

Place Names in the Construction of Social Identities: The Uses of Names of Helsinki

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Abstract

Toponyms are used not only to identify places, but also to accomplish many relevant social and interactional tasks. In a conversation speakers may use diverse forms of a toponym or different names to refer to the same place. The choice of a name or a name variant is not coincidental or free but depends on the context, e.g., the formality of the situation. The name variants speakers use may even reveal the identities they have as local dwellers.

The article studies the relationship between the use of toponyms and social identity. The names used by Finnish speakers of Helsinki (the official variant *Helsinki* and two unofficial variants, *Hesa* and *Stadi*) and both the use of them and images and ideas connected to these names, are studied. With the names *Hesa* and *Stadi*, the central distinctions are made between the speakers' status as country people and city dwellers and between native Helsinki dwellers and people who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere. The metalinguistic and actual use of names used of Helsinki show considerable differences. They may be based on a desire to identify oneself with a given group, which is, however, not always manifested in actual language use. The material consists of focus group interviews conducted among dwellers in one neighbourhood in Vuosaari.

Research questions

The article presents the use of names used of Helsinki, the capital of Finland. The material consists of focus group interviews and has been collected in the neighbourhood of Vuosaari in Helsinki. The relationship between the use of toponyms and social identity is studied. Social identity is conceived as a social and cultural co-construction (see e.g., Bierbach and Birken-Silverman 2007, 122). In the material of the present study, social identity is often affiliated with place-identity or attachment to a place (about definitions of identity and place-identity, see e.g., Myers 2006, 324–325). Social identity covers different types of membership and various social features, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. However, the most important and relevant social feature in this study is the place of birth, i.e., the question of whether you are a native city dweller or whether you have moved to the city from elsewhere. In addition, the study also pursues in what ways the metalinguistic and actual use of toponyms differ from each other. Since the material displays both, it is fruitful to examine this question that has been rarely touched upon. I will give an answer to both of these questions by looking at the reported and actual use of names referring to Helsinki.

Research material

The study is based on a research project titled “Transformation of onomastic landscape in the sociolinguistically diversifying neighbourhoods of Helsinki.” The project investigates the historical and current onomastic landscape of Helsinki from the viewpoint of toponyms (both official and unofficial) that the various social segments of the population use. Two case study

neighbourhoods, Kallio (or Sörnäinen; see Ainiala and Vuolteenaho in these Proceedings) and Vuosaari, are studied (Ainiala and Vuolteenaho 2006, 59). The data comes from Vuosaari, a fairly recently built, quickly expanded suburb in eastern Helsinki. The size of the population is about 34 000. The building of the suburb was started in the 1960s, and the area has expanded extensively in recent times.

The primary sources in the entire research project and the present study consist of focus group and individual in-depth interviews conducted among inhabitants. The present study consists of eight interviews, of which two were individual and six were focus group interviews. In all, nineteen Vuosaari-dwellers were interviewed, all native speakers of Finnish. Eleven of them are native Helsinkians, whereas eight moved to Helsinki. The interviews were made between 2004 and 2006. In every focus group there were two to four participants from Vuosaari talking about their home district. Discussions were taped and transcribed later on. The transcription used is pretty rough and only gives the word-for-word description.

The main material thus consists of focus group interviews. It is not spontaneous talk, which is, of course, something to bear in mind. But, in this material, the boundary between the interview talk and spontaneous talk is woolly. The atmosphere in the interviews was casual and the informants talked about Helsinki and their home districts in an informal way. The topics in the focus groups were the following: presenting the interviewees, general questions about place names in Helsinki, the interviewees' own places of residence, moving about in the city, images and views associated with different quarters and different place names and their contexts of use.

