

## Re: Learning a language

**Source:** <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2004-06/1022.html>

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**Date:** 06/16/04

Date: Wed, 16 Jun 2004 06:03:13 +0300

In article <40CEF95E.1A4D@worldnet.att.net>, "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net> wrote:

<deletions>

>

> *The way you've been approaching pidgins and AAVE doesn't have its roots*

> *in Labov, that's for sure.*

Now that we've waxed all nostalgic about our shared Cornell past, what is your intake on the following situation from the Cornell area?

About twelve miles due south of Ithaca there is a town called van Etten. Its Dutch-looking name notwithstanding, a significant percentage of the inhabitants of the town are descendants of Finnish immigrants from Ostrobothnia (Western mid-coastal Finland) who settled there during the early 20th century (for details, see <http://www.fingerlakesfinns.org/>).

Almost all of the inhabitants of van Etten, whether of Finnish descent or not, speak what could be initially characterized as a local, heavily anglicized variant of Finnish. Its grammatical structure is clearly Finnish, even if study of its details reveals this to be that of illiterate 19th century Ostrobothnian rural Finnish, not that of the current literary language. Its lexicon, but not its phonology, has been restructured towards English:

Van Etton Finnish (VEF) English etymon Standard Finnish (SF)

karpitsi garbage roska

peipipukki baby-buggy lastenvaunut

portsi porch kuisti

pussia to push työntää

rouata to throw heittää

Most current native speakers of Standard Finnish are fluent in English, and they would understand it, even if they would regard it as a hilarious-sounding (VEF mun komia akka 'my beautiful wife'/SF kaunis vaimoni 'my beautiful wife'; mun [colloquial register] 'my', komea 'magnificent', akka 'hag'), corrupt, illiterate-sounding, English-permeated version of their language.

This local patois functions in van Etten as a widely used code language and it has attained some status because it has enabled the local basketball team to win several New York state championships (although they were once crushingly defeated in interstate competition by a team from New Jersey, where the local patois was American Estonian. Estonian is phonologically more innovative than Finnish, with many originally unstressed syllables having been lost due to phonetic attrition, for which reason speakers of Estonian understand Finnish more easily than vice versa).

In any case, van Etten Finnish, which I shall refer to in the following as Vanettenese, arose from transplanted, dialectal varieties of Finnish, first as a code (or vernacular norm) to indicate ethnic identity, later as a local code language with virtually no input from Standard Finnish but a major input from the locally spoken English, that can be used, among other things, to indicate local loyalty. It is nobody's native language. The few native speakers of Standard Finnish in the area have to learn Vanettenese as a new and foreign code, just as native speakers of English in Papua New Guinea have to learn Tok Pisin. Conversely, the local Finnish church, which maintains links with the Finnish Lutheran Church and thus ensures that there is a constant presence of native speakers of Standard Finnish in the area, conducts its services in Standard Finnish, which a decreasingly small number of speakers of Vanettenese really understand or are interested in.

In my understanding, Vanettense is an independent offshoot of the dialectal Finnish of several generations ago that was transplanted to an area where English was the dominant language and which evolved into a structurally simplified, functionally limited jargon that was used first between native speakers of Finnish and the English speakers, who knew or had learned some Finnish, with which they interacted. Eventually it assumed the status that it has now of a code that is too far from Standard Finnish to be regarded as simply a localized variant. Simply stated, Vanettenese is a linguistic code in which a subset of 19th century rural Finnish grammatical structure and segmental phonology have amalgated with American English lexicon, suprasegmental phonology, and pragmatics. Vanettenese is nobody's native language, and the primary reason for using it is to show local loyalty to van Etten; it is not a symbol of Finnish heritage or sympathy for things Finnish.

Vanettenese, did not arise in a slave or plantation culture, like a paradigmatic pidgin. Nevertheless, it is the consequence of the transplantation of one variety of a language and some of its speakers to a new environment, and of the subsequent efforts of these speakers, most of them first generation subsistence farmers and lumberjacks, professions of low social status and with a strict delineation of gender roles, to communicate with the English speakers, generally of higher social status, in the locality to which they moved.

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What methodological objection do you have to calling Vanettenese a Finnish-based pidgin? Does it have anything to do with the fact that the social environment in which the interaction between the two speech communities involved was not characterized by the degree of social distance that accompanies the evolution of the paradigmatic pidgins? And if so, how do you regard Russenorsk, a pidgin that arose along the Arctic coast between Norwegian and Russian-speaking fishermen? Why does Russenorsk qualify as a pidgin (according to Holm 1988), but not Vanettenese?

Regards,  
Eugene Holman