

Slang Toponyms in Early Twentieth Century Helsinki

Jani Vuolteenaho

Terhi Ainiala

Finland

Abstract

In this article, we analyse spatial slang coinages by boys and young men from Sörnäinen, a bilingual working-class neighbourhood in early twentieth century Helsinki (1900–1939). During this period, Helsinki slang developed into a unique slang spoken among the working class of both Finnish and Swedish language backgrounds in their densely occupied quarters. In their childhood, male juveniles of Sörnäinen used many place-referring slang words in both appellative (classifying) and proprial (identifying) functions. When the same males got older and began to move more widely in different kinds of social settings across Helsinki, the use of these kinds of double-functional nouns decreased in favour of slang names derived from the city's official nomenclature. The primary research material of the article covers a set of interviews made between the 1920s and the 1980s.

Research questions

This article is based on a research project titled “Transformation of onomastic landscape in the sociolinguistically diversifying neighbourhoods of Helsinki”. The basic idea of the project is to investigate the historical and current onomastic landscape of Helsinki, the capital of Finland, from the viewpoint of place names (both official and unofficial) that the various social segments of the population use. The project focuses on some of the most prominent sociocultural groups within two case study neighbourhoods, i.e., Sörnäinen and Vuosaari.¹ Sörnäinen is an old working-class neighbourhood that is currently in a transitory phase of gentrification, whereas Vuosaari is a relatively newly built suburb by the sea in eastern Helsinki (Ainiala and Vuolteenaho 2006, 59).

An essential premise in the research is that the city dwellers do not constitute a homogeneous group of people as users of place names. Although the entity formed by the official place names at a given point of time is the same for each city dweller in principle, adopting place names and their meanings depends on the individuals' cultural background, former life history, the area where they live, and their social networks in different parts of the urban space, and other such factors. In the project, the uses of toponyms are analysed from three perspectives: the incidence of different historical layers in the vocabulary of various groups; the role of place names in the cognitive perception of urban space; and the symbolic meanings of place names in the construction of different urban identities (Ainiala and Vuolteenaho 2006, 59–61).

The present study focuses on the toponymy used by boys and young men in Sörnäinen in the early twentieth century (1900–1939). It reveals the link between the urban transformation of Helsinki during early industrial urbanisation and the informal toponymy of everyday spaces. There are three research questions:

1) What kind of place names did boys and young men in Sörnäinen use to communicate about the urban environment of their daily lives?

- 2) What was the role of appellative expressions in identifying the places?
- 3) With which kind of activities were the names associated?

Sörnäinen as a research area

The industrial revolution began in Finland in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the ensuing decades, Helsinki was split into two residential halves as a result of intense industrial urbanisation. In the south, there was the ‘stone city’ of the gentry and of the burgeoning middle classes. By contrast, the northern parts of the city were characterised by rapidly spreading wooden settlements of the working class (Waris 1973, 13–29). In the north, Sörnäinen was a major concentration of working-class housing. It got its in-migration mainly from the countryside as people from both Finnish and Swedish provinces of the country moved to the capital of Finland.

The bilingual community created its own informal language. Dubbed subsequently *Stadin slangi* (literally: ‘the language of the City’) by its speakers themselves, this unique mixed sociolect reminded actually more of a pidgin or even creole language than a slang as customarily defined by linguists (see e.g., Hymes 1971). It developed among the working class of both Finnish and Swedish language backgrounds in their densely occupied quarters, most notably in Sörnäinen. In particular, it was born among its second generation migrants at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a vernacular language of the working class, Helsinki slang had a very strong unifying function. Since it was developed to make the communication between Finnish and Swedish speaking populations possible, linguistic correctness did not play a significant role (Paunonen 1994, 237–238; Paunonen 2006, 34–35).

Around the turn of the century, an overwhelming majority of the vocabulary in slang was derived from Swedish (ca. 75 per cent), whereas just one fifth of its words were of Finnish origin. In addition, slang also had words from other languages, mainly from Russian (ca. 5 per cent). A few words were also adopted from English, German and Italian.

