What's left when a language recedes?
Belonging and place-making in the linguistic landscape of Hancock, Michigan

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Abstract. Our study examines how meanings related to Finnishness are reflected in the linguistic landscape of Hancock, Michigan, a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Centering on Benedict Anderson's (1983/2003) concept, *imagined communities*, we investigate how discursive strategies in public spaces index belonging and place-making. The social correlates that underpin this reimagining affect ways of understanding larger sociocultural meanings about identity, place, and language use (Cornips & de Rooij 2015; Blommaert 2013; Bucholtz & Hall 2004; Leeman & Modan 2009). We aim to answer three questions: 1) how is Finnishness discursively indexed in Hancock's linguistic landscape?; 2) how are meanings represented as recognizable and valued?; and 3) what are the ideological effects of the discursive practices and related meanings? Our analysis demonstrates that both linguistic and metalinguistic practices are abundant in Hancock. The ideological effects of Finnishness in the landscape reinforce values of Finnish identity and language, while simultaneously erasing (Gal & Irvine 2000) languages and identities of other residents, past and present. The collective discursive practices function ideologically to affect belonging and place-making.

Key Words. linguistic landscape; identity; discursive practices; belonging; place-making; Finnishness

1. Introduction. The landscape is layered with meaning, from the ecology and geology that affect the design and natural resources of communities, to social structures and cultural practices that continue to shape and define a community's identity and recognizability as well as residents' sense of belonging. Much of a community's recognition as a unique and specific place is based on the linguistic landscape (LL), or simply, language use in public spaces (Shohamy & Gorter 2009). This landscape also affects how connected residents feel to the place, its history, and cultural practices–in short, their identities in relation to the place. These meanings are not only communicated through language use, but also with metalinguistic features such as colors, flags, architecture, art, and other material objects. Together, linguistic and metalinguistic features constitute a landscape that reflects the history, people, and everyday ways of being and doing that make a place recognizable and identifiable.

We investigate how meanings related to Finnishness are reflected in the LL of Hancock, Michigan, a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP). We survey the LL through an interdisciplinary lens with a focus on how linguistic and metalinguistic practices discursively reimagine the place (Anderson 1983/2003). To understand how Hancock is reimagined as "Finnish" and how local residents claim a "Finn" or "Finnish" identity, we examine the linguistic and metalinguistic discursive practices and related social meanings presented in the LL. More

* We recognize the Anishinaabe People of the Lake Superior Band of the Chippewa, especially the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, on whose land we conduct research. The Anishinaabe, and before them the Eastern Dakota People, are indigenous to this land, and we owe a great debt and offer deep gratitude for their land that has made this research possible. Authors: Kathryn A. Remlinger, Grand Valley State University (remlingk@gvsu.edu) & Kayleigh Karinen, University of Helsinki (kayleigh.karinen@helsinki.fi).

 Bergen Language and Linguistics Studies 14(1), 68–80.
DOI: 10.15845/bells.v14i1.4341. CC-BY-4.0.

importantly, we question how ideologies about language, place, and people, reinforce these meanings. Like Barni and Bagna (2015), we argue that these discursive practices are part of a "dynamic process" of meaning-making. An authenticated identity, whether claimed, imposed, or perceived, is one outcome of dynamic meaning-making processes. As Bucholtz and Hall explain, identity is an authentication process stemming from "intersubjectively negotiated ideologies and practices" (2004:493). Given the dynamic and intersubjective nature of ideologies, discursive practices, and related social meanings, we can expect that social meanings, particularly notions of authenticity, shift over time and space. An examination of past and present linguistic and metalinguistic discursive practices makes visible the ways in which social meanings change over time, what Michael Silverstein (2003:193) identifies as *orders of indexicality*. These practices also reflect how meanings vary from place to place or group to group, which Penny Eckert (2008:454) describes as *fields of indexicality*. For example, meanings associated with Finnish language and culture in Hancock have taken on new meanings from those in Finland.

