Andreas Nuottaniemi*

The slowness of language, the speed of capital: conflicting temporalities of the "green transition" in the Swedish north

https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2024-0076
Received April 12, 2024; accepted June 16, 2024; published online July 2, 2024

Abstract: Following substantial investments in battery production and fossil-free steel, a few select places in northern Sweden are currently undergoing rapid economic and cultural changes. The aim of this article is to explore the role language education plays for three different groups of (im)mobile subjects – refugees, labor migrants, and cosmopolitan elites – in the ongoing social transformations. By using the time-consuming and ideologically charged social practice of teaching and learning languages as a lens, it is argued that although framed as a sustainability project, the pace of the transformation is set by the accelerating logic of capitalism, posing a challenge to the democratic planning of inclusive local communities, as well as to societal subsystems characterized by much slower temporal regimes. Hence, although Sweden is committed to a "just transition" as part of the Paris Agreement, some are obviously benefiting much more than others from this transition. This paper further highlights the potentially high costs for the local communities that "win" the bids for the new green industries. Apart from considerable economic costs in the present, another result might also be increased social stratification and weakening social cohesion in the long term.

Keywords: language teaching and learning; green transition; sustainable development; social acceleration; desynchronization

Sammandrag: Ett fåtal utvalda plats i norra Sverige upplever nu hastiga ekonomiska och kulturella förändringar till följd av omfattande investeringar i batteriproduktion och fossilfritt stål. Syftet med den här artikeln är att utforska vilken roll språkundervisning spelar för tre olika grupper av (im)mobila subjekt – flyktingar, arbetsmigranter och kosmopolitiska eliter – i den pågående samhällsomvandlingen. Genom att utgå från de tidskrävande och ideologiskt laddade sociala praktikerna undervisning och lärande av språk visas här att även om samhällsomvandlingen ofta ramas in som ett hållbarhetsprojekt så bestäms hastigheten av kapitalismens accelererande logik, vilket innebär

***Corresponding author: Andreas Nuottaniemi**, Department of Geography, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, E-mail: andreas.nuottaniemi@umu.se. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7950-2772

utmaningar för demokratiska planeringsprocesser, likväl som för samhälleliga delsystem som präglas av betydligt långsammare temporala regimer. Även om Sverige har förbundit sig att arbeta för en rättvis omställning som en del av Parisavtalet blir det därför tydligt att somliga tjänar betydligt mer än andra på den här omvandlingen. Artikeln belyser vidare de potentiellt höga kostnaderna för lokalsamhällen som ”vinner” tävlingen om de nya gröna industrierna. Förutom betydande ekonomiska kostnader i samtiden kan ett annat resultat bli ökad stratifiering och minskad social sammanhållning på lång sikt.

1 Introduction

Following substantial investments in so-called green industries, a few select places in the Arctic region are currently undergoing rapid economic and cultural changes (Näsman et al. 2023). In this paper I consider one such place, the small Swedish town of Skellefteå, where a megafactory for car battery production has recently been established. In the space of just a few years the company responsible for the factory, Northvolt, has attracted venture capital in the range of 10 billion Euros (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå 2023), and contrary to the expectations of disbelieving commentators, the giant building now spreads across an area equivalent to 71 soccer fields on a gravel field outside the town. Four times a day, a long line of workers in yellow safety vests winds through the high gates surrounding the factory. According to the latest data, these workers number nearly 3,000 altogether, and hail from 120 different countries, with 50–120 new workers being added on a weekly basis (Interview with HR-manager at Northvolt).

Considering decades of depopulation in this and other parts of the rural north, as well as increased anti-immigration policies on both the national and European scale levels, it might well be asked how it will be possible to maintain such a massive influx of people in the long run (Eriksson et al. 2023). But equally important is the more immediate focus of this paper; that is, the question of what kinds of local communities are now being shaped in conjunction with what is officially referred to as a “green” and “sustainable” industrialization[1] (see e.g. Larsson 2022). Companies and municipalities are seemingly uniting in a desire to attract people to megaprojects in the north, but there is an apparent conflict between the capitalist industries’ immediate need for value-creating laborers and the municipality’s wish to build socially sustainable local communities, with more or

1 According to Northvolt’s Linkedin-page, the company “was founded to enable the transition to a decarbonized future by establishing a sustainable battery industry” (Northvolt 2024). The company further boasts an ambition to build “a cleaner world”. Skellefteå municipality, on their part, describes the central vision for the social transformation initiated by the establishment of the battery factory as building “a sustainable place for a better everyday life” (Skellefteå kommun 2022: 7).

less firmly rooted populations. Furthermore, even though they are essential both for achieving competitive battery production and for the maintenance of public services in the booming town, newcomers are arriving in Skellefteå, and Sweden in general, at a time of a dismantling of the welfare state and growing socioeconomic inequality (Suhonen et al. 2021), whereby not least immigrants of various kinds are subjected to increasingly repressive measures in the name of "integration" (Flubacher and Yeung 2016; Milani et al. 2021). In this context, the time-consuming and ideologically charged social practice of teaching and learning language becomes a lens through which to investigate the increasing tensions between nation-state ideologies, high-speed capitalism, and community-building in a welfare society.

My aim here is to explore the role language education plays for three different groups of (im)mobile subjects – refugees, labor migrants, and cosmopolitan elites – in the ongoing social transformations in northern Sweden. By analyzing data from an ethnographic field study at key educational sites in the town of Skellefteå using the notion of *desynchronization* (Rosa 2013), I will argue that although it is framed as a sustainability project, the pace of the transformation is set by the accelerating logic of capitalism, posing a challenge to the democratic planning of inclusive local communities, as well as to societal subsystems such as education and language learning, characterized by much slower temporal regimes.

As I will demonstrate, this tendency toward desynchronization is handled quite differently in relation to the three groups of newcomers under scrutiny. Despite being increasingly emphasized in contemporary Swedish political discourse, proficiency in the majority language, Swedish, is in practice only demanded of those deemed un-exploitable by the capitalist system; that is, refugee migrants with little or no prior education. Labor migrants, at the mercy of the individual employers, are not given the time to either learn Swedish or to become an active part of the local community. The hypermobile elites, on the other hand, can sit back and observe how the local space takes shape around them and their idealized linguistic repertoires, leaving the costs of and efforts for integration to the more rooted locals.

2 Doing ethnography in a town in flux

In October 2017 it was announced that Northvolt, a start-up launched by the so-called Tesla Swede Peter Carlsson and two of his associates, would locate a megafactory for producing car batteries in the small town of Skellefteå (Steinvall 2021). This decision followed a half year-long competition that had largely been staged in the local and national media, in which rivaling municipalities were encouraged to outbid each other in the fight for the billion-dollar investment. When the announcement was made, those who were involved celebrated together in the local press, convinced that

many years of depopulation and disinvestment had now come to an end, and a prosperous new time had just begun for the peripheralized town (Nilsson 2017). In light of numerous unfulfilled promises in the past – spectacular and eventually deserted entrepreneurial ventures, leaving behind some of the "ironic landscapes" of the rural north (Eriksson 2020) – there were certainly detractors, but they were neither seen nor heard publicly at this point in time (Eriksson et al., forthcoming).

Seven years later, the mostly silent skeptics seem to have been proven wrong. Unlike in the neighboring Norwegian town Mo i Rana, where a similar project has recently been abandoned mid-build (Guttormsen 2023), the factory in Skellefteå is actually up and running, providing job opportunities for several thousands of workers directly, and creating indirect spin-off effects all over town. However, several of the critical questions concerning not least the project's sustainability still remain unanswered (Müller 2023), and it is yet to be seen what kinds of long-term effects this and similar so-called green megaprojects will have on the local communities (Näsman et al. 2023).

Acknowledging the challenges involved in trying to understand a process that is still very much in the making, I consider ethnography a suitable approach for exploring the kind of ongoing sociolinguistic changes I want to shed light on here. By approaching these volatile contexts ethnographically – that is, talking to and spending time with those who are invested in the practices under scrutiny as a "professional stranger" (Agar 1996) – I do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of the social transformation in the Swedish north, but rather try to provide a locally sensitive and detailed analysis of processes that will need to be researched for years to come.[2] Taking as my point of departure the politicized and mediatized phenomena of majority language teaching and learning, I want to make sense of whose terms it is on which the societal transformation is taking place, and what limits and affordances this creates for local actors as they plan livable and inclusive spaces for all inhabitants.