Names of Helsinki

There are three main name variants for Helsinki in the material. The official name of the capital of Finland is *Helsinki*. The city was founded 1550 at the mouth of the river Vantaanjoki. The Swedish name *Helsingfors* was used to refer both to the city and the rapids of the river. Swedish was the major language in the area at that time, since the largest part of the population was Swedish-speaking. It was only later that the city received its Finnish name *Helsinki*, in co-occurrence with the growing Finnish-speaking population. The first written documents about the name *Helsinki* are from the end of the eighteenth century. (Suomalainen paikannimikirja s.v. *Helsinki*.) In today's bilingual city, both *Helsinki* and *Helsingfors* are used, the latter one by the Swedish-speaking population, which makes up about six percent about the population in Helsinki.

The most common and widespread unofficial names for Helsinki are *Hesa* and *Stadi*. They both have their origin in Helsinki slang. Helsinki slang is a unique Creole dialect which developed at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century among the working class with both Finnish and Swedish language backgrounds in their densely occupied neighbourhoods in Helsinki. Slang was born to facilitate bilingual communication. In slang, slang names and words were usually composed by annexing a "slangifying" suffix to the root of the name (e.g., *Fleminginkatu* 'Fleming's Street' > *Flemari*). In contrast to the suffixes in standard Finnish, the slang suffixes did not have a semantic function of their own but they were simply used to make words and names slang-like. Some of the most frequently used suffixes in Helsinki slang are *ari*, *is*, *tsa*, *tsi*, *ski*, *sku*, *sa* and *de*. The origin of these suffixes is not totally clear, but the Russian language may well have influenced some of the suffixes (*tsa*, *tsi*, *ski*, *sku*). There are also some Russian loan words in Helsinki slang. Finland was part of the Russian Empire from 1809 to 1917.

Eventually, in its later phases, gradually from the 1950s onwards, Helsinki slang transmuted into a common street language of the youth throughout the Helsinki region. And this is the situation with the slang still today. Even though the main user group and the function of the slang have changed, very many slang expressions and slang-based place names have remained the same from the very beginning of Helsinki slang, for over a hundred years.

Hesa derives from the official name *Helsinki*. The official name has been shortened and a slang suffix *sa* has been attached to it. The variant was known in Helsinki slang as early as at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the dictionary of Helsinki slang, *Hesa* belonged to the language use of native Helsinkians until the first half of the twentieth century. *Hesa* was thus a common name variant used by natives when they talked about their own city (Paunonen 2000 s.v. *Hesa*).

Stadi, in turn, has its origin in the Swedish word *stad* 'city, town'. Even *Stadi* has been in use in Helsinki slang ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. Traditionally, *Stadi* was used both to refer to the city or town generally and to Helsinki, especially the city centre. *Stadi* began to refer more and more often to Helsinki in the second half of the twentieth century, whereas the other well known name for Helsinki, i.e., *Hesa*, has been labeled more and more explicitly as a name variant used by peasants and those who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere. *Stadi* thus carries the label of a name used by native Helsinkians (Paunonen 2000 s.v. *Hesa*, *Stadi*; Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006, 237). Accordingly, a native Helsinkian has been called *stadilainen* in Helsinki slang since the 1910s (Paunonen 2000 s.v. *stadilainen*).

The names the informants say they use

In the interviews, the informants were asked which name they use in referring to Helsinki. In most cases the interviewer gave the three alternatives explicitly.

Helsinki is the official name of the city and the standard and neutral variant. It is only natural that most of the informants said they used it. However, what I found somewhat surprising is that as many as six out of the nineteen informants did not say they used the standard form *Helsinki* at all. I guess it must have been regarded so self-evident that the informants did not consider it necessary to point it out in the interview.

The unofficial name variant *Hesa* was reported to be used by eleven of the nineteen informants, i.e., more than half of all the informants. These eleven informants included six natives and five non-natives.

(1) Interviewer: Okay, so, if we'd like go right to the point now, let's start with Helsinki, so I'm asking you first what name you use for Helsinki.

Tuula (1949, nonntv [=non-native]): Well *Hesa*, of course. ¹

In the example above, Tuula, who moved to Helsinki, follows the general assumption of the use of *Hesa*: it is a name variant used by non-natives. In addition, she answers the question very quickly and is certain about her own name use.

Some of the informants did not find the use of *Hesa* as categorical and uncontroversial in any sense. In the following example (2), a non-native man, Pentti, reflects on his own name use.