Place-making is fundamental to these practices and related ideologies. Benedict Anderson's (1983/2003) work, *Imagined Communities*, is important for examining the function of discursive place-making practices, while research compiled in Leonie Cornips and Vincent deRooij's (2018:3) edited collection demonstrates the unique "role played by language and culture" in processes of place-making and belonging. Historical approaches are critical for understanding how Finnish immigration to the UP and resulting language and culture contact not only influence the variety but also define local communities, cultural practices, and the emphasis on Finnishness. Several sources lay the foundation for understanding the sociocultural linguistic context of Finnish identity and culture in Hancock and the Keweenaw Peninsula, including Armas Holmio's (2001) *History of the Finns in Michigan* and Gary Kaunonen's (2009) *Finns in Michigan*. Because copper mining is the bedrock of this foundation and the reason why many Finns settled in the Keweenaw, we also draw from Larry Lankton's histories, *Cradle to Grave* (1991) and *Beyond the Boundaries* (2010), as well as Arthur Thurner's (1994) *Strangers and Sojourners: A History of Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula*.

2. Sociocultural linguistic context. Hancock is located in the northwest of the UP in the Keweenaw Peninsula—a 70-mile stretch of land jutting into Lake Superior, illustrated by the map in Figure 1. Discovery of the world's largest deposit of native copper in 1842 drew tens of thousands specifically to the Keweenaw Peninsula. From the mid-1800s through the early 1900s it was a booming timber and copper-mining region. The pull of prosperity coupled with the push of war and famine in immigrants' homelands drew people from far and wide, creating multilingual and multicultural communities throughout the Upper Peninsula. For example, Calumet school records from 1908 report that there were over 40 nationalities among their students, and we can assume those students spoke at least half as many languages (Thurner 1994:131). In addition, during the early 1900s there were 18 different newspapers published in several languages, including English, Swedish, Finnish, Italian, Slovenian, and German (Lankton 2010:211). Historian Arthur Thurner lists the multitude of nationalities that settled in the region: "Joining [European] and African Americans [and the indigenous Anishinaabe] were people from…England, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall. Others were Germans, Austrians, Belgians…Bulgarians, Croatians, Danes, Dutch, Finns, Swiss, French, [French Canadian], Greeks, Hungarians…Italians, Lithuanians, Norwegians, Poles, Rumanians, Russians…Slovenians, and Swedes… Armenians, Turks, Syrians, Chinese, Japanese, and Australians" (1994:131). Heritage languages and related cultural practices were maintained through interaction at home, in

neighborhoods, rural communities, social organizations, temperance societies, lodges, cooperatives, and church services. While most immigrant languages were lost after the second or third generation, Finnish was maintained for four and five generations, and continues to have a significant effect on the local variety of American English spoken in the area (Remlinger 2017). While the Finnish language is spoken today in Hancock, it is most often a second language or recited as stock words and phrases. These phrases and words are commodified to sell items from hats, to t-shirts, signs, stickers, and other items. Although the Finnish language has receded as a spoken language, the language and related material culture and cultural practices are drawn upon as people discursively reimagine the area as “Finnish” and claim a “Finnish” or "Finn" identity.

