

## The Role of Language Movements in the Migration Novel *Suomalaiset*

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*Данная работа рассматривает роль взаимодействия между языками в жизни мигрантов, описанную в романе американского автора Марка Мангера “Suomalaiset: People of the Marsh” (2004). Рассказывая о жизни финских мигрантов в США в начале XX века, Мангер уделяет большое внимание финскому и английскому языкам в их жизни. Финны в романе вынуждены выбирать между двумя языками и часто сталкиваются с необходимостью переходить с одного языка на другой, то есть переключаться. Целью анализа является выявление того, какую роль это переключение играет в жизни финских мигрантов, в частности, в таких аспектах, как языковая преданность, власть и социальная мобильность, которые в данном романе тесно взаимосвязаны с одним из языков, английским или финским, который выбирают мигранты.*

**Keywords:** migrants, Finns in the USA, language movements, identity

### 1 Introduction

The recent migration novel *Suomalaiset: People of the Marsh* (2004) by the North American author Mark Munger tells about the experiences of the Finns in the USA in the early 20th century. These people, torn between the ‘Old country’ and their new home, face the challengeable question of self-identification – whether they should maintain their sense of belonging to Finland or they should identify themselves with America. A great deal of attention is paid to the situations in which these settlers face the necessity to move between languages in their new environment. This situation is described by Søren Frank (2010: 39): “the migrant constantly oscillates between one nation and the next, between one culture and others, between languages”. So, this process of oscillation or switching becomes a common experience of the Finnish characters. Through this movement the Finns construct and express their identity. The migrants’ choice of language serves to demonstrate to the English-speaking environment whether the settlers identify themselves as Finlanders (as they are called in the novel) or Americans. In this paper I am going to study the role language movement plays

for the migrants' identities, in relation to three aspects – power, loyalty and social mobility.

*Suomalaiset* by Duluthian Mark Munger is a historical novel which tells about the experiences of Finnish migrants in the late 1910s in the USA. The author himself defines his text as fictional but notes that certain characters are based on real people living in the early 20th century (Munger 2004: 527). The narrative follows the lives of the young worker Anders Alhomaki and some of his Finnish friends. Munger pays a great deal of attention to their experiences of moving. Throughout the novel these Finns travel between different regions of the USA and switch between occupations and social classes. For these characters there is little stability and fixity; they are in transit. Such a situation is well described by Charles Lock (2010: 37) who relates migration and migration literature to nomadism which does not know any stability of address, and any fixed place called home. Lock (2010: 29) says that “movement must be the implicit theme of migration literature, and is usually explicitly so”. At the same time in *Suomalaiset* the Finns' identities are constructed as in-between and mobile because of the settlers' travelling and residing between two countries and cultures. Crang (1998: 115) notes that in mass culture America was often portrayed as a place that privileged mobility – constant travelling and not being at home. As a result, “identity in America meant the feeling of freedom and not having to have a home” (Crang 1998: 115). Thus, in *Suomalaiset* the mobility of the Finns leads to the mobility of their identities. The migrants' new environment makes them to abandon the ‘Old country’ and (at least, in public) identify themselves with America; at the same time some settlers do not want or cannot become ‘proper’ Americans. In the novel studied this situation finds reflection in the Finns' oscillation between languages.

## **2 Language Movements and Identity in the Novel**

Hoenselaars (1997: 91–92) notes that the concept of identity has two basic meanings: sameness and difference. The former indicates the similarity between various objects or persons. The latter marks where a person differs from others (Hoenselaars 1997: 92). Joep Leerssen (1999: 390) emphasizes the imaginary character of identity and views it as a matter of projection and seeing. “Identity is not what you are, but what you are perceived to be or how you perceive yourself to be, image and self-image” (Leerssen 1999: 390). In the novel studied the

identity of the Finnish migrants is also represented in terms of their images seen by the Americans and the self-images the Finns construct in their new country.

