

Heritage Somali and Identity in Rural Wisconsin

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Abstract

Wisconsin has a long history of heritage language use, which continues to the present. Latinos, Hmong, and Somalis are groups, which now call Wisconsin home. As new generations of American-born individuals emerge, more removed from immigrant culture, the vitality of the language as a heritage language may weaken. This study examines the vitality of Somali as a heritage language in Barron, Wisconsin. It investigates the negotiation of identities in the context of heritage Somali in the rural Upper Midwest.

Keywords

Somali – Wisconsin – heritage languages – identity

1 Introduction

Wisconsin has a long history of heritage language use. At the turn of the twentieth century, European immigrant families and Native Americans resided within the borders of the Badger State and spoke many dozens of languages (Salmons, 2013). Although the use and transmission of heritage language proficiency has declined in Wisconsin, it is nonetheless present today, though the greatest populations of heritage language speakers now hail from Latin America, East Asia, and Africa. Previous work on immigrant bilingualism in the United States has shown that usually within three generations the immigrant

population will assimilate linguistically to mainstream English monolingualism (Fishman, 1985). However, these early models were based nearly entirely on European immigrant populations in the United States. The picture is less clear for refugee groups, which may or may not view their residency as permanent. Refugees in the United States, who do not immediately see resettlement as a viable option and want to return to their homeland, may impede linguistic assimilation. Moreover, the social and cultural contexts of these refugees—living, in some instances, for extended periods in refugee camps—may create greater in-group solidarity and resolve, again impeding external pressures for assimilation. Currently over 70,000 refugees live in Wisconsin, the vast majority, 79%, are Hmong (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2015). Linguistic research on refugee groups in both Wisconsin and the United States is limited. In her research on Hmong in Wisconsin, Burt (2013) found the beginnings of language shift among the youngest generation in contrast to their older refugee parents and grandparents who came to the United States in the 1980s. As most Hmong in Wisconsin have sought resettlement options for permanent citizenship status, one might expect that they, too, would follow the pattern of linguistic assimilation. Burt's (2013) findings, though, show that other factors, e.g., demography, residence, and cultural identity, may in fact support retention of Hmong. However, the establishment of Hmong in the United States as permanent residents with new generations of Hmong Americans, including part-Hmong individuals, plays a large part in the tendency to shift to monolingual English.

One of Wisconsin's newest refugee groups are the Somalis. Similar to Hmong, Somalis are racially, religiously, and linguistically different from the demographics of the Wisconsinite majority, e.g., white, Christian, monolingual Anglophones. However, the Somali population is increasing and many hold temporary residency in the United States as they hope to return to Somalia. These aspects make them very different from their Hmong neighbors. Between 2001 and 2005, they constituted 25 percent of the entire admitted refugee population in the United States—an increase from 5.5 percent from the previous two decades (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012). With 7,608 refugees admitted to the United States in 2014, Somalia is the fourth largest country of refugee admittance behind Iraq, Burma, and Bhutan (Department of State, 2014). While a few studies exist on healthcare and general cultural and social aspects of the Somalis in the Midwest, no research thus far has undertaken a linguistic analysis of this group.

This study examines the language behavior of Somalis in rural Wisconsin, specifically the features of a refugee population, which may support language retention in spite of dominant societal pressures to shift to monolingual

English. To this end, this study examines the social and cultural aspects of the interactions of language and identities. While structural approaches to heritage languages can tell us much about the bilingual brain, permeability of grammars in language contact situations, and inform larger discussions on the nature of language universals and attrition, this study seeks to elucidate the sociocultural aspects of heritage languages. Namely, this study engages with issues of power, legitimacy, and ideologies—all of which have direct implications on what language is spoken, when, and to whom (Fishman, 1965). These issues are important for the study of heritage languages as they directly inform about the sociolinguistic situation of the heritage language. In turn, the sociolinguistic situation has direct implications on the transmission of the heritage language whether complete, incomplete, overheard, or non-existent. The contact situations that we investigate structurally are significantly impacted by the social context of that contact.

This paper is the first on the linguistic situation of Somali refugees in Wisconsin and shares initial findings of an ongoing ethnographic study. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework for analyzing identities in multilingual situations. The demographic information about the Barron Somalis follows. Interview data leaning on the theoretical foundation is then analyzed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results, especially in reference to heritage language trends in the U.S. and proposes areas for further research.

