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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reading groups' perspectives on literary dialect and the ideology of authenticity

Laura Tammilehto

Tampere University, Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014 Tampere University, Finland
Email: laura.tammilehto@tuni.fi

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Abstract

Authenticity has been a central concept in sociolinguistics and in the study of literary representations of dialect. This article examines the ideology of dialect authenticity in the context of literary fiction from the point of view of language users. Two Finnish reading groups comprising members with different dialect backgrounds read one Finnish novel, in which the Far Northern dialects of Finnish are represented in a partly unconventional manner. Thematic analysis was applied to two video-recorded reading group discussions to investigate how the groups discuss the novel's dialect representation and its (in) authenticity. The analysis revealed that instead of adhering to a static and essentialist ideal of authenticity, the readers overlooked the unconventional representation of literary dialect and viewed authenticity as a dynamic process. The study contributes to theoretical discussions on dialect authenticity and employs an experimental approach to exploring language ideologies through reading groups.

Keywords: authenticity; dialect; Finnish; language ideologies; literary fiction; sociolinguistics; perceptual dialectology

1. Introduction

Dialects have long been used in literature for a variety of purposes and in a variety of ways (e.g. Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2013, Stockwell 2020:362–365). In the study of literary dialect representations, as well as in sociolinguistics more broadly, one of the central concepts and ideological constructs has been authenticity (Eckert 2003:392). Traditionally, fictional discourse has not been regarded as authentic as an object of study as everyday conversational discourse (Bucholtz 2003:405–406, Coupland 2007:181). If literary dialect has been studied, it has generally been compared with spoken dialect to determine how authentic the representation feels (Stockwell 2020:362). By contrast, in contemporary sociolinguistics, the attention has been turned to sociolinguistic styles, performances, and how fictional discourse constructs the social reality instead of simply mirroring it (Bell & Gibson 2011,

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Stamou 2014:123, Schintu Martínez 2023:69–70). Nevertheless, authenticity can still be regarded as a hegemonic ideology in sociolinguistics (Stamou 2014:135), extending into the study of literary dialects.

Research on literary dialect authenticity has largely relied on scholars' perspectives. Examining language users' perceptions of authenticity in literary dialect representations would be of equal importance. Studies conducted on reading groups indicate that book talk often involves talk about and evaluation of language (Swann & Allington 2009:253, Ahola 2013:138) and that the influence of other readers and co-construction of interpretations present in reading group meetings can alter or reinforce individual views (Swann & Allington 2009:253). Therefore, reading groups are likely to discuss literary dialect representations and form shared views on their authenticity. Studying these discussions can offer insight into the social construction of dialects and the language ideological views regarding dialect authenticity.

In this article, I examine the ideology of authenticity through two reading group discussions. The 'ideology of authenticity' is used here to refer to authenticity as a language ideology (e.g. Bucholtz 2003, Coupland 2003, Eckert 2003; see Section 2.1), which Silverstein (1979:193) defines as 'a set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use' (for an elaborated account of the concept, see e.g. Woolard 2020). In the study design, two Finnish reading groups with participants representing different dialect backgrounds read the novel *Erään kissan tutkimuksia* ('Investigations of a cat') by Katja Kettu (2023). The novel's dialect representation differs from a dialectological description of the Far Northern dialects of Finnish, featuring dialect variants from both the Far Northern dialects and other varieties of Finnish. The study explores the reading groups' perceptions and reflections of the novel's dialect, with the aim of answering the following research questions: How do the readers discuss the unconventional dialect representation of the novel *Erään kissan tutkimuksia* and evaluate its authenticity? What do the discussions reveal about the ideology of dialect authenticity in the context of the novel?

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical background of the study, focusing on the concept of authenticity. The reading group data and analysis methods are described in Section 3. Section 4 presents the results of the analysis, and Section 5 summarizes them with concluding remarks.

2. Authenticity in sociolinguistics and in literary fiction

The study is theoretically anchored in the third wave of variation studies (see Eckert 2012) and its engagement with authenticity and post-structuralist conceptions of place and space (see e.g. Johnstone 2004, 2011, Lacoste, Leimgruber & Breyer 2014). Section 2.1 addresses the notion of authenticity in sociolinguistic research and Section 2.2 discusses authenticity from the perspective of literary fiction and its readers.

2.1 The concept of authenticity in sociolinguistics

Authenticity is a central concept in the field of sociolinguistics (Eckert 2003:392). The pursuit of authentic language, which Bucholtz (2003:398) defines as 'language produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers', can be traced back to the

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field's origins in dialectology (Bucholtz 2003:399). In Finland, the late nineteenth century is typically recognized as the starting point of the systematic study of dialects. At that time, the aim of the research was to document speech that had not been influenced by written standard language, which is why elderly, uneducated, rural individuals were deemed the most authentic informants (Kurki & Mustanoja 2019:88, 91–93). Authenticity was, and to some extent still is, bestowed by regional origin (Aarikka 2023:183–184). With the emergence of sociolinguistic research, the influences of which came to Finland in the 1970s, the analytical focus broadened from regional to social variation (Kurki & Mustanoja 2019:95). The notion of authenticity expanded, although the emphasis on the vernacular remained prominent (Coupland 2007:181, Eckert 2012:88–90).

In what is referred to as the third wave of variation studies (Eckert 2012:93–98) and its socio-constructivist view of language, authenticity is regarded as a construct (Lacoste, Leimgruber & Breyer 2014:10, Schintu Martínez 2023:69). According to Eckert (2014:44), authenticity is 'something that people claim'. It is a process in which certain groups, individuals and qualities become regarded as authentic through linguists' and non-linguists' linguistic and metalinguistic practices (Bucholtz 2003:398–399, 407, Eckert 2014:44, 53). With theoretical concepts such as indexicality (Silverstein 2003, Eckert 2008) and enregisterment (Agha 2006), third-wave studies explore the indexical variability of variables, registers and social styles (Eckert 2012:93–97). Studying authentication processes (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:601), performed authenticities (Coupland 2007:184) and contexts where the notion of authenticity appears to be in some way complex (Johnstone 2014:98) can offer insight into what has become considered authentic and by whom (Lacoste, Leimgruber & Breyer 2014:9).