Language and identity are tightly intertwined with each other. According to Ronald Wardhaugh (2007: 6), language is a profound indicator of identity, ethnicity or social position. Thus, in the novel studied Finnish and English are often represented as markers signifying the characters' Finnishness and Americanness, and their belonging to Finland and the USA. Through speaking these languages in different situations the migrants express their identities and solidarity with or distance from the Finns and Americans. As David Crystal (1997: 42) notes, language can be used not only to identify with a certain social group, but also to separate oneself from it. In *Suomalaiset* there is also the phenomenon described by Wardhaugh (1988: 5) who points out that with change of language may come a shift in nationality or identity. He writes that immigrants in the USA often willingly surrender their mother tongue in their quest for a new identity (1988: 5). These words describe the situation in the novel in which there are the characters who avoid Finnish in favor of English in order to become Americans. At the same time through the maintenance of their Finnish language other migrants seek to preserve their original sense of self in the host country which can serve as the example of "language loyalty" introduced by Joshua Fishman (1966: 21–22).

According to Crystal (1997: 42), a multilingual person can switch from one language to another to signal their different identities. This phenomenon exists in *Suomalaiset* in which the Finns are put in-between their mother tongue and English, and express the projection of their identities through switching between languages. Their new country wants them to be Americanized, which presumes that the migrants will (at least, publicly) identify themselves with the USA, use English as a marker of this identification, and conceal non-American identities as something suspicious and unpatriotic. As Ronald Wardhaugh (1988: 254) describes this phenomenon, the languages other than English often are viewed in the USA as "un-American", while English is portrayed as the "natural" language of the country, and the language that all of those who live there should master as soon as possible. In *Suomalaiset* some migrants are ashamed of their original non-American ethnicity and identity. As one of the characters says, "I am only half-Finn, thank God" (Munger 2004: 365). So, to express their sameness with Americans, to conceal their Finnish identity, and to construct their image as patriotic and loyal citizens, these people avoid their mother tongue as "gibberish" (Munger 2004: 397), use English in any situation, and sometimes force other

settlers to do so. For instance, they can forbid their children to speak Finnish: “Now I’m ready,” Elin said in Finnish [...]. “Your father would tan your behind if he heard you speaking Suomi” (Munger 2004: 60). For these migrants to live in America means to “speak American” (Munger 2004: 380). So, through language Americanized Finns seek to express their new identity as comprising the sameness with Americans and the difference from those less assimilated Finns who still speak their mother tongue. As Wardhaugh (2007: 116) writes, the choice of a language or dialect on a particular occasion indicates how people wish others to view them. Thus, by preferring English in the situations, when Finnish may also be used, some migrants in *Suomalaiset* demonstrate their desire to be perceived not as “Finlanders” but as Americans.

On the other hand, the majority of the characters in the novel speak both Finnish and English, and switch between them to mark either Finnish or American identities. Their lives become a field of linguistic clash and competition. Munger (2004: 301) portrays this competition in the following way: “Kinkkonen’s mind raced. Thoughts collided. English words battled Finnish for supremacy as he attempted to sort out what it was he wanted to say”. The situation of two identities of the migrants is described by Toivonen (1999: 102) who notes that the Finns in the USA were forced, at least, superficially to be both Finns and Americans. In certain occasions the characters speak Finnish to express their solidarity with other Finns and demonstrate their shared belonging to the ‘Old country’. For instance, they can use their mother tongue as a secret language unifying them in the non-Finnish environment or in the face of threat.

*This doesn’t look good*, Olli Kinkkonen thought.

[...] “They’re here to sack me,” Kinkkonen replied quietly.

“What?”

“I’ve heard talk [...],” Kinkkonen continued in Finnish (Munger 2004: 379–380).

In some circumstances the Finns switch to English to assure the Americanizing environment of their being Americans or to conceal their Finnishness in order to avoid accusations of disloyalty to the new home. Thus, their constant language movements construct their sense of self as hybrid Finnish American.

This phenomenon of moving between two languages is close to diglossia. According to Ronald Wardhaugh (2007: 89; 1988: 17), a diglossic situation exists in a society or a social group, which has two distinct codes (languages, dialects or varieties) with clear functional separation. One code is used in one set of

circumstances and the other in entirely different set. Diglossia also presumes some hierarchy of the codes: people attach prestige and power to a “high” one and value it over a “low” one (Wardhaugh 2007: 90). In multilingual society through using one or another language in different situations people can gain and maintain their status (Chambers 1999: 10). Thus, in the novel English and Finnish have different functions and positions for the migrants. Their mother tongue is reserved for their in-group (those Finns who do not avoid Finnish), while English is used as a lingua franca in communication with the out-group such as the Americans, migrants of other nationalities and Americanized Finns. At the same time there is a hierarchy of languages for the settlers in *Suomalaiset*: English serves as a high code of power, prestige and citizenship, while Finnish is perceived by some characters as a low code associated with immigration, lack of influence, and lesser social position. The same hierarchy concerns the issue of identity. Some migrants value their American identity over Finnish one. In the novel this diglossic process of switching between languages and, consequently, signaling different identities is closely intertwined with such aspects of the migrants’ lives as power, loyalty, and social mobility. Their English-speaking environment encourages the settlers to be Americanized, to speak English and to identify themselves with their new country by offering better opportunities to those who turn into Americans. Under these circumstances, the Finns in the novel switch to English and signal their Americanness to become more influential, to express loyalty to the USA in order to raise their status in the host society, and, consequently, to obtain better chances of upward social mobility.

