

Defining legitimate taste in Finland: Does mother tongue matter?

Riie Heikkilä and Nina Kahma

Department of Social Policy
University of Helsinki

Finns are said to be homogenous when it comes to cultural taste. However, the division between the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority is often considered significant. Previous study shows that the Swedish-speakers are statistically better-off when it comes to issues such as income and health. The stereotype of the Swedish-speakers is that in cultural consumption they represent upper-class taste. Most contemporary theory claims that the notion of legitimacy itself is changing. The paper examines ideas of legitimate taste brought up in twenty focus groups. We shall compare the linguistic groups and form a picture of what type of culture is considered legitimate by which group. In the end we aim to answer the question of what legitimate taste in the Finnish context means. The paper is based on a focus group study that serves as a pilot research for the project Cultural Capital and Social Differentiation in Contemporary Finland.

Key words: cultural taste; legitimacy; linguistic groups; focus groups.

Introduction

In this paper we will investigate the socially constructed concepts of good and bad taste in Finland: both among the population majority and its important minority, the Finnish Swedes, a group that has been ascribed a more legitimate or correct taste than the linguistic majority. As cultural capital in this context consists of knowledge about cultural products, participation in cultural activities and judgement on cultural products, how are the latter two discussed in focus groups consisting of either Finnish or Swedish speakers? More importantly: what tools do the different language groups have for defining and analyzing taste? Our aim is to investigate the different ways of speaking about culture between the two language groups, not the possible differences in cultural taste within the language groups.

The focus group data scrutinized here was generated for a

pilot study of an ongoing Finnish research project. The data offers valuable information about consumption of culture, participation, identification of cultural products and their importance as well as ways of speaking which can be analysed as such (Rahkonen et al. 2006). Culture was approached through a frame of seven topics including music, cinema, television, arts, reading, eating, clothing and participating in different kinds of events and leisure activities. In each focus group interview (see Heikkilä & Kahma 2006), two sub-fields of culture (out of seven) were discussed along with a short section about cultural events and participation. 'Good' and 'bad' taste were also discussed.

The case examined in this paper consists of focus group data of altogether twenty groups, of which ten are Finnish-speaking and ten Swedish-speaking. We have chosen these specific groups from the entire data (consisting of more than 40 focus groups) to form two palettes of groups as similar as possible regarding background information on age, gender and education in order to better study the impact of mother tongue upon taste.¹ Even if we use more quotations from fo-

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¹ The ages of our interviewees range from 16 to 91 in the groups of the linguistic majority and from 16 to 87 in the Finnish Swedish groups. Group sizes range from 3 to 12 people. Excluding alto-

cus groups made up of middle-aged or older people², the overall scrutinized groups have been selected in order to give larger scope on each language group.

The Finnish Swedes are an interesting cultural counterpoint for the majority for two reasons. They form a social and cultural world of their own, having their own cultural products, newspapers, TV and radio channels, editors and institutions with strong Swedish influence. Traditionally, in popular notion of the majority, the Finnish Swedes are thought to be wealthier, healthier and generally better-off – even if in reality they are a very heterogeneous group that differs little from the majority on a socio-economical scale (cf. Åström 2001). This often mythical perspective can be examined both by comparing the language groups and by studying their attitudes towards each other's culture. These important factors will be dealt with further in this paper.

Class, mother tongue or something else as a basis for formation of tastes?

During the last couple of decades Pierre Bourdieu's *La Distinction* (1979; in English 1984) has been one of the most discussed works in social sciences regarding the study of taste. *Distinction* deals with differences and distinctions and their relationship to the formation and division of people's lifestyles in French class society. According to Bourdieu taste was the key area of emergence of class differences, and linguistic structures were important in actualization of the classification system (Bourdieu 1979, 561-564).

The idea of class based taste and lifestyle differences has been contested by theories and research on cultural pluralism and individualisation: already in the 80's individualisation was seen as having moved "beyond classes and layers" (Beck 1986; cf. also Gronow 1997). In Gerhard Schulze's (1992) gigantic work *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* categories of taste are examined as horizontal groups instead of classes. A more recent example of research breaking away from class has been Bernard Lahire's (2004) *La culture des individus*, where Lahire suggests that taste is continuously negotiated and reformed thus individuals in pluralistic society are now more free than ever to diffuse a variety of cultural products (both legitimate and popular) into individual taste patterns. The notion of pluralism presupposes the existence of a vast

range of cultural products and a certain acceptance towards the new.³

Thus contemporary research continues to support the importance of socio-demographic variables such as class, educational qualifications, gender and age as the most significant factors in explaining the tendencies for having certain tastes (e.g. Gayo-Cal et al. 2006; Vander Stichele & Laermans 2006; Roberts 2004). However, comparative research on the differences between countries have been few (among these Lamont 1992; Virtanen 2007). Some studies have noted that there can be many other divisions within countries, too: taste differences may follow for example ethnic, linguistic or regional boundaries (e.g. Vander Stichele & Laermans 2006).

