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Finding your Language: Language and Identity in Dess Terentyeva's Fiction

Language is an issue for all migrant authors – one may say it concerns all authors since language is a writer's most important instrument. In the works of migrant authors, however, the importance of language is somehow often more explicitly visible. Migrant authors knowing several languages must actively make choices between their languages. Language is often present in their works at a thematic level too. In this article, I will deal with language mainly from two different angles. First, I will explore some ideas on language that the Finland-Russian author Dess Terentyeva (b. 1992) presents and discusses in interviews and in social media. By doing this, I will also look at her image as an author and at her readers. Second, I will trace the themes of language and linguistic features in her works. I wish to study how language is connected to the identity of her female characters and how this works in relation to other factors that define their identity – the main features being their gender and notions of transcultural identity.

I have specifically chosen to study Terentyeva's works since she uses Russian extensively in some of her works and language is clearly one of the main defining features of her characters. She began her career as an author by publishing the *Neonkaupunki* trilogy with Susanna Hynynen – *Neonkaupunki* (*Neon City*) came out in 2020, *Neonkaupunki 2: Spiraalitie* (*Neon City 2: Spiral Road*) in 2021 and *Neonkaupunki 3: Luutivoli* (*Neon City 2: Bone Fair*) in 2024.[1] Terentyeva has continued her writing career in the field of young adult verse novel publishing a trilogy consisting of *Ihana* (*Lovely*, 2021), *Freestyle* (2023) and *Zeno* (2024; the title of the book refers to the name of the town Joutseno). She has also written an audiobook *Hääkengät* (*Wedding Shoes*, 2023) that came out only in audio format in the True Love series that according to the publisher WSOY offers perspectives on love from some of the most interesting voices of our time (*WSOY True love: Hääkengät*). In addition, Terentyeva has written some short fiction and essays, for example, in 2024 her poem "Kadonneen irveen laulu" ("The song of the lost grin") was published in *Tästä ihmemaahan*, a collection of texts inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*. In this article, I will mainly concentrate on the

1 So far none of Terentyeva's works has been translated into English. In this text, the title *Neonkaupunki* is used collectively for the whole trilogy. In references, NK1, NK2 and NK3 stand for the novels *Neonkaupunki*, *Neonkaupunki 2: Spiraalitie*, and *Neonkaupunki 3: Luutivoli* respectively.

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Neonkaupunki trilogy since the themes connected to language and identity are especially prominent in it.[2]

Dess Terentyeva belongs to the same generation of young migrant authors as Anna Soudakova (b. 1983) and Susinukke Kosola (b. 1991). Kosola published his first poems in 2014, and Anna Soudakova's debut novel *Mitä männyt näkevät* (*What the pines see*) came out in 2020, the same year as Dess Terentyeva debuted with *Neonkaupunki* (*Neon City*). They all moved from Russia to Finland as children and started their careers as authors writing in Finnish. They also belong to the biggest group of Finland Russians who moved to Finland after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Viimaranta, Protassova and Mustajoki 2018, 101–102). Terentyeva and Soudakova are similar in the sense that they both deal with their Russian roots explicitly in their works, whereas Kosola mentions in an interview that he even changed his Russian name to a Finnish one because he did not want to be seen as a political immigrant author (Casal 2019). Soudakova writes within the context of a realistic prose that borders on autofiction while Terentyeva started as a fantasy author. Russian migrant writers who have left their homeland after the collapse of the Soviet Union differ greatly from the previous generations. Emigré writers that left their homeland between the 1917 revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union usually left their homeland permanently whereas the new generation of migrant authors has been able to return or visit Russia relatively freely and live their lives in two cultures. Thus, post-Soviet Russian migrant literature has been described as transcultural or transnational literature rather than émigré literature (Klapuri 2012a, 369; Sorvari 2018, 62). I understand the phenomenon of transculturality to be "the formation of multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters" (Nordin, Hansen and Zamorano Llena 2013, ix). Especially in the case of Finland, until the Russian war against Ukraine, travelling between Finland and Russia was relatively easy. Particularly for writers who came from the areas of Karelia and St Petersburg, the closeness of location made travelling both easy and affordable so that life in two cultures has been possible. Also, for an author of Terentyeva's generation, the knowledge of both Russian and Finnish literary traditions can be seen as a defining factor. A good example of this are Terentyeva's verse novels. In the Finnish context, young adult verse novels are a new phenomenon. The genre has gained popularity beginning from the 2010s mostly under the influence of English language young adult (YA) literature. The question may also be about confluence, the genre gain-

2 The genre of fantasy gives the authors several different means of dealing with the questions related to identity. For example, the theme is explored by the recurring motif of *doppelgänger* when several of the *Neonkaupunki* characters meet their doubles during their adventures in the fantasy world of Elm. For more on *Neonkaupunki* series as fantasy see Salminen (2024).

ing popularity without direct influence: one of the pioneers of Finnish YA verse novel Kirsti Kuronen mentions in an interview that she heard of the English genre only after publishing her first verse novel *Paha puuska* (2015) and that the Finnish name for the genre "säeromaani" came from the suggestion of author Anneli Kanto. Interestingly, unlike the English term, the name "säeromaani" in Finnish has no connection to the traditional verse novel like Byron's *Don Juan* or Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Yet as an author with a knowledge of the Russian tradition, Dess Terentyeva also sees a connection between her work and traditional Russian verse novels like *Eugene Onegin* (Tarsalainen 2021). Thus, Terentyeva's belonging to and knowledge of both Finnish and Russian literary traditions gives her verse novels a special place among contemporary Finnish YA literature.

