

On Assimilation and Language Use among Finnish Immigrants



Minna K. Laurikkala

Nearly a century ago, Park and Burgess (1921:735) defined “assimilation” as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.” In subsequent definitions, Park (1930) argued that an immigrant could be considered assimilated in the United States when s(he) could participate in the common life without encountering prejudice enabled by the immigrant learning the language and the social rituals of the new country. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of language in the assimilation experiences and ethnic culture maintenance among Finnish immigrants living in Florida.

The first Finns arrived to the United States in the beginning of the 17th century (The Genealogical Society of Finland 2005). The greatest period of immigration took place 1899–1913, but the rates of immigrants began decreasing when the quota laws were established in the 1920s (The Genealogical Society of Finland 2005). Historically, the primary reasons for immigration were purely economic (Heikkilä and Uschanov 2004; Korkiasaari 1989). Most Finns settled in the northeastern states of New York and Massachusetts, and the Midwestern states of Michigan and Minnesota. Very few Finns settled in the south, for example, in 1930 there were only 333 Finns in Florida (The Genealogical Society of Finland 2005). After

The author wishes to thank the interviewees for sharing their immigrant experiences and Drs. Tracy Dietz, Jana Jasinski, and Jay Corzine for their guidance during the research and writing of this article. The article is based on the author's Master's Thesis examining ethnic culture maintenance and ethnic identity among Finnish immigrants. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Central Florida's Graduate Research Fair in 2007. The author is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Central Florida.

1945, however, Florida began attracting Finnish retirees who established a prosperous ethnic community in the Lake Worth-Lantana area (Kivisto 1989) – also the setting for this study.

On Language

Decades ago, Kolehmainen (1937) concluded that Finnish immigrants prefer communicating in their native tongue and only speak in English when necessary. Kolehmainen noted that English taking prominence over Finnish occurs among the second-generation immigrants. Consistently, the suggested span for assimilation has been two generations (Archdeacon 1985). Congruent with Kolehmainen's notion of retreating Finnish, Stoller's (1996) examination of language use among second- and third generation immigrants indicated that Finnish language was not a part of everyday life for a majority of the respondents. Similarly, Sintonen (1993) examined the development of English proficiency among Canadian Finns and the immigrant's motivations to use it. The results indicate that, in the beginning, the immigrants had little motivation to use English and that their ability to use English developed only to a moderate level. Kivisto (1989) has pointed out that, compared to many other groups, it is plausible that Finnish language declines slower in the American society, perhaps due to the fact that many Finns may encounter difficulties in learning English because Finnish is not an Indo-European language. Kivisto (1989) also notes that the importance of public school experiences enabling the subsequent generations to become proficient in English.

The Present Study

This study builds upon existing research of Finns in America, including Stoller's (1996) examination of

ethnic identity among Finnish-Americans and Korhonen and Roinila's (2005) research on Finnish North Americans. These studies have, however, mainly focused on second- and third generation Finns. The purpose of this study is to focus on the immigrant generation to gain a better understanding about assimilation and ethnic culture maintenance.

Methodology

Since the purpose of qualitative methods is not to generalize from a large, representative sample to the population, but to obtain in-depth knowledge from a smaller group of people (Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner 1995), qualitative methods were chosen for the present study. Qualitative methods also allow probing, which would not be possible if quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, would be used.

Procedure

The study took place at an assisted living facility located in south Florida in September 2005. Ten people (eight women and two men) volunteered to participate. Seven of the interviewees were Finns who had immigrated to the United States themselves, and three were children of Finnish immigrants. All interviews were conducted at the facility, on weekdays, and the times for the interviews ranged from about 45 minutes to three hours.

The design of the interview was semi-structured so that the respondents could address issues they felt were important to them personally, but guiding questions were asked if needed to gain more information regarding language use and ethnic culture maintenance. Examples of the probing questions include: "Were you able to speak English when you first arrived in the United States?" "How did you learn English?" "How well would you say that you can speak English?" "How important was it for you to learn English?" and "Today, what is your language preference in your daily life?"

