of citizenship. In addition, we examine the intertextual and interdiscursive links that evoke other texts and discourses and show how the ideologies of citizenship are materialized in discourse. This second level of analysis links our study to a longstanding tradition of examining identities and different forms of discrimination in critical discourse analysis and sociolinguistics and to the construction of positive representations of the ‘self’ and ‘us’ and negative representations of the ‘other’ and ‘them’ (Wodak 2001). Central elements in this discursive analysis include *topoi*, namely argumentative elements that are necessary for a claim to be possible because they introduce arguments or themes presented as being shared and generally accepted truths, so that no further explanations are needed (Wodak 2001; Anscombe 1995, 190).

In the following three sections, we analyze a sample of excerpts from our three datasets. The original Finnish, Danish, and French texts are italicized, and the English translation is placed below the excerpt in roman style. Specific words that are analyzed more in detail are boldfaced. For the sake of clarity, we have normalized idiosyncratic writing practices such as erroneous spelling or punctuation in our translations because their indexical and other additional meanings would be impossible to translate (Blommaert 2006).

Due to the focus and scope of the analysis, several discussion board posts containing overtly xenophobic and racist discourse are reproduced in the article. While this hateful language can have politically significant and severe consequences for minorities, we would like to emphasize that it is important to analyze these harmful, stereotyping, and derogatory expressions in order to understand how everyday hate speech is operationalized as a tool of exclusion and dehumanization. We do not endorse the views represented by the posts we analyze.

The construction of anti-immigrant discourse on a Finnish discussion forum

In this section, we analyze a short thread consisting of 27 posts in the Suomi24 (‘Finland24’) online discussion forum, which is the largest online discussion board in Finland.¹ The thread, which is part of the department ‘Society – Immigration’ of the discussion board, was started in October 2017, and in addition to the 27 remaining posts, 13 had been removed by the moderators for rule violations.² The data were collected in November 2017. The thread coincides with a period during which several terrorist attacks had taken place in Europe, including Finland, and most posts express explicit

¹We have analyzed other aspects of this thread in another article (Määttä, Suomalainen, and Tuomarla 2020).

²The entire thread can be read here: <https://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/t/15019779/kauanko-muslimija-aiotaan-sietaa-sivistysmaissa>.

anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments. This is clearly visible in the title of the first post, *Kauanko muslimeja aiotaan sietää sivistysmaissa?* ('For how long will Muslims be tolerated in civilized countries?'), which initiates a question–answer pattern that mimics the properties of naturally occurring face-to-face conversations to a certain degree and introduces a topic to which the other interactants are expected to adhere (Virtanen and Kääntä 2018, 142; Giles 2016, 486). Here, the topic consists of Islam being incompatible with civilization, and it creates a strong division between 'Muslims' and the people of 'civilized countries'. While the author of the first post mentions Muslims as a generalized group in the title of the thread, this group is not named in the first post. Instead, the writer's idea of 'Muslims' is defined through several attributes attached to them:

(1) *Lähes päivittäin saa kuulla allahu akbar-uutisia. Lapsivaimot, muiden uskontojen vainoamiset, tyttöjen sukuelimen silpomiset, naisten alistaminen jne jne jne. Raiskaukset, silmitön väkivalta uskonnon varjolla. Ei tällaista ole tilauksessa länsimaihin.*

Almost every day, one may/has to hear 'allahu akbar' news. Child wives, persecutions of other religions, mutilations of girls' genitals, submission of women etc. etc. etc. Rapes, blind violence under the guise of religion. Such things are not on order in Western countries.

Hence, the beginning of the thread clearly associates Muslims with brutality and terrorism that are both based on religion. Muslims are represented as the opposite of Western civilization, and the last sentence clearly links civilization per se with the West. In addition to words, this representation is based on presuppositions. Thus, the question that forms the title of the thread invites responses from like-minded people because it presupposes that Muslims effectively do not belong to civilized countries. The same presupposition is expressed in the first sentence of the actual thread, in which the author uses the so-called zero-person construction (*saa kuulla*, ['has to hear'] or ['may hear']) in which the verb is in the third person singular but there is no overt grammatical subject. This particularity of the Finnish language allows the author to include the readers among those who have to hear such news, as if they shared the same experience (see Laitinen 2006). At the same time, the construction allows the diversion of discursive authority: anyone could be the author of this statement. Other techniques used to divert discursive authority include using a question instead of a declarative sentence in the title of the thread, as well as the list of attributes in elliptical sentences in which there is neither subject nor verb. Hence, these strategies enable the author to emit stereotypical topoi related to Muslims without being syntactically responsible for them.

