

## Functions of Usage of Urban Place Names

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### Abstract

The following paper introduces various functions of urban place names by analyzing spoken data gathered from residents in the neighbourhood Kallio in Helsinki, Finland. The data consists of six group interviews, in which groups with two to six members answer questions concerning their home neighbourhood.

I have studied various kinds of place names (both official and unofficial), which the inhabitants of Kallio use daily, in terms of how the age, range, and users of the names vary, and what types of images the inhabitants have about the names. On the basis of this, I introduce four functions of urban place names: the collective, practical, affective and informative functions.

Besides the functions, I also studied another theme – that of the roles of the name users. To mention but a few, the roles include those of the name knower, name specialist, name giver and name learner.

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### Background

In this article I will introduce various functions of urban place names by analyzing spoken data gathered from residents in the neighbourhood Kallio in Helsinki, Finland. I have studied various kinds of place names (both official and unofficial) the inhabitants of Kallio use daily in terms of how the age, range, and users of the names vary, and what types of images the inhabitants have about the names.

I am going to discuss the functions of names, e.g., how people, by using certain names, express their attitudes (affective function) or their belonging to regional or social groups (collective function). The names' practical functions consist of, e.g., shortening the names to ease the expression and locating and limiting places with the help of names. I am also going to discuss the informative function of the names by studying how the residents know and notice the (etymologic or connotative) information included in the names (Sjöblom 2006, 68–69 < Halliday 1976, 9, 17–18).

This article is mainly based on my licentiate thesis, which was inspected and accepted in April 2008 at Helsinki University. The data of my study consists of six recorded group interviews, in which groups of two to six members answer questions concerning their home neighbourhood.

My study is a part of a research project titled *Transformation of onomastic landscape in the sociolinguistically diversifying neighbourhoods of Helsinki*. In this project we investigate the relationship between the residents and the urban environment in two different neighbourhoods, Kallio and Vuosaari. The goal of the project is to produce information about urban place names and the way they are used as part of the wider urban development (Ainiala and Vuolteenaho 2005, 379).

### Research area: Kallio

My research focuses on Kallio neighbourhood, which is a former working-class community.

Kallio emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when thousands of workers moved to the industrializing Helsinki from other areas of Finland, in the hope of a better life and job. Kallio was built very quickly into a working-class neighbourhood (Kuoppamäki-Kalkkinen 1984, 14, 21; Waris 1932, 204–205, 212–214).

Later, since the two world wars, Kallio gradually turned into an increasingly elitist middle-class neighbourhood, and nowadays it is popular among young adults. With its background as a migrant area, it is a good place for students to settle down when they move to the capital Helsinki. Besides that, its central location near the city centre of Helsinki has made it more and more popular (Klinge & Kolbe 1999, 126–127; Kuoppamäki-Kalkkinen 1984, 41).

### The slang of Helsinki

The language forms spoken in Kallio also have a colourful background. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, workers moved to Helsinki from different regions of Finland, so several language forms – such as various Finnish dialects, Swedish, and even Russian – were heard there daily. Among the children of the migrant generation, these languages were mixed together as a slang.

The slang of Helsinki has survived for over a century and shown great variation along the way. It is still a rich language format, which is manifested clearly in my research material. There are still old slang names in use, such as *Sörkka*, *Vaasis* and *Flemari*. They have been formulated from the official place names *Sörnäinen*, *Vaasankatu* and *Fleminginkatu* by adding certain suffixes. Especially the suffixes *-is* and *-ari* are frequent in slang words and names in Helsinki.

When the slang of Helsinki was born, its most important function was to serve as a language form that facilitated the communication between the working-class people; in other words, Helsinki slang was their common language (Paunonen 2006, 33–35, 51–52).

Nowadays the class boundaries in Finland are not as distinct as a century ago, and this has affected the position of slang. It has become a fairly general language of the youth, and many new slang words and names often involve humoristic tones. An example of such humorous names is *the Flea market of Jesus*, which is a spontaneous nickname for a second-hand shop maintained by a Christian association.

However, the common factor between the slang names in different ages is that by using them, people express their belonging to a certain group. Those who used slang names like *Sörkka* and *Flemari* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century belonged to a group of boys of a working-class area. Nowadays, when people use a name like *Flea Market of Jesus*, they will use it only when speaking to people who understand the name.

### Research material

The data of my study consists of all kinds of place names: official names, like the names on street signs, and unofficial names created by city dwellers. The names in my material come both from the neighbourhood of Kallio and from outside of it.