Finland seems to be a special case if we look at the applicability of the theory of distinction although so far there have been only a few non-systematic attempts to apply the theory of distinction to Finland.⁴ Overall the applicability of class perspective to Finland has to be questioned: for example Tarasti (1990, 207) has suggested that it is typical for Finnish culture to have very little cultural objects with which distinctions can be made. Whereas other cultures are rich and continuously receive foreign and even contradictory influences, Finland has lacked this type of cultural interaction. Consequently, culture has become dull and static. Therefore Finnish culture includes very few influences and has borrowed few elements from other cultures, thus the ones borrowed have remained peripheral. (Tarasti 1990, 197–198.) It is widely accepted that Finland embraces

gether four groups of only men or women, in all Finnish Swedish groups there has been a fairly equal proportion of sexes, whereas in the Finnish-speaking groups 6 out of 10 groups consisted of only men or women. More information is provided in Annex 1.

² Like, among others, Lahire (2004) has noted, contemporary youth culture is fairly mixed and tolerant; the study of the cultural taste of middle-aged and especially older people reveals many more differences.

³ Pluralism comes close to the so-called omnivorousness thesis which refers to taste embracing a wide range of cultural products freely chosen from cultural categories of very different statuses. It has been claimed that omnivorousness, another thesis strongly challenging Bourdieu's theory, has replaced classical highbrowness as a legitimate taste (cf. Peterson & Kern 1996).

⁴ The theory of distinction has mainly been applied by Keijo Rahkonen and J. P. Roos. Their research has however been limited to rather small data and restricted groups of people such as the metal workers and the Finnish intelligentsia (Roos & Rahkonen 1985; Rahkonen et al. 1989; Rahkonen & Roos 1993).

some kind of uniform culture. This assumption indicates that there are only minor differences or even undeveloped taste hierarchies or total lack of these (cf. Mäkelä 1985, 247–260; Liikkanen 1998, 131–132). Based on empirical data on consumption and lifestyles Terhi-Anna Wilska (2002, 208–209) has also reached similar conclusions. She stated that Finns are modest and not too individualistic in consumption and lifestyle choices, although there are some divisions, and socio-economic and demographic factors (gender, age, class position and income level) that act as strong dividers of lifestyles.

The uniform culture that is often explained with language, ethnic resemblance or national character or isolation from the rest of the world is a myth that presupposes ignorance of obvious differences nationally and influences from elsewhere (Lehtonen et al. 2004, 47, 111–112). Altogether, if the question of language is addressed, Finland can hardly be labelled as a mono-cultural country; in a country of two official languages mother tongue is seen as an important divider when it comes to culture and even life conditions. Moreover cultural divisions have been and still are explained with language-related stereotypes: the Swedish-speaking majority is seen as better-off in every way (cf. Allardt & Starck 1981).

In international comparison, the Finnish Swedes are an interesting minority.⁵ Even if they count for only 6 per cent of the population, in many ways they seem to be relatively much more visible in Finnish society. Many researches have explained the differences with social capital (Hyypä & Mäki 2001): the Swedish-speakers form a smaller and a well integrated society, and they share more traditions than the majority. There is, however, also an historical explanation in the status of the Finnish Swedes: they formed the ruling elite when Finland was a part of Sweden from 1150 to 1809 and partly kept their positions after the Russian occupation and after Finland became independent in 1917.

Nevertheless, there is also still a large proportion of peasants and farmers among the Finnish Swedes (Allardt & Starck 1981) and the economical structure of the minority does not differ much from that of the majority's. The rights of the Finnish Swedes have been well preserved: they are offered all the public services in their mother tongue, and a plethora of institutions and associations keeps a close watch on their welfare. This is why it is somewhat problematic to

define the Finnish Swedes as an ethnic minority: like McRae has noted (1999), there is hardly any linguistic minority in the world with so much power and equal (or better) living conditions than those of the majority.

The analysis: mapping the discussions

In this article, focus groups are used as a way of studying values, attitudes, and the social formation of opinions.⁶ The possible consensus reached discussing taste in a group covers all of these areas. A consensus, moreover, is not always reached: there are distinctive ways of marking differences within the group which range from agreeing, ignoring or even disagreeing completely to building an open confrontation. Different groups also have different tools in building their discourses (Silva & Wright 2005); in the following chapters we will discuss these aspects in depth.