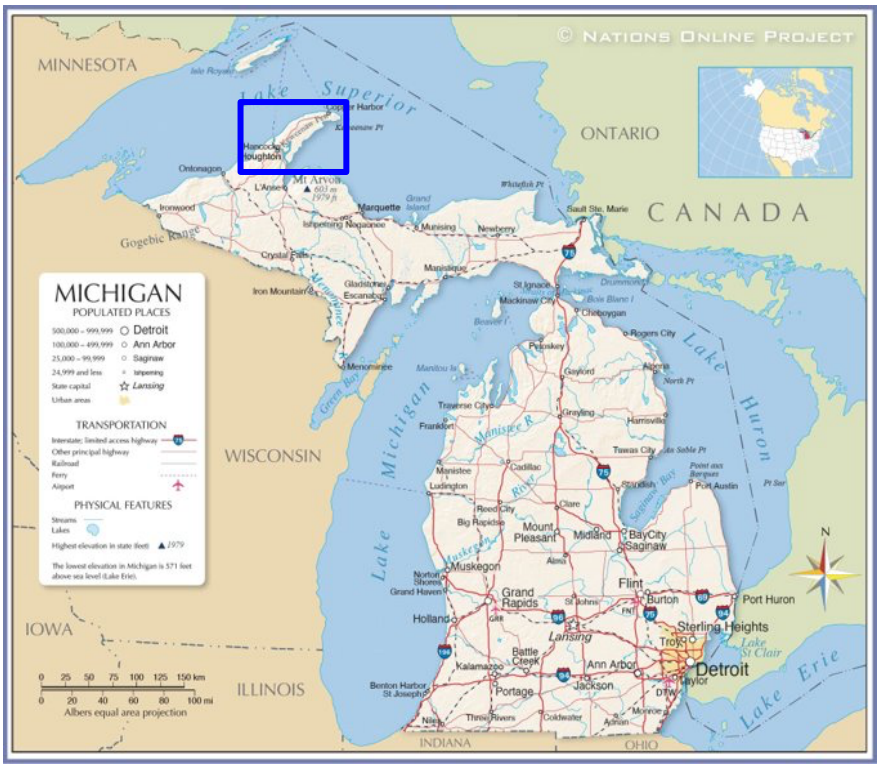

Figure 1. Map of Michigan and Keweenaw Peninsula (Nations Online Project)

The northwestern UP is home to the stereotypical “Yooper” voice and identity, often associated with being “Finn” because of the predominance of Finnish Americans and the value of Finnishness in the area (Remlinger 2017). This predominance is reflected in the most current census data for ethnic ancestry, illustrated in Figure 2, with 21% to nearly 40% of residents in the Keweenaw Peninsula claiming Finnish heritage (Kilpinen 2014). Like several other towns throughout the northwestern Upper Peninsula, Hancock is known as a “Finnish American Nesting Place”, from the Finnish, *pesäpaikka*, ‘nesting place’ (Loukinen 1996). This linguistic link to the city’s Finnish heritage is reinforced by the city of Hancock’s Finnish Theme Committee, which creates and directs various festivals and events.

The value of Finnishness is so strong that the area, also known as the Copper Country, has been called "*Kuparisaari*", Finnish for 'Copper Island', since the late-1800s when Finns first settled in the Keweenaw and copper mining was the main industry. When residents describe their Finnish heritage, they often give a percentage, for example: “I’m 100% Finn”; “I’m 80% Finn”; Even a seven-year-old claimed, “I’m 10% Finn”, when asked by the teacher if any students in the class

were Finnish. This child had no Finnish heritage yet recognized its local value. The response demonstrates the strong value of Finnishness in the area.

