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# Handling Linguistic Asymmetries via Bilingual Punning in Conversations among Speakers of Cognate Languages

**Abstract:** This paper explores the use of bilingual punning in multilingual multiparty conversations among speakers with asymmetric language skills. The data of the study is drawn from video-recorded mundane peer conversations among Finns and Estonians. In this data, participants often use their respective mother tongues while talking to each other, even though only some of them have an active command of both cognate languages. The analysis of the data revealed that bilingual punning is used in these conversations among other things for dealing with the speakers' asymmetric language skills and asymmetric access to the ongoing talk. Punning typically occurs in sequences, in which participants teach each other words and in which problems of understanding are expressed. Puns can be used for both indicating and treating problems in understanding, and they are used for sharing linguistic knowledge. Puns can also help close prolonged and problematic sequences in an affiliative way. Punning provides the participants with a means of sharing positive affects even in interactionally problematic situations.

**Keywords:** bilingual puns, conversational humor, Estonian, Finnish, homophony

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from video-recorded mundane peer conversations, this paper explores the use of bilingual punning in multilingual multiparty conversations among

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful for the helpful comments by Salla Kurhila, Taru Nordlund, Hanna Lappalainen, Kaarina Mononen, Kendra Wilson and other members of the University of Helsinki sociolinguistics reading group and the University of Helsinki Center of Excellence on Intersubjectivity in Interaction, as well as the members of the University of Oulu project Northern Sociolinguistic Encounters. We also thank the project Multilingual Practices in Finno-Ugric Societies, which has partly funded this research. None of these people is responsible for the use to which we have put their advice. Härmävaara is the author responsible for most of the analysis and conclusions of this paper while Frick has acted as a reader-commentator contributing her knowledge from the areas of multilingual language use and conversation analysis.

speakers of cognate languages. A pun can be defined as a humorous verbalization, in which the humor is based on purposeful ambiguity of a word that can have two interpretations through homophony, homography or polysemy (Dynel 2009: 1288–1289; see also Alexander 1997: 18–19). A pun is bilingual, when the ambiguity of meaning is based on interlingual similarity, mostly homophony, and resources of two languages are combined for creating humor (Delabastita 2001: 49; see also Stefanowitsch 2002: 67; Li 2000: 314). Punning has been noted to occur in bilingual language use (see, e.g., Auer 1995: 120), but there are few studies on bilingual punning in general (see Knospe 2015: 162) and especially as a conversational phenomenon (see, however, examples in Jørgensen 2003: 365–367; Savijärvi 2011: 120–124; Luk and Lin 2007; Luk 2013: 239]). Our paper aims at narrowing this gap.

Bilingual punning, as humor in general, has varied functions in conversations. In this article, we focus on describing how the participants use punning to handle asymmetries in language skills. The participants of the study are members of a social network in which Finnish-Estonian receptive multilingualism has a special status. Receptive multilingualism refers to interactions in which participants employ a language different from their interlocutors', in this case Finnish and Estonian (see Zeevaert and ten Thije 2007: 1; Rehbein, ten Thije and Verschik 2012: 248–249). In this kind of interaction, reaching mutual understanding can be based on the linguistic similarity of the languages, on language acquisition, or on both (see Zeevaert 2007: 109–110). Some of the participants have acquired active skills in the cognate language, but most have not. Hence, the participants have asymmetric language skills.

In the studied conversations, it is rather common for bilingual puns to be used for dealing with the speakers' asymmetric language skills and asymmetric access to the ongoing talk. Punning typically occurs in sequences in which the participants are teaching and learning words and in sequences with problems in interaction. We will demonstrate how, in these data, bilingual punning has positive outcomes for the participants, for instance as a means to deal with problems in interaction, to participate in a conversation the speaker has limited access to, and to share linguistic knowledge as well as positive affects. As this paper explores punning and its functions in conversations, Section 2 discusses punning as conversational humor. In Section 3, we reflect on the lexical formation of Finnish-Estonian bilingual puns. The data and the participants are introduced in Section 4, and Section 5 focuses on findings based on the data analysis.

## 2 Punning in Conversations

Punning can be classified as a form of wordplay, along with other kinds of witticisms, rhyming and alliteration (Dynel 2011a: 5, 2009: 1287–1291; Norrick 2003: 1338–1340). Puns are commonplace in both oral and written contexts. Research on mono- and bilingual puns has mostly focused on punning in planned discourse, such as advertisements, journalistic writing, Internet texts, punning riddles and literary works (e.g. Seewoester 2011; Adamczyk 2011; Li 2000; Stefanowitsch 2002; Luk 2013; Knospe 2015; see, however, Norrick 1993: 61–67, 2003 on punning in conversations). These studies have largely focused on how puns are formulated linguistically, along with genre and / or culture-specific issues. This article focuses on issues that are specific to face-to-face conversation.