Our data consists of twenty focus groups, ten conducted with the Finnish-speaking population majority and ten with Swedish-speaking groups. As the aim was to compare ways of speaking about culture, these palettes (see Annex 1) were built in order to make the comparison between the two language groups easier. Much importance was given to the identical proceeding of each group independently of the mother tongue. A semi-structured interview frame was used to cover two areas of culture out of seven (music, cinema, television, arts, reading, eating and clothing) with each group, followed by a short discussion on participation in different kinds of cultural events and, finally, on good and bad taste. The cultural themes, depending on the exact topic, proceeded from concrete cultural practices (“*What music do or don't you listen to?*” or “*What books have you read lately; did you like*

⁵ There is a lot of literature on how to define the minority status (cf. Finnäs 1986): do we refer to the official language status in the population register (which is subjective data in the sense that parents, for instance, are allowed to choose their child's language independently of their own linguistic status) or to cultural identities of different levels?

⁶ Focus groups are a research method of growing popularity, and there is a growing amount of literature on how to conduct (Fern 2001; Morgan 1988), moderate (Fern 2001, 73–95; Steward & Shamdassani 1990, 69–86) and analyze them (Knodel 1993; Morgan 1988). Traditionally focus groups have mostly been used as a part of marketing research, health education or a pilot research for quantitative research (Wilkinson 1998).

them or not?") to more abstract definitions on the subject ("What kind of music is good or bad?" or "What does a good or bad book look like?"). Participants were encouraged to discuss freely, and that is why moderation was kept as low as possible.

Further effort was needed to map the discussions, since focus groups do not themselves offer tools for analysis. We start our analysis by scrutinizing the dynamics of the discussions. Then, in order to identify the construction of the consensus, the utterances are divided into two categories: statements and reactions. Statements are utterances which either simply answer the question or introduce a new topic to the conversation. Whereas statements tell more about the content of the interview, reactions are very interesting from the perspective of outlining the formation of consensus.

We have classified three types of reactions according to how they relate to the previous remark. Firstly there are reactions that express agreement and acceptance to what was said before – sometimes even encouragement to the previous speaker to continue. Secondly, there are reactions that do not involve a clear reaction to what was said before – this includes everything from silence to ignorance. These reactions can include both silent acceptance and disagreement – or ignorance – but it is impossible to guess which the case is. Finally, there are reactions in which a participant openly expresses a disagreement or challenges what was previously stated in the group. We want to emphasize that this division leaves out many interesting factors concerning the situational group dynamics and the linguistic competences of individual participants. Still, it serves excellently our research question: how is taste actually defended, built and gradually formed in relatively heterogeneous groups, and how is a possible consensus built – if it is built at all.

Taste matters in two different languages

In Finland silence is not equated with failure to communicate; it is an integral part of social interaction. In Finland it is considered impolite or inappropriate to force one's opinions on others – it is more appropriate to nod in agreement, smile quietly, and avoid opinionated argument or discord. (Lewis 2005, 68)

Lewis (2005) has pointed out in his research on Finnish business culture that Finns have a distinctive communication style compared to other western nationalities. Introversiveness, modesty, quietness, not interrupting, and the use of silence characterize the communication between Finns. Lewis even describes the Finn as a person having an "obsessive talent for self-effacement and ultra-taciturnity, where opinions are strongly held but often unvoiced." As negative as these features may sound, he also describes Finns as adaptable, tolerant and easygoing, essentially polite and tolerant on the outside (secretly despising some that fails to conform to some standards of behaviour). (Lewis 2005, 65, 103.) Also academic research in Finland has supported similar results. Satu Apo (1998, 84-87) has studied discourses on Finns from historical perspective. She states that the stereotypes of Finns involve predominantly negative ingredients: Finns are seen as rude, straight-faced, they lack communication skills, and they are too straight-forward and realistic. Thus, we must contemplate the applicability of the stereotype critically: it may be that it simply doesn't apply. It must also be noted that there may be differences between the two linguistic groups in Finland.

The language groups seem to relate differently to the cultural products in different languages. In certain areas of culture such as visual art (paintings, photographs) or artistic performances such as dance and instrumental music the language of either the artist or artwork is not seen as relevant, but in some areas of culture language is a very important divider. Self-evidently in (non-translated) literature, TV programmes and theatre, language is very important and tends to influence choices.

The different linguistic groups talked about very different cultural products, even if the frames of the discussions were identical. For example the Finnish-speaking groups mainly talked about literature, music and television programmes made in Finnish. Also English cultural products were much discussed. Instead the cultural products mentioned in Swedish groups were limited to certain authors writing in Swedish, films of certain Swedish film directors known worldwide such as Ingmar Bergman, and certain programmes on FST (the Swedish channel). However, it must be noted that also people from the Finnish-speaking majority speak Swedish to some extent – some even very well.

Thus, on the basis of the interviews, it seems that the surface of contact to the culture of the minority is limited to a few cultural products which in some cases are either translated into Finnish or come with subtitles. We might even say that Swedish culture is almost in the same position as cultural products in languages other than Finnish or English.