Coming from a background as a teacher of newly arrived refugees in the rural Swedish north, I first became curious about the shifting language practices in Skellefteå when I witnessed how language issues were being reported in the local and national press. Apparently, a new kind of linguistic diversity was developing in the wake of the large investment there, and it was represented through an affective stance that was quite different from the largely problem-oriented discourses surrounding migrants' multilingualism in politics and media today. Locals interviewed

2 The field work on which this article is based has been conducted within the 7-year interdisciplinary research program "A promised land? Drivers, challenges and opportunities related to the (green) industrialization of Northern Sweden", awarded by the Swedish *Riksbankens Jubileumsfond* in 2022 (nr. M22-0029). The program aims to "understand the economic, social, and political challenges and opportunities of the ongoing industrial transformation in northern Sweden" (Näsman et al. 2023).

by enthusiastic reporters claimed to be "thrilled" to hear all sorts of new languages on the streets and in local shops, and instead of demanding that the newcomers learn the majority language, Swedish, as quickly as possible, the locals conveyed their strong resolution to communicate in linguistic repertoires more familiar to those arriving.[3] In a similar vein, the local newspaper *Norran* soon discovered a potential market and started publishing a daily edition in English, with the explicit aim of "facilitating integration" (Interview with editor; see also Hedberg 2023). Following initial demands by Northvolt the municipality also decided to start several English-medium schools, one of which does not even follow the Swedish curriculum but rather the internationally recognized Cambridge curriculum.

All in all, it looked like the "burden of bilingualism" (Heller 2013) was partly shifting in Skellefteå, hence bearing witness to a change not only in local language practices but also in the dominant ideologies of language. Instead of repeating the widespread claim that Swedish is the all-powerful "key" to social inclusion (Nuottaniemi 2023), thereby placing the responsibility for integration exclusively on the newly arrived individual, the local population appeared eager to adapt to at least some of the newcomers and reshape the community around their presence. The integration process was turned on its head, and the media coverage of the emerging multilingualism testified to ongoing renegotiations between nation-state ideologies, democratic planning practices, and an increasingly accelerated capitalist production.

To further explore these evolving tensions, I started in the autumn of 2023 by locating actors and educational contexts that have been affected by the recent changes in demographics, and looked at how the relationship between language and integration was being negotiated at these sites. Eventually, I identified three groups of (im)mobile actors, with their associated places, that I wanted to study further. These three groups, mentioned in the introduction above, are referred to throughout this article as refugees, labor migrants, and cosmopolitan elites. I have approached these three groups of actors in partially different ways, due to both ethical considerations and limitations in terms of access. For example, while adult members of the elite group have been contacted directly through a form of snowball sampling (Denscombe 2018: 76–77), their children's schooling and interaction patterns have been analyzed without talking to the children personally, instead using the secondhand accounts of teachers and parents as well as official documents. This can surely be considered a limitation of the study but has been deemed necessary due to both the limited timeframe of my own postdoctoral employment and the ethical challenges associated with involving children in a critical research project like this

3 See e.g. the exuberant joy demonstrated by two shop assistants in a news feature about the new linguistic diversity on the local TV channel *SVT Västerbotten*: https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/engelskan-vaxer-i-ett-vaxande-skelleftea.

one. The same goes for the refugees studying at the adult education center: Here I mainly rely on accounts by teachers, principals, and managers at the school. In the case of refugee students, however, I am also informed by a growing body of research on language requirements and social inclusion (see e.g. Bauer et al. 2023; Fejes and Dahlstedt 2023; Milani et al. 2021), as well as a large ethnographic field study conducted in 2020 in a language introductory class [*språkintroduktion*], and thoroughly reported in a separate monograph (Nuottaniemi 2023). As far as the labor migrants are concerned, it has not been possible to contact or meet with them at their workplace due to Northvolt's strict security regulations. Instead, I have managed to capture some of this group's experiences by participating as an ethnographic observer in the Swedish education organized by a local community college [*folkhögskola*] at one of the camps where many of them live. The reader should be aware that this has meant a clear selection of participants from this group, as it has only been possible to meet a small minority of highly motivated language learners on these occasions. In contrast to the majority of migrant workers at Northvolt, they mainly originate from other EU countries which means that they are not as dependent on a single employer for their right to stay in Sweden as non-EU citizens. However, that they, too, experience a form of subordinate inclusion (Tollefsen et al. 2021) in Skellefteå, hopefully serves to demonstrate the even more severe dependency endured by workers from outside the EU.

In this paper I will mainly analyze three types of data, all in some way concerning the three groups of actors described above. The first is a selection of media representations of the social transformation in northern Sweden collected from local and national press during the course of the ongoing field study, which began in October 2023. It has been a daily routine of mine to scan the local newspaper *Norran* for news related to the project, but I have also conducted more focused searches in the digital Media Archive [*Mediaarkivet*], combining the company name *Northvolt* with key words such as *speed* [*hastighet*], *language* [*språk*], *migrant worker* [*migrantarbetare*], and *barrack village* [*barackboende*]. This has resulted in a collection of 50 individual articles from print and broadcast media concerning some of the issues under scrutiny here. Secondly, the data consists of transcripts based on 26 semi-structured interviews with local policymakers and civil servants, workers, and managers at Northvolt, as well as educators representing both public and private schools. The interviews were conducted in Swedish or English, lasted between 45 and 110 min, and were all audio-recorded and thereafter transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.[4] Finally, I have taken fieldnotes in connection with participant observation at educational sites in the town of Skellefteå, including the public adult education center [*Komvux*] and the

4 In the transcriptions (.) annotates pauses between 0.5 s and 3.0 s, while pauses longer than 3 s are marked by (…). - indicates repetition and * that something is said with a laughing voice.

international school established in the town as a result of Northvolt's demands on the municipality. Of particular importance here are the fieldnotes I took during the 20 h I spent as a volunteer at a barrack village, where I, from January 2024, have been assisting teachers in Swedish courses for temporary labor migrants. As described above, this activity has also made it possible for me to meet individual workers, with whom I have subsequently been able to conduct semi-structured interviews about their experiences.

3 Conflicting temporalities in the Swedish north: theoretical points of departure

One thing that stands out in virtually all accounts of what is now happening in Skellefteå is *the unprecedented speed of the process*. In a revealing interview with the daily *Dagens Samhälle* in November last year, Municipal Director Kristina Sundin Jonsson says that what separates this from everything they have faced in the past is that "it goes so very fast. We're not really used to that in the public sector" (Helte 2023). When asked directly if things are going *too* fast, she replies "sometimes it feels like it," and likens the situation to being in a tumble dryer. You also get this feeling when *reading* the article, in which Sundin is described as rushing between meetings, conferences, and photo opportunities, with the reporter hurrying along in tow. "Bring a sandwich in your backpack," she urges the journalist. "It's not certain that we'll have time for lunch." The reporter continues:

Schemat för Kristina Sundin Jonsson är fullspäckat. Att boka in den här torsdagen i början av oktober när Dagens Samhälle ska följa i kommundirektörens fotspår under en arbetsdag krävde månader av planering.
Det fullsatta morgonflygplanet från Arlanda till Skellefteå Airport var försenat, men nu sitter konferensdeltagarna från Konjunkturinstitutiet här i salen på The Wood Hotel med ljumma kaffekoppar och hör kommundirektören dra sin välrepeterade show.

– Vi står inför en extraordinär samhällsomvandling, säger Kristina Sundin Jonsson i en lätt sprakande headsetmikrofon.
Bakom henne flimrar ett bildspel förbi. Utmaningarna radas upp.

Kristina Sundin Jonsson's schedule is packed. Booking this Thursday at the beginning of October, when Dagens Samhälle is to follow in the footsteps of the municipal director during a workday, required months of planning.
The full morning flight from Arlanda to Skellefteå Airport was delayed, but now the conference participants from the National Institute of Economic Research are sitting here in the hall at The Wood Hotel with lukewarm cups of coffee and listening to the municipal director deliver her well-rehearsed show.
– We are facing an extraordinary societal transformation, says Kristina Sundin Jonsson into a slightly crackling headset microphone.
Behind her, a slideshow flickers by. The challenges are listed.