Humor in conversation can be seen as an interactional achievement between participants, through which they can build different kinds of identities and rapport (Norrick 2010: 235). In Hay's (2000: 716) words: "Every attempt at humor is an attempt to both express solidarity with the audience and construct a position of respect and status within the group." In addition to these more general social functions, humor can be used to deal with matters that emerge in contexts that are specific to a certain setting or sequential position. Conversational humor has, for instance, been studied as a means of constructing gender in the workplace (see, e.g. Schnurr and Holmes 2009) and as a component in giving reasons for visits to convenience stores (see Haakana and Sorjonen 2011). Thus, conversational humor is typically meaningfully interwoven in the ongoing conversation, to which humorous turns can contribute relevant and serious meanings (Dynel 2011b: 226–227).

In multilingual contexts and situations where the participants have asymmetric language skills, humor may be used for purposes that are not present in all-native contexts. This is especially the case with wordplay, such as punning. Bell (2009: 244) has found in her studies that wordplay is not common for non-native speakers, and that it is more typical for proficient speakers. Wordplay is, however, possible at lower proficiency levels as well (see also Davies 2003; Čekaitė and Aronsson 2004). In our data, bilingual puns are made by participants who know both languages and by those who do not. Our analysis will show that, in fact, punning can be motivated by the asymmetric language skills of the participants.

Other studies support the finding that linguistic humor can be motivated by a speaker's insufficient language skills: In conversations between native and non-native speakers, it has been found that "learners use mechanisms of humor to alleviate the communicative problems that arise from their incomplete mas-

tery of the target language” (Kersten 2009: 187). Other researchers have made the claim that verbal humor can enhance the non-native speaker’s competence in the target language (e.g. Pomerantz and Bell 2007). While previous studies have mainly dealt with classroom interaction, we will show how bilingual humor is used both to solve communicative problems and to enhance language learning in everyday conversations as well.

### 3 Bilingual Homophones – the Core of Puns

Bilingual puns can occur whenever two languages are in contact. Stefanowitsch (2002: 81) argues that a particular type of language contact situation, with a large number of loan words and / or well-established practices of code-mixing, is required for bilingual puns to occur widely and frequently (see also Li 2000; Knospe 2015). While Finnish-Estonian bilingual punning is not very common in the Finnish or Estonian society as a whole, it becomes more frequent in settings where the two languages are in contact. Our data of spontaneous speech are rather rich in bilingual puns. This can be explained, to a certain extent, by the nature of the conversations. Because Finnish and Estonian are used in the same conversations, meanings of both languages are active all the time, which may make it easier to start playing with homophony.

Another matter that favors punning is that Finnish and Estonian are relatively closely related languages. The languages share basic morphology and syntax, but major differences are found at the lexical level (see, e.g., Laakso 2001). The languages share a great amount of *bilingual homophones*, so-called *false friends* – words that sound similar but differ in meaning. The existence of bilingual homophones is widely known by Finns and Estonians, and anecdotes about fatal misunderstandings between Finns and Estonians are a part of Finnish and Estonian folklore (see Laalo 1992: 16–19). Even humorous dictionaries on the “risky words” exist (e.g. Alvre and Vodja 1993; Wirén 2008a, 2008b). The fact that these false friends exist creates a fruitful ground for bilingual punning (see also Frick 2013: 16, 64–67).

An example of a Finnish-Estonian bilingual pun that is based on commonly known false friends is shown in example (1). Prior to this passage one of the participants, Sofia, has told an anecdote about her sister giving a humorous answer on an exam. The punchline of the anecdote contains a nominal phrase *skogens konung* ‘king of the forest’ in Swedish, the original language of the exam answer, but the rest of the story is told in Estonian and Finnish.

(1) Metsakull<sup>2</sup>

Homophonous pair	kull (Est.) ‘hawk’	kulli (Fin.) ‘dick’
01 Sarita:	he he he [heh he	
02 Sakari:	[he he	
03 Voitto:	sko[gens konung ‘king of the forest (Swe.)’	
04 Sarita:	[me- metsa kunn he [he he heh [he he ‘king of the forest (Est.)’	
05 Sofia:	[n(h)ii hi [hi ‘yeah (laughingly) (Fin.)’	
06 Sakari:	[heh	
07 Valmar:	see on metsakull äkki oopis ‘or it might be forest (Est.) hawk / dick (Est. / Fin.)’	
08	((Everyone laughs))	

In lines 01 and 02 Sarita and Sakari laugh about the story. In line 03 Voitto repeats the nominal phrase in Swedish, and in line 04 Sarita gives a translation of it in Estonian: *metsa kunn*. The turn can be seen as a serious translation, directed to Valmar, the only person in the situation who does not speak Swedish. Still, the turn is marked by laughter and constructed by using the slang form of ‘king’ *kunn* (cf. *kuningas*, in both standard languages). Thus, it contributes both to engaging in the humorous mode set up by Sofia’s story, and to meeting the potential need for translation. Sofia and Sakari respond by laughing, and Valmar makes a bilingual pun in line 07.