The material is gathered by interviewing groups of residents of Kallio. In our research project we have made a total of seventeen recorded interviews in Kallio, and the data of my own study consists of six group interviews.

The interviews consist of relatively free conversation, although we have also used a question frame with questions concerning, for example, living in Kallio. The questions cover the good and bad features of the area, the residents' hobbies, transport in the city of Helsinki, and knowing and using the place names of Helsinki and Kallio.

When choosing groups for interviews, my most important criteria were that the members of the groups represented different ages and different periods of living in Kallio. Consequently, one of my interviews was made with about 20-year-old young adults who had been living in Helsinki

and Kallio for just one or two months. Another group had older members who were born and raised in Kallio. Between them, there were groups with members who had been living in Kallio for around five, ten or twenty years.

Even if my data consists of interviews of different resident groups, I have not limited myself to comparing the groups with each other. Instead I have found it better to see the data as a continuum based on the age of the informants and the time they have lived in Kallio. Besides that, my central research problem has not been the analysis of what names the informants use, but rather showing the functions of usage of urban place names.

### The functions

I will now give some thought to what people do with place names and how the names are related to the interaction between people. I will introduce four functions: the collective, practical, affective and informative functions. I am not suggesting that these are the sole existing functions of names, but these four are the functions that were the most prominent in my data.

The first one of the functions is the **collective function**. It could be illustrated by the following question: what does the usage of names tell about a speaker's belonging to given regional or social groups? Various kinds of collectivity represent, for example, being a Helsinki dweller or a member of a certain age group, a group of friends or colleagues.

Here are some examples of names whose usage reveals the speaker's belonging to a regional group. In examples 1 and 2, the speakers convey their identity as old indigenous inhabitants of a working-class area by using old slang names *Sörkka*, *Blobika* and *Käbis*. The names in Helsinki slang have been derived from both Swedish and Finnish language names<sup>1</sup>.

(1) Veikko (M60)<sup>2</sup> It was where the boats used to leave from *Sörkka* to *Blobika*.

(2) Paavo (M58): And, erm, because we were lacking a place to stay, we had to move to *Käbis*.

The usage of certain names expresses belonging to different age groups. For example, younger residents of Kallio seem to call the *Sörnäinen* area more often *Sörkkä*, whereas the older usually use the name *Sörkka*. – In the Finnish language, there is a clear difference in pronunciation between these two variants.

The third collective function is the function of being a member of a group of friends. Example 3 is about a private joke. A circle of friends calls a certain fast-food restaurant *Mini Ethnic*, because they are not sure what the current name of the place is. The restaurant has been called *Mini China* and *Mini India* before.

(3) Mika (M33): Well, there is, on *Toinen Linja Street*, a place... maybe it's called *Mini Hong Kong* nowadays but before it was *Mini China* and *Mini India* and... (laughs)

Kaija (F55): You mean it's a fast food place?

Mika (M33): Yeah, it's a fast food place, so we just call it *Mini Ethnic*. But the name is used by a very small community.

Let us next take a look at the **practical functions** of names, which are many. First there is the practical function of facilitating communication, and the function of making sure that the message is registered. They can be seen as counterforces of each other.

By the function of facilitating communication, we refer to the speakers' aim at faster and easier expression, for example, when they call *Fleminginkatu* Street by the nickname *Flemari*. The young informants in example 4 say that the official name *Fleminginkatu* is as long as it's hard to use. But there is always the danger that if you use nicknames, people might not understand you!

(4) Henri (M27): These nicknames [*Hesari* and *Flemari*] are clear cases. There's no point of using the whole name [*Helsinginkatu* and *Fleminginkatu*].

Petteri (M26): Yeah, it's hard to use a name as long as *Fleminginkatu*!

We are faced with the opposite when people focus on making sure that their message is registered. So, if a speaker wants to make sure that the listener understands which place he/she is talking about, he/she may act as shown in example 5 and explain even the official name of the place.

(5) Veikko (M60): Every single kid who lived in *Hämeentie* Street 36 went to *Lindis* sled hill, so *Lindis* means *Lintulahdenkatu* Street.

One of the practical functions is to illustrate places with the help of the names of other places. This is shown in the following example where four people are talking about the location of a book store on *Torkkelinkatu* Street, near a bar called *Mäkikupla*. In example 6 the informants illustrate the location of the place with the help of the street name and the company name.

(6) Matti (M26): It was quite a good book store. I don't remember the name.

Anna (F24): Is it the one located on *Torkkelinkatu* Street or..?

Tommi (M24): Yeah, right there on the slope.

Janne (M26): Oh yeah, that's where the bar called *Mäkikupla* is, too.

The last one of the practical functions is that of the classifying usage of names. Usually, names individualize places but in some cases they classify them. *Kerava* in example 7 is a small town at about 30 kilometres' distance from Helsinki. But when there is an indefinite pronoun *some place like* in front of the name, the name individualizes the place no more. It appears not until in the conversation context that *some place like Kerava* means here "a rather unknown town at a relatively long distance from Helsinki". *Kerava* could be replaced by the name of any other similar small town here.

(7) Henri (M27): Or in *some place like Kerava*, I wouldn't like living in a place like that. It would take like one hour to get to work.

Besides classifying, expressions like *some place like Kerava* also represent the **affective function**. Such phrases are often emotionally loaded: they involve a superficial attitude towards a place and are used when referring to places used by "other" or "strange" people.

Even many unofficial place names are affective. Places considered unattractive or somehow negative can be referred to with names with negative tones. *Vaasankatu* Street in example 8 has had a nickname *Knife Boulevard* because it is considered a dangerous street where there have been some knife fights – at least according to rumours.

(8) Reino (M67): By the way, do you know what's the other name for *Vaasankatu* Street?

Ritva (F62): No, tell me!

Reino (M67): *Knife Boulevard*.

The last one of the functions I have studied is the **informative function**. This function covers the ways in which names contain information and how this information is preserved and forwarded. In example 9 the speakers come up with the idea that some of the street names in Kallio follow a coherent theme: that of great men in the history of Finland (Aminoff and Pesonen 1970, 89, 96, 128).

(9) Leena (F58): They have named the streets like... Well, of course there is a specific theme: there are, for example, *Agricola* and *Porthan* and *Franzén* [appearing in the street names]...

Ritva (F62): Great men's streets!

### The roles of the name users

We have now seen a couple of examples of the functions of usage of urban place names. Besides the functions, I also have studied another theme – that of the roles of the name users. To mention but a few, the roles include those of the name knower, name specialist, name giver and name learner.

All people are naturally **name knowers**: at least we know all the names we use. Besides them, we also know names we do not use ourselves, but we can guess who uses them: we can, for instance, talk about names used by the youth, or by our late father, or by a cousin from the countryside. Some name knowers can even consider themselves as **name specialists**, as in example 10 where an older native talks about the variants of certain old slang names.

(10) Veikko (M60): You see, the name *Vasari* [Vaasankatu Street] – is used by a certain age group, and then there were [variants] *Vasis* and *Vaasis*. My father always used the name *Vaasis*.

All people can also be **name givers**. For example, among groups of friends, new names are being created all the time. In example 11, one of the speakers and his friends have acted as name givers when they have given a new name to a restaurant. (As example 3 also illustrates this point, it is repeated here.)

(11) Mika (M33): Well, there is, on *Toinen Linja Street*, a place... maybe it's called *Mini Hong Kong* nowadays but before it was *Mini China* and *Mini India* and... (laughs)

Kaija (F55): You mean it's a fast food place?

Mika (M33): A fast food place, yeah, so we just called it *Mini Ethnic*. But the name is used by a very small community.

And then there is one role left for us to consider: that of the **name learner**. Naturally, the people who are the most likely to be name learners are those who have lived in an area for just a short time, but as we can see in example 12, even long-term residents can be name learners.

(12) Reino (M67): By the way, do you know what's the other name for *Vaasankatu Street*?

Ritva (F62): No, tell me!

Reino (M67): *Knife Boulevard*.

### Conclusions

As we can see, names certainly do have several functions. In conclusion, we can summarize the viewpoints of my study.

- 1) With using certain names we can express our belonging to regional or social groups.
- 2) One reason for creating new (unofficial) place names is to facilitate our usage of names.
- 3) With the help of names we can illustrate our spatial position and moving from one place to another.
- 4) With usage of names, we express our attitudes towards a place, the image of it or the inhabitants of it.
- 5) The place names include information about the features of the place or the motives of the name giver. When using names, we forward this information.

### Notes

1. *Sörkka* < *Sörnäinen* (FI) / *Sörnäs* (SWE), *Blobika* < *Blåbärslandet* (SWE), *Käbis* < *Käpylä* (FI).
2. The informants are presented by fictitious names. Letters M and F after the pen name are used to mark 'male' or 'female' and the number is the age of the person interviewed.

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