

First generation Finnish speakers in Australia – language maintenance and attitudes

Tiina Lammervo



This article is based on a larger study on first generation Australian Finns, their language and culture contacts and attitudes (Lammervo, 2007). The project investigated language use, skills and attitudes, culture maintenance and identity of first generation Australian Finns in South-East Queensland. Data was collected from 31 informants who had migrated to Australia over twenty years before the time of the interviews. Although most of the informants in this sample came to Australia on an assisted passage or were recruited from Finland during the most active years of Finnish migration to Australia (peaks around 1958 and 1968), the sample also includes informants with different paths and arrival times. This distribution makes the sample well balanced with reference to the time of arrival of Finnish population in Australia. The focus in this article is on Finnish language maintenance among this group which is rapidly decreasing through natural attrition.

Tiina Lammervo is a Finnish Academy Postdoctoral researcher undertaking research on Australian Finns at the Institute of Migration and in co-operation with the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland.

In the early years of European settlement in the numbers of Finns in Australia were very small. Around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries North America continued to be a more attractive destination. Only in the 1950s and 1960s, when Australian government made assisted passages available for Finns, did more substantial numbers of Finnish migrants arrive. Individual peak years for Finnish migration to Australia were 1958 and 1968. In the years around each of these peaks about 5,000 Finns arrived in Australia. Depending on the scheme, a part or all of the migrants' fare was paid by Australian government. In both schemes migrants were required to remain in Australia for a minimum of two years so as not to be obliged to pay back the assistance. A detailed account about the history and numbers of Finnish migration to Australia are available in the works of Koivukangas (1975, 1998, 1999) and Korkiasaari (1999, 2003a, 2003b).

The number of Finnish born people in Australia has never exceeded 10,400. The 1971 census indicates that there were 10,359 Finnish born people permanently residing in Australia. Over the years New South Wales and Queensland have taken turns in

having the highest numbers of Finns. The earlier census years 1934 and 1954 when Queensland had the most Finns, indicate the importance of farming and mining in drawing Finnish migrants to the state. Resuming the lead in recent years (since 1991) corresponds with the internal migration pattern in Australia. People from the southern states are moving to the warmer climate in the north. This brings also Finns, often retired Finns, from the southern states to South-East Queensland, and its Australian Finnish community is revitalized as a result of domestic migration not migration from Finland.

These days the numbers of Finns arriving in Australia per year are low. In the financial year 2005–2006 there were only 67 settler arrivals of Finnish origin. The number of temporary residents to which category the popular working holiday visas and business sojourners belong was 1,657 for the same period. (ABS Overseas arrivals and departures statistics)

Maintaining Finnish language in Australia

The term "language maintenance" is used to describe a situation in which a speaker, a group of speakers, or a speech community contin-

ues to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite competition with the dominant or majority language to become the main/sole language in these spheres (Pauwels, 2004). Among migrants in general, the first generation, who had reached full proficiency in their first language in the homeland (often through schooling), have the highest language maintenance figures. This is certainly true for Finns in Australia. According to Clyne (1991, p.66–67) 75.1% of first generation Finns maintain their first language, about 60% of the second generation, but for further generations the percentage of people maintaining the first language is as low as 13.3%. Although these language maintenance figures are high compared to other northern Europeans in Australia, (e.g. Norwegian-Swedish maintenance in the first generation was 45.6%, in the second generation 21.1% and in further generations 1.2% (ibid.)), researchers have concluded that Finnish in Australia is a dying language.

Owing to status factors, demographic factors, the lack of institutional support and the cultural dissimilarity of the Finnish language, it is a language that is failing to be maintained (Watson, 1996). Kovács (2001, 2004) concludes that among Australian Finns language shift is already complete before the third generation. At the community level the Australian multiculturalism and language policies in the 1970s brought a positive change. However, particularly in the area of L1 teaching, language policy does not offer much support for smaller language groups. At an individual level patterns of language

use indicate a strong tendency to language shift (Kovács, 2004).