2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical premise of this paper is based on the assertion of Bailey (2007: 341) that “[l]anguage is our primary semiotic tool for representing and negotiating social reality, including social identity categories.” This assertion does not, however, imply that there is a one-to-one match in speaking the heritage language and displaying a heritage language identity. Heritage language can be lost, while heritage identities remain through a variety of other expressions (Edwards, 2010). In fact, a one-to-one match between identity and language use is a very Western notion that assumes a monolingual identity for the nation-state (Bailey, 2007). This study seeks to understand the nature of Somali identities and Somali language use in Wisconsin—a situation where several languages can contribute to the negotiation of identities. We follow the work of Bucholtz and Hall (2010: 18) in broadly defining *identity* as “the social positioning of self and other.” Positioning rejects earlier static notions of “roles,” and sees individuals and groups engaging with narratives and interactions to position themselves as either same or different (Davies and Haaré, 1990). These

interactions provide a means of *indexing* both self and others' relationships to social categories (Liebscher and Dailey O'Cain, 2007). Social positioning implies, then, that identity work is a dynamic and discursive process. Importantly, however, positioning is not solely agentive, in that the individual alone decides the trajectory of this process. Positioning the self and other is both reflective and interactive. It is reflective in that the individual decides how to position themselves and others. It is interactive in that the individual may feel pressure from external forces to influence their social positioning (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). Similarly, the dynamic and discursive nature of positioning produces attitudes and ideologies about language that do not represent a neat binary of positive and negative. In earlier work, positive attitudes were often aligned with language maintenance and negative attitudes with shift. However, the "trend" at first may posit a correlation between positive language attitudes and language maintenance on the one hand and negative language attitudes and shift on the other, this approach is not tenable in all instances, making the research of language attitudes extremely context-specific. Although favorable attitudes toward Irish are consistently reported, shift to English is the norm (Watson, 1989: 44; Romaine, 1995: 43). Positive attitudes toward Arvanitika for group identity result nonetheless in shift due to negative attitudes for prestige, etc. (Sasse, 1992: 14). Silva-Corvalán (1994: 206) also comments on the divergence of positive attitudes toward Spanish and the negative correlation in behavior, i.e., negative language loyalty and failure to maintain despite positive attitudes. In examining the narratives of speakers, attitudes and ideologies may be expressed on a continuum depending on the context at that moment in time. Thus by positioning in discourse, individuals invoke stances about language and culture that are diverse and even contradictory (Dailey-O'Cain and Liebscher, 2011). These stances will be analyzed in this paper. Important to the analysis of these stances, the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts of the United States factor prominently into understanding how the narratives of heritage language speakers are formed and are informed. For immigrant groups, issues of legitimacy and foreignness come into play, meaning that identity formation is not always solely negotiated by the individual or community (Hatoss, 2013).

Although rich in linguistic diversity, the contemporary United States represents a largely monolingual society. Potowski (2010, 2013) notes that younger immigrants are more likely to acquire English than their parents or grandparents as a result of urbanization, education, mass communication, and regional integration. Although the relationship of the United States with multilingualism changes throughout its history depending on economic and militaristic developments, English still maintains high linguistic capital (Revis, 2015;

Zentella, 1997). Swells of immigration contribute to the cultural and linguistic anxieties of English-speaking Americans and often politically motivated tropes of loss of American unity and identity are invoked to convince the populace that English is in danger. As a result, twenty-seven states have Official English laws (Potowski, 2013). This “culture of nativism” in the United States is pervasive, largely as a result of power and purism—derived from a Western idea that the nation-state has but one language (Shiffman, 2008). In fact, Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean (2006) in their studies on immigrant Spanish, Tagalog, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean have called the United States a “linguistic graveyard”—though the analogy is not without its problems. Immigrants arrive in the United States and subsequently “bury” their heritage languages. Although immigrant groups may acquire their native language as the L1 in the United States, the trend is to shift to just English, e.g., English supplanting Hmong (Burt, 2010) and the cyclical bilingualism of Spanish in the United States (Rivera-Mills, 2012).

Bilinguals in the United States have been characterized as having “conflicting personalities” with the implication of divergent allegiances (Pavlenko, 2006; Stafford, 2013). Languages in the United States that are spoken at home in contrast to a dominant language of larger society constitute *heritage languages* (Rothman, 2009). A heritage speaker is markedly different from other bilinguals in that the sociolinguistic situation of language exposure and use is one in which power is paramount. The heritage language is not given the same amounts of support outside of the home as the dominant language in Anglo-American society; the legitimacy of the heritage language—whether from authoritative auspices or the speech community itself—does not obtain the same amount of legitimacy as the dominant language. Although the linguistic hegemony characteristic of heritage language situations may be seen as oppressive to minority culture, it is the implied power and non-power afforded to languages created through ideologies about language use which present the strongest areas of viable research on the sociolinguistic situation of the speech community. The tension and conflict that arise through the power-play enacted in heritage language situations provide valuable insights to identity research. In these situations, identity is “interesting, relevant, and visible” as it moves through the processes in which it is “contested or in crisis” (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004: 19). Heritage languages with the tensions created between a home language and a dominant mainstream language highlight the power and inequality of languages and language ideologies. In discourse, then, through the social positioning of self and others, negotiation of heritage language speakers’ identities occurs.

