

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRON RANGE DIALECT IN NORTHERN MINNESOTA

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William Labov has demonstrated that "one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occurs" (1972 : 3) and certainly the Iron Range of Northern Minnesota is no exception¹. It is composed of three ranges: the Vermilion, the Mesabi, and the Cuyuna. All three are located in the northeastern third of Minnesota, primarily in St. Louis County. Iron ore first was shipped from Tower, Minnesota, in 1882 from the Vermilion Range. By 1900 operations had increased and the desire for cheap labor forced the mining companies to import large numbers of immigrants from Europe. Until 1929 there was a thriving lumber industry which also brought in large numbers of immigrants. Few places on earth have changed as much in as short of period of time as the Iron Range. It moved from a pristine, heavily forested area before the 1880's to a timberless one with huge open pit mines and mountains of tailings and low grade ore from the mines. The lives of the people have changed as much as that of the land.

In the 1800's the Iron Range had been ignored by westward-migrating Americans looking for farm lands because of the dense forests, rocky land and foreboding blizzards. As a result, there was no base of English speaking residents in the area when the rich iron ore deposits were discovered and began to be mined in the 1890's. Most of the immigrants who were sought and persuaded to work in the mines and lumber camps were non-English speaking Europeans. There were few native speakers during the settlement period. Even today, the majority of Rangers are descended from non-English speaking ethnic groups, Finnish being the largest with 13.5%, followed by German with 11.9% and

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Swedish with 11%. Less than 8% are descended from English and Irish (Laundergan *et al.*, 1977). The number of languages and dialects spoken on the Range during the settlement period had been estimated as high as forty-three (Kalibabky, 1978).

When the mines were first being developed, there was a large number of non-English speaking immigrants working for a small number of English speaking bosses. At this time the workers created a foreign or immigrant workers' speech, not unlike that of a plantation pidgin. Like pidgin speakers, these immigrants were actively excluded from the social life of the English speaking supervisors by the caste system of the locations.

However, their situation also differed from that of plantation slaves. They were allowed to create their own social organizations and, eventually, were able to organize unions. Most important, they had the hope of, and aspiration for, moving into the main stream of American life. To do this, the immigrant worker desperately needed to learn English. Since the mines did not provide formal English instruction, the workers were forced to learn it from their environment. Because native English speakers and immigrants who gained a good command of English were placed in supervisory positions, the contact between native English speakers, or even fluent immigrant speakers of English, with the non-English speaking immigrants was minimal in the mining locations² and lumber camps. Because English had to be learned and little or no formal education was available, a foreign-influenced English developed, in a manner similar to that of pidgins and creoles as described by Whinnom (1971). English became the target language with the non-English languages becoming the substrate languages. Thus in a work crew composed of a Finn, a Serb, a Swede, a Russian, and an Italian, each worker would be forced either to learn all of the other languages or to use English as a second language. (Here it should be pointed out that, according to many old timers, the work crews were usually composed of mixed ethnic groups. That way less time was spent talking and more work got done. Later, this same segregation hindered the organization of unions.) The English of these first immigrants was restricted and used primarily at work or for obtaining necessities in the community at large. The home language used for most social activities was the native language. As a result, most immigrants married within their own language groups. Of course, most of the social organizations, including the churches, were conducted in the various non-English languages of the immigrants.

While this workers' speech is difficult to reconstruct because of the numerous varieties of English that were spoken, some generalizations about it

² A location was small company owned town built around a mine. Everything in it, including the police and fire departments were owned by the mining company.

can be made from interviews with speakers born at or before the turn of the century. Most members of this group of immigrants workers can be identified as to their ethnic origin or native language. However, some linguistic features seem to be shared by all, or most of, the groups.

1. LEXICAL FEATURES OF THE IMMIGRANT GROUP

As is to be expected, a great many terms from the immigrants' native languages that referred to items, values, or traditions brought from their native countries were incorporated into the various workers' versions of English. Household items were usually referred to in the native language, as were native foods. Also, each ethnic group had its own terms of abuse for other ethnic groups or for an unpopular foreman. Thus a Slovenian might refer to an unpopular crew boss as a *chwar* and a Finn might describe the same boss as one who has *no sisu*.