Defining an author as "Finland Russian" can be problematic.[3] When talking about groups of immigrants, the term "Russian-speakers in Finland" is sometimes used (see, for example, Viimaranta et al. 2018). "Russian" is an ambiguous definition since many migrants in Finland have their roots in Russia or the Soviet Union, yet their native language can – in addition to Russian – be one of many other languages spoken in the area and they might define their ethnicity as something else than Russian. Many, for example, have Karelian or Ingrian roots. Also, in Finland the definition of a person's mother tongue is based on a person's own (or in the case of children – their parents') announcement so that the exact number of Russian speakers in Finland is impossible to define, especially as the statistics seldom take into account bilingual Russian speakers who consider some other language as their mother tongue. According to Statistics Finland, at the end of 2023 there were 99,606 people with Russian as their mother tongue living in Finland and 74,807 people who were born in the Former Soviet Union and 22,414 born in Russia (Statistics Finland 11rl and 11rp). In her article on Russian migrant writers of the 2000s and 2010s, Marja Sorvari discusses the term "Russian" and applies it to authors who have been citizens of Russia or the former Soviet Union before moving to Finland (Sorvari 2018, 59). I am using the term in a similar way, and in the case of Dess Terentyeva this is hardly problematic since she comes from Russia and names Russian as her mother tongue.

3 The term Finland Russian is reminiscent of another minority in Finland, the Finland-Swedes. The two groups differ from each other historically, since Swedish speakers are not considered immigrants but have a long history of living in Finland. Swedish language is also one of the two official and national languages of Finland.

1 *Neonkaupunki* as Transcultural Literature

One connecting theme of Finland Russian literature in the twenty-first century has been transmitting and discussing the migrant experience, often from a female point of view and concentrating on the experiences of the author's own generation. One of the best-known examples might be Zinaida Lindén, who writes about the lives of Russian immigrants of the generation born in the 1960s (Klapuri 2012b, 401). The mode has been mainly realistic and often to some extent bordering on autofiction. Dess Terentyeva's fiction partly follows this path but also it partly differs from the trend. In both the *Neonkaupunki* series and in the verse novel *Ihana* some of the main characters are Finland Russian and especially in the former the experiences of Finland Russians are a central theme. *Neonkaupunki* books belong to the genre of urban fantasy and thus the ways of representing the Finland Russian experience differ from the more realistic mode that has been typical of earlier Russian migrant authors in Finland. Like several other transcultural authors, Terentyeva writes about her own generation's experiences in the *Neonkaupunki* series, whereas her verse novels are mainly addressed to younger readers and they also depict the life of younger protagonists. In *Neonkaupunki*, the protagonists seem to be slightly younger than the authors but most of these Russian migrants represent the same generation as Terentyeva, a generation that has moved to Finland after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the novels work on the terms of fantasy genre, the exact year of the events and the precise age of most of the characters is not explicitly revealed, yet judging by the presence of social media and certain smartphone brands in the books they are situated at about the same time as the writing, probably in the late 2010s. Moreover, in the secondary world of Elm, time does not exist or at least it works in different terms than in the primary world, so people do not age and nobody seems to know exactly how long they have been there. Thus, the characters who seem to be of about the same age can actually represent different generations. For example, one of the characters is depicted as younger than most others, still a child, yet she wears a Soviet school dress that raises the question of which generation she actually belongs to (NK2, 168).

The main characters of *Neonkaupunki* are two young women, Vera and Nikita.[4] Vera is born in Finland to a Finnish mother and a Russian father, whereas Nikita, also called by the nickname Tarkkis, has moved to Finland from Russia as a child or teenager when her mother married a Finnish man. The novels also provide the background stories of several other young people who have moved to

4 Despite her male name, Nikita is a woman. I discuss her name in more detail later.

Finland for different reasons. Widely speaking, some characters' backgrounds match Terentyeva's own background at least "demographically", yet as the novels are written in fantasy mode they do not mimetically retell the life and experiences of certain real-life people – or try to represent the experience of young Russian immigrants as a homogenous group. As many of the central characters are women, their immigration stories are often connected to their gender. One of the characters, for example, has moved to Finland after marrying a rich Finnish man and another has fled the expectations of a traditional heterosexual marriage and now searches for a more tolerant climate.

The events of the story are divided into two worlds: the primary world of the story is present mostly as realistically depicted, yet anonymous, suburbs in an unnamed town in Finland. In its anonymity, the milieu is explicitly contrary to, for example, Anna Soudakova's books that are situated in clearly defined and easily recognisable locations in Finland and Russia and Terentyeva's verse novels that are situated in clearly defined Finnish towns. The secondary world is the dark apocalyptic, dystopic fantasy world of Elm, sometimes called Neonkaupunki ("Neon City"). The two-world-structure and fantasy mode give the authors a space in which to explore the transnational identities of the characters and the characters gain a chance for introspection and to shape their identities outside the demands of everyday life. The inhabitants of Elm are youths who form gangs that fight for their right to exist. The gangs are led by "protectors" who have brought these youths to Elm from the real world – or from "the world of light" (*valomaailma*) as the characters call it, underlining the difference between that world and Elm where it is always night. The events in the primary world are realistically depicted and the reader also gets to know about Vera and Nikita's real-life problems. Nikita has a mentally unstable and violent mother, has had bad experiences with an abusive girlfriend and has been sexually assaulted by her cousin. Vera's problems seem to be connected to her Russian and Finnish roots. She was born in Finland and feels like an outsider among both Finns and Russians, believing that Finns see her as too Russian and Russians as too Finnish (NK1, 23). As is typical of fantasy as a genre, in the fantasy world of Elm, the characters' problems acquire a more tangible form and, in a sense, a grander scale. Nikita's experience of violence and sexual abuse finds a parallel in Elm, where violence is both an everyday problem and the way to solve problems, especially when the Russian folktale monster, wizard Koschey the Deathless, kidnaps Vera and tries to force her to marry him. Nikita's ambiguous relationship with her abusive mother and her longing for her deceased grandmother have a parallel in Baba Yaga, who is both a loving grandmother figure and a manipulative, violent and cannibalistic witch. In Elm, too, Vera's fears and ambiguous thoughts about her Russian heritage acquire a more dramatic form: if in the real world she feels bad when she

cannot converse fluently in Russian with her Russian relatives, in Elm she gets into physical danger on account of her absent language skills. Her undefined real-life fears of Russian culture are manifested in Elm in the forms of the witch Baba Yaga and the wizard Koschey. Nikita's problems are not as explicitly connected with her Russian background. Her mother attacking her with a knife, for example, can also be seen as a depiction of the Finnish – or universal – family violence problem. Yet the way the family reacts to such violence can be read as a sign of the Russian background. Hence, instead of calling the police or an ambulance, Nikita's cousin takes care of her with the help of a doctor, who is acquainted with her cousin in order to avoid any possible problems with authorities.