(continued)

– Motsvarande etablering i Stockholm skulle innebära hundratusentals arbetstillfällen. Då förstår ni vilken total landsättning batterifabriken innebär för en sådan här ort. Den förändrar allt.	– An equivalent establishment in Stockholm would mean hundreds of thousands of jobs. Then you understand what a total game-changer the battery factory means for a place like this. It changes everything.
(Dagens Samhälle 11/9/23; original Swedish version)	(Dagens Samhälle 11/9/23; English translation)

To be sure, this is not just the late modern account of an ideal neoliberal, high-achieving subject in a demanding managerial position. My interviews are filled with similar statements, with participants consistently talking about the compulsion to keep up with the accelerated development. Politicians and civil servants alike testify to the ever-increasing speed of their daily operations, and as another top-level municipal officer tells me, even though it can feel overwhelming, she sees no limit to how high the tempo can become. Limits are in fact not allowed in the societal transformation, since: "det är ju bara ett måste (.) vi måste ju lyckas […] annars så har vi ingen samhällsutveckling i- i Skellefteå" ["it's just a must (.) we have to succeed […] otherwise we will have no social development in- in Skellefteå"] (Interview with municipal officer). Where does this sense of urgency come from? And why does the societal transformation necessarily have to go so fast that local planners have difficulty providing basic welfare services and housing for old and new inhabitants alike?

To understand this, and the conflicting views on language proficiency arising from these tensions, I draw on a historical materialist perspective on the relationship between political economy and language, along with contemporary sociological theory on *social acceleration* (Rosa 2013). Northvolt is a private actor working in a highly competitive emerging capitalist market, and is therefore subject to the temporal logic of capitalist production. As outlined by Marx (2018 [1867]) in Volume 1 of *Capital*, all capitalist production aims first and foremost at the accumulation of value. As value in capitalism corresponds to the average time required to produce a commodity, *surplus value*, according to Marx, can arise in one of two ways: through either the extension of the working day (which he calls *absolute* surplus value) or through the shortening of the socially necessary working time (generating *relative* surplus value). Even though the battle over the length of the working day has been a constant since the dawn of capitalism, in the here and now the latter option is more available to the individual capitalist, who through technological innovations will try to intensify the labor process and thus reduce the value of labor power (Harvey 2017: 8–12). For a company like Northvolt, charged with venture capital, a great deal depends on their being the first to use a given way of production, as this allows them

to reap an additional, temporary surplus value, which only lasts until the competitors have adopted the same – or a more efficient – technology for battery production.

In other words, capitalist economic activity rests on *the acquisition and exploitation of time advantages*, which in turn creates a constant pressure on the entire economy to continually accelerate (Rosa 2013: 163). Through "the coercive laws of competition" (Harvey 2010: 277) this leaves the individual capitalist – regardless of their personal dispositions or preferences – with little choice but to move faster and faster, in a race for the ephemeral extra profits stemming from the short-lived competitive advantage. In late capitalism, characterized by flexible accumulation regimes and globalized supply chains, the pressure to accelerate the circulation of capital increases even further (Harvey 1990). But it may need to be emphasized that this tendency is not at all unique for the current condition of neoliberalism, since it is a constituent part of the capitalist mode of production. Hence, it is important to understand that when a company like Northvolt tries to speed up the accumulation process, it is not simply because the owners are greedy or find delight in exploiting workers, but because this is the way value is produced within a capitalist logic. Capitalism is indeed reproduced through the everyday actions of formally free individual actors, but any labor that does not generate profit will not be considered productive and therefore over time either cease or be assigned a highly marginal position in society.

It is therefore not only private entrepreneurs and government actors who are subjected to the accelerating logic; as Marxist philosopher Mau (2021) has convincingly argued, this *mute compulsion* of capital ultimately comes to include everyone living in a capitalist society. This explains why local actors in Skellefteå feel compelled to "keep up" with the breathtaking pace set by Northvolt in their pursuit of competitive advantage, even though they might much rather spend time caring for current and future inhabitants. Local policymakers and educators are neither coerced by violence nor deceived by ideology, but simply experience a lack of choice when subjugated to the logic of economic relations under capitalism (see also Marx 2018 [1867]).

In the case of Skellefteå and the so-called green transition, at least two additional reasons might be boosting the accelerated process: Firstly, even before Peter Carlsson and Northvolt entered the scene, local politicians and civil servants had an explicit aim to turn the depopulating tide around, and in a visionary document published seven years ago they determined that Skellefteå would grow from roughly 70 to 80,000 inhabitants before the year 2030.[5] Inspired by *urban entrepreneurialism* (Harvey 1989; Lauermann 2018), they saw it as their main task to make Skellefteå

5 Following Northvolt's establishment, this once laughable goal has now been adjusted to 90,000 inhabitants (Skellefteå kommun 2024).

more attractive to outside investors through strategies such as place marketing, creating a favorable business climate, and catering to the creative classes through urban transformation. But Skellefteå also had something of more material importance to offer than spectacular symbolic buildings, waterfront housing and hip latte cafés: land and abundant cheap energy. Close to the town center, a large land area had in fact already been set aside with a view to attracting energy-intensive production – of any kind (Eriksson et al., forthcoming)! A major reason for this was that the municipality-owned energy company *Skellefteå Kraft* had a large surplus of electricity due to limitations in the Nordic energy infrastructure. When the Tesla Swede emerged with his high-flying plans in 2017, the feeling was that this was the chance they had been waiting for. It was now or never if Skellefteå wanted to grow, creating a momentum which has subsequently proven difficult to control.

Secondly, what gives the events in Skellefteå an extra sense of urgency is the increased framing of the megaprojects as part of a necessary "green transition". In an opinion piece in Sweden's most important business newspaper, *Dagens Industri*, three ministers in the current right-wing government claim: "Det finns en gyllene möjlighet för norra Sverige att leda den nya industriella revolutionen och bli en motor för gröna innovationer som kan gynna nordligaste Sverige, hela landet och I förlängningen hela Europa" ["There is a golden opportunity for northern Sweden to lead the new industrial revolution and become an engine for green innovations that can benefit northernmost Sweden, the whole country, and ultimately all of Europe"] (Busch et al. 2023). The media coverage is also filled with statements about how the struggle against climate change now depends on the successful development of this project and related ones in northern Sweden. There are indicators that, at least when it comes to Northvolt, the sustainability discourse was not part of the initial story but was rather added at a later point in time when it proved to be an effective way to gain support from the Swedish government and the general public (see Eriksson et al. forthcoming). Regardless, the references to accelerating climate change and the immediate need for a green transition make it difficult for critical voices to argue for a reduced speed.

3.1 Desynchronization: on the limits to social acceleration

There is also the question of why anyone would want to hinder this rapid development. For capital, speed is obviously beneficial, and most people agree that we need to quickly find solutions in order to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. The local community, furthermore, has begged for years for something to happen so they can leave their peripheralized existence behind. The problem is, as sociologist Rosa (2003; 2005; 2013) has pointed out, that there are spheres of social life that are not as easily accelerated as the economy. On the one hand, there are biological and natural

limits (such as the need for sleep and nutrition, cognitive abilities, etc.) to how much the tempo of human life can be sped up; and on the other hand, there is a certain inherent slowness to many social institutions constituted by human interactions. In a democracy, political processes necessarily take time (Chesneaux 2000), and the more dynamic and heterogenous societies become, the slower any collective decision-making will be (Rosa 2014: 125). According to Rosa, this leads to the problem of *desynchronization*, whereby some spheres either fall behind, or risk changing beyond recognition due to acceleration.

Here, I will consider how the inherent speed limits of language teaching and learning are handled in a context of accelerated social transformation. Without overstating it, linguistic repertoires require at least a minimum of space and time to develop. How much of each can be discussed – and it depends after all on a variety of factors both within and outside the individual learner's control (see e.g. The Douglas Fir Group et al. 2016) – but *that* they are needed is indisputable; certainly, no one has ever learned a language in a vacuum as if by magic. As an embodied *social* and *local practice* (Pennycook 2010), language is therefore subject to not only natural and biological but also sociopolitical boundaries for acceleration. In other words, how quickly you can learn a language depends partly on your cognitive abilities and partly on the social spaces you are given access to, but in both cases there is an outer limit to how much they can be accelerated. Put simply, your brain can handle only so much without becoming overloaded, and the maximum number of social interactions you can have in one day is set by, among other things, the available interlocutors.

Admittedly, most biological limits are not fixed forever, but rather co-evolve with technological and social development (Malm 2019). Any human being acts according to a framework set by their biological constitution at this particular moment, but what human beings are able to do today is not necessarily what they can do tomorrow. Considered in the narrow neoliberal sense, as an individual skill development (Del Percio and Flubacher 2017), it might therefore already be possible to accelerate language learning beyond what most people think is feasible, as demonstrated by, for example, self-proclaimed "language hackers" (Bruzos 2023b), posing on YouTube with the ability to learn up to 50 different languages in a short amount of time. Sociopolitical limits are much more difficult to stretch, however, and when pushed can lead to the most severe desynchronization problems (Rosa 2014: 124). Languages understood as a set of individual skills can be "hacked," but social practices cannot (Bruzos 2023b: 1224). Language learning on speed can still be considered learning even if the individual suffers burnout and depression because of it, but on a societal level no common language practices at all will develop if there is not enough time for people to interact with each other. Similarly, beyond a certain

point, democratic deliberation on speed will no longer resemble what we think of as democracy but will rather take on the shape of its opposite, authoritarianism (Rosa 2005).