These ideas lean heavily on a poststructural approach to multilingual contexts which highlights identity as dynamic, multiple, and discursive (Pavlenko, 2004; Fuller, 2007; Dailey-O'Cain and Liebscher, 2011). When contested or under duress, identity is a process of negotiation and the negotiation of identities are embedded within larger social and cultural systems and relationships of power. To understand how speakers work through these processes, one must understand the economic, political, sociohistorical, etc. contexts and how they legitimize or degrade a language or its speakers. As this study engages this poststructural approach to language, it relies on the theoretical framework for the negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts proposed by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004). Their framework proposes the following aspects: (1) linguistic and identity options are contextually-based, (2) identity options and links are differently valued, (3) identity options may be negotiable, non-negotiable, or not negotiated, and (4) agency allows individuals—through social and linguistic resources—to resist or re-appropriate meanings. As a result, the analysis of the data in this study will invoke the social context of Somali in Wisconsin and how the economic, political, and other social systems empower (and disenfranchise) both Somali and the Somalis. To achieve this goal, this study examines the language attitudes of the Somalis in Wisconsin as a means of positioning themselves in the negotiation of identities within a “culture of nativism” that demands homogeneity. The study is emic, i.e., participant-relevant, and engages both semi-structured interviews as well as critical ethnography.

3 Data

Somalia is a country on the eastern coast of Africa in the Horn of Africa. Somalis speak Somali, an Afro-Asiatic language, alongside their hagiolect, Arabic. The language was first given an orthography in 1973. Most Somalis are Sunni Muslim and Islamic practices inform much of Somali culture including dress, food, ritual, gender roles, etc. In 1991, the country erupted into civil war and many Somalis fled into neighboring African nations—approximately two million of its population of more than 10 million. More than 300,000 Somalis were killed either as a result of the war or due to famine caused by militia blockades of food shipments to refugee camps (Schaid and Grossman, 2007). In 1992, Operation Restore Hope—a joint effort of twenty-four nations including the United States—brought 37,000 soldiers to Somalia to establish a secure zone and supply food to Somali children (Yusuf, 2012). However, the following year, eighteen

American soldiers and hundreds of Somalis were killed in Mogadishu—a story made widely known by the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*. Shortly thereafter, President Bill Clinton removed all Americans from Somalia. The door, however, was kept open for Somali refugees either living in Somalia or in a refugee camp in neighboring African nations to come to the United States for asylum. Ramsden and Ridge (2012: 226) estimate that 1.4 million Somalis have been displaced from their homeland with 680,000 living in neighboring countries. The Somalis came as refugees to smaller Minnesotan cities, especially Marshall, because of better job prospects, lower cost of living, and a higher minimum wage (Yusuf, 2012). They were especially drawn to places with meat-packing plants, which required less proficiency in English. Many also moved to the larger Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, area because of the job market and more experienced refugee social services agencies (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012). Currently, the Twin Cities has a large Somali population with a social service center—the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota—just a short distance from a residential site known locally as “Little Mogadishu” (Yusuf, 2012). Although many Somalis live in both smaller and larger cities in Minnesota, some were keen to leave. Because of increasing crime in the Twin Cities neighborhoods, longing for greater safety, new employment opportunities, and a high school graduation requirement that does not require an English language essay test, waves of Somalis have come to rural Barron, Wisconsin.

Barron, Wisconsin, the county seat of Barron County, in northwestern Wisconsin has a largely monoethnic (white, European, Christian) population of nearly 3,500. The Somalis were especially drawn to Barron, because of the large Jennie-O company meat processing plant. Although the town had experience with outsiders before—the processing plant had hired a largely Latino workforce—the Somalis were markedly different. Although the Latino groups were racially and linguistically “non-Barron,” they were, like the majority of Barron residents, Christian. The Somalis, in contrast, are racially, linguistically, and religiously different from the majority of Barron residents. Moreover, the differences in religion are markedly more tangible. Muslim dress, prayer rituals, food prohibitions, etc. are readily observable and visible in the small town. The Somalis today represent around 13% (over 400 individuals) of the total population of Barron (Falardeau, 2005). The Somali population in Barron increased by 622% between 1990 and 2010 from less than fifty to over 400 (Veroff, 2010). As a result of the large influx of Somalis, several initiatives were started to aid cultural understanding among both the Somalis and the residents of Barron. The faculty in the school district underwent diversity training and

instituted a larger ESL program. A soccer team was formed to bridge cultures among the children, the apartment building property owners made accommodations to the Somali residents, and local stores stocked some Somali foods (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012). In their study on initial interactions in Barron, Schaid and Grossman (2007) found that the majority (81.5%) of Somalis had a positive first experience in interacting with Barron residents. However, tensions between the Somalis and local Barronites do exist. Tensions were high following the combined effects of the September 11th attacks, the release of the movie *Black Hawk Down*, and the murder of a Somali refugee in town. Much of this tension resulted from misunderstanding of who the Somalis are and why they are in the United States. These misunderstandings pervade the community today, as the only informational book on Somalis in America is limited to Minnesota (Yusuf, 2012). Additionally, these misunderstandings remain an important marker of the isolative social nature of the Somali community in Barron and figures prominently into their heritage language use.