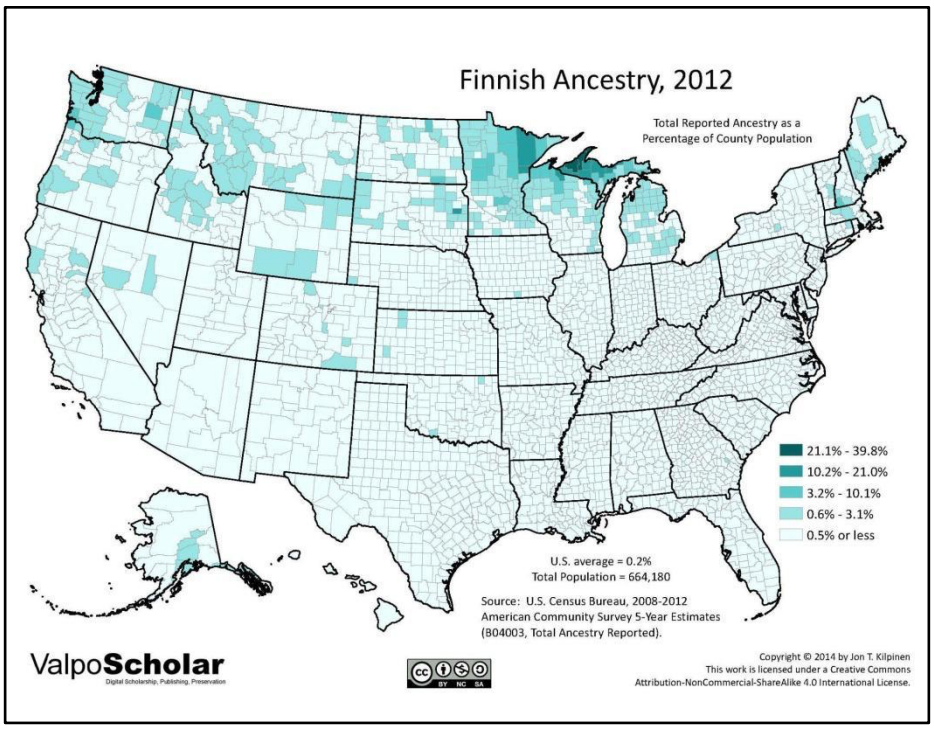

Figure 2. Map of Finnish ancestry in the US (Kilpinen 2014)

3. Methods. Linguistic landscape studies of shifting and post-heritage language communities, like Hancock, examine how language use in public spaces functions indexically, in other words how the social meanings are communicated in the landscape (e.g., Barni & Bagna 2015; Blommaert 2013; Leeman & Modan 2009; Scollon & Scollon 2003; Shohamy & Gorter 2009). Landry and Bourhis define linguistic landscape as the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (1997:23). Language use can be mobile and transient, such as bumper stickers, graffiti, text and images on t-shirts and caps, or more permanent like that on shop, traffic, and street signs as well as building names. As Barni and Bagna explain, "The term 'linguistic' is now no longer just confined to verbal and written languages, but embraces the complexity of semiotic spaces as well as people as authors, actors, and users, all of which is part of LL analysis" (2015:7). We collect data by documenting the landscape with photos, videos, and field notes. While our primary data collection took place in Hancock, our LL findings extend across the Keweenaw Peninsula (Figure 3). In addition to examining the LL, we employ ethnographic methods including participant observation and unstructured interviews as we informally and often spontaneously engage with community members. We take a qualitative approach in our analysis to examine the patterns of meaning reflected in the data. We code the data to identify identity and place-making practices, which include coding LL findings as top-down versus bottom-up influences, linguistic and metalinguistic features, translation, periphery versus center, location, and geosemiotic features.

Figure 3. Tracing Finnishness: Mapping data collection locations (map by Kayleigh Karinen)

4. Findings and analysis. In this section we describe our findings, which are based on linguistic landscape and ethnographic data that we collected during May 2022. This section also includes discussion of the findings' significance in relation to how Finnishness is visible throughout Hancock's landscape.