Blommaert & Varis (2013) link authenticity with the notion of 'enoughness' and state that in order to be acknowledged as an authentic member of an identity category, one has to have enough of certain features associated with that identity. Authenticity can be produced through a limited set of recognizable features, or even a mix of emblematic and non-emblematic features (Blommaert & Varis 2013:146–147, 156). The criteria of enoughness are adjustable and in constant change, depending on who, at any given time, is defining them (Blommaert & Varis 2013:147, Johnstone 2014:97–98).

Sociolinguistics has prioritized the study of spoken language over written, and 'naturally occurring' speech over fictional or performative uses of language (Bucholtz 2003:405–406). The authenticity of literary language as research material has been questioned, although fictional texts have nevertheless served as data sources, for example in historically oriented dialectology in Finland (Keskimaa 2018:27–29, Aarikka 2023:73–77). Contemporary sociolinguistics also examines linguistic representations and performances in pop culture, media texts and everyday interaction (Coupland 2007, Stamou 2014:119). Performances can be seen as central discursive practices that involve negotiations of social identities and, accordingly, authenticity (Moll 2015:29). Bell & Gibson (2011:570) argue that performed language 'displays and heightens the social semiotic impact of language', as performances rely on the reflexivity of both performers and audiences and participate in the formation and shaping of social indexicality (2011:559).

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Authenticity in performances needs to be achieved through discursive practices as opposed to being automatically given (Coupland 2007:184).

As written linguistic performances, literary representations of dialect are involved in the processes of defining and negotiating authenticity. Schintu Martínez (2023:70) describes dialect writing as a 'conscious indexical process', emphasizing an author's influence in the enregisterment of dialect variants with regional and social meanings. The written, fictional nature of literary dialect representations does not reduce their value as linguistic data. That being said, Stamou (2014:123) suggests that fictional discourse should be analyzed not by comparing its authenticity to everyday speech, but by examining its influence on audiences' perceptions of the language of different social groups and the associated linguistic and social stereotypes.

2.2 Authenticity in perceptual dialectology, literary fiction, and reading group discussions

Linguists and non-linguists are likely to approach authenticity in somewhat different ways. Folk linguistics, the study focused on non-linguists' language regards (the term first used in Preston 2010), established itself as a field of research in the 1980s, but it was preceded by fundamentally folk linguistic studies carried out in Japan and the Netherlands in the mid-1900s. Within folk linguistics, perceptual dialectology focuses on non-linguists' dialect beliefs, perceptions and attitudes (see e.g. Preston 1999). In Finland, a substantial amount of this knowledge has been accumulated since the early 2000s (see e.g. Mielikäinen & Palander 2014), although the interest in language users' language regards was already present in research during the twentieth century (see Aarikka 2023:137, 250–253).

According to Preston (1996:40–41), folk linguistic awareness can be divided into four relatively independent modes: AVAILABILITY, ACCURACY, DETAIL, and CONTROL. Each mode can be understood as a continuum that represents one aspect of how non-linguists perceive language (Preston 1996:40–45). Another way of conceptualizing folk linguistic awareness is to analyze metalanguage: drawing on Niedzielski & Preston (2003:302, 308), METALANGUAGE 1 refers to overt language commentary and METALANGUAGE 2 to shared beliefs and presuppositions about language and its users. When discussing language, non-linguists and linguists alike often refer indexically outside of it to language users, groups, places, and their characteristics (Niedzielski & Preston 2003:302–314, Mielikäinen & Palander 2014:80, 104).

Language users' views on authentic language can affect language use (Johnstone 2014:98). Folk linguistic authenticity has been examined, for example, through authentication practices: how language users evaluate authenticity and negotiate it individually and as members of different groups (Moll 2015:184, 256). In the third wave of sociolinguistics, speakers are regarded as 'stylistic agents' (Eckert 2012:97–98), who may view some variants, speakers, and varieties as more authentic than others, or claim authenticity for themselves in order to identify with certain categories and qualities (Eckert 2014:44, Johnstone 2014:98). Authenticity remains an important factor in the construction of personal and social identities, as a sense of authenticity enables language users to feel connected to communities and places (Coupland 2007:427, Coupland 2014:19, 21; see also Bucholtz & Hall 2005).

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Language users can view dialect as an intrinsic part of one's social identity and authentic self (Siegel 2021:288–289, 291). As a residue of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century romanticism and its emphasis on rurality, dialects have been associated with the notions of rootedness and authenticity (Bucholtz 2003:399). These associations are activated when dialects are represented in literary fiction. In Finland, the growing regional consciousness has fostered dialect appreciation since the late 1990s and early 2000s, reflected in the expanded use of dialects in written texts. Literary fiction may also use different dialects to evoke different associations. (Makkonen-Craig & Vaattovaara 2007:402, 404–405, 411.) Central to this study, perceptual dialectological research has indicated that non-linguists often describe the Far Northern dialects as old-fashioned and primordial – an impression possibly shaped by the romanticized, exotic portrayals of Finnish Lapland in media representations (Mielikäinen & Palander 2014:85, 95, 109).