The most common and very productive way of composing slang names – as well as other nouns – was to add a “slangifying” suffix to the root of the name (e.g., *Fleminginkatu* ‘Fleming’s Street’ > *Flemari*, *Vaasankatu* ‘Vaasa’s Street’ > *Vaasis*). Ever since its early stages, slang has included a number of suffixes that have been used to form slang names on the basis of Finnish and Swedish names and words. In contrast to the suffixes in standard Finnish, the slang suffixes did not have a semantic function of their own but were quite simply used to make words and names slang-like. The most frequently used suffixes in Helsinki slang were *ari*, *is*, *ka*, *ga*, *kka*, *tsa*, *tsi*, *ski*, *sku*, *sa* and *de*. For example, the slang name for Sörnäinen, i.e., *Sörkka*, contains the suffix *kka*. Further, slang toponymy also included compound names that were often metaphoric or metonymic (e.g., *Pirunlinna* ‘Devil’s Castle’ as the name of a residential building) (Paunonen 2000: 25; Paunonen 2006: 55–57).

Since Helsinki slang developed in the working-class neighbourhoods it also received a strong social label. First of all, it was a disparaged language among the local upper classes. Furthermore, Helsinki slang was not an approved form of language to be used anywhere. By way of example, it was prohibited to use slang in schools and other official institutions. Not all working-class families allowed the use of slang words at home, either. In particular, many mothers regarded slang as a language of hooligans; in their opinion slang was not a language to be used while trying to attain a “better” life and social status for their children. In contrast, many fathers used slang words also when talking to their children, especially to their sons. Consequently, slang was above all a language used by men and boys (Paunonen 2000: 42–43). For this particular reason, our article concentrates on the toponymy used by boys and young men.

Research material

Sampled from a larger set of recollections by Helsinkians, our research material consists of 87 interviews made between the 1920s and the 1980s. The earliest interviews used in the article were collected for Heikki Waris' (1973; originally published in two volumes in 1932 and 1934) path-breaking dissertation of Finnish sociology on the development of working-class neighbourhoods on the northern part of Helsinki. Moreover, we utilise interviews of slang-speakers by M. A. Numminen (the 1960s), Heikki Paunonen (1970s–), Aila Rantala and Tapio Ruotsi (early 1980s), a study project on colloquial Finnish of Helsinki (1972–1974), and a slang collection campaign (1976). Earlier, the same material was utilised by Heikki Paunonen (2000) for a compilation of a dictionary of Helsinki slang, with over 33,000 entries in alphabetical order. The dictionary in question covers a total of around 3,000 chronologically classified slang toponyms, out of which approximately one third were utilized in our interpretations on the typical slang toponyms among Sörnäinen's male juveniles between 1900 and 1939.

Names used in early childhood

Based on the interviews, boys in early twentieth century Sörnäinen, or Sörkka guys, as we call them, started to speak slang as toddlers. Predominantly, the boys and their families – whether Finnish or Swedish by mother tongue – lived in large and architecturally rather homogeneous working-class tenements that characterised the landscape of Sörnäinen in the early industrial era. As soon as they were old enough to participate in games occurring in the yards of these tenements, they also began to learn slang words that eased bilingual communication with other boys. For obvious reasons, the most important names at this stage were *pitsku* (< Fi. *piha*) 'yard' and *hima* (< Swe. *hem*) 'home'.² Other important places in the yard were called, e.g., *tvettis* 'common laundry', *keltsu* 'cellar', *skinderi* 'outhouse' (< Swe. *skithus* 'shit house').

When a little older, the guys ventured to leave the familiar yard. This made them increasingly aware of the adjoining yards and children, which in turn consolidated their identification with 'our yard's kids'. Notably, it took some time for a child to realise that *himabyggas* (*bygga* 'building'), *porttaris* 'gateways', *buidus* 'stores', *lafkas* (Ru) 'eating places' or 'stores', *kulmas* (Fi) 'street corners' and *kartsas* 'streets' around their home neighbourhood were often very much alike. Accordingly, many of the place-referring expressions that young Sörkka guys learnt could designate both specific places (e.g., *Pitsku* as one's home yard) and certain types of places (any *pitsku* in Sörkka). The very same slang terms could thus be used both in proprial and appellative functions, but of course not in the same context. In this regard, it strongly seems as if Sörkka's relatively uniform built environment in itself 'encouraged' the youngest speakers of slang to spontaneously shift, depending on the context of speech, between exploiting spatial expressions as either proper names or appellatives.

Names used by preteen guys

Homes of the working-class families were regularly very small; an average dwelling consisted of one room only and was inhabited by more than four persons. Obviously, this state of affairs left hardly any room for visiting children in the homes of the families in the working-class district. In consequence, kids (particularly boys) played mainly outside, where they also had good opportunities to use slang.

For one thing, remnants of the non-urbanised landscape in the rapidly growing city were among young Sörkka guys' favourite sites for play activities such as climbing, sledging, as well as building huts and snow castles. Inter alia, there were several informal variants for woodland, all of them eponymous to Swedish *skog* (e.g., *skuge*, *skuide*, *skutta*). Similarly, *branttis* 'steep hill', *bärtsi* 'rocky hill', *plotti* 'pond', *plantsku* 'open area' and *rantsu* (Fi) 'shore' designated certain types of topographic features. In addition, in some cases they were also utilised to

pinpoint specific locations. In this respect, many typical slang expressions of preteen Sörkka followed naming models set forth in earlier childhood. In some other instances, however, names for certain empty lots (not built upon) were also compounded through references to contiguous streets or other urban constructions (*Kägäri's bärtsi* [*Kägäri* < *Käenkuja* (Fi) 'Käki Alley']).

The urban areas became important to Sörkka guys as well. In different streets of Sörnäinen, groups of guys used to hang around, play team games and guard their areas. In this regard, urban nicknames increasingly based on the official toponymy of the city were invented or learned from older guys. Among these kinds of names were *Hesari* < *Helsinginkatu* 'Helsinki's Street', ironic *Herulin Espis* < 'Hermann's Esplanade', *Ryssäntalo* < 'the Russki's building', and *Kusila* < 'Piss-place', a metaphorically re-named tenement. In addition, an especially attractive landscape was the local harbour area – a place with exciting berths, timber yards, gutters (*skeidakanaali* 'shit canal') and a gasworks area (*Koiranperse* (Fi) 'Dog's Arse').

Nevertheless, the preteen guys of Sörnäinen were not just adventuring in their daily lives, but also helping their families. Most boys were expected to assist their families in acquiring wood for heating, running errands, scraping together money for rent, and so on. As a man born in 1921 remembered it: "A most ordinary gig was a stop at *Elkka's mjölkki*, on some days when *mutsi* (< 'mother') was making sour whole milk, you needed to drop by there twice a day". In Sörkka guys' common parlance, a dairy became *mjölkki*, a grocer's *sekis* (Fi), a butcher's shop *tsötebuidu*, a wood-selling cellar *klapihandeli*, and a pharmacy *aptis*. Indeed, a great deal of preteen Sörkka guys' accumulating knowledge of the nearby urban environment became more and more tightly linked with miscellaneous earning activities.

In addition, one of the most important everyday places in Sörkka guys' lives was quite naturally the school. They called it simply *skole* or *kansis* (Fi).

Names used by teen guys

Sports and athletics were popular with teenage Sörkka guys. Much of the youngsters' lives were spent in activities like wrestling, boxing, skating or playing team sports. These could occur either on purposely-built venues like *Bygga* 'Building' (the workers' main community hall), *Bragu* (also nicknamed *Sörkka's Bislet* (O) after Oslo's well-known stadium), *Klubba* (a skating ground), or vacant areas such as a clearing nicknamed *Narva* (O), apparently named after a historical battleground in Estonia.

Naturally there were other attractions as well. Inter alia, cinemas (*Fenkk* (O)) and dance halls (*Bygga*, *Sörkan Vennu*, *Valkan Työsi* (Fi)) were very important for them. Interestingly, slang coinages referring to teenage Sörkka guys' swimming, fishing, trash collecting and other money-earning sites disclose a mobility pattern that extended several kilometres away from their home district. With regard to swimming, for instance, nearby working-class pools in *Blobika* and *Kylis* (Fi) were naturally among their favourites, but the guys also went to waterfronts (*rantsus* (Fi)) and open-air sea water pools (*simmises*) elsewhere in the city and even in its upper-class areas.

In the premier residential areas of southern Helsinki, the guys were often treated as unwanted, socially inferior "Sörkka vagabonds". As a man born in 1911 put it in the interview: "If you went on the side of *Kaivari* (< *Kaivopuisto* 'Well Park'; an upper-class residential area and recreational park), people there recognised immediately that you were from the other side of *Pitkäsilta* ('Long Bridge'; a bridge separating the city centre and northern parts of the city). Yet despite these kinds of attitude, Sörkka guys were visible in many central places of the city.

On the one hand, this occurred in their various roles as service-sector workers. One of the most important ways to earn money was to work as *jynssäri* 'shoe-polisher'. As a quote from the aforementioned informant reveals, the guys regularly worked in public places where their potential paying customers could be found: "*Kapla* (< *Kappeli* 'Chapel'; a restaurant at the end of

Esplanade Park) was a sort of place where a shoe-cleaner made a lot... one always desired to get there, or at *Statsa* ('Railway Station'), those were the best places".

On the other hand, the youngsters of Sörnäinen not only moved around in southern Helsinki in search of money-earning chances, but also spent a part of their spare time in the midst of the temptations of modernising city life. One such place was the Esplanade Park (*Espis, Espä*), considered by many of their upper-class contemporaries as a showcase of Helsinki's new metropolis-like atmosphere (Kervanto Nevanlinna 2003, 368–369). In and around the promenade park, Sörkkä guys had a number of slang words for popular gathering sites and meeting-spots, as shown by *Bulitortsi* (from colloquial *Isotori* 'Big Square', officially *Kauppatori* 'Market Square'), the restaurant *Socis* 'Seurahuone' and a statue nickname *Kaivo-Manta* (Fi) 'Well-Amanda' (after the fountain of Havis Amanda).

In sum, teenage Sörkkä guys mainly took into use slang names which had their origin in the official nomenclature. In southern Helsinki, these toponymic adoptions included, for instance, slangified names, such as *Bulla* 'Boulevard', *Aleksi* (< *Aleksanterinkatu* 'Alexander's Street'), *Bulitirra* 'Big Theatre' (actually the National Theatre), *Järkku's tortsi* 'Railway Station Square', *Roiskis* 'Royal' (a restaurant), and *Stokis* 'Stockmann' (a department store). Interestingly, these names were in part based on earlier student or working-class slang names – a fact that mirrors the guys' increasing sociolinguistic contacts with the other segments of the city's population.

Conclusions

This article analysed the slang toponymy used by working-class boys and young men from Sörnäinen between 1900 and 1939. Instead of a strictly quantitative analysis, we have traced the most important spatial-semantic focuses in the toponymic vocabulary of slang-speakers of different ages. As such, our analysis has revealed interesting features in the informal verbalisations of urban space that can be only understood in the light of Sörkkä's guys' typical living conditions and everyday practices in the industrialising Helsinki of the time.

One of the most striking results is that the initial motif for Sörkkä guys to adopt slang names was largely practical. While the common, independently contrived place-referring vocabulary eased communication among the boys' bilingual companionships, it naturally also formed a strong sociolinguistic basis for their identification with these groups.

Second, the typical ways of adopting slang names changed when growing older. In their childhood, male juveniles of Sörnäinen mainly used place-referring slang words in both appellative (classifying) and proprial (identifying) functions. While it is a more general phenomenon that young children at the initial stages of cognitive-environmental learning resort to the use of appellative expressions as individualising identifiers (Tikka 2006), it is very likely that the relatively uniformly built environment in Sörnäinen enhanced this tendency among the speakers of Helsinki slang. However, when the male adolescents from Sörnäinen began to move more widely in different kinds of places both in their home neighbourhood and Helsinki as a whole, the use of these kinds of double-functional nouns decreased in favour of slang names derived from the city's official nomenclature.

In comparison to post-WW II Helsinki slang, the period studied in this article represents a highly idiosyncratic phase in its socio-linguistic development. Although the linguistic community of the capital and its surrounding areas was turning more and more Finnish, the majority of slang names used between 1900 and 1939 were still of Swedish origin. In contrast to its origins as a practical creole language of local working-class male juveniles, during its later phases Helsinki slang has transmuted into a cross-class (if not 'classless') and cross-gender street language of the youth used throughout the Helsinki region. In the decades following World War II, the slang was strongly influenced by a new type of 'American' popular culture. The next period of transition came in the 1970s and 1980s, as the previously uniform youth culture – with the English-

influenced youth slang as its central stylistic expression – was differentiated into various subcultures with their own slangified vocabularies. Increasingly prominent, the slang spoken in Helsinki was now characterised by humoristic, surprising, and affective expressions as well as lexical impermanence (Paunonen 2000, 7, 16; Paunonen 2006, 56–57). Although there exist some important linguistic continuities between the old and the new Helsinki slang, the societal and urban context that gave rise originally to the local working-class language has totally changed.

Notes

1. In the article published in 2006, we refer to the roughly same working-class neighbourhood as *Kallio*, not as *Sörnäinen* (Ainiala and Vuolteenaho 2006). This is so because *Sörnäinen* is a more appropriate name for the neighbourhood from the historical perspective adopted in this article.
2. The equivalents in standard Finnish or Swedish will be given elsewhere in the article only exceptionally. If the slang name has its origin in a language other than Swedish, this will, in turn, be clarified with an abbreviation (Fi = Finnish, Ru = Russian, O = other language).

References

- Ainiala, Terhi, and Jani Vuolteenaho, 2006. How to study urban onomastic landscape? *Acta Onomastica* (Prague) XLVII, 58–63.
- Hymes, Dell (ed.). 1971. *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kervanto Nevanlinna, Anja. 2003. Esplanadi – katkelma Keski-Eurooppaa [Esplanadi – a touch of Middle Europe]. In: Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna, and Laura Kolbe (eds.), *Suomen kulttuurihistoria*, 368–369. Helsinki.
- Paunonen, Heikki. 1994. The Finnish language in Helsinki. In: Bengt Nordberg (ed.), *The sociolinguistics of urbanization: the case of the Nordic countries*, 223–246. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Paunonen, Heikki. 2000. *Tsennaaks Stadii, bonjaaks slangii? Stadin slangin suursanakirja* [The dictionary of Helsinki slang]. Helsinki: WSOY.
- Paunonen, Heikki. 2006. Vähemmistökielestä varioivaksi valtakieleksi [From minority language to varying majority language]. In: Kaisu Juusela, and Katariina Nisula (eds.), *Helsinki kieliyhteisönä*, 13–99. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston suomen kielen ja kotimaisen kirjallisuuden laitos.
- Tikka, Kaisa. 2006. Paimion Vistan koululaisten leikkipaikannimiä: katsaus leikkipaikannimien syntymiseen ja käyttöön [Place names used by school children in Vista in Paimio: how place names are born and used]. Unpublished Masters' thesis. University of Turku.
- Waris, Heikki. 1973. *Työläisyhteiskunnan syntyminen Helsingin Pitkäsillan pohjoispuolelle* [The birth of the working-class community in the northern side of Pitkäsilta in Helsinki]. 2nd ed. Helsinki: Weilin and Göös.

Terhi Ainiala
 Research Institute for the Languages of Finland
 Vuorikatu 24
 00100 Helsinki
 FINLAND
 terhi.ainiala@kotus.fi

Jani Vuolteenaho
 Department of Geography
 PO Box 64 (Gustaf Hällströmin katu 2)
 00014 University of Helsinki
 FINLAND
 jani.vuolteenaho@helsinki.fi