An element that might be called typical of Russian migrant authors, namely dealing with traumatic experiences in and memories of the Soviet Union, is missing from *Neonkaupunki*. Whereas, for example, Anna Soudakova writes explicitly about her family history during and after Stalin's terror (Sorvari 2023, 153), in *Neonkaupunki* none of the characters reminisces about their own or their relatives' experiences during the time of Soviet repressions.[5] Although Hynynen and Terentyeva's characters have their histories, the problems they deal with seem to have more to do with their own lives than their family history. The idea of memory is still present in the *Neonkaupunki* series, but it seems to deal more with the characters' own life stories and, on the other hand, it reaches beyond the memories of individual characters to some kind of collective or cultural memory that is reflected by the allusions to Russian folk tradition, religion and cultural history (see, for example, Erll 2011, 14–18; 27–37). This might be seen as a sign that whereas the former generation of Russian-born authors had to deal with the Soviet traumas the newer generation struggles more with their relation to the Russian heritage and culture – both pre-Soviet and contemporary. The books and the world of Elm also have a kind of nostalgic and retrospective nature. Elm is strongly inspired by 1980s horror films and music, although the authors' actual memories of 1980s culture are from later decades since they were born in the late 80s and early 90s (Nörttitytöt 2020; Mankkinen 2021; *Kulttuuriykkönen* 2021). The same goes for younger generation readers: the authors themselves do not call the series youth literature and the books are classified as adult literature in libraries, although the themes of the book seem to make it possible to call it young adult fiction and Susanna Hynynen also discusses the book in terms of youth literature

5 Although the representations of power structures in Elm might have something in common with Soviet power structures, for example, the Gorky gang's power hierarchy is presented more as "Russian" than "Soviet". For example, the leader of the gang is sometimes called "czar", which has obvious connotations with pre-Soviet Russia.

or young adult fiction (Leisiö 2023).[6] The films and music alluded to in the books are partly Russian (or rather Soviet) and partly Western so that the nostalgia is not only felt for Russian culture but for the popular culture of the previous decades in general.

Elm also serves as a metaphor for immigration, which some of the characters note in the text: "You'd think that those two would know exactly how it was to come to a new place without understanding anything about it. At least Vera assumed that Slava was also an immigrant, everyone was according to Tarkkis"[7] (NK1, 100). The transition from real-life Finland to Elm parallels moving from Russia to Finland and, just like in real life, the transition seems to solve some problems yet gives rise to new ones. The Gorky gang members have on Baba Yaga's orders been kidnapped and brought to Elm, which can be read as an exaggerated metaphor for children brought from Russia to Finland by their parents, not of their own will. The characters' background stories about how they came to Finland vary, and only a few of the stories are actually told in the text. Not all have moved with their parents as, for example, one has married a Finnish man (NK1, 201–202) and one has moved to Finland in pursuit of more liberal attitudes to sexuality (NK2, 305–306), and some like Vera were born in Finland. The transition to Elm happens in the opposite direction: the notably Russian Baba Yaga kidnaps the young Finland Russians in their Finnish environment and takes them to a Russian-speaking one which for some characters, like Vera, means horror and fear. For others, like Nikita, it seems to mean going back to her roots and getting a chance to achieve things she is unable to get in her real life. It would, however, be too simple to read Elm as a metaphor for Russia: Elm is more like a parallel dimension where the young Finland Russian characters can negotiate their identities free of their everyday problems.

Dess Terentyeva and Susanna Hynynen have in several contexts talked about the importance of representation, both in connection with Finland Russians and with sexual and gender minorities. They see it as important that different minorities are represented in literature – especially in youth and young adult literature (Virtanen 2020; Neuvonen 2021). From this point of view, the presence of Finland Russian youth in *Neonkaupunki* as well as in the verse novel *Ihana* and in *Zeno* can also be seen as a means of representation. In *Neonkaupunki*, Finland Russian

6 It is quite typical of fantasy literature and its subgenres to have a wide age range of readers from teenagers to adults. In libraries, for example, several classics of the genre can be found in both children's and adults' departments.

7 "Luulisi että nuo kaksi tiesivät tismalleen, millaista oli tulla uuteen paikkaan ilman että tajusi siitä yhtään mitään. Ainakin Vera oletti, että Slavakin oli maahanmuuttaja, kaikki olivat Tarkkiksen mukaan." All translations are my own.

youth is clearly an important theme and discussing the migrant experience is strongly present, whereas in *Ihana* representation might be a more productive point of view from which to discuss the Russian background of some of the characters. *Ihana* came out in 2021 and unlike *Neonkaupunki* it represents the genre of young adult verse novel. The mode is realistic and mimetic: the verse novel tells a story of a teenage girl who has a crush on someone she meets online and starts calling Ihana ("lovely") only to find out that her own father is dating Ihana's mother. The text explicitly deals with different notions of gender and sexuality. Ihana's Russian mother does not accept her child's gender identity and the characters ponder whether the narrow-mindedness of the mother can be explained by her conservative Russian mindset (*Ihana*, 51). In *Zeno* the family is briefly mentioned and the mother's attitude is partly explained by her anxiety about her child's well-being (*Zeno*, 107–110). Yet in Terentyeva's verse novels the Russian connection is only one minor aspect of the text that discusses young people's views on their own and their friends' identities. The representation of Finland Russian youth is based on Terentyeva's experiences as an insider of that culture and in *Neonkaupunki*, it gains an additional perspective from Hynynen's position as a Finnish-speaking Finn outside of that culture (Mankkinen 2021). Belonging to this minority also gives Terentyeva a position from where she can also express critical views about Finland Russian culture.