In evaluating dialect authenticity in literary fiction, it is essential to consider that written dialect representations are inherently partial and cannot fully capture the features of spoken language (Leech & Short 2007:128–137, Johnstone 2014:104, Stockwell 2020:363). Furthermore, fiction writers can be assumed to be primarily concerned with creating an illusion of dialect, rather than striving for a precise linguistic representation (Leech & Short 2007:121, 136). In literary fiction, dialects serve literary aims (Keskimaa 2018:57–64), and deviations from the established conventions of language use can be interpreted as the author's creativity (Busse & McIntyre 2010:16). Instead of reflecting reality, fictional discourse can, and arguably should, be regarded as a construction of sociolinguistic style (Stamou 2014). It is also worth noting that sociolinguistic authenticity is connected to adjacent social practices, and a representation of speech is perceived as authentic only within an otherwise authentic setting (Johnstone 2014:100). For readers, the perceived authenticity of a literary dialect may depend on the narrative credibility of the literary work they are reading (see Tammilehto 2023:524–526).

The perceived (in)authenticity of a literary dialect is constructed partly individually, partly together with other language users. It is debated on, for example, in reading groups. Peplow (2016:1) defines reading groups as collectives who 'meet regularly to discuss a book that all members (should) have read'. Individual members' identities have an influence on the conversation, but final interpretations are created in cooperation with other group members (Peplow 2016:4–5; see also Swann & Allington 2009:262). According to Ahola's (2013) research on Finnish reading groups, readers pay attention to literary language and even refer to it as the most crucial component of a good book (2013:138). Through language discussion, reading groups can form shared interpretations of dialect authenticity and its value within the context of literary fiction.

3. Data and analysis method

The research data were collected in spring 2024 from two reading groups, one gathering in Helsinki and the other in Tornio. Tornio is a northern city with approximately 21,000 residents, located near the Swedish border in the region of Lapland. Tornio falls within the Far Northern dialect area of Finnish (Rapola 1969:131–134), while Helsinki, in the

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region of Uusimaa in southern Finland, is the capital of Finland with over 600,000 residents and significant linguistic diversity (see e.g. Paunonen 2005). These cities were chosen to compare how the perspectives of the two groups, presumably differing in their exposure to the Far Northern dialects, might vary.

The novel *Erään kissan tutkimuksia* was assigned to the reading groups before data collection. The participants were encouraged to make notes about their thoughts while reading. One meeting from each reading group, during which the novel was discussed, was video-recorded. The research data comprise two two-hour meeting recordings, their transcriptions, and handwritten notes from six participants.

In the following sections I introduce the reading groups (Section 3.1), present the discussed novel (Section 3.2) and describe the thematic analysis process applied to the data (Section 3.3).

3.1 Reading groups

The Helsinki reading group had three members present at the recorded meeting, while the Tornio group had thirteen attendees. The Helsinki participants were aged between 50 and 60, and the Tornio participants were over 60 years old. All the participants were women, reflecting common patterns in gendered reading group participation (Ahola 2013:68–71). The readers' age and gender may have shaped their approach to the novel and its dialect: the participants were experienced readers accustomed to literary discussion (see Ahola 2013:134–135), and female readers have been shown, for instance, to be more likely to interpret fictional worlds through their own life experiences (Andringa 2004:237).

Given that dialect perception requires exposure to variation (Dossey, Clopper & Wagner 2020:347) and readers' familiarity with the represented dialect affects how it is evaluated and interpreted (Stockwell 2020:370, Schintu Martínez 2023:83–84), the group members were asked about their residential history as part of the background information collection. The participants were asked where in Finland they felt they were from, and whether they had resided in the region of Lapland. All the Tornio group members had lived in Lapland, where Far Northern dialects are spoken, for over twenty years. Of the thirteen members, four had origins outside Lapland (in the regions of Central Ostrobothnia, South Karelia, South Savo, and Uusimaa). In the Helsinki group, only one member had lived in Lapland, for less than five years. Two out of three members identified regions other than Uusimaa (Central Ostrobothnia, Kainuu) as their home region, despite the members currently residing and the group gathering in Helsinki. For the purposes of this study, the groups are referred to as the Helsinki and Tornio groups, irrespective of individual residential histories, to highlight their differing exposure to the Far Northern dialects. The relevant aspects of the readers' backgrounds are, however, addressed in the analysis.

The reading groups differed in their organization. The Helsinki group gathered at a member's home, and aside from the host starting the discussion, the meeting remained informal and unstructured. In contrast, the Tornio group met in a public space. The group had a prominent leader who guided the conversation, and the meeting featured more overlapping talk and less individual speaking time. This may have influenced the members' willingness to express differing views or take up space in the conversation, as the established discursive practices within the group affect

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readers' voiced interpretations (Swann & Allington 2009:250, Peplow 2014:310), and the leader's role is a central factor influencing participant involvement in reading groups (Ahola 2013:85–87).

To minimize interference with authentic observations, participants were initially given a general description of the study as focusing on readers' experiences of the novel and its language. During the meetings, the groups discussed the novel without intervention, although the researcher's presence and the recording of the meetings may have influenced the readers. Towards the end of each meeting, the specific focus on the novel's dialect representation was disclosed, and participants were asked further questions regarding their views on dialect authenticity in literary fiction.

The participants were informed about the course of the study and the processing and protection of their personal data.[1] They were given the opportunity to ask questions, and it was emphasized that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. After this, they were asked to sign consent forms. In order to protect participator privacy, personal data collection in the study was minimized, and the readers' names were pseudonymized during the transcription process.

3.2 The novel Erään kissan tutkimuksia *and its dialect representation*

The novel discussed by the reading groups tells the story of two women from different generations of the same family, connected by a spirit guide that appears in the form of a cat. As is typical of Kettu's works (see Viertola 2012:52–58, Jytilä 2022:59–61), the novel features dual timelines, multiple perspectives, and a blend of historical accuracy and magical realism. The author is known for her distinctive style that incorporates dialects and made-up words (Viertola 2012:53, Jytilä 2022:67), a feature briefly noted in the reading group discussions (see example (9) in Section 4.3). With its unique language and various places, times, and dialects, the novel allows for diverse interpretations and serves as fertile ground for discussions on literary dialect.