In this first generation data Finnish language maintenance is still high. Informants were asked to indicate their language choice when communicating with ten different interlocutors (e.g. children, friends, boss), and when undertaking thirteen different tasks (e.g. watching films, writing letters). The concept of domain is widely used when discussing the choice of language in particular situations, the main elements of a domain including interlocutors, their relationship and specific locales. Overall language choice in all these twenty-three instances is polarized between the extremes. 30.4% of the answers indicate that Finnish is always used, and the next highest percentage is 21.0% for answers claiming that English is always used.

Since the informants are first generation Finnish speakers, we can infer that Finnish has a strong position in many domains, particularly in the non-public domain. In fact, the highest percentages of the answers "always Finnish" are found with interlocutors and tasks in the private domain: Parents 100%, siblings 81.8%, spouse 81.5%, relatives 74%, religion 60.9% and personal letters 55.6%, while the highest percentages of answers "always English" are found with language spoken to boss 80%, TV 80%, and language spoken to colleagues 64.3%. In this data Finnish is clearly the language for the private domain.

The home domain is crucial in maintaining and passing on ethnic languages. In this study the great majority of parents were married

to a Finn and most indicated that it had been natural to continue speaking Finnish in the home. Finnish migration to Australia in the peak years around 1958 and 1968 was mostly migration of young families, so continuing a Finnish home life would have been natural and the migrants would not have faced the dynamics and problems familiar to those bringing up children in ethnically and linguistically mixed marriages. Parents also express a strong wish that their children be able to speak Finnish. The importance of Finnish skills is purely practical. Parents think that it would be useful for the second generation to be able to communicate with their Finnish family. In the example below informants talk about the importance of Finnish skills to their children and grandchildren:

– T14I25F: *jos ne mänöö niinku Suomes käymää niinku heiänkii lapset käi ni ni tuota ei se ois olt yhtää mukavaa jos ei ois ymmärtäny.*

– Other guest: *se on no olla siellä ku et ymmärrä miwttää*

– T14I26M: *nii*

– T14I25F: *ei mittää*

– T14I26M: *nii ja sitte vähä semmosena tuppisuuna*

– T14I25F: *if they go to visit Finland like their children did it would not have been nice at all had they not been able to understand*

Other guest: *it's embarrassing to be there when you don't understand anything*

– T14I26M: *yeah*

– T14I25F: *nothing*

– T14I26M: *yeah and to be a bit tongue tied.*

Self-evaluated language skills and attitudes

Living in Australia requires some skills in English. Although those who arrived during the recruitment had the best chance among Finns in Australia to live in the vicinity or even work with other Finns, it is clear that the domains of Finnish use offered by the communities are limited. Many of the informants arrived in Australia with very limited or non-existent English skills. The comment often heard is:

– *Eikä osannu kyllä kieltä ei sitten niin ei ei jees eikä nou eikä tuota sitäkkään jos niin väärään paikkaan nekin. (T8I13F)*

– *And we didn't know the language (English) at all not even yes or no and if said them it was often in the wrong situation.*

However, at the time of this data collection the informants overall reported having moderate English skills. The average for the self-evaluated English language skills on a scale from 1 to 5 (no skills to very good skills) is 3.04. The more the informants have studied in Australia, be it language or other studies, the better their English skills. The younger the informants were on arrival in Australia, the better their English skills at the time of data collection.

On the face of it, moderate self-evaluated English skills are in contrast with the recurring emphasis in other studies on Finnish immigrants' lack of English skills (Koi-vukangas, 1975; Mattila, 1990). However, even moderate English skills may not be good enough to allow full linguistic integration in

to Australian society. For instance, language skills adequate for the controlled environment of work may not be good enough for socializing with ease. Also, as long as a 'foreign' accent is distinguishable it is a cue for Anglo-Australians to elicit ethnic stereotypes (Pham, 1998, p. 3)

Overall the informants agree with the accepted view that maintaining one language does not diminish the capacity to learn other languages. Two statements enquired about the informants' attitudes towards the possible consequences which Finnish language maintenance might have on adjusting to life as an immigrant in Australia. The overall pattern is to express a similar attitude towards the effect of Finnish language maintenance to learning English and succeeding in Australia, and to think that maintaining Finnish does not have a negative effect on either.

