

Language Retention in the Ethnic Identification of Winnipeg's Finnish Population

The lack of studies in language retention and ethnic identity for minor ethnic groups has led to a detailed, descriptive study on the Finnish population found in Winnipeg, Canada. The research establishes various levels of language knowledge, frequency of language use and attitudes toward the support of the Finnish language within the group. While the importance of language in ethnic identification becomes the greatest concern in ethnic survival of the minority group, other factors such as socio-economic status and intermarriage which contribute to ethnic identification are also considered.

Finnish Settlement History

The first Finns to reach North America were a small number of colonists, who along with the Swedes, came to settle the Delaware River area in 1638. While the number of Finnish settlers grew slowly, many distinctive characteristics and customs, along with language disappeared, as the Finns were assimilated to the American way of life (Engle 1975:21). In 1840, a number of Finns had settled in Sitka, Alaska, as part of the frontier posts of the Russian Empire. After joining the United States in 1867, many Finns stayed on and settled areas in Alaska, while some drifted south to Seattle and other mainland communities where work was available (Engle 1975:27).



The author has received a degree of B.A.Honours from the University of Winnipeg in 1986, and is presently nearing completion of the Master's degree at the University of Turku. The following article draws its information from an extensive Master's thesis which was prepared for the University of Turku geography department.

The first Finns to arrive in Canada appeared in the 19th Century, coming largely from the United States or Alaska, rather than directly from Finland (Saarinen 1967:113). The earliest Finns were made of the Delaware

settlers, who moved north to work on the Welland Canal between 1829-1833 (Engle 1975:63). A small group of Finns lived in Vancouver as early as 1840, and were later joined by others from Alaska in 1867. The first significant wave of Finnish immigration, however, did not occur until the early 1880's, when the trans-continental line of the Canadian Pacific Railway was constructed (Saarinen 1967:113). These Finns came largely from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Upper Michigan and Finland. Yet, before 1900, there were probably no more than 1,000 Finns in the whole of Canada (Engle 1975:64).

After the turn of the century, a series of economic depressions in the United States made Canada a popular target for Finnish immigration. Many of them left the Dakotas and Montana to work in Canadian mines, lumbercamps and on the railroad. These Finns were joined by a number of immigrants from the old country, and by 1911, some 15,000 Finns had settled in and around Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Timmins, Toronto and Sault Ste. Marie in Ontario, in Montreal, and in various other locations across the country (Engle 1975:64). A second wave of Finnish immigrants came to Canada in the 1920's, precipitated by a period of hard times in Finland because of her recent Independence War. About 30,000 Finns came to Canada during this period. A more recent, third wave of immigrants came to Canada between 1950-1960, following the Second World War. As of 1981, there were some 53,000 Finns in the country, with more than half of them living in the province of Ontario (Engle 1975:65).

Finns appeared in Winnipeg after 1905, and by 1921 numbered some 36 people. By 1931, the number of Finns reached 179, and by 1941 - 239 people. According to the 1971 Census of Canada, 710 were found in Winnipeg, and most recently in 1981, the number had dropped to 640. Although a small number is thus encountered, some ethnic cultural activities have been present over the years. A Finnish Club was established in 1927