4.1. LINGUISTIC PRACTICES. Throughout the landscape linguistic features are abundant, particularly the use of Finnish. This use includes standard, contemporary Finnish, and more often, localized forms. Direct and indirect indexes reflect a history of language and culture contact resulting in language transfer, borrowings, and language change. We find the loss of the umlaut on the *ä* and the *ö* in surnames, such as *Pietila* and *Lepisto*, which in standard Finnish would be written as *Pietilä* and *Lepistö.* In addition to the spelling change with the loss of umlauts, is a change in the pronunciations from Finnish, /píɛtilæ/and /lépistø/, to English pronunciations, /píɛrələ/ or /pírelə/ and /lépɪsto/, respectively. The loss of umlauts is also exemplified in the localized form of *löyly*, steam that arises from adding water to the sauna stove. In the sauna, one would use the partitive form, *löylyä* 'some steam'. However, in Hancock's landscape we find a t-shirt with *löyla* (Figure 4), where interestingly, the umlaut remains on the *o* but not on the *a*, and the *y* has been dropped. We assume that this is a simplification of *löylyä*. We also find double constants that have been simplified to one, such as *Pikku Amerika* 'Little America', a street where Finnish Americans have cottages. Here, *Amerika* is spelled with one *k* opposed to two as in standard Finnish. Another example is *limpu* (a kind of bread), printed on a bread package, which has two *p*s in standard Finnish. Additionally, locally *juusto* (a kind of baked raw-milk cheese) is known as *juustoa*, where the *-a* particle suffix has fossilized, and in Finland this word would be *leipäjuusto*. A curious phonetic feature is the /j/ transfer with *juustoa* but not with surnames such as *Jarvi*, *Jukkari*, and *Juntala*, which use /dʒ/.

Figure 4. Löyla t-shirt (Photo by Kayleigh Karinen)

Figure 5. Kaleva Cafe (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

We also find linguistic indexes of Finnishness, including a monument commemorating a local historical figure, Lauri "ISO-Louie" Moilanen, written in Finnish and English; signs welcoming guests at the *Kaleva* Café; the names of restaurants, trails, and parks such as *Maasto Hiihto* 'cross country ski' Trail System and *Porvoo* Park, respectively; names of streets in English and Finnish; menus with Finnish labels for meals and food items such as *pannukakku* 'an oven-baked pancake'; and in the locally published monthly periodical, *The Finnish American Reporter*, where every issue features a quote in Finnish. Figure 5 illustrates how restaurants like the Kaleva Café lay claim to Finnishness and reinforce its value discursively with Finnish names, signage, menu items, and architecturally with Falun red siding (Remlinger 2017). Lexical features like *pannukakku* and *maasto hiihto* and the phonological features, such as the Anglicized pronunciation of *Kaleva* as [kʌlívə] rather than [káleva], have become enregistered (Agha 2003): recognized as local dialect

features and valued for social meanings associated with Finnishness.

Figure 6. Marimekko-inspired flowers (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

4.2. METALINGUISTIC PRACTICES. Coupled with linguistic performances of Finnishness, are metalinguistic indexes: colors, images, symbols, and other visual features that reference Finland, Finnish design, and other things 'Finnish', such as the Marimekko-inspired flowers painted on the side of the Northwinds Bookstore at Finlandia University (Figure 6). A Finnish flag hanging in the doorway of a former Lutheran church is especially significant in that the Luthern church helped to maintain Finnish language and culture through Finnish-language services, among other cultural practices. Some meanings associated with certain symbols, such as the Finnish lion on a bag of locally roasted coffee (Figure 7) and Finlandia University's mascot, have shifted meaning in Finland to be appropriated by white nationalists, whereas in Hancock, the symbol correlates with an idealized Finland and a sense of Finnishness. These shifts are described by Silverstein (2003:193) as *indexical orders*: the Finnish lion has taken on new and different meanings over time. Eckert (2008:454) further develops this idea to explain how related meanings vary not only over time, but from place to place, creating a field of meaning, or *indexical field*.

