

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Hey everybody, I'm joined here today by Mirva Johnson, a PhD candidate in Scandinavian Folklore with minors in Linguistics and Curriculum and Instruction. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to talk with me.

Mirva Johnson

Yeah, no, thanks for having me!

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Yeah, so you're involved in a lot of different projects and fields of study. Could you just give us a brief overview of yourself by explaining what languages you teach and study, why these particular languages, and then a little bit about your educational background as it relates to these areas?

Mirva Johnson

Yeah, definitely. So a lot of my research is focused on Finnish American linguistic and cultural change. And so I'm especially interested in Finnish American language and folklore. I have taught beginning Finnish and Swedish classes here at UW. And Finnish, I'm interested in Finnish in the first place, because I'm a heritage speaker of Finnish myself and I grew up visiting family in Finland. But I wasn't a part of the Finnish American community in the upper Midwest. So this is a new area of research for me. And so I think that's part of why I'm really excited about it. And I've also taught beginning Swedish classes, in part because for the MA program here, I needed to learn another Scandinavian language. And I chose Swedish because it is one of the official languages of Finland, it's recognized as a minority language. And because there was extensive contact between Finland and Sweden, prior to Finnish independence. So basically everyone in Finland learns Swedish in school. And it's a very useful research language when you're focusing on Finnish. So that's part of why I got involved with teaching Swedish. And before I came to Wisconsin, I did my undergrad in linguistics and history. So I've always been interested in language and language change how it relates to social factors.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, yeah. And like you were saying just at the end, I'm really intrigued by your study of post-vernacular Finnish. I don't know, too many people are familiar with that concept. Could you just explain briefly what that is and why it's relevant to the Finnish speaking population in general, and especially here in Wisconsin?

Mirva Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. So typically, a heritage language speaking community will eventually shift to speaking the dominant language over time. But rather than disappearing entirely, often, the role and value of the heritage language can shift from being communicative to symbolic or shift to become a post-vernacular language. So it becomes more of a marker of connection to a shared past. And that gets performed by using the words of the heritage language, but also through visual symbols, of particular words and music, or like on bumper stickers or other ways. So it's

basically, it's shifting the role of the language from everyday communication to a marker of the heritage.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

And I know you work pretty extensively with a population up in Oulu, Wisconsin, even teaching some summer language courses. Could you just give us a 30-second overview of Oulu's, linguistic history and how they engage in this post vernacular use of the language and then just a little bit about the work you've done with them out there?

Mirva Johnson

Yeah. So Oulu, Wisconsin, basically, they became a township in 1904, and they're settled predominantly by Finnish immigrants. Population, at its height in the 1920s, was around 1,000 people, but today, it's closer to 500. And it's a little easier for me to tell you the story of how I got up there. So basically, I first went up to conduct interviews with heritage speakers of Finnish a few years ago. And while I was there, I heard that their Heritage Center, the place where I was conducting the interviews, runs a summer camp style, summer school, focused on local history and culture. And so I asked if I could help out, in part to thank them for their generosity with their time. And so they asked if I could teach the kids some basic Finnish. And so I did that for a couple summers and teaching Finnish in that community in particular was really more about teaching the local history and cultural components, rather than just the language, that is very much a part of the local history and interest that they had in the program. And so I did that for a couple summers, and I've been helping out since doing with Finnish, but also with other parts of their folk arts and other other things. So in terms of vernacular language, in particular, there's clear — the Heritage Center is very committed to celebrating Oulu history and honoring the diversity of backgrounds in the region. And you can still see Finnish flags on their welcome rock and other welcome signs in the community, as well as on different t-shirts and bumper stickers and you'll see words like *Sisu*, which is the Finnish word meaning kind of like perseverance in the face of adversity. And that's, that's something you see in a lot of Finnish American communities. So that's just a lot of these symbolic things that a visitor who's familiar with Finnish American traditions would see it and say, *Oh, that's, that's Finnish American*. So they definitely have some of those symbols, but also, others, like they have some Swedish flags and some other markers. There are the Finnish symbols, but then there's also other other markers of -- they're definitely making a point to be inclusive, in their honoring of Oulu history.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure. And I know that Oulu isn't the only place in the state where you can find people who are interested in the Finnish language and culture. I know Milwaukee is just, you know, due to their size, but also a lot of other factors they have a pretty active Finnish community. Can you talk a little bit about maybe what Milwaukee does as well as you know, are there other areas across the state that might have a sizable or significant population of speakers or those interested in the culture?