In an attempt to understand the linguistic situation of Midwestern Somalis, this study utilizes both semi-structured interviews and critical ethnography to examine negotiation of identities through language attitudes. We interviewed six individuals (table 1). One was an outsider who works directly with the Somalis in Barron. The others were Somalis—born both in the United States and in Somalia. They ranged in age from 18 to 62. The semi-structured interviews occurred in Barron with both authors asking questions—and being asked questions—related to language use and culture.

Additionally, sociodemographic information, historical information on the refugees in the Midwest, and participant observation all contributed to a critical ethnography of the space. The critical ethnography provided valuable insights to help frame the interviews within the larger social systems at play in both Africa and the United States.

TABLE 1 *Participants.*

Narrator 1	middle age, female, teacher, non-Somali
Narrator 2	late 20s, male, assistant teacher, born in Somalia
Narrator 3	middle age, female, social worker, born in Somalia
Narrator 4	late teens, female, assistant teacher, born in U.S.
Narrator 5	early 20s, male, college student, born in Somalia
Narrator 6	above middle age, male, construction, born in Somalia

4 Analysis

4.1 *English for Education*

Language as the “primary semiotic tool for representing and negotiating social reality” comes to the fore in many of the narratives on Somali identity in the United States. Learning English for the Somalis in American society is frequently cited as the number one need for the Somalis in Barron (Schaid and Grossman, 2007; Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012), likely because English is seen as the door to navigating bureaucracy and education for the refugees’ children. There are, arguably, other issues that may be more pressing, such as safety in the new living environment for newly arrived refugees. For several of the Barron Somalis, English is the language of education, and, implicitly for economic growth. Importantly, however, the language of the home generally remains Somali until the child enters formal education at school. At face value, the non-shift in language use would dictate Somali as a heritage language in the home and the language of education as English:

Narrator 1: In the last 15 years, I haven’t really seen a shift in the languages themselves. What happens is, the Somali parents want to isolate their children only in the Somali language until the children turn five. Then they would focus in on developing their English language.

Narrator 1, an outsider who works directly with the Barron Somalis, notes that English learning starts first when the Somalis enter school. She does not see the shift from Somali to English in the home domain. When not working with students, she most frequently works with parents and negotiates the stability of Somali in the home based on the parents’ limited English proficiency. Her use of the word “isolate” is intriguing, because it shows how the perception of monolingualism pervades. Somali is used in the home and is separate from other domains of language use. Yet, the languages are not entirely separate as the schools in Barron have signs written in Somali at the entrances alerting parents and guardians to check in at the main office before going through the school. In marking the linguistic landscape with such signage, the implicit message hints at the limited English proficiency of the parents of schoolchildren.

Narrator 5, a young man in his twenties attending college, echoed her sentiments. For him, the contextualized space of their new community is enough to warrant the learning of English:

Narrator 5: I advocate English is better because America is where we live. English is a language of communication in America. I like it.

He has positive attitudes toward English, and importantly, as a college student places the use of English and the role of education in his life as paramount. The connection he draws here between not only the utility and his preference for English was one of the few overt positive attitudes toward English. The other narrators held largely neutral views on English. The separation between English and Somali resonates with the Somalis themselves. English is seen as the language of the school alone:

Narrator 4: I only speak English when I'm here [at school].

Although Narrator 4 is an assistant ESL teacher, she limits her speaking of English to only the school environment. One might assume that as an educator, she may wish further to immerse herself in English outside of school to improve her own proficiency. Yet she indicated during the interview that her educational pursuits are temporary—she does not wish to remain an educator. However, in analyzing these two sentiments, it becomes apparent that Somali may not be seen as educationally “worthy” a language, as English occupies that domain entirely in their lives.

For these narrators, English is the language of education in contrast to Somali—which (as uncovered later) is unavailable as a written language for many of Barron’s Somalis. As the language of education, English holds the key to economic advancement and further education. Yet even in Somalia, English featured prominently in education. English remains one of nine or ten compulsory subjects in both primary and secondary schools. In their new linguistic environment, surrounded by (text)books in the dominant language and void of books in Somali, English takes on a greater role as the language of learned society.

4.2 *Negative Attitudes toward English*

Although English affords the benefits of educational mobility, it is not assigned entirely positive attributes in accord with analyses that find a variety of stances beyond the regular positive and negative binary (Dailey-O’Cain and Liebscher, 2011). Language options, under the theoretical framework employed here, are differently valued and the values are consistently reassessed in discourse. Narrator 3, a woman with young children at home, maintains close ties to Somalia and took her children there on a visit so that they could better acquaint themselves with their home culture. For her, English has both positive and negative aspects:

Narrator 3: Yes, everyone’s different. Some prefer English, because it’s for intimidation and education.