Finnish personal constructions that express generalized or impersonal actions, such as zero-person, passive, and elliptical constructions, are used in several other posts of this thread for similar purposes. While certain posts mention the word 'Muslim', especially when referring to acts of terrorism and the author's own opinions, another recurrent feature is to replace this word by another noun:

(2) *Nämä kuppaiset valepukit on ajettava ulos Euroopasta.*

These **syphilitic liars** have to be chased out of Europe.

In this example, the identity of the actor who has to chase the unwanted visitors is left open: the passive voice allows the author to represent the wish as potentially shared by all interactants, while at the same time as emanating from no particular source of discursive authority. The adjective *kuppainen*, here in the plural form *kuppaiset*, denotes ‘syphilitic’, but it can also be used in a wider sense as referring to something that is dirty or in bad shape. This adjective and the compound noun *valepukki*, literally ‘lying billy-goat’, form a collocation representing the topos of dehumanization, describing the out-group as dirty and animalistic. In addition, the word *pukki* (‘goat’) may also denote a man who is sexually overactive, which, together with the adjective *kuppainen* (literally, ‘syphilitic’), echoes the topos of sexual violence. Other examples of the topos of dehumanization in this thread include words such as *paska* (‘shit’) and *sonta* (‘dung’), referring to Muslim refugees and other migrants. In fact, this topos is presupposed in the title of the thread and the first post, where Muslims are represented as not pertaining to civilization.

The data also contain an example of a deformation of the word *Muslim* in an ironic vein:

(3) *hyssyn, hyssyn. ei saa yleistää. yksittäistapaus. ei saa antaa pelolle valtaa. pitää kääntää molemmat posket. puukko kilahtaa, henki pellolle vilahtaa. mikähän sota syttys, jos me tehtäs mussuille samat teot, mitä he ovat meille tehneet. oltas narun jatkona lyhtypylväessä.*

Hush, hush, one must not generalize. An individual case. One must not be overwhelmed by fear. One must turn both cheeks. As soon as the knife rings, life away springs. (I wonder) what kind of war would break out if we did to **Muslims** the same they have done to us. We would be hung on a lamppost.

All aspects of the figurative language used in this example cannot be translated into English. Thus, in line 3, the author uses the noun *mussu* (here in the plural allative case [dative] *mussuille*) to refer to Muslims. While this noun appears to be invented by the author of this post, it clearly recalls the noun *mussukka*, used as a term of endearment and affection between lovers. At the same time, it begins with the same three letters as the Finnish word *muslimi* (‘Muslim’) and has an even clearer phonological analogy with the obsolete, nowadays derogatory noun *musulmaani*. This double connotation, fluctuating between endearment and irony, is linked to the irony present in the first four sentences of the example, emanating from an imaginary liberal discourse that welcomes foreigners. Interestingly, the last sentence in the ironic passage (‘One must turn both cheeks’) is an almost direct quote from the Sermon on the Mount, attributed to Jesus Christ.³ The following sentence is also related to Christianity: it constitutes a pastiche of the couplet related to indulgences and attributed to the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel (‘As soon as the gold in the casket rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs’). However, it is clear that these intertextual elements are not used in order to create an antagonism between Christianity and Islam. Rather, they emanate from a shared depository of adages and fragments of text whose exact origins have become obscure. Interestingly, the ironic deformation of Tetzel’s couplet also forms an articulation separating the liberal discourse, quoted in the first four sentences, from the rest of the post, presumably echoing a discourse to which the author adheres.

³Matthew 5:39.