Results

Of the ten interviewees, seven were immigrants (six females, one male) called Emma, Ester, Hilda, Lyy-

dia, Raakel, Viola, and Otto, and three were children of immigrants (two females, one male) called Anna, Vilma, and Elias. All of the interviewees' names have been changed to protect their identity. In the following discussion, the children of immigrants will be referred to as first generation Finns. The ages ranged from 81 to 94 years. One immigrant had arrived in the United States in the late 1920s and the remaining between 1950 and 1961. The interviewees' educational attainment ranged from some *kansakoulu* [the common school, which consisted of six years of schooling] to some college. All had worked in the paid labor force, and all of the respondents had been married, all to Finns or to first generation Finns.

Overall, the decision to immigrate was influenced by a desire to obtain a better life here. Majority had left Finland after World War II, in the 1950's. During that period, times were tough in Finland, as evident from the stories of the immigrants. Many described how there was an immense need for housing, and the fear of future war with Russia was also in people's minds. Immigration was also easier for many because they already knew people who had immigrated. Many of the interviewees described how they had relatives or friends of the family to visit them from America and how the visitors begin talking them into immigrating. Similarly, the first generation Finns indicated that their parents immigrated for a better way of life, and in one case it meant getting more education here. All immigrated to areas that were populated by Finns already. The majority of the interviewees relocated to Florida during the 1960's and 1970's.

Language Use

Discussions with the immigrants revealed that for this cohort and group of immigrants, language barriers restricted their lives in the United States. Of the seven immigrants, only two stated that they knew a little bit of English before immigration, and the remaining five did not know any English at all. When asked if they ever learned English, the majority stated that they had learned enough to get by in everyday situations. Some said they learned English from television and newspapers. Two mentioned going to night school to learn English when it came time to apply for their citizenship papers. When asked if it was important to

learn the language, many immigrants indicated that it was important to learn English, but also admitted not knowing English very well – just enough to manage in everyday situations. Some felt that “no “[because you can speak Finnish to Finns], but by the same token admitted that it makes life harder at times if you do not know the language, as Raakel put it: ”because you don’t know, don’t understand.”

When asked whether they preferred Finnish or English in everyday life, four of the seven immigrants stated that they prefer Finnish. Two admitted forgetting English altogether. Three stated that they could speak either one of the languages, depending on the situation. Ester explained: “Well, you can only manage with Finnish among Finns and compared to others, the groups of Finns is so small... And it is a tough thing for Finns”, thereby reflecting on how language might act as a restricting force in the immigrants’ lives.

When it came to language use, there was a clear difference between the immigrants and the first generation Finns. All three first generation Finns stated that Finnish was their home language when they were growing up. Vilma and Elias learned English when they went to first grade and Anna learned English when her older sister went to school. Today all three prefer English as their daily language, even though one of them told me that her language preference also depends on the people. As Anna explains: “some can’t speak English, so I speak Finnish with them. Most of them can speak a little bit but they are afraid of making mistake. So I use both languages. But the language in this home is English.” Learning English was seen as very important by Elias who commented: “...You can’t manage here in the America unless you learn English. No, not at all.”

All immigrants had lived in predominantly Finnish areas throughout their lives in the United States. This was also the case for the first generation Finns when they were growing up. When the first generation Finns were asked the question “When you were younger, did you live in areas that had a lot of Finns?” Anna exclaimed: “Oh, yes, our church was completely Finns. Our high school was all Finnish people. Our basketball team was completely Finnish and when they had basketball games, the boys would call their signals in Finnish so the other teams could not...did not know what there were talking about.”

In addition, all immigrants worked in places that had other Finns as well, thereby learning the language

was not necessarily required. For example, the entrepreneur explained how he knew a lot of Finnish people and how that population became his clientele. Therefore, even in order to run a business, it was not necessary to speak perfect English. In addition, the types of jobs that the immigrants held did not require mastery of English. One of the immigrants explained her experiences as a housekeeper, how her boss said she did not have to know English because “she did her job one hundred percent.”