When it comes to the Finnish Swedes, it seems generally easier for them to initiate a conversation about culture and speak freely about their tastes. Maybe this is why they tend not only to name more cultural products than their Finnish-speaking counterparts when asked about tastes, but also usually display a wider variety within them. This variety tends to be greater even among single groups.

Quite independently of the legitimacy of the cultural products, the variety of the cultural products mentioned by the Finnish Swedes is larger also on the socio-geographical scale. Finnish Swedes not only consume culture of their own cultural universe, but also that of the Finnish-speaking Finland or the globalized culture (like the Finnish-speakers), and, more interestingly, the cultural products of Sweden. Lönnqvist (2001, 16) has noted a clear difference between the cultural orientations among different Finnish Swedes: the bourgeoisie has traditionally picked its tastes from the European cultural hierarchies; the working class, on the contrary, has always tended to be turned towards Sweden and purely Swedish cultural products.

This division can still be seen in the Swedish-speaking focus groups: the more educated interviewees display a wide range of internationally known cultural products, whereas the less educated tend to select their likes and even dislikes from the Swedish or, in some cases, domestic arena. The tastes of the majority are almost always limited to purely Finnish or sometimes international products. As specific focus groups are not compared here but only language groups, this tendency broadens notably the general cultural profile of the Finnish Swedes and enhances their possibilities of distinction, something that Tarasti (1990) has supposed to be difficult for the (Finnish-speaking) Finns. It also introduces their openness for the *cultural Other* in a larger sense: if the variety of cultural likes and dislikes within a group is large in itself, the group disposes of a large cultural repertoire.

Finnish-speakers

Refusing to disagree. Our data on the Finnish-speaking groups supports to some extent the findings of Lewis on how the Finns communicate. The conversations were characterized by search for – at least an apparent – consensus. The groups' conversations basically consisted of statements, i.e. utterances that brought something new into the conversations and remarks that expressed agreement and acceptance. Comments which openly expressed disagreement or challenged what the previous speaker(s) said were few.

Remarks that expressed agreement and acceptance were prevalent in all of the groups. There were few remarks with no clear reaction, and even fewer disagreeing remarks or remarks that sought open confrontation. In almost all of the groups some of the group members stressed that the group was tolerant and open to a variety of cultural products and genres. Some group members even described themselves as omnivores. Thus, when answering a question, the first comment usually defined what types of cultural products could be discussed, e.g. would the group talk primarily about esteemed cultural products such as opera and classical music, or about more popular culture.

However, certain types of questions triggered different types of group interaction. With questions concerning concrete cultural activities, a vast variety of cultural products and categories were usually disclosed and freely described. The group members usually ended up taking turns and listing their leisure pursuits that may have even clashed with what was previously said. They would nod or mumble acceptingly on each others' pursuits. We might even say that little interaction occurred among the group – different interests were displayed rather than disputed.

Reactions to questions concerning likings and personal preferences were more varied. In general, questions concerning preferences were more easily answered than questions concerning dislikes. Judging tended to be avoided and dislikes were hardly commented on (unless the target was distant to the whole group, for example youth music to the elders). As in the next example⁷, the answers to questions

⁷ All names have been changed. Background information is provided according to forms filled by the participants. The possible initials refer to the moderators (the authors).

concerning dislikes had to be sometimes virtually dragged out:

I⁸

NK: And what kind of music don't you like?

Tapio: The music that we don't like isn't necessarily bad.

Seppo: I haven't listened to anything that I don't like.

NK: But what do you personally consider bad?

Tapani: Well, I for example don't like jazz in particular. Nor the kind of heavier rock.

Tapio: I listen to a good deal of all kinds [of music]. I may not like everything exceedingly, but I listen to all kinds.

Whereas naming dislikes was avoided, as in the previous excerpt, questions concerning likings were usually met with less awkwardness. Each group member would answer without others commenting, which resulted in the groups seemingly unanimously listing some cultural products and genres. There were practically no disagreeing remarks – instead they were formulated as statements on something other than liking, for example understanding or having enough knowledge of something:

II⁹

Aili: ... then there are some wonderful non-figurative pieces that give a sensation, feeling of something fresh. Then there are the likes of Kauko Lehtinen¹⁰, who draws peculiar details in his works. I simply don't appreciate that the least bit.

Helmi: [has earlier said she doesn't like modern art] I draw back this much that I may look at a modern painting that I think has wonderful colours.

Aili: Right.

Helmi: So that... although there's nothing more than the wonderful colours, it is...

Ellen: Yes, so that it is alive and it has depth, so that it is not a mere surface. Nowadays there's quite a bit of modern art. But colours can make it work.

Helmi: But that kind [of paintings], where two lines have been drawn like this, and different colour applied to the squares... That I can not comprehend.

The likings of others were in none of the interviews directly judged as unworthy. It seems likings are considered as a part of one's personality – therefore subjective likings can not be judged by others.