Valmar constructs his pun by picking out the words *metsa kunn* from Sarita’s turn and altering them into *metsakull*. While doing that, Valmar plays with the similarity of two words in the same language. What makes this a bilingual pun is that in Estonian *kull* is ‘hawk’, whereas in Finnish the homophone *kulli* can be translated as ‘dick’. The Finnish word is not said aloud in the extract, but

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<sup>2</sup> The transcription system is given in the appendix. The (main) language of a turn is mentioned in parentheses. Sometimes it is impossible to tell the language of a turn, or a part of a turn, and such cases are marked by abbreviations of both languages. Finnish and Estonian orthographies are slightly different, which may sometimes give a false impression of a difference in pronunciation.

*kull / kulli*<sup>3</sup> is a commonly known Estonian-Finnish bilingual homophone, and judging from the participants' shared laughter following it, it seems that the recipients find Valmar's wordplay entertaining. Furthermore, by producing a pun, which is quite subtle in its formulation and which requires knowledge of the meanings in both languages, Valmar can display his understanding of the original story and establish himself as a linguistically competent person.

A thorough linguistic analysis of the bilingual puns in our data is beyond the scope of this article. However, it must be noted that even though the puns in our data are often (about half of the time) based on widely known false friends<sup>4</sup> like *kull / kulli* or Est. *linn* 'town', and Fin. *linna* 'castle', almost as many puns are based on bilingual homophones which are not so widely known that they would, for instance be listed in dictionaries of bilingual homophones.<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed in Section 5, homophony can be discovered by participants when listening to talk in the other language and finding words that resemble something in their own language. These puns can be described as witticisms formed on-line, based on previous turns (see Norrick 2003: 1339–1340).

Furthermore, punning can be a rather "random exploitation of homonymy", not "semantically highly motivated", as Stefanowitsch (2002: 68) concludes based on English-German puns in written data. Examples of such puns in our data include Fin. *sinkku* 'single' interpreted as Est. *sink* 'ham', as well as Est. *laava pääle*<sup>6</sup> 'on a boat' interpreted as Fin. *naaman päälle* 'on (someone's) face'. In both cases, the punster does not know the meaning of the homophone in the cognate language at the moment of punning (see Section 5.3). The latter example shows that punning in conversation is possible with pairs whose phonological resemblance is rather distant: *laava* and *naaman* only share the vowels, but have three different, although similar, consonants.

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**3** Compared to Finnish, Estonian has undergone more contraction and change, for instance the final vowel of the stem is lost in the nominative case, e.g. in the words meaning a 'stick' *kepp* (Est.) and *keppi* (Fin.). This is a commonly known difference between Finnish and Estonian, and adding / removing the final vowel is generally used as a means of "doing speaking Finnish / Estonian" (see Verschik 2012; Härmävaara 2013).

**4** This is in accordance with the observations made by Knospe (2015: 181), Stefanowitsch (2002: 72) and Li (2000: 315) about the fact that in bilingual punning the foreign language element is often widely known and in conventionalized use in the language community.

**5** The origin of the similarity between the bilingual (near) homophones used in puns varies. The words can share historical roots, or the similarity can be more coincidental, resulting e.g. from loaning or word inflection (see Laalo 1992). On different types of sources of ambiguity see Delabastita (2001) and Knospe (2015: 171–177).

**6** The standard form of the utterance would be *laeva peale*.

On the other end of the continuum, puns can play with minimal differences in meanings. Such an example is the word *laine* meaning ‘wave’ in both languages. Finnish has a synonym *aalto* used for bigger waves, and *laine* more likely refers to ‘ripple’. The pun in this case is created by forming a compound *hyöky+laine* ‘tidal ripple (cf. tidal wave)’, which in standard Finnish would be *hyöky+aalto*. Names can also be punned on.<sup>7</sup> Even though puns are ubiquitous in the studied data, punning does not take place every time someone utters a bilingual homophone and homophones can of course go by without the participants even noticing them. Instead, as will be discussed in section 5, puns are motivated by the participants’ need to secure mutual understanding and other socio-pragmatic factors.

## 4 Data and Methods

The data of this study consist of 8 hours of video-recorded naturally occurring multiparty conversations with a total of 15 Finns and 12 Estonians. In these data, we found 46 bilingual puns. The recordings have been drawn from a larger body of data, collected for an on-going ethnographic study that aims at describing language practices, especially receptive multilingualism, among student and alumni members of two student organizations with an official agreement of friendship – one from Finland and the other from Estonia (see Härmävaara 2013, 2014, in press). The research topic of the article at hand arose from the data, in which we found many interesting examples of bilingual punning.

The situations can be described as informal gatherings of peer groups. The participants in the conversations are in frequent contact with the members of the friendship organization, and the data used in this article are from four different situations in which the studied Estonians and Finns normally meet, such as at someone’s home or at a student building. The participants’ age varies from 22 to 44. As Tab. 1 shows, most of the participants have little or no active knowledge of Finnish / Estonian, but some are fluent in both languages (as assessed by both the participants and the researcher). Hence, they have different access to the languages of the interaction. All of them have a command of English that is good or very good.