Future Generations and Language

As parents and grandparents, immigrants hold an important role in helping to transmit language to future generations. All five immigrants with children affirmed that their children knew Finnish. One interviewee admitted that while all of her three children can speak Finnish, only her daughter knows how to write it, too. When inquired about their grandchildren’s language use, the role of grandparents as language teachers emerged. Otto stated: “No, they don’t [know Finnish]. They don’t know anything about Finnish language, because they are already adults and have their own lives. We are not in contact with them so much that I could have taught them because they have lived so far away.” Vilma also stated how her son was able to speak it very well and he even went to summer school to learn the culture but “when they went to school...and when my parents died, he lost a lot of it. But he can get along.”

Nevertheless, a desire to transmit Finnish language emerged. For example, Viola, an immigrant, talked about how she wanted to find old-fashioned Finnish ABC-books so that she could give a copy for her grandchildren; for them to learn the Finnish alphabet and how to pronounce the letters. Unable to find one, she accordingly said that her grandchildren are not proficient in Finnish today. Consistent with existing research, the responses in this study confirm how fast English takes prominence over Finnish, but also demonstrate how grandparents hold an important role in transmitting the ancestral language. However, English taking prominence might be, in part, simply due to geographic distances and grandparents passing away, and not due to subsequent generation’s lack of aspiration to learn Finnish.

Immigrants' Views of the Future of Finnish Culture in America

Transmission of culture was also brought up during the interviews. The consensus was that teaching children Finnish is consequential in passing along the culture. However, a few shared a view that the younger generations are becoming more and more Americanized. As Viola explained "The younger generation is becoming more Americanized; they don't want to learn Finnish" and another one believed that both aspects, passing along the Finnish culture and learning about the American culture, are important. Two talked about the importance of various clubs and organizations in helping to maintain the culture, however, Otto felt that is harder and harder to get the younger generations to participate. Furthermore, he talked about how "in Finland, people become familiar with English [in schools] and they learn it for the most part, so that has disseminated the dense life together [in ethnic communities]." Similarly, Vilma noted that when she first arrived to Florida in 1977, "Finns were very active, in politics and civic affairs, I guess they aren't now." Contrarily, Anna was optimistic about the future of Finnish culture and language in the United States:

I think it is very important, you know. In my hometown, they are just making a new Finnish center. Yeah, they are building a new building and it is going to be a Finnish center. And of course, here, that's all we have is Finnish, so it just keeps on and on, you know, the younger people. We have, at church, we have Finn school, they teach the little language, but they still don't want them to forget the Finnish language, so we have Finn school at the church. And it is a big group of young people.

When the discussion was directed to ethnic culture maintenance, the interviewees felt strongly that it can be maintained through organizations, including church, and teaching Finnish. One immigrant pointed to her heart and said: "It is here, that Finnishness."

Discussion and Conclusion

It can be argued that in the case of Finns, language holds a significant role in ethnic culture maintenance and also in the assimilation process. Since all immigrants lived in areas that had ethnic enclaves, it is

likely that learning English was not necessary. It is also possible that living in predominantly Finnish areas hindered their opportunities to learn English. It would be beneficial to locate Finns who do not live in predominantly Finnish areas and examine whether these immigrants have managed to maintain a good command of Finnish.

Consistent with prior research (Kolehmainen, 1937; Stoller, 1996) the three first generation Finns in this study demonstrate how fast English takes prominence over Finnish. Even though Finnish was the language spoken at home when they were growing up, all three stated that they speak better English than Finnish, and they prefer it as their daily language. The results regarding language are typical and consistent of most immigrant groups in that they learned English when they started school (Kivisto 1989).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study is not without limitations. While the sample of ten respondents in this study is arguably small, insights into immigrant life experiences were captured. It is also unlikely that anyone who views their ancestral homeland negatively would move into the type of community or facility where the respondents are currently living. The validity of this study could be improved by conducting subsequent interviews with the respondents, or by interviewing their children and grandchildren, so that more knowledge about the assimilation process could be accumulated.