(2) Pentti (1934, nonntv): Well I'd say that maybe you'd talk about *Hesa* with your friends and so but once you get up to Ostrobothnia and to the cottage and so, you'll start talking about *Helsinki*. I've noticed that you'll talk about *Helsinki*, *Hesa*'s what they don't, like, they won't take notice of *Hesa*.

In example 2, it is worth noticing that the interviewee does not think that *Hesa* is necessarily a variant you should use anywhere else in Finland than in the capital region.

(3) Interviewer: What about *Hesa*?

Mikko (1981, ntv [=native]): Never in a million years.

Heidi (1985, nonntv): That's what people from Vantaa use.

Timo (1963, ntv): Well, I dunno, it doesn't make a difference who uses it, but I wouldn't use *Hesa* myself anyway. It's somehow just a wrong word.

In example 3 there are two native men debating over the use of *Hesa*. Especially Mikko makes a

quick comment that *Hesa* is not for him. Timo does not take as categorical a stand, but points out anyway that he does not use *Hesa* because he finds it “a wrong word” in some way. Thus Mikko and Timo as natives also follow the general assumption of the use of *Hesa*: it is not a name variant used by natives any more. Another point related to this example is made by Heidi, a young woman who has moved to Helsinki. She notices that *Hesa* is used by the dwellers of Vantaa. Vantaa is a neighbouring city of Helsinki which some Helsinkians regard as rural-like when compared to Helsinki.

As already mentioned, *Hesa* has been labeled as a variant that people from the country and people who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere would use. Such ideas and attitudes seem, indeed, to be the main reason for not using the name – or, alternatively, they may sometimes even act as a ticket to use the name. Let us look at two of the previously given examples again and follow the line of discussion in them.

(4) Interviewer: So, if we'd like go right to the point now, let's start with Helsinki, so I'm asking you first what name you use for Helsinki.

Tuula (1949, nonntv): *Hesa*, of course.

Tuomas (1988, ntv): People from the country say *Hesa*.

Lauri (1985, ntv): *Hesa* and *Stadi*.

Tuomas (ntv): It's simply *Stadi* or *Helsinki* for me. I haven't I wouldn't, in my ears *Hesa* sounds nasty, since mom always says that country people say *Hesa*.

Tuula (nonntv): Well no, I'm from the country, it suits me well enough.

Tuomas (ntv): It's *Stadi* or *Helsinki*.

Tuula (nonntv): I moved there when I was nineteen, so I can say *Hesa*.

Lauri (ntv): Erm, I might have learnt from you.

Tuula (nonntv): Yeah.

Interviewer: Does it vary from one situation to another?

Tuomas (ntv): Yeah it does.

Lauri (ntv): Yeah if you talk to somebody, someone who's like from the country or something.

Tuomas (ntv): Do you know any people from the country?

Lauri (ntv): So then you'd talk, you'd probably try to be polite, like you wouldn't use some of your own like code language, so you'd say *Helsinki* and the like, but otherwise to other people from Helsinki like *Hesa* and so on, like that.

In the previous example 4, Tuomas, a native Helsinkian says he has learnt from his mother to avoid *Hesa*, since it would sound like a peasant speaking. His friend Lauri, who is a native Helsinkian, says, in turn, he has probably learnt to use *Hesa* from his mother Tuula. However, he says you should not use other variants than the official *Helsinki* with people from the country. Tuula, who moved to Helsinki when she was nineteen says that *Hesa* fits into her language use, since she is part of the presumed “target group” of the users of *Hesa*, i.e., that of people who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere.

(5) Interviewer: What about *Hesa*?

Mikko (1981, ntv): Never in a million years.

Heidi (1985, nonntv): That's what people from Vantaa use.

Timo (1963, ntv): Well, I dunno, it doesn't make a difference who uses it, but I wouldn't use *Hesa* myself anyway. It's somehow just a wrong word.

Interviewer: So have you noticed with other people that what kind of people talk about *Stadi* and what kind of people talk about *Hesa* or *Helsinki*?