### **3 Language Movements and Power in the Novel**

According to Ronald Wardhaugh (2007: 103), in bilingual society the deliberate choice of certain language can become a move to gain or resist power. Although Wardhaugh refers mainly to bilingual countries such as Canada, his notion can be used for the situation in *Suomalaiset*. The Finnish community speaks both Finnish and English, so through the choice of language the migrants may express a certain identity, American or not, to empower themselves. The American society in the USA gives more influence to those Finnish migrants who openly identify themselves with their new home. So, to publicly express their belonging to the USA, maintain their higher position in society, and demonstrate their power to the newcomers, the Americanized settlers (comprising mainly the upper classes of the diaspora) deliberately speak English with other Finnish migrants and force them also not to use their mother tongue. In some cases the less influential and

less Americanized settlers (who generally speak both languages depending on the situation) obey and switch to English in order to (symbolically) conceal their Finnishness. For instance, the protagonist, the miner Anders Alhomaki, has to avoid his mother tongue, declare Finnish as something shameful and low, and apologize for speaking it when he is in the mansion of the prominent Finnish businessman who can also speak this language but who declares himself to be American, and prefers English only.

“I hope so, ma’am [...],” Anders confided, replied nervously in their native tongue.  
“Oh, Anders, please don’t speak Finnish,” Elin interjected. “Father will explode if you speak Suomi.”  
“Sorry. It was inadvertent lapse, a bad habit from working in the mines [...],” he said apologetically, reverting to English (Munger 2004: 65–66).

At the same time in the novel there are situations when Finnish is used by some migrants as a means to resist this influence, and express their solidarity with the Finns in the face of challenge or threat to them. As Ronald Wardhaugh (2007: 31) writes, “a feeling of solidarity can lead people to preserve a local dialect or an endangered language to resist power, or to insist on independence”. For some migrants the deliberate choice of Finnish in dialogue with the influential Americanized Finns can be a way to oppose their will. There is a situation when two Finns, one a striker and low-paid worker, and the other an American patriot and prominent businessman, can speak both English and Finnish, but defiantly do not use the same language in their dialogue. The more influential migrant is imposing his power, distancing from the Finns, and expressing his self-image as American. The less influential one is resisting by the use of his mother tongue.

“You Kinkkonen?” Laine asked in English [...]  
“Wirta,” Kinkkonen insisted [...] “I am Olli Wirta,” he added in Finnish.  
“Don’t speak Suomi. For Chris [sic] sake, you’re in America. Speak American,” Laine rebuked. [...] “Show me [...] some legal document [...]”  
“I have no need of such documents”, Kinkkonen responded defiantly in Finnish.  
Laine’s eyes stared hard at the belligerent dockworker.  
“Then I guess you’ll have to work elsewhere [...] Draft-dodgers are not welcome in my father’s employ” (Munger 2004: 380–381).

Then another Finnish worker feeling the injustice of the situation stops to speak English (as he did before) but instead also uses his mother tongue to challenge the power and to express his solidarity with the resisting Finn. Finnish becomes a means to demonstrate the defying identity which comprises either social position

(both men are low-paid workers) or Finnishness. This effort of resistance is faced with the threats and once again the order to speak the ‘proper’ language.

“You have no right to treat a man this way,” Peltoma shouted as Laine withdrew [...] “Olli has worked hard for you, done all he was asked,” Peltoma added in Finnish. “Watch yourself, sir. Or you too will be looking for a job. And for God’s sake, speak American,” the young man added stubbornly [...] (Munger 2004: 381).