The story is set partly in Helsinki but primarily in a place called Saari ('Island') or Perukka ('Back end'), located far in the north and near the Finland–Russia border. While several locations from Lapland and Kainuu are mentioned, the exact location of Saari remains open to interpretation. Similarly, the novel's dialect representation is ambiguous (see Tammilehto 2024). It features dialect variants commonly present in the Far Northern dialects (see Rapola 1969:131–134), such as the first-person singular pronoun *mie* (*minä* 'I') and the *h* in non-initial syllables (e.g. *mit**h**än* for *mitään* 'anything', *taiva**h**alla* for *taivaalla* 'in the sky'). However, these variants are not systematically employed in a way that corresponds with dialectological descriptions, for example the *h* in non-initial syllables can be seen in linguistic environments where it is not generally found (see Mantila 1992), as in *pit**h**ää* (*pitää* 'have to'). Additionally, these variants are combined with widespread variants (e.g. participle *ollu* for *ollu**t***, a past form of 'to be') (see Mielikäinen 2009) and variants from other Finnish dialects, notably Kainuu (e.g. the *ht* variant of standard Finnish *ts*, as in *ka**ht**elemme* for *ka**ts**elemme* 'we are looking') (see Rapola 1969:39–45, 141). Thus, the novel's dialect representation diverges from the dialectological description of an authentic Far Northern dialect.

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3.3 Thematic analysis of the data: analysis process, codes, and themes

To explore the readers' experiences of the novel's dialect and its authenticity, thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke 2022) was applied to the transcriptions of the video recordings and participant notes using the Atlas.ti software. After dataset familiarization, recurring meaning-based patterns were identified and grouped under codes such as 'dialect mixing' and 'getting used to the language'. Transcription passages, ranging from individual turns to longer stretches of conversation, were tagged with one or multiple codes. Dividing the transcription into passages of different lengths was based on topic shifts in the conversation.

The codes were clustered into broader themes, reviewed, and named in relation to the research questions. The four themes and the most significant codes associated with each of them are as follows.

(i) DIALECT AS A MIX OF MULTIPLE DIALECTS AND VOICES: dialect mixing; familiar and unfamiliar variants; dialect perceived as incorrect; dialect evoking images of familiar people and places.
(ii) THE PRECEDENCE OF THE STORY OVER DIALECT AUTHENTICITY: getting used to the language; getting engrossed in the narrative; the richness and abundance of the story; accepting the novel's world; good enough dialect is enough.
(iii) DIALECT AS A PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S (UN)CONSCIOUS CHOICES: the novel interpreted in relation to the author's residential history and life events; the author's creativity; questioning readers' linguistic knowledge; thematic explanations for observations.
(iv) DIALECT VARIATION AS AUTHENTIC: literary fiction is not spoken language; literary fiction is fictional; variation recognized as an integral part of language; questioning authorities.

The following section presents a more detailed account of each theme.

4. Reading groups and the dialect of *Erään kissan tutkimuksia*

The identified four themes summarize the participants' thoughts on dialect authenticity in the novel *Erään kissan tutkimuksia*. What follows is an account of these four themes. Section 4.1 presents the readers' view of the novel's dialect as a mix. Section 4.2 describes how the communicative function of language, in this case the novel's narrative and thematics, takes precedence over dialect authenticity in the group discussions. Section 4.3 explores the readers' inclination to interpret the novel's dialect through its author's background. Finally, Section 4.4 addresses the readers' thoughts on language variation, linguistic authorities, and literary fiction as a special context for dialect use.

4.1 Dialect as a mix of multiple dialects and voices

The study participants note that the novel's dialect representation includes variants from several dialects. The readers mention the dialects of Northern and Eastern

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Finland, and more specific places such as Rovaniemi, Kemi, and Tornionlaakso (from the Far Northern dialect group), Kainuu (the Kainuu dialect group, Eastern Finland), even White Karelia (Northern Karelian dialect, Eastern Finland) and Helsinki. The readers recognize both familiar and unfamiliar variants.

(1) Ritva (T): tuli semmonen_olo että niin tuota @hei tämähän on meiäm murretta@, paikoin, mut sitte hoksas_että @eei helekatti tuo sana ei ainakhaa ole kyllä meiän murretta@ mutta se oli samassa yhteyessä kuitenki melkein siellä että niin tuota.[2,3]

Ritva (T): I got this feeling that well @hey this is our dialect@, at times, but then realized that @heck no at least that word is not our dialect@ but it was in the same context almost there though so.

(2) Anne (T): mum piti ihan kattoa että mi- mihin tämä sijottuu tämä kirja ko mi- tässä oli semmone murteiden sekamelska, ja mi- minua häiritti se hirveesti mua ärsytti ihan se, se just se että n- siellä oli vaikka minkä näköstä murrettah.

Anne (T): I had to check where this book is set because I- this had a kind of a jumble of dialects, and it bothered me terribly it quite annoyed me that, just that there were all kinds of dialect in there.

In example (1), Ritva's initial enthusiasm at recognizing her dialect in the novel shifts to confusion upon encountering a word she does not associate with it. Anne, in example (2), expresses greater displeasure, describing the dialect as a 'jumble' that bothered her. The 'mixing' of linguistic varieties may be viewed negatively when contrasted with ideals of purity and originality (Mielikäinen & Palander 2014:229), particularly if a dialect is a part of a language user's identity (Siegel 2021:284, Tammilehto 2023:520–522). Given that in the background information collection, both readers identified Tornio as the place they feel they are from, it can be assumed that the Tornio dialect holds significance for them. This is supported by Ritva's use of the phrase 'our dialect'. However, Anne is the only reader to express outspoken irritation towards the novel's perceived mixing of dialects. For most participants, regardless of their regional background, it is a relatively neutral issue, as indicated in example (3).