What I seek to do in this paper is to consider the social relations embedded in "the green transition" from the point of view of language education. My starting point is the basic idea, put forward already by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, that language is a social practice, emerging from the need (or necessity) to communicate with other people (Marx 1995: 144). Language, however, is not *only* a practice; it is "also and always infused with and caught up in the political economic, national, (post) colonial, and political circumstances that shape its use and its role as an object of study, political manipulation, and cultural value" (Cavanaugh 2020: 51). Hence, language and materiality are inevitably intertwined, so that on the one hand meaning-making consists of material properties formed by human bodies (air waves, signs, etc.), while on the other, "material conditions shape ideologies and uses of language" (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012: 356). In other words, which semiotic resources that are at our disposal – as well as how they are circulated, used, and valued – are dialectally formed in relation to the sociopolitical and economic conditions on separate but interconnected scales, from the local to the global (cf. Blommaert 2007). By examining how communicative practices are being (re)shaped and (re)valued in a local community undergoing rapid social transformation, we might therefore be able to say something about how social relations are concomitantly being reconfigured.

4 Language education as pause, promise or pastime?

Notwithstanding the materiality of language practices themselves, ever since the birth of the nation-state language has been used to legitimize inequality (Heller and McElhinny 2017). Through technologies such as *standardization* and *nativespeakerism*, the colonial differentiation between center and periphery has been incessantly reproduced on seemingly neutral grounds. From the perspective of subordinated and marginalized subjects, a cunning regime has been established whereby the physical movement from periphery to center may indeed be possible to make but is always accompanied by a demand that in practice is much harder to fulfill – that is, to learn to speak English like an Englishman, or French like a Frenchman: "For as long as it is the 'French' or the 'English' who define what counts as legitimate language, learners from outside can never catch up – the 'native speakers' have only to change the rules" (Heller and McElhinny 2017: 111). Against the background of such an understanding of "proper" and "correct" language as ideological constructions, I will

now analyze the role of language education for three groups of migrants whose linguistic skills are positioned very differently in relation to the so-called green industrialization in Skellefteå: refugees, labor migrants and cosmopolitan elites.

4.1 Language education as pause: on the necessary outside of the labor market

In Sweden today, as in most other European countries, the teaching and learning of the majority language has gained an increasingly prominent role in the migration policy debate, with growing demands on L2 learners' demonstrated language proficiency (Milani et al. 2021; Rydell 2018). The current right-wing government has announced a goal to strengthen the requirements for proficiency in Swedish for citizenship, and also intends to limit the right to mother-tongue instruction and introduce a limit on how long someone can participate in the municipality-funded adult education SFI (Swedish for Immigrants). What these partly conflicting proposals have in common is a stated ambition to *speed up* the integration process and strengthen the social cohesion in Swedish society. In a news article reporting on some of the new language-related proposals in the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* (Thurfjell 2024), Integration Minister Johan Pehrson states:

Vi måste bli bättre på att förmedla att vi förväntar oss att man lär sig svenska när man kommer till Sverige […] De med dåliga förutsättningar måste alltid anstränga sig mer än de med goda förutsättningar. Det är fullt möjligt att lära sig svenska på ett år, två år. Men nu sätter vi gränsen på tre år för att det ska vara tydligt att det bör man kunna klara av.	We must get better at communicating that you have to learn Swedish when you come to Sweden […] Those with poor conditions must always strive more than those with good conditions. It's entirely possible to learn Swedish in one year, two years. But now we set the limit at three years because it should be clear that one should be able to manage that.
(Svenska Dagbladet 3/2/24; original Swedish version)	(Svenska Dagbladet 3/2/24; English translation)

Similar demands for accelerated language learning have been noted by applied linguists in other contexts (Barnawi 2020; Lising 2023), usually linked to an increased individualization of the integration process, placing the responsibility of social inclusion primarily on the migrants themselves (see also Nuottaniemi 2023). While it is undoubtedly true that participation in second-language education can improve an individual's chances on the job market, and also facilitates social participation in other areas, the relationship between language skills and job market access is complex (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2023). Access to the labor market is influenced not only by knowledge of the majority language but also by factors such

as educational background and social networks, the latter of which often clearly outweighs the former. And then we haven't even touched on the structural racism in the West that tends to lead to racialized speakers being judged as illegitimate speakers *regardless* of their actual abilities (Flores and Rosa 2015; Piller 2016; cf. Heller and McElhinny 2017 quoted above). From a Marxist perspective, however, it is also necessary to consider that full employment has generally been abandoned as a goal of political governance in the neoliberal era. Unemployment in fact has a clear *economic purpose* in capitalism, both providing an "industrial reserve army of labor" (Marx 2018 [1867]: 555–566) for the characteristic boom-and-bust cycles of particular markets as well as keeping the actually employed workers docile, in fear of being excluded altogether from the ranks of wage laborers (see also Mau 2021: 281–287).

In Skellefteå, where an already low unemployment rate has dropped to record levels following Northvolt's establishment, it therefore comes as no surprise that unemployment has still not been erased altogether. And for those who for various reasons are kept far from the job market, it is also clear that participation in Swedish instruction is less than sufficient for becoming a part of the rapid development. Using the same metaphor as the municipality director quoted earlier, the principal at the school for adult Swedish education, *SFI* (Swedish for Immigrants), likens the situation with being caught in a tumble dryer, but with some people being pushed outward rather than inward:

och jag tänker att de som pressas ut i periferin det är ju de som stor långt från arbetsmarknaden eller som har funktionsnedsättning eller som (.) de är inte inne i den här virveln (.) utan de pressas liksom ut utanför (.) och jag tänker att det är (.) risken är att det blir segregation	and I think that those who are pushed out to the periphery are the ones who are far from the labor market or who have disabilities or who (.) they aren't part of this whirlwind (.) they're pushed out on the outside (.) and I think that (.) the risk is that there ends up being segregation
(Interview with SFI principal; original Swedish version)	(Interview with SFI principal; English translation)

In the principal's account, those who do not meet Northvolt's expectations of a "good worker," and for various reasons learn slowly – or are not recognized as legitimate speakers by the listening subjects in their environment – end up on the sidelines, left out. They live their desynchronized lives in a different, significantly slower temporal regime, partly unaffected by the social acceleration surrounding them (cf. Barnawi 2023). For them, language education becomes a type of pause, as they are partially stuck somewhere for an extended period because there is no place for them even on an overheated job market (Nuottaniemi 2023).

However, posing this as a *learning problem* merely hides the capitalist logic at work. The reason for their exclusion is that they are currently not exploitable

through wage labor, which can only partly be said to depend on their individual skills (cf. Olofsson et al. 2023). Capitalism, in fact, would not function properly without an industrial reserve army. The inherently slow temporality of language learning (slower for *some*, admittedly, but as we will see this is not always regarded as a problem) here rather serves the purpose of regulating the spatial-temporal fluctuations in the demand for labor, and of keeping a necessary space *outside of* production where workers are always at risk of being relegated (cf. Del Percio 2023). Claiming that language is "the key" to opening society's doors appears to be nothing less than a cynical blaming of the victim, especially considering the doors that readily open for more desirable newcomers in this context, who do not need to know a single word of Swedish to be welcomed.

4.2 Language education as promise: on the subordinate inclusion of migrant workers

To put it simply, knowledge of Swedish seems to be of highly varying importance to different actors in the green transformation. In another recent interview in the major newspaper Dagens Nyheter, the Minister of Education, Mats Persson, cited a lack of proficiency in the majority language as an important reason for the difficulties recruiting labor from the mostly urban southern of Sweden: "Idag är det för många som hoppar av SFI, eftersom det är för kravlöst. Det måste vi ändra på, för om vi inte gör det, kommer industrin i norr att fortsätta skrika efter folk." ["Today, too many people are dropping out of SFI because it's without demands. We have to change this, because if we don't, the industry in the north will continue to cry out for people"] (Kejerhag 2023). On the local scale level, however, such explanations have very little relevance. As a principal at the local SFI school puts it: "om du pratar engelska i din vardag och gör det helt perfekt (.) så är ju Skellefteå ett ställa nu där alla andra kommer att b örja prata engelska runt dig" ["if you speak English in your everyday life and you do it perfectly (.) then Skellefteå is now a place where everyone else will start speaking English around you"] (Interview with SFI principal).