Suggestions for future research are wide reaching. If in the future immigrants will not face language barriers, their experiences might be significantly different from the experiences of the immigrants in this study. Since language appears to be crucial when it comes to ethnic culture maintenance and assimilation, more specific measures of both, language maintenance and learning, should be included in succeeding studies. Additionally, many respondents mentioned how the Lutheran church has a language school where small children can learn Finnish. Since the Lutheran church appears to hold many functions, including serving as an institution where language is preserved, future studies could be extended to examine organizations

such as the Lutheran church and its effect on maintaining Finnish culture in the United States.

Lastly, discussions with other Finns in the community hinted that while it is still a strong ethnic community, it is beginning to lose impetus. For example, once, it was said, *all* hotels on a strip were owned by Finns, now there is none. Could it be, then, that after this generation passes away, the thriving ethnic community in Florida will begin to diminish? The role of language might be particularly relevant. For example, it was noted by an immigrant that since Finns today study English, their lives might not be restricted by language. Could it be that, among immigrants, ethnic culture was maintained to a significant extent due to language ties that bound? While the immigrants showed very little evidence of assimilation, their responses echoed the inevitability of assimilation in the part of their children and grandchildren.

References

- Ambert, Anne-Marie, Patricia A. Adler, Peter Adler, and Daniel F. Detzner. 1995. "Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57(4): 879-893.
- Archdeacon, Thomas J. 1985. "Problems and Possibilities in the Study of American Immigration and Ethnic History." *International Migration Review* 19(1): 112-134.
- Heikkilä, Elli and Elisabeth Uschanov. 2004. "The Dynamics of Finnish Migration to America and the Development of Emigration Databases." Paper presented at the conference of the Europeans on the Move, Aberdeen, Great Britain. Retrieved May 3, 2005 (<http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/articles/pdf/Heikkila-Uschanov.pdf>).
- Kivisto, Peter. 1989. "The Attenuated Ethnicity of Contemporary Finnish-Americans." Pp. 67-88 in *Ethnic Enigma*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press.
- Kolehmainen, John Ilmari. 1937. "The Retreat of Finnish." *American Sociological Review* 2(6): 887-889.
- Korkiasaari, Jouni. 1989. "Suomalaiset Maailmalla." [Finns Abroad]. Institute of Migration. Retrieved May 3, 2005 (<http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/articles/art.php?artid=3>).
- Korkiasaari, Jouni. 2004. "Finnish North Americans Today." Institute of Migration. Retrieved May 3, 2005 (<http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/articles/pdf/finforum.pdf>).
- Korkiasaari, Jouni and Mika Roinila (2005). "Finnish North Americans Today." *Journal of Finnish Studies* 9(2): 98-116.
- Liffing-Zug Bourret, Joan, Gerry Kangas, and Dorothy Crum, eds. 2002. *Finnish Touches: Recipes and Traditions*. 2nd ed. Iowa City: Penfield Books.
- Park, Robert E. 1930. "Assimilation, Social." Vol. 2, pp. 281-283 in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Park, Robert E. and Ernest W. Burgess. 1924. *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Sintonen, Teppo. 1993. "Life Course and Ethnicity: Experiences of Canadian Finns Who Immigrated to Canada in the 1920s." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 25(3): 76-88.
- Stoller, Eleanor. 1996. "Sauna, Sisu and Sibelius: Ethnic Identity among Finnish Americans." *The Sociological Quarterly* 37(1): 145-175.
- The Genealogical Society of Finland. 2005. "Emigration from Finland to the United States." Retrieved May 3, 2005 (<http://www.genealogia.fi/emi3e.htm>).