Figure 7. Coffee label with Finnish lion (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

Figure 8. Hand-loomed rag rug (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

4.3. CULTURAL PRACTICES. The indexical field includes social meanings communicated through material objects and cultural practices, for example, foods marketed as "Finnish" with Finnish-language names like *limpu* and woven household items such as hand-loomed rag rugs (Figure 8), woven wall hangings, placemats, and other decorative and functional household objects. Although weaving has been a common practice among many heritage groups, locally, these objects are recognized and valued as traditional and are recognized as "Finnish". The Finnish American Folk School at Finlandia University and festivals like *Juhannus,* which celebrates midsummer, and *Heikinpäivä,* a midwinter festival, intentionally maintain cultural practices. Of all the cultural practices, sauna is the most ubiquitous and most significant in terms of identity and place-making. Many families take Saturday night saunas, and homes, cottages, and university dorms have saunas. Children are enculturated through family sauna time and with creative and literary activities, as illustrated by a coloring and activity book (Figure 9). We also find local shops that reinforce sauna culture and thereby "Finnishness" by selling sauna stoves, birch and pine soap from Finland, and sauna accessories like backrests and pillows, which discursively emphasize Finnishness with

Finnish language labels. Significantly, sauna is both a cultural practice and linguistic practice. Throughout the US most English speakers pronounce *sauna* as [sanə] "saw-na", but throughout the northwestern UP many people pronounce it as [saʊnə] "sow-na", which is close to the Finnish pronunciation (Remlinger 2017; Rankinen & Ma 2020). This shibboleth functions not only as an identity marker, but also a symbol of authenticity, because as we find on t-shirts and other objects, "Real Finns know how to pronounce 'sow-na'".

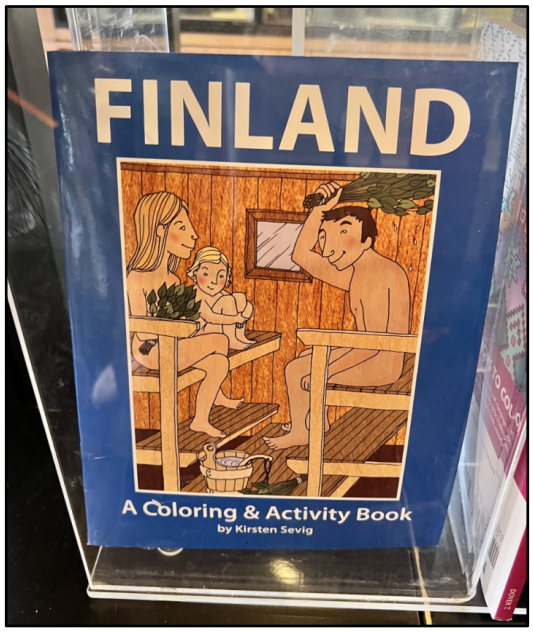

Figure 9. Coloring and activity book (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

4.4. BELONGING. Language is central to discursive practices of identity, or belonging, and agency is a significant factor in these practices. Bumper stickers rely on language not only to create a sense of place and thereby claim Finnish identity for those who would post the stickers on their car or other object, but also to reinforce perceptions of authenticity. The sticker *saatana perkele* pictured in Figure 10 illustrates the significance of language, agency, and interaction in the discursive performance of identity. *Saatana perkele* is profanity that literally means 'evil spirit' or 'devil', but translates as various strong English profanities. Linguistically, this is an example of what Barbara Johnstone (2013:117) refers to as *feature dropping*–the intentional use of recognizable linguistic features that function to claim an authentic, local, and here ethnic, identity. The example is especially poignant, not only in terms of agency through the use of Finnish profanity that is no longer well known by most residents, but also, and more importantly, because it draws on idealized perceptions of authenticity—only a "real" Finn would understand this phrase and would shout it out loud with a sticker on their car. This idealized identity is authenticated through discursive interaction coupled with shared values associated with being "Finn" and speaking Finnish (or, at the very least, knowing how to swear in Finnish). Similar discursive practices and authentication processes are illustrated on a license plate holder (Figure 11), which uses the most recurring linguistic feature we found: *sisu*, roughly meaning 'perseverance in the face of adversity'. In addition to *sisu*, the use of *mitä kuuluu* 'how are you?' is an overt claim to the local Finnish identity.

