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“Like little Helsinki girls in the backseat of a tram”

Folk linguistic views on gay Finnish

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This article explores the conceptions and attitudes that non-linguists have towards Finnish spoken by gay men. Combining folk linguistics and feminist theories, the study utilises interview and survey data for content analysis. The study finds that the main characteristics of speech viewed as “gay” – e.g. high pitch, atypical intonation patterns, nasality, non-canonical /s/ quality, use of affective adjectives – align with the speech stereotypes associated with girls and young women. The article suggests that, even though the attitudes explicitly communicated by the participants are mostly neutral, the language features associated with gay men show a strong relation to extra-linguistic gay stereotypes.

Keywords: Finnish, lavender language, gay men, folk linguistics, metalanguage, speech, language attitudes, stereotypes

1. Introduction

The title of this article is a data excerpt that illustrates how non-linguists describe Finnish spoken by gay men: collapsing the linguistic with extra-linguistic, comparing different groups of people with each other, and revealing stereotypes in the process. What can we learn from data like this? The purpose of this article is to highlight gay Finnish as one of the lavender languages yet to be thoroughly researched and to give a descriptive account of non-linguists’ conceptions and attitudes towards it.¹

¹ Lavender language means “words, phrases, and ways of speaking that are used by gay people” (CALDT 2024).

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Which linguistic features do non-linguists associate with Finnish spoken by gay men?
2. How do these features relate to extra-linguistic gay stereotypes?
3. What kinds of attitudes do the participants show towards gay Finnish?

As illustrated by the research questions, the study aimed to map the *conceptions* of non-linguists. This article does not seek to describe *actual* speech or its linguistic features but focuses on thoughts and attitudes instead. In other words, the results do not necessarily mirror linguistic reality and should not be interpreted as such. However, thoughts and attitudes do matter: community-based claims of knowledge have real-life consequences, as they can create and sustain inequalities between speakers (Albury 2017).

The Nordics are among Europe's most LGBTI friendly countries when it comes to legal rights and policies (ILGA-Europe 2024). Nordic countries have also topped ranking lists of European countries where people show the most positive attitudes towards gay people. However, Finns have shown a more negative attitude towards gay people than Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians. (van den Akker, van der Ploeg & Scheepers 2013; Smith, Jaesok & Jibum 2014.) This article demonstrates that there is a connection between beliefs of and attitudes towards gay Finnish and general attitudes towards its speakers – gay men. Making these attitudes and stereotypes visible is the first step towards changing them for the better, and to better align with the other Nordic countries.

In addition to answering the research questions, the aim is to suggest a need for further research on the relationship between the Finnish language, gender, and sexuality. Thus far, queer identities have largely been ignored in sociolinguistic research on Finnish. In fact, this article is likely the first study on gay Finnish that is available in English, and it builds on

the third master's thesis on gay Finnish (Lindeman 2017).² As a Uralic language, Finnish also provides an example from a less studied language family when it comes to lavender linguistics.³

2. Research design

This study combines sociolinguistics, folk linguistics, and feminist theorising for quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The data consists of survey answers and interviews. The following sections introduce the research design in more detail, starting with the theoretical framework and methods (2.1.), followed by data sets and participants (2.2.).

2.1 Theoretical framework and method

Firstly, this study relies on the core ideas of sociolinguistics: that community has an effect on language; that language has an effect on community; and that language variation is not random, but connected to extra-linguistic social correlates (see e.g. Chambers 2009: xviii; Nieminen 1999; Wardhaugh 2010: 10) – in this case, gayness. More specifically, this study employs folk linguistics, a subfield of sociolinguistics. Folk linguistics studies folk theories of language, or in other words, non-linguists' language beliefs and attitudes. Folk linguistics grew into an independent field of study in the 1980–1990s, especially through the work of Dennis R. Preston (for early works, see Preston 1982 and 1989). However, its roots lie as far back as the 1880s, and the Dutch and Japanese had already been developing it earlier in the 20th century (Preston 1999). Unlike most folk linguistic work on the Finnish language, this study does not focus on dialects, yet explores conceptions and attitudes on a language variety through the methods of

² The first two were Pauli Valo's thesis (2007), which compared straight and gay men's sexual slang in a chat room, and Sanni Surkka's thesis (2016) on stereotypical gay men's speech.

³ However, see e.g. Rácz & Papp 2015 for work on Hungarian.

interviews and surveys for non-linguists – all typical features of Finnish folk linguistics. (Mielikäinen & Palander 2002: 90–91.)

One of the strengths of folk linguistics is that it “allows local language phenomena to be understood through local knowledge paradigms and cognition rather than through theory from afar” (Albury 2017: 39). Focusing on conceptions enables examining how gay speech is understood locally, within the speech communities of Helsinki and Tampere, Finland (more about these cities in section 2.2.2). Even though Finland is part of the Global North and the West, as well as heavily influenced by American media, local cultural and linguistic circumstances might produce differences in conceptions of gay speech (similarly to the differences between “western” and Hungarian perceptions found in Rácz & Papp 2015).

This study focuses on non-linguists’ metalanguage, a term that refers to using language to describe language (Cameron 1996: 281) or “language about language” (Preston 2004: 75). The analysis utilises a two-level distinction of metalanguages: Metalanguage 1 refers to remarks about the language itself, while metalanguage 2 actually describes the language *users* (Mielikäinen & Palander 2002: 96, cf. Niedzielski & Preston 2000: 302–314). Utilising this distinction, this study maps the connections between beliefs about gay men’s speech and gay men themselves.

In folk linguistics, there are direct and indirect ways of gathering data. In the direct approach, the participants know that their conceptions and attitudes are the focus of the study, whereas in the indirect approach they do not. (Coupland & Bishop 2007: 75.) This study utilises both approaches: the participants were explicitly asked about their conceptions (section 3) but were not told that their attitudes (section 4) were also of interest.

Secondly, the analysis is guided by feminist theories, in particular by queer theories that contest the normative ways of conceptualising gender and sexuality. The study

will make use of the notion of gender as performative, or in other words, repetitive *doing* instead of *being*, as theorised by queer theorist Judith Butler (1988). This approach understands identity in a postmodern manner as non-solid, non-essential and changing (Karkulehto 2011: 73–79). This study also utilises the queer theoretical practice of resistant reading in its analysis. Resistant reading implies a critical approach that highlights, questions, and deconstructs hierarchies manifested in texts (Karkulehto 2011: 77).