In the mining locations, the laborers were kept in the same area which meant that they were mixed ethnically. What towns there were were small and also ethnically mixed. As a result, household terms were not limited to those from the immigrant's own language. In particular, food items were shared and the original names were usually maintained. Among these are the the following terms:

1. *Sarma* A Serbo-Croatian cabbage roll that is stuffed with meat and rice.
2. *Pastie* Cornish-type of meat turnover with potatoes, onion and, often, rutabaga.
3. *Potica* A Serbo-Croatian pastry made with very flaky dough and having walnuts.
4. *Polenta* An Italian dish composed of boiled corn meal with tomato sauce on top.³
5. *Pigs* A Slovenian type of long john or pastry from *pika*.
6. *Sauna* The Finnish type of steam bath.

The assimilation and social process that has been taking place on the range is epitomized by the word *moyaka*. The word seems to be derived from Serbo-Croatian *mojo yuka*, meaning my soup, but it has become applied to a Finnish type of soup. The dish is also called Finnish or Finn soup. All of these terms are universal among Rangers.

³ Here it should be pointed out that this is the only corn meal dish consumed on the range. This lack of other corn meal dishes on the Range is significant because the westward migration of American pioneers can be charted by the terms used to refer to corn meal of one sort or another.

The second type of lexical feature characteristic of the immigrant group is the use of neologisms that result from an extension of an English word or the nominalization of a verb or adjective. Among these are the following.

1. *The drys*. A singular noun always used with the article and with an *s*. Originally it referred to the change room in the mines, but it has come to mean any room where laborers shower and change their clothes. Its origin seems to come from the early days of underground mining when the miners would return from their shift and their clothes would be wet with sweat. These clothes were put in baskets and hoisted up to the ceiling to dry. The word seems to be a nominalization of the infinitive *to dry*.

2. *The Dumps*. Like *the drys* it is always used with an article and always has an *s* at the end. Originally it referred to the place where the overlay, or top soil, from the opening of the mine was dumped. It has no pejorative meaning: in fact, the best section of many Range towns is built on the dumps. Later this term has been extended to include the large piles of non-magnetic iron ore. It is a nominalization of the infinitive *to dump*.

3. *Location*. This term is usually used in conjunction with the name of a mine such as the Hill Ross Location. Each mine had its own company-owned settlement built around it. The last of the locations disappeared around 1940, but the term is still used to refer to the section of town where the location originated. It is possibly a nominalization of the infinitive *to locate*, but it might also be an extension of the noun *location*.

Third there are some terms that seem best explained by what Mougeon *et. al.* describe as being imperfectly learned children's language that have become fossilized in adult language. These appear as normal English words, but have fewer semantic restrictions than the standard English usage. Examples of these are the following:

1. The extension of the verb *to close* to include turning on both the lights and television. As in

1a. Open the lights.

and

1b. Close the lights.

Likewise one can

1c. Open the television.

and

1d. Close the television.

Another example of this extension is having the scope of *pick* extend to

clothes as well as berries as in

2. Pick the clothes from the line and bring them in.

Finally the verb *come* is used to include both motion to and from a point as in

3. Let's come on a sleight ride.

1.1. PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE IMMIGRANT GROUP.

The phonological features of the English of the immigrants varies considerably from language group to language group. The listener can usually tell the native language of the speaker. However, the most general characteristics are the supra-segmental patterns, devoicing final consonants, and interdental fricatives becoming alveolar stops. Because the phonological differences are the result of language interference and vary considerably from group to group, they will not be discussed here.

1.2. SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IMMIGRANT GROUP

Among the syntactic features common to the immigrant group are the following:

1. Absence of the copula

4a. You going back Duluth tonight?

4b. He late.

4c. Where you at now?

4d. How she going?