The fate of the call-to-prayer fragment, *Allahu akbar*, is somewhat similar to adages and fragments emanating from Christianity, although in this case there are intertextual links to current affairs as well. This metonymic expression appears twice in the data. Originally, it means ‘God is the greatest’ or ‘Allah is greater’ (WikiIslam 2019) and is part of the Islamic call to prayer (Pye 1993, s.v. *Allāhu akbar*). In addition, it is said to have been used in battle cries even in Mohammad’s era (Adamec 2009, 32). In our data, the expression is clearly linked to Islamist terrorism and the knife attack in Marseille that took place just a couple of days before the thread was started. For example, the Finnish National Broadcasting company mentioned, at the beginning of their story, the Marseille attack and the fact that the attacker uttered the phrase *Allahu akbar*.

While the dichotomy between ‘legitimate’ members of community and ‘traitors’ is treated as a Finnish phenomenon in many posts, several other posts describe it as a division that is present in several nation-states. In particular, this argument is represented as pan-European, so that in addition to references to Finnish political leaders, one post also mentions European leaders. In another post, Europe is also contrasted with the Middle East. In addition, the title of the thread mentions ‘civilized countries’ in the plural, and this concept is further defined as referring to the West in the first post. Hence, while all posts, with the exception of that of one potential troll, represent nationalistic ideologies, this nationalism is often conceived as pan-European in the sense of all European nations sharing the same ‘problem’ with foreign intruders and naïve and foolish politicians and liberals.

Defining ‘residents’ and ‘visitors’ in a Danish news comments section

In this section, we analyze a series of comments collected on the website of a Danish tabloid newspaper, *Ekstra Bladet*. The comments are related to a news article dealing with immigration and refugees, published in May 2020, with the following headline: *Flere flygtninge forlader Danmark end der kommer hertil* (‘More refugees leave Denmark than come here’).⁴ The data were collected in June 2020. Among the 849 comments, we have chosen to analyze the first 44 in this article. These comments are also a part of *Ekstra Bladet*’s debate forum *Nationen* (‘The Nation’), an online platform where registered users can comment upon the articles of *Ekstra Bladet* as well as respond to each other’s comments.

The news article explains the results of an analysis made by the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration. The analysis shows that in 2019, there were more refugees of Somalian, Syrian, and Iraqi origin leaving Denmark than coming to the country. In the comments section, the readers speculate why this is happening. A general topos reproduced in several comments is that there are refugees who come to Denmark to take advantage of the Danish society, returning home enriched after having made Danish citizens finance their stay in Denmark. This topos, common in anti-migrant discourses in other countries as well, construes refugees as ‘visitors’ who have no intention of becoming Danish citizens, as illustrated in the following post:

⁴The article can be accessed online through the following link: <https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/samfund/flere-flygtninge-forlader-danmark-end-der-kommer-hertil/8109614>

(4) *Vi har betalt i dyre domme, for at vi har givet disse ikke inviterede mennesker ophold, mad, husly, tolkebistand, lægehjælp, tandlægehjælp, undervisning m.m. Nu skal vi gud hjælpe mig også betale mange penge efter deres målestok, for at de rejser hjem igen og hjælpe til med at genopbygge deres hjemlande. De vender hjem velbeslæede. Håber vi får en garanti for, at de ikke har mulighed for at søge hertil igen ☺ ☺*

We have paid a high price to accommodate these intruders' stay, food, housing, interpreting service, medical and dental care, education etc. For God's sake, now we also have to give them what to **them** is large sums of money just to have **them** go home and rebuild **their** home country. **They** return home wealthy. Hope we are guaranteed that **they** can never return here.