English may be used as the language of education, but it also is used for intimidation—as a means to establish a power hierarchy both within and outside the Somali community. Those with better English may exploit the lower proficiencies of others. Narrator 3 lamented the overuse of English in her community that seeks to highlight the linguistic insecurity or lower proficiency of other Somalis. She finds that this severs the ties to Somali identity. In fact, affronts to one's own in-group—especially by using a Western language to intimidate—go directly against Somali cultural identity. One of the most important aspects of Somali cultural norms is *martisoor*, hospitality, which dictates social grace and mandates that the “slightest infraction [against another, especially guests] would bear grave social disdain” (Yusuf, 2012: 2). Her negative attribution to English lies mainly in its abuse as intimidation by positioning oneself as linguistically more powerful. Throughout the rest of the interview, she highlighted instead her attitudes toward the maintenance of Somali. She recounted an incident earlier in another state:

Narrator 3: I got on a bus in Detroit and this woman's child couldn't speak Somali, and that was a shame.

Connecting English-speaking with intimidation and shame highlight the strategies of avoidance that she uses among her own children, who occasionally use English at home—a growing concern of some who think that the home language should remain Somali:

Narrator 3: Sometimes they start to speaking English and I get after them and say “Stop that.”

As a result, the domains of language use are not as neatly distinct and defined. The children, even Somali-born children, are using English at home while the policing of language behavior is taken on largely by their parents' generation and older Somalis.

Another narrator saw the use of English as something beneficial to help the community and not as a means of intimidation. Narrator 2, a young father in his thirties, whose wife and child are still in a refugee camp in Kenya, notes the possibilities that English affords in helping the future of the Somali refugees in the United States:

Narrator 2: Sometimes it is good to know about the language [English] because they [Somalis] can help the community when they are done with school.

Perhaps because of the fact that his family is still in a refugee camp in Africa, he sees English as a means of helping them settle Barron. Between Narrators 4 and 2, one can see how the language options and ideologies attached to those languages are differently valued among speakers. Moreover, one can see the agency of the speakers to resist or re-appropriate what those ideologies mean for their identities in America. Narrator 4 who strongly believes in a strict maintenance of Somali as a heritage language at home and connotes English with both education and intimidation stated several times that she wishes to return to Somalia as soon as the political climate is better. Thus, the political systems at play contribute to the ideologies formed around languages. Additionally, she has taken her children back to Somalia several times for extended periods so that they do not forget their homeland. Narrator 2, on the other hand, is more interested in being reunited with his wife and young son. He sees English as a means to navigate the lengthy paperwork processes involved in petitioning for refugee status in the United States. Additionally, his work as an ESL teaching assistant—helping younger Somalis learn English—brings more economic gain and a greater ability to sponsor his family's immigration to the United States, than if he were employed in the meat-processing plant with the majority of Barron Somalis. Both narrators produce differing attitudes toward English among Somalis while invoking larger social systems at play.

In his study on the Somalis in Minnesota, Yusuf (2012: 65) directly comments on the English abilities of American-born Somalis:

People who survived refugee camps—now taxi drivers, hotel maids, janitors, teachers, business owners—see their children graduating from colleges, navigating the system like other Americans, and speaking English with an American accent, and they are proud of them.

He believes that the ability to speak English with an American accent is a function of younger age and higher economic status. Without directly stating that language shift is underway, Yusuf (2012) comments on the increasing proficiency and more American-like target structures existent among the newest generation of Somali-Americans. What, then, are their attitudes toward Somali?

4.3 *Attitudes toward Somali*

Several participants claimed that they were proud to speak Somali in America. This pride correlated with a perceived ability to maintain Somali in the United States and in Barron, specifically:

Narrator 5: I think the community stick very well to their language. I think they can retain the language.

He went on to say that one is not truly Somali if they do not actually speak the language. He invoked the connection between racial identity and language use:

Narrator 5: You may be brown, but if you don't speak Somali, you're not Somali.

Interestingly, Narrator 5 commented earlier that he “advocates” for English, which he likes. It is not that he sees Somali and English as positive and negative on an axis as stated in our theoretical stance. Through his negotiation of multilingualism in the interview, he views the languages as important for different purposes. English is important for communication in America, but his ethnic and cultural heritage align more prominently with maintaining Somali. These cultural factors weigh in heavily to promote the continued use of Somali as a heritage language in Barron. Indeed, cultural identity maintenance was the strongest reason for keeping Somali as a heritage language in Barron:

Narrator 6: I believe if they keep them language, they can also keep some of the culture.

Other than Narrator 4, no one saw the use of English among the Somalis as detrimental. The other participants focused instead on importance of maintaining the Somali language and with it Somali culture:

Narrator 2: Actually, they don't hate to hear their children speaking English, but they prefer their children speaking Somali language, because they don't want to lose both the culture and the language.