2 Native Writing Language and Language of Emotions – Dess Terentyeva in Social Media and Interviews

Marja Sorvari has noticed that it was typical of Finland Russian authors in the early 2000s to be active in the media – such as literature journals (Sorvari 2018, 60). Terentyeva follows this tradition but, unlike the former generation, she is more active on the Internet than in traditional print media. She has an active Instagram account from 2016 to the present where she primarily discusses literature and her work as a writer. She also makes YouTube videos. She often writes and talks about rainbow literature[8] and promotes the works of other Finnish authors, often authors of young adult fiction and rainbow literature. She also engages in dialogue with her readers and encourages them to write and comment.

8 Rainbow literature (in Finnish *sateenkaarikirjallisuus*) is an umbrella term used for literature that is in some way connected to the ideas of sexual and gender minorities.

There is also a separate Instagram account for the *Neonkaupunki* series administered by Hynynen and Terentyeva. The account provides the authors' views on the writing process and some extra content, such as trailer videos for their books.

In her Instagram, Terentyeva talks quite openly about her views on her writing and identity, although she also draws a clear line between the public and the personal. Following the conversations on Terentyeva's Instagram account, the reader gains a glimpse into a community of mainly young Finnish writers and readers. Among the commentators there are well-known authors, more novice writers and of course readers. Many commentators seem to share Terentyeva's interests in fantasy, the horror genre, young adult literature and sexual and gender minorities. One can also find some conversation on both Terentyeva's and the commentators' Russian roots and Russian language and culture. In some posts and an interview that are related to the Russian themes in *Neonkaupunki*, Terentyeva poses for photos wearing a traditional Russian kokoshnik headdress and a Russian scarf, making a kind of performance of Russian cultural stereotypes (IG 19.3.2021, IG 26.3.2021, IG 16.4.2021, Tarsalainen 2021).

Terentyeva moved to Finland at the age of seven. She started school in Russia, yet most of her school years were in Finland. Terentyeva writes in Finnish, which puts her into the group of Russian migrant authors who have chosen to write in the language of their new country of residence rather than Russian, like Zinaida Lindén who writes in Swedish and Anna Soudakova who writes in Finnish. Terentyeva's books are in Finnish, as is her social media content; she does answer Russian comments in Russian though. In an Instagram post from November 2022 she ponders the meaning of different languages in her life: "My native language is Russian and my native writing language is Finnish. Also, my native swearing language might be Finnish XD" (IG 4 November 2022). She also identifies Russian as her language of emotions and ponders whether one can see dance, films and music as languages in the sense that through them one can communicate feelings and thoughts to others. Whereas films and music are strongly present in *Neonkaupunki*, Terentyeva's second verse novel *Freestyle* (2023) focuses on dance as a means of self-expression. In addition to discussing the meaning of native language she also writes about the importance of foreign language skills for reading literature in connection to Katherynne Valente's novel *Deathless* (IG 13 November 2020, comments).

In a few interviews (Lehtinen 2021; Tarsalainen 2021), Terentyeva makes a strong connection between language and literature. She links her learning of Finnish language to reading books in her childhood, especially books in the horror genre. She names specifically Angela Sommer-Bodenburg's children's books from the *Der kleine Vampir (The Little Vampire)* series but also Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* which she gives as an example of how even as a child she

preferred adult horror literature to children's literature. She also mentions that both her mother and grandmother were teachers of Russian language and literature and that they influenced her reading habits. In one interview (Lehtinen 2021), instead of the typical Finnish expression "mother tongue", the reporter used the expression "mother and grandmother tongue".[9] Terentyeva writes that she used to read adult books already at grammar school age and one can speculate whether that has something to do with the strong female literary tradition in the family or the Russian tradition of introducing adult literature, especially classics, to children at quite a young age – or just individual taste in literature. Terentyeva also connects her language learning with writing. She mentions that she used to write horror stories in grammar school Finnish classes and at home and tells anecdotes about her early experiences of writing in school (*Lohikäärmeradio* 2022).

Terentyeva describes Finnish as her natural language of writing, yet she also ponders the possibilities of the *Neonkaupunki* series being published in Russian. In a 2021 interview she states that it would be impossible to publish these books in Russia in the current social and political circumstances and seems to be somewhat sad about the fact that her Russian-speaking relatives will not be able to read her texts (Tarsalainen 2021). In her Instagram account, she also tells how she feels she is not able to translate her books herself: "I cannot see myself ever writing in Russian, although people sometimes ask me if I would like to translate my books myself. Let's not treat the books so badly 😅" (IG 4 November 2022). Yet she and Susanna Hynynen have done some translation work for the book in the sense that they have published online Excel sheets of the Russian vocabulary used in the books and provided Finnish translations for them.[10] She also comments on mixing Russian words and expressions in Finnish text as reflecting her experience of bilingualism:

> Although [checking translations] is exhausting, I'm glad I can write the [*Neonkaupunki*] series in Finnish and at the same time use Russian. It feels natural to me and at the level of the text it reflects at least my experience of bilingualism in a surprisingly authentic way. [. . .] now I must think which good words of affection and swear words we haven't used yet. Matters connected to strong feelings feel most genuine in your native language, right? (IG 29 December 2020)

9 "Äidin ja isoäidin kieli."