In (4), we can also see how a juxtaposition between 'us' (in Danish, *vi*) and 'them' (in Danish, *de/dem*) is created. In this context, *vi* refers to the in-group, comprising members of Danish society – including the author of the comment – and *de/dem* to the out-group, the unwanted refugees who do not belong to Denmark. In this dataset, the out-group is mostly referred to as *de/dem* ('they/them'), but generalizing plural nouns are used as well. These nouns may indicate the religion of the group, as in *muslimer* ('Muslims'); country of origin, as in *syrere* ('Syrians'), *somaliere* ('Somalians'), or *tyrkere* ('Turks'); or status, as in *flygtninge* ('refugees'). Interestingly, the word *flygtning* ('refugee') is used only in six out of 44 comments, even though it is a key word in the news article to which the comments react. As in the Finnish data, the usage of the third-person plural pronouns instead of a specific noun to refer to people forming the topic of the discussion relies on shared understanding among the users of the website. Hence, by replacing the noun with a pronoun, the writer assumes that other users know the 'correct' referent of the pronoun *de/dem* based on the context: the referent is constituted by migrants, presented as misusing Danish taxpayers' money.

Even if the general attitude of the comments section is occasionally rather hostile, there are not many openly aggressive or racist lexical expressions referring to the out-group in this dataset, as compared to the Finnish dataset.⁵ Out of the 44 posts, only three comments contain referential expressions that have an explicitly racist meaning. Two of these are cited below:

(5) *Husk at sprede rygten om at dk ikke er et godt land for muhammedanere og at starthjælpen⁶ er genindført og aldrig nogensinde fjernes, hjemme i de muhammedanske kredse!!!*

Don't forget to spread the word to the **Mohammedanian** circles that Denmark isn't a good country for **Mohammedans** and that the start allowance has been reinstated and it will never be abolished.

(6) *Det ville være bedre at sige til muhammedanerne at nu skal i skride at helvede til, men uden penge . . . [- -] der er endda råd til ferie til muhammedanistan, med billige charterfly.*

It would better to just tell the **Mohammedans** to go to hell, but without money . . . [- -] there is even money for a vacation in **Mohammedanistan** on a cheap charter flight.

⁵This could naturally also be a result of moderation; with regard to the Danish data, we do not have the information of how many comments are removed by the moderators for rule violations.

⁶*Starthjælp*, 'start allowance', is a very low economic benefit for people who have immigrated to Denmark. In 2002, it replaced the much more generous social assistance that immigrants were allocated prior to the change.

In (5) and (6), racist expressions include the noun *muhammedaner* ('Mohammedan') in plural form, the adjective *mohammedanske* ('Mohammedanian'), as well as the place-denoting derivative *muhammedanistan*. In Danish, the word *muhammedaner* is considered old-fashioned and derogatory like the English word *Mohammedan* or the word *musulmaani* in the Finnish dataset (*DDO*, s.v. *muhammedaner*), making it a racist expression.

In the Danish dataset, the use of the first- and third-person plural pronouns is clearly intertwined with the question of who gets to be a genuine Danish citizen who is not just a visitor without a verified status. For the authors of these posts, being a Dane is highly valued and constitutes an exclusive property that is not easy to attain, if altogether possible. Several posts appear to contain an underlying claim that one can only obtain real, cultural citizenship by being born in Denmark, preferably from Danish-born parents. Hence, it is impossible for foreigners to become Danish. However, if they acclimate to the surrounding culture, they can be accepted among the Danes as legitimate residents within Denmark's borders. This idea can be observed in the following post, which does not oppose immigration per se but points the finger at *kulturfremmede*, 'cultural foreigners' or 'strangers', as others who do not fit into Denmark and its culture:

(7) *Indvandringen kan til dels kontrolleres og er ikke det største problem.*

*Det er derimod, at der er så mange af de **kulturfremmede**, der allerede er her, der er utilpassede og får en hulens masse børn.*

Det sidste gælder specielt syrere, somaliere og tyrkere

To some extent, immigration can be controlled and that is not the biggest problem. Contrarily, the fact that there are so many of these **cultural foreigners**, who are here already, not fitting in and having a ton of children.

The latter is especially true for Syrians, Somalis, and Turks.

In Section 2, when discussing the Finnish dataset, we noticed a certain pan-European nationalistic ethos, whereas in the Danish dataset, the arguments clearly underline a Danish nationalistic ethos, focusing on what happens inside Denmark's borders. In this dataset, Danes constitute the default category among all people who live in Denmark, and the boundary between 'us' (Danes) and 'them' (non-Danes) is clearly drawn: Danes are born and raised in Denmark, and anyone not fulfilling these criteria is considered a 'visitor', probably aiming to exploit the Danish welfare system.