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<sup>7</sup> It may of course be questioned whether the names belong to just one of the languages (see, e.g., Delabastita 2001: 53; Knospe 2015: 175).

The participants are introduced in Tab. 1, in which E stands for an Estonian participant and F for a Finnish participant. Those who are fluent in both languages are marked with “bi”, and the + sign indicates active skills in the cognate language. The parentheses indicate that one of the participants in the breakfast situation occasionally participated, but mainly stayed in another room. In the transcriptions, the Finnish participants are given names that start with the letter S, and the names of the Estonian participants start with the letter V.

**Tab. 1:** Interactional situations and participants

Situation ID	Participants (Est.)	Participants (Fin.)
Breakfast	E, (E)	F F F Fbi
Lunch	E+ Ebi	F F F+ Fbi Fbi
Sauna-party	E E E+ E+ Ebi	F F F+ F+ Fbi Fbi
Student building	E E E E+ E+ Ebi	F F F F F F Fbi

The main languages of interaction among the participants are Finnish, Estonian and English, but the conversations included in this study are those that took place in Finnish and Estonian. The data were analyzed using methods of conversation analysis. In order to find out how bilingual puns were used in these data, we first identified sequences in which punning occurred, and then analyzed them more closely. According to the principles of conversation analysis, we did not make any judgements of our own as to what was funny or humorous, in the conversations studied, but relied on the participants’ own orientation.

## 5 Bilingual Punning as a Means of Handling Asymmetries in Language Skills

A close look at our data revealed that, in many instances, bilingual puns are motivated by the asymmetric language skills of the participants: bilingual puns tend to cluster around sequences where participants orient to the learning and teaching of lexical items, or around those in which mutual understanding is threatened. In the following subsections, we will introduce some of the most salient surroundings, in which bilingual puns occur in our data. Section 5.1 shows how a pun can be used for structuring what is currently being discussed in a teaching-learning sequence. Section 5.2 also looks at punning in teaching-



learning sequences, but that section will be devoted to discussing how a pun can open such a sequence and how punning can be used as a means of sharing linguistic knowledge. In Section 5.3, we discuss how bilingual punning can be used to express problems in understanding ongoing talk. Thus, each section focuses on one aspect of bilingual puns, but these categories are not always mutually exclusive. For instance, a teaching-learning sequence can include dealing with troubles in understanding.

In addition to these, bilingual puns also occur in other circumstances. A bilingual pun can be a “merely” humorous comment that plays with interlingual homonymy, and it can occur within a sequence where there are no asymmetries in the access to the ongoing talk, or where these have not been made visible. In general, teasing, presenting wittiness and enhancing rapport have been reported interpersonal functions of conversational punning (Norrick 2003: 1345; Dynel 2009: 1288).

## 5.1 Puns Closing a Teaching-Learning Sequence

In the conversations, the participants can use their L1, and, while doing that, they often have to try to understand the other language. Thanks to the similarities of the languages, it is possible to do so to some extent by relying on one’s L1, even when there is no prior knowledge of the L2. In such a setting, similarities and differences of the languages are constantly paid attention to, which makes it a fruitful ground for metalinguistic activities.

In our data, bilingual puns occur most frequently (22 times) in the context of metalinguistic activities, i.e. when the languages, typically certain lexical items, are discussed. It is no wonder that metalinguistic talk attracts punning, which, itself is a type of metalinguistic activity. As Zirker and Winter-Froemel (2015: 8) put it, wordplay “invites to [express] and is expressive of metalinguistic reflection.” Knospe (2015: 187) states that understanding a pun is like problem-solving, for which the interlocutors have to employ their “linguistic, communicative and encyclopedic competences, as well as the context information.” The same can be said about formulating a pun, as will be shown in this section.

One metalinguistic activity is teaching each other linguistic items (mostly words) in Finnish and Estonian. We will call such sequences, in which the central activity is explaining and asking about linguistic items, teaching-learning sequences. A teaching-learning sequence can be initiated either by participants who do not speak both languages, and who orient to learning new words, or by the more knowledgeable participants, who orient to teaching them. However, the identities of “linguistically competent” and “linguistically incompetent” are

not fixed according to the overall language skills; instead, they are locally negotiated according to the interactional situation (see Kurhila 2004: 58). For instance, one does not have to know anything about the cognate language to be able to teach something in their own mother tongue. Furthermore, one can teach anecdotal knowledge about a language without having active skills in it.

One of the functions of punning in conversation is switching topics (Norrick 2010: 234). This section focuses on bilingual puns that close a teaching-learning sequence. We found 13 such instances in the data; example (2) shows one of them. The extract is from a conversation between five Finns and three Estonians. The Finns do not speak Estonian, but Estonian Vaano speaks Finnish very well, and Villem has elementary knowledge of Finnish. Prior to this, the participants have been talking about different meanings of homophonous *kynä* / *küna* in Finnish and Estonian in non-humorous manner. The topic has been established after one of the participants has talked about a pen (*kynä* in Finnish) that is on the table, and bilingual Vaano has pointed out that Est. *küna* means ‘manger’. In (2), they seriously engage in learning and teaching vocabulary. The extract starts by Santtu asking what ‘pen’ is in Estonian.