Thirdly, of course, this article has been influenced by earlier studies on conceptions of gay men’s speech. As noted above, the history of investigating gay Finnish in general is much shorter than that of many other languages. Aside from the master’s theses mentioned before, there are only a couple of slightly related works (such as a three-page article about the Finnish words *gay*, *gei*, *homo* and *homoseksuaali* [Nevis 1984]), and small pieces of information found as a side product of research that focuses on other topics. For example, folk linguists have found that non-linguists sometimes associate gay men with “the Helsinki /s/” and the absence of border lengthening of the consonant /k/ (Nikkinen-Piraccini 2011: 50, 56; Vaattovaara & Halonen 2015: 64–70; for more about the Finnish-specific Sandhi phenomenon of border lengthening, see Suomi, Toivanen & Ylitalo 2008: 44–46).

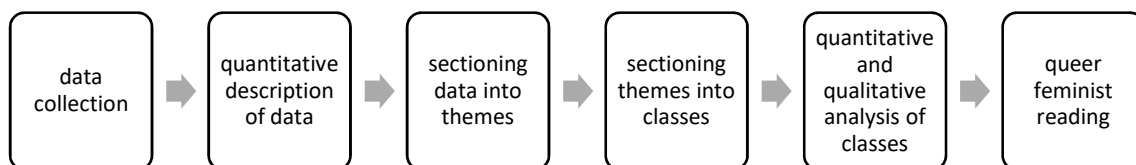
Outside of Finland, there is more research on folk beliefs of gay men’s speech. Aside from interviews and surveys, listening tests have been a popular method. In these tests, the participants have listened to recordings and answered questions about the perceived gayness of the speakers. Often the participants agree on which speakers “sound gay”, but this does not always correlate with the actual sexual identity of the speaker. (Cameron & Kulick 2003.) Usually, men that are perceived to sound feminine are also perceived to sound gay (Levon 2014). Some phonetic and prosodic features that have been associated with men’s sexuality are pitch, consonant length, sibilant quality, vowel quality, syllable length, clarity of

articulation, and falsetto (see e.g. Crist 1997; Levon 2006, 2007 & 2014; Mack & Munson 2012; Munson, McDonald, DeBoe & White 2006; Piccolo 2008; Podesva 2007).

The principal method of this study is content analysis.⁴ In content analysis, a large body of text is reduced to fewer content categories in order to make inferences from it (Weber 1990: 9, 15). Content analysis was chosen as the method because it is suitable for analysing both survey and interview data.

The first step was making quantitative descriptions of the data and then, using the Atlas.ti software, sectioning the original text and audio files into themes. The content under each theme was further divided into classes and developed into qualitative descriptions and explanations of the data. For the attitude section (section 4), coding was followed by a quantification process in which the coded expressions were fitted into a subsequently created attitude scale. Finally, a queer feminist interpretation was given.

Figure 1: Data analysis process.



2.2 Data sets and research participants

The data for this study consists of two data sets collected in 2015 and 2016. The first data set contains face-to-face interviews with self-identified gay men (N=31). The second data set includes the answers to an online survey for politically active youth (N=59) with varying sexual identities. The survey data was collected by the author, and the interview data was collected

⁴ Not to be confused with content-based approaches to the analysis of language attitudes (see Liebscher & Dailey-O’Cain 2009; Preston 1994).

together with Sanni Surkka for the purpose of two respective master's theses (Lindeman 2017; Surkka 2016).

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they consented freely to their participation and to the research use of the data they provided. After the General Data Protection Regulation came into effect inside the EU in 2018, the participants that could still be reached were further informed about the ongoing use of the data and their rights regarding it. The data has been stored, handled and reported with care to protect the privacy of all participants. No ill effects on the participants were reported during or after data collection.

The aim of combining two different data sets, as well as different theoretical backgrounds, was tapping into the benefits of triangulation. Triangulation is a strategy that enriches knowledge by transgressing the limits of a single method, investigator, theory, or data (Flick 1998: 229–230). Triangulation helps saturate the data, mitigates bias, and enhances the reliability of research (Fusch, Fusch & Ness 2018: 20). In this case, triangulation also allowed gathering data from people of different sexual identities than just gay men, which then made it possible to compare gay men to other non-straight and straight participants.

2.2.1 Interviews with self-identified gay men

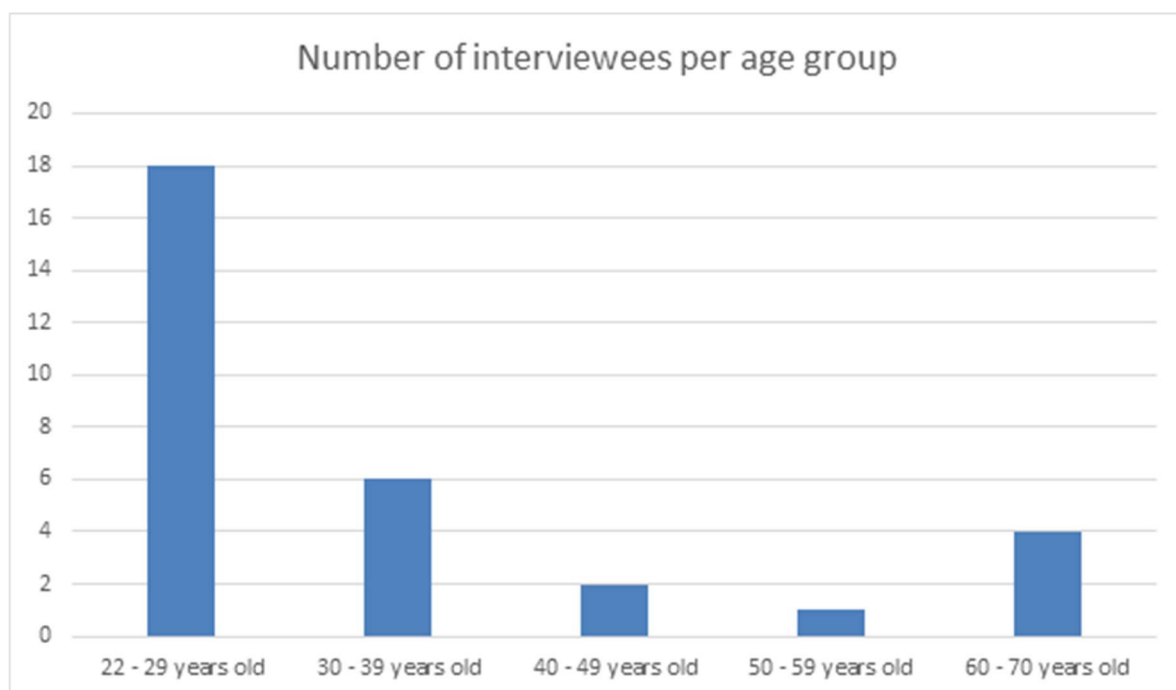
The first data set consists of 31 recorded face-to-face interviews with self-identified gay men. The average length of one interview is approx. 39 minutes, and the entire duration of the data set is 20 hours and 23 minutes. Sixteen interviews took place in Helsinki, and fifteen in Tampere. These are, by population, among the three largest cities in Finland (Statistics Finland 2024). All the interviewees lived in either Helsinki, Tampere or their neighbouring towns, but the majority of them had moved there from small towns.