(3) Jaana (H): ja sillä lailla must se ei ollu niinku päälleliimattua tavallaa se murteiden käyttö mut se ei ollu myöskääm puhdasta että siellä oli musta niinku just, pohjosem murteita ja itämurteita ja, ja, ja tota, sillä lailla hyvin luovasti, käytetty mun- mun korviin.

Jaana (H): and in that way I think it wasn't kind of superimposed in a way, the use of dialects, but it was not pure either, and I think there were like, northern dialects and eastern dialects and, and well, in that way very creatively used to my ears.

Jaana from the Helsinki group observes that the novel's dialect is neither 'pure' nor 'superimposed'. The 'creative' use of both Eastern Finnish and Northern Finnish

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dialects does not bother her, even though she has named Kainuu as her home region and refers to her regional background several times during the discussion.

Language users' degree of familiarity with a dialect influences their perceptions and evaluations (Preston 1999:xxxv, Schintu Martínez 2023:83–84). This is evident in how both reading groups identify familiar and unfamiliar elements in the novel's dialect but focus on different aspects. The Tornio group, for instance, discusses the correct spelling of the Far Northern dialect word *kläp(p)i* ('child'), while the Helsinki group focuses on where they have previously encountered the word. Another example is Jaana's reflection on the words and phrases she associates with the Kainuu dialect, absent in the discussion of the Tornio group. All the dialect variants are not equally available to all readers, nor are they characterized with the same amount of detail or accuracy; to follow Preston (1996:41), the modes of folk linguistic awareness are relatively independent.

Folk perception of dialects is shaped by sociocultural factors, such as contacts to other dialect speakers and dialect representations seen in media and culture (Preston 1996:72, Preston 1999:xxxv, Mielikäinen & Palander 2014:80). In reading group settings, readers engage in literature discussion with their group members, but also with other voices, including those of characters, authors, absent readers, and critics (Peplow 2014:170, 2016:57). The readers of this study hear echoes of familiar voices, places, and people in the novel's dialect, as reflected in the written notes of one Helsinki group reader.

(4) Pohjoisen kuvauksessa on paljon tuttua, joka tulee oman isäni tarinoista, kotitilasta, sukulaisista (Utajärvi, Vaala, Kajaani, Sotkamo). Köyhyys, ankaruus, uskonto. Isän puhelimessa puhuma murre . . .

There is a lot of familiarity in the description of the north, coming from my own father's stories, homestead, relatives (from Utajärvi, Vaala, Kajaani, Sotkamo). Poverty, severity, religion. The dialect spoken by [my] father on the phone . . .

Example (4) illustrates how the novel evokes memories in Kirsi. The memories involve language ('the dialect spoken by father on the phone') but also non-linguistic characteristics (poverty, severity, religion) and places (homestead, the north). Both levels of folk metalanguage, metalanguage 1 and 2 (see Niedzielski & Preston 2003:302–314), are present. Places are shaped and experienced partly through language, and vice versa, the experiences of places can shape the way language is experienced (Johnstone 2011:210). Kirsi's notes suggest that dialects, places, and people can become so closely intertwined that distinguishing between them may be unfeasible (see Tammilehto 2024:167). The novel's dialect is seen as a mix of dialects, voices, and memories emerging in the readers' minds.

4.2 The precedence of the story over dialect authenticity

Discussion about the novel's characters and narrative dominated the conversation in both reading groups at the expense of language talk, similar to what Swann & Allington (2009:253) have observed. This is exemplified in how the reading groups,

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after briefly addressing language, repeatedly shift their conversation towards the novel's themes, plot events, and character evaluations. The story can be so engrossing that readers do not pay attention to the language.

(5) Kirsi (H): siihen tottuu ja sitä ja että ehkä hän niinku sit käyttää sitä jotenki systemaattisesti että, ei tullu semmosia, niinku ou-, outoja, käyttötapoja vaikkapa että, että se oli että siihen tottu siihen_että että miten yleiskieleen sekottu, jotkut murresanat tai, tai että, että tässä kohtaa tällä tavalla se vaihtaah, vähä siihen että sit se alko niinku siihe- siihenkin alko tottumaan eikä vaan niihin, tiettyihin outoihin sanoihin, tai ehkä sit jotku sanat toistu en tiiä.

Jaana (H): niin tai sä hyväksyt sem maailman, ku sä oot vähän_aikaa, lukenu, sit sä niinku os- ostat sen ((nauraa)) tavallansa.

Kirsi (H): you get used to it, and maybe she kind of then uses it somehow systematically so that, there weren't these kind of like strange usages for example so that, so that it was that you got used to how standard language was mixed with some dialect words or, or maybe in this context in this way she changes it, a bit to that so then you started like, started getting used to that too, not just to those certain strange words, or maybe then some words were repeated I don't know.

Jaana (H): yeah or you accept that world after you've read for a while, then you kind of buy into it ((laughs)) in a way.

In example (5), the Helsinki group discusses getting used to the novel's dialect. Kirsi interprets the novel's combination of dialect and standard forms as systematic, enabling readers to become accustomed to it, and Jaana mentions 'buying' into the novel's world. The readers overlook the unconventional use of dialect and see it as a part of the novel's reality. Linguistic details are overshadowed by the communicative function of language (Preston 1996:46–48), so that the dialect performance is influenced by what language users observe on the level of content, not just on the level of language (Moll 2015:257). The same can be seen in how both reading groups describe the novel's language as 'rich' and 'abundant', often conflating linguistic and narrative aspects.

However, the readers' approval of a dialect representation depends on certain criteria being met.

