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Author(s): Halonen, Mia; Vaattovaara, Johanna

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Mia Halonen* and Johanna Vaattovaara

Tracing the indexicalization of the notion “Helsinki s”

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Abstract: Earlier research has concluded that there is a strong symbolic relationship between Helsinki as a place and non-standard /s/ pronunciation. This phenomenon is likewise in continuous evidence in the Finnish media and social media. The notion of “Helsinki s” has become a folk linguistic fact although it lacks a clear linguistic correlate or even status as a linguistic fact. The only sibilant of the Finnish language is officially a voiceless alveolar, while the “Helsinki s” is most often discussed as “hissing”, “sharp” or “fronted”. However, according to recent research based on listening tasks, any /s/ may be designated and discussed as a “Helsinki s” if the speaker is regarded as a Helsinki speaker according to other criteria. The present article seeks to trace a development path to illustrate the layered semiotic processes that has led Finnish society to construct “Helsinki s”. In exploring the indexicalization process of this folk notion, the article focuses in particular on the origins and the circumstances under which /s/ pronunciation started to gain social recognition in Finnish society. The ideological link between the socially meaningful /s/ pronunciation and Helsinki is traced back to the early industrialization and urbanization era and (media) discourses of Helsinki in the late 19th century. The present-day associations and the 150-year path of “Helsinki s” are discussed.

Keywords: indexicality, social meaning, place, sound symbolism, enregisterment

1 Introduction

It is relatively easy to find examples of linguistic facts that invite metalinguistic commentary in language societies. It is presumably more difficult to point out “folk linguistic facts” that are culturally central objects of comments without

***Corresponding author: Mia Halonen**, Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä, P. O. Box 35, 40014 Jyväskylä, Finland, E-mail: mia.halonen@ju.fi

Johanna Vaattovaara, Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Tampere, 33014 Tampere, Finland, E-mail: Johanna.Vaattovaara@uta.fi

having a clear correspondent as a linguistic fact.¹ This article deals with one such case. In this article, we explore the social semiotics of /s/ variation in Finnish, and concentrate on the kinds of sociocultural phenomena that have influenced the emergence and circulation of discourse concerning /s/ variation in Finnish society. Particularly we will explore the development path of the “Helsinki s” notion.

The starting point for the present article is the fact that “Helsinki s” is stronger as a folk linguistic fact than it is as a linguistic fact. We have already indicated in Vaattovaara and Halonen (2015) that the label “Helsinki s” is primarily a cultural artifact resulting from complex semiotic processes. This article focuses more closely on the social changes in Finnish society over the past 150 years, which can be considered a crucial period in the historical trajectory of the indexicalization process of the folk label “Helsinki s”. To shed light into the emergence of this folk theory, we will particularly deal with the origins and the circumstances under which /s/ pronunciation started to gain social recognition in Finnish society. The relevance of this history is discussed in the light of present-day associations and potential social meanings of /s/ which underpin several cycles of sociocultural processes.

Our perspective is truncated and imbalanced in the sense that we will mostly deal with limited resources and will focus particularly on the media and popular culture personae involved. Nevertheless, the deeper tracing of the history gives insights into how the /s/ variation has started to gain social meaning, and how something that does not really exist as a linguistic fact (“Helsinki s” as a regional feature) has become a central target of metalinguistic commentary in Finnish society.

The present “Helsinki s” discourse (introduced later on in this article) has its origins in the late twentieth century, when the political situation in Finland promoted purism in Finnish culture and nation as well as in the Finnish language. At the time, Finnish was established as the official national language and literary Finnish was standardized. The present day associations undoubtedly draw also on other more global sources (see articles in this volume), but the historical data presented here shed light on the initial historical reasons for the development of /s/ as a socially meaningful variable, in particularly the Finnish context. As the folk concept “Helsinki s”, or often the slang variant “Stadi s”, already implies, in the Finnish society social meanings of /s/ are often connected to a place, Helsinki, the Capital of Finland. The article seeks to explore the indexical processes that enable and circulate this perceptual connection. In

¹ See Preston (2002) for further theoretical discussion on professional and folk theories on language.

the following sections, we present historical, ethnographic and discourse data in order to construct the early path of development.