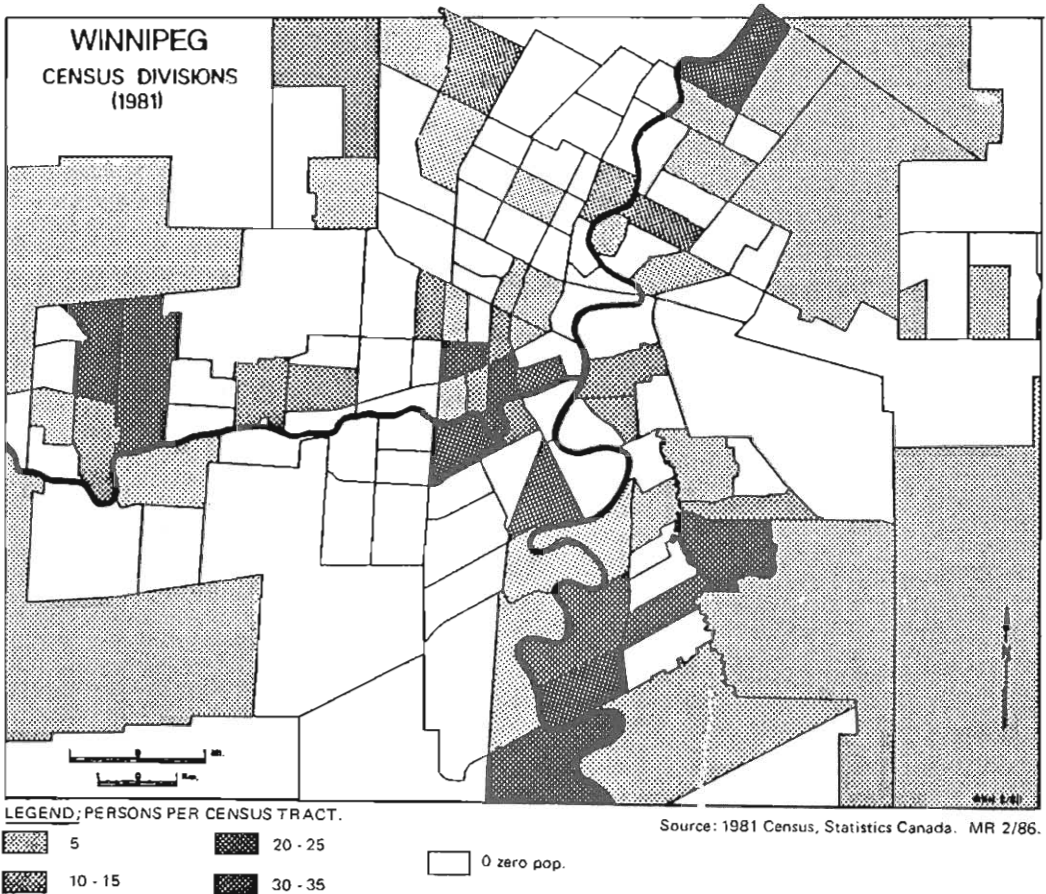
which was well supported by the Winnipeg Finns. In 1930, the Finnish women formed a gymnastics organization, followed by the men, who founded their own Finnish Mens Gymnastics and Sports Club later in the same year (Raivio 1975:77-78). From about 1930 to 1945, Finnish cultural activity was at its height in the city. While the two athletic clubs were formed in 1930, they soon amalgamated in 1931 to form the Finnish National Society of Winnipeg. There was a resident Finnish United Church minister in the city for a few years, and a communist group was active at this time. Following the Second World War, a turn-around in the operations of the Finnish National Society occurred. As young, new immigrants arrived from Finland, they took over leadership and the interests of the group. By 1963, this re-organization in the ranks of the Society was completed (Raivio 1975:81). Participation in various cultural activities declined after the War, as older members ceased to take part in organizational activities. This has been attributed to the strong feelings over organizational changes which occurred over time, involving different generations. Presently, the Finnish-Canadian Club of Winnipeg is active in the city, and draws many local Finns to various cultural and social activities, which are held most often at the Scandinavian Cultural Centre.

The Finnish Ethnic Group Sample

Winnipeg, the provincial capital of Manitoba, had a total population of 584,842 in 1981, of which some 640 persons belonged to the Finnish ethnic group (Census Canada 1981). Thus a very small proportion of Finns are encountered within the city, making up only 0.11 % of the entire city population. From examining the distribution of Finns at the census tract level, a very sporadic distribution is noted, which at the same time indicates a lack of ethnic segregation,

The city of Winnipeg was chosen for the study site because it has the largest concen-

Finnish Population Distribution.



tration of Finns in the province of Manitoba (Manitoba had a total of 1,060 Finns in 1981). Because no socio-demographic data was available for the study, a questionnaire was prepared in order to obtain primary information. A sample survey of 96 persons or heads of households, representing a total of 15 % of all local Finns was obtained. While in Winnipeg there are 640 individual Finns, the number of Finnish families is less, and ranges from 150-200 families. By contacting 96 families, a good proportion of Winnipeg Finns were covered by the survey.

Since the aim of the research is to examine language retention and its role in ethnic identity, the questionnaire concentrates on this issues along with other variables related

to culture. A total of 28 questions were used in the questionnaire, and covered areas in selfidentity, friends and neighbours, language, feelings towards language retention, children, ethnic media and communications, religion and other cultural features, marriage, education and income, as well as age and years of residence in Winnipeg.

The interviews were done in both the English and Finnish languages, and were conducted over the phone, usually lasting from 15-20 minutes. Overall, every respondent was very eager and willing to answer the questions. Of the 96 respondents interviewed, 52 preferred English while 44 preferred the Finnish language in corresponding with the author. The study sample was picked at

random from the membership list of the local Finnish-Canadian Club, along with some names which were found in the city's telephone directory.

While the methodology of the study concentrates on frequency distributions and cross-tabulation analyses, as well as a P.C. factor analysis with numerous tables, only the more significant and interesting findings will be discussed here, without the tabular presentations.

Knowledge and use of the Finnish Language and its Correlates.

In examining the knowledge of Finnish among the respondents, one must remember that responses to the interview questions are subjective, and only subjective evaluations were given by the respondents. Thus, the language knowledge of one respondent can be better or worse compared to another respondent, yet, self-evaluation of language knowledge can be interpreted differently by every respondent.

From the data collected, it became obvious that a good proportion of Winnipeg Finns have maintained a fluent knowledge of the Finnish language. Some 60.4 % were fluent, 28.1 % had some knowledge of Finnish, while 11.5 % had no knowledge of Finnish. In a more detailed examination on aspects of knowledge, comprehension ranked highest at 74.0 % of respondents understanding Finnish very well, while reading and writing very well was low at 54.2 % of all respondents. Similarly, no knowledge in reading and writing showed up with the highest percentages - at 18.8 %. From this it is obvious that understanding the Finnish language is inbred among respondents the best. This is understandable as comprehension is learned at an early age, while knowledge of reading and writing requires education. For respondents who have not had the chance of learning these in Finland prior to immigration or in a Finnish parochial school - none are available in Winnipeg, this aspect of knowledge remains at a disadvantage.