Negotiating Frenchness in a YouTube discussion related to homophobia

In this section, we analyze one thread that is part of a YouTube discussion related to the video 'Homophobie – Stop à la vague de la haine' ('Homophobia – Stop the hate wave'), posted on YouTube in January 2019. The data were collected in May 2019 and consist of 410 posts. The thread analyzed here contains 12 posts by six different participants. We chose this dataset in order to illustrate how xenophobia and definitions of 'legitimate' citizenship can intersect with other discriminatory discourses, such as homophobia.

The thread starts with a long post (153 words) whose main argument, reproduced in (8), is that homophobia is a form of terrorism because it entails attacking and killing people for ideological reasons:

(8) [—] *l'homophobie EST du terrorisme. Des gens sont agressés et tués au nom d'une idéologie; l'idéologie de l'agresseur*

[—] Homophobia IS terrorism. People are being threatened and killed in the name of an ideology; the aggressor's ideology.

The next post (9) introduces the expression *racaille de cité* ('ghetto thug' or 'ghetto scum'), which designates a prototypical member of an out-group causing problems. The word *racaille(s)* is used six times in this thread, and it can therefore be considered a key word. The words *racaille* and *cité*, as well as the compound *racaille de cité*, represent serious translation problems. The word *cité* in this compound refers to low-income housing projects comprising mostly high-rise buildings, typically characterized by a large concentration of immigrants, and often associated with violence, drugs, and criminality. In the absence of a better equivalent, we have chosen to translate the compound *racaille de cité* as the English compound 'ghetto thug'. The word *racaille* became famous in October 2005, after Nicolas Sarkozy, who was the Minister of the Interior at the time, used it to refer to young people rioting in Argenteuil, on the outskirts of Paris. Implicitly, the author of example (9) argues that homophobia is caused by *racailles* and that nothing will change as long as these 'thugs' are not punished:

(9) *Tant qu'on laissera les racailles de cité impunis, rien ne changera. Ils font régner la terreur là-bas*

As long as the **ghetto thugs** are not punished, nothing will change. They impose terror there.

This post links homophobia directly with the video that inspired the discussion thread. The video also presents the difficulty of being gay while living in a suburban high-rise development where people experience a constant threat of violence. The video also associates homophobia and fear with the immigrant population. In the next post, a person who identifies himself as gay argues that it is mostly 'French people' rather than 'foreigners' who stare at him when he walks down the street with his boyfriend:

(10) *je suis gay et je peux te garantir que j'ai eu plus de "français" qui ont des regards insistant dans la rue que des "étrangers" quand je me promène avec mon copain . . .*

I am gay and I can assure you that it is more often "French people" than "foreigners" who stare at me when I walk with my partner . . .

This post therefore attempts to counter the previous argument by using a personal experience of belonging to a minority as anecdotal evidence. By using quotation marks, this interactant questions the simplistic division between 'French' and 'foreigners'. In other posts that follow, the discussion centers around issues of racism and citizenship:

(11) *Racaille de cité= étrangers ? Heu c'est un peu raciste comme penser –*

Ghetto thug = foreigners? Er that's a little bit racist as a way of thinking –

Hence, in this post (11), the implied equation between ‘ghetto thugs’ (9) and ‘foreigners’ (10) is literally questioned and labelled as racist.

The following three⁷ posts, (12)–(14), are authored by the same username, *J’ai pas d’idée pour mon pseudo* (‘I can’t come up with a username’). The main argument in these posts is that many ‘French’ people are homophobic and that many people living in the *cités*, referred to as ‘thugs’ in example (9) earlier, are in fact ‘French’ citizens even though they may have different origins:

(12) *Figure-toi qu’il y a énormément de français homophobes et ce que tu appelles les “racailles de cité” sont de nationalité française, ils ont juste différentes origines.*

Try to understand that there are a tremendous number of French people who are homophobic and that among those you call “ghetto thug”, many are French citizens, they just have different origins.