## (2) Pastakas

Homophonous pair	pastakas (Est.) ‘pen’	pasta (Fin.) ‘pasta’
01 Santtu:	aa taas (.) eestiks tää ((holds a pen in the air)) ‘And in Estonian this (Fin.)’	
02 Villem:	pasta[kas. ‘pen (Est.)’	
03 Vaano:	[pas- pasta- [>pastapliiats< ‘pen (Est.)’	
Lines 4–14 omitted, during which the participants teach and repeat the word “pastakas” and its longer form “pastapliiats.”		
15 Sampo:	pastakas se on pasta[kas ‘pen (Est.) that’s (Fin.) pen (Est.)’	
16 Valle:	((nods))	
17 Santtu:	pastakas ‘pen (Est.)’	
18 Sampo:	pastakas (.) hyvä ‘pen (Est.) good (Fin.)’	
19 Samuli:	siitä tule-e pasta-a-ki paperi-lle he he	

DEM.ELA come-3SG pasta.PAR.CLI paper-ALL

'It makes pasta on a paper. (Fin.)'

20 Vaano: *pastaa* [hi hi

'pasta (Fin.)'

21 Santtu: [copy-paste ((makes a writing gesture))

22 ((joint laughter))

In extract (2), a pun closes a lengthy teaching-learning sequence, in which the punster, Samuli, has not participated. After Santtu has asked what 'pen' is in Estonian (see line 01), the word *pastakas* 'pen' is repeated many times by different participants. For instance Sampo, who has learned the word just before, now starts to teach it to the other Finns (lines 15 and 18). In line 18, Sampo initiates closure of the teaching-learning sequence by evaluating Santtu's turn in line 17, repeating the word *pastakas* after Santtu and saying *hyvä* 'good' (see, e.g., Mehan 1979 on the turn-organizational structure of teaching). The participants do not seem fully aligned as to who gets to say the final word on the topic, as Samuli and Santtu are yet to propose closings of their own.

According to Schegloff (2007: 186–187), jokes that trade on what has been said in the preceding sequence can be used to initiate closure of lengthy sequences and topics. In line 19, Samuli makes a bilingual pun, which trades on the similarity of the Estonian word *pastakas* 'pen' and the internationalism *pasta* 'pasta' that also exists in Finnish and Estonian. Samuli's pun is a humorous conclusion of what *pastakas* does: makes pasta on a paper. While doing that, he creates a connection between new and existing knowledge, and, as a result, both meanings are blended in the pun; pasta is being made on a paper, which collocates with *pastakas* 'pen'. This is followed by a repetition of the key word *pastaa* 'pasta' and laughter by Vaano, and another bilingual pun, *copy-paste*,<sup>8</sup> by Santtu in line 21. Santtu's pun in line 21 continues the interpretation of what can be done with *pastakas*. By engaging in this kind of ping-pong-punning (see Crystal [1998] 2013), they both organize what is being learned, in a slightly competitive way.

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**8** Neither *pasta* nor *copy-paste* are originally Finnish words, but *pasta* is an established loan word, and it is integrated into a Finnish syntactical frame in Samuli's turn. Even though *copy-paste* is a widely known concept that is often referred to in English in the two recipient languages, it is not as established as *pasta* is. *Copy-paste* serves as an example of how a Finnish-Estonian bilingual pun can be followed by a pun in other languages.

## 5.2 Puns that Open a Teaching-Learning Sequence

A pun can also open a teaching-learning sequence. According to Norrick (1993: 62) puns occur “most obviously in the second position of an adjacency pair”, that is, as a response to something that has been said in an earlier turn. In our data, some puns are not responsive to preceding turns, and not even based on a recycling of anything uttered previously. Instead, they are ostensibly context-less; they are introduced without previous mentioning of an item that is punned on. Such puns are typically known to (at least some of) the participants from earlier conversations or from general folklore about false friends (see also Norrick 2003: 1348). Puns that do not recycle elements from previous turns often function as a means to test and share linguistic knowledge: The existence of common ground can be tested by making such a pun, and common ground can also be built on them (see Norrick 1993: 133, 2010: 235).

We found 11 instances of puns that do not recycle elements from previous turns and that open a teaching-learning sequence. In (3), line 03, we see a pun opening a new topic. Prior to this, Villem, who has elementary skills in Finnish, has been talking about cheese in a mix of Finnish and Estonian. He has tried to find the word for ‘cheap’ in Finnish but got confused by the fact that the Finnish word *halpa* ‘cheap’ resembles the Estonian word *halb* ‘bad’.

(3) Hallitus

Homophonous pairs	hallitus (Est.) ‘mold’	hallitus (Fin.) ‘government’
	kohtu (Est.) ‘court’	kohtu (Fin.) ‘uterus’

01 Villem: Soomes on juust odavam (0.6) kui Eestis

‘In Finland cheese is cheaper (0.6) than in Estonia (Est.)’