While it is noted that the ability to understand as well as speak the Finnish language is most widespread and indicates the presence of Finnish as being the mother tongue, this knowledge of language does not depend upon high levels of income nor education. In fact, where average family income was below \$ 20,000, and where the highest grade reached was below grade 12, a slightly higher degree of language knowledge occurs. This finding is further supported by the fact that the less-well-educated and lower income earners support the retention of the language more strongly than the higher socio-economic categories. Why this pattern occurs here, however, is not clearly determined. Perhaps, as indicated by O'Bryan (1976), it may be that an increasing income provides an opportunity for members to support language retention as a cultural heritage and as a useful tool, while in other situations it frees the group's members from dependence upon the ethnic community: thus reducing the need for language retention (O'Bryan 1976: 113). Whatever the reason, a clear difference is found in this aspect.

Of all respondents who are fluent in Finnish, over half of the sample (55.2 %) speak the language every day. Similarly, over 70 % of the respondents fluent in the language strongly support its maintenance and retention. Perhaps this is a reflection of a strong will which appears in the Finnish community and in the Finnish people to keep its own special language and heritage. Or perhaps it simply indicates a subconscious effort to carry on a language which is so different from all other language groups, that to lose the language would simply be to lose one's identity and roots. Age does not appear to be a factor in this matter, as over 77 % of all age categories are in favour of retaining the Finnish language.

Further retention of the language is maintained by the large number respondents who read Finnish literature, through contact with other in-group friends, and the general interaction amongst local and not-so-local Finns.

One of the best ways of retaining the language is reflected by the ethnic background of the spouse. Some 45 % of all married respondents had a Finnish spouse, 29.9 % had English-Canadian spouses, 22.9 % with spouses of other ethnic backgrounds, and only 2.4 % with French-Canadian spouses. The other ethnic groups represented by the spouses include three each from both German and Ukrainian backgrounds (6.9 % of total), followed by one each of American, Australian-Polish, Belgian, Chinese, Dutch, Filipino, Finno-Swedish, Italian, Japanese, Polish-Ukrainian, Slovak, South American Indian and Swedish backgrounds (16 % of total). Where the spouse of the respondent is Finnish, 69 % of the respondents use the language at home, while some 96 % of respondents who married to English-Canadians spoke English at home. Thus, where both parents are Finnish, the language mostly used is Finnish.

This in turn is passed on to the children, and is seen where over 90 % of respondents with one child have some level of Finnish language knowledge. Where two children were considered, 100 % of the children have some level of knowledge.

Ethnic self-identification was broken down to four categories, and respondents were asked whether they thought of themselves as being Finnish, Finnish-Canadian, Canadians of Finnish origin, or Canadian. Of the total sample, 8.3 % identified themselves as being Finnish, 35.4 % identified themselves as Finnish-Canadians, 36.6 % as Canadians of Finnish origin, and 19.7 % identified themselves strictly as Canadians.

The presence of a sauna in the Finnish community has become a symbol of Finnish identity, and prior to this study was believed to related strongly to ethnic self-identification. It was discovered that among the group identifying themselves as being Finnish, 50 % of the respondents own their own sauna. Overall, ownership ranged from 20 % to 50 % in all ethnic categories, with 41.2 % of Finnish-Canadians owning a sauna, and

interestingly, 36.8 % of Canadians owning one as well. It was not surprising to find 26.3 % of the Canadians as having no access to a sauna. This may be a reflection of the age of the respondent and/or the number of years as being a resident of the city. Older respondents claimed interest in saunas in years past, but can no longer attend due to health reasons or remoteness of residence in context to local access to a sauna. In the end, it is seen that the relation between the sauna and ethnic self-identification is not statistically significant, and ranks low in correlation ($R = 0.12$). However, a better sample size could reverse this insignificance.

Conclusions

The preceding research was conducted in order to examine the main patterns of Finnish language knowledge and use among the Finnish population of Winnipeg, and to ascertain whether there is a relationship between language retention and ethnic identification. The overall study has accomplished this objective, and is a small addition to previous studies done on the topic of language retention. This research thus adds to the more numerous studied ethnic groups of Canada, such as the Ukrainians, Germans and French.

It has generally been found that for many ethnic groups the survival of their ethnic heritage and culture - especially their own language - is a key concern which has both social and emotional impact (O'Bryan 1976: 165). This conclusion can also be made in regard to the Finnish ethnic group. While this research examines the Finnish population of Winnipeg and the important relation language retention plays upon ethnic identification and cohesion, a further examination on the subject in a much broader context would prove fascinating, while at the same time give more statistical significance to the findings. By studying the Finnish ethnic group more widely, relative comparisons could further identify differences between Finns and Scandinavians, as well as other

ethnic groups.

To study Finnish populations in major cities in countries such as Canada, United States, Australia, etc., would further demonstrate the importance of ethnic identity and cohesion as the two relate to various indicators of ethnicity - the greatest and most important of which is, without a doubt, the retention of the ethnic language.

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