The tie between the language and the culture is the most important aspect for the Somalis, however this tie is connected generationally. Being a Somali who speaks English is not only an option for children, but it is with that generation that it is seen as the most threatening. Whether speaking Somali will index Somali cultural identity remains to be seen for these young children of the refugee generation. English as the language of educational mobility and economic growth is seen in certain contexts as important to learn. However, Somali as a language for cultural identity and attraction to the homeland and

the family is just as important. As the children are not surrounded by Somali culture, their parents fear that they will forget or never get to know and share memories of Somalia. Narrator 6 echoed these sentiments again, not by vilifying English or American culture, but rather highlighting the loss endured when one loses their language and with it their culture:

Narrator 6: It's not so good to change your culture and language.

4.4 *Changing Roles in Literacy*

One of the problems that was highlighted often in the interviews was the lack of literacy in Somali. As Somali was first written down in the 1970s, there is a considerable lack of language learning materials, but also of written material that is readily available to the Somalis in Barron, especially books for children. Thus, while the families maintain Somali as a heritage language in the home, it is usually only as an oral medium:

Narrator 1: What we see now is that not a lot of families are working with their child to become literate ... I wish that they would have more exposure to Somali academic language.

While these sentiments come from an outsider, and a teacher who works closely with the Somalis, her sentiments are echoed by the Somalis in Barron as well. Her wish, as she implied throughout the interview, was that Somali would join English as a language of education, as mentioned in Section 4.1. Several of the Somalis interviewed noted that the closest connection they have to their home country is audiovisual—through a television station to provide news and programming in Somali. Additionally, the Director of the Barron Somali Community Association lamented the lack of literacy among his community members:

If somebody doesn't know his own language, it is very hard to learn a different language. We have elders, and they don't know Somalian language well enough to know how to read or write. We have Somali youth, and especially Somali youth who were born and raised in America, who cannot read or write Somali language. (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012)

Importantly, he sees the connection between learning English and knowing Somali. For him learning a second language is only possible if you know—or, more specifically for him, can read and write—your first language. Implicit is that the power afforded by the language of oral and written media, English,

should not overshadow the power of Somali. Somali must be learned to be read and written as well as English; Somali should be seen as a literary language in the competition with English. The idea of literacy in Somali is an interesting one. Obviously, the high linguistic capital of English as the language of education may force some to examine how to increase the linguistic capital of their native language given the new linguistic ecology in the new context. New language ecologies often form when literacy is tightly connected to the dominant language (Martin, 2007). Indeed, Eira (2002) found the adoption of an alphabet system important for the emergence of literacy in Hmong among refugees. Hatoss (2013) finds that championing literacy is the third level of language function in a new language ecology. Language is first used, then maintained, and finally expanded. The director elaborates further and draws in a connection among culture and language learning and literacy:

... the most important thing is if they read their history, their culture, it will help them to stay away from many things they are doing now. (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012)

For him, literacy is the key to not only keep Somali culture alive, but also to avoid the “bad” behaviors of the Somali youth, in particular those that are *haraam*, those which are in direct violation of their religious beliefs. By engaging in those activities, the Somali youth take on more of a Western identity and attempts at assimilation increase. Somalis in Barron are seeking to support the maintenance of Somali by expanding its use into other domains.

4.5 *English and Somali in Contact*

The reality of speaking a heritage language while maintaining a Somali identity surrounded by a largely monoethnic and monolingual community is a great challenge. Religious identity markers do present a strong boundary around maintaining Somali culture. Muslim dress, food restrictions, prayer rituals, and Saturday *duxu* instruction for Somali youth in Barron are all very visible ethnic boundaries around Somali cultural identity. A similar “hermetic ethnic boundary” was found among Hmong participants in Burt’s (2013) study in which the minority culture desires to maintain a distinctive identity, rather than assimilate. Moreover, Yusuf (2012) claims that a stereotypical characteristic of Somalis is their tenacity to hold to their values and beliefs, and to challenge oppressors when they are pressured. He found that Somali children in Minnesota sometimes physically lashed out—feeling the pressures of the entire community and their families in particular—in their struggles to “fit in ... when under verbal siege” (Yusuf, 2012: 17, 49). The Executive Director of the Confederation

of Somali Community in Minnesota explained an instance of religious intolerance, which climaxed quickly with added problems of language concerning prayer during work hours by a Somali worker:

She tries to explain that she is praying or having ablution. However, she didn't have the language, so they didn't understand that. She was fired, and they thought that she was doing something unclean. And so we were called after to talk to them and explain Islamic ablution. And she was hired back. (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012)