At Northvolt, their only concern is that the workers they hire demonstrate a working knowledge of English – Swedish is of limited interest, and will most likely continue to be so for the foreseeable future (Interview with HR-manager at Northvolt). The principal's statement that it is those who speak "perfect" English who are greeted with open arms has some truth to it, but also hides the fact that the majority of those now being hired at the battery factory are not highly educated, and do not need to demonstrate such advanced skills.

Based on interviews with a human resource manager at Northvolt and six migrant workers living in one of the company's temporary barrack villages in the

town, there do not seem to have been any uniform language requirements for the regular industrial jobs. Rather, it appears to have been up to the individual recruiters, who in turn work at various staffing agencies such as *Adecco* and *Randstad*, to test candidates' English skills at the time of the interview itself. For some, this meant that they had to take an online multiple-choice test, while for others the recruiter temporarily switched to English during the interview, which was otherwise held in their Central and Eastern European first languages. As one of the workers explained to me, also submitting one's CV in English can be considered a sort of test:

> Andreas: so there was no- there was no special test or?
> Migrant worker 4: no special tests but they (.) sometimes they will like speak English (.) maybe to (.) check if I understand and also I think the CV was (.) like you have to write it in English (.) so I think that was like maybe (.) a test or (.) maybe *I mean I don't know because I don't work there but* (Interview with migrant worker 4)

When I talked to the migrant workers in the first half of 2024, the requirements for the bulk of newly hired employees had actually been gradually lowered over an extended period in other respects as well. According to one of the managers at the adult education center, during their initial contact with the municipality Northvolt said they intended to employ over 3,000 engineers. However, they soon backed away from this plan as it did not align well with the factory's timeline: "skulle man ha utbildat (.) tretusen ingenjörer som det var (.) tanken från början ja då skulle väl (.) Sveriges samlade universitet ha få hållit på i kanske (.) tio år" ["if they had trained (.) three thousand engineers as originally planned then Sweden's combined universities would probably have been involved for maybe (.) ten years"] (Interview with adult education center manager). As such a lengthy timeframe was not even thinkable, they adjusted their ambitions to envision a workforce in which 15 % had university-level competence and 85 % high school-level competence. However, as the education manager emphasizes, assessing a high school competency level does not mean that everyone must have a *high school education*. Less than two years after the first battery was manufactured at the Skellefteå factory, the need for labor was so high that: "dom anställer ju vem som helst […] och sen kommer dom till oss och sager hjälp oss och utbilda dom litegrann" ["they hire just about anyone […] and then they come to us and ask for help in training them a little"] (Interview with adult education center manager). Instead of providing the local community and the company with inhabitants and skilled labor in the long term, the municipality now finds itself in a situation in which it uses both personnel and expensive teaching materials (see Figure 1) to quickly introduce already employed Northvolt staff to basic tasks, such as those required by an automation operator. These introductory training sessions are conducted primarily in English, further highlighting their limited relevance to the broader Swedish job market.

Figure 1: One of the classrooms designed for training industrial workers at the adult education center in Skellefteå. On the wall are promotional pictures from Northvolt. Photo: Johannes Samuelsson.

For the labor migrants, coming from over a hundred different countries and hired on six-month contracts with a possibility for extension, the low language requirements are obviously a prerequisite for them to be able to take these jobs in the remote Arctic. At the same time, the lack of opportunity to learn the majority language puts them even more at the mercy of their employer, who already has almost full control over both their working hours and their leisure time (Interview with labor union representatives). The rapid establishment of the company, combined with unfavorable interest rates, has meant that housing construction has not been able to keep the pace up with the factory (Larsson 2022). Therefore, over a thousand workers live in (semi-)temporary barracks (see Figure 2) – euphemistically named "entrepreneurial housing" (Away Group 2024) – which through a complicated chain of subcontractors are in fact controlled by the parent company Northvolt. Here, migrant workers live without rental contracts under a strict disciplinary regime, whereby everything from smoking (see Figure 3) to collecting cans for their return deposit can lead to warnings, which ultimately means that they can lose both their work and housing from one week to the next. The location of the barracks, far from both the small city center and other residential areas, also makes the opportunities to interact with the local population and practice the majority language minimal.

Figure 2: “Entrepreneurial housing” for migrant workers in Skellefteå. Photo: Johannes Samuelsson.

Figure 3: Designated smoking area at the camp for migrant workers. Smoking outside of this area is one of the offences that lead to a warning. If a worker receives three warnings the contract is immediately terminated. Photo: Johannes Samuelsson.

The fact that the battery factory has recruited thousands of workers from within as well as outside the EU in such a short time with the help of staffing companies must be seen in the light of both the low propensity of Swedish workers to move permanently to where the jobs are located (Eriksson et al. 2023) and the increased informalization of the Swedish labor market (Olofsson 2024). As a result of a legal change in 2008 (Committee on Social Insurance 2008), Sweden, long regarded as an exception when it comes to inequality on the labor market, has in fact one of the most deregulated systems for labor immigration from countries outside the EU, whereby the driving force is companies' demand for workers rather than national and regional considerations. As reported from the northern green industries – i.e. forestry, agriculture, and not least berry picking – it causes imported labor to be exceptionally exposed to individual employers, as their right to stay in the country is entirely linked to their employment contract (Eriksson and Tollefsen 2018). Together with the disciplinary regime, this makes any self-organizing of labor difficult at Northvolt, and instead risks leading to a "culture of silence" among workers (Interview with labor union representatives).

While EU citizens who move to Skellefteå to work at the battery factory do not need to worry about their residence permit because they are covered by the free movement regulation within the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), it is still clear that the temporary contracts, the housing situation, and the lack of a social safety net make their maneuvering space very limited. For those who do not want to be dependent on Northvolt but still have a chance to stay in Sweden in the long term, the company's language policy and the geographical segregation pose additional challenges. Partly to remedy this, a local community college [*folkhögskola*] offers free Swedish courses twice a week at one of the barracks. As a result of the rotating five-shift schedule and the opportunity to work large amounts of overtime at the factory, regular participants in these courses are rare, but a handful of the nearly thousand residents in the area can at least be considered recurring participants (Interview with Swedish teacher). By participating as an observer on some of these course occasions I have had the opportunity to talk to course participants about their motives, and even though they differ (such as a general interest in language learning, ideological conviction regarding the importance of proficiency in the majority language, or a lack of other meaningful leisure activities) it is clear that one motive is the desire to utilize one part of what Marx ironically calls the worker's double freedom; that is, the opportunity to choose which capitalist they will sell their labor to (Marx 2018 [1867], p. 146). Even this highly limited freedom is not enjoyed today by labor migrants to most high-income countries (Hedberg and Olofsson 2022), and as one of the workers I spoke with explained, one reason for this may be the inadequate conditions for developing knowledge in the majority language: "because I think finding other jobs might be hard without (.) knowing the language" (Interview with migrant worker 2). The adult education center manager – responsible for

introducing training programs in English for Northvolt workers – agrees, and says that if the automation operators they educate at the center would want to work somewhere else (for example at the local metal smelter *Rönnskärsverken*) they would need to know Swedish (Interview with adult education manager).

From the perspective of the local community, there is also a promise attached to language education. For the factory establishment to benefit the municipality, a large proportion of those who are now moving there for work must stay in the long term. It is only as taxpaying residents that they will become a real asset to the local community, but the chances of this happening obviously decrease as long as they live in segregated, company-controlled barrack areas with insecure employment. The limited role of language education for migrant workers shows that, at least so far, the demographic change in Skellefteå mainly involves importing labor, not people, in striking similarity with the treatment of seasonal workers in the green industries (Olofsson 2024: 27). In contrast to the low-educated refugees, the migrant laborers are seen as exploitable by capital and at least on paper have the same rights as Swedish workers, therefore gaining some sort of social inclusion. But this is a form of *subordinated inclusion* (Tollefsen et al. 2021), whereby their opportunities to take advantage of most of their formal rights are extremely limited. As I have demonstrated here, one element of this is the lack of opportunities to learn the local language(s) (cf. Pennycook 2020). And at the same time, the local community's need for socially sustainable development is downgraded in favor of capital's need for a quick profit.

