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American Finns as Language Learners – The Age Issue

When a Finnish emigrant left for America during the great migration years round the turn of the century, he was typically a young man, in his early 20's, single – or at least travelling alone – uneducated, and in most cases originated in the rural areas of the province of Oulu or Vaasa. He was driven away from his home country by economic necessity, by a lack of work and food.

He thought of America as a promised land, the country of freedom, where living conditions were good, the soil productive and fruitful, and where anyone could make money and reach an independent and respected position.

This image of America was greatly strengthened by letters received from friends and relatives who had already moved to America and who described the United States as the golden land of prosperity. "No matter how good your life is over there, here it will be much better", they wrote (Kero 1976:19).

It goes without saying that reality was often harsher than what people imagined. Even the journey over the Atlantic was full of hardships. After the money for the trip had finally been acquired, usually borrowed, the journey started: the first miles on horseback, then by train to Hanko, where one sometimes had to wait for weeks before embarking on a voyage towards England and the town of Hull. From Hull the journey was continued by train to the West coast of England, usually to Liverpool, from where the actual crossing started. Conditions on the ship were poor, there was not enough room, and the food was lousy. This kind of discomfort could go on for a couple of weeks, before the travellers arrived in New York. On Ellis Island they had to go through a thorough examination, after which they were able to move on to their respective destinations, to the copper mines of Upper Michigan, to the forests or iron mines of Minnesota, or to the farmlands of Wisconsin. Some had to travel across the continent to the West coast; others – particularly part of the women immigrants – stayed in the cities of the East.

The moment he had set foot on American soil, the young Finn was faced with quite a problem: he did not know any English. Fortunately, he found his first job in an area which was already populated by Finns, so he could get along in Finnish quite well. It could even happen that as the obstinate Finns stubbornly went on speaking their own language, some of the other nationalities, such as Norwegians and Ital-

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ians in the area, realized that they had to learn Finnish to be able to communicate with the Finns.

In general, those women who worked as maids in American families, learned the basics of English relatively quickly and were soon able to handle situations where English was needed. On the other hand, those men and women who lived in Finnish communities, married other Finns, and worked and spent their leisure time primarily among their countrymen, usually managed to avoid learning English a great deal longer. They also participated in various Finnish organizations. In fact, while churches, political groupings and the temperance movement attracted Finnish people and increased their group identity, they unavoidably isolated the Finns from the majority population (Kero 1980:60–61).

The situation was somewhat different for those Finns who moved to the United States later. The present research deals with the English of those immigrants who moved to America at the beginning of the century and of those who moved there more recently. The former group has now reached a very advanced age, whereas the latter group consists of young and middle-aged Finnish Americans.

The background of the younger immigrant group was rather different from that of the older immigrants. The younger ones no longer had to leave Finland because of hunger, although their reasons were also largely economic. Integration into the new society was faster and easier, as more and more had some knowledge of the English language when arriving in America. There were some, however, who did not know any English, but unlike their predecessors, they could not avoid contacts with English-speaking people from the very beginning.

All of my Finnish-American interviewees had to go through some kind of an adaptation process after settling in their new home country. America was unfamiliar to everyone; the ways and customs were different from those in Finland. One had to create new living conditions, struggle hard to make one's way in the labor market, or adjust oneself otherwise to the new environment. The adjustment was not easy for everyone; some succeeded better than others.

For understandable reasons, the acquisition of second languages in naturalistic communicative settings has mainly been studied in countries with a great number of immigrants from other parts of the world, for instance in the United States, Germany, and Sweden. Sometimes the language acquirers have also received formal instruction in their second languages. My informants, the elderly and working-age Finnish Americans, had had very little formal training in English during their American years. For the most part, they had acquired English when communicating with Americans, in other words, in a mainly naturalistic communication environment.

According to John Schumann, those who have settled in the target language area acquire the language to the degree to which they acculturate to the new society. That is, the acquisition of the second language is determined by the distance, or proximity, between the learner and the speakers of the target language. Schumann talks about social and psychological distance or proximity. Among factors that increase the distance and therefore make language acquisition more difficult are, for instance, negative attitudes between the learner group and the target language group, a certain political or economic imbalance of the groups, internal cohesion and a certain self-sufficiency of the learner group (which tends to diminish contacts with speakers of the target language), the learners' intention to stay in the target lan-

guage area for only a short time instead of having settled there permanently, etc. (Schumann 1978a:164–166, 1978b:28–31). For American Finns the situation seems to have been relatively favourable, at least after they had overcome some initial difficulties. There are individual differences, of course.

It is a common assumption that acquiring the mastery of a second language is more difficult for adults than it is for children. Children seem to pick up foreign sounds and structures without any difficulty at all, whereas adults have to struggle hard to become fluent speakers of a second – or foreign – language. And after years and years of hard work and constant practice, there is still that foreign accent or slightly wrong intonation that tells everybody that you are not a native speaker. And that is so unfair, isn't it?