Theoretically, the study builds on a post-structuralist view of places as socially constructed spaces and processes (e.g., Massey 2005; Johnstone 2011; Gal 2010). Although focusing on language ideological processes rather than linguistic variation, we regard this piece of research as sociohistorical linguistics or historical sociolinguistics (see Romaine 1982; Auer et al. 2015). Understanding the emergence of “Helsinki s” requires examination of the layered socio-cultural processes (Blommaert 2010: 125–130; Nevalainen 2015). We take it as no coincidence that there are such large-scale issues as urbanization, migration, standardization and role of media at play (see Nevalainen and Rutten 2012 for these megatrends affecting European languages in the Late Modern era). Nevalainen (2015: 250) also calls for embracing “broader view of evidence than is customary” in the task of historical sociolinguistics. Here we offer an ideological level of language analysis, based on a variety of data and observations, to shed light into indexical orders (see Silverstein 2003) on “Helsinki s” as becoming a folk linguistic fact.

2 Finnish /s/ as a phoneme and as a source for social distinction

The phonemic inventory of Finnish includes the sibilant fricative /s/, standardly described as voiceless, alveolar, and in relation to division of tongue, laminal. Furthermore, it is the only sibilant in Finnish, consequently having a relatively wide range of variation related to a variety of variables like coarticulation phenomena or the individual structure of the vocal tract. (Suomi et al. 2008; Iivonen 2009.) The phonetic realization of /s/ in Finnish shows a fair amount of free variation in natural speech, which has allowed distinctive variants of /s/ in Finnish to gain social meaning. Work in Finnish folk linguistics has confirmed the generally well-known fact that Finns imagine the pronunciation of /s/ to be special in the capital region of Helsinki (e.g., Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006; Mielikäinen and Palander 2002; Palander 2011: 69; for an introduction to folk linguistics, see e.g., Preston 1999; Niedzielski and Preston 2003). In the folk commentary, the “Helsinki s” is one of the most frequently mentioned features connected to characteristics of Helsinki speech. Very often it is described as “sharp” and “hissing” with regard to its supposed phonetic qualities. Most typically, therefore, “Helsinki s” is discussed as fronted, that is, dental instead

of alveolar. Here we will use the term “fronted” to describe this variable, independent of whether we refer to the public discourses and perceptions of the /s/ being fronted or to the acoustic fronting.²

However, many of the folk descriptions include or imply social categorizations and evaluations (“Stadi s”, “City s” or “Pissis s”),³ which associate the variant with young, urban female speakers (e.g., Mielikäinen and Palander 2002; Palander 2011; Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006; Vaattovaara 2013a). In our recent empirical studies (Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015) on perceptual landscape of Helsinki (see Section 3.3 for some details concerning /s/ perceptions), we observed that the /s/ sounds that in the folk linguistic comments were described as “sharp” or “hissing” typically refers to a pronunciation that can be produced in the fronted dental area compared to the (more) standard alveolar area.

As much as there is already folk linguistic data to indicate the centrality of the concept of “Helsinki s” for Finnish society, there is to date no research-based evidence on regional or social variation of /s/ in Finnish in terms of speech production. Anecdotal though, there is little evidence to support the claim of distinctive /s/ pronunciation not being unique to Helsinki speakers, however relevant for social distinction. The only study thus far to report on the variation of /s/ in Finnish is Aittokallio (2002), which concentrates on exploring the pronunciations of /s/ that speech therapists would regard as stemming from articulatory problems. In the course of this research, additional interesting sociolinguistic patterns were revealed: whenever secondary (i.e. middle) school girls talked to boys of their age, their /s/ pronunciations tended to be more fronted than when talking to peer girlfriends (Aittokallio 2002: 61–66). This result thus provides preliminary support for the idea that social distinction is being done with the /s/ variation. Aittokallio’s data was from Turku and not Helsinki, which contradicts the popular belief that the fronted variant of /s/ is specifically a Helsinki feature. In addition, given that young girls from all over Finland (not only Helsinki) are being sent to speech pathologists for “/s/ therapy”, there is no reason to believe that in production the fronted variant would be restricted to the Helsinki region. It is therefore of value to investigate

² We prefer this folk linguistic term over using the term of the place of articulation since fronting of voiceless sibilant /s/ seem to be a relevant phonetic feature based on which social distinctions are done and perceived in many languages, like we see in the articles of this special issue.