02 (0.4)

03 Vaano: aa sis on ee see mis on: Soome-s

PRT PRT be. 3SG DEM REL be.3SG Finland-INE

he- hea on ju see hallitus.

good be.3SG PRT DEM mold

‘Then there’s, ehm, that thing that is good in Finland, that ehm government (Fin.) / mold (Est.)’

04 Sulo: [he heh

05 Sarita: [he he

- 06 Vaano: hallitus ((looks at Villem))  
 ‘government (Fin.) / mold (Est.)’
- 07 Villem: jah  
 ‘yes (Est.)’
- 08 Santtu: siäl päästiin hauskaan [hallitukseen ((directed to Sulo))  
 ‘They’ve gotten to the funny government. (Fin.)’
- 09 Viljar: [ruumid ((directed to Sarita))  
 ‘rooms (Est.)’
- 10 Vaano: ee hallitus [on ee] valitsus=ehk  
 ‘Government (Fin.) / mold (Est.) is ehm government (Est.)’
- 11 Sarita: [mida?] ((directed to Vlijar))  
 ‘What? (Est.)’
- 12 Viljar: ja eesti hallitus eesti m- mõistes hallitus on  
 ‘And the Estonian *hallitus*, mold in the Estonian sense is’  
 [soome keeles  
 ‘in Finnish (Est.)’
- 13 Sarita: [home  
 ‘mold (Fin.)’
- 14 Vaano: home  
 ‘mold (Fin.)’
- Lines 15–20 omitted, during which the participants repeat the word *home*.
- 21 Sanna: [hallitus on home. ((question, directed to Sarita))  
 ‘mold (Est.) is mold (Fin.)’
- 22 Saimi: nii onki  
 ‘yeah, that’s right’
- 23 Sanna: ja kohtu  
 ‘and womb (Fin.) / court (gen., Est.)’
- 24 Sarita: kohtu [hehe  
 ‘womb (Fin.) / court (gen., Est.)’
- 25 Sanna: [oikeus  
 ‘court (Fin.)’
- 26 Saimi: hehe
- 27 Sarita: ää kohtu on ju: emakas=eks. ((directed to Vaano))  
 ‘womb (Fin.) is womb (Est.), isn’t it?’

In line 01, Villem makes an assessment in Estonian that closes the topic and is followed by a pause. Bilingual Vaano then initiates a new topic in line 03: ‘There’s that thing in Finland that’s good – that ehm government / mold’. Vaano’s turn does not really make sense, if a hearer does not know both mean-

ings of the classic false friend *hallitus*, which is ‘government’ in Finnish and ‘mold’ in Estonian. Even though *hallitus* is not mentioned earlier in the conversation, Vaano’s turn may be inspired by the previous topic, cheese, and Villem’s word search, in which Vaano and the others have participated, and in which homonymous words have been discussed.

Vaano’s turn could be read as an ironic assessment of the Finnish government (or governments in general), in which the irony is based on the parallel interpretations of the homonymous item *hallitus*. Vaano’s turn in line 03 is followed by laughter by two participants. In line 06 Vaano repeats the homonymous item and looks at Villem, maybe checking to see if he understands both meanings. Villem acknowledges the response with a particle, but does not take a longer turn. In line 08, Santtu indicates that he has noticed that the others are talking about the word *hallitus* and assesses it as funny. Overlapping with the end of the turn, Viljar, who has elementary skills in Finnish, utters another well-known bilingual homophone, *ruumid*, which means ‘rooms’ in Estonian and ‘corpses’ in Finnish (line 09). Viljar’s turn interestingly shows that he interprets making bilingual puns as an ongoing activity and participates in it by dropping another interlingual homonym. This also happens later during Sanna’s turn in line 23.

The others are not ready to change the topic yet, and in line 10 Vaano, who has started the topic, takes a turn teaching the others what the Finnish word *hallitus* ‘government’ means. Viljar aligns with Vaano’s teaching activity, and takes a learner’s role, asking in line 12 what ‘mold’ is in Finnish. Both Vaano and Sarita, who is the only Finn present competent in both languages, answer (lines 11 and 12), and the others join in the teaching-learning activity, which comes to its end in line 22. Making sure others understand the pun is a typical feature of punning sequences, in which the pun is a part of a turn that introduces a new topic. If common ground is not immediately found, the punster engages in explaining the butt of the joke and sharing their linguistic knowledge.