(6) Kirsi (H): täytyy olla niinku jotain_että, et sen_osaa ilman_että sanoo et, niinku kirjailija ite sanoo että tämän tämän paikka on nyt, pohjoisessa ni siinä pitäis olla kielessä sit jotaki sellasta josta sen tunnistaa et se on pohjosessa. jot- niinku jotaki semmosia piirteitä vaikkei se niiku ookkaa oikein.

Kirsi (H): there has to be like something so that, so that you can know without [the author] saying that, like without the author herself saying that this takes place now, in the north, so the language should then have like something that makes it recognizable that it is in the north. some- like some characteristics, even if it were not like correct.

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In example (6), Kirsi expresses that a dialect representation must allow the reader to identify the setting of the story, but at the same time, the representation does not need to be fully accurate. A stylized language performance is successful as long as its target is recognizable (Bell & Gibson 2011:569). To apply the concept of 'enoughness' (Blommaert & Varis 2013), a good enough dialect representation is enough. It can feature a limited set of distinguishable dialect variants and also include some non-emblematic variants (2013:147, 156) that are not 'correct'.

4.3 Dialect as a product of the author's (un)conscious choices

In reading groups, readers are aware that the book they are reading will be collectively discussed. Rather than purely immersing themselves in the narrative, they might approach the text analytically, with the understanding that it is a construct created by the author (Ahola 2013:134, 139–140). This is evident in how the study participants attempt to explain the novel's unconventional use of dialect. For instance, the author's background is discussed in the meetings, especially among the Tornio group. In example (7), the group debates what dialects they recognize in the novel.

(7) Kaija (T): kyllä siinä se Kainuum murre tuli kans (et)-
Ritva (T): jotenki- no en-, en tiiä onko,
Kaija (T): mulle ja- nii oli, ja myös Rovaniemej ja, siinä näitä,
Ritva (T): joo. niiv varmaar Rovaniemen.
Tuula (T): Kemin murretta jos joo, Katja Kettu jo- ei ole länsirannalla asunut.
Ritva (T): joo, varmaan siinä oli sekotettu kaikk-
Kaija (T): näitä- nii. nii.
Leena (T): ei sole tässä asunu, eikö se ole Rovaniemeltä läh-
Ritva (T): ei ei ookkaaj joo.
Tuula (T): Rovaniemen niin ympäristöstä se on, kyllä.
Leena (T): nii.

Kaija (T): yeah the Kainuu dialect came also through in it (so)-
Ritva (T): somehow- well I don't, don't know is it,
Kaija (T): to me, and- yeah it was, and also Rovaniemi's and, in it these,
Ritva (T): yeah. probably Rovaniemi's.
Tuula (T): the Kemi dialect if yeah, Katja Kettu hasn't lived on the west bank.
Ritva (T): yeah, it probably had everything mixed-
Kaija (T): these kind of- yeah. yeah.
Leena (T): she hasn't lived here, isn't she from Rovaniemi-
Ritva (T): no no she hasn't yeah.
Tuula (T): she is from the Rovaniemi area, yes.
Leena (T): yeah.

Several Tornio group readers refer to the author's residential history when identifying the dialects in the novel. Tuula, Leena, and Ritva note that Katja Kettu has not lived 'here', in Tornio, but rather in Rovaniemi. The discussion implies that the readers view the author's dialect background as influencing the use of dialect in

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the novel, a view also assumed by earlier studies on literary dialect in Finland (e.g. Palander 1987:214–221, Mantila 1993). This can, to some extent, be seen to reflect the notion that dialect speaker legitimacy is contingent upon a language user's birthplace or at least residency in a specific location (see Aarikka 2023:183–187). The notion may offer an explanation to why the unfamiliar variants in the novel's dialect do not appear to notably disturb the Tornio readers: since the author has not lived in Tornio, the novel's dialect is not seen as the Tornio dialect.

The novel's dialect may also be viewed as the result of conscious choices made by the author. Both reading groups emphasize the author's creativity, imagination, and talent, and prioritize her artistic freedom over dialect authenticity, even when the perceived mixing of dialects is found annoying. This is exemplified by Anne, whose irritation was presented previously in example (2) in Section 4.1.

(8) Anne (T): mutta em mie nyt kuitenkhaa lopettanu lukemista enkä mie aattellu että tämä nyt ei saa mie just_aattelin et se on se on ki- se on tai-kirjailija taiteilija, se käyttää vähän niinko, maalari pensseliä.

Anne (T): but I didn't stop reading, though, and I didn't think that the author is not allowed I just thought that she's an author an artist, she uses a bit like a painter uses a brush.

Example (8) illustrates Anne interpreting the novel's unconventional dialect as an expression of the author's artistic abilities. Despite her annoyance with the dialect, she does not leave the book unfinished (cf. Tammilehto 2023:522).

The reading groups, particularly the Helsinki group, believe that the author makes her stylistic choices intentionally. Both groups reflect on the reasons behind the author's decision to use various dialects, and as noted earlier in example (5) of Section 4.2, Kirsi sees the dialect use in the novel as systematic. Paveau (2011:41–43) conceptualizes language knowledge as a permeable continuum, with writers positioned between the extremes of professional linguists and non-linguists with no professional engagement in linguistic practices. According to this view, writers may possess more linguistic knowledge than most non-linguists, a belief shared by the study participants. The readers trust the author's expertise and regard her as a linguistic authority. In contrast, they question their own abilities to evaluate dialect authenticity, as shown in the next example.

(9) Maria (H): kyl se joka lukee niih, niinku jos se on sieltä kotosin nii sit se kyl tunnistaa niinku semmost, silloin on hyvä mut sitte taas mielikuvituksellisuus ja ja just sen takii et jos, ku täs oli niin rikasta, niin, et, et, et sä et tiedä ((naurahtaa)) minä, lukijana en tiedä et onks se keksitty vai onko se, mistä, niin niin, tällaseen kirjaan must, ei tarvi olla.