Timo (ntv): Well the country, people who have moved from the country, it's *Hesa* for them. It's fairly common.

Mikko (ntv): Yeah, people from Helsinki or Helsinki natives use it – use it more rarely for what I’ve noticed.

Timo (ntv): Yeah. *Hesa*.

Mikko (ntv): *Hesa*.

Timo (ntv): Yeah.

Example 5 also strongly implies that *Hesa* is a name variant used by people who have moved to Helsinki, which is not for native Helsinki dwellers, like Timo and Mikko in the interview.

Even though the name variant *Hesa* is regarded in the dictionary of Helsinki slang as being used by people from the country and those who have moved to Helsinki, there were six native informants who reported they used *Hesa*. In general, I would rather suggest that *Hesa* is not rejected by native Helsinkians as commonly as the dictionary for Helsinki slang suggests. Rather, *Hesa* is part of the language use of natives as well, even though it is sometimes labeled as a rural variant, in contrast to *Stadi*. For example, Lauri in quotation 4 says he uses *Hesa*. One of the obvious reasons for using *Hesa* is that it is a short and thus easy variant to use.

Further, *Hesa* seems to be a common variant also in the collection of slang place names. This collection was compiled by interviewing teenage school children in the Helsinki region in 2003. The material includes about 4 000 different place names used by teenagers and about 14,500 different references to names (Ainiala 2006, 101). The name *Hesa* is mentioned 97 times in the material, which makes it the 18th most popular name in the whole material (Ainiala 2004). In addition, many of the interviewees gave a concrete example, a short sentence in which the name appears (e.g., “I live in *Hesa*”). Some even commented on the name use and described it as common and widespread. Thus, the name variant *Hesa* seems to belong to the name usage at least of young Helsinkians.

Let us then move from *Hesa* to *Stadi*. Out of the nineteen informants in the material, fewer than half, i.e., a total of nine people say they use *Stadi*. Of them, six are natives and three non-natives.

Therefore, as expected, people who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere do not seem to feel that *Stadi* is a natural variant for them and they say that they would not use it. One such example is Seppo who has moved to Helsinki from elsewhere. In example 6, he is fairly certain that he has never used *Stadi* and points out that he has not used it at least consciously.

(6) Interviewer: Maybe I could ask you one question about the name *Helsinki* at this point, is Helsinki just *Helsinki* to you or do you sometimes use *Hesa* or even *Stadi*?

Seppo (1941, nonntv): No, *Stadi* is strange to me, I haven’t I haven’t, I’ve never, probably never used it like consciously at least, I don’t think I have even accidentally like, like.

Yet, three of the informants who have moved to Helsinki say they use *Stadi*. One of these people is Pirjo in example 7, who says she definitely uses *Stadi*. In fact, she does not even mention that she would use other names, *Helsinki* or *Hesa*, besides *Stadi*.

(7) Pirjo (1950, nonntv): Well I use *Stadi* both as a general name for the city and like for the city centre in particular.

Two other people saying they use *Stadi* are Tuula in example 8 and Sanna in example 9.

(8) Tuula (1949, nonntv): Well you’d use *Stadi*, too, sometimes.

Lauri (1985, ntv): Yeah and *Stadi*, yeah.

Tuula (nonntv): I probably shouldn’t, a country girl like me, but I still do sometimes.

Lauri (ntv): Yeah that’s right.

Tuula says she is well aware of the fact that *Stadi* is associated with the language use of native Helsinkians and that people who have moved from elsewhere would not even be allowed to use

it. In fact, she tries to justify her “unauthorised” use of the name, as it were. Sanna in example 9, in turn, points out that she can use both *Stadi* and *Hesa* in informal and casual language use. *Stadi* (or its humoristic variant *Stati*) means just the city centre to her, not the entire city.

(9) Interviewer: Just one first question at this point so do you say, when you’re talking about Helsinki, could you say *Hesa* or do you use the name *Stadi* or all of them and do you use different names in different situations?