The interviews were carried out in late 2015, less than a year after the Finnish Parliament had approved the legislative change making marriage gender-neutral starting from

2017 (Ministry of Justice Finland). The public debate on gay marriage, and gay rights in general, was still heated, especially with a citizens' initiative aimed at cancelling the amendment. Taking all this into account, we as interviewers met these gay men at a very special time and place.

The interviewees' age range was 22–70, but 58 % were under 30. This might be due to the fact that the interviewees were found primarily using gay-oriented social media.

Figure 2: Number of interviewees per age group (N=31).



All interviewees spoke Finnish as their first language. About half of them either had a university degree or were enrolled in higher education at the time, while the other half had completed upper secondary education or less. None of them had linguistic training.

The interviews were semi-structured theme interviews, all carried out one-on-one. The questions revolved around the following themes:

Background information

Gay culture

Interviewee's conceptions of Finnish gay men's speech

Interviewee's own way of speaking

Social surroundings and societal stance on gay men

Other people's conceptions of Finnish gay men's speech

The exact questions (accompanied by their English translations) can be found in Appendix A.

The interviewers often modified the wording of the questions as well as the order in which they were asked in order to create a more natural flow of discussion with the interviewees.

As mentioned, the interviews were carried out by two different interviewers. This made it possible to include both Helsinki and Tampere areas in the data. Both interviewers followed the same question template, as well as listened to each other's interview recordings throughout the data collection to make sure that the style of communication remained similar to the other interviewer. Thus there are no substantial differences between the interviews recorded in Helsinki and Tampere, despite being conducted by two different interviewers.

In the interview, the participants were asked to describe their gender and sexuality in their own words. For most, such terms as *homomies* ("a gay man"), *homoseksuaalinen mies* ("a homosexual man") or *mies ja homoseksuaali* ("a man and a homosexual") were sufficiently comprehensive. Some of the participants, however, communicated more complex relationships to the category of gay men. One interviewee preferred the expression *ei-heteroseksuaalinen* ("non-heterosexual"), while another interviewee described himself as *ihan tavallinen heteromies sillä erolla vaan et mä tykkään jätkistä* ("an ordinary straight man, only except that I like guys").⁵

⁵ His identity seems somewhat parallel to the "normal straight gays" in Bogetić's research of Serbian teenagers' personal ads (Bogetić 2013). It also resembles the "straight-acting" category (e.g. Milani 2016).

Many interviewees conceptualised being a man, being gay, or both of these, as only the then-current situation. Some of them believed that their identity might change in the future, and some had had significant changes in their gender or sexuality in the past. Further complicating the matter, two of the interviewees expressed that they had sexual interest in men only, but that they could feel romantic attraction to women as well. In addition, some interviewees simply felt that comprehensively defining themselves was difficult or unrealistic.

In other words, the interviewees' ways of wording their experiences and identities varied, and therefore their gayness cannot be regarded as a uniform phenomenon. Some might argue that including all these men (with at least one trans man among them) in the data was faulty and that they are not all "unambiguously" gay men. However, this is the reality of human gender and sexuality: the lines are blurred, and identities are, as defined by queer theorists, non-solid, non-essential, and changing.

2.2.2 Survey for politically active youth

The second data set was gathered through an online survey for active members of political youth organisations. The survey was carried out in 2016 and had 59 respondents. The survey consisted of three parts: background questions, questions about gay men's speech, and a final section in which the respondents were asked about their sexual identity and opinion of the survey itself. The exact questions can be found in Appendix B.

The invitation to take part in the study was accepted by seven out of eight of the largest political youth organisations in Finland at the time: The Finnish Centre Youth Association (n=19), The Left Youth of Finland (n=16), The Social Democratic Youth of Finland (n=11), The Federation of Green Youth and Students (n=7), The Youth of the National Coalition Party (n=3), The Christian Democratic Youth of Finland (n=2) and The Swedish Youth of Finland (n=1). The Finns Party Youth declined the invitation.

One motivation for inviting political youth organisations was that contacting organisations with existing communication channels offered an efficient way of recruiting respondents. Because the number of respondents from each organisation was relatively low, possible connections between political stance and views on lavender Finnish will not be discussed in this article. Even with this limitation in mind, politically active youth is an interesting population for this study, especially given that gay rights had become a central, much-discussed political topic in Finland during the few years preceding the survey (as described in section 2.2.1).

The respondents were aged between 18–30, with an average age of 24. 52 % identified themselves as men, 42 % women, and the remainder of 6 % chose not to answer. None of the respondents chose the option *muu* (“other”). The majority were straight (64 %), while 7 % reported being gay men and 15 % reported belonging to “other sexual minorities”.⁶ 14 % chose not to answer. All the respondents spoke Finnish as their first language, and most of them lived in some of the largest towns in Finland (>100.000 residents; only nine municipalities in Finland exceed this limit [Statistics Finland 2024]). 54 % of the respondents were students, 28 % were employed or entrepreneurs, 7 % were both working and studying, and 10 % were unemployed.

3. Linguistic and extra-linguistic features associated with gay Finnish

This section tackles the first two research questions: Which linguistic features do non-linguists associate with Finnish spoken by gay men, and how do these features relate to extra-linguistic gay stereotypes? In the interviews, the metalanguage was found under the question *Mitä tähän puhutapaan mielestäsi kuuluu? Esimerkiksi millainen ääni tai millaisia sanoja?* (“In your opinion, what belongs to this way of speaking? For example, what kind of voice or what kinds

⁶ The survey only used the umbrella term. The participants in this category presumably identify as non-straight (for example, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual or queer).

of words?") The survey respondents, in turn, answered the question *Miten kuvailisit suomenkielisten homomiesten puhetta? Kirjoita vapaasti.* ("How would you describe Finnish gay men's speech? Write freely.")

The most prominent features in the data have been divided into the two charts below: figure 3 summarises metalanguage 1 (mentions of clearly linguistic features), while figure 4 lists metalanguage 2 (mentions of extra-linguistic features that describe the language users more than the language itself). Gestures and laughter were considered linguistic parts of speech and are therefore included in the first chart. The charts also illustrate how many participants mentioned each feature. Note that the numbers amount to more than 90 because one participant often mentioned more than one feature. Linguistic features mentioned by less than five and extra-linguistic features mentioned by less than three participants were left out in the interest of space.

Figure 3: Metalanguage 1. Linguistic features of gay Finnish mentioned by the participants (N=90).

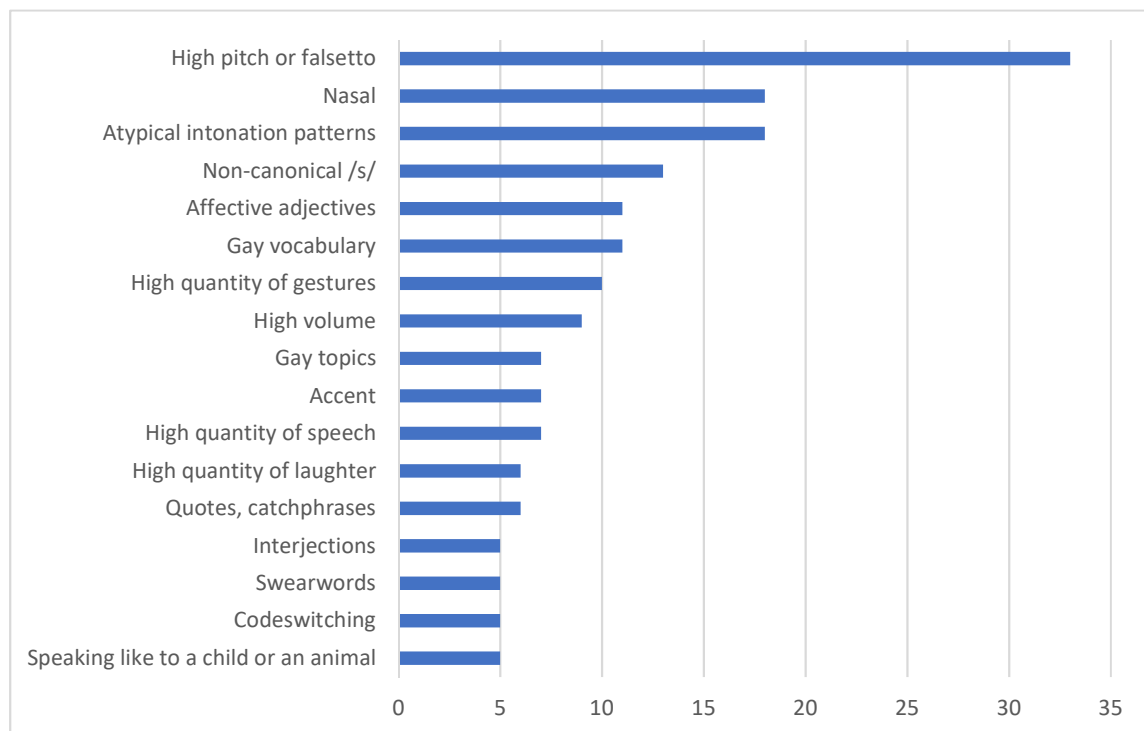
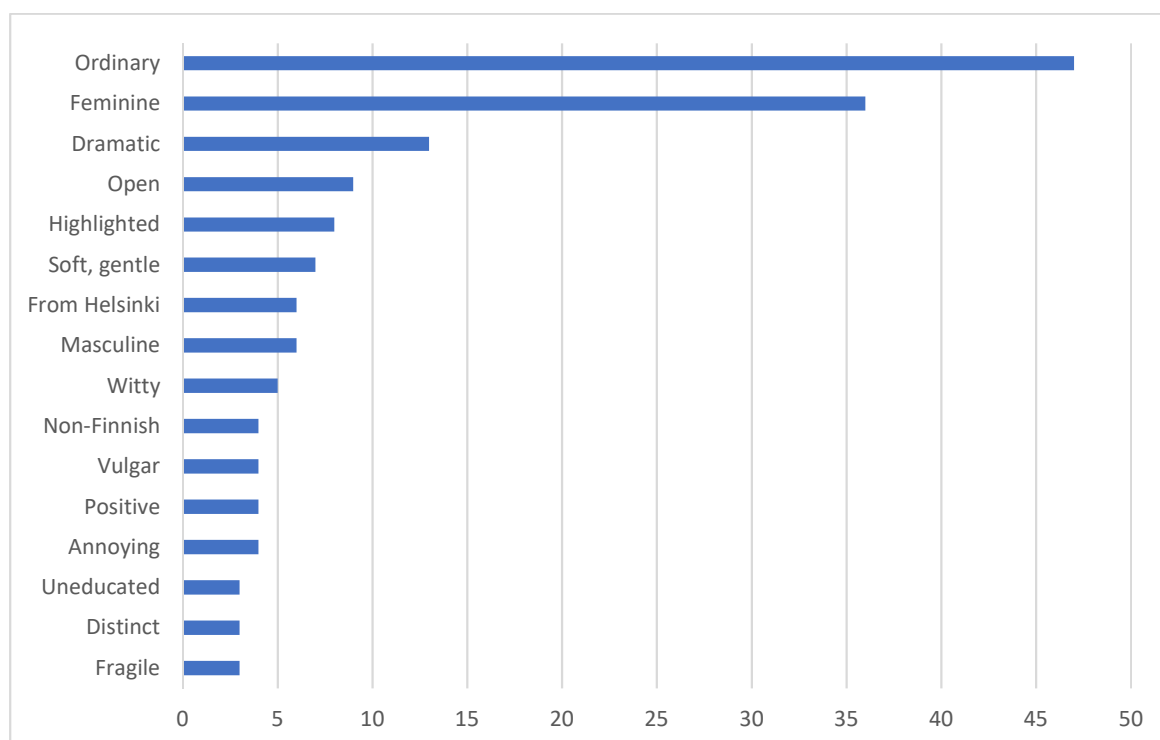


Figure 4: *Metalanguage 2. Extra-linguistic features mentioned by the participants (N=90) when describing gay Finnish.*



Even though it is sometimes hard for a layperson to distinguish their impressions of people from their impressions of how the people speak, and the features in figure 4 do seem to describe gay men more than their speech, it is noteworthy that the clearly linguistic features in figure 3 align with the more general descriptions of figure 4. For example, not only do the participants describe gay men's speech as feminine, but they also name features that are generally perceived as feminine in the Finnish-speaking context: high pitch, nasality, rising intonation at the end of an utterance, non-canonical /s/ and the use of affective adjectives (Surkka 2016: 37–47). For this reason, it can be argued that what is listed here as metalanguage 2 is actually concerned with language as well, only on a very general level.

Conversely, the linguistic features listed in figure 3 seem to have a connection to extra-linguistic phenomena such as gay stereotypes and gender roles. By naming linguistic features that are seen as typical to girls and women, participants place gay men in the feminine

gender role. This could be a strategy for solving the contradiction between gayness and hegemonic masculinity since, as it is often noted, gayness challenges the cultural norms of masculinity and femininity (see e.g. Jones 2016: 215; Miller 1994: 213; Morin & Garfinkle 1981: 126). Associating gayness with femininity is of course not a new idea. The archetypes of a feminine gay man and a masculine lesbian have been present in some cultures since the 17th or 18th century (Löfström 1999: 167) and persist in the 21st century (see e.g. Levon 2006: 71–72), as also demonstrated by this data.

The metalanguage used by the participants reflects the same stereotypes that the gay interviewees mentioned when asked about general gay stereotypes they had faced, perhaps most prominently femininity and youth. Some of them also believed they were perceived as unintelligent, uneducated or incapable compared to straight men. As shown in figure 3, the most commonly mentioned linguistic feature in this data was high pitch or falsetto. High pitch is associated with not only femininity but also young age, as smaller vocal cords produce a higher pitch. It is also linked to the stereotypes such as stupidity or incapability; previous studies have shown that a wish to gain authority and credibility has motivated English-speaking women to lower their pitch during the past hundred years (Cameron 1996: 98, 103; Yuasa 2010: 14). In this study, one of the interviewees reported lowering his pitch purposefully when he wants to be taken seriously. Similarly to high pitch, nasality, rising intonation, and non-canonical /s/ are all associated with both femininity and youth (girls or young women) (Surkka 2016: 37–47).

Other stereotypes that the gay participants reported having encountered were drama, attention-seeking, sex-drive, partying, vanity, and materialism. Considering this, it comes as no surprise that gay men's *speech* was also described as dramatic or exaggerated (vs drama, attention-seeking) and vulgar (vs sex-drive). The stereotype of a vain and materialistic gay man seems to be connected to what the participants understood as "gay" topics; seven

participants reported thinking that gay men speak mostly about aesthetic things such as fashion or flowers.

Closer reading of the data shows that sometimes, the opposite of a stereotypical gay man is not simply a straight man, but a *Finnish* one, as demonstrated by the following data excerpt:⁷

(1) The stereotype of a Finnish man

HKI3: *et se suomalaisen miehen stereotypiahan on sit taas se heteromiehen stereotypia et semmonen jäyhä jököttäjä mikä murahtelee sillon tällön jotain ja he- hirveen tarkat maneerit*

SS: *he he mm*

HKI3: *et niinku homo mies selvästi, mun mielestä myös SAA puhuu paljon vapaammin, elehtii vapaammin*

SS: *joo*

HKI3: *[...] heteromiehellähän on hirveen tarkka se mihin se joutuu asettumaan*

[...]

HKI3: *homon ei tartte asettuu siihen ahtaaseen raamiin*

(HKI3: so the stereotype of a Finnish man then again is the stereotype of a straight man like a kind of a taciturn, withdrawn person that grunts something now and then and really strictly constricted mannerisms

SS: *haha mm*

⁷ In the excerpts, the abbreviation HKI stands for participants interviewed in Helsinki, TRE for participants interviewed in Tampere, POL for the politically active survey participants, SS for Sanni Surkka and ML for the author of this article.

HKI3: so like a gay man clearly, in my opinion also is ALLOWED
to speak a lot more freely, to gesture more freely

SS: yeah

HKI3: [...] a straight man in fact has a really strict the
[frame] where he has to settle

[...]

HKI3: a gay [man] doesn't have to fit into that narrow frame)

In the excerpt, HKI3 states that stereotypically, a Finnish man is synonymous with a *straight* Finnish man. What HKI3 calls *the stereotype of a Finnish man* here can also be conceptualised as part of a “gendered national imaginary” where gender archetypes are linked to belonging to a particular national group (Levon 2015a). This data excerpt, as well as several similar passages in both interview and survey answers, imply that gayness somehow represents non-Finnishness and that heterosexuality is a part of not only normative masculinity but also normative national identity.

Perceiving a tension between national identity and gay identity is not unique to this data or Finnish culture. In fact, normative understandings of gender (including heterosexuality as a part of normative masculinity) often tend to act as building blocks for nationalist imagining, and nationalism in turn is complicit in constructing and maintaining gendered order (Levon 2015b). As Levon describes the dynamics between language, gender, and nation,

[...] the creation of gendered language norms (that is, ideas about how women and men ought to *speak*) ends up delineating normative gender categories (ideas about how women and men ought to *be*) that are then instrumental in the construction of dominant national discourse. Language is therefore the symbolic medium through which beliefs about gender come to define beliefs about the nation (Levon 2015a: 1, emphases in original).

Perhaps more unique to Finland were some of the linguistic features that can be traced back to the stereotype of non-Finnishness: high quantity of speech, high quantity of (hand) gestures, and rising intonation. The first two have to do with the widely circulated belief that Finns are extremely quiet and reserved in their communication. (See excerpt 1 where HKI3 describes a stereotypical Finnish man as *taciturn* and as someone who only *grunts something now and then*, whereas gay men can *gesture more freely*.) The notion of rising intonation as “foreign” stems more from the Finnish language itself, as smoothly descending pitch contour is more typical of Finnish, and from a (slightly misguided) tradition of deeming rising intonation in Finnish alien or even unacceptable (Suomi et al. 2008: 114–117). Other linguistic features that can be associated with non-Finnishness include codeswitching between Finnish and English, slang loan words, an atypical accent, and non-canonical /s/.

Interestingly, many of the stereotypes mentioned above are also associated with non-canonical productions of /s/ but without an explicit association with gayness. In addition to the newer, globalised social meaning of “the gay s”, non-canonical productions of /s/ also carry older, more local meanings that stem from Finnish cultural history. Language contact between Finnish and Swedish is one such historical factor; “the Helsinki s” has been traced back to the Finnish spoken by Swedish-speaking actresses of the 19th century. In the Finnish folk linguistic consciousness, non-canonical productions of /s/ are closely linked to the capital city and the (already familiar) social meanings of femininity, drama, vulgarity, and non-Finnishness. (Halonen, Nyström, Paunonen & Vaattovaara 2020.) Gayness is only one of these social meanings attached to “the Helsinki s”, and it seems that the gay stereotype interacts with other stereotypes related to the /s/ in multi-layered ways.

However, it is important to note that more than half of the participants (n=47) described gay men’s speech as *ordinary, normal* or *similar to everyone else*. Thus, it would be untruthful to state that the majority of the participants have a strongly othering stance on gay

men. On the contrary – it was even difficult for some participants to understand why anyone would even pose a question about how gay men speak:

(2) This question makes no sense

POL19: Eihän tässä kysymyksessä ole mitään järkeä. Ihminen puhuu miten puhuu seksuaalisesta suuntautumisesta riippumatta. Siis mitä vittua.

(POL19: This question makes no sense. A person speaks in whatever way they speak regardless of [their] sexual orientation. I mean what the fuck.)

It is noteworthy, though, that straight survey respondents were more likely to describe gay men's speech as *ordinary* than gay men themselves: 63 % of straight respondents and 31 % of gay men mentioned ordinariness. This could theoretically be due to gay men's greater access to lavender Finnish since all the gay interviewees had a relatively strong bond to the gay community and thus access to gay-oriented spaces and situations that might be foreign to the straight participants. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that gay men and participants who reported membership to other sexual minorities gave notably more precise and vivid descriptions of gay Finnish than straight participants. This conclusion should be treated with caution, though, as the picture is skewed by the fact that most of the gay men were interviewed – as opposed to the straight participants who all gave their answers through the online survey. Because of this methodological constraint, possible sexuality-based differences between the participants will not be further discussed in this article.

4. Attitudes towards gay Finnish

This section will address the third research question: What kinds of attitudes do the participants show towards gay Finnish? The attitudes that the participants explicitly expressed in their interview or survey answers are illustrated in the following table. All data passages that contained evaluative expressions were first highlighted individually for each participant, then

scored based on their negativity or positivity. For example, word choices such as *mielenkiintoinen* (“interesting”) or *mukaansatempaava* (“compelling”) showed a positive or highly positive attitude. Negative or highly negative passages included expressions such as *en arvosta* (“I do not appreciate”) or *ärsyttävä* (“annoying”). Finally, each participant was placed on the subsequently created Likert scale below, taking into account all evaluative passages in the individual’s interview or survey answers.

Table 1: Attitudes towards lavender Finnish (N=90).

Highly positive	Positive	Neutral, divided or unclear	Negative	Highly negative
1	11	58	16	4

A large majority (n=58) of the attitudes communicated in the data were either neutral or divided so that the answers contained both positive and negative passages. There are at least two possible explanations for this, apart from this accurately reflecting divided attitudes of the participants: Firstly, the participants were not explicitly asked about their attitudes or opinion of gay Finnish, only to describe gay Finnish. Secondly, explicitly expressing homophobic sentiments has become more frowned upon, and such attitudes are more likely to be expressed more implicitly (Jones 2021: 17). Especially the survey participants (who were all recruited through their political affiliations) might have refrained from negative commentary on gay speech because of this.

It is noteworthy, though, that negative attitudes towards gay Finnish appear more prominently among gay men themselves than other participants. About one-third of the gay participants expressed a negative or highly negative attitude, and all the participants who

expressed a highly negative attitude were, in fact, gay men. At the other end of the spectrum were women, for whom it was rare to express negative attitudes.

Negative attitudes among gay participants often reflected not only internalised homophobia but also misogynistic undertones. This is illustrated by the following example, where TRE4 describes the difference between how *karhut* (“bears”) and *kanat* (lit. “hens” or “chickens”) speak.

(3) Bears and chickens

TRE4: karhuilla se on ehkä semmonen tota, hyvin maskuliininen hyvin semmonen niinko, macho, heteromiestä, jäljittelevä. mutta sit tietysti tiet- tietyl taval siin on myös semmosta niinko, lempeetä nallemaisutta he he jos nyt näi voi sanoa, semmost niinko, lämpöä. mitä mitä ehkä ei sitte niinko tämmösillä, mitä ei ehkä sit niinku kanojen puheesta löydä.

ML: mm

TRE4: et se on semmost niinko, hiukan maailmaasyleilevää, lämmintä, puhetta. ja sit niinko, tota, kanoilla sit tämmöstä niinko, enemmän mm. tämmöst niinku pintaliitosta hiukan ulko- ulkonäköön keskittynyttä, ulkoseen olemukseen keskittynyttä, mut nää on siis, stereotypiota mutta, näin mä sen, näen

(TRE4: for bears it is maybe the kind like, very masculine very kinda like, macho, emulating a straight man. but then of course in a w- in a way there's also kind of like, tender teddy-bear-likeness haha if you can say that, kinda like, warmth. which which maybe then like this kind of, which you maybe don't find in chickens' speech

ML: mm

TRE4: so it is kinda like, a bit all-embracing, warm, speech. and then like, um, for chickens then kinda like, more mm. kinda like superficial a bit focused on lo- looks, focused on external appearance, but these are like, stereotypes but, this is how I, see it)

It is quite clear that, although he was asked to describe gay men's speech, TRE4 is actually describing the speakers. In other words, he is producing metalanguage 2. TRE4 creates a binary opposition between masculine gay men (*karhut*, "bears") and feminine gay men (*kanat*, "chickens").⁸ At the same time, he associates positive attributes (warmth, tenderness, and implicitly also deep thinking) with masculinity and negative attributes (shallowness, and implicitly also coldness and lack of tenderness) with femininity.

It was typical for the participants in this study to think that "chickens" are the prototypical speakers of lavender Finnish. The participants generally had a negative attitude towards this archetype of a gay man, and none of the gay participants expressed identifying as a chicken themselves, but rather distanced themselves from this archetype. This seems to be a strategy similar to the one that Milani (2016) found in a South African online community: Valorisation of masculinity at the expense of femininity allows gay men to gain access to privilege associated with hegemonic masculinity while also resisting normative discourses that seek to exclude non-heterosexual men from masculinity.

However, some of the gay men were critical of stigmatising feminine speech. One good example is the following excerpt where HKI3 makes a queer feminist reading – highlights, questions, and deconstructs hierarchies – of attitudes such as the one that TRE4

⁸ In this data, the Finnish words *kana* (lit. "a chicken") or *kanahomo* (lit. "a chicken gay") do not correspond with how *chicken* is used in English, as they allude to femininity, not youth.

expresses above (excerpt 3). HKI3 addresses the misogynistic layer of homophobia and then questions hegemonic masculinity:

(4) Is straight-man-like behaviour that great a thing then?

HKI3: ja ehkä vähän elehtiinkin enemmän tälle, ja sehän kyl, niinku, aika helposti mielletää, mielletään sit varmaan, hetii sellaseks homomaiseks ja NAISmaiseks [...] ja sit se tarkoittaa hetii et se on negatiivist

SS: mm

HKI3: ja, mua häirittee se tosi paljon, et niinkun, ensinnäki niinku mu- mun mielest se loukkaa naisii, et

SS: nii

HKI3: et mitä vikaa on ensinnäki naismaises käytöksessä et onks se sit se heteromiesmäinen käytös hirveen hieno asia

(HKI3: and maybe gesture a bit more like this, and that, like, quite easily is perceived as, perceived as maybe, right away like gay or WOMANly [...] and then that means straight away that it is negative

SS: mm

HKI3: and, it bothers me a lot, that like, first of all i- in my opinion it offends women, like

SS: right

HKI3: I mean what's wrong with first of all womanly behaviour like is straight-man-like behaviour that great a thing then)

5. Conclusions

To date, there is very little research on how speech communities in Finland view Finnish spoken by gay men. However, folk theories of language can have material impacts on the lives of speakers, so it is crucial to make those theories visible. This article has provided analysis on the metalanguage used by non-linguists when describing gay Finnish, covering three topics: linguistic features associated with gay Finnish, gay stereotypes related to those features, and attitudes towards gay Finnish.

Section 3 discussed linguistic features associated with gay Finnish, as well as their connections to extra-linguistic gay stereotypes. The most prevalent linguistic features found in the data were:

- high pitch or falsetto
- nasality
- atypical intonation patterns (e.g. rising intonation)
- non-canonical /s/
- high volume
- affective adjectives (e.g. *ihana*, “lovely”)
- specialised vocabulary (e.g. English loans *darkroom*, *drag queen*)
- high quantity of nonverbal cues (especially laughter and hand gestures)

The vast majority of linguistic features seemed to be linked to the same extra-linguistic gay stereotypes that gay interviewees mentioned when asked what stereotypes they had faced. Some of these were femininity, youthfulness, and urbanity – all encapsulated by TRE15’s claim that some gay men sound “like little Helsinki girls there in the backseat of a tram” (*niinku helsinkiläiset pikkutyöt tuala ratikan takapenkillä*). Additionally, the features shared connections with stereotypes such as drama, vulgarity, vanity, incapability and non-Finnishness. Simultaneously, 47 participants (N=90) described gay men’s Finnish as ordinary,

which can be interpreted as either straight respondents' lack of access to gay speech or resistance against othering gay men.

Section 4 demonstrated that explicitly expressed attitudes towards gay Finnish were mostly neutral – expressing extremely positive or negative attitudes were rare in this data. Interestingly, the most negative attitudes were expressed by the gay men themselves. They judged feminine gay men negatively while viewing masculine gay men more positively. Stigmatising femininity, while homophobic and misogynistic, allowed these gay men to access privilege associated with hegemonic masculinity while resisting normative discourses that seek to exclude non-heterosexual men from masculinity (similarly to the men studied in Milani 2016). At the other end of the spectrum were women, for whom it was very rare to express negative attitudes towards gay Finnish.

The results consolidate previous observations on non-linguists' attitudes, (mis)conceptions and beliefs about different varieties of the Finnish language, as the participants mentioned mostly phonetic features (such as the /s/ and prosodic features) and there were hardly any mentions of syntax or morphology. In contrast to the studies focused on attitudes towards dialects, the participants did not draw as much attention to certain phonetic features (e.g. consonant length, phenomena related to diphthongs), personal pronouns or particles. Instead, the lexical examples they gave were nouns and adjectives. (Kunnas 2015: 606–607; Mielikäinen & Palander 2002: 97–98.) These differences probably result from the fact that different features are relevant to different language varieties. For example, it looks like personal pronouns might not be as strongly associated with different sexualities as they are with areal variation.

The link between non-canonical productions of /s/ and gayness (Vaattovaara & Halonen 2015) was again present, but perhaps surprisingly, mentions of border lengthening did

not occur in this data (vs Nikkinen-Piraccini 2011). Unlike in the Hungarian context (Rácz & Papp 2015), these findings do not suggest significant local differences between conceptions of gay speech in Finland and elsewhere. Although the conceptions appeared to be in line with the rest of the West, a closer look into them shows that some of them have local flavour; as gay men seem to be contrasted with the archetype of “a Finnish man”, many of the features associated with gayness also index non-Finnishness or foreign accents and languages.

The key takeaway from this study is that non-linguists’ metalanguage can reveal stereotyping beliefs about the speakers in question, even when the metalanguage does not explicitly express negative attitudes (or look like metalanguage 2) on the surface level. Mapping the social meanings of different linguistic features associated with gayness (metalanguage 1) showed that the features are not arbitrary. Instead, they are related to extra-linguistic gay stereotypes.

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Transcription conventions

- . pause
- , short pause

-	the word is interrupted
haha	laughter
WOMANly	emphasised passage (e.g. spoken in higher volume or pitch)
[...]	removal
[their]	added clarification for the translation

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Appendix A. Interview questions

Original Finnish question	English translation
<i>1 Taustakysymykset</i>	<i>1 Background questions</i>
Mitä kautta sait kutsun tähän haastatteluun?	How did you get the invitation to this interview?
Vahvistatko olevasi täysi-ikäinen ja että et ole opiskellut mitään kielitieteellistä ainetta yliopistossa pää- tai sivuaineena?	Do you confirm that you are of legal age and that you have not studied in any linguistic major or minor in any university?
Onko suomi äidinkielenäsi?	Is Finnish your mother tongue?
Minkä ikäinen olet?	How old are you?
Millä paikkakunnalla asut?	What municipality do you live in?
Miltä paikkakunnalta olet kotoisin?	What municipality are you from?
Millainen koulutus sinulla on? (<i>Haetaan astetta.</i>)	What kind of education do you have? (<i>Looking for level.</i>)
Millainen elämäntilanteesi on nyt, oletko työssä, opiskelija, työtön...?	What is your life situation like now, are you working, a student, unemployed...?
(<i>Jos on tai on ollut töissä:</i>) Millä alalla olet töissä?	(<i>If is working or has worked:</i>) What field do you work in?
Miten kuvailet sukupuoltasi ja seksuaalisuuttasi?	How would you describe your gender and sexuality?
<i>2 Homokulttuuri</i>	<i>2 Gay culture</i>
Mitä sinulle tulee mieleen sanasta homokulttuuri? Millaisia asioita siihen kuuluu?	What do you think of when you hear the expression 'gay culture'? What kinds of things belong to it?
Käytkö paljon esim. Setan tapahtumissa?	Do you often go, for example, to Seta events? ⁹
Oletko mukana muiden seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjen asiaa ajavien järjestöjen toiminnassa?	Do you take part in other organisations that aim to promote the rights of sexual and gender minorities?
Käytkö Prideillä? Homobaareissa? jne.	Do you go to Pride? Gay bars? etc.
Onko Tampere / Helsinki sinulle hyvä paikka asua? Viihdytkö täällä? Miksi?	Is Tampere / Helsinki a good place to live for you personally? Do you like it here? Why?
Onko Tampereella / Helsingissä mielestäsi tarpeeksi seksuaalivähemmistöille suunnattua	Are there enough activities targeted at sexual minorities in Tampere / Helsinki?

⁹ Seta is an LGBTI rights organisation in Finland (Seta 2024).

toimintaa? Kulttuuria? Tarvitseeko sitä mielestäsi yleisesti ottaen olla?	What about culture? In general, do you think it is something that should exist?
Onko homojen keskuudessa erilaisia alakulttuureja?	Are there different subcultures among gay [men]?
Onko sinulla paljon seksuaalivähemmistöihin kuuluvia ystäviä tai tuttavvia?	Do you have many friends or acquaintances that also belong to a sexual minority?
<i>3 Omat käsitykset suomenkielisten homomiesten puheesta</i>	<i>3 [Interviewee's] own conceptions of Finnish-speaking gay men's speech</i>
Puhuvatko suomalaiset homomiehet mielestäsi jollakin tietyllä, tunnistettavalla tavalla?	In your opinion, do Finnish gay men speak in a particular, recognisable way?
<i>(Jos vastaa myöntävästi:)</i> Mitä tähän puhetapaan mielestäsi kuuluu? Esimerkiksi millainen ääni tai millaisia sanoja?	<i>(If answered yes:)</i> In your opinion, what belongs to this way of speaking? For example, what kind of voice or what kinds of words?
Voiko miehen suuntautumista mielestäsi päätellä puhettavan perusteella? (Voiko miehen puheen perusteella siis päätellä olevan homo?)	In your opinion, can a man's sexual orientation be deduced based on how he speaks? (In other words, can you figure out that a man is gay based on his speech?)
Käyttävätkö jotkut tätä puhetapaa enemmän kuin toiset?	Do some [people] use this way of speaking more than others?
Onko seksuaalivähemmistöjen sisällä alakulttuureilla erilaisia puhetapoja?	Inside sexual minorities, are there different ways of speaking among different subcultures?
Mistä tämä puhetapa / nämä puhetavat mielestäsi voisivat olla lähtöisin?	Where could this way of speaking / these ways of speaking originate?
<i>4 Oma puhetapa</i>	<i>4 [Interviewee's] own way of speaking</i>
Kuvaile omaa puhetapaasi. Puhutko yleensä yleiskieltä, murretta, slangia...?	Describe your own way of speaking. Do you usually use standard language, dialect, slang...?
Oletko huomannut, että puhetapasi vaihtelisi eri tilanteissa?	Have you noticed that your way of speaking would vary in different situations?
Puhutko itse omasta mielestäsi jollakin tapaa homomaisesti? Miksi teet tai et tee niin?	In your opinion, do you yourself speak in a 'gay' way? Why do you or don't you do it?
<i>(Jos vastaa myöntävästi:)</i> Mikä omassa puheessasi mielestäsi on homomaista?	<i>(If answers yes:)</i> What is it in your own speech that you find 'gay'?

<i>(Jos vastaa myöntävästi:)</i> Oletko huomannut, että puhuisit joissain tilanteissa homomaisemmin kuin toisissa?	<i>(If answers yes:)</i> Have you noticed speaking 'gayer' in some situations than others?
<i>5 Ympäröivän yhteisön suhtautuminen homoihin</i>	<i>5 Attitudes towards gay [men] in the surrounding community</i>
Miten ystäväpiirisi yleensä suhtautuu seksuaalivähemmistöihin? Muu lähipiirisi? Työyhteisösi?	In your circle of friends, what is the general attitude towards sexual minorities? What about your other close contacts? Your work community?
Miten suomalaiset kokemuksesi mukaan suhtautuvat seksuaalivähemmistöihin keskimäärin?	According to your experience and on average, what kind of an attitude do Finns hold towards sexual minorities?
Onko suhtautuminen kokemuksesi mukaan muuttunut elämäsi aikana?	Has this attitude, according to your experience, changed over your lifetime?
Luuletko, että suhtautuminen on samanlaista kaikkialla Suomessa?	Do you think that the attitude is similar everywhere in Finland?
Oletko huomannut, että homoihin liitettäisiin jonkinlaisia stereotyyppioita? Millaisia?	Have you noticed that people would associate some sorts of stereotypes with gay [men]? What kind?
<i>6 Ajatukset muiden ihmisten käsityksistä</i>	<i>6 Thoughts on other people's conceptions</i>
Millaisia stereotyyppioita uskot homojen puheeseen liitettävän?	What stereotypes do you believe people associate with gay [men's] speech?
Mistä luulet näiden stereotyyppioiden johtuvan?	Why do you think these stereotypes exist?
Voiko homomaista puhetta mielestäsi matkia tunnistettavasti? Millainen puhetapa saa sinut ajattelemaan, että tarkoitus on matkia homomiestä?	Can 'gay' speech be imitated in a recognisable way? What kind of speech makes you think that the purpose is to imitate a gay man?
Onko näissä stereotyyppioissa mielestäsi mitään perää?	In your opinion, is there any truth to these stereotypes?
<i>7 Lopuksi</i>	<i>7 To conclude</i>
Haluatko täydentää vastauksiasi vielä jotenkin? <i>(Aihealueet käydään tässä läpi.)</i>	Would you like to add something? <i>(At this point, the interviewer goes through the themes.)</i>
Haluatko kommentoida tätä haastattelua tai kysyä jotakin?	Would you like to comment on this interview or ask something?
Haluatko saada tutkielmat tai niiden tiivistelmät luettavaksesi niiden	Would you like to read the finished theses or their abstracts? Can your email address be saved for this purpose?

valmistuttua? Voiko sähköpostiosoitteesi säilyttää tätä tarkoitusta varten?	
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Appendix B. Survey questions

Original Finnish question	English translation
<i>Taustatiedot</i>	<i>Background information</i>
Mihin poliittiseen nuorisojärjestöön kuulut?	Which political youth organisation are you a member of?
Oletko opiskellut yliopistossa kielitieteellistä ainetta pää- tai sivuaineena?	Have you studied in a linguistic major or minor in a university?
Ikä	Age
Äidinkieli tai äidinkielet	Mother tongue or mother tongues
Sukupuoli	Gender
Asuinpaikkakunnan väkiluku [pudotusvalikko]	Population of the place of residence [dropdown menu]
Elämäntilanne opiskelija työssäkäyvä työtön muu, mikä?	Life situation student working unemployed other, please specify
Korkein loppuun suoritettu koulutus	Highest completed level of education
<i>Homomiesten puhe</i>	<i>Gay men's speech</i>
Miten kuvailisit suomenkielisten homomiesten puhetta? Kirjoita vapaasti.	How would you describe Finnish gay men's speech? Write freely.
Jos olet itse homomies, miten kuvailisit omaa puhetapaasi? Kirjoita vapaasti.	If you yourself are a gay man, how would you describe your own way of speaking? Write freely.
<i>Lopuksi</i>	<i>To conclude</i>
Olen... [pudotusvalikko seksuaaliselle suuntautumiselle]	I am... [dropdown menu for sexual orientation]
Muuta kommentoitavaa? Risuja tai ruusuja kyselystä?	Other comments? Feedback for the survey?

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