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*“Michigan’s Upper Peninsula Vowel Systems:
Finnish- and Italian-American Communities”*

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In the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan there is a possibility of a lingering influence of immigrant languages among persons who are no longer speakers of those languages but whose English is still distinct. This report compares an earlier 70-person sample of UP Finnish-Americans with a more recent sample of 60 UP Italian-Americans. Both studies are stratified by age (young, middle and old), sex, and social status (middle and working). Among the older respondents, there are three subsets: 1) speakers whose 1st language is either Finnish or Italian, 2) speakers who are bilingual in either Finnish or Italian and English from birth or a very early age, and 3) monolingual speakers of English with little or no knowledge of either Finnish or Italian. The middle aged and younger respondents have little or no Finnish or Italian language competence.

All respondents were recorded in sociolinguistic interviews that included a recording of a word list, reading passage, and casual conversation. All data reported here are drawn from the reading passage section. The acoustic characteristics of these speakers' vowels were determined by using a Linear Predictive Coding analysis (Praat). The vowel systems of the speakers were plotted in acoustic space (with NORM) to reveal if they are retained either a Finnish or Italian influence, a Canadian influence, or an older or newer regional influence. These data have also been normalized so that speakers with different physical characteristics can be directly compared and so that larger numbers of speakers can be pooled to show community norms.

The data from the Finnish-American sample show a strong Canadian influence with perhaps some lingering Finnish characteristics. The current study among Italian Americans in the UP will reveal if similar developments show up in other immigrant subgroups.

Work in other areas (e.g., on German in Wisconsin and on Louisiana French) has revealed interesting continuations of immigrant language influences in younger generations. The UP is an excellent test case for such influences from Finnish and Italian and is, at the same time, in an interesting position to show the influence of several competing local norms (e.g., the North, the Inner North, an older conservative US pattern, the Canadian vowel system). This report seeks in particular to determine if the evidence of a strong Canadian influence on the English vowel systems among Finnish immigrant descendents is more widespread among other groups in the UP. It also seeks to determine the characteristics of the zone that lies between the “North” and “Canada” in Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006, one in which they suggest that Canadian norms do not apply, a suggestion not supported by the work done so far on the Finnish-Americans in the UP. Ultimately, this work seeks to determine a more thorough characterization of this interesting international border zone with the potential for continuing ethnic substrate influences.