Sanna (1969, nonntv): That’s a fun question, cuz first I was thinking that I’d probably use *Helsinki* most often but then that yes it does vary, so in some specific situations it may be *Stadi* or *Hesa*, like it’s the kind of language you use to distinguish or differentiate like from the standard language meaning of it when you use something like this like more casual and erm.

Interviewer: So those, their meanings for you are the same with you that *Stadi* means Helsinki just as well?

Sanna (nonntv): *Stadi*, *Stadi* or when you like in a country people style say *Stati*, it’s like the context where you use it yourself like let’s go to *Stati* so then it means the city centre.

The informants who had moved to Helsinki from elsewhere justified their non-use of the name *Stadi* by the fact that they did not belong to the “authorised” user group of the name, because they were not native Helsinki dwellers or even people who would have lived in Helsinki for long enough to use the name (cf. example 8). Therefore, Heidi in example 10 does make the following point:

(10) Heidi (1985, nonntv): Yeah, I certainly [use] *Helsinki*, and all, I’m not yet a *Stadi* native enough that I’d dare to use that.

She states ironically that since she is not a “*Stadi* native enough” – having lived in Helsinki for just a few years – she dare not use the name *Stadi*.

Stadi is often known to refer to the centre of Helsinki in particular. In example 11, a native Helsinki youngster Mikko says he uses *Stadi* to refer to the city centre.

(11) Mikko (1981 ntv): I do use *Stadi* from time to time, that is, in the sense that when you go to the city centre, so.

Heidi (1985, nonntv): Yeah.

Mikko (ntv): Then you can say that you’re off to *Stadi* now.

When native Helsinki informants gave their reasons for not using the name *Stadi*, at least not to refer to the entire city, they often brought up the strong ideas associated with the name and its affective nature. In example 12, Mikko points out that you can use *Stadi* when you want to deliberately irritate people from elsewhere in Finland.

(12) Mikko (1981, ntv): [I use] *Helsinki* fairly often when I’m faced with a situation somewhere some place further up than Central Finland so.

Timo (1963, ntv): Yeah it’s in the south then.

Mikko (ntv): Yeah. So like, you can say first of all that you live in the south but if there’s someone who’s getting on your nerves especially and you want, you want to wind people up deliberately then it’s in *Stadi*. Which is not often.

Interviewer: But it isn’t like neutral?

Mikko (ntv): Naw, no it isn’t. I wouldn’t use it neutrally in any sense. It’s *Helsinki* in general.

Then why has *Stadi* been labelled so strongly as a name used by native Helsinkians and associated with such strong ideas? We should look at this by considering the early days of Helsinki slang – which, by the way, is generally called *Stadi slang*. Slang was born over a hundred years ago as a linguistic form that combined Finnish and Swedish and was filled with phonetic and lexical features from the Swedish language. Swedish includes features which were missing from most dialects of Finnish of the time. The most typical of these features were the initial double

consonant and the phoneme *d*, which are both found in the name *Stadi*. By making a strong assumption it could be claimed that *Stadi* gained popularity at least partly because it was difficult to pronounce for rural-born Finnish-speakers. They pronounced the name “incorrectly” as *Stati* or *Tati*, which struck true-born-slang-speakers as strikingly comical or irritating. *Stadi* was thus one of the words in Helsinki slang in which the difference between the new urban dialect of the capital and the dialects of the rural-Finland was the most prominent (Paunonen 2006, 52–53). The name *Stadi* became a visible emblem of the life in Helsinki and urban life in general. It was associated with the speakers of slang, just as Stadi slang was in a wider sense. The slang and the name *Stadi* as one of its most prominent emblems were loaded with associations that might have been based on very strong stereotypes (see Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006, 226). The affective nature of the name *Stadi* has been preserved until today.

Awareness of the ideas associated with the name and its use can also be seen in that present-day Helsinki dwellers, too, may use the name in ironical ways. *Stadi* may turn into, e.g., the humorous forms *Stati* or *Tsadi* in the language use of both those who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere and Helsinki natives (examples 9 and 14). In other words, even new forms of the name are being invented.