Sometimes it was not possible to decipher whether an attitude about language maintenance or use of English was about the informants own skills and use or about those of their children or the community in general. There are, however, indications that even if the importance of English in the Australian society is obvious and parents are proud of their children's having had an easier time in learning Australian English and adopting Australian culture than their parents, they still hope that the second generation would also maintain Finnish at some level. This positive view to multilingualism may not, particularly at earlier stages of Australian immigration and language policy, have been shared by Anglo-Australians.

– *Ennen oli semmonen erilainen suhtautuminen et enne tota ei kaikki tykänny ollenkaan että puhu muitten aikana ni puhu omaa kieltänsä ja jotku ihmiset sanoki jossain voi jopa yleisel paikal bussiski sanoi jos jotku puhui kauan sitte. (T2I3M)*

– *Earlier the attitude was different not everyone liked it at all that you spoke your language in the presence of others and some people said sometimes even in public places in busses people commented too if you spoke a long time ago.*

First generation Australian Finns can often take their Finnish skills for granted. The average for the self-evaluated Finnish language skills on a scale from 1 to 5 was 4.03 i.e. good skills. The informants in this study did not mention making great language maintenance efforts to maintain their own Finnish skills, even if overall their attitudes towards Finnish language maintenance were very positive. Most of these informants have continued to speak Finnish at home and have regular contact with other Finns and this comes so naturally that it is hardly recognized as contributing to language maintenance. When ranking reasons for language maintenance communicating with friends and relatives, and maintaining contact with Finland are the most important. Culture and identity maintenance, which may appear more abstract to the informants, are seen as less important. Based on the answers it is not possible to say whether the informants explicitly realize that communicating in Finnish is directly linked with identity and culture maintenance. They

maintain their Finnish to communicate with people who are important to them, and at the same time this communication is helping them maintain their identity and culture. It is no surprise then that "Finnish spoken at home" was placed at the top of the list of most effective language maintenance methods. "Books, papers and magazines" was second followed by "Finnish school" and "trips to Finland". In fact, the scores for home language calculated from the informants' language use with children and spouse indicate that 48% of informants use always Finnish at home. The combined figure for those using Finnish more than English or always Finnish is 74%.

Features of Australian Finnish and speaker attitudes

The first impression when talking to first generation Australian Finns is that they have maintained their Finnish really well. The way they speak sounds Finnish with varying degrees of influence from dialects or sociolects. Hentula (1990) has concluded, based on her study of vocabulary of Australian Finnish that the Finnish of the first generation is more like Finnish in Finland as compared to second and further generation speakers' Finnish, should they still speak Finnish. Research has found, however, significant differences between Australian Finnish and spoken Finland Finnish (Gita, 2001; Hentula, 1990; Hirviniemi, 2000, Kovács, 2001). The most typical strategy of code-switching for first generation speakers is to "Finnishise" the code-switched items, at least at the

level of grammar (Kovács, 2001: 194). In my data the most typical language contact phenomena in the conversations are items that have been assimilated both phonologically and morphologically into Finnish, as for instance, *instraktori* 'instructor'. The second most typical type is items with English phonology and Finnish morphology, for instance *marbleleita* 'marbles'. Code-switches into unassimilated English were in this study categorized into short, one word switches: "*niinku tämä kaiteet* balustrade *kaikki*" 'like the railings the balustrades and all', and long switches extending for more than one word: "*Kiitoksiapaljonja* excuse me now *mun minun täytyy lähteä*" 'Thank you very much and excuse me now I have to leave'. These were significantly less common than the fully assimilated language material.

Data on the frequency of the above strategies in each individual's speech was used to create speaker profiles. The typical speaker profile for a first generation Australian Finn has a strong Finnish emphasis as material fully assimilated into Finnish is the largest category of contact phenomena. It is followed by other phonologically Finnish material and words pronounced in English with Finnish case endings. Switches into English are the smallest categories. This extract is from conversation with a first generation Finn displaying the typical code-switching strategies:

– *Jee se maini teki vähä paljo että piti suomalaiset omissa ja kieliset. Sitte sano muutammat sano työ finnit saatte parhaamman palkan ja sitte matkustelette ulkomaille vaistitte maniiit* (un-

derlining indicates material with English influence).