On the whole, in the novel Finnish and American identities are interwoven with the issue of power. The environment empowers those migrants who identify themselves with the USA and express their belonging. These people cannot eliminate their original Finnish ethnicity and identity altogether, but they symbolically conceal them by the deliberate choice of English in the situations which allow bilingualism. By this switching some settlers seek to distance themselves from other Finnish migrants, and to demonstrate their power over them. Facing this imposition, the characters either obey and speak English, or use their mother tongue as a means to resist the oppressors’ influence and express the shared identity with the oppressed.

#### **4 Language Movements and Loyalty in the Novel**

In *Suomalaiset* switching between languages is also closely connected to the issue of loyalty which is important for the Finnish migrants. The novel is set in 1917 when because of WWI the American society forced the immigrants of various nationalities to express their patriotism to the new country. In that period the Finns also faced the necessity to demonstrate their loyalty to the USA (Ross 1982: 145). This situation is reflected in *Suomalaiset* where the American society demand the settlers to publicly identify themselves with their new home, and avoid to openly express belonging to other countries. Under such circumstances, some migrants seek to create their image as ‘proper’ patriots in order to be accepted and approved by the Americans. “It’s time we [...] prove to the American people that Finns are hard-working, loyal, trustworthy citizens” (Munger 2004: 145). Some of them use their movements between languages and identities for that purpose. Their environment perceives the migrants’ speaking English as patriotic and American, while Finnish or bilingualism is viewed as something disloyal. As Einar Haugen describes the specificity of the role of English in the USA (1964: 10), “Americans have tended to take it for granted that foreigners should acquire English, and [...] failure to do so was evidence by implication of a kind of disloyalty to the basic principles of American life”. Ronald Wardhaugh

(1988: 251) adds that bilingualism in the USA has often been regarded suspicious since it suggests divided loyalty or at least not the full devotion to America.

In the novel some Finnish characters move from their mother tongue to English in order to express their new American identity and, therefore, their loyalty. For them living in the USA and being citizens means speaking English only and, consequently, identifying themselves with Americans. As one of the settlers, a patriotic businessman, said (deliberately in English) to his Finnish employees: “[...] You’re in America. Speak American” (Munger 2004: 380). At the same time these loyalists avoid their mother tongue and force others to do so. Although both sides understand Finnish, the Finnish American patriots and other migrants switch to English in dialogue: the former want to express their belonging to the USA and impose power through such aggressive measures; the latter obey this power and move from one language to another in some form of identity mimicry – to signal that they also are Americans, and to conceal their Finnishness when it is necessary.

“Can I help you?” Charles Talonen said in Finnish [...]  
“Speak English”, a gruff male voice said. [...]  
“It’s after midnight,” Talonen said in English. (Munger 2004: 394–395).

The loyalist Finns view speaking Finnish in public as a marker of the migrants’ non-patriotism and disloyalty. In these situations they openly criticize the fellow Finns for “talking gibberish” (Munger 2004: 397).

“Who are you?” Kinkkonen muttered [...] “What the hell are you doing in my room?” he asked in Finnish.  
“Stop talking gibberish,” a man’s voice reprimanded. “Speak English [...]” (Munger 2004: 394–395; 397).

When the so-called Finnish American patriots prepare to lynch the “slacker”, the Finnish socialist, who is regarded disloyal, they view his speaking Finnish as one of his unpatriotic punishable deeds the same as his the protest against the war or escape from the draft.

“Why are you doing this to me?” the captive asked in Finnish.  
“The Knights of Liberty ask the questions. Stop speaking Finnish. It’s not going to go well for you, in any event. Why antagonize us further by speaking gibberish?” (Munger 2004: 407).



Thus, in the novel in which the war policy of the USA demands American patriotism from the migrants of all nationalities and ethnicities, switching between languages becomes a matter of great significance for the Finnish settlers. Through the choice of English in dialogue, which allows bilingualism, some Finns seek to express their solidarity with the Americans, identify themselves as belonging to their new home and demonstrate their loyalty. As Ronald Wardhaugh (2007: 104) notes, in multilingual environment through the change of language one can seek to redefine the situation – for instance, to express we-type solidarity with the in-group. By deliberately speaking English with the Finnish settlers, the Americanized patriotic Finns wish to signal their own belonging to the USA and to distance themselves from the newcomers speaking mainly Finnish. However, the majority of the settlers do not abandon their mother tongue and, thus, Finnish identity altogether but express hybrid Finnish American identity through the use of both languages. They speak English in public to demonstrate their loyalty but also continue to use Finnish within their in-group.

