Language Shift and Verticalization in Finnish American Communities of the Upper Midwest

Mirva Johnson
University Wisconsin – Madison

The process of and motivations for language shift are driven by factors that are often difficult to quantify, ranging from the social to the political to the economic. This paper offers case studies of two Finnish American communities that support theories of language shift as proposed by Frey (2013), Lucht (2007), and Wilkerson & Salmons (2008) whereby language shift is ultimately driven by ‘verticalization’ or shifts of social and economic control from the local level to the state and national level.

Finns began immigrating and creating settlements across the Upper Midwest already in the early 1900s, though the majority came after the biggest waves of Scandinavian immigrants had already arrived and settled. While most in the communities shifted in favor of speaking English by the mid-1900s, the heritage language was maintained by bilingual Finnish-English speakers as many as two and three generations after immigration. This language preservation was further encouraged by the tight strawberry-vine networks of social connection maintained by Finnish Americans across state lines via Finnish language newspapers and co-operative store networks (Kostiainen 2014; Alanen 1975). As these communities experienced economic shift in the mid 20th century due in part to legislation imposed by state governments, their social and economic structures shifted from horizontal, or locally controlled, to vertical, where control was increasingly held outside the community. With this social and economic shift, there was a corresponding increase in the use of the majority language (English) in business exchanges, public institutions and in private homes.

This paper offers a case study of two rural communities in northern Wisconsin: Oulu and Maple. While the towns are nearly adjacent to one another, variation in economic shift and other social factors resulted in varying degrees of preservation of not only the Finnish language in these communities, but of the role of Finnish heritage in the creation and performance of these towns’ identities. I examine the social and economic connections between Oulu and Maple to nearby major cities, namely Superior, WI, and Duluth, MN, to better inform on economic shift and regional systems of cultural maintenance in Upper Midwestern Finnish American communities. Through census data, newspapers, and oral histories, I examine immigration patterns between Finnish American communities and the role that Finnish language newspapers and co-operative store networks had in resisting the effects of verticalization. This paper offers new data from Finnish American communities to show how economic shift not only correlates with language shift in these rural communities, but how the two are inherently tied together.