4.3 Language education as pastime: on the language consumption of the hypermobile elites

But what about the highly educated 15 % – the group of engineers, economists, and managers that the local politicians originally envisioned in connection with the establishment of the battery factory? Instead of demanding that these new elites should earn their place in society (through linguistic and other means), one can see that it is now rather the local community that is doing everything it can to adapt to their presence. One of the requirements set by the company for the municipalities competing for their establishment was, as mentioned earlier, that there must be at least one international, English-speaking school in the area. Even though the Social Democratic-led Skellefteå has long prioritized a cohesive, equal school, and despite the increasing monolingualism at the national level, it did not take long before the municipal council gave the green light to a profit-making company to start an independent school that was exempted from the requirement to follow the Swedish curriculum (Skellefteå kommun 2019). The local education committee, which feared

that such an elite school would lead to increased costs for the municipality, in fact first rejected the establishment, but for the first time ever saw itself overrun by the municipal leadership on a school issue (Interview with local politician). Today, about 70 children of the Northvolt-employed engineers and managers attend the school, with only 2 h of teaching in Swedish each week and limited contact with the surrounding local community. The Swedish class is merely a fun break in the otherwise demanding schedule, and unlike other subjects is not graded as it is not included in the Cambridge curriculum (Personal communication with teacher; see also Cambridge IGCSE Subjects 2024).

Meanwhile, their parents have fundamentally changed the municipal SFI education in just a short time. Among relatives of the most well-paid Northvolt employees, it has indeed become popular to attend evening courses in the Swedish language. But, unlike the clientele SFI teachers are used to planning their lessons for, they do not do this in order to have the continued right to stay in the country or to improve their position on the Swedish labor market, but rather because they have time to spare and it is free (that is, tax-funded). Therefore, unlike the rest of the adult education, whose premises stand empty because the battery factory does not have time to wait for the tailor-made courses, Swedish teaching is therefore growing at an unprecedented rate. The new students' approach poses a challenge both to the way the teachers' are accustomed to working and to the municipality's economy:

alltså man tog fram ett sätt att jobba som skulle passa människor som har väldigt stora problem i bagaget och mycket med sig hemifrån så att säga (.) och är mitt i ett pågående flyktingtrauma (.) och den här gruppen är ju inte alls det (.) det här är ju- de är ute och shoppar utbildningar mer (.) *alltså det är ju lite mer så här* (.) 'ja men titta här nu lägger vi en SFI-kurs i varukorgen (.) och nu anmäler jag mig till den (.) nej jag struntar ju i att gå (.) nu lämnar jag tillbaka kursen' (.) alltså det- det är lite mer som ett- (.) man lägger en SFI-kurs i varukorgen och så checkar man ut och så struntar man i att man har anmält sig (.) men det kostar ju ändå för kommunen	so [the teachers] developed a way of working that would suit people who have very big problems in their luggage and a lot with them from home so to speak (.) and are in the middle of an ongoing refugee trauma (.) and this group is not at all that (.) this is- they're more out shopping for courses (.) *so it's a bit more like this* (.) 'wow look here now we'll put an SFI course in the shopping cart (.) and now I'll sign up for it (.) no I won't bother to go (.) now I'll return the course' (.) so it- it's a bit more like a- (.) you put an SFI course in the shopping cart and then you check out and then you don't care that you've signed up (.) but it's still a cost for the municipality
(Interview with SFI principal; original Swedish version)	(Interview with SFI principal; English translation)

For the students who the teachers are now seeing at SFI, participation in Swedish teaching is rather a pleasant pastime activity than the high-stakes education it is for refugee migrants. According to the principal, they behave like consumers at a market, where an evening course in Swedish is equated with singing in a choir or

learning to turn clay at a study circle. That the courses, according to law, must be free of charge and open to everyone who has the right to participate (Skolverket 2023) lowers the threshold at the moment of registration, but does not necessarily lead to a willingness to make the considerable investment that is required to pass a qualified language course with standardized examination forms. Therefore, the dropout rate is now so high that the school management has begun to worry that these uncompleted courses, with participants who had very little use for them from the start, will affect their ability to offer meaningful training to those who are the furthest from the labor market (Interview with SFI principal).

And what about the Northvolt employees themselves? Those who are directly employed by the parent company, and not one of the many staffing companies that employ the majority of the workers, hardly have the opportunity to participate in any demanding SFI courses. Given that the working language is English, their children attend the international school, and that many "northvolters" socialize even in their free time (Interview with member of civil society organization for expats), the need is not imminent either. Instead, they are offered the opportunity to participate in online courses that Northvolt purchases from a private language company. The explicit reason the employer gives for this is a wish to facilitate integration into the local community, which is of course appreciated by representatives of the municipality, but a closer examination of the courses the language company offers (Swedish for Professionals 2024) reveals that it seems to be more a symbolic measure than anything else.

As a manager at *Swedish for Professionals* explains, one of their most important tasks is "to create a fun educational trip" (Interview with entrepreneur at language company), with the customer's needs at the center. This means that they minimize all elements of potentially uncomfortable assessment – above all, no tests or grades! – and that the teaching is characterized by playfulness and "gamification". Indicative of this is that the teachers are not called teachers but rather "coaches," and go through a form of casting before being hired, in which their ability to arouse enthusiasm is valued more highly than things like their formal education or documented pedagogical competence. All teaching materials are purportedly produced by the company's own employees, and as an example of their innovative methods, an app is highlighted that allows participants in the simplest possible game format to practice choosing an indefinite article ("en" or "ett") for randomly generated nouns.

These courses obviously bear very little resemblance to the high-stakes education at SFI. Mainly conducted individually in the participants' spare time, they rather offer a way to give the incoming engineers and managers a form of gilt edge for their existence in Skellefteå. Learning to say "hej" or "hej då" makes the stay in the exotic Arctic a little more pleasant and bearable, and in this way is more an employment benefit than a requirement, similar to the wellness money that at many Swedish workplaces allows

employees to exercise once a week during working hours. Language, furthermore, is not treated as a social practice in these courses, but rather as a reified and commodified set of skills: "discrete units, which are in principle separately teachable and assessable, and can be bought and sold as distinct goods in the range of commodities available on the educational market" (Fairclough 1992: 209).

Based on the educational contexts described above – and the priority taken there by "language as a finite and manageable object […] over language as an open-ended social practice" (Bruzos 2023a: 171) – there is nothing to suggest that the hypermobile elites attracted to Skellefteå to lead the "green transition" intend to become a lasting part of the local community. To the extent that they show interest in the majority language it happens on a mainly superficial level, and in their interactions that take place with the local population, it is rather the latter who must adapt. The municipality would like to see Swedish teaching as a kind of anchor, mooring and synchronizing the free-floating mobile elites to the local place and its temporality, but at the same time feels compelled to offer teaching entirely in English for their children when the company demands it, and evening classes in Swedish for bored partners who seldom manage to complete the ambitious courses. Therefore, a more realistic assessment of the effect of Swedish teaching is perhaps given by the manager of Swedish for Professionals, who believes that participation in these courses can make some of the mobile cosmopolitans stay 15 rather than five months (Interview with entrepreneur at language company).

5 Concluding discussion

In this paper, I have argued for the use of the concept of *desynchronization* (Rosa 2013) in unpacking the conflicting temporalities of the "green" re-industrialization currently taking place in the Arctic region. In news reporting and political discourse, the events in Skellefteå are framed as a necessary part of the battle against climate change, as well as a rescue mission for declining peripheral towns. The question is: Is this is in fact a win-win situation, in which the climate and the local community have as much to gain from the rapid success of the battery factory – or, given the potential for profit in a new and rapidly growing market, even a win-win-win situation, with the private company along with its venture capitalists just one in a line of winners?

As geographer Holgersen (2017) aptly points out, in the context of capitalist societies the notion of win-win relationships usually hides some form of inequality, and social relations in which certain actors benefit at the expense of others. By using as a lens the time-consuming practice of language teaching and learning, in this paper I have been able to show that there might be an inherent conflict between the accelerating logic of capital and the planning of sustainable and equitable local communities. If we take the development of similarity in linguistic repertoires

(which is of course not to be understood as homogenous bounded languages) as an indication of long-term social interaction, the considerable lack of interest here in the majority language can be seen as a sign of the desynchronization between the economic sphere and other societal subsystems. This may explain why proficiency in the majority language, Swedish – despite being increasingly emphasized in contemporary political discourse – has been given such a marginal role in the societal transformation in Skellefteå. Venture capitalists seeking a quick return on their investments do not have time either to wait for more equitable forms of multilingual communication to develop or to consider the monoglossic language regime of the current right-wing government. Thus, the hope of precarious workers as well as local politicians and policymakers that shared language practices will foster a more enduring connection to the local place among newcomers seems quite futile in light of the *mute compulsion* (Mau 2021) of capitalism.