Importantly, while the author of the post in (12) repeats the compound *racailles de cité* used in post (9) (without quotes), he/she prefers not to take responsibility for using the expression. This distancing becomes clear by the use of quotation marks and metalinguistic expressions such as ‘what you call’ or ‘like the person said’ in connection with the questionable expression. The negotiation continues in the following post: the idea of the *racaille* being French is refuted, and the author states that ‘they themselves reclaim their North African origins’, meaning that they do not consider themselves French and that they hate France:

(13) *certes mais ils se revendiquent eux même des ces origines maghrébines, donc au final ils ne se considèrent même pas en tant que français et haïssent la France*

Sure, but they themselves reclaim their North African origins, so in the end they don’t even consider themselves to be French and **hate** France.

In French, the verb *haïr* (‘hate’) has a very strong negative connotation. In fact, while the expression *racailles de cité* implies a localization of the topos of danger and threat, this post generalizes danger and threat as concerning the entire French nation. However, while acknowledging the possibility of such hatred, the author of the next post seems to interpret it as an almost innocuous emotional stance and answers by saying that ‘they’ remain French even if they reclaim their origins and hate France, and that ‘they’ do not all reclaim their origins and some of them call themselves French. In this post, it is difficult to know what the exact referent of the pronoun ‘they’ is: a subcategory of immigrants of North African origin or the immigrants in general? This is due to the fact that the pronoun may in fact refer to any of the plural nouns depicting groups of non-French populations mentioned earlier in the thread:

(14) *Ils n’en restent pas moins français même s’ils revendiquent leurs origines et haïssent la France. Après ils ne revendiquent pas tous leurs origines, certains se disent français.*

They are not less French even if **they** claim their origins and hate France. Besides, **they** do not all reclaim their origins, **some of them** call themselves French too.

⁷Note that moderators may have removed posts in between.

In a similar manner as in the Finnish and Danish data above, there is a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, namely the in-group and the out-group. Some participants seem to take the divide for granted and as self-evident, while others, particularly username *J’ai pas d’idée pour mon pseudo* (‘I can’t come up with a username’), question the categorization. The nationality of homophobic persons emerges as the main topic in this thread: are the French homophobic, or is homophobia typical of North Africans? And what if ‘they’ are French citizens after all? The pronoun *nous* (‘we/us’) seems to refer to the French in some cases and to homosexuals in others. It is clear that none of the participants count themselves as *racaille de cité*, and in harmony with the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, a distinction is operated between ‘there’ (working-class suburbs) and ‘here’ (elsewhere). Indeed, none of the participants claim to have foreign origins in this discussion thread.

The construction of in-groups and out-groups in everyday online discourse

Online discussion boards and digital communication in general have become a new arena of everyday discourse and acts of everyday citizenship. These sites of citizenship are characterized by freedom in the sense that anyone can publish anything regardless of the contents and the style, and the text is disseminated immediately to countless other participants; censorship in the form of moderation cannot possibly monitor all discussions. Besides, several techniques can be used to counter moderation: words can be deformed, new words created, and the meanings can be obscured by using metaphorical language or irony, as was demonstrated in the analysis. In online communities consisting of large numbers of users, it is easy to connect with like-minded people, which also favors the creation of echo chambers. The shortcomings of online communication, as compared to live or ‘natural’ communication, provide one explanation. Since features constructing context and guiding the interpretation of others’ speech – such as gaze, posture, or tone of voice – are lacking, the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is higher than in a live setting. In such a situation, it is easier to discuss with users who share the same background knowledge and ideologies and construct their arguments on the same premises. For example, in our data, the participants rely on the idea that their interlocutors share a similar view on ‘legitimate citizens’ and ‘others’ in their definitions of ‘citizenship’ and ‘belonging’. Since the premises on which these definitions are based are ideological, there is not much space for contestation and logical argumentation.