– *Yeah the mine often kept Finns and non-Finns separate. Some people said that you Finns make the best wages and then travel overseas and waste your money.*

The following extract is from a conversation with a first generation Finn with a more atypical speaker profile. Although the two largest categories of English influence are the predictable ones for first generation Australian Finns, the special features are switches into English for strings longer than one word. This together with high numbers of short code-switches and words pronounced in English with Finnish case endings make a speaker with this profile sound overall different from the typical first generation speaker as English phonology is very prominent:

– *Leijonilla ni mittään klubille ei mittään ite me autetaan semmosia niinku help those who can't help themselves ni se on niinku leijona motto enempi.*

– *With the Lions nothing x for the club nothing we ourselves help those well help those who can't help themselves that is more the Lions' motto.*

The Australian Finnish community accepts varieties of Finnish which may have even extensive English influence. On average the subjects' attitude towards mixing English with Finnish is neutral, yet the most frequent reaction is to approve of mixing English with Finnish. The Finnish variety with English influence is considered to serve a specific purpose in the community. It

is an accepted variety of Finnish for communication in Australia and it is the variety that is passed on to following generations. English words in Finnish speech are justified by, for instance, there not being a satisfactory Finnish equivalent for an Australian item, or by admitting that a Finnish term for a Finnish item has been forgotten. Some informants display a slightly disparaging attitude towards the mixed language variety:

– *Minä sanoin että meidän kaikki räpeltää samanlaista suomii ku myö ni jos Helsingin horisontist kattois ni myö osata ensinkää ... (T14I25F)*

– *I said that our children all speak the same kind of Finnish as we do and if you'd look at it from the Helsinki point of view you'd say we don't know Finnish at all...*

Often the variety is critiqued in a joking manner:

– *Sil on joka toinen sana englantii ni sit se ihmettelee et kui se Patrickki tietää et mist se puhuu koko ajan se on australialainen @@@ ni kul se pysyy kärryllä (T2I3M)*

– *Her every other word in English and then she wonders how Patrick knows all the time what she is talking about he is Australian @@@ every other word is English so he can follow all right.*

Conclusion

Continuing to communicate in Finnish in the private domains remains the most important way of maintaining Finnish in Australia

on the community and individual levels. Continuing to speak Finnish at home is how parents have passed on the language to their offspring. In the typical situation second generation Australian Finns have learnt Finnish from their mother at home. The discussions with informants hardly ever extended to the realization that reading and writing a language, also the first language, has to be studied and learnt. As the chances of this are very limited in Australia, the second generation's Finnish typically remains limited to spoken language. This is sufficient to keep in touch with the family. It will not, however, allow a deeper understanding or participation in Finnish culture. The first generation often sees their offspring as Australian and are happy to see them being accepted as 'Aussies'. Finnish culture and language are seen as heritage which the parents hope the children will respect and preserve, but it is additional to the second generation's Australian identity.

My postdoctoral research project currently underway investigates the role of Finnish ethnicity among members of the second and third generations of Australian Finns. Considering the history of Finnish migration to Australia, the focus is on the offspring of those who migrated during the peak years of Finnish Australian migration, but also more recent migrant families are included. Regardless of Australia's official policy of multiculturalism, the responsibility of language and culture maintenance particularly for a small low profile group such as Finns is with the community itself. Support has been available from Fin-

land and will hopefully continue and even increase, as Finland now has an official government policy for expatriate Finns (Hallituksen ulkosuomalaispoliittinen ohjelma 2006–2011).

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of population and housing*, (2006), www.abs.gov.au.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Overseas arrivals and departures statistics*. Retrieved June 2007 from www.abs.gov.au/media/statistics.
- Clyne, M., (1991), *Community languages: The Australian experience*, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Gita, J., (2001), *Kahden toisen polven australiansuomalaisen suomen kielen piirteitä*, Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Helsinki, Helsinki.
- Hallituksen ulkosuomalaispoliittinen ohjelma 2006–2011, (2006), Työhallinnon julkaisu 369.
- Hentula, H., (1990), *Australian-suomen sanaston luonteenomaisia piirteitä. Suomen Akatemian Amerikan- ja Australiansuomen tutkimushankkeen raportti ja australiansuomen sanaluettelo* (unpublished report) Institute of Migrations, Turku.
- Hirviniemi, R., (2000), *Sademetsässä, saremehtästä, saremesähän: Havaintoja kolmen alevan sukupolven australiansuomen puhujan kielestä*, Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Turku, Turku.
- Koivukangas, O., (1975), *Suomalainen siirtolaisuus Australiaan toisen maailmansodan jälkeen*. Institute of Migration, Turku.
- Koivukangas, O., (1998), *Kaukomaiden kaipuu: Suomalaiset*