## **5 Language Movements and Social Mobility**

In *Suomalaiset* the central Finnish characters are portrayed as demonstrating a significant degree of occupational and social mobility. Throughout the novel they switch between different workplaces in their new country. At the same time this process is also connected to their movements between languages and identities which play a crucial role for the working Finns as a factor of success or failure.

As Virtanen (1997: 118) notes, in the early 20th century many Finnish migrants did not intend to learn English, since they did not expect to stay long in the USA. But as the time passed, their return to Finland became less and less likely. Settlers had to concentrate around certain workplaces such as mines or lumber camps because there already were other Finns, and the fluency in English was not required. “Language alone was reason enough why the workers in the mines clustered by nationality” (Taramaa 2007: 133). They had to compete with other migrants for better jobs. According to Virtanen (1997: 119), these situations led to strengthening of the Finnish settlers’ sense of identity. “The Finns wanted to maintain their Finnishness in nationality and language even in the mines, mills and lumber camps” (Taramaa 2007: 133). Thus, their work helped them to maintain their original identity in the USA.

This situation is represented in *Suomalaiset* where certain occupations and workplaces are linguistically marked as Finnish. As the protagonist puts it, there are mines where “[...] you either speak Finn or Serbo-Croatian. Only a few men speak English, and most of that’s impossible to understand” (Munger 2004: 66). There the orders from the superiors also come in Finnish. ““Let’s give Old Blue and Little Bob a hand”, Maki insisted, naming the horses in the process of directing his men in Finnish” (Munger 2004: 152). Among their countrymen the Finns are in the familiar environment and can speak their mother tongue freely and do not have to conceal their original ethnicity and identity. So, in the novel the migrants’ Finnishness expressed in terms of language is preserved in these workplaces.

On the other hand, some occupations of the Finnish migrants are marked as English or bilingual. The settlers have to use the language of their new country, and can speak Finnish only in situations when their work demands interaction with other Finns. For instance, in cafes visited by the migrants bilingualism becomes a part of the employees’ common experience.

As the waitress turned towards Andrew Maki [sic], the logger inadvertently smiled [...]  
“May I help you?” she asked in English.  
“I’d like dinner,” Andrew Maki replied in Finnish. [...]  
“I’m sorry, but the kitchen is closed,” she advised, speaking their language without hesitation. (Munger 2004: 157).

In other cases the migrants have to conceal their mother tongue and speak English only, since their American employers view the workers’ use of Finnish as a sign of suspiciousness and untrustworthiness. This situation can be explained by Ronald Wardhaugh (2007: 108), who says that in certain Western societies speakers of English give less credit to those who speak “exotic” languages. In *Suomalaiset* Finnish in the American environment is perceived as exotic and inferior, and the use (even occasional) can harm the migrants’ opportunities of better career. Even the protagonist’s Canadian friend, who offers Alhomaki a job in his company, is annoyed by the settler’s Finnish and expresses some doubts about his reliability. “I hate it when you talk gibberish,” McAdams said, a touch of annoyance to his voice. “Mr. Maki, I’m not sure I can trust you” (Munger 2004: 138).

In the novel the social mobility of the Finns is also connected to their transit between languages and identities. Some workplaces accept their mother tongue, and

the migrants' Finnishness is safe there; others make them to be bilingual or use English only to signal their Americanization. The more the settlers speak English, the more they demonstrate their belonging to the USA through the choice of language, the better opportunities they may be offered. On the whole, this situation leads either to the gradual loss of their Finnishness in favor of Americanness or to the hybrid Finnish American identity. Through the process of switching between languages the migrants have to conceal the Finnish part of their identity at work and signal the American one to mark their trustworthiness and, thus, to be more successful in their social mobility.

## 6 Conclusions

In *Suomalaiset* language movements play important role in the lives of Finnish migrants. In their new environment English brings more opportunities, so they have to switch to it. At the same time this process is connected to the issue of self-identification. The Finns' position in-between Finland and the USA, and their language movements produce the migrants' identities as mobile and hybrid, comprising both Finnishness and Americanness. Thus, by speaking a certain language in different situations the settlers can signal one identity and conceal another, and mark themselves as either Finns or Americans. In *Suomalaiset* this expression through English or Finnish serves them as a means to get more power, demonstrate their loyalty and get better opportunities for social mobility in their new environment or to resist others' influence and establish solidarity with the fellow Finnish migrants.

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