Maria (H): the one who reads, like if they are from there, then they will recognize like this kind of, in that case it is good but then again imagination and that's exactly why if, because this had so rich that you don't know ((chuckles)), I, as a reader, don't know if it's made up or if it's from where, so, in a book like this, I think it doesn't have to be.

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Maria's reflections in example (9) follow the Helsinki group's discussion about whether literary dialect representations should be authentic. Maria remarks that for a reader from the represented dialect area, it would be good if the dialect was accurately depicted, but for her, dialect authenticity is not essential, especially in a novel as rich and imaginative as the one read by the group.

The readers place such high trust in the author's expertise that they seek explanations for the unusual dialect variants in the novel, discussing possible reasons behind the author's choices. Explanations are sought, for example, in the narrative and thematics. This is illustrated by Kirsi's description of the dialect as a bridge between different narrational worlds.

(10) Kirsi (H): se voi niinku kertoo niinku tästä päivästä ja sit- tai jostain niinku tän- vaikka Helsingis tapahtuu jotaki ja sit siellä onki jossain ihan lopus *itte*, joka ei oo niinku s-se sovi siihem muuhun kappaleeseen niin sillon, se, yhtäkkiä vetääki sitte tähä, niin ku toiseem maailmaan.

Kirsi (H): it can like tell about today and then- or about something like this- for example, something happens in Helsinki and then at the very end, there is also *itte* [*itse* 'oneself'], which is not like- it does not fit with the rest of the paragraph and then, it suddenly pulls into this, like into another world.

In example (10), Kirsi deduces that a single dialect variant is used to draw the reader into another world. The novel's dialect is seen as conveying meanings related to the thematics of the novel, and as such, it is regarded as the result of the author's intentional and creative literary choices.

4.4 Dialect variation as authentic

The partly unconventional representation of the Far Northern dialect is accepted as a part of the novel's world (see Section 4.2), which is understood to be an outcome of authorial creativity (Section 4.3). Literary fiction is perceived as a distinct context of dialect use: a literary dialect representation is not, as the readers remark, spoken language.

(11) Jaana (H): siinä mielessäki kirjallisuus om must silleen_aika, tai et siinä on jo semmone sal- sallimisen niinku efekti et ku eihäs se oo mitään tämmöstä litterointi- litterointia, vaan vaa siinä pitää niinku vähän, vähän niinku stilisoida tavallansa, että se on_ymmärrettävää ja, ja tota, et_ehkä se salliih, enempi, en tiiä.

Jaana (H): in that sense too I think literary fiction is quite like, or it already has this kind of permissive kind of like an effect because it is not like this transcription, but you have to like stylize it a bit in a way, so that it is understandable and, and well, maybe it permits more, I don't know.

(12) Tuula (T): ja eihän tää se mikään niinkun ole totta eihän tässä siitä ole kysymys.

Tuula (T): and this is not, nothing of this is like true, that's not what this is about.

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In example (11), Jaana discusses the 'permissive effect' of literary fiction, acknowledging that literary dialect representations are 'stylized', not accurate transcriptions. Tuula, in example (12), takes the idea further and points out that nothing in the novel is actually true. The readers understand that the authenticity of fictional speech cannot be evaluated against actual speech (see Leech & Short 2007:129) and that literary fiction is artificial in nature.

Moreover, the 'permissive effect' does not apply solely to literary fiction, but also to spoken language. The participants accept variation as an integral part of language. The Helsinki group members discuss how their own idiolects have changed throughout their lives, and the Tornio group deliberates on language variation on an even more general level:

(13) Päivi (T): mä luulen_että, että jos on perehtyny suomen murteisiin noin periaatteessa nii, niin ei voi olla, kauheen tarkkana niitten kanssa tietää sen variaatiomahdollisuuden, et ne on sitten tämmösiä, no, amatöörejä jotka, tuntee jonkun murteen, ja jos se ei ole hänen murteensa mukaista nii se on huono.

Päivi (T): I think that if you are well-versed with Finnish dialects then basically, then you can't be, too strict with them you know that possibility of variation, so they are these kind of, well, amateurs who know a dialect, and if it doesn't match their dialect, then it is bad.

In Benson & Risdal's (2018) study of language users' valuing of sociolinguistic variation, a notion they call 'sociolinguistic receptivity', approving attitudes toward variation were linked to higher levels of linguistic awareness and acceptance of nonstandard language features (2018:80–81). This is comparable to Päivi declaring, in example (13), that language users well-versed with Finnish dialects cannot be pedantic about their representation. She argues that 'amateurs' tend to dismiss dialect representations as inaccurate if they differ from their personal understanding. In this way, Päivi positions herself against an imagined outgroup of 'amateurs' and presents herself, and possibly her whole reading group, as a more informed language user acquainted with Finnish dialects (see Peplow 2014:167).

The Tornio group challenges the notion of linguistic authorities.

(14) Päivi (T): no kuka sen tietää kun se vaihtelee jopa kyläkunnittain, ja jos se nyt on ((naurahtaa)) naapurikyläm murretta ni niin sehän on sinänsä ihan oikein [– –] kriitikko arvi- arvioi, Hannu Paloniemen kirjan joitakin kohtia et ei se oo torniom murretta ollenkaan ku se, nä- näin kirjottaa, no mutta jos, mistä sä tiedät.

Päivi (T): well who can know when it varies even from village to village, and if it is ((chuckles)) dialect of the neighbor village then it is quite correct as such [– –] a critic evaluated some parts of a book by Hannu Paloniemi, saying it is not the Tornio dialect at all when he writes like this, but well if, how do you know.

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(15) Tuula (T): kuka pystyy sanomaan asiantuntijana, mikä murresana on_oikea. [− −] saa kirjottaa mitä haluaa sanoa mite haluaa, minum mielestä, kirjailija ja määki saan sanoa mite haluaj ja, sehän on puhuttua kieltä. eikö vaan?

Tuula (T): who can say as an expert, which dialect word is correct. [− −] you can write what you want say as you want, in my opinion, the author can and I can too say as I want and, it's spoken language. right?

The readers in examples (14) and (15) state that no one can definitively judge dialect usage as right or wrong. Literary critics, for instance, are not regarded as language experts. On the contrary, the readers seem to distinguish themselves from critics (see also Peplow 2016:83) by questioning their understanding of how dialect can vary from village to village and still be 'correct'. As discussed in Section 4.3, the reading groups emphasize the author's linguistic freedom. They also seem to extend this principle to all language users, valuing linguistic variation over static ideals of authenticity. In Tuula's words, 'you can write what you want' and 'say as you want'.

5. Discussion

In this article I have examined dialect authenticity through two reading group discussions of the novel *Erään kissan tutkimuksia* by Katja Kettu. The novel merges dialect variants characteristic of the Far Northern dialects of Finnish with other variants, in a manner diverging from the dialectological description of an authentic Far Northern dialect. The analysis centered on how the reading groups discuss the novel's dialect representation, its authenticity, and the importance of authenticity in literary fiction. The material and methodological choices of the study represent a means to explore the ideology of authenticity, discussed and theorized particularly in the third wave of sociolinguistics (see e.g. Bucholtz 2003, Eckert 2003, Lacoste, Leimgruber & Breyer 2014).

Thematic analysis of the reading group discussions revealed four key themes. The first theme, DIALECT AS A MIX OF MULTIPLE DIALECTS AND VOICES, highlighted the readers' perception of the novel's dialect as a mix of several Finnish dialects. Only one reader from the Tornio group expressed overt irritation at the perceived 'mixing', while most participants did not view it negatively. Moreover, the responses were shaped by more than just linguistic features. Reading group talk reflects a range of voices, from group members to authors, characters, absent readers and critics (Peplow 2014:170, 2016:57). When discussing the novel's dialect representation, the participants frequently referred to absent voices and their own experiences with different dialects, speakers, places and the associated characteristics.

Reading groups tend to pay attention to literary language (Ahola 2013:138), but it is typically not the main topic of discussion (Swann & Allington 2009:253), as seen in THE PRECEDENCE OF THE STORY OVER DIALECT AUTHENTICITY. The readers focused on narratives and characters and overlooked unfamiliar or unconventional linguistic variants. As long as the dialect representation is authentic 'enough' (see Blommaert & Varis 2013), the 'illusion of real experience' (Leech & Short 2007:127) is maintained, allowing readers to get immersed in the story.

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The readers perceived DIALECT AS A PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S (UN)CONSCIOUS CHOICES. The Tornio group interpreted the novel's dialect through its author's residential history, asserting that since Kettu has not lived in Tornio, the novel's dialect cannot represent the local dialect. In certain respects, the dialect was seen as an unconscious choice shaped by the author's background. Conversely, the data also highlighted the readers' emphasis on the author's artistic freedom and the role of dialect in narrative construction. The author was regarded as a creative linguistic professional who consciously uses dialect to convey meanings, with literary fiction considered a distinct context for dialect use.

The readers regarded linguistic variation as a feature of literary fiction, but also of spoken language, as illustrated in the theme DIALECT VARIATION AS AUTHENTIC. The reading groups discussed authorities, and in the Tornio group it was asserted that no one can define what is a 'correct' way to write or speak a dialect. The readers demonstrated a tolerant attitude toward the novel's use of multiple dialects, and this openness was at least partly extended to other contexts of language use as well. Authenticity as a fixed notion was not regarded as important as linguistic variation and freedom.

The comparison of the reading groups revealed that the readers analyzed familiar dialects in more detail, aligning with findings from earlier folk linguistic research. However, contrary to expectations, the Tornio group did not respond more negatively to the perceived mixing of dialects in the novel, despite the group members' greater familiarity with the Far Northern dialects. The unconventional use of dialect was overlooked in light of the novel's thematics, the author's background, and the dynamic nature of language. While these findings offer insight into language users' views on dialect authenticity, they should not be considered widely generalizable due to the study's limited scope: the study involved only two all-female reading groups accustomed to literary discussion. Additionally, differences in group size and organization as well as the researcher's presence may have influenced the discussions, as readers tend to follow the social norms of their reading groups (see Peplow 2016:55–99) and the presence of an observer may have prompted the readers to discuss in ways that present them in a favorable light (see Benson & Risdal 2018:91). Further research involving more diverse readers, reading groups, and works of literary fiction is needed.

Based on the analysis of two reading group discussions, the third-wave sociolinguistic view of authenticity as a dynamic process can be seen in how some language users talk about literary dialect. Although the study has focused on written fictional dialect, the data reported here suggest that some language users extend this view to other contexts of language use as well. These results contribute to the theoretical discussions on authenticity, authentication processes, and the socio-constructivist nature of language as a socially indexical, dynamic semiotic system (see Eckert 2008), from the point of view of language users and literary dialect. Simultaneously, the study represents an experimental approach to exploring language ideologies by examining reading groups and the variety of experiences, attitudes, voices and co-construction that exists within them.

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Notes

1 Based on the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) and the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, the study did not require an ethical review.
2 In the examples, the reader's reading group (T = Tornio, H = Helsinki) is denoted in parentheses following their pseudonym. The translation of the examples was carried out by the author of the manuscript.
3 The following transcription conventions are used in the examples:
, = short pause
. = longer pause, e.g. the end of an utterance
- = interruption of a word or an utterance
_ = absence of a break between words
abc = emphatic stress
@abc@ = change in sound quality, e.g. stylization
((laughs)) = non-speech elements
(so) = uncertain transcription
[comments] = author's comments

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