2. Absence of prepositions, especially *to* and *at*.

5a. We came back _____ Minnesota.

5b. There was a lot of spruce _____ that time.

5c. Let's go _____ Hibbing [one of the Range towns].

3. Double superlative endings.

6. The worstest thing about it.

4. Different use of articles.

A. A bsence of articles.

7. I dont' think there was _____ dozen houses.

B. Inserted article.

8. He lives off *the* Lake Street.

5. Loss of inflectional endings of nouns and verbs.
- 9a. You had to stay, some times two, three night_____
- 9b. We stayed till we move_____ here.
6. Non-English word order.
- 10a. We had a little brace that we hauled with it.
(We had a little brace that we hauled it with.)
- 10b. You play with five cards just.
(You play with just five cards.)
7. An extended use of *for*.
- 11a. I m^ade it for cheap.
(I made it cheaply.)
- 11b. He's going for social work.
(He's going for a social work degree.)

The above seven syntactic characteristics of immigrant speech seem to have become fairly wide spread among all of the immigrant workers' groups because they were learning English from each other, not native speakers of English.

2. THE SECOND GENERATION OF IRON RANGERS

Beginning with the second generation, the first to be born on the Range, a hybridization or assimilation process began that had similarities to pidgin and creole development. While the parents tended to speak a language other than English at home, their children, who were born on the Range, spoke English with their friends. This was an English that was influenced by the variety of their parents' speech. These children were forced to learn English as a common language for play because there were simply too many languages for the individual children to master. However, it was an English with very little adult influence. As several informants past sixty reported, they learned their English from older childhood friends or relatives, not their parents and often from some child who spoke a different language at home. It should be emphasized that these children were in an unusual language learning situation. Normally, when a child first learns a language, adults, most notable his or her parents, provide a model. For this generation of Rangers, the children soon knew more *English* than their parents so they were able to create their own variety of English, one that had minimal influence from the adult world. By the time they began school, they were fluent in the variety of English spoken by their peers. Here, I should mention that traditionally Iron Range speech has been stigmatized and derided by many of the same terms used to describe Black English Vernacular. Until recently, those with a discernible Iron Range speech pat-

tern were forced to take speech correction classes before they could become certified as teachers.

Four separate, but related factors, seem to have been significant in the determination as to what linguistic features were selected by the children of the original immigrants as they learned English. First if a feature occurred in more than one immigrant language and second if the feature were marked or unmarked. Naturally, these factors reinforce each other. Unmarked features are more likely to occur in more than one language. The third factor was that the prestige- and large relative numbers of immigrants who spoke Norwegian, Swedish, German, and Finnish gave special influence to these languages. The fourth factor was what Edourd Beniak, Raymond Mougeon, and Daniel Valois call imperfectly learned English. Since the children learned English from each other, they did not have a role model for their language. Some features brought into the dialect at this time seem to have become fossilized in the child language state.

2.1. PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE SECOND GENERATION

Phonological patterns that occur in the second and succeeding generations include:

1. Consonant cluster reduction
 - A. Final *t*, *d* is dropped
 - 12a. cooked > cook
 - 12b. seasoned > season
 - B. Medial consonant cluster reduction
 - 13a. didn't > dint
 - 13b. pork > pok
2. Interdental fricatives become alveolar stops
 - A. Initially
 - 14a. them > dem
 - 14b. thing > ting
 - B. Medially
 - 15a. another > anudder
 - 15b. mother > mudder or mutter
 - C. Finally
 - 16a. with > wit
 - 16b. Duluth > Dulut
 - 16c. lathe > laid

3. Devoicing of consonants

A. Initially

- 17a. Duluth > tulut
17b. Vern > fern

B. Finally

- 18a. kid(z) > kits
18b. girl(z) > girls

C. Both initially and finally

19. job > chop

In final position, devoicing is so strong that often an /ŋ/ is devoiced so that it is followed by a voiceless /g/ offglide.

- 20a. Hibbing > Hibbin^g
20b. Showing > showin^g

4. Devoicing also occurs in combination with interdental fricatives becoming alveolar stops.

A. Initially

- 21a. then > ten
21b. thin > tin

B. Medially

- 22a. father > fater
22b. lather > later

All of these phonological features are both unmarked and occur in several of the immigrant languages.

In addition, there are some phonological features that came in at this stage that do not occur in the immigrant stage. Most immigrants, because they were not native speakers, spoke a careful, albeit native influenced English. As a result, they had phonological interference, but they did not have much elision. The second, and more so the the third and fourth generations, do have a good deal of elision such as

- 23a. didn't > dint
23b. used to > yusa
23c. did you eat > /dʒit/
23d. not yet > /dʒt/

However, the most characteristic feature of Iron Range pronunciation is the tense, unreleased stop in word final position.

3. SYNTACTIC PATTERNS OF THE IRON RANGE

Some syntactic patterns have also been maintained from the earlier immigrant workers' language. Most of these seem to be literal translations of Finnish, German, and the Scandinavian languages. One pattern occurring on the Range, although not as commonly as in the rest of Minnesota, is the ending of a sentence with a *with* that does not have a surface structure object.

- 24a. Want to go with me > Want to go with
24b. Want to take with you > Want to take with

Both of these sentences can be interpreted as literal translations of sentences from Swedish, Norwegian, German and Finnish.

Swedish

- 25a. Vil ne gor mer.

Norwegian

- 25b. Vill do komme med.

German

- 25c. Vill do komme med.
or
25d. Komst du mit.

Finnish

- 25e. Tuletko mukaan.
25f. Tuletko kansani.

All of which mean essentially, "Do you want to come with."

Another syntactic pattern, one that has become a style marker for the Range, is the absence of the combination of the preposition and the article *to the* in sentences such as

- 26a. Want to go to the show > Wanna go show.
26b. Want to go to Hibbing > Wanna go Hibbing.

This expression also occurs in the past tense and in the negative in expressions such as

- 27a. We went to Detroit > We went Detroit.
27b. I didn't go to the prom > I didn't go prom.

While these expressions are literal translations of the Finnish illative, it seems just as likely that they are the result of imperfectly learned English at the child language stage of the second generation that has become fossilized. This se-

cond point is reinforced by having this feature common in the East Range which was settled primarily by Southern Europeans, especially, Italian, Serbs, Slovenians, and Croations. This area does not have the earlier mentioned expression, "Wanna go with." It seems more likely that at the second generation when children were teaching children English a confusion with English occurred in the commonly used sentences

28a. Want to go home.

28b. We went home.

28c. I didn't go home.

These expressions then became fossilized and were used by later generations. Most of the vocabulary items and idioms that differentiate the Range from the rest of Minnesota seem to have come in at the immigrant stage. All of the lexical items mentioned as being present in the immigrant workers' speech are still used on the Range in vernacular speech. Of course, many of the immigrant lexical items have dropped out; only those that were picked up by the child learned English of the second generation are common.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The origin and development of the Iron Range Dialect in Northern Minnesota was different enough from the rest of the United States to produce a unique dialect. Only the neighbouring dialect of the Upper Peninsula of Northern Michigan (which had a similar origin) seems similar. The original immigrants spoke broken, native-language influenced English that differed from ethnic group to ethnic group. This workers' speech produced many vocabulary items, but does not seem to have had much other influence. Their children, the first born on the Range, created a children's language much like a creole, but when they started school, they learned a standard English without much influence from their parents' immigrant workers' speech. "Good," standard English was viewed as the way out of the mines and the way to social success. Their desire was to become what they considered "good Americans" which meant having "good English". Their children, who felt confident in being good Americans, identified more strongly with the Range as a particular regional area, reinstated the Iron Range features (often to the chagrin of their parents). Here it should be emphasized that these generations are family generations, not chronological ones. The immigrations lasted from the 1880's until the 1920's so that the first generation would spread over the same time span. Likewise, their children could be born in the 1880's until the 1940's. The children who reinstated the dialect features could be born as early as the late 1890's. Because these generations overlapped chronologically, all three varieties have existed side by side.

5. THE FUTURE OF IRON RANGE SPEECH

While Iron Range speech is the dominant form of speech on the Range, all Rangers do not use it to the same extent. At first, because it is quite stigmatized, I thought that men would use more features than women and members of the working class would use more than the middle class. While this may be true, and it seems to be so in a general way, it does not adequately describe the situation. Some middle class women use more Iron Range features in their speech than do some working class women; likewise, some working class women use more than some middle class women. In the same family, one son may have few distinctive Iron Range features and another one may have many. A sister may have fewer or more than her brother. Level of education also seems to matter very little. As a group, Iron Rangers are well educated. Many of the miners have some college education. Because of the high salaries and the relative safety of open pit mining and the taconite plants, several teachers have left teaching to work for the mining industry as labors of one sort or another.

Paralleling Labov's study on Martha's Vineyard (1972 : 1-42), one reason for the difference in the use of Iron Range features does seem to correlate with the speakers' identity with the Range. Two families demonstrate this point. The first one involves the speech pattern of a single family. The father, a medical doctor, moved to the area about fifty years ago from the southern part of the state. He has no discernible Range features and has remained aloof from the rest of the community. He even sent his son out of state for his college degree in hopes of "purifying" his speech. His wife, having been raised on a farm within thirty miles of her husband, mixes well in the community and has many Range features in her speech. The son, a graduate engineer, identifies closely with the Range and has all of the Range features that have been mentioned for the second and succeeding generation.

The second example is the speech of a woman who also would be considered upper class on the Range. She was born in 1918, of English descent, her ancestors having come to the United States in the 1600's. Both her parents were college educated. Her father worked as an accountant and her mother, at one time, had been a proofreader for one of the Twin Cities' newspapers. Yet her speech was so filled with Range features that she even devoiced the /ŋ/ at the end of words as in *swearing* (swɛrɪŋ).

While there are similarities between the social situation on the Iron Range speech and that of Martha's Vineyard, there is a difference. The Vineyard is an old, established community that is threatened with losing its identity. The Range is a relative new community that is just finding its identity. Thus in the history of the Range, an additional factor has been present: that of seeking status or "respectability." The children of the original immigrants wanted

“proper” or “good English” to demonstrate that they were literate and “good” or at least respectable Americans. For the most part, members of the third generation want to be viewed as Rangers so they have incorporated many of the features used by the immigrant children in the hybridization process before they went to school. (It must be remembered that there was a constant stream of immigrants through the 1920's so that immigrants, first, second and third generation rangers were contemporaries.)

In the case of some individuals of the third and fourth generation, particularly those who felt they were not considered respectable by the community, the need for respectability takes precedence over the need to express identity with the Range and, as a result, their speech contains few Range features. An example of this is a twenty eight year old female whose father was an alcoholic. She identifies closely with the Range, has never left the Range and does not plan to leave. She identifies strongly with the Range. However, she does work as a bartender. To express her respectability and that she is not an alcoholic like her father, she uses a speech pattern that is devoid of Iron Range features so that it sounds like the prestigious speech of the metropolitan area surrounding Minneapolis and St. Paul.

In the final analysis, it is this tension between the need for identity with the Range and the need for status or respectability that determine the use of Range features among individuals. Both the upper class families had status; and in addition, they were both of English descent, the ethnic group which, paradoxically, had the highest social status, but which was felt to be condensing toward other immigrant groups. A group of children of the upper class examples had the need to be identified with the Range so they spoke like their friends. On the other hand, the barmaid who came from a family that was not respected, had a greater need for status and respectability than for identity as a Ranger. She was already accepted as a Ranger, but had a great need to express that she was a respectable woman.

Labov was certainly right. To account for the language variation, one needs to look at the social life of the community. The individual experiences a tension between the need for group identification and the need for respectability and upward mobility. How this tension is resolved determines much of the language variability and accounts for much of the language change which has taken place on the Range.

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