It is worth noting that those participants who know both languages are not the only ones to engage in punning and subsequent sharing of linguistic knowledge by using this kind of ready-made puns. After line 22, the participants move on to discussing other bilingual homophones in a similar manner, which is initiated by Sanna’s turn in line 23. Sanna takes a turn saying *ja kohtu*. The word *kohtu*<sup>9</sup> means ‘uterus’ in Finnish and ‘court’ in Estonian. Even though Sanna does not speak Estonian, she knows about this particular Estonian word

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<sup>9</sup> Est. *kohtu* is the genitive form of the word *kohus* ‘court’. Sanna says, as the sequence progresses, that she has learned the word in Tallinn, while passing a courthouse, *kohtumaja*.

and its resemblance with a Finnish word. This short turn functions as a bilingual pun, and it is followed by a long humorous sequence of teaching and learning before the participants reach mutual understanding of the equivalents of *kohtu* in both languages.

Teaching and learning the word *kohtu* can be considered successful, since about half an hour later Salla, another Finnish participant who does not speak Estonian, replies to Villem's Estonian question about what she studies by saying in Finnish *opiskelen kohtua* 'I study uterus / court' (she is studying law). Her response is received with laughter. This is not the only time the participants refer to and recycle puns they have previously shared. Some puns even become so established in the community that they are found in the data on recordings made in different years (see Dynel 2009: 1288).

### 5.3 Punning as a Means of Dealing with Troubles in Understanding

The participants in the conversations have asymmetric access to the ongoing talk, because not all of them have a command of both of the languages being spoken. As Härmävaara (2014) shows, the participants do not treat reaching mutual understanding in Finnish-Estonian interaction through receptive multilingualism as self-evident. Receptive multilingualism is considered a somewhat laborious way to interact (Härmävaara, in press), and often participants who command both languages actively facilitate mutual understanding by, for example, translating (Härmävaara 2014). Still, trouble in understanding occurs frequently.

In previous sections, we have discussed puns that are made by participants who at the moment of punning know both meanings of the homonymous items they pun on. In this section, we discuss puns that are made relying only on the knowledge of the meaning in the punster's native language. These kinds of puns are based on recycling elements from preceding turns and making fun of them. It has been noted that by recycling preceding turns and by relying on their L1 in creating bilingual puns, even speakers at a very low L2 proficiency level can engage in wordplay (see Čekaitė and Aronsson 2004; Savijärvi 2011: 120–124, 169).

In the seven instances in our data, the participants with lower proficiency levels in the cognate language use punning to indicate that they have problems

in understanding the ongoing talk. In (4), a bilingual pun is produced within a repair sequence.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the participants already orient to the ongoing interaction as problematic. In line 01 Villem starts a new topic and asks the Finns, in Estonian, what they think of Estonia “seriously” (*päriselt*). Villem’s question is followed by a pause and Santtu’s request to repeat the question in line 03, which indicates that the Finns do not understand the question posed in Estonian. None of the Finnish participants in this situation have active skills in Estonian.

## (4) Päriselt

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Homophonous pair	päriselt (Est.) ‘seriously’	päriset (Fin.) ‘you buzz’
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01 Villem: aga mis te: tegelikult Eestist arvate. (.) päriselt.

‘But what do you actually think of Estonia.

Seriously. (Est.)’

02 (1.0)

03 Santtu: anteeks voiks toistaa=

‘Sorry can you repeat that? (Fin.)’

04 Villem: =mitä: miētitte:: Vīrosta. ööö

‘What do you think about Estonia, eh. (Fin.)’

05 Salla: ai mitä ajattelee Virosta

‘You mean what do we think about Estonia? (Fin.)’

06 Villem: aja-

‘th- (Fin.)’

07 Salla: ajat[te-

‘thi- (Fin.)’

08 Villem: [ajattelette Virosta

‘you think about Estonia (Fin.)’

09 Salla: ai niinku mitä miältä

‘Do you mean how do we find (Fin.)’

10 Santtu: mm

‘mhm’

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<sup>10</sup> Repair sequences deal with “trouble” in speaking, hearing, or understanding, the talk (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977; Schegloff 2007: 100–106).



- 11 Salla: joo  
‘yeah (Fin.)’
- 12 Viljar: päriselt  
‘seriously (Est.)’
- 13 Villem: Eno päriselt noh  
‘seriously, you know (Est.)’
- 14 ((joint laughter, both Finns and Estonians, initiated by Estonians))
- 15 Salla: [mitä  
‘what (Fin.)’
- 16 Sampo: [mitä sä päriset  
‘Why are you buzzing? (Fin.)’
- 17 Salla: mitä mä pärisen vai  
‘You’re asking why I’m buzzing? (Fin.)’
- 18 ((Finns laugh))
- 19 Villem: oh it’s a nice country and very nice people blaa blaa blaa
- 20 Viljar: ei täyty olla visas  
‘You don’t have to be polite [clever] (Fin.)’  
[viisas=clever in Finnish, viisakas=polite in Estonian]
- 21 Salla: ↑aa
- 22 Saimi: nice [beer
- 23 Salla: [sama ku Suomi.>  
‘Same as Finland. (Fin.)’

