Discursive Displays of Authentic Finnishness in the "Finnish American Nesting Place"

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The objectification of language is central to displays of Finnish American identity in Michigan’s Keweenaw Peninsula, marketed as the "Finnish American nesting place." Individuals rely on discursive, metadiscursive, and multimodal practices to claim "Finnishness." The significance of language in defining 'Finnish American' and locating it in the Keweenaw is evident in souvenirs, websites, naming practices, and in particular, activities and events at folk festivals. Meanings associated with these practices are reinforced and legitimized through historical and census records, folkways, the use of Finnish, and references to Finnish texts and folklore. Individuals who do not claim Finnish American identities recognize this speech community, where it is located, and what it means to be 'Finnish American' through linguistic and metalinguistic awareness, especially enregistered features such as yah, sisu, and the shibboleth sauna. While enregisterment and related levels of indexicality are key in the performance and recognition of these symbolic practices (Beal 2009; Johnstone 2010; Purnell, Raimy, & Salmons 2009), historical processes also link Finnish American identity, language use, and the Keweenaw, for it is historicity that legitimates these connections (Milroy 2002). Thus, historical, discursive, and ideological processes contribute to the creation of this speech community, one defined by the idea of an authentic identity that is located in language specific to a place.

References


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