Mirva Johnson

Yeah. So in Milwaukee, I've worked a bit with their Finnish American Society of Milwaukee in particular, and they put a lot of work into creating programming that's of interest to folks. Part of the community, and a lot of it's about talks, but also music and a chance to gather, spend time with one another. And so but they also have, they've had a "Finn Kids" club there. And so there's also definitely an interest in trying to get the younger generation interested at least in Finnish heritage and also aware of the possibilities that there are in the state for learning Finnish and possibly studying abroad or going and doing language classes in Finland, for example. But then, in terms of the state in general, most of the majority of Finnish immigrants actually went up to northern Wisconsin, and so a lot of communities in northern Wisconsin are where you'll find markers are where you'll find folks with Finnish heritage and even town names that are Finnish so you get Oulu for example, but also so closer to Minnesota, you have Maple, Brule, we know Oulu, Marengo, even Washburn have a pretty strong Finnish settlement. Closer to the border with the U.P. in Iron Belt, Saxon, and Hurley, Oma pretty strong settlements there. And then there's also a little bit farther south Merrill, especially Brantwood had a pretty sizable Finnish communities through through the 50s.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

That's so interesting. So it's like niche knowledge, but it's just so cool to learn about all the different languages in our state. You also do some pretty incredible work with website design and film and other digital projects. I'll be sure to leave a couple links below if people want to check out some of that work. But could you just talk maybe about what you've done with a couple projects, highlight a few resources. I know, CSUMC has a Teachers of Local Cultures website that people might find really interesting to check out, but just, yeah, a couple things that you worked on that you're proud of?

Mirva Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. So I guess one, the big thing to highlight if you're interested in Finns in Wisconsin, Oulu in particular, for my MA thesis, I worked with the Oulu Cultural Heritage Center to create a short documentary film about the creation of their Heritage Center, but also about the history of the community in general. So that's probably linked below. But then in terms of other resources, I personally believe strongly in the Wisconsin Idea and doing research that's of interest and benefit to the Wisconsin community. And so I worked with the Wisconsin Humanities Council to create content for the website for their traveling exhibition, Immigrant Journeys From South of the Border. And so that has a lot of fantastic information there. And then yeah, like you said, CSUMC's website has some great information as well as the Wisconsin Languages Project. And yeah, I think those are the best, best spots I would point you to for sure.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

And before we go, are there any Finnish saying that you think are particularly powerful or beautiful or just anything you'd like to share with us in the language before we head out?

Mirva Johnson

Yeah, this may or may not be what you're going for. But my favorite word in Finnish I always love to teach people is Mörkö, and it's my favorite. So I first heard it as a kid. It's a character in this Moomin series. It's basically, if you know anything about, Finns love Moomin, let's just put it that way. It's a cartoon kind of character. Google it. It's great. But anyway, the point is, I always thought that the word sounded really scary and threatening because of the character in the show. And but so not only is the word really fun to say with this, like strong rolled r and the o, but it's cool. I always thought it was cool for me how the particular combination of sounds can evoke particular emotions that often get lost in translation. So it kind of it's, for me, it's always kind of represented, like, why it's cool to be aware and to learn different languages and like, how, how distinctive those can be.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Yeah, it's fascinating. I so wish I could roll my Rs, so might not be able to pronounce it. But it sounds really cool. I really appreciate you for just sharing a little bit about your work. I know, prior to speaking with you, I didn't really know much about the Finnish or Swedish speakers and culture in Wisconsin. So I think a lot of people will find it interesting. And I'll be sure to leave a couple of those resources and projects in the transcript. But thank you so much for all your time.

Mirva Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.