Figure 10. *Saatana Perkele* bumper sticker (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

Figure 11. License plate holder (Photo by Kayleigh Karinen)

While *saatana perkele* and *sisu* index authentic Finnishness in Hancock, they do not index this meaning in Finland. In fact, one rarely sees a *sisu* sticker or coffee mug in Finland, and to exclaim "*saatana perkele*" would violate Finnish politeness practices. Localized features of heritage languages, as with symbols associated with the homeland like the Finnish lion, often take on different meanings than the same features used in Finland, thereby populating the indexical field with claims of authenticity and belonging. The Finnish name day sign pictured in Figure 12 is another important discursive identity and geosemiotic place-making practice (Scollon and Scollon 2003), with its location on the side of the Finnish American Heritage Center and adjacent to a Finnish flag. While the use of English and Finnish on the sign is interesting, the significance lies in the understanding of *nimipäivä* 'name day', a day where one's name is celebrated. This awareness is both a cultural practice and identity marker: "real" Finns understand the language use on the sign, the names, "Tuukka" and "Touko", celebrated on the designated day, in this case, May 24, or in Finnish, *24 Toukokuuta*, as well the cultural significance of name days.

Figure 12. Name day sign and Finnish flag (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

4.5. PLACE-MAKING. Place-making practices intentionally claim a space, and in Hancock this occurs through linguistic and other semiotic practices, most notably naming and the use of the Finnish national colors. In fact, in the 1980s the city council directed shop owners on the main street to use blue and white signage. Naming is found in rough translations of English to Finnish street name signs, the *tori* 'outdoor market', and across Finlandia University's campus on buildings such as Hirvonen Hall, the Maki Library, Juntila Center, and Koskela House. Porvoo Park, with its Finnish name, geographically and establishes a connection to Finland and Finnishness. This connection is reinforced by the fact that Hancock and Porvoo, Finland have official status as sister cities. And finally, the *sisu* sticker pictured in Figure 13 discursively claims the entire Upper Peninsula as "Finnish" by dotting the *i* with an outline of the UP and the use of the symbolic blue and white.

Figure 13. *Sisu* sticker (Photo by Kathryn Remlinger)

As we move away from Hancock into the periphery, the reach of Finnishness is long, stretching 70 miles up the Keweenaw Peninsula, yet the intensity weakens: we find fewer linguistic demonstrations of cultural identity than in Hancock, and instead, Finnishness is more often represented metalinguistically. For example, the Finnish flag and national colors on houses and signs are predominant. However, what remains prevalent throughout the landscape, both at the center and in the periphery, is the use of Finnish surnames on shop signs and in street names, which reimagine the place as "Finnish".

5. Results and conclusions. *Sisu, sauna* and *saatana perkele*. This trifecta represents the overall significance of our findings and the discursive practice of belonging and place-making in Hancock

as they are the most pervasive and have taken on new meanings. In particular, we find that these and other linguistic features and cultural symbols are commodified to sell coffee mugs, sauna accessories, and bumper stickers. But more importantly, these discursive practices reimagine the city as "Finnish" and make claims about authenticity. The linguistic landscape certainly plays a role in shaping this locally valued identity related to Finnishness. While the spoken language has receded, Finnishness is indexed linguistically and metalinguistically, and this clearly stands out in Hancock, whether it be the sea of blue and white that ripples throughout the town, the bilingual street signs, or the *sisu* and Finnish flag bumper stickers zooming by.

The ideological effects of Finnishness in the landscape reinforce values of Finnishness, while simultaneously erasing (Gal & Irvine 2000) languages and identities of other residents past and present. In short, the collective discursive practices in Scandinavian heritage language communities, like Hancock, function ideologically to affect both belonging and place-making, typically Euro-centric and grounded in whiteness. An interdisciplinary linguistic landscape approach is invaluable in understanding heritage communities and how discursive practices function to claim identity and space. Furthermore, this approach makes visible what might otherwise be hidden in the reimagining of a community: a sense of belonging also entails exclusion.

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