The construction of a loud group of insiders is particularly salient in the Finnish and the Danish data. In these posts, the participants tend to associate with exclusionary politics, and they tolerate only like-minded stances. Typically, the construction of the image of the ‘Other’ parallels the creation of the image of the ‘Self’. The ‘Other’ therefore emerges as a quintessential component of the definition of ‘us’ (see Said 1978). Topoi circulating in different discourses related to migrants and migration play a key role in this process. Thus, in the Finnish and Danish data, the out-group is described as being *dishonest* and *taking advantage* of the system. The topos of *dehumanization* or animalization (Shindo 2019; see also Puumala and Shindo 2021) is present in all datasets, especially in the Finnish data, which also shares the topos of *violence and intolerance* with the French data.

The topos of *victimization* is powerfully foregrounded in all datasets as a defining feature constructing the in-group: *Westerners are victims of violence on the part of Muslims* (Finnish and French data) and *financial exploitation on their part* (Finnish and Danish data). In all datasets, the quintessential out-group is formed by Muslims. All these topoi are built on the premise that Muslims or other migrants constitute a threat to the safety and purity of the national community, and they are presented as elements that could never fit in. The voice of the ‘Other’ is not heard because all participants share the same anti-migrant and anti-Muslim premises or because participation requires proficiency in the language of the discussion. If the voice of the ‘Other’ is quoted, it is reduced to fragments of religious discourse deformed into terrorist mantras. On other occasions, the voice is replaced by negative actions and essences, namely attributes and patterns of action represented as being permanent. Importantly, the dichotomy between the in-group and the out-group is constructed across categories: the in-group consist of members of national and ethnic groups (Finns, Danes, and French), whereas the out-group is defined by its members’ religion (Islam), racialized into an essentialist category.

In addition to the similarities, important differences emerge between the datasets. A racialized image of Europe is constructed in the Finnish dataset (example 2), whereas the Danish data construct Danes as the in-group, which is sometimes essentialized as culturally pure (example 7). In the French data, the out-group is constituted by people of North African origin who are in France, many of whom are French citizens. In other words, the out-group is spatially close yet culturally distant. In addition, the French discussion challenges the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through genuine argumentation. This can be a coincidence, but it can also be related to the intersectional foregrounding of the thread (homophobia and immigration). Nevertheless, the French data show that an online forum can also constitute a site for competing visions of community where the exclusionary discourse on migration is disturbed. Hence, while discussion boards allow the coalescence of like-minded users, they also potentially provide an arena for conversations between people whose views on citizenship and national communities are completely different.

In recent citizenship studies, citizenship has been regarded as essentially spatial, and acts of citizenship have been described as encounters between people whose degree of inclusion in a community varies (Maestri and Hughes 2017). At the same time, acts of citizenship are often conflated with concrete actions, especially actions whose consequences aim at disrupting existing exclusionary politics (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Our understanding of ‘act’ is very different, and we do not regard acts as inherently revolutionary or disruptive. Rather, we contend that acts aimed at exclusion and restrictions of citizenship are also acts of citizenship. According to our constructivist view of discourse and language use, language itself is a social practice. Consequently, people perform acts every time they use language. Depending on the contexts that are activated, the speaker’s intention, the consequences, and the interpretation thereof, linguistic acts can have different functions simultaneously. They can be neutral, ambiguous, positive, negative, or a combination of these.

Language use always has consequences, and the consequences of acts performed within normative discourses such as law are the most salient politically. With our analysis, we intended to demonstrate that the acts performed within everyday discourse may have remarkable consequences as well, for they naturalize and materialize ideologies

of citizenship and community, and they do this linguistically in everyday conversations. In other words, they construct reality. Like the performative construction of the Nation (Bhabha 1991) or gender (Butler 1990), the construction of reality by everyday discourse in online discussion boards is largely citational (see Derrida 1988): in addition to political and media discourse, the discussants borrow elements from each other and draw on ideological discourses (Van Dijk 2006) such as xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia. This citationality naturalizes the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the derogatory image of the ‘Other’. As a result, persons representing the ‘Other’ are explicitly described as not belonging to the national space, whereas the in-group that fits in is taken for granted and defined implicitly by the opposite of the features characterizing the out-group: peaceful, civilized, honest, hardworking, and (within specific discursive regimes) tolerant. By reiterating exclusion based on such binary oppositions, the everyday discussion of these datasets naturalizes hate speech (cf. Pascale 2019).