High-speed capitalism, in fact, appears to have little use for the standardized forms of monolingualism associated mainly with the older, Fordist accumulation regimes, other than in a commodified and highly simplified form. But by prioritizing a rather loose understanding of English as a *lingua franca* at the workplace, and the learning of reified bits and pieces of the local majority language, it also prevents the development of spatial repertoires that might benefit the local community's need for social cohesion in the long run. The winners are those individuals who already possess sufficient capital to participate in the global circulation of highly valued goods and resources, and are therefore not in need of any stability the local community might have to offer. Consequently, instead of social cohesion, a new social stratification seems to be emerging in Skellefteå, with desynchronized social layers adhering to partially different temporal regimes.

The small group of highly educated engineers and managers I have called the cosmopolitan elites are those who are the best adapted to the increased speed of the economy, and therefore float almost on top of the local community with its long-developed social practices. The relatively frictionless use of English here, as well as Swedish teaching taking on the character of a commodified pastime, is a clear sign of their weak anchoring in the local community.

For the semi-mobile labor migrants, contacts with the local community – including learning the majority language – carry a promise of increased freedom and reduced dependence on the individual employer. Given the limited affordances to influence both their working and living conditions, their attempts to "hook on" to the temporality of the local community are quite fruitless, and they are helplessly drawn into the accelerated chain of events.

Finally, the (im)mobile refugee migrants, whose abilities are not in demand by Northvolt, appear to be those who have less possibility than anyone else to free themselves from the power of nationalist and monoglossic language ideologies. For

them, Swedish language learning becomes a form of pause, as they see the promise of belonging in the majority society growing increasingly remote, and are themselves blamed for the alleged failures of integration. At the same time, in contrast to the migrant workers they are at least given the opportunity to learn the majority language.

My preliminary conclusion is that in this so-called green transition, profit and economic growth have taken precedence over social sustainability. Hence, although Sweden is committed to a "just transition" as part of the Paris Agreement, some are obviously benefiting much more than others from this transition. This paper further highlights the potentially high costs for the local communities that "win" the bids for the new green industries. Apart from considerable economic costs in the present, another result might also be increased social stratification and weakening social cohesion in the long term. To determine whether this is the case, more research – from many different contexts and perspectives – is needed.

Acknowledgments: I want to express my gratitude to all participants who took their time to help me navigate and understand the field. For discussing and commenting earlier versions of the analysis, I am indebted to Madeleine Eriksson, Johan Järlehed, Tommaso Milani, Janus Mortensen and Sari Pietikäinen. I naturally take sole responsibility for all remaining weaknesses.
Research funding: This work was supported by the Svenska Forskningsrådet Formas (2022-01145_Formas) and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (M22-0029_RJ).

References

Agar, Michael. 1996. *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography*. San Diego: Academic Press.

Atkinson, Dwight, Heidi Byrnes, Meredith Doran, Patricia Duff, Nick C. Ellis, Joan Kelly Hall, Karen E. Johnson, James P. Lantolf, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Eduardo Negueruela, Bonny Norton, Lourdes Ortega, John Schumann, Merrill Swain, Elaine Tarone & The Douglas Fir Group. 2016. A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal* 100(S1). 19–47.

Barnawi, Osman Z. 2020. *TESOL and the cult of speed in the age of neoliberal mobility*. London: Routledge. (accessed 12 December 2023).

Barnawi, Osman Z. 2023. Multilingualism and speed: Challenges and issues in applied linguistics. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 26(10). 1153–1158.

Bauer, Simon, Tommaso M. Milani, Kerstin von Brömssen & Andrea Spehar. 2023. Constructing the "Good Citizen": Discourses of social inclusion in Swedish civic orientation. *Social Inclusion* 11(4). https://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/7060 (accessed 15 September 2023).

Blommaert, Jan 2007. Sociolinguistic scales. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 4(1). 1–19.

Bruzos, Alberto. 2023a. Can language be commodified? Toward a Marxist theory of language commodification. Critical inquiry in language studies. *Routledge* 20(2). 150–178.

Bruzos, Alberto. 2023b. 'Language hackers': YouTube polyglots as representative figures of language learning in late capitalism. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 26(10). 1210–1227.

Busch, Ebba, Johan Pehrson & Andreas Carlson. 2023. Debatt: En strategi för norra Sverige och för omställningen [Debate: A strategy for northern Sweden and the transition]. *Dagens industri*, sec. Debatt. https://www.di.se/debatt/debatt-en-strategi-for-norra-sverige-och-for-omstallningen/ (accessed 3 March 2024).

Cambridge International. 2024. Cambridge IGCSE subjects. https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-upper-secondary/cambridge-igcse/subjects/ (accessed 6 March 2024).

Cavanaugh, Jillian R. 2020. Language ideology revisited. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2020(263). 51–57.

Chesneaux, Jean. 2000. Speed and democracy: An uneasy dialogue. *Social Science Information* 39(3). 407–420.

Committee on Social Insurance. 2008. Nya regler för arbetskraftsinvandring (Betänkande 2008/09:SfU3) [New rules for labor immigration (report 2008/09:SfU3)]. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/betankande/nya-regler-for-arbet.skraftsinvandring_gw01sfu3/ (accessed 2 April 2024).

Del Percio, Alfonso. 2023. Speeding up, slowing down. Language, temporality and the constitution of migrant workers as labour force. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 26(10). 1197–1209.

Del Percio, Alfonso & Mi-Cha Flubacher. 2017. Language, Education and Neoliberalism. In Mi-Cha Flubacher & Alfonso Del Percio (eds.), *Language, education and neoliberalism*, 1–18. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Denscombe, Martyn. 2018. *Forskningshandboken: För småskaliga forskningsprojekt inom samhällsvetenskaperna* [The research handbook: For small scale research projects in the social sciences], 4th edn. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Eriksson, Madeleine. 2020. Villkor för platser och människor i en tid av ”flaggskeppsprojekt”: radikal samtidighet och rural-urban förändring [Conditions for places and people in a time of ”flagship procects”: radical contemporaneity and rural-urban change]. In Anna Sofia Lundgren (ed.), *Makt, moral och motstånd: engagemang för norrländska landsbygder* [Power, moral and resistance: Commitment for northern countrysides], 147–164. Umeå: Umeå universitet, Institutionen för kultur- och medievetenskaper. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-177503 (accessed 6 November 2023).

Eriksson, Madeleine & Aina Tollefsen. 2018. The production of the rural landscape and its labour: The development of supply chain capitalism in the Swedish Berry Industry. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series* 40. 69–82.

Eriksson, Madeleine, Evelina Liliequist & Anna Sofia Lundgren. Forthcoming. Logics of competition: The forming of opinion in the bid for a Green Mega Investment. *Geografiska Annaler*, In preparation.

Eriksson, Rikard, Emelie Hane-Weijman, Johan Lundberg & Marcin Rataj. 2023. Stora investeringar i små kommuner: vem ska flytta till norra Sverige och hur planerar vi för det? [Big investments in small municipalities: Who will move to northern Sweden and how do we plan for it?] *Plan: tidskrift för planering av landsbygd och tätorter* 2. 30.

Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fejes, Andreas & Magnus Dahlstedt. 2023. Adult migrants' language learning, labour market, and social inclusion. *Social Inclusion* 11(4). 1–4.

Flores, Nelson & Jonathan Rosa. 2015. Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review* 85(2). 149–171.

Flubacher, Mi-Cha & Shirley Yeung. 2016. Discourses of integration: Language, skills, and the politics of difference. *Multilingua* 35(6). 599–616.

Guttormsen, Marius Eriksen. 2023. Freyr kutter kraftig i batterisatsingen i Mo i Rana [Freyr cuts investments in batteries in Mo i Rana]. *NRK*. https://www.nrk.no/nordland/freyr-kutter-kraftig-i-batterisatsingen-i-mo-i-rana-1.16630920 (accessed 26 February 2024).

Harvey, David. 1989. From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: The transformation in urban governance in late capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* [Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography] 71(1). 3–17.

Harvey, David. 1990. *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Harvey, David. 2010. *A companion to Marx's capital*. London: Verso.

Harvey, David. 2017. *Marx, capital and the madness of economic reason*. London: Profile Books.

Hedberg, Gerth. 2023. Startar ny sajt – på engelska: Anställer brittisk journalist [Starting new site – in English: Hires British journalist]. *Norran*. Skellefteå. https://norran.se/nyheter/skelleftea/artikel/startar-ny-sajt-pa-engelska-anstaller-brittisk-journalist/r16gq5kj. (accessed 26 February 2024).

Hedberg, Charlotta & Irma Olofsson. 2022. Negotiating the Wild West: Variegated neoliberalisation of the Swedish labour migration regime and the wild berry migration industry. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 54(1). 33–49.