(14) Interviewer: So if we'll just start like from Helsinki in general and like especially the city, so what name do you use for Helsinki?

Timo (1963, ntv): *Tsadi*.

Interviewer: All right, are there any other opinions?

Mikko (1981, ntv): [I use] *Helsinki* fairly often when I'm faced with a situation somewhere some place further up than Central Finland so

Timo (1963, ntv): Yeah it's in the south then.

Mikko (ntv): Yeah. So like, you can say first of all that you live in the south but if there's someone who's getting on your nerves especially and you want, you want to wind people up deliberately then it's in *Stadi*. Which is not often.

Interviewer: But it isn't like neutral?

Mikko (ntv): Naw, no it isn't. I wouldn't use it neutrally in any sense. It's *Helsinki* in general.

Interviewer: What about the rest of you?

Pasi (1966, ntv): Well yeah, I do use *Helsinki*, but then there's of course this, like Timo mentioned this funny name *Tsadi*, which has of course been twisted from *Stadi*, but well yeah. But it's like *Helsinki* then really.

Timo (ntv): Well I'm using just *Tsadi* these days.

[...]

Timo (ntv): I haven't been using *Stadi* really, but *Tsadi* is a great word.

The names the informants use

What is the reality revealed by the interview material, i.e., what names and name variants did the informants use in the material? Of course, it is obvious that the material does not indicate what the informants' real use of the names is like in different everyday and institutional situations but it only shows how the informants used the names in this interview material. However, it is interesting to analyze the differences between the metalinguistic use of the names and the actual use of names in the light of the material.

When asked, eleven of the informants said they used *Hesa*. However, nobody used this variant in the material in actual use. Just one informant, Pirjo, born in 1950, who has moved to Helsinki from elsewhere, refers to herself as *hesalainen*, 'a Hesa dweller'. She is the same woman who claimed to be using only *Stadi* when asked (which she does not use, by the way). As for *Stadi*, nine informants reported it was a variant they would use. Of these nine people, just two Helsinki natives use the name otherwise than metalinguistically. They use it to refer to just the city centre.

In the light of the material it would seem that there is a considerable difference between the reported use and actual use of *Hesa* and *Stadi*. This may have to do with the fact that the interviewing situation was perceived as an institutional, official discussion, and the informants thus attempted to use standard language expressions. Yet, it might also be that the informants' perception of their own use of names is different from their actual use.

Conclusions

I hope I have managed to show that toponyms are used not only to identify places, but also to accomplish many relevant social and interactional tasks. In conversation – whether it is spontaneous talk or an interview – speakers may use diverse forms of a toponym or different names to refer to the same place. The choice of a name or a name variant is not coincidental or free but depends on the context, e.g., the formality of the situation.

An interview situation may be experienced as so official that the names are used more formally and more standard-language variants are used than would be used otherwise. There is great situational variation in the names: different names and name variants are often used in different situations and contexts. The speakers are often conscious of the meanings and ideas associated with different names and name variants.

The name variants speakers use may even reveal the identities they have as local dwellers. Social identity and place identity are often linked with each other: identifying yourself with a place also often means identifying yourself as a member of a social group. By using a given name variant you can show you are part of a social group with a special link to a place (hometown) and to how you experience and perceive the place. The speakers of a language may use or at least report they are using a name preferred by the community with which they want to identify themselves, or they may avoid using names associated with user groups they want to differentiate themselves from. With the names *Hesa* and *Stadi*, the central distinctions are made between the speakers' status as country people and city dwellers and between native Helsinki dwellers and people who have moved to Helsinki from elsewhere.

The metalinguistic and actual language use may show considerable differences. They may be based on a desire to identify oneself with a given group (e.g., “Stadi dweller”), which is, however, not always manifested in actual language use.

Note

1. The informants are presented with pen names. After the pen name, there is the informant's year of birth and the abbreviations 'ntv' (= native) or 'nonntv' (= non-native). Age and gender are not studied as social features here, though they are mentioned. The quotations have been translated from Finnish.

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