However, the picture is not quite as simple as it looks like. In fact, in some aspects of second language acquisition adults seem to have an advantage over small children. In the early stages of second language acquisition, adults tend to be faster, especially when it comes to learning morphology and syntax. In the long run, however, children do outperform adults (Long 1988:16), and of course, it is the ultimate attainment that is, perhaps, the most interesting for most of us.

According to Larry Selinker, one of the central figures in early interlanguage studies, the number of adults achieving native-speaker competence in a second language is very small indeed, perhaps a mere 5 % (Selinker 1972). One could argue that the percentage is probably even smaller than that, but of course it is rather difficult to determine what is native-speaker competence. Not all native speakers speak in the same way; they are not all equally proficient in their mother tongue. Then what do we expect from a learner? On the other hand, English, for instance, is spoken in many different ways in different parts of the world, so even "native" English has a number of varieties. And on an individual level, there is, naturally, a tremendous amount of variation. Still, it is native-speaker competence that language learning somehow aims at – not literally perhaps; many learners only need a basic knowledge of a foreign language and they are perfectly happy with that, but somehow it is native-speaker competence that kind of looms in the remote distance – and sets a standard by which a learner's proficiency level is judged and evaluated.

One way of looking at a language learner's career is seeing it as a continuum. The learner starts at one end, acquires the language little by little, moves along the continuum as acquisition goes on, approaches the other end, knowing that the ultimate goal (native-speaker competence) is really unattainable (and continua don't have ends, anyway!), and stops somewhere on the continuum, when acquisition no longer takes place. The acquisition of the different aspects of language (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammatical morphemes, syntax, and everything that is included in these domains) may proceed differently and stop at different points on the continuum.

In Schumann's terms, every point on the second language acquisition continuum corresponds to a particular degree of acculturation, in other words: the degree to which the learner acquires the second language is determined by the degree to which he or she acculturates to the target language group and society (Schumann 1978b:29).

It is easily conceivable that second language acquisition does not go on for ever. Depending on various motivational, situational, and even biological factors, the second language ceases to develop toward

target language norms. An immigrant, for instance, may realize that his proficiency in the target language is perfectly sufficient for him to get along in everyday communication. He is not motivated to make any further effort to learn more.

When it comes to the language development of elderly people, a number of changes have been found to occur in their native language capacity (eg. by Obler & Albert 1981, Emery 1986, Kynette & Kemper 1986). However, the development of a second language in advanced age has received very little attention. My research is primarily concerned with second language development in advanced age. Those Finnish Americans who left Finland in the early decades of the century are now in their eighties and nineties. They hardly learn any more English nowadays, but their English is very unlikely to remain the same. The language acquisition of these elderly Finnish Americans has stopped at some point on the language acquisition continuum, but their language continues to evolve. It is still in a state of development, although some of this development may involve reverting to earlier stages of linguistic competence, making a U-turn on the continuum, as it were. Contrasting tendencies, however, can also be found. Elderly people tend to be rather talkative, in spite of the fact that they may not be able to find all the words so easily. They keep their ability to communicate in their native language – and even tend to become more skillful in certain aspects of it – and this ability seems to be preserved in a second language as well.

So if we think of our young Finnish American, who arrived in the United States without knowing a word of English, he was certainly faced with a task of great magnitude: trying to come to grips with a totally new language that did not even remotely resemble anything he had heard before. Besides, he was an adult, which meant that he had passed the most sensitive, or receptive, age for acquiring language. Of course he was not aware of the fact that he had reached the stage of Formal Operations a long time ago, or that he had developed an affective filter which could actually prevent him from picking up language from his environment in a child-like manner, in other words, without being afraid of making mistakes and sounding ridiculous. Children do not mind that; they are happy to try everything new. It is rather like playing a new game (Rosansky 1975, Krashen 1981).

The concept of ego permeability (Guiora 1972, Schumann 1975:223) was certainly totally unknown to our Finnish American, but, as a grown-up person, he probably could not help being affected by it – or by the lack of it, rather.

The young immigrant might have been frustrated to know that the left hemisphere of his brain had taken over the control of his linguistic faculties, and that the plasticity of his brain had diminished in the process, making it more difficult for him to acquire new linguistic skills. On the other hand, he might have been relieved to know that the right hemisphere had probably started to contribute more and more to his efforts to acquire the English language (Scovel 1969:252, Albert & Obler 1978:243–244).

Moreover, our young immigrant most certainly did not notice that the input he was receiving from native and other speakers of English was – with great likelihood – less explicit and more complex than the kind of speech that was addressed to children, a fact which also acted against him in his endeavours to internalize the English language (Hatch 1983:165–182, Long 1988:35–36).

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that he was an adult trying to acquire a new lan-

guage, our Finnish American did manage to learn English. He got along fine in his daily activities and interactions with Americans, and he became an American citizen himself. He worked hard for many years to fulfill his aspirations for success and comfortable living, and finally – retired to enjoy his remaining years in the company of his fellow countrymen in southern Florida. This was what he wanted, because he found it comforting to be able to use his own native language again and exchange memories and recollections of his beloved old country with other Finnish Americans.

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