Heller, Monica. 2013. *Repositioning the multilingual periphery: Class, language, and transnational markets in Francophone Canada*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199945177.001.0001/acprof-97801.99945177-chapter-2 (accessed 8 March 2020).

Heller, Monica & Bonnie S. McElhinny. 2017. *Language, capitalism, colonialism: Toward a critical history*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press.

Helte, Stefan. 2023. Vi står inför en extraordinär omvandling [We face an extraordinary transition]. *Dagens Samhälle* 8–11, 9 November 2023. Stockholm.

Holgersen, Ståle. 2017. *Staden och kapitalet: Malmö i krisernas tid* [The city and the capital: Malmö in the time of crisis]. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Kejerhag, Jenny. 2023. Ministrarna om hur man får arbetslösa att flytta norrut: Måste se till att folk kan svenska [The ministers on how to get unemployed to move north: Must make sure people know Swedish]. *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 November 2023. Stockholm. https://www.dn.se/sverige/ministrarna-om-hur-man-far-arbetslosa-att-flytta-norrut-maste-se-till-att-.folk-kan-svenska/ (accessed 15 April 2023).

Larsson, Peter. 2022. *Rapport från samordnaren för samhällsomställning vid större företagsetableringar och företagsexpansioner i Norrbotten och Västerbotten* [Report from the coordinator for the societal transition in relation to larger company establishments and company expansions in Norrbotten and Västerbotten]. Stockholm: Regeringskansliet. https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/departementss.erien-och-promemorior/2022/12/rapport-fran-samordnaren-for-samhallsomstallning-vid-storre-foretagsetableringar-och-foretagsexp-i-norrbotten-och-vasterbotten/ (accessed 20 May 2023).

Lauermann, John. 2018. Municipal statecraft: Revisiting the geographies of the entrepreneurial city. *Progress in Human Geography* 42(2). 205–224.

Lising, Loy. 2023. 'Speak English!': Social acceleration and language learning in the workplace. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 26(10). 1183–1196.

Malm, Andreas. 2019. Against hybridism: Why we need to distinguish between nature and society, now more than ever. *Historical Materialism* 27(2). 156–187.

Marx, Karl. 1995. *Människans frigörelse* [The emancipation of man], (Trans.) Sven-Eric Liedman. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Marx, Karl. 2018. *Kapitalet: kritik av den politiska ekonomin. Första boken. Kapitalets produktionsprocess* [Capital: critique of the political economy. Volume one. The production process of capital]. (Trans.) Ivan Bohman. Lund: Arkiv förlag.

Mau, Søren. 2021. *Stum tvang: en marxistisk undersøgelse af kapitalismens økonomiske magt* [Mute compulsion: a Marxist investigation of the economic power of capitalism]. Aarhus: Forlaget Klim.

Milani, Tommaso M., Simon Bauer, Marie Carlson, Andrea Spehar & Kerstin von Brömssen. 2021. Citizenship as status, habitus and acts: Language requirements and civic orientation in Sweden. *Citizenship Studies* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968698.

Müller, Arne. 2023. *Norrsken: drömmen om den gröna industrin* [Northern lights: The dream of the grean industry]. Skellefteå: Ord & visor förlag.

Näsman, Mattias, Ann-Kristin Bergquist, Nils Björling, Madeleine Eriksson, Evelina Liliequist, Magnus Lindmark, Johan Lundberg, Anna-Sofia Lundgren, Dieter K. Müller, Marcin Rataj, Malin Rönnblom, David Scott, Roine Viklund & Rikard Eriksson. 2023. *A promised land? First summary of the research program*. Umeå University. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-218238 (accessed 20 December 2023).

Nilsson, Jonas. 2017. Upprymd glädje i Skellefteå. *Norran* 8–9. 20 October 2017. Skellefteå.

Northvolt. 2024. Northvolt: challenge accepted. https://www.linkedin.com/company/northvolt/ (accessed 6 June 2024).

Nuottaniemi, Andreas. 2023. *Flerspråkighetens gränser: språkdidaktik på (o)jämlik grund i migrationernas tid* [The limits to multilingualism: Language pedagogy on (un)equal grounds in the age of migrations]. Umeå: h:ström Text & Kultur.

Olofsson, Irma. 2024. *Invisible yet essential: The role of seasonal labour migration in Sweden's green industries*. Umeå University. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-219789 (accessed 16 February 2024).

Olofsson, Irma, Aina Tollefsen & Charlotta Hedberg. 2023. 'A STRONG MIND AND A SOLID PHYSIQUE': Symbolic constructions of migrant workers in Sweden's green industries. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 13(2). 1–17.

Pennycook, Alastair. 2010. *Language as a local practice*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Pennycook, Alastair. 2020. Blue-collar work and multilingualism: "C'est tough". In Kellie Gonçalves & Helen Kelly-Holmes (ed.), *Language, global mobilities, blue-collar workers and blue-collar workplaces*, 224–236. London: Routledge.

Piller, Ingrid. 2016. *Linguistic diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rosa, Hartmut. 2013. *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. (Trans.) Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rosa, Hartmut. 2014. *Acceleration, modernitet och identitet: tre essäer* [Acceleration, modernity and identity: three essays]. (Trans.) Joachim Retzlaff. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Rosa, Hartmut. 2003. Social acceleration: Ethical and political consequences of a desynchronized high-speed society. *Constellations* 10(1). 3–33.

Rosa, Hartmut. 2005. The speed of global flows and the pace of democratic politics. *New Political Science* 27(4). 445–459.

Rydell, Maria. 2018. Being 'a competent language user' in a world of others – Adult migrants' perceptions and constructions of communicative competence. *Linguistics and Education* 45. 101–109.

Shankar, Shalini & Jillian R. Cavanaugh. 2012. Language and materiality in global capitalism. *Annual Review of Anthropology. Annual Reviews* 41(1). 355–369.

Skellefteå kommun. 2019. *Ansökan från Internationella Engelska skolan i Sverige om godkännande som huvudman för internationell skola på grundskolenivå i Skellefteå kommun från och med läsåret 2020/2021* [Application from International English School in Sweden for approval as principal for international school at elementary level in Skellefteå municipality from the school year 2020/2021]. Skellefteå: Skellefteå kommun.

Skellefteå kommun. 2022. Skellefteå 2030: Strategy for sustainable social transformation. https://sk.elleftea.se/download/18.54e5162b18851a4da4b12170/1686578997490/Skekom_strategi_uppdaterad_F_en_GB.pdf (accessed 6 June 2024).

Skellefteå kommun. 2024. Utvecklingsstrategin 2030 – Skellefteå kommun [Development strategy 2030 – Skellefteå municipality]. https://skelleftea.se/2030/startsida (accessed 27 February 2024).

Skolverket. 2023. Rätt till sfi [The right to SFI]. https://www.skolverket.se/regler-och-ansvar/ansvar-i-skolfragor/ratt-till-sfi (accessed 6 March 2024).

Steinvall, Anders. 2021. *Batterifabriken: Skellefteå och resan mot framtidslandet* [The battery factory: Skellefteå and the journey to the promised land]. Skellefteå: Norma.

Suhonen, Daniel, Göran Therborn & Jesper Weithz. 2021. *Klass i Sverige: ojämlikheten, makten och politiken i det 21:a århundradet* [Class in Sweden: inequality, power and politics in the 21 century]. Lund: Arkiv förlag.

Swedish for Professionals. 2024. Swedish for professionals – language courses in Sweden. *Swedish for Professionals*. https://swedishforprofessionals.com/ (accessed 6 March 2024).

Thurfjell, Karin. 2024. Nya Tidökravet: Lär dig svenska på max tre år [New Tidö-requirement: Learn Swedish within three years]. *Svenska Dagbladet*, sec. Politik. https://www.svd.se/a/3EWjo0/nya-regler-invandrare-maste-klara-sfi-inom-tre-ar (accessed 3 March 2024).

Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå. 2023. Nya storinvestering i Northvolt – nu har de sammanlagt 100 miljarder i riskkapital [New large investment in Northvolt – now they have 100 billion in venture capital]. *NyTeknik*. Stockholm, sec. ekonomi. https://www.nyteknik.se/ekonomi/nya-storinvestering-i-northvolt-nu-har-de-sammanlagt-100-miljarder-i-riskkapital/4223531 (accessed 21 February 2024).

Tollefsen, Aina, Charlotta Hedberg, Madeleine Eriksson & Linn Axelsson. 2021. Changing labour standards and 'subordinated inclusion.' In Johan Fredrik Rye & Karen O'Reilly (eds.), International labour migration to Europe's rural regions, 121–137. London: Routledge (accessed 15 March 2024).