

Andreas Braun

Researcher, Ph.D.  
Siirtolaisuusinstituutti



# Language practices of Finnish mothers in the UK: An intercultural journey

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*In today's globalised world, an increasing number of people are involved in short and long-term migration between countries, many of them young families with children. Since Finland joined the EU in 1995, studying, working and marrying across borders have become easier than ever before. This trend has created linguistic and cultural challenges, particularly for couples who have different nationalities, native languages and cultures. When children grow up in multilingual contexts, language practices are inherently different from monolingual or even bilingual families. There are no ready models for intercultural couples with children, who could potentially be using three or more languages. This report explores the language practices of Finnish mothers living in intercultural families in the UK and whether they wanted to pass on their native language(s) to their children. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews of 12 participants who elaborated on their language competencies, the influence of education, extended family and cultural markers.*

## Background

Sporadic migration of Finns to Britain according to Bell can be traced back to the 1600s through trade and shipping. However, it was not before the early 1700s that sizable communities emerged, when Finnish refugees arrived in London to escape the Great Northern War. Migration slowly continued over the centuries, reaching new heights since 1995 when Finland joined the EU. Today there are

an estimated 20 000 Finns living in the UK, many of them in Greater London. However, future migration trends have become speculative since the recent Brexit vote in 2016. Nonetheless, globalisation will continue, making multilingualism a recognised area for theory development in social geography and sociolinguistics.

Multilingualism entails the availability of at least three languages between home and the community. Although advances have been made in recent years, the processes and directions of multilingual acquisition are still unclear. Particularly the influence of mothers has been underreported as it is commonly assumed that children automatically acquire the "mother tongue" regardless of the sociolinguistic environment. In addition, relatively little research has been conducted on identity development in multilinguals, often relying on bilingual concepts. While they overlap, divergences within different intercultural families need to be taken into account, such as the number and status of the available languages and cultures. Heikkilä & Rauhut point out that in some multicultural marriages language could become a barrier, which may affect the linguistic and cultural upbringing of children. This article aims to shed some light on the language choices of Finnish mothers with their children, including their hopes and fears about multilingualism.

## Methods

In semi-structured interviews conducted in the UK, 12 married mothers with Finnish her-

itage described their language and cultural practices with their children. Most resided in Greater London, having lived there between four and 30 years (mean=15). Their age ranged from 24 to 52 (mean=35). Most (n=7) were housewives, while five worked as skilled professionals. Seven of them described themselves as being only Finnish, while three were Finnish/British, one Finnish/US-American and one Finnish/Russian. Most of their husbands (10/12) were British, often in addition to a second nationality, such as Chinese, Greek, Pakistani or Spanish. They had on average two children aged between one and 26 years (mean=7). The majority of participants were recruited via cultural centres. Data scrutiny followed the principles of qualitative thematic analysis using Nvivo. Names were changed to protect anonymity of participants.

## Results and Discussions

This report explores the influence of socio-cultural and linguistic factors on the language use of Finnish mothers with their children residing in potentially multilingual families in the UK. Four overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews, which are language proficiency, formal education, extended families and cultural practices. These themes are interlinked and dynamic within the context of multilingualism, adaptable to changing circumstances and contextual differences.

### Language proficiency

Not surprisingly, linguistic competences are important for language use depending on language status. In most of the UK the community language is English, which is also the world language of today. This implies that the use of minority languages in the UK, including Finnish, may be challenging. It was found that generally first generation mothers were persistent in using Finnish with their children regardless their age. For example Pia, who was married to her British/Spanish husband, had been living in the UK for six years. She spoke English with her husband but Finnish with her one year old daughter, because she felt that she *only had that one language*. Other first generation mothers commented similarly, saying that they did not want to use anything else than Finnish with their children because it was their most natural and fluent language. This suggests that language mastery was one of the factors that influenced these mothers to use Finnish with their children. At the same time, they referred to their limited proficiency in English, despite the fact that they spoke it

with their husbands and others in the community. A mother of two said: *I can cope in English fine but there are lots of gaps and limits still going on.*

A different picture emerged from second generation mothers and those who spent their formative years in the UK. Although they too reported language discrepancies between their English and Finnish, it was the other way round. While they could cope in Finnish, their English was far better. A British/Finnish mother revealed: *My Finnish is rusty... Yeah, English is my strongest language, that's why I am speaking it to him (son).* Maija, an English/Swedish/Finnish speaking mother who was married to her British husband John said: *I actually came more to the fact that it is so much more natural to speak English with the children.* Therefore, the shared language for most of these families was English, which limited the use of Finnish considerably.

### Formal education

A main challenge for multilingual language development in children seems to coincide with the beginning of formal schooling. It is at this point when the balance between community and home languages is most likely to be undermined. The language used in nursery or school usually becomes the child's dominant language, unless supplementary language support is provided. Even then, socially dominant languages, particularly English, may undermine the acquisition of minority languages. In the UK children start formal schooling and teaching of literacy and numeracy at the age of four or five, many parents opting for "Early Years" education at nurseries at the age of three. This created new challenges for the Finnish mothers in this study, who reported that they could not spend so much time anymore with their children, once they were old enough to go to nurseries or schools. Therefore, language became a stronger issue in terms of educational choices because the input of Finnish was significantly less than English. Parents were either considering certain strategies in order to maintain Finnish or they just surrendered to the overwhelming exposure to English.

A good example is Aira, who was married to Amir, a second generation immigrant from Pakistan who spoke Urdu, Punjabi and English. She only spoke English with Amir and with her five children saying that they *didn't really have any other language in common... it is for the children's sake, because they are in school.* Aira also believed that her children would have had difficulties in school if she had used Finnish at home. *Those children re-*

ally struggle because they think in a different language and do all their calculation in different languages, which slows them down. Lumi, who had three young children together with her British/Greek husband, added that within one month of going to nursery her three year old boy changed to English. *I have heard him playing in English, which sounds weird because before that he never played in English, only in Finnish.*

## Extended family

Research, such as Lammervo, postulates that multilingualism can be supported by other relatives as a strategy to stimulate “natural” language acquisition in children. It has been suggested that under certain conditions, the presence of grandparents can help to maintain minority languages. When families move overseas, parents may like to keep up with their native languages to enable their children to speak with other relatives back in the home country. It was found that especially grandparents with limited or no command of English influenced the language choices of most first generation Finnish mothers. Hanna, a mother of two said: *I...wanted that our children can discuss with their...grandparents...when we go to visit my parents or my husband's parents, grandparents.* In order to communicate with their grandparents, the grandchildren needed to acquire at least some Finnish. Although other relatives and friends were mentioned too, they did not seem as influential. English, in particular, is so widely spoken that the children could speak in English with their cousins and friends in Finland, who themselves may have wanted to improve their English.

The situation for second generation mothers was different as they spoke Finnish and English natively. In these families most grandparents also lived in the UK and they spoke English well, which reduced the need for the grandchildren to learn Finnish. Mirja, who had grown up with English, Finnish and Norwegian, said: *Both of my parents are bilingual, English and Finnish.*

## Cultural practices

Braun & Cline have suggested that languages may be used for practical and status reasons, without giving attention to the associated cultural values. Even if a language is part of a person's cultural identity, it may not be used because of the dominant culture and language of the wider community. This issue may be further complicated by a situation that involves three or more cultural traditions and languages. By looking at the multilingual fam-

ilies in this report, it was established that first generation mothers described themselves as having only one native language and culture, usually Finnish. Once they had moved to the UK, new cultural traditions and languages were at their disposal not just from the host country but also from their multilingual spouses. Although the first generation mothers had lived considerable time in the UK, they did not regard English as part of their cultural identity. When asked about her cultural background, Lumi, who was married to her British/Greek husband with three children, replied: *I am completely Finnish, nothing else. I don't see myself British, although I have been living here now for seven years.* It was natural for these mothers to speak Finnish, even if some older children replied in English.

A complete different situation emerged from those Finnish mothers who were speaking English and Finnish natively. Although they identified with the Finnish culture, they did not necessarily use the Finnish language with their children. Maija, who described herself as *half and half, English and Finnish*, came to the UK when she was 13 years old. Although she mainly used English with her two children, Maija taught them some *Finnish songs... at bath time* as part of Finnish culture. Mothers with similar backgrounds were often eager to pass on Finnish cultural traditions but found it too challenging to use the Finnish language on a communicative level.

## Conclusions

The influence on language choices of Finnish mothers was multifaceted, though the most substantial aspect perhaps was their background. First generation mothers in the UK were highly motivated to pass on the Finnish language and its associated cultural values. Despite having lived in the UK for many years, these mothers preferred to speak in Finnish with their children even at school age. This was mainly related to their outstanding Finnish skills and to the grandparents who knew little or no English. Grandparents were part of the Finnish culture to be valued and respected.

In contrast, second generation mothers and those who migrated during their formative years felt that English was their emotional language to bond with their children. This group of parents grew up in the UK speaking Finnish and English, but usually “dropped” Finnish when they raised their own children. However, they felt strongly about their Finnish heritage. These findings go in line with Lammervo's observations of second and third generation Finns in Australia, who lost some or all of their Finnish language skills, but pre-

served Finnish culture. While juggling different languages and cultures, Finnish mothers in the UK created strategies to blend into the society without compromising their Finnish roots. While language may not be pivotal for some, they all embraced the intercultural journey as a way of life unique only to these mothers.

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Kauhava ja Kauhavan vastaanottokeskus

Vuoden 2015 jälkipuoliskolla Suomeen perustettiin runsaasti turvapaikan hakemiseen liittyviä vastaanottokeskuksia. Yksi tuolloin perustetuista vastaanottokeskuksista tuli Etelä-Pohjanmaan Kauhavalle, entisen Lentosotakoulun tiloihin. Tämä tutkimus valottaa Kauhavan vastaanottokeskuksen ensimmäistä vuotta. Siinä käsitellään sitä, miten vastaanottokeskus Kauhavalle tuli ja miten se otettiin vastaan sekä miten kauhavalalaisten ja vastaanottokeskuksen suhde muotoutui ja miten se kehittyi. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan myös niitä uusia innovaatioita, joista Kauhavan vastaanottokeskus tuli tunnetuksi, Osuuskunta Mamulandia ja parlamenttia. Ääneen pääsevät myös vastaanottokeskuksen asukkaat, jotka kertovat jokapäiväisestä elämästään, sen iloista ja suruista.

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