10 The link to the Excel file used to be found in both Terentyeva's and Neonkaupunki Instagram accounts' Linktree in their Instagram Bio. The link for the NK1 vocabulary file can still be found in Terentyeva's Instagram post (IG, 29 December 2020).

Marja Sorvari has noted similar code-switching in Ljudmila Kol's texts when the author uses Finnish words in a Russian text. Sorvari notes that code-switching is typical of multilingual societies but sees it also as "a sign of the "untranslatability" of the culturally-specific practices and meanings" (Sorvari 2018, 67–68). Likewise, in *Neonkaupunki*, Russian words and expressions are often used in situations connected with strong emotions that might have some elements of untranslatability, making the use of Russian expressions a natural choice.

In what follows, I will pay attention to the ways in which Russian is present in the Finnish text of the *Neonkaupunki* books and how language is treated as an important factor in the characters' identities.

3 The Door is Locked, *idiotka* – Russian Language in Terentyeva's Books

Questions concerning Finnish and Russian languages are strongly present in the *Neonkaupunki* books. The protagonists Vera and Nikita have Russian roots and the Gorky gang members living in Elm are young people who all come from real-world Finland. As one of them puts it, Gorkys are "strong beautiful Finland Russians" (NK2, 310). Russian is a vital part of their communication between themselves and sometimes also with the other gangs in Elm. Language is most visibly present in the text in two ways: first, the characters talk and think about language in relation to their identity and second, Russian words and expressions are present within the Finnish text, marked in italics. Dess Terentyeva has stated that the idea of using Russian expressions in a Finnish text derives from Anthony Burgess using Russian words as the basis of youth slang in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962; *Lohikäärmeradio* 2022). Yet in *Neonkaupunki* the Russian expressions are not used as building blocks for an imaginary slang but are used as they are in Russian, only transliterated into Latin alphabet. Adrian Wanner (2011, 12–14) discusses several Russian-born translingual authors' use of Russian language in the texts they have written in the language of their new home country. He identifies the practice of using Russian words or expressions to imply that the characters are speaking in Russian and using "Broken English" or calques of Russian expressions to imply that the characters are speaking with an accent. He sees in this elements of insider jokes that only bilingual or bicultural readers can fully appreciate, which means that the ideal implied reader comes from a similar background as the author. In the *Neonkaupunki* trilogy, Terentyeva and Hynynen are very consciously writing mainly to an audience that does not understand Russian language or is not especially familiar with Russian culture. The Russian expressions they use are

either such that their approximate meaning can be deduced from the context or they are explained to the reader in some way, often through Vera, who also struggles with Russian, and her wonderings about the language make the meanings of the expressions clear for the reader too.

Sometimes Russian expressions are indeed used to illustrate that the conversation goes on in Russian, although it is rendered in Finnish in the text, which reminds one of the practices of the multilingual authors studied by Wanner (2011, 12). Nikita, for example, begins a conversation with her mother by using the Russian word "Mam", meaning mother: "Mam, I want to talk about a girl. No, not Vera, another one."[11] (NK1, 343). Marja Sorvari has noted the similar use of italicised Russian words in Anna Soudakova's *Mitä männyt näkevät* and sees it partly as a marker of the characters' multilingual belonging (Sorvari 2023, 163). Similarly, in the *Neonkaupunki* trilogy it is not possible for the reader to use the Russian expressions as markers of a certain part of the text being supposedly in Russian, but more as a sign of the multilingual environment and the bilingual status of the characters.

One of the main focalised characters in the *Neonkaupunki* trilogy is Vera, who is born in Finland to a Russian father and a Finnish mother. She is presented as bilingual, but Finnish is her stronger language and she struggles with Russian. Her contacts with Russian and her encounters with Russian culture are often described as difficult and embarrassing. Some of her cultural "traumas" and small domestic failures seem to reach across generations: for example, in Elm, she enjoys the luxurious abundance of delicious Russian food and remembers her mother's unsuccessful attempts to make Russian sauerkraut. Vera's family is not described in detail, yet her relation to her Russian father is depicted as close, loving and caring and her father also seems to be her most important connection to her Russian roots: he has, for example, read her Russian folktales. In Elm, Vera's encounters with Russian language and culture are first presented as difficult and distressing, yet after spending some time in Elm, these encounters become more natural. First, she is told she is too Finnish to understand Russians: "'Because you are such a *finotška*', said Tarkkis. 'Vera, I love you, but you cannot cope with Russians if you don't try to understand what's happening around you.'"[12] (NK1, 61). Learning and getting used to Russian is shown as an ongoing and complicated process that is full of setbacks. In Chapter 22 of the first book, Vera feels she has got used to Russian and Russian ways:

11 "*Mam, mä haluun kertoo yhestä tytöstä. Ei, en Verasta, vaan toisesta*" (italics in original noting that the conversation happens in Nikita's memory).

12 "Koska sä oot tommonen finotška", Tarkkis sanoi. "Vera, mä rakastan sua, mut sä et pärjää venäläisten kanssa, jos et yritä tajuta mitä sun ympärillä tapahtuu."