At the same time, the exclusionary everyday discourse of our datasets is ambiguous in the sense that it also shares some of the ideological underpinnings of normative political and legal discourses that are equally exclusionary toward migrants. It is precisely this ambiguity that justifies the necessity of analyzing everyday online discourse. In the current media environment, it is common for established media to look for material and insights online, and the everyday digital discourse alimnts political discourse through politicians’ online participation. For the participants in the online discussion analyzed in this article, exclusionary everyday discourse can be disruptive in the sense that it targets political and media discourses that *they* view as ‘too liberal’. For them, writing a hateful comment online may constitute a liberating and righteous ‘act’. If the goal is to counter online hate speech related to citizenship and communities, it is important to acknowledge that the roots of such speech may well reside in sentiments of exclusion whose links to more acceptable disruptive acts need to be analyzed. In other words, instead of focusing on the qualification of online everyday discourse as either right or wrong, research should focus on these questions: why this type of language use, why now, and what are the consequences? Otherwise, research aimed at deconstructing essentializations about the ‘good guys’ ends up essentializing the ‘bad guys’.

From a linguistic point of view, a key instrument of the naturalization of the binary opposition between in-groups and out-groups consists of generalizations in which the out-group is represented as an entity and a homogenous group whose members think and behave the same. These generalizations are based on implicit and perhaps even unconscious assumptions about citizenship and the ‘Other’. On the lexical level, generalizing nouns and personal pronouns play an essential role in the process of naming out-groups and referring to them. Thus, members of the out-group are named through generalizing plural nouns, such as ‘Muslims’, ‘Syrians’, or ‘North Africans’. In addition, the binary opposition between the personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’ is a salient linguistic technique construing generalizations. On the syntactical level, it is noteworthy that these nouns and pronouns often appear in elliptical sentences in which the agent and/or the object of the action are missing. A certain ambiguity seems to suit the discussion partners, who prefer to avoid explicit authorship, so that interpretation lies heavily on the context. In other words, while everyday discourse is ambiguous and difficult to grasp in discursive terms, it is also ambiguous linguistically.

Conclusion

This article has examined the ways in which the issues of citizenship and national belonging are discussed in everyday online discussions. In particular, we have analyzed how these discussions, which are by nature exclusionary, produce a community of like-minded people through specific linguistic strategies constructing the space of citizenship. Using data from Finnish, Danish, and French internet fora, our analysis has focused on the linguistic and discursive features of the online construction of citizenship that is founded on nationalist and at points even ethnonationalist views that are rarely contested in their contexts of use. Our approach has been empirical: we have explored what kind of citizenship categories emerge from the data and investigated the role of language and linguistic expressions in creating these categories.

Two central and partially connected themes emerge from our analysis: the othering of Muslim migrants and citizens and the construal of imagined communities. In all datasets, Muslims were seen as the racialized 'Other' and/or alien, pushed to the margins of the society. The othering of Muslim migrants and citizens is strongly connected to the creation of imagined communities, as the process of othering and racialization serves the purpose of defining the in-group of legitimate citizens by excluding an out-group that is defined as illegitimate. In the analysis, we highlighted the relevance of lexical choices and grammar in the construal of these imagined communities, and thus demonstrated how linguistic analysis may contribute to understanding the construction of communities of practice in mundane discourses.

Our analysis provides an attempt to understand how the macro-level social phenomena, such as polarization and the discrimination of certain social groups, are visible in micro-level processes constituted in everyday conversations. Since everyday conversations cannot be seen as separate from political decision-making in the digital communication environment, it is important to gain understanding of how the everyday discussions function.

We have made an empirical contribution to the study of citizenship by introducing a new level of analysis where the starting point is the systematized, empirically grounded study of the very core of language use, namely linguistic structures and word choices. We hope to have demonstrated how subtle linguistic choices become performative in conversational contexts and modify the reality in which the everyday conversations occur. However, while data-driven linguistic research can point out how the linguistic acts of citizenship are formulated and what immediate effects they have, it cannot tell how these acts affect the society as a whole and its understanding of citizenship. It is precisely here that more interdisciplinary research is needed.

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