- Afrikassa, Australiassa, Uudessa Seelannissa ja Latinalaisessa Amerikassa*, Institute of Migration, Turku.
- Koivukangas, O., (1999), Finns in the southern hemisphere – a comparative approach, in O. Koivukangas & C. Westin eds., *Scandinavian and European migration to Australia and New Zealand*, Institute of Migration, Turku, pp. 185-214.
- Korkiasaari, J., (1999), *Suomen siirtolaisuus kautta aikain (-1997)*, www.utu.fi/erill/instit-migr/fin/f_01.htm.
- Korkiasaari, J., (2003a), *Maastamuuttaneet sukupuolen ja kohdemaan mukaan (1980-2001)*, www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/stat/fin/art.php?artid=10.
- Korkiasaari, J., (2003b), *Siirtolaisuus Suomesta Australiaan 1945-1996 (Suomen kansalaiset)*, www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/stat/fin/art.php?artid=49.
- Kovács, M., (2001), *Code-switching and language shift in Australian Finnish in comparison with Australian Hungarian*, Åbo Akademi University Press, Turku.
- Kovács, M., (2004), Australian-suomalaiset kielenvaihdon kynnyksellä, *Virittäjä*, 2: 200–222.
- Lammervo, T. (2007), *Language and culture contact and attitudes among first generation Australian Finns*. Web Reports 26. Finnish Institute of Migration. Turku. www.migrationinstitute.fi/pdf/webreports.htm.
- Mattila, T. (1990), *Australian suomalaisten elinolot ja sopeutuminen*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Turku, Turku.
- Pauwels, A. (2004), Language maintenance, A. Davies & C. Elder (Eds.) *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA.
- Pham, M. N. (1998), Language attitudes of the Vietnamese in Melbourne. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21(2), 1-20.
- Watson, G. (1996), The Finnish-Australian English corpus. *ICAME Journal: Computers in English Linguistics*, 20, 41–70.

Tiivistelmä

Artikkeli perustuu laajempaan tutkimukseen ensimmäisen polven Australian suomalaisten kieli- ja kulttuurikontaktista, asenteista ja identiteetistä. Aineistossa painotuu ryhmä, joka muutti Suomen Australian siirtolaisuuden huippuvuosien 1958 ja 1968 vaiheilla. Suomen kieltä käytetään yksityiselämän domeeneissa ja sen asema

kotikielenä on ollut edellytyksenä toisen polven australiansuomalaisten suomen oppimiselle. Englanninkielisessä ympäristössä vakiokielien asemaa ei kyseenalaisteta, mutta aineistossa kaksikielisyyteen ja suomen kielen säilyttämiseen suhtaudutaan positiivisesti. Australiansuomi on suomen kielen variantti, jota leimaa englannin vaikutus. Ensimmäisen siirtolais-

polven puheessa on englanninkielinen aines tyypillisesti mukautettu täysin suomeen sekä ääntämisen että morfologian osalta. Huomatavakin englannin vaikutus kuitenkin hyväksytään ja australiansuomi on kielimuoto, jolla on funktionsa ympäristössään ja joka siirtyy myös jälkipolville, sikäli kun he suomea vielä osaavat.



Väestön ja työvoiman kansainvälistyminen nyt ja tulevaisuudessa -julkaisun tiedotustilaisuus pidettiin Opetusministeriössä 31.1.2008. Hankkeen rahoittajina olivat Euroopan Sosiaalirahasto, opetusministeriö ja Siirtolaisuusinstituutti. Kuvassa kirjan kirjoittajat tutkimusjohtaja Elli Heikkilä (vas.) ja tutkija Maria Pikkariainen.