As opposed to questions concerning activities and likings that are covered by talking about concrete cultural items, questions concerning taste and taste judgements provoked conversation about more general and non-specific matters. They were answered in collaboration and consensus and defined by the group as a whole. Disagreeing arguments were virtually absent from the conversation. In what follows a construction of consensuses on taste in the Finnish-speaking groups will be addressed in detail.

Constructing taste. Woodward and Emmison (2001) have pointed out that in social sciences the idea that judgements of taste are much more than mere aesthetical reflections upon hierarchies of cultural products is often neglected. In their study, good and especially bad taste were far more often described by levels of appropriate behaviour, discreetness and interpersonal conduct than by cultural products of any kind.

Even if our research primarily covers judgements of taste on different areas of culture, our main findings resemble the one detailed above: when discussing good and bad taste, the groups usually talked about behaviour, taking others into consideration and responding appropriately. This moralistic judgement of taste, which Woodward and Emmison see as the most prominent one, can thus be found in our data. Especially bad taste is often defined as the wrong kind of

⁸ Executives in Helsinki region, age 43–69, 5 men.

⁹ Retired clerical workers and housewives, Helsinki, age 82–88, 4 women.

¹⁰ Kauko Lehtinen (1925–) is an internationally respected Finnish surrealist.

behaviour, treating others with disrespect and so on. The following example from the interview of well educated middle-aged women shows a typical reaction to bringing up the question of good taste:

III¹¹

NK: I have one more question for you. It's about good taste. How would you define good taste?
[silence]

Eila: What can I...

[laughter]

*Riitta: The Fazer Blue.*¹²

[laughter... silence]

Kirsti: Does it exist in general? Is there good taste and is there bad taste? I mean tastelessness exists, but...

As in the previous example, the groups belonging to the Finnish-speaking majority usually stayed silent for a little while when asked to define good taste or the opposite, bad taste. It varied how keenly the groups would discuss taste: usually some of the interviewees would totally shut themselves out of the conversation, or just keep on nodding, whereas the more confident talkers would enumerate features of good or bad taste. The conversation usually revolved around clothing, home decoration and manners. Thus what is noteworthy is that there was no disagreement when talking about taste.

The groups would generally refrain from giving clear rules on what is good/bad taste. They usually considered taste to be relative and defined good taste as something abstract and hard to define, but most of all as a subjective and personal matter beyond all judgement. Conversation on good taste usually turned to discussion on values and manners: good taste means “representing and behaving in a way that doesn't insult or hurt others”, “valuing others”, “knowing what kind of behaviour is appropriate in different situations”, and so on. These involved sometimes concrete sets of rules – for example what to wear for certain situations such as the opera, when is it appropriate to call a person by his/her first name and so on.

Conversation on good taste was usually intertwined with clothing and home decoration. In clothing good taste was seen as the ability to use colours, dress in style, appear presentable and well-groomed and so on. Although dressing up was seen as something requiring skill and knowledge on what goes together, the groups avoided judgement:

“In the flea market you see all kinds of people, and there was [...] a punker or a Gothic girl, who had shaven her head from the sides, and dyed it with many colours... and then thoroughly black clothes and jewellery... one might say she didn't maybe have too good taste, but in her own style she was quite...” (Tapio 59, director of finance.)

As in the previous example, naming some style as tacky or tasteless was avoided, although usually some styles were labelled as incomprehensible. Despite the apparent acceptance of all kinds of styles, clothing manifested itself as an important area where one must know how much is enough (cf. Woodward & Emmison 2001, 302). In the interviews of the language majority, taste in clothing was mainly measured in quantities: one should not show off too much or have too much glitter. On the other hand dressing up for an occasion was considered important. In clothing one should also take factors such as time frame into consideration. Open criticism was usually expressed towards what the fashion used to be. What used to be in fashion may become a symbol of bad taste in a matter of decades – to name a few: mini skirts and *Miami Vice* clothing. Things that are in fashion now were described as bad taste mainly by the older groups:

“And then there is... I get irritated if someone is dressed up according to the latest fashion and when... sometimes... it applies maybe better to women than men... when you go like “Oh dear, can she really go out in that outfit?” But it also must be respected; you cannot go and tell her to go home real fast!” (Pertti 79, teacher.)

¹¹ Arts professionals and executives, eastern Finland, age 41–70, 11 women.

¹² The most traditional Finnish chocolate brand.

In home decoration the idea of quantity was totally absent. The groups emphasized that good taste equals the ability to create comfortable surroundings. What is good taste in home decoration is thus more subjective.

