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Names in Teenagers' Linguistic Landscapes

1. Background

The visible language use in (urban) public spaces, the *linguistic landscape* of a given territory or place, offers great potential for onomastic research (see PUZEY 2011, 2016). Even in my study of teenagers' observations of the suburban linguistic landscapes in Helsinki (see SYRJÄLÄ 2018) proper names can be found in the material and are mentioned in the discussion. But how do teenagers comment on proper names: are they given special attention compared to other texts? What types of names appear in the teenagers' observations? These questions are discussed in this paper.

My experimental study had as aim to discuss how language users interact with the linguistic landscape of their home area – and whether or not the visible language use affects their perceptions of linguistic places or communities. Thus, I am combining the *study of linguistic landscapes* (e.g. PUZEY 2016) with the more ethnographic take of *folklinguistic* studies (e.g. NIEDZIELSKI–PRESTON 2000). As the focus here is on the proper names in the landscapes, one could also talk about *folk onomastics* (cf. AINIALA 2016: 378).

Studies of linguistic landscapes are usually based on observations made by the researcher. Some, such as COLLINS and SLEMBROUCK (2007: 335), have noted that the question of what passers-by make of the signs rarely gets asked. More recently there has however been development towards more qualitative studies (cf. BARNI–BAGNA 2015: 11–12), some of them also discussing the views of language users. An example is the study of GARVIN (2010) where she uses a "walking tour method" to interview the townspeople in Memphis, Tennessee during a walk through the linguistic landscape. As language users construct attitudes and perceptions as a dialogue with both the landscape and the interviewer (GARVIN 2010: 255), she concludes that the language of public spaces functions as both a stimulus for discussions about languages and a motive for emotional responses on identities and communities (GARVIN 2010: 268).

With a focus on brand names, TUFI and BLACKWOOD (2010: 198–199), too, discuss how the interpretation of the language on signs is dependent on one's own background. Thus researchers with the objective to map the visibility of different languages see the linguistic landscape differently from those for whom it is just a backdrop for the daily interactions. The commercial names that do not

have an obvious linguistic background can be perceived differently in different linguistic surroundings and by different people, depending on their language skills and knowledge of the name bearer (cf. the discussion in SYRJÄLÄ 2016).

As demonstrated by e.g. EDELMAN (2009), proper names have a central role in the linguistic landscape. According to SJÖBLOM (2013: 163–165) commercial names are highly salient features of language in the public space. Both these facts are true even in the case of bilingual towns in Finland (SYRJÄLÄ 2016: 274). Thus the way in which these proper names are categorised affects the perception of the visibility – and thereby also the status – of different languages (cf. EDELMAN 2009: 150). Despite some recent studies (e.g. MATTFOLK 2017) touching on the subject, the matter of how the average language user perceives the proper names in the linguistic landscapes has still not been investigated thoroughly.

Setting aside the question of interpreting single signs (and names in them), the overall linguistic landscape does affect our perception of specific places, what can be called our *sense of place* (e.g. STJERNHOLM 2015). Her study shows how different kinds of names are used in two different areas of Oslo, thus contributing to the idea of different kinds of places (STJERNHOLM 2015: 101). Another example is found in ÖSTMAN (2017). The visible use of dialectal place names evokes a lot of questions related to identity, that of the place in question and those of the language users, and authority (ÖSTMAN 2017: 436–437).

The interaction with names showcased in public spaces potentially challenges our understanding of the very nature of proper names. This is discussed by SANDST (2016: 125–127), whose examples of urban names in Copenhagen highlight the *multimodal* nature of name use in the linguistic landscape. Other studies have shown this multimodality to be a key aspect of commercial naming (e.g. SJÖBLOM 2008). All the aforementioned studies illustrate the potential of the linguistic landscape as a starting point of onomastic research into the societal roles of names (cf. PUZEY 2011: 220–221).

This paper looks at how names are featured in teenagers' observations of linguistic landscapes in suburban Helsinki. The aim is to discuss the importance of names as building blocks of the linguistic landscape – and of the (perceived) linguistic place. Thus the study broadens the discussion from studies such as STJERNHOLM (2015) and SANDST (2016) by looking into the subjective views of language users: which names get noticed and commented by the teenagers?

2. The method

I will here summarise the main design of my study, starting with a brief description of the informants and the areas (linguistic landscapes) in focus, as well as the method used. A more detailed description can be found in SYRJÄLÄ (2018). As only a limited number of teenagers participated in this experimental study, the paper should first and foremost be seen as a contribution to the methodological discussion within the fields of socio-onomastics and linguistic landscape studies.

Two groups of teenagers took part in the study. The first group consisted of four Finnish-speaking teenagers from *Kontula/Gårdsbacka,* a suburb in eastern Helsinki. They were all girls and born in 2000. The second group consisted of two Swedish-speaking teenagers. They were both girls, born in 2001 and from the area of *Espoon keskus/Esbo centrum,* one of the "city centres" of Espoo, the municipality comprising the western suburbs of the Helsinki metropolitan area.

Both groups observed the linguistic landscape round the commercial centre of their own suburb. These suburbs offer a highly multilingual setting. Officially part of bilingual (Finnish–Swedish) municipalities, they are also a home to a large amount of people speaking different (foreign) first languages. As often is the case with minority languages, this linguistic diversity is underrepresented in the visual linguistic landscape. And while there are a number of Swedish-speaking residents, the language is hardly visible outside the official signage.

The Finnish-speaking teenagers appear positive about the multilingualism of the public space. They cannot, however, really relate to the viewpoints of the Swedish-speaking teenagers, who are clearly more concentrated on the visibility of their own language (see SYRJÄLÄ 2018). I return to the linguistic attitudes and observations of the teenagers in the following two chapters.

Methodologically, the study comprises three parts. First the teenagers got instructed to observe the linguistic landscape while walking around their own suburb. Because the aim was to see what kind of signs get noticed, they got only simple instructions to photograph any signs that they found interesting. The teenagers used the cameras of their smart phones and sent their pictures to me using WhatsApp.

In the second part the teenagers where tasked to discuss amongst themselves the pictures they had taken. They were instructed to discuss and write down motivations for choosing to photograph the specific signs as well as to identify the languages used on the signs. Their discussion was recorded, and at the end of the discussion, they handed over their written notes to me as well.

As the last part of the study, the groups were interviewed. I asked about their attitudes towards the use of different languages in the public space, as well as

more generally about their take on the linguistic landscape as a mirror of the language situation. The interview was recorded.

The method resulted in a varied material that I have used in my analysis. The core data comprises of the pictures taken by the teenagers, 20 from Kontula and 11 from Espoon keskus, as well as the notes written by the teenagers. This data is complemented by the recordings of approximately 10 minutes of discussion from each group and approximately 10 minutes of interview with each group, as well as my own field notes.

3. Names on the signs picked by the teenagers

As mentioned above, previous studies (e.g. SJÖBLOM 2013, SYRJÄLÄ 2016) have concluded commercial names to be among the most prominent features of linguistic landscapes. SJÖBLOM (2013: 169) further discusses how the same international brand names construct much of the linguistic landscape of urban areas in different countries. These names can still be interpreted differently in different contexts (cf. TUFI–BLACKWOOD 2010: 198–199). As noted in SYRJÄLÄ (2017), the bilingual towns of Finland are no exception to this.

When it comes to the Finnish-Swedish bilingualism in names in public spaces, parallel names are a norm in official signposting (cf. SYRJÄLÄ 2016). However, SJÖBLOM (2013: 168) concludes that Finnish names dominate in the commercial sphere together with the international names. The second national language, Swedish, seems to only get used in commercial naming when there is a larger percentage (a local majority) of Swedish-speaking residents (SYRJÄLÄ 2017: 199).

In addition to the commercial names, toponyms (both street names and names of different localities) are well represented in the linguistic landscape. In all, proper names of different types were featured on 76 % of all signs in the public spaces of bilingual Finnish towns analysed in SYRJÄLÄ (2016: 268). This is in accordance with previous studies on names in the linguistic landscape (cf. e.g. EDELMAN 2009). Thus it could be expected that names would feature even in the signs photographed by the teenagers.

Of the 31 pictures taken by the two groups of teenagers, a total of 23 include signs with proper names. In some of these signs the name(s) is (are) the main feature of the sign, and thus in focus in the picture. To determine what is in the focus is not always straightforward, but at least ten of the pictures can be counted into this category. These signs include both official place names, e.g. on a street name sign, and commercial names, e.g. the name of a restaurant.

In the rest of the pictures with proper names, the names appear as part of a longer text or more peripheral in the sign. Names are e.g. included in addresses

or in logos placed at the bottom of an advertising billboard. Thus, only eight of the 31 pictures depict signs with no proper names. This factors in with previous studies, when it comes to the amount of names and the fact that they are often the most salient parts of the linguistic landscape, as mentioned above.

The examples already mentioned illustrate that proper names from different name categories got noticed by the teenagers. Officially signposted place names are included on six of the signs photographed by the teenagers. Some place names feature on the commercial signs, too: this is the case with six of the pictures. Different types of commercial names, both business names (in 14 of the pictures) and product names (on three of the pictures), are however the names featured most often. Even some personal names can be found on the observed signs. This is the case with one sign, where names of judges of an agility competition are listed in addition to both place names and commercial names. As the figures listed here show, several of the other signs depicted in the material, too, include e.g. both a place name and a company name.

4. Names in the motivations of teenagers

It is thus clear that names are a part of both the linguistic landscapes in general and the observations made by the teenagers. But is the fact that they are proper names relevant when teenagers are discussing the different signs? To get a better understanding of the role of proper names, I will in the following look into the comments made by teenagers regarding these signs.

The teenagers gave varying motivations for choosing to photograph the signs in question. Their reasons include both the languages used, the information displayed on the sign, and the overall design of the sign. The Finnish-speaking teenagers focused e.g. on signs that were multilingual, included a "nice poem" or ones they had not noticed before. The Swedish-speaking teenagers were more concerned about the use of their own language, commenting e.g. "weird" translations and lack of bilingualism. Both groups commented on the multimodal aspects of the signs (images, colour, etc.) as well. The teenagers' motivations are discussed further in SYRJÄLÄ (2018).

When it comes to proper names, they certainly influence many of the above mentioned comments: several of the signs commented as "multilingual" include place names in different languages, for example. The number of comments where names are specifically mentioned is limited though. Only two names are given as reasons for choosing to photograph a specific sign. These are the street name *Edgränden* (Swedish: 'Oath alley') and the company name *Matkamieli Oy* (Finnish: 'Travel mind Ltd.'). The teenagers comment these as "a weird name in Swedish" (although it is a direct translation of the Finnish street name *Valakuja,* also displayed on the sign) and as "sounding funny", respectively.

In an additional comment the product name *Eau Thermale* is referred to as a "fine text". It is, however, unclear whether the teenagers are commenting on the name itself or e.g. the typographic features of the sign. In other comments, the names are used to refer to the actual name bearer that is relevant in the narrative. This is the case with both the company name *Tiimari* referred to as "legendary" and the comment that (restaurants) *Fullmoon* and *Sagun Nepal* "both have left the mall". It is thus not the names themselves, but the fact that the businesses that once put up these signs have been closed down, that motivated the teenagers to photograph them. One more related comment, only written down as "Kontula hoods", refers to an ad for a locally produced ice cream brand. Here, too, it is not the name *Kontula* itself (nor the brand name *Kolmen Kaverin Jäätelö* 'Three Friends Ice cream', found on the sign), but the image of the suburb it symbolises, that is in focus.

Other than the comment about the street name *Edgränden* mentioned above, the word *name* is only used once by the teenagers. This is in connection with a sign at a supermarket featuring the word *PERSIMON*. The teenagers motivate the choice of this sign with it being "so weird name". Thus, the word *name* does not refer to a proper name, but to the name of a type of fruit.

In the study of Ainiala (2010: 42–43) teenagers with Somali background from another suburb of Helsinki appeared to be irritated by the official Swedish place names. Negative reactions towards bilingual features in the linguistic landscape are prominent also among the Estonian majority language users in Tallinn in Zabrodskaja (2014). It is therefore worth to notice that both groups of teenagers in my study are overall positive to the visible multilingualism in their suburb.

5. Final remarks

In line with previous research this study has confirmed that names are an important feature of the linguistic landscape. The teenagers commented for example on some "funny" and "weird" names; the creativity of commercial naming thus getting noticed by them. These names can therefore be said to have had the desired effect, as one of the functions of commercial names is to catch the attention of potential consumers (cf. Bergien 2007).

The attention of the teenagers is not necessarily on the names as such, though. There are various features, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that they comment upon while motivating their choice of signs. This points to the importance of multimodality in the linguistic landscape, a fact also influencing the interpretation of the signposted proper names, as discussed by e.g. Sandst (2016: 133). Furthermore, the function of names as symbols for the actual name bearers is central to how they are commented upon by the teenagers (cf. Tufi–

BLACKWOOD 2010 on how names are partially interpreted on the basis of our knowledge of the name bearer).

The fact that proper names are present in both the signs photographed by the teenagers and in their motivations for choosing these signs is thus above all due to them being a prominent part of the linguistic landscape. The fact that these linguistic features are actually proper names is not that relevant from the point of view of the teenagers.

The experimental, participatory method used in this study worked well. It gave new insight into the views of the language users – and to the role of names as features of the linguistic landscape. There is a lot of potential in both using folklinguistic methods and enlisting the participants in the data collection when studying the linguistic landscape. As already pointed out by PUZEY (2011), the linguistic landscape offers great possibilities for further socio-onomastic research. By applying folk onomastic methods to the context of public spaces, attitudes linked to visible use of names can be discussed, as well as what is actually recognized as a *name* by language users. These methods also shed light on the multimodality of names, as exemplified in this paper.

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Abstract

This paper discusses how proper names are featured in teenagers' observations of the linguistic landscapes of suburban Helsinki. Two groups of teenagers, one of Finnish-speaking and one of Swedish-speaking teenagers, participated in an experimental study combining methods from the study of linguistic landscapes and folk onomastics. The teenagers first took pictures of signs in their suburb. Afterwards they discussed motivations for choosing these specific signs. Their linguistic attitudes were then surveyed through an interview. The study finds that proper names of different types (place names, commercial names) feature both in the photographed signs and in the teenagers' comments. This is, however, more due to the prominent role of names in the linguistic landscapes in general, than the fact that these linguistic features are proper names.

Keywords: Folk onomastics, Linguistic Landscape, Place, Commercial names