In line 04 Villem responds by translating his question into Finnish, but still no one provides an answer. Instead, one of the Finns, Salla, gives two candidate understandings (lines 05, 09), and Villem repeats parts of them. Another Estonian, Viljar, takes a turn in line 12, uttering the word *päriselt* ‘seriously; honestly; really’, which was a part of the original question but was not translated into Finnish. By picking up the word *päriselt*, Viljar makes it prominent, and Villem further marks it as laughable by producing the turn *no päriselt noh* smilingly and initiating laughter (line 14). The other Estonians and then the Finns join in.

Making the word *päriselt* prominent clearly does not help the Finns understand the question.<sup>11</sup> There is no similar expression for ‘seriously’ in Finnish, and in line 15 Salla utters the repair initiator *mitä* ‘what’. Overlapping with Salla, Sampo produces a bilingual pun *mitä sä päriset* ‘what are you buzzing’ (line

<sup>11</sup> In addition, the speaker who knows Finnish relatively well must realize that the Finns cannot understand the meaning of *päriselt*, and, since he does not provide a translation, it would not make sense for him to seriously expect them to acknowledge or respond to his turn.

16). The pun is formed by picking out the word that has already been made prominent by the Estonians and interpreting it as a Finnish item. The Finnish item is near-homonymous, but it is obvious from the context that the lexemes do not carry the same meanings. The pun is followed by Salla's humorous response in line 17 and laughter by the Finnish participants.

As in (4), it is characteristic for punning in repair sequences not to come immediately after the problem in understanding occurs but only after other attempts to solve the problem have failed. Sampo's turn localizes the problem to the lexeme *päriselt*, but a repair does not follow. Instead, Villem takes a turn in line 19 and makes a candidate response to his own earlier question in English, which is the participants' lingua franca. After this, the prolonged repair sequence ends when Saimi and Salla start to answer Villem's question (lines 22 and 23).

In (4) and in the interaction following it, the Finns do not get to know what the Estonian word *päriselt* means. Knospe (2015) describes puns as *conceptual blends*, which are based on the simultaneous activation of two meanings. This can well be seen in puns like the ones in the extracts discussed prior to this. In extracts (1) and (3), the participants have pre-existing knowledge of the meanings of the homonymous items they pun on, and, in (2), the pun is made by first observing the homonymy on-line and then attaching the meaning to the word in one's mother tongue. It is, however, worthwhile asking whether puns are also conceptual blends in the cases where the punster and the interlocutors only know one of the meanings.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

On the one hand, the conversations analyzed for this study are rather special since Finnish and Estonian are present in a receptively multilingual setting that provides the basis for making constant comparisons between these two languages. On the other hand, the interactions consist of conversations among speakers with asymmetric language skills, which is not rare for situations where people with different native language backgrounds are present. In this article, we have shown that, in these conversations, bilingual punning serves as a resource that can be used for handling asymmetric language skills and asymmetric access to the ongoing talk.

Analysis of bilingual punning in such interactions showed that in order to make a bilingual pun in conversation, one does not have to have a command of both languages or even understand the previous turns. Instead, the humor can

be constructed merely by pointing to the fact that an item in the cognate language resembles an item in their native language. Indeed, some of the participants do not know much more of the other language than some false friends. Furthermore, using established, culturally shared puns is a handy way for the speakers to participate in a conversation. Thus, bilingual punning is also a practical resource for the participants with limited linguistic resources. By making a bilingual pun, a participant can also display understanding and present themselves as linguistically competent.

Both the participants who do not and those who do speak both languages can engage in sharing linguistic knowledge via bilingual punning. As puns draw close attention to language and the local context, it is no wonder that we discovered most puns in metalinguistic sequences. The data showed how bilingual puns can be used in metalinguistic reflection and for creating shared vocabulary in two different ways: by initiating the activity of teaching and learning new vocabulary, and by organizing what is being learned. Punning can thus contribute to creating common ground and to enhancing an individual's language skills.

In linguistically asymmetric situations, puns are useful for indicating problems in understanding. They can be used to pick out a word that one does not understand and make that word laughable by making a pun in the form of a mock translation or a repair initiator. Humor is a means of sharing positive affects while simultaneously fulfilling one's serious interactional needs. It can be used to indicate a problem source and express a related affect at the same time. When doing so, the delicacy of the matter is being treated as well (see Haakana 2001).

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## Transcription symbols

.	falling pitch
h <u>e</u> ti	stress
[	overlap (start)
]	overlap (end)
(.)	pause 0.2 s.
(0.4)	timed pause in seconds
=	a turn start immediately after the previous speaker
> <	fast speech
< >	slow speech
e::i	lengthening
AHA	loud speech
.hhh	inhalation
hhh.	exhalation
.joo	word pronounced during inhalation
he he	laughter
s(h)ana	plosive (laughter)
£ £	smile voice
@ @	change in tone
(tai)	doubt in transcription
(-)	inaudible word
(--)	several inaudible words
(( ))	transcriber comments

## Abbreviations

3SG	3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	Fin.	Finnish
ALL	allative	INE	inessive
CLI	clitic	PAR	partitive
DEM	demonstrative pronoun	PRT	particle
ELA	elative	REL	relative pronoun
Est.	Estonian		