In some of the groups bad taste was approached less carefully than good taste, although abstract definitions such as “bad taste is narrow-mindedness” and “we cannot make any generalizations based on one case” were presented from the beginning. Whereas concrete examples on good taste were hardly articulated, examples on bad taste were. The examples included direct comments on the most obvious popular and rude markers of bad taste in behaviour such as farting, burping, vulgar expressions in speech and bad behaviour (not taking others into account, not letting others speak etc.). In the area of clothing, concrete examples contained piercing and tattoos, and too revealing clothing. Discussion on wearing too little sometimes turned into moral judgement as the next example shows:

IV¹³

Tarja: And then, it is quite funny, when we think about clothing...

Osmo: Well, good taste is not in high demand today.

[...]

Kimmo: I think today... I am... I will be 59 soon and I think I am wearing well...

Osmo: We are all oldies here...

Kimmo: ... in any company, but I don't understand why young girls dress up like porn stars.

Osmo: Yeah, that is...

Kimmo: I believe it is bad taste. They do not comprehend that... So if they get treated as porn stars, then they shouldn't complain. It is a typical example of bad taste.

Osmo: They send out signals that they don't live up to... And so... they should blame themselves.

Kimmo: Right! If they get treated like porn stars... it's natural.

[...]

Kimmo: They [the parents] are way off track, if they haven't told them what kind of treatment results of... being half naked....

Tarja: In summer they carry a backpack when they go out. When they have gone around the corner, they change and put on their horrid war paint.

Osmo: And in the autumn they get an abortion.

As in the previous example, talk about bad taste concentrated on areas which can be easily perceived and judged such as clothing and manners. Other areas of culture such as music, TV programmes, and theatre plays were mentioned only in singular cases. Thus it is interesting that the groups would not talk about areas of culture that had been discussed previously in the interview when the question of taste was introduced. It seems that by concentrating on easily perceivable topics instead of personal judgement on cultural products the groups kept the conversation away from themselves.

What is significant in the conversations is that the groups avoided conflict and direct negotiation of the definitions and seemed to construct their ideas on good and bad taste in collaboration. Lack of disagreement is not a proof of either cultural homogeneity or genuine tolerance. Instead the willingness to represent oneself as tolerant and an omnivore may result from an unwillingness to argue and the inability to talk about differences. The talk about being omnivorous seems to obscure the differences between the group members; although in many groups the interviewees defined themselves as omnivores, it may not actually be the case.

The applicability of focus groups must be questioned if we are hoping to obtain knowledge on the differences in taste and cultural consumption between singular group members in this way; it seems consensuality is a marker of a distinct conversation culture of the Finnish-speakers, which involves avoidance of direct conflict and tendency to comment on distant targets of criticism. The seemingly unanimous consensus may not be a sign of lacking differences and distinctions, but rather a proof of a distinctive code of communication.

¹³ Arts professionals and executives, Helsinki, age 59–70, 2 women, 2 men.

If we believe in theorists such as Bourdieu (1979) claiming that taste differences embody class differences and that taste differences manifest differences in societies, how can they be detected on the basis of data in which manifesting differences is being avoided – or can they be detected?

The case of the Finnish Swedes

Agreeing to disagree. The tendency of polite agreement and a certain search for consensus, already shown to be a part of the Finnish universe of discourse, naturally manifests itself among the Finnish Swedes too. The logics of the discussion, moreover, are dramatically different. As the Finnish speakers are being very influenced by what the first speaker has said and keep the conversation in those frames, the Finnish Swedes usually take the previous speakers' comments as challenges or cues. It is this tendency that leads the Finnish-speaking focus groups towards polite, neutral consensus and the Finnish Swedes towards multifaceted, typically self-disclosing elaborations. Therefore the most striking difference between the language groups is that the Finnish Swedes, as a rule, show stronger patterns of agreeing – strong, characteristic markers of sharing the same opinions – but also disagreeing.

Status, apparently, bestows more cultural and rhetorical confidence. As we are not comparing single groups but larger clusters of language groups (which, as we have seen, form two similar palettes containing similar groups), we cannot draw these conclusions here. Nevertheless, it was soon clear that the groups of Finnish Swedes were more expressive and more at ease with the situation of conversation than the Finnish speakers. In the following examples, two very different groups, with a very high and low cultural status, respectively, express their opinions about taste.

I¹⁴

RH: What then, in your opinion, is good taste?

Bob: It's so terribly difficult! What you have posed is a very difficult question. Because everything depends on how these things are used... or how they are said to...

Katy: Taste evolves all the time!

Bob: Not at all! Good taste is always good taste. Bad taste is bad taste.

Katy: No! It changes!

Bob: You see... I've been in Rome for example, and I...

Katy: And I have been in Stockholm!

Tom: And I have been drunk.

Bob: There has always been bad taste.

Katy: Sure. But there are lots of things that were considered beautiful in the past. And they were beautiful!

Lisa: Now you're confusing things.

II¹⁵

RH: Is there something else you'd like to say about taste that you don't like at all?

[Silence]

RH: Nothing?

Viola: Well, it's not exactly that you hate something...

Max: Things like metal and chrome are not too fancy.

Peter: Miina Äkkijyrkkä¹⁶ and her metallic...

Max: Those cows!

Viola: They are fantastic!

Peter: No, I don't like them at all!

Max: They're great I think.

Viola: That woman really has imagination!

Peter: Well, I don't know...

Viola: I think her art is quite clever.

¹⁴ Arts professionals and executives, Helsinki, 54–75 years, 3 women, 6 men.

¹⁵ Lower executives, Helsinki region, 42–79 years, 2 women, 4 men.

¹⁶ Miina Äkkijyrkkä (1949–), (at the moment called Liina Lång, previously Riitta Loiva) is a Finnish artist and cattle farmer. She has attracted much attention with her eccentric scrap art sculptures of cows, which can be found scattered through Finnish cities.

Even if the data quoted comes from two socially very different groups, both examples display the fact that the Finnish Swedes really do disagree about matters of taste – and that disagreeing is not a feature of only groups with higher statuses, like Fern (2001) has claimed. Strong personal opinions like the ones expressed above are typically seen in all of the focus groups made up of Finnish Swedes, who seem to be more culturally confident with expressing deviating opinions and even clearly disagreeing. Sometimes these features come out in forms of joking (like in the first example on drunkenness) or through allusions, which can also be seen as a sign of feeling comfortable with the situation (Kitzinger 1994, 108). This general willingness to disagree, to challenge others verbally and even to provoke has been the most striking feature among our Swedish-speaking groups.

Finnish Swedes constructing taste. When it comes to defining good and bad taste, the Finnish Swedes follow the general pattern outlined both in the previous chapters on the language majority and in Depending on the group this is almost a rule: good taste is, depending on the group, something “eternally beautiful”, “within the simple and classic” or “a personal decision of each of us”. Bad taste, on the contrary, is often described with the help of images of behaving or dressing in a way that does not fit a specific context. Even very specific cultural products, such as the classical but culturally somewhat banalized Finnish Aalto vase or the already famous Muhammad pictures published in Denmark are brought out as examples of bad taste.

As the previous examples show, taste is a question of moral and interpersonal conduct with the Finnish Swedes also. In our data there are, however, much less direct comments on the most obvious popular and rude markers of bad taste (“earrings are terrible”, “young girls dress too daringly”) from the part of the linguistic minority, whose opinions generally are somewhat more abstract and open-minded “behaving well is important”, “acting in a way that respects others is crucial; the Finnish Swedes interviewed also tend to soften their statements by the end of the interview by introducing a consensus on both good and bad taste even it would first have been disagreed about.

As Woodward & Emmison (2001, 310) show, the more the group possesses of educational (and therefore often cultural

and social) capital, the more abstract the definitions of both good and bad taste are. The awkwardness of speaking about taste in general leads to utterances that do not really display personal opinions, only something generally learned or something that the participants think that the research might appreciate as an answer. In the last example a group with very modest cultural competence discusses good taste, making it clear that the Finnish Swedes do not really possess a more legitimate culture than that of the majority just because their mother tongue happens to be Swedish. The ways of speaking about culture and reaching agreements are simply different.

III¹⁷

RH: I have one more question which draws together everything we've spoken about. It's about good taste. How would you define good taste?

[Silence]

Tim: It's divided into two like the bottom...

[Laughs]

Elena: So do you mean clothes, colours, or...?

RH: Whatever comes into your mind.

Gina: You mean how colours match? Mixing red and orange... I don't like it at all. I don't think blue and black fit either at all.

Tim: Yeah, black shoes and blue socks...

Anna: Simply don't fit!

Louis: Does this question concern clothes or behaviour?

RH: Whatever you want.

Louis: Well, you have to behave nicely. And that includes respecting people around you and dressing according to the circumstances...

Quite differently from the language majority, the Finnish Swedes rarely stay silent for a long while or avoid the question; on the contrary, they are generally very alert in the

¹⁷ Lower executives and manual workers, Helsinki region. 32–70 years, 5 women, 5 men.

situation of the group discussion, always trying to respond even if the question seems difficult¹⁸ and (like the example above shows) repetitively asking the interviewer how exactly the question should be answered if they feel intimidated by the often abstract theme. What is clear is that the Finnish Swedes dispose of a different, possibly more European culture of conversation with longer historical roots in the bourgeois tradition than their Finnish-speaking counterparts. They clearly lack Lewis' (2005) stereotypical characteristics of a silent Finn seeking consensus in a conversation. This is true especially of adults: as Woodward & Emmison (2001) have noted, more abstract or broad definitions of taste are rarely found among teenagers, and therefore groups with very young participants are more difficult to compare.

Can it thus be stated that the Finnish Swedes have a larger cultural repertoire and therefore represent a higher level of legitimacy? Yes, if we adopt here the omnivorousness thesis (Peterson & Kern 1996) that states that expressing good taste means having access to a large repertoire of cultural products. But as we have seen, our data does not show that the Finnish Swedes would be culturally more capable than the majority; the greatest difference lies simply in different ways of handling cultural and taste questions in a group and agreeing (or disagreeing) about them. The picture of a culturally uniform Finnish culture is therefore in serious decline.

Conclusion: is there uniform taste?

The aim of this article was not to point out differences inside the language groups, although some differences can be detected in the data. For instance differences between upper-class and working class Finnish-speakers seem greater than any differences between socio-economically similar groups that cross the mother tongue boundary. Finland might be culturally more uniform than many other societies, but cultural differences clearly do exist.

According to Bourdieu, the battle of legitimate language is one of the most visible battles of power in general. Linguistic capital is an important sub-group of cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu & Boltanski 1975), and therefore one's linguistic competence is an immediate indicator of class position. Our findings show that the focus groups made up of Finnish Swedes, compared to similar groups of the linguis-

tic majority, use a wider repertoire of communication when expressing their views on cultural tastes.

Nevertheless, our aim has been to show that the two national language groups have a clearly different *culture of communication*. On the basis of our analysis it is impossible to lean either towards class-based taste hierarchies or a more individualistic approach such as the Lahirean idea of individual socialisations and taste patterns (Lahire 2004). Thus the differences between our Finnish and Swedish speakers are mainly differences inside the discourse: culturally determined ways of speaking that come out as linguistic *habitus*, always both individual and social.

As we have seen, the Finnish language majority and the Finnish Swedes appear culturally quite different: whereas the former usually try to reach a consensus discussing taste matters or simply stay quiet, the latter use tactics like provocation, allusions, or jokes just to have the chance to express their personal opinions. This difference is reflected in the common image of the Finnish Swedes as a better-off minority that has access to a more legitimate taste – apparently merely because of their prestigious language status. In many cases the differences simply stem from different codes of communication and do not come out as differences in concrete cultural practices.

The focus group discussions involve to some extent constructing consensus between the group members. We ended up suggesting that the method in itself could weaken the diversity among the groups. It is possible that the focus group as a method better suits the Finnish Swedes, who are more accustomed to a formal culture of conversation and are possibly more competent in situations of public conversation that include expressing one's opinions – they simply have more experience in a special "groupness" that Hydén & Bülow (2003) have thought to be the key of a successful focus group. Nevertheless, we do not suggest that the Finnish-speakers are without differences in taste or even strong cultural hierarchies – they just do not come up in conversation as easily as those of the language minority.

Biographical note. Heikkilä is a doctoral student at the Department of Social Policy at the University of Helsinki.

¹⁸ Jokes like the one told by Tim are often tactics of making an awkward situation more comfortable (cf. Silva & Wright 2005)

She's currently researching the lifestyle and cultural capital of the Finnish Swedes. Kahma is a doctoral student at the Department of Social Policy at the University of Helsinki. She is working on her doctoral thesis about the taste of the Finnish middle class.

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ANNEX I. Summary: Information on the focus groups used in the analysis*Finnish-speaking groups*

1. Executives, Helsinki region, age 43–69, 5 men.
2. Retired clerical workers and housewives, Helsinki, age 82–88, 4 women.
3. Arts professionals and executives, eastern Finland, age 41–70, 11 women.
4. Arts professionals and executives, Helsinki, age 59–70, 2 women, 2 men.
5. Clerical workers in a governmental institution, eastern Finland, age 26–51, 4 women, 1 man.
6. Health care professionals, southern Finland, age 35–56, 4 women.
7. Students of a vocational school of technology, Helsinki, age 17–18, 4 men.
8. Executives, clerical workers and students, southern Finland, age 19–67, 1 woman, 6 men.
9. Inhabitants of the same sheltered accommodation block, Helsinki, age 78–91, 6 women, 4 men.
10. Lower executives, south eastern Finland, age 59–79, 4 men.

Swedish-speaking groups

11. Executives, priests, Helsinki region, age 58–70, 4 men.
12. Retired executives, housewives, age 68–81, Helsinki, 3 women, 3 men.
13. Arts professionals and retired executives, western Finland, age 60–66, 3 women.
14. Arts professionals and executives, Helsinki, age 54–75, 3 women, 6 men.
15. Lower executives, Helsinki region, 42–79 years, 2 women, 4 men.
16. Higher and lower executives, teachers, western Finland, age 46–87, 6 men.
17. Students of a vocational school of technology, Helsinki region, age 17–19, 4 men.
18. Students in a high school, Helsinki, age 16–17, 3 women, 3 men.
19. Retired engineers, teachers and housewives, Helsinki, 5 women, 4 men.
20. Lower executives and manual workers, Helsinki region, age 32–70, 5 women, 5 men.