> Vera learnt every night and day by following the example of others. She listened with them Akvarium and DDT, and Agata Kristi during the booze comedown phase. Her Russian became better almost without noticing it and even Tarkkis stopped teasing her about wrong conjugations. Vera grasped the notion of addressing people correctly. The Gorkys, Russians, played with language, that was it. Their gestures and the corners of their eyes were loaded with meanings.[13] (NK1, 151)

Yet after a conflict over how to treat newcomers, Vera in the next chapter feels like an outsider again: "Vera didn't understand after all how the Gorkys functioned. Maybe Tarkkis and Kostja were right – maybe she was too Finnish. She wasn't able to read between the lines."[14] (NK1, 57)

Most of the explicit ponderings about Russian are presented through Vera: she talks about language and, in particular, thinks about language a great deal. Many of her thoughts are somehow linked to the connection between language and identity. She wonders, for example, about how to address people in Russian in order to appear more confident speaking in Russian. Using different forms of Russian characters' names and Russian informal and formal second person forms are a recurring motif in the books. Vera also thinks about the use of Russian and Finnish personal pronouns: when addressing a Finnish-speaking character Nova, who is of non-binary gender, it bothers her that she cannot ask about Nova's gender in Finnish, because "the stupid Finnish language did not offer a way to ask indirectly"[15] (NK1, 188). When learning that Nova understands some Russian, Vera asks if Nova prefers to be called "on" or "ona", "he" or "she", since in Finnish there is only one singular third-person pronoun "hän", which is gender neutral. Thus, she turns upside down the predominantly Finnish idea of how handy the Finnish non-gendered personal pronoun is and gives credit to languages that offer the choice of gendered pronouns. Terentyeva returns to the same question in her verse novel *Ihana* (36–37) in which the main character, Lilja, ponders the importance of the English pronoun "they" using typography to express its meaning: the word is written in a larger font and the English word literally stands out in the context of the text that is otherwise in Finnish. Lilja compares the pronoun

13 "Vera oppi päivät ja yöt seuraamalla muita. Hän kuunteli muiden kanssa Akvariumia ja DDT:tä, laskuhumalassa Agata Kristiä. Hänen venäjänsä parantui kuin huomaamatta ja Tarkkiskin lakkasi kiusaamasta virheellisistä taivutuksista. Vera sai kiinni teitittelystä. Gorkyt, venäläiset, leikkivät kielellä, sitä se oli. He latasivat kasapäin merkityksiä eleisiin ja silmäkulmiin." The bands mentioned are well-known Russian rock bands formed during the Soviet era (see, for example, Huttunen 2012, 21–32; 95–106).

14 "Hän ei ymmärtänyt sittenkään, miten gorkyt toimivat. Ehkä Tarkkis ja Kostja olivat oikeassa – ehkä Vera oli liian suomalainen. Hän ei osannut lukea rivien välistä."

15 "Puhutko sä venäjää? Vera kysyi, koska typerä suomen kieli ei tarjonnut kiertoteitä."

use in Finnish, English and Swedish, seeing good sides in both gendered and ungendered pronoun systems.

Russian words also introduce a Russian atmosphere into the text. There are many easily recognisable Russian words in the text, ranging from names of characters to *vodka*, *samovar* and *balalaika*. Terentyeva and Hynynen seem to be quite conscious of Russian stereotypes and often the characters comment on them by seeing the situations at the same time from a nostalgic and ironic point of view. For example, a balalaika, a traditional Russian instrument, evokes warm feelings in the characters during a gang member's funeral (NK1, 116). The balalaika is also mentioned in an ironic sense as a Russian stereotype when Vera is told about patrolling the enemy territories:

> "[. . .] we have to make tours there [in the enemy territory]"
> "Tours?"
> Tarkkis burst into laughter.
> "Yeah, Vera, we go there to play balalaika and accordion. What do you think a tour means?"[16] (NK1, 97–98)

A balalaika is also a suitable weapon in a fistfight for gang leader positions (NK1, 328–330). Some Russian words and clichés like *samovars* surrounded by traditional Russian food are connected to pure nostalgia and the feeling of home and safety, whereas *vodka* and other alcoholic beverages have more ambiguous connotations to both having a good time and dangerously losing control on account of drinking too much. This kind of combination of nostalgia and irony is a typical feature of several migrant authors (Wanner 2011, 12–14). In *Neonkaupunki* it seems to be connected to the characters' search of identity when they try to negotiate their relationship with Russian culture. For the point of view of fantasy as a genre, Russian expressions and Russian realia have an important role in world building. It is often considered important to build unique yet consistent fantasy worlds and the *Neonkaupunki* trilogy is unique in the sense that it is the first fantasy series to depict a Finland-Russian fantasy world: there are also non-Russian and non-Finland-Russian characters, yet the strong influence of Russian culture and language ranging from Russian or Slavic folktale characters to 1980s Soviet rock music make the world distinctively Russian. Most of this culture is presented through the use of Russian words. The names of the mythical characters like Baba Yaga are used in their Russian form and not in Finnish translations,

16 "[. . .] sinne on pakko tehä keikkoja." "Keikkoja?" Tarkkis pärskähti. "Joo Vera, me käydään siellä soittelemassa balalaikkaa ja haitaria. Mitä sä luulet keikan tarkoittavan?"

whereas the name of the Finland Russian gang Nikita and Vera end up in is "Gorky", derived from the English name of the Soviet rock band Gorky Park. While the world of Elm is Finland Russian, the presence of other cultures, especially English-speaking ones, is always present and makes the world more open to interpretation.

Terentyeva has on several occasions spoken about the connection between language and feelings. The connection is obvious in *Neonkaupunki* too. Most Russian words used in the text are quite expressive and emotionally loaded and charged: they are often swearwords or expressions of affection. Many of the Russian characters are depicted as using swearwords, but expressions of affection are mostly used by Nikita. At home, she addresses her mother with the word "mam", which is not the dictionary form of the word but a vocative form of "mama", typically used by children talking to their mother and implying a certain closeness – despite their ambiguous relationship. Nikita thinks about her girlfriend as "krasotka" ("beauty") and calls her "solnyško" (literally "sun") (NK1, 129, 132). She also teaches – although first reluctantly – her girlfriend an affectionate word, "myška" (literally "mouse"), that she can use for her.