³ *Pissis* or *Pissa-Liisa* (‘Pee-Lisa’) refers to poorly behaved, drunk teenage girls who dress in a particular way (compares to for example the Valley girl stereotype, see Eckert 2008; Vaattovaara 2013a; Halonen 2015).

how “Helsinki s” has become a stereotype without having a clear status as an indicator (Labov 1972). In other words, what are the phenomena that have (mis) led Finnish society to collectively come to believe that such a linguistic variable as “Helsinki s” exists?

Since the /s/ variable is among the most discussed elements of spoken Finnish particularly in relation to Helsinki, a study of the perceived social and stylistic connotations of /s/ variation in Finnish is justified even in the absence of research on actual variation in production. Eckert (2012: 94) states that “[v]ariation constitutes a social semiotic system capable of expressing the full range of a community’s social concerns. And as these concerns continually change, variables cannot be consensual markers of fixed meanings; on the contrary, their central property must be indexical mutability.” So far, fairly little is known about perceptions of speech styles other than geographically based regional varieties in Finland, and even less about how stylistic perceptions change over time. While the Finnish folk dialectological studies mentioned previously have already verified the saliency of “s” in connection to “Helsinki”, these studies fail to reveal the indexical and ideological mechanism underlying this belief.

Ideologically motivated regard toward language varieties seem to develop similarly across Europe. These tendencies have been studied for example in the extensive research of the network *Standard language ideology in contemporary Europe* (SLICE; see Kristiansen and Coupland 2011; Kristiansen and Grondelaers 2013) and in its Danish predecessor *Language change in real time* (LANCHART; see, e.g., Kristiansen and Jørgensen 1998; Kristiansen 2003). On the conscious level of evaluation, the varieties of capital areas are most often negatively assessed. At the same time, below the level of conscious awareness, these varieties are often highly valued, as has been shown repeatedly in experimental research and in the widespread move toward dedialectalization.

When it comes to attitudes, a similar tendency is also well established in the Finnish context. Studies in sociolinguistics, mainly in folk linguistics, indicate that the spoken variety of the Helsinki region tends to be overtly negatively evaluated, despite the fact that, simultaneously, many linguistic changes originate in this region below the level of consciousness. In predominantly rural areas of Finland, features indexing the urban capital are often evaluated as “posh”, “conceited”, “arrogant” or “irritating” (e.g., Mielikäinen and Palander 2002; Palander 2011; Vaattovaara 2013a). This is a well-recognized folk ideology, which can be constantly witnessed in a variety of forms and contexts, for example, in internet discussions touching the linguistic landscape of the capital region. The following extract from an online-discussion is one example, with overt self-reflection by a (presumably) young Helsinki resident:

Tääl saa tosi usein kuulla, ku lukee murrekeskusteluja, et helsinkiläisten puhe kuulostaa ärsyttävältä. Itse oon koko elämäni täällä asunu, ni en oikee ymmärrä mitä sil meinataan. Monet sanoo kans, et ois jotenki tosi lässyttävä tai nasaali. En koskaa tajunnu tota, mut just yks päivä törmäsin vanhaan kaveriin ja se puhui ihan vitun ärsyttävästi lässyttäen, et ehkä se ois sit se. Keskittyykö tää vaan osaan helsinkiläisii vai onko tää joku yleisempi juttu? Miltä me kuulostetaan?

'Here, you get to read really often, when you read comments on dialects, that Helsinki speech sounds really irritating. Myself I have lived here all my life, and I don't really understand what is meant by that. Many people comment that our speech is somehow really lisping or nasal. I was never able to understand that, but then the other day I ran into an old friend and her way of talking was fucking annoyingly lisping, so maybe that's what it is. Is it like just some Helsinki people, or is this a more general thing? What do we sound like?'

(*Skur* in online-discussion forum of *Demi* magazine, 06.12.2013 at 01:19 a.m.)

Of all the individual linguistic items appearing in the social media discussions, the pronunciation of /s/ receives a fair amount of attention. In the folk commentary, "Helsinki s" or "Stadi s" is referred to with a variety of folk concepts, including "voiced s" like in the following example:

Itse kyllä tunnustan stadi-ässän, eli sellaisen soinnillisen ässän käytön syntini. [...] En jaksa yrittää karsia tapaa, vaikka voinkin kuulostaa yli kolmekymppiseltä pissikseltä :D

'I do admit using Stadi-s myself, that is the sin of using the particular kind of voiced s. [...] I'm not trying to get rid of it, although I might sound like an over-aged *Pissis* :D.'

