Perceptions of language (mis)fit at a multilingual workplace : the case of the University of Vaasa

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Abstract

Based on a case study we identify sources and contexts of linguistic challenges that academic and university services staff perceive at a multilingual workplace. Some of these challenges produce subjective perceptions of language misfit – a concept that refers to a sense of inadequacy in the social context through which professionals communicate specialized knowledge. Professionals who experience misfit have limited language skills or their skills are inconsistent with the language policies and practices of the university and/or the region where the university is embedded. Our findings suggest that language misfit and fit form a dualistic pair of concepts which is dynamic and context-specific. We offer a contribution to person-environment (mis)fit research and the study of multilingual organizations, which has to date focused on private, for-profit organizations.

Author bio

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and the induction of new staff members.

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1   Introduction

Today's universities are multilingual workplaces because internationalization has changed their

linguistic landscape. An important part of the internationalization process of universities is the

integration of foreign faculty (Slíwa & Johansson, 2014). In fact, recent research on the

internationalization of higher education institutions goes beyond merely counting the number of

foreigners and emphasizes the integration of these foreigners into the university (Beelen, 2011;

Blåfield-Rautanen, 2012; Hudzik, 2011; Knight, 2008). In Finnish higher education institutions,

particularly the internationalisation of top management has been slow. The University of Vaasa,

however, is a special case, because in 2019 Professor Adam Smale was appointed dean and he is

one of the few non-Finnish deans in Finland. Appointing a non-Finnish dean has considerable

symbolic power – it sends a strong signal to both internal and external stakeholders that the

higher education institution in question offers career advancement and promotion possibilities to

all employees. However, from a language perspective, the path is not an easy one. To illustrate

this, we begin by presenting Dean Adam Smale's[i] story of his career advancement from a

language perspective.

> **Dean Adam Smale – Working my way up in Finnish and English**
>
> *I knew very little about the Finnish language before deciding to move to Finland at the beginning of 2004. Having learned Latin, French and German at high school, and studied German at university, learning another language didn't seem impossible – quite the opposite, I was keen to see whether I could manage to learn another. Having also lived in Germany, I knew the importance of learning a language in settling in, understanding the culture and*

making friends. Although Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, the dominant language at work and within my extended family was Finnish. Although Swedish would have been easier to learn, it became clear very early on that I would need to learn Finnish.

When I started at the University of Vaasa, I was able to take advantage of the free Finnish language lessons offered to international students. In addition, I took a class provided by the City of Vaasa, but I soon realized I was at a more advanced level than my fellow students. The next and only formal language education I received was that organized by the University for international faculty some years later. That involved a more tailored approach where the focus was on work-related situations and I was in the 'advanced' group with one other faculty member. Everything else I have learned informally, through reading, watching TV and in interactions with others.

I can think of two main turning points [from a language perspective]. *The first was when the language of the department in which I was working switched from Finnish to English. At that time, I was no longer the only non-Finnish faculty member, and most of the other non-Finnish speaking members understood very little Finnish. This was a turning point in two senses: I was no longer the only person that the organization had to adapt their language practices for, and the working community had finally accepted that it was international. Using English was a big step towards acknowledging this and it made me feel a greater sense of belonging.*

The second turning point was when I applied for the position of Dean. I suspected that there would be some Finnish language requirements, but it was very unclear what these would be – both in a selection criteria sense as well as what level would be needed in practice in order to carry out the job effectively. After nearly a year in this role, I can say that this was a very significant turning point. For example, around half the meetings I sit in are in Finnish, and almost all of the reports, statistics and university-level communication I receive are in Finnish. Some days, I speak nothing but Finnish, which is a big jump compared to my previous work roles.

In a lot of formal meetings the language is determined by the chairperson, and this is typically Finnish. During the meeting, the informal policy is that people can use their own mother tongue (essentially Finnish or English). In those meetings I tend to use English in two kinds of situations: the discussion involves technical language that stretches my Finnish vocabulary, and issues where I feel it is important to get my point across.

In meetings that I chair, I draw the distinction between the policy that 'the language of administration is Finnish' and the language of the meeting. In those cases, I switch between languages and sometimes play the role of translator in order to keep the non-Finnish speakers involved. The University of Vaasa is now finalizing its language policy, which will make this kind of approach more commonplace and language services will be provided where necessary. This is important, since I believe that non-Finnish faculty participation in decision-making bodies will only be possible by changing the language policy and by demonstrating that their involvement is possible and welcomed.

The dean's story illustrates how a highly-skilled professional has moved from perceptions of language misfit to fit. Language misfit refers to a perceived lack of fit between a person's language skills and language requirements and practices in his/her work environment. This perception can be based on either underqualification or overqualification in a particular language or complete lack of skills in this language.

Dean Smale's account vividly describes the coping strategies that he used to deal with experiences of not fitting in language-wise and underscores the importance of Finnish as the local administrative language and the university's formal language as well the role played by language training. It also sheds light on the role of language in his personal life more generally. He experienced language misfit due to his insufficient skills in Finnish as well as his skills in Latin, German and French, which were not needed in his daily work. At the same time, the dean had a perfect language fit in international academic forums (e.g., conferences, journals) due to his status as a native English speaker. The dean's story also raises the pivotal role of language agents, who have the power to decide on the working language of meetings and teams.

As the dean's story suggests, language policies and practices shape opportunities for equal participation and inclusiveness of foreign faculty members. Slíwa and Johansson (2014) interviewed 54 non-native English-speaking faculty members in 19 UK business schools and analyzed the ways in which these faculty members reported to be evaluated on the basis of their spoken language. The findings show that since native English was the dominant standard, the foreign faculty members in the study reported that their professional status was devalued due to their "wrong" accent (Slíwa & Johansson, 2014). While our study is set in a non-English context, where non-native speakers of Finnish are not devalued professionally due to their "wrong" accent in Finnish (instead they are praised for their efforts!), the findings in Slíwa and Johansson

(2014) are relevant for us. They show the close relationship between Englishization of higher education institutions and the integration of foreign faculty.

This chapter explores professional communication in a multilingual university. Previous research on how professionals perceive linguistic practices and challenges in a multilingual (in)formal work-related context is limited. A study of bilingual organizations in the Finnish context shows that linguistic challenges can be interpreted both as constraints and opportunities, which may cause frustration, uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and anger (Pilke, 2013). Some linguistic challenges can also be organization-specific. For example, at a bilingual hospital the need for ad hoc para-professional interpretation can be a source of linguistic challenges for nurses and patients. In state and municipal administration the two main linguistic challenges involve officialese and the need to explain and popularize complex concepts and contents for the customers in a foreign language (Dahl, 2011, p. 55).

Our study of a multilingual university contributes to research on multilingual organizations which has to date focused on private, for-profit organizations rather than public, not-for-profit organizations (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018). Furthermore, we present a new concept of language misfit which refers to subjective perceptions of not fitting in. Such perceptions of misfit are socially constructed in workplace interactions and shape co-worker relationships (Cooper-Thomas & Wright 2013). Given the above, we pose the following research questions: What kind of linguistic challenges do university personnel perceive at work? How do these linguistic challenges relate to the concept of language misfit in a multilingual context?

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. In order to set the scene, we first discuss previous research on language policies and practices in multilingual universities that illustrate

how internationalisation has changed the linguistic landscape of universities. We then introduce the notion of language (mis)fit, which is the key concept in our chapter. Thereafter, we proceed with the data and methods used in our case study. Finally, we discuss the findings of the case and make suggestions for future research.

2 Englishization of higher education

In higher education institutions, language policies may be presented as part of internationalization strategies or as separate policy documents (Saarinen & Taalas, 2017). In a recent qualitative study, Saarinen and Rontu (2018) examined language policy documents in two Finnish universities, Aalto University and the University of Jyväskylä. They found that internationalization of the university sector are closely associated with the use of English. English becomes "the self-evident, if not always explicitly mentioned, language of internationalization" (Saarinen & Rontu, 2018, p. 114). Their findings suggest that the service staff lacked a sufficient proficiency level in English, and that the teachers' proficiency in English varied greatly, creating difficulties for student learning. Many teachers found it challenging to change the language of instruction from Finnish or Swedish to English and needed support in making this transition. Also the requirement by university management to translate texts so that foreign staff could participate in decision-making processes of the university were found demanding. These findings reveal that many employee groups suffered from a language misfit because the transition towards Englishization was not supported with requisite resources such as language training or additional funding for translation.

Saarinen and Rontu (2018, p. 102) observe that higher education institutions in Finland "have moved towards more relaxed form of language steering" and tend to rely on "some form of parallel use of the national language(s) and English". Koskela, Picht and Pilke (2011, p. 27) point out that the word *parallel* has been used to solve many kinds of problems associated with language use also in university contexts. *Parallel language use* is a vaguely applied term referring to the involvement of more than one language in interaction. Instead of normalizing bilingualism and enhancing multilingualism it often stands for diglossic functional separation between languages. This is the case when English (often the high prestige variety) and national language(s) (often the low prestige variety) are used under different conditions and to the exclusion of the latter in research and teaching (Brock-Utne 2007, p. 377; García, 2007, p. xiii).

In another study, Saarinen and Taalas (2017) examined the motivations for language policy drafting in Nordic higher education institutions at macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. Their findings suggest that internationalization is mostly associated with international mobility of students and staff, which drives the development of language policies. In Nordic higher education institutions, language policies regulate the use of English and the relationship between English and the national languages. Saarinen and Taalas (2017, p. 28) conclude that "language policy drafting seems reactive rather than [pro]active: language policies are construed as a reaction to perceived external rather than internal needs." Similar findings have also been reported in the context of language policies in multinational corporations (Kangasharju et al., 2010).

To sum up, the crafting of language policies reflects how universities are responding to changes in their linguistic set-up. The process of Englishization also has many unintended consequences for faculty and staff working for a Finnish university, such as social exclusion and

reduced opportunities for career progression. Research on person-environment fit assists us in digging deeper into these consequences.

3   The notion of language (mis)fit

Person-environment (P-E) (mis)fit research is an established stream in industrial and organizational psychology. Within this body of research, two different paradigms prevail: the person-environment fit paradigm and the perceived fit paradigm. While the former refers to objective fit between the person and her environment through separate measurements, the latter refers to subjective experience of fit, which we adopt in this chapter. Both individuals and environments change over time, which may produce perceptions of misfit. So far, the notion of misfit has received limited attention in P-E fit research (Billsberry et al., 2006; Chatman, 1991; Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Oh et al., 2014; Wheeler et al., 2007). However, what is clear is that misfit is likely to lead to anxiety, stress, alienation, depression, or organizational exit (Billsberry in Kristof-Brown & Billsberry 2013, preface xx).

We join the research trajectory by Wheeler et al. (2007) and Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013) on P-E misfit. However, we focus on misfit rather than the relationship between misfit and fit. Some linguistic challenges, it seems, can produce perceptions of misfit, negatively affecting the individuals themselves or the groups they work for at the university (Harrison et al., 2002). We define the concept of language misfit as a perception of inadequacy in the social context where professionals communicate specialized knowledge. Individuals who perceive misfit experience limited language skills or inconsistency of their skills with the language

policies and practices of the university, and/or the language practices of the region where the university is embedded.

Individuals, who perceive misfit, may be implicitly assumed to be underqualified; their abilities are seen to fall short of the demands in their work environment (i.e., demands-abilities misfit), which might lead to lower job satisfaction, frustration, stress, and anxiety. However, perceptions of misfit may also develop because of overqualification, although this has received limited attention in previous research (see Cable & DeRue, 2002; Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013; Kalleberg, 2008, Kulkarni et al., 2015, for exceptions). Highly skilled individuals may experience misfit because they hit or exceed these demands. These overqualified individuals tend to suffer from boredom and frustration in their work environment because their abilities are not put to use or they need to do others' tasks. For example, when tasks, which require certain type of language skills, start to overload language-skilled individuals they may perceive the situation as unfair (i.e., needs-supplies misfit, e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002). From the organizational perspective, however, the existence of language skilled personnel that is able to take on such tasks, suggests that there is language fit (i.e., complementary fit, e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002; Piasentin & Chapman, 2006). Language (mis)fit is a multilevel concept involving person-organization (mis)fit, person-group (mis)fit, person-supervisor (mis)fit, and person-job (mis)fit. The broader P-E research acknowledges that the (mis)fit construct cuts across multiple levels of analysis (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Oh et al., 2014).

3   The case study

Our chapter presents a case study which is "a research strategy that examines, through the use of a variety of data sources, a phenomenon in its naturalistic context, with the purpose of 'confronting' theory with the empirical world" (Piekkari et al. 2009, p. 569). In this study, we have used open-ended and closed answers to a questionnaire, Dean Smale's story and university documents as data sources. One of the strengths of the case study lies in contextualization of the research phenomenon, i.e., in linking the case with its broader context (Alasuutari, 1996). We selected the University of Vaasa as our case because this officially monolingual university is located in a genuinely bilingual region, rendering it a particularly rich case to study language use. In interpreting our findings, we link them to the specificities of this particular university and its regional context.

3.1 Research setting

Finland is a bilingual country: 5% are registered as Swedish speakers and 90 % as Finnish speakers. Children in the Finnish education system must study the other national language and all university graduates must have a certain level of proficiency in both national languages. The share of population with a foreign background has been quite small in Finland. In the beginning of the 1990's there were only 50 000 individuals with foreign background. However, 385 000 persons (i.e., 7%) with foreign background including both first and second generation were living in Finland in 2017 (Statistics Finland 2019). Compared with e.g. Sweden, the figures are still quite low.

Regarding the two national languages in Finland, the majority–minority relationship varies regionally. In the region of Ostrobothnia where the University of Vaasa is located, 50% of

the inhabitants are Swedish-speaking, 45% Finnish-speaking, and 5% speak other languages. In the city of Vaasa the corresponding figures are Finnish-speaking 69%, Swedish-speaking 23% and other languages 8% (Ostrobothnia in Numbers 2018). Vaasa has a linguistic profile in which the two national languages are more balanced than in other cities of the same size and in which the over 100 different foreign languages and nationalities play as visible a role as in bigger cities near the capital area. The largest foreign language groups in Vaasa in the end of 2017 were Arabic, Russian and Somali, followed by English (Statistics Finland 2018). It is worth noting that the largest energy technology cluster in the Nordic countries is located in the Vaasa region with several international companies headquartered in the city.

The University of Vaasa is a relatively small multi-disciplinary university with affiliated institutes, university services and schools. It has recently undergone a thorough renewal process during which its organization and profile were clarified. According to the strategy (2017–2020), the University of Vaasa will invest heavily in research and societal relevance, phenomenon-based multidisciplinary research platforms, and high-level international recruiting. Because of strategic profiling, the degree education and research of languages were moved to the University of Jyväskylä in 2017. The current core areas at the University of Vaasa are management, accounting and finance, marketing and communication, technology and innovation.

Officially, as stipulated in the Finnish Universities act (558/2009), the University of Vaasa is administratively a monolingual organization and the language of instruction and degrees is Finnish. In practice, however, the working languages are Finnish and English. Although internationalization has been a key component in the university strategy for well over a decade, the measures to internationalize the organization have intensified in recent years. For example, the number of non-Finnish staff has more than doubled during 2011–2016. In October 2018,

already 26% of the teaching and research staff were of foreign origin, whereas none of the university services staff were from abroad. In addition, the University community welcomes each year a significant number of foreign scholarship researchers, trainees and highly skilled migrants. Of the entire personnel, 16% have foreign background, and the University staff members represent more than 40 different nationalities. Depending on the unit and its profile, 15–100% of the teaching and research staff are non-Finnish citizens. The increasing degree of internationalization has consequences for language use at the university.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The main data source was a survey undertaken in April 2018 at all units of the University of Vaasa (schools, university services and institutes). The purpose of the survey was to get a better overview of the general needs for language training and cross-cultural communication skills of the staff members, as well as the overall linguistic situation within the University of Vaasa. The survey was available in Finnish and in English. The questionnaire had two parts, a qualitative and a quantitative one, including 73 statements or questions. The qualitative part of the survey consisted of open-ended questions, and the survey questionnaire covered closed questions including e.g., background questions, questions concerning the linguistic profile and bilingualism/multilingualism, language use within the organization, and staff language skills in English, Finnish and Swedish. The reason for selecting these three languages was that they are the main ones used in the university.

Altogether 134 respondents filled in the Finnish version of the survey and 46 filled in the English version, which provided us with a multilingual dataset. The total response rate was 41%

(180/439). The age range of the respondents was 25–68 years, and approximately half of the respondents were academic staff and another half university services staff members. The respondents had 30 different first languages. The majority (71%) were Finnish speakers, 7% were Swedish speakers and the rest of the languages had 1–4 speakers each (22%).

For the current study, we analyse one closed question ("How often do you come across linguistic challenges in your work?") and one open-ended question ("What kind of challenges related to bilingualism/multilingualism at the University of Vaasa do you come across in your work and where do you think the challenges originate from?"). We received altogether 180 answers to the closed question. The qualitative analysis of the open-ended question, however, covers 144 responses, which reported some linguistic challenges. Seven answers were empty, sixteen answers reported no linguistic challenges and thirteen answers were of the type: "not faced yet such challenges" or "just minor challenges". Where necessary, we have translated the verbatim responses from Finnish into English, paying careful attention to conveying the meaning of the entire texts instead of trying to establish equivalence of meaning at the level of single words. The answers are coded as AS (Academic Staff) and USS (University Services Staff) and with a corresponding number.

In the quantitative analysis, we compared self-perceived language skills in English according to personnel groups (academic staff including schools and institutions versus university services staff). Further, we contrasted language skills in Finnish according to language groups (Swedish or other) and examined perceived linguistic challenges according to personnel group, mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish or other), and managerial position (yes or no). Finally, we undertook a data-driven qualitative analysis to identify how language skills are seen to explain linguistic challenges (sources of challenges) and when and where linguistic challenges

occur (contexts of challenges). Considering that previous research has shown that misfit can be conceptualized as a continuum (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013) and that linguistic practices can reflect contrastive thinking between different organizations (Lehto & Pilke, 2013), we first took a constrastive approach to the expressed linguistic challenges. According to Myking (2007, p. 271) contrasting has a cognitive, didactic or sociological function. We believe it is important to be able to identify different forms of contrastive thinking within an organization, because contrasting can be used as a rhetorical means to categorize and structure information, to focus on something (see also Cruse, 1986, p. 262; Bosseldal 1998, pp. 116–117; Picht, 2005, p. 190).

We ended up with two types of contrasts: (a) dichotomies with two mutually exclusive subcategories (either-or) and (b) dualistic continuums with two polar positions but no pre-determined and fixed starting point as in the case of confrontation. A dichotomic pair can be divided into two distinct parts (e.g. profit – loss) whereas a dualistic pair on a continuum can be determined differently in different situations (e.g. order – chaos). Example 1 presents a dichotomic pair of two answers in our material.

Example 1 a) *Challenges can occur if people don't fully understand each other (AS_114)*
b) In my case, there are no challenges. Since I don't speak Finnish and Swedish is not used here, I don't have a choice but using English (AS_147)

In example 1a, the informant describes possible linguistic challenges in human interaction, and therefore present also in professional contexts. In the second example (1b), however, the informant considers English as the only possible choice because s/he does not have skills in Finnish (misfit based on complete lack of skills in Finnish), and Swedish is not used at work (misfit based on overqualification as different languages in use than Swedish). These two views thus form a dichotomy of *can always occur – never occur*.

Example 2 further illustrates dichotomies constructed from our data.

Example 2. a) *The meetings are often held in Finnish, so the English speaking team members cannot participate. (AS_23)*
b) *Lack of knowledge and will to speak anything other than Finnish. (AS_177)*
c) *Sometimes I should write or speak in Swedish. I do understand Swedish, but cannot speak or produce a text in Swedish (USS_156)*

In example 2 a-c, the informants categorize a monolingual meeting situation (2a, one language > not possible to participate), other's willingness to speak other languages (2b, Finnish only) or own language skills (2c, no productive skills in Swedish) in a dichotomic manner. These examples suggest that language misfit is based on either complete lack of skills (2a), situational language choice (2b), or one's own or one's colleagues' underqualification in a particular language or lack of willingness to speak this language (2b and 2c).

In contrast to the dichotomies described above, dualism makes it possible to form pairs such as *clean – dirty*, which can be determined differently in different situations (see Lundahl, 1998, p. 92). Dualism does not draw on pre-determined and fixed starting points (e.g. warm or cold measured from 0°C) but makes distinctions by polarizing on a continuum. Examples of dualistic points of view can be found in example 3.

Example 3. a) *Meetings suffer from bad English [...] (AS_120)*
b) *My (productive) oral and written English skills could be more fluent. (AS_16)*
c) *My biggest challenge is probably writing articles in English. Even if I have good language skills, I am not at the level of a native language user. (AS_50)*

The continuums in the example polarize bad with good (3a), fluent with non-fluent (b) and native with non-native (c). These examples show how we link contrastive thinking to linguistic challenges both in the form of dichotomies and dualisms that occur at the University of Vaasa. The examples above (3a-c) indicate language misfit based on underqualification.

4   Findings

In this section we present self-reported language skills of the academic and university services staff. We compare different types of personnel groups in terms of how often they come across linguistic challenges in their work (scale based). Furthermore, we report how the informants describe the linguistic challenges they perceive in their professional settings by identifying the sources and contexts of these challenges. Finally, we relate the linguistic challenges perceived by the university personnel to the concept of misfit.

4.1 Self-reported language skills and the frequency of experienced challenges

Table 1 shows personnel's language skills in English according to self-evaluation of *productive skills* (oral and writing skills) and *receptive skills* (listening comprehension and reading comprehension). The results show that the English language skills of the personnel are at a high level. Academic staff report to master English better than university services staff both regarding productive and receptive skills. However, also the university services staff report good mastery of the English language: 75% of them estimate their productive language skills to be at an excellent or good level, and 83% estimate their receptive English language skills to be at an excellent or good level.

Table 1: Language skills in English

		Personnel group		
		Academic staff	University services staff	Total
Productive language skills				
Oral skills	Excellent	35,2%	21,3%	30,4%
(English)	Good	52,7%	53,2%	52,9%
	Moderate	8,8%	14,9%	10,9%
	Acceptable	2,2%	4,3%	2,9%
	Passable	1,1%	6,4%	2,9%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Writing skills	Excellent	39,6%	27,7%	35,5%
(English)	Good	51,6%	46,8%	50,0%
	Moderate	7,7%	14,9%	10,1%
	Acceptable	0,0%	6,4%	2,2%
	Passable	1,1%	4,3%	2,2%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

		Personnel group		
		Academic staff	University services staff	Total
Receptive language skills				
Listening comprehension	Excellent	51,6%	40,4%	47,8%
(English)	Good	40,7%	40,4%	40,6%
	Moderate	4,4%	12,8%	7,2%
	Acceptable	2,2%	4,3%	2,9%
	Passable	1,1%	2,1%	1,4%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Reading comprehension	Excellent	60,4%	42,6%	54,3%
(English)	Good	37,4%	42,6%	39,1%
	Moderate	1,1%	8,5%	3,6%
	Acceptable	1,1%	2,1%	1,4%
	Passable	0,0%	4,3%	1,4%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

As presented in Table 2, those who have neither Finnish nor Swedish as mother tongue, report low language skills in Finnish. Only about 6% of them report to have good oral skills in Finnish. In contrast, almost 50% perceive that they have no productive skills in Finnish, i.e. they lack both oral and writing skills. Concerning receptive skills, almost 49% report that they do not have skills in listening comprehension, and about 43% say they lack skills in reading in Finnish. The most difficult part of learning the Finnish language seems to be writing, where 89% regarded their skills either passable or non-existent.

Table2: Language skills in Finnish

		Mother tongue*		
Productive language skills		Swedish	Other	Total
Oral skills	Excellent	33,3%	0,0%	4,9 %
(Finnish)	Good	33,3%	5,7%	9,8 %
	Moderate	16,7%	0,0%	2,4 %
	Acceptable	0,0%	17,1%	14,6 %
	Passable	0,0%	28,6%	24,4 %
	No skills	16,7%	48,6%	43,9 %
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Writing skills	Excellent	33,3%	0,0%	4,9 %
(Finnish)	Good	33,3%	0,0%	4,9 %
	Moderate	16,7%	5,7%	7,3 %
	Acceptable	0,0%	5,7%	4,9 %
	Passable	0,0%	37,1%	31,7 %
	No skills	16,7%	51,4%	46,3 %
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0 %

*Finnish excluded

Receptive language skills		Mother tongue*		
		Swedish	Other	Total
Listening comprehension	Excellent	50,0%	0,0%	7,3 %
(Finnish)	Good	16,7%	2,9%	4,9 %
	Moderate	16,7%	11,4%	12,2 %
	Acceptable	0,0%	14,3%	12,2 %
	Passable	0,0%	22,9%	19,5 %
	No skills	16,7%	48,6%	43,9 %
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0 %
Reading comprehension	Excellent	50,0%	0,0%	7,3 %
(Finnish)	Good	16,7%	2,9%	4,9 %
	Moderate	16,7%	8,6%	9,8 %
	Acceptable	0,0%	14,3%	12,2 %
	Passable	0,0%	31,4%	26,8 %
	No skills	16,7%	42,9%	39,0 %
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0 %

Table 3 shows the frequency of experienced linguistic challenges in a work setting. Almost 6%

of the respondents report that they never face linguistic challenges at work. However, almost 4%

report that they face these challenges on a daily basis, and most of the respondents (26%) face

them a few times a year.

Table3: The frequency of experienced linguistic challenges in the work setting

How often do you come across linguistic challenges in your work?	Personnel groups			Mother Tongue				Managerial position		
	Academic staff	University services staff	Total	Finnish	Swedish	Other	Total	Yes	No	Total
On daily basis	2,2%	6,4%	3,6%	3,8%	15,4%	2,6%	4,4%	0,0%	4,9%	4,4%
Every week	20,9%	25,5%	22,5%	23,1%	23,1%	18,4%	22,1%	42,1%	19,8%	22,1%
Every month	18,7%	34,0%	23,9%	26,9%	15,4%	10,5%	22,7%	5,3%	24,7%	22,7%
A few times a year	27,5%	23,4%	26,1%	25,4%	38,5%	26,3%	26,5%	36,8%	25,3%	26,5%
More seldom than once a year	23,1%	8,5%	18,1%	15,4%	7,7%	26,3%	17,1%	15,8%	17,3%	17,1%
Never	7,7%	2,1%	5,8%	5,4%	0,0%	15,8%	7,2%	0,0%	8,0%	7,2%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The results differ to some extent by personnel groups. As shown in Table 3, the university

services staff experience linguistic challenges in their work more often than the academic staff.

Some explanation for these linguistic challenges can be found in the open answers to the survey.

The open answers suggest that university services staff do translation work, which they describe

as time-consuming, especially because of lacking terminology or background materials.

Although none of the managerial staff members reported experiences of linguistic challenges on

a daily basis, many managers (42%) reported coming across linguistic challenges every week.

An interesting detail in Table 3 is the frequency of linguistic challenges experienced by staff

members with other mother tongue than Finnish or Swedish. As shown in Table 1, almost 80%

of them regarded that they have "no skills in Finnish" or their "skills are at a passable level".

However, their lack of Finnish skills does not seem to correspond to the work-related linguistic

challenges of this group. Indeed, the majority reported that they experience linguistic challenges

at work only a few times a year (26%) or even more seldom. Almost 16% of them reported to

never experience linguistic challenges at work, which is noteworthy as they are employed by an officially monolingual, Finnish-speaking university.

4.2 Sources of linguistic challenges

When answering the open ended question ("What kind of challenges related to bilingualism/multilingualism at the University of Vaasa do you come across in your work and where do you think the challenges originate from?") the respondents referred to several source related aspects such as the level and lack of as well as gaps in language skills, activating of language skills, (self)critique, language choice, avoiding of languages, devaluation of language skills (no language bonuses, not utilizing all skills), difficulties with modalities and certain registers (e.g. dialects, articulation), unequal load and uncertainty (terms, grammar, balance between languages). In terms of how language skills are seen to explain linguistic challenges, we found two main explanations: perceived lack of sufficient skills by self or others in one of the local languages (i.e., language misfit based on underqualification), as well as the need for translation. One source of challenge is the perceived lack of sufficient skills in local languages (Finnish and Swedish). The strong bilingual background (Finnish-Swedish) of the University of Vaasa region is clearly present in our data and the challenge caused by the lack of sufficient skills in Swedish is mentioned several times (i.e., person-region language misfit based on underqualification). In fact, the self-evaluation of skills in English, Swedish and Finnish shows that whereas the English skills are at a high level in all personnel groups, the same does not apply to the self-evaluation of Swedish (example 4: person-group language misfit based on

underqualification). This has implications both for the organization as a whole as well as for

work in teams such as research projects:

Example 4.   *When working in the Vaasa region and in the region of Ostrobothnia, the Swedish language skills would be very useful. Often the linguistic situations are e.g. tackled so that everyone speaks their own mother tongue, but I feel that in many cases information is lost in these conversations. In the same way, I sometimes feel that I have no choice but to decline certain events, if the target group is monolingually Swedish and I cannot e.g. give a Finnish presentation in the seminar. (USS_78)*

In the following (example 5), the language in question is not specified. However, it seems

that regardless of language, at the organizational/team level the experienced gaps in language

skills (i.e., person-organization or person group language misfit) often result in relying on the

input of the more fluent team members:

Example 5.   a) *In my own unit, we are not used to operating in many different languages, so when these situations arise we always turn to the same specific people for help. Therefore those who would be in need of strengthening their language skills in practice, are not able to do so in their daily work. (USS_144)*

b) *[…]Those colleagues who do not speak Finnish, are normally not selected into workgroups etc. This means that the Finnish speaking colleagues are more burdened. (AS_27)*

In example 5 professionals are not provided with the opportunities to practice their

language skills (5a) and colleagues more fluent in a particular language (in this case Finnish) are

burdened (5b). This pair of examples provides two perspectives on how linguistic challenges

cluster at the workplace: the first perspective is that of the *more fluent* person and the second

perspective is that of the person who is *not fluent* in the language at hand (see also example 8a).

Interestingly, the source of linguistic challenges is not only related to language skills per

se, but to other factors associated with working in multilingual settings. This seems to apply to

e.g. informants working in the university services and operating in two or more languages.

According to the data on self-evaluation of language skills, the skills in English across all

personnel groups at the University of Vaasa are at a high level (see Table 1 and 2). Despite this, linguistic challenges may arise because colleagues lack the requisite language skills or because there is a need to translate, which is very time-consuming. The respondents also commented on e.g. missing background documents or forms and difficulties with terminology, which might not exist or cannot be easily found. Respondents are not always clear which texts and messages need to be translated into which language. When this is coupled with time pressure, opportunities to ask for guidance or clarification become few:

Example 6.   *[It is] unclear what info is mandatory in both languages and what is not, translations are done when there is time for it. (USS_112)*

One source of linguistic challenge seems to be specific terminology and its consistent use. Besides finding the time for translation work, correct terms and titles have to be used or, in case they do not exist yet, created:

Example 7.   *In my work, I use a lot of time translating. I find it challenging that the university does not have a terminology bank/register, where I could e.g. check the names/ titles of certain functions or working groups or committees. (USS_75)*

Whenever language is used, it is used in a specific context. Therefore the actual challenges of language use stem from contextual specificities. In example 4, both sources (lacking skills in Swedish) and contexts (the bilingual region) of linguistic challenges are mentioned, but this is not always the case (see example 6). When the context is mentioned, the reference points for meaning in terms of when and where the linguistic challenges occur can be identified.

4.3 Contexts of linguistic challenges

In terms of when and where linguistic challenges occur, our informants described various scenarios: the contextual challenges in our data related to teaching (e.g. giving lectures in English for hundreds of students) and research (e.g. writing articles in English), internal (e.g., writing emails) and external communication (e.g. presenting multilingual webpages) as well as formal (e.g. using particular languages in meetings) and informal (e.g. discussing in coffee rooms) interactions. The identified contexts of language use refer to the various levels in which language misfit may occur.

The contexts of linguistic challenges in our material are temporal (time-based) and spatial (place-based). Example 8a refers to spontaneous situations like oral conversations about research related contents. Example 8b points to communication through the intranet Navi and the University's website. Both these formal information channels as well informal notes on office doors represent a linguistic challenge for a non-Finnish speaker (i.e., language misfit based on underqualification or complete lack of skills).

Example 8.   a) *Every once in a while expressing certain issues in English in a research setting is challenging in spontaneous conversations, when discussion partners have no skills in Finnish. (AS_67)*

b) *Sometimes I need to access information on the NAVI system and I find it only in Finnish. Not all information is translated into English on the university's website. Also sometimes I find colleagues leaving notes on their doors in Finnish and I have to translate them to understand what's the message is about. (AS_127)*

In the following, example 9a illustrates a situation experienced by an informant who is aware of linguistic isolation during lunches at the workplace (i.e., person-group language misfit). The direct challenge stems from the respondent's skills in Finnish (source of challenge) but at the same time there are other, more indirect contextual challenges in the form of not wanting to

cause a change in language use and thus being isolated. The last example (9b, person-organization language misfit) describes how monolingualism or imbalance in language use during e.g. meetings can be a reason for linguistic challenges.

Example 9. a) […] *Often, I prefer to sit alone during lunch and not join a table where there are only my Finnish-speaking colleagues; I just don't want to disturb their conversation in Finnish and force them speak English. My spoken Finnish isn't so advanced to follow the conversation. (AS_133)*

b) *Meetings and official programs (Rector's announcements etc.) are not always in English. Don't know why... (AS_153)*

4.4 From linguistic challenges to language misfit

In line with general P-E fit research, we consider the notion of language misfit a multilevel concept (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Oh et al., 2014) that cuts across the levels of person-organization (mis)fit, person-group (mis)fit, person-supervisor (mis)fit, and person-job (mis)fit. In addition, based on our analysis, we introduce person-region (mis)fit, which takes into account the linguistic complexity of the region (see Table 4). Clearly, language skills (as a part of knowledge, skills and attitudes) are relevant on several levels rather than being associated with the person-job level only. Our findings contradict the general assumption in P-E fit literature that relates skills mainly to person-job level. We believe this viewpoint is too narrow, because language skills and language requirements at work are broader and not limited to the specific skills required to perform a particular job.

Table 4. Illustrative quotations according to levels of person-environment misfit

Levels of Person-Environment Misfit	*Illustrative Quotations*
A. Person-region language misfit	

When working in the Vaasa region and in the region of Ostrobothnia, the Swedish language skills would be very useful. Often the linguistic situations are e.g. tackled so, that everyone speaks their own mother tongue, but I feel that in many cases information is lost in these conversations. In the same way, I sometimes feel that I have no choice but to decline certain events, if the target group is monolingually Swedish and I cannot e.g. give a Finnish presentation in the seminar.

B. Person-organization language misfit

Not all information is translated into English on the university's website. Also sometimes I find colleagues leaving notes on their doors in Finnish and I have to translate them to understand what's the message is about.

C. Person-group language misfit

Often, I prefer to sit alone during the lunch and not join a table where there are only my Finnish-speaking colleagues; I just don't want to disturb their conversation in Finnish and force them speak English. My spoken Finnish isn't so advanced to follow the conversation.

D. Person-supervisor language misfit

Maybe in the sense that as the new Dean is English speaking, it might occasionally be a bit challenging to work with her/him although (s)he does speak Finnish too, of course.

E. Person-job language misfit

My biggest challenge *is probably writing articles in English. Even if I have good language skills, I am not in the level of a native language user.*

As our findings suggest, linguistic challenges can be perceived both as opportunities and constraints, leading to frustration, uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. Sometimes these emotions turn into perceptions of language (mis)fit. However, the five levels of language misfit illustrated in Table 4 need not be aligned with each other. For example, Dean Smale is a native speaker of English who enjoys language fit on the person-job level because he can use English in his teaching and research activities. However, on the other levels, he has suffered from language misfit because Finnish is the predominant administrative language at the University of Vaasa. It

is possible that the choice of Dean Smale may have caused some of his local colleagues to experience language misfit because of increased work load. Thus, perceptions of language (mis)fit are highly dynamic and dependent on work context.

5   Discussion and conclusions

In this case study, we explored the perceptions of academic and university services staff on language misfit in a multilingual university located in a bilingual region. Hence, we contribute to person-environment (mis)fit research by defining subjective misfit in multilingual context. So far, the concept of subjective misfit has been elusive and lacking precise definition (Piasentin & Chapman, 2006; Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013).

The linguistic challenges perceived by personnel at the University of Vaasa formed dichotomies as well as dualistic pairs along a continuum. The approach of contrastive thinking indicates that individuals with seemingly equal language skills may sometimes perceive fit (see example 1), but at other times misfit (see example 8b) depending on professional context. This may be due to the existence of so called 'language pockets' (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Piekkari et al., 2014) at the university. In such pockets, which may reside in monolingual (Finnish or English) or multilingual units, language use differs from the rest of the organization.

Polar positions along a continuum also revealed distinctions such as native−non-native (see example 3c), suggesting that misfit and fit can move along a continuum without fixed starting point. A person may perceive herself as a misfit and inadequate, because she is comparing her own language skills to an ideal language "fit". This ideal language fit may refer to native ("perfect") language skills. However, in our data set, most linguistic challenges were

related to demands-abilities misfit based on underqualification. In this regard, the dean's story is an exception because it captures perceptions of language misfit based on overqualification. Dean Smale is not only skilled in English and Finnish but also in Latin, French and German, which he does not need in his daily work.

The literature on socialization provides interesting insights into how individuals respond to experiences of misfit. They may change their identities or jobs to find a better fit (e.g., move to a language pocket in the same organization). Our findings also showed that individuals may simply deny any experience of misfit (e.g., "there is no language misfit") or they may work on improving their language skills (e.g., to better align their skills with the requirements of the organization or the region in question). Further, Shipp and Jansen (2011, p. 90) suggest that individuals may "recraft their fit stories without creating an actual change in themselves or their environments". As a coping strategy, these fit narratives may help the individual to combine their experiences of (mis)fit with different aspects of their professional environment (see Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). For example, a person may ignore his or her person-organization language misfit by shifting the attention to the person-job language fit (like the dean did in the first phase but then started learning Finnish as well), or by transferring language misfit to other members in the work context. This provides interesting opportunities to study language-related paradoxes and calls for qualitative approaches in future research.

Our findings have implications for university management (e.g. recruitment and integration of non-Finnish employees) because multilingualism may easily produce perceptions of language misfit. Typically, person-job language fit attracts most attention in recruitment, but other potential misfit(s) may be equally salient and have a considerable effect on e.g., job satisfaction and commitment. Understanding linguistic challenges and perceptions of misfit is

also essential for developing language policies and practices, because perceptions of language misfit can be reduced through language policy measures, such as allocation of supporting resources (e.g., translators, language training, and a term bank).

Yet, language practices are dynamic and therefore measures of language policy are often reactive (Saarinen & Taalas, 2017) as an academic staff member commented:

> *"Language is almost impossible to separate from internationalisation. Language policies tend to follow (react to) trends in hiring international staff and Phd students. Language needs are already embedded into the number of Finnish-language educational programmes we have and how much staff publish in English and operate in international academic circles. One of the challenges is to break down the belief that certain parts of the university do not need to internationalise and do not need English. This is a question of where we set our expectations (forward looking) rather than just reacting to the current status." (AS_90)*

We suggest that language policy should follow or at least reflect language practices in use (Saarinen & Taalas, 2017). Recent research blurs the boundaries between policy and practice by stating that language policies come in various forms, ranging "from formal/formalised, official, overt, *de jure* language policies to informal/non-formalised, non-official, covert, *de facto* language policies" (Sanden & Kankaanranta 2018, p. 547). Despite increasing Englishization of universities (Boussebaa & Tienari, 2019 in press), senior management should also be aware of the requirements of mono-, bi- and multilingualism as well as parallellingualism. The latter refers to situations in which two or more languages are used side-by-side and none of them is subordinated or marginalized in relation to the other(s) (see Harder 2008; Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research 2007).

Because this study was a cross-sectional single case study, future research would benefit from comparative and longitudinal case designs (both qualitative and quantitative) covering different language regions and organizations. One interesting area of future research is the

linguistic challenges experienced by managers, because a relatively high number of them reported such challenges on a weekly basis. Another group that deserves further attention consists of those who did not report any linguistic challenges. Do they possess superior skills or resort to agile strategies in order to be able to navigate in the changing linguistic landscape? There is also a need to study language skills more holistically, including productive and receptive skills of professionals, and language related coping strategies. The dynamics and outcomes of (mis)fit across levels is another topic worthy of attention. We expect person-job language fit to be salient in the short term. However, from a long term perspective, the importance of person-organization and person-region language (mis)fit is likely to increase, if the person is seeking career progression within the same organization. For example, the University of Vaasa is large enough to offer opportunities for horizontal, vertical and international career moves. An interesting question is related to psychological contracts (Shore & Barksdale 1998, p. 731) and the language related expectations and responsibilities that universities and employees have towards each other. We believe that the changing landscape of higher education institutions offers a fascinating context to further explore questions around the novel concept of language (mis)fit.

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[i] Dean Smale was one of our informants who gave his permission to publish his story without anonymization.