> "Talk to me in Russian" Helle asked. It was still scary. [. . .]
> "*Solnyshko*," Tarkkis whispered, but her voice broke. Her face was hot with shame. She knew painfully well in her guts what kind of looks and words people reacted to when talking Russian.[17] (NK2, 132)

Yet later, the Russian word "myška" turns into something that is truly meaningful to her. Nikita has come to see Helle after a long time in order to ask her to marry her and during their dialogue there is at the same time a quiet monologue going on in Nikita's head:

> "Say that one word," Tarkkis thought. "Say that word you always call me. The one you cannot pronounce correctly, the one that at first I definitely didn't want as my nickname."[18] (NK2, 276)

Vera also uses Russian words to express her emotions. In a few situations, she calls herself *idiotka* in her mind: "The door is locked, *idiotka*, thought Vera"[19] (NK2, 17). Sometimes she also uses the word *dura*, which has the same meaning.

17 "Puhu mulle venäjää", Helle pyysi. Se oli vieläkin pelottavaa [. . .] "*Solnyško*", Tarkkis kuiskasi, mutta ääni särkyi. Häpeä tuntui kuumalta kasvoilla. Hänellä oli tuskallisen hyvin selkärangassa, millaisilla katseilla ja sanoilla venäjän puhumiseen reagoitiin.

18 "Sano se yksi sana, Tarkkis ajatteli. Sano se, jolla sä aina kutsut mua. Se jota sä et osaa lausua oikein, jota mä en alun perin ois todellakaan halunnut hellittelynimeksi itselleni."

19 "Ovi on lukittu, *idiotka*, Vera ajatteli."

This is presented as Vera's inner speech addressed to herself.[20] What does it actually imply, that Vera uses Russian in her mind when she is not pleased with her own actions – when she is disappointed with her abilities to think like her Russian friends and tries to open a door that is locked? Interestingly, Anna Soudakova also uses the same word as one of the rare Russian words in her novel *Varjele varjoani* (Soudakova 2022, 168). It is significant that Vera addresses herself in Russian both in Elm and in Finland when she has temporarily returned to the real world. Is she in these situations seeing herself as if through the eyes of her Russian-speaking friends? Or has she despite all her doubts somehow reached something Russian in herself that she was afraid did not exist?

Another ample source of Russian language in the text are names. Most characters with a Russian background have Russian names and Russian name practices are a recurring problem for Vera. She ponders about using different forms of the names (first name, patronym, surname, different nicknames) and the informal and formal "you". The use of informal and formal "you" in Russian and in Finnish is formally similar (Russian "ty" has a Finnish equivalent "sinä" and Russian "vy" is equivalent to "te"), yet they are in practice used in different ways and in different situations. Vera is all the time nervous she might use either the names or pronouns wrongly. The use of Russian names and the formal and informal "you" is also explicitly explained in the text for implied Finnish-speaking reader.

Of all the characters, Nikita has the name with the most complex network of meanings. It is a mix of Russian and Finnish components and is full of potential to perplex both Russian and Finnish-speaking characters. Her first name is Nikita, a Russian boy's name her mother gave her in memory of her late brother. The mother also sees the name as a glamorous European girl's name – there might be an allusion to Luc Besson's 1990 film *Nikita* that in Finland goes by the name *Tyttö nimeltä Nikita* ("a girl called Nikita"). Nikita's Russian friends call her by the nickname Kita, which is a standard Russian short form of Nikita, yet in Nikita's memories her late grandmother calls her Kiša instead of the more typical Keša, because "Kiša sounds more like a girl, said babuška smilingly" (NK1, 146).[21] Nikita's Finnish girlfriend Helle calls her Niki in a loving tone, and her not-so-serious enemy Nadja – who is also Finnish despite her Russian name – calls her Nikke in

20 This literary device reminds one of Lewis Carroll's Alice constantly talking to herself and correcting herself. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be seen as one of the early predecessors of the fantasy genre and, naturally, there are connections between Vera and Alice, two girls who end up in a world where everything is different from their own world and language is a central object of both confusion and fascination.

21 "Kiša kuulostaa enemmän tytöltä, babuška hymyili."

a playful and teasing tone. Niki and Nikke are more Finnish-sounding nicknames and Nikke is a typical boy's name. Thus, Russian and Finnish speakers use different nicknames for Nikita, yet the Russian nickname Kita might also have connotations in Finnish: the Finnish word "kita" means the mouth of an animal and it can also be used as a slightly rude way to mean a human mouth. Nikita's surname Tarkkinen, moreover, is important and full of meanings. It comes from her Finnish stepfather and hence she often goes by the nickname Tarkkis, which is based on the surname but is also a somewhat outdated and rude slang word for a child or young person who goes to special classes for badly behaving pupils. The word has connotations of aggression, rebellion and difficulties in adapting to rules. Tarkkis is the name that the narrator uses for the character. Nikita's patronym Ivanovna is an object of bewilderment among the Russian-speakers: according to their sense of grammatical correctness, the feminine form "Ivanovna" does not go together with her masculine first name "Nikita". In the last book of the trilogy, we also learn Nikita's original Russian surname, Zvereva, which comes from the word *zver*, meaning an animal or beast. Nikita's mixed name can be seen as a symbol for her identity crossing in at least two cultures. Her first name Nikita symbolises her Russian roots and her masculine lesbian identity whereas the Finnish nickname Tarkkis symbolises her difficulties in adapting to Finnish society – or her refusal to adapt to rules she does not see as her own. In addition to these varieties of language, the grammatical incorrectness between the male name Nikita and the female patronym Ivanovna adds to the multifaceted image of Nikita and causes confusion among the other gang members. Nikita's many names also seem to be the key to her identity and to her finding the way to define herself.

In the final book of the trilogy, Nikita is caught by the gang of luupojat (bone boys) who are dead inhabitants of Elm who have been turned into zombies, blindly obeying their leader. Nikita also becomes a zombie; her transformation is not complete and she struggles to keep her own will, consciousness and identity. Throughout the trilogy, the zombies are often referred to as animals and the first time the reader gets to know Nikita's original Russian surname, Zvereva, is when she is being turned into a zombie. So, symbolically, when Nikita becomes a zombie, she loses – at least partly – her human nature and her identity by remembering her original, animal-like name.[22] Yet one of the elements keeping her aware of herself is her name. Her friend Slava calls her by her name Nikita but she does not understand: "The living boy kept calling out three syllables. She had a feeling

22 Another detail that adds to the theme of losing or gaining one's humanity in the final book of the trilogy is one character who refers to Vera as Malvina. Malvina is a character from *Buratino*, the well-known Soviet version of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* by Aleksey Tolstoy, and the connecting factor between Malvina and Vera is that both have blue hair. One of the main themes of the orig-

she should understand what they meant"[23] (NK3, 229). During her time as a zombie, her friends repeatedly call her by name, trying to reach her. Names – and language in general – seem to be the thing that keeps Nikita as an individual amongst the horde of zombies and her understanding of language seems to be the key to becoming a real human being again:

> The body [Nikita] did not know, who the girl [Vera] was, but it knew more about the girl than herself – also herself was now a word – *same*. That had a meaning in two languages she knew. *She* knew languages. "Kita", the blue-haired girl said. "Vera". *Vera*, faith."[24] (NK3, 379)

Another element crucial to Nikita gaining self-consciousness is her remembrance of past events and recognising familiar people. Zombie Nikita's realisation of her identity has a parallel at the end of the story when she returns home to real-world Finland. She has moved in with her girlfriend, Helle, and seems to suffer from some kind of PTSD after her horrible experiences in both the real world and Elm. Nikita's coping with everyday life and learning to accept herself seems to be connected to Helle's patience and good associations connected to the name of Nikita: "When Helle breathed out her name, something substantial moved. Nikita was in use so much, and not once spat out in loathing so that it came back. From somewhere many years ago" (NK3, 414).[25] Nikita even officially changes her surname back to her original Russian name, Zvereva, and puts that on the door of her and Helle's apartment as if it was a sign of her accepting all sides of her nature – or her many-faceted cultural background.

4 Conclusion

Hynynen's and Terentyeva's *Neonkaupunki* series differs from Terentyeva's other books in terms of its multilingual nature. There is an abundance of Russian vocabulary within the Finnish text and the characters are used to living in a multi-

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inal *Pinocchio* is a wooden doll that turns into a real boy, an event that never happens to its main character, Buratino, in Tolstoy's version.

23 "Elävä poika hoki kolmea tavua. Hänellä oli tunne, että hän [sic] olisi pitänyt ymmärtää mitä ne tarkoittivat."

24 "Ruumis ei tiennyt, kuka tyttö oli, mutta se tiesi tytöstä enemmän kuin itsestään – myös itse oli nyt sana – *sama*. Sillä oli merkitys kahdella kielellä, jota hän osasi. *Hän* osasi kieliä. 'Kita,' sinitukkainen sanoi. 'Vera.' *Vera*, usko." The Russian word "vera" means "faith".

25 "Kun Helle huokaili hänen nimeään, jokin olennainen liikahti. Nikita oli niin paljon käytössä, eikä kertaakaan inhoten syljettynä, että se tuli takaisin. Jostakin todella monen vuoden takaa."

lingual environment, contemplating their use of different languages and comparing languages to one another. The books result from cooperation between two authors of different linguistic background and this supports the multilingual nature of the text. The novels do not show the Finland- Russian culture in Elm only as a simple mix of Russian and Finnish languages and cultures. The strong presence of Western or American culture and, to some extent, the presence of English language are also an important part of Elm and the characters' identities. Some characters build their identities partly on a mix of American metal music and Russian 1980s rock, whereas one character named Andy is revealed to be a Russian Andrei who just prefers the English name Andy. The building blocks of identity have many sources and change when the characters develop, providing material for multifaceted, transcultural identities. As shown before, Dess Terentyeva writes extensively about the importance of language in her Instagram account, and she also raises the question whether film and music can be perceived as a language for communicating feelings and thoughts, thus widening the concept of language. Elm is deeply inspired by the horror films and music videos of the 1980s. I did not analyse the meaning of film and music in the *Neonkaupunki* series in depth, but it could be argued that allusions to horror films are used in giving Elm its visual features and music is often used to describe the characters: some of the characters base their identities partly on their taste in music and the changes of their thinking are reflected in the changes in their preferences of heavy metal bands.

The issues related to the characters' migrant backgrounds are only one theme in the series – albeit an important one. Other prominent themes are, for example, sexual and gender minorities, an individual right to bodily integrity, and problems related to the misuse of drugs and alcohol. The issues themselves are not brought about by the characters' Russian background but they are often seen through the prism of migrant or Finland-Russian experience.

As a portrayal of the experiences of the young generation of Finland-Russian migrants Hynynen and Terentyeva's *Neonkaupunki* can be compared with Anna Soudakova's novel *Varjele varjoani* (*Save my Shadow*, 2022[26]), where Soudakova writes about the experiences of a Finland-Russian migrant and her family in a realistic and, to some extent, autobiographic tone. *Neonkaupunki's* type of fantasy offers the authors an arena to discuss language and culture in an environment that is not bound by the laws and demands of realism. Elm as an imaginary space allows the characters to negotiate and build their identities in ways that are not possible in a more realistic genre. Towards the end of the trilogy, it becomes clear

26 The title of the novel refers to Joseph Brodsky's poem "Pis'ma k stene" ("Letters to the Wall", 1964).

that Elm itself is alive and is constantly changing along with the characters. The trilogy ends with the end of Elm itself, yet Vera manages to save a copy of it and thus after the death of the old Elm a new one is born with a new Baba Yaga sitting in a rocking chair in her chicken leg hut, probably waiting for a new generation of Finland Russians to enter Elm in order to reshape their identities. Thus, Vera becomes one link in the chain of mediators of Finland-Russian identity.

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