From a monocultural and monoethnic bias, religious identity markers keep Somalis in Barron isolated from assimilation with Western traditions and language behaviors. However, it is important to note that mainstream American society and the social systems at play may also impede assimilationist activities. The negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts is not only reflective and agentic—stemming from the individuals and the in-group—but also interactive. Social systems in mainstream society may isolate the minority culture just as the minority culture seeks to isolate itself. This is readily apparent in Barron, where the Somalis are largely isolated from mainstream American society. They reside in an apartment complex on the edge of town between the meatpacking plant and the county prison. Economically speaking, Somalis work largely for minimum wage and save most of their earnings to pay for refugee petitions and travel of family members still in Africa. This situation mandates that they reside in housing for lower incomes about which most Barronites do not need to worry. Most Somalis are employed in the blue-collar meatpacking plant and rarely interact beyond the plant and the apartment complex, i.e., they rarely interact with non-Somalis. As a result, the Barron Somalis are socially kept from engaging more with mainstream society. Several participants mentioned that some Barronites markedly change the speed and volume of their voice when speaking to Somalis. Endeavors meant to “integrate” Somalis into Barron life are largely for children, e.g., schooling and soccer. The “hermetic ethnic boundary” created by the Somalis and created by social systems at play in mainstream American society produce a situation in which Somali remains a dominant language in the lives of Barron Somalis. However, the weakening of the cultural boundary among children in school and on the soccer team may affect the role of Somali as a heritage language for future generations. The future of Somali in Barron is largely up for debate.

American-born Somalis are still in the youngest generation of those in Barron. Some are just now reaching the age of having children of their own. Several of the study's participants had children or grandchildren who are

American-born. Narrator 6, a grandfather of several American-born Somalis stands in his family as both patriarch and champion of the heritage language:

Narrator 6: I encourage them (the grandchildren) to speak Somali at home, because that way they can keep their language.

Interestingly, he qualifies that he is in favor of using Somali at home and thus sees its importance as a heritage language in the Barron community. Again, English is important for the children, but holding on to their heritage is important as well. Narrator 2, who has friends with American-born children and works with many of them in the elementary school, notes the varying levels of proficiency:

Narrator 2: Actually, those who were born in this country, they speak Somali, but then sometimes they have difficulties. They have difficulties speaking Somali language. They can speak, but not that they can speak like they came from country of Somalia.

He notes that their Somali has taken on an American twist to it; younger Somalis change their verbal behavior to signify their changing identities as Somalis in America, American-born Somalis, or Somali-Americans. Narrator 4, a younger woman who works with Somali children at the high school level, goes further to indicate that not only is their Somali different, but they cannot keep speaking it to the same degree:

Narrator 4: They just can't speak Somali all the time.

The inability to maintain Somali all of the time may hint at various levels of code-switching between English and Somali that may be a hallmark of the newest generation of Somali-Americans—an area of further exploration. The majority of American-born Somalis were too young to include in this initial study. Within a few years, they will be the newest parents of second-generation American-born Somali-Americans. Further study into the actual language abilities of American-born Somalis is necessary.

5 Conclusions

Naturally, the viability of Somali as a heritage language for future generations of Barron Somalis is a looming question as a result of this research. While our

research shows a perceived difference in proficiency of Barron Somali from native Somali and a definite presence of both English and Somali in the home domains, the amount of shift is nonetheless unclear. The newest generation of American-born Barron Somalis will undoubtedly provide information about language use and the future of Somali as a heritage language in Barron. As the members of this generation are largely children, they are not included in this initial study. Outgrowth research of this initial study will continue to track the tendencies of language use in Barron over several years and monitor the situation as these children enter adulthood and have the second generation of American-born Somalis.

A distinction between the language of education, English, and the language of cultural identity, Somali, pervades the narratives of the Barron Somalis. Yet the draw of education, and with it economic mobility, has forced several participants to encourage greater literacy in Somali among the younger generations. They want them to not only be able to read about their cultural heritage, but also to enjoy the same literary prestige as English. Their perception of a potential language shift underway provides for them ample reason to bolster the study of Somali language in its competition for English as a literary language.

Somalis in Barron strongly correlate being able to speak Somali in the home with the continuance of Somali identity—including ethnic and religious identities. The cultural boundary around the Somalis is, at present, strong enough to maintain Somali as the dominant language of the home. The weakening of that boundary, especially through economic opportunities afforded by a professional workforce beyond the meat-processing plant and the isolation in affordable housing apartments, will increase the interactive nature of the language situation.

As economic mobility increases with increased abilities in English, economic class distinctions will arise among the Barron Somalis. It will be then that Somali-Americans will sense the greatest tension in their negotiation of identities in rural Wisconsin. However, the reality of assimilation into American society and participation in economic mobility have strong racial barriers. African-Americans are economically more disadvantaged than nonminority whites in the United States (Lofstrom and Bates, 2013). Although the United States has a history of immigration culture embedded in its social systems, researchers find that social dominance is more at odds with race than with foreign birth (Fainstein, 2013). Thus, the social systems at place in American society may impede the changing identities of the Barron Somalis because of their ethnicity.

In spite of isolative practices, refugee groups in Wisconsin have been shown to experience language shift, i.e., among Hmong in Wisconsin (Burt, 2013).

However, this language situation is complicated in many ways that Hmong in Wisconsin are not. Pavlenko (2004), developing the language ideologies work of Blommaert (1999), emphasizes that a sociohistorical perspective is necessary in understanding the negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts. In this context specifically, while Somali among the first generation of refugees was non-negotiated or non-negotiable, future generations may see a shift in the role of the language in determining their identities as Somali-Americans. If further assimilation into American culture manifests, the links between language and identities may become more negotiable, such that the choice of speaking Somali in the home domain is no longer dependent on defining their identities as Somali-Americans. Although the current situation in Somalia is still unstable enough to warrant a continued influx of refugees to America, that situation may change. Many Somalis in Barron work solely to provide money to pay for their relatives to join them in Barron, freeing them from the conditions of refugee camps in neighboring African countries (Swedien, 2011). The future of the situation in Somalia is unclear enough such as to draw questions regarding the length of refugee residency in the United States. The Director of the Barron Somali Community Association could only call the situation “long term”: “I can’t say this is permanent or temporary, but I can say this is long term.” While many of the refugee generations of Barron Somalis continue to maintain close contact with relatives in Africa and hold on to Somali language and culture, the generations of American-born Somalis will call into question the legitimacy of those connections. As the situation in Somalia develops and becomes even longer term, the non-negotiated and non-negotiable links of identity and language may indeed fade. When residency in American is seen as more permanent, the link with the homeland becomes less obvious and less necessary. Only time will show how the future of Somali in Barron will fare.

The identities of Barron Somalis are varied (and expectedly so)—some hold onto English for economic growth, others to Somali for cultural and political gain; there is no one-to-one map between identity and language. In viewing the negotiations of their identities as contextually based, this research shows how language attitudes transcend a simple positive and negative mapping. Languages are chosen and links between languages and ideologies are differently valued within the speech community. Moreover, these links are changeable. For future generations facing the prospect of permanent resettlement in the United States, Somali as a heritage language may become a negotiable aspect of their identities. Regardless of the changes, the speakers have agency to resist those negotiations or re-assign ideologies to their language repertoire to fit the context. In viewing identities as discursive and multiple, we are confronted

with a wide range of avenues for future research on Somali as a heritage language in rural Wisconsin.

Avenues of future research also include a better examination of the refugee situation. The comparisons between American-born Somalis and Somalia-born Somalis brings to light other issues at play in the multilingual ecologies in Barron. Other research among immigrant heritage language communities in the United States, namely German in the United States, has shown that language shift occurs when social systems move from being horizontal to vertical (Salmons 2005a, b). At the surface, twenty-first century Somali refugees seem so far removed from nineteenth century German immigrants to the United States. Rural residents relied on local social systems and settlement on prairie expanses on the American West aided the isolative nature of linguistic enclaves. Surely, modern day Somalis coming from a country with its own vertical social systems will not be as greatly impacted by the vertical social systems in the United States. Here again, the discursive and dynamic nature of multilingual identities revealed through narratives is elucidating. Although Somalia—complete with governmental agencies, systems of education, infrastructure—had vertical social systems, the remembered homeland as brought forth in narratives is very different. Ramsden and Ridge (2012) note that Somali refugees often relate their homeland in terms of safety and “collective culture.” The collective nature of the remembered homeland indicates a horizontal structure. As the new language ecology in the United States is faced, new linguistic hegemonies are encountered (Hatoss, 2013: 5). The perception (or reality) that the language situation in the United States is hierarchical with English holding more linguistic capital than the heritage language creates the shift in structures. English is more powerful nationally, educationally, economically and thus a hierarchy forms in the new language ecology. The resulting vertical social system means that inequalities have been drawn on linguistic lines. For the Somalis in this study, American-born Somali children are different culturally and linguistically from those born in Somalia. It would be interesting to see how theories of language shift, like verticalization, could be utilized to explain any shifts among American-born and America-raised Somalis.

The refugees come with language ecologies that existed in Somalis and perhaps in a refugee camp in a neighboring country. Those ecologies need to be examined as they change in the new context (Bailey, 2007; Martin, 2007). Moreover, the histories of the refugees need to be better understood before they came to the United States. Refugee camps are notorious sites of rape, organized violence, and shelling attacks (Rutter 2003: 9). Maksoud's (1992) work on refugee children is especially disheartening. She found among child

refugees in Lebanon that 90.3% exposed to shelling or combat, 68.4% forcibly displaced, 54.5% food or water shortages, and 50.3% witness violent acts. These instances will most definitely influence the identities of the refugees, linguistic and otherwise. Often, as Revis (2015: 214) notes, refugee parents' minds are more occupied with the traumatic experiences before immigration and what that entails than they are about the use of a child's language. To get a complete picture of the language ecologies present in Barron, one must also understand the ecologies that preceded their current refugee status.

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