(A mother in online-discussion forum of *Vauva* [Baby] magazine, 6.11.2012)

We will come back to details concerning the present-day indexes of /s/ variation with regard to "Helsinki" later on. But first, we explore the historical processes behind the early emergence of the "Helsinki s", which also is the main focus of this article. In light of the various data we have collected, we offer a trajectory of crucial events and periods of time illustrating the nexus of events and sociological, socio-demographic and sociolinguistic processes in the history of Helsinki. The next section (3) reveals, among other things, why the origin of the "Helsinki s" discourse revolves around the particularly fronted variant(s) of /s/, even though the present label "Helsinki s" appears to bear a wider range of acoustic correlates.

3 Tracing the history in the light of empirical data

When Helsinki was founded as early as 1550, Finland was part of the kingdom of Sweden. At the time, Helsinki (originally *Helsingfors*, in Swedish) was practically a monolingual Swedish-speaking village till the twentieth century. (For an

overview of the national status of Finland in relation to the statuses of the languages of Finland see, e.g., Huumo et al. 2004; Halonen et al. 2015.) Radical changes in the status and linguistic developments of Helsinki started when, as a result of Finland’s becoming a Grand Duchy of Russia in 1809, Helsinki gained the title of capital city in 1821. Subsequent industrialization, which began in the 1870s, further strengthened the city’s position. This development involved a large amount of migration from other areas of Finland. As a consequence, the predominantly Swedish-speaking city quickly became bilingual Swedish-Finnish speaking, and by 1890, Finnish speakers outnumbered Swedish speakers. In socio-demographic terms, the most prominent feature in this development process was extensive population growth, from 30,000 inhabitants in 1870 to 140,000 in 1910 (Åström 1956: 9; Nyström 2013: 25).

Throughout its history as a capital city, Helsinki has been a city of migrants. Today in the European Union, Finland is known for having a very tight immigration policy, but the modest flows of migrants have long been concentrated in the Helsinki area. In the first decades of population growth, migration was mainly domestic and economically motivated. Later, subsequent waves of domestic migration in the 1960s and 1970s accompanied a restructuring of Finnish society away from the agrarian lifestyle of rural Finland. In sociolinguistic terms, the migrant nature of Helsinki, and consequently its status as a base for a steady flow of dialects and languages, has meant that it has often been the focus of discourses about Finland and Finnishness.

3.1 The late nineteenth and early twentieth century

The beginning of the twentieth century was a significant period in the history of Helsinki, and evidently a crucial period for the roots of the “Helsinki s” discourse. Along with extensive growth of the city at the time, there was a strong rise in Finnish nationalism in reaction to both a long Swedish cultural heritage and ongoing Russian rule. The linguistic-political situation generated a need to separate from both of the host countries and their major languages, Swedish and Russian. The pressure for self-distinction came from both the East and the West, and was crystallized in the motto “We are not Swedish, we don’t want to become Russians, let us thus be Finns” by Fennoman A. I. Arwidsson. To live up to this aim, the educated Swedish-speaking upper class, clergy and officials switched from Swedish to the majority language of most citizens, Finnish. The voluntary switch from Swedish to Finnish by the Swedish-speaking elite played a historically important role in the birth and construction of the Finnish nation. (See, e.g., Huumo et al. 2004; cf. Anderson 1982; Halonen et al. 2015.) The events

establishing Finnish as the language of the new Finnish nationalism were centered in the governmental capital, Helsinki.

In order to develop the Finnish language more fully, the language was a target of intense efforts of verbal hygiene (Cameron 1995), reflecting a desire to keep it “pure” and protected from foreign influence (About the linguistic purism of the era, see Huumo et al. 2004; Mäntynen 2003; Nordlund 2012: 41, 52.). The closest and most dangerous threat was considered to be the Swedish language, and thus Swedish became the “other” in relation to Finnish. This is documented, for example, in the minutes of the Finnish Literature Society meeting in 1890:

Neiti J. Hannikainen piti huvittavan esitelmän Helsingin Suomesta, huomauttaen siinä, kuinka ruotsinkieli on runnellut varsinkin lausumatavan suomea puhuvalta väestöltä pääkaupungissa.

‘Miss J. Hannikainen gave an interesting presentation on Helsinki Finnish, remarking how the Swedish language has especially ruined the pronunciation of the Finnish speakers in the capital’.

The context where we came across the first explicit discourses on the pronunciation of /s/ was theatre. The resistance of the Swedish-speaking other was very much centered on actresses, their reputation and their ways of speaking. This association was likely the first phase of an indexicalization process of the “Helsinki s”, associated especially with women’s “unrefined” or “overdone” femininity. Helsinki was in the scene through the fact that The Swedish theatre was established in the 1860s in Helsinki, and the actors naturally were native Swedish speakers. When the Finnish National Theatre was also founded in Helsinki in the 1870s, many of the same Swedish-speaking actors and actresses performed both in Swedish and in Finnish theatres. It was thus inevitable that the Finnish of actresses who spoke Swedish as a first language had influences from Swedish pronunciation, and that whatever deviations in the speech, it would be inferred to be of Swedish origin. In the puristic climate of the time, the speech of these actresses was therefore closely monitored, and as evidenced, a topic in public discourses and the print media of the time.

In 1885, E. N. Setälä stated in a meeting of the Finnish Literature Society that “the sharp fronted Swedish /s/”, articulated by several female actresses, sounds artificial and “prissy” (originally noted in Paunonen 1976: 337). Worth mentioning in this regard is that Setälä was one of the most influential linguists of his time, if not the most influential. Any claim made by Setälä was likely to be given credence (e.g., Karlsson 2000; Kelomäki 2009), which might, to some extent, explain the attention that /s/ pronunciation gained among the contemporary linguists. The media interest in /s/ pronunciation was also seen already at the time. For example, a review in the newspaper *Wiipurin Sanomat* states:

S-ääni on rwa A-K:kään suussa melkein aina kaksinkertainen ja sihahtavan terävä. Hän ääntää ‘ssinä ssanot’

‘S-sounds in Mrs A-K’s mouth are almost always doubled and hissing sharp. She pronounces “you ssay” [emphasis added] (*Wiipurin Sanomat* 31 December 1893)

“Mrs A-K” in the extract refers to the great diva of the time, actress Ida Ahlberg-Kivekäs who thus got the status of a representer of the prejudices and beliefs concerning life in the sinful city. A number of years after that, another news article in *Uusi Aura* (19 April 1907), offered the following explanation for the problem with the actresses’ pronunciations of /s/: *ilmaisewat wieraan sukuperän. Pois semmoiset!* (‘these are of foreign origin. Should be gotten rid of!’).

With the great migration from rural areas into cities in Finland, new migrants were able to make Helsinki perceptually more accessible to people all over the country. Descriptions of the experiences of these migrants illustrate how moving to the modern, liberal city caused alienation and led to an increase in various “sinful” activities, such as prostitution and drug and alcohol abuse. Ameal’s (2014: 89) study of the literature of Helsinki from that period illuminates how the city was perceived as a vicious heterotopia, an “other space” in Foucault’s (1986: 24) terms. For example, in the novels *Jaana Rönty* (1907) and *Veneh’ojalaiset* (1909), issues regarding the independent nation, landholding, and the pleasures and sins of the city are intertwined. These scenes of alienation are essential for understanding how cities were experienced as “bad places” at the dawn of the 20th century, a sentiment which appears to be shared throughout the Europe of that era. Similar accounts are offered, for example, of Oslo by Røyneland and Mæhlum (2011). It seems that the early sound symbolic processes have been important in the development of the “Helsinki s” discourse. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the most pronounced association of the feature with a type of overdone or unrefined femininity began to take shape.

Another phenomenon that is likely to be involved in the process of indexicalization of the concept “Helsinki s” at the time is the emergence of a new vernacular variety, Helsinki slang (Paunonen et al. 2009). This variety combined Swedish, Finnish and some Russian, and developed in the working class neighborhoods of Helsinki, where the newcomer migrants from the Finnish-speaking countryside met the Swedish-speaking community (Paunonen 2006). Helsinki slang has many features, such as clusters initiated by /s/ sounds (e.g., *skrode* ‘big and strong’) which do not exist in standard Finnish and are thus marked. Therefore, these are vulnerable for sound symbolic processes (cf. Hinton et al. 1994). There is an /s/ initiated cluster also in the very slang name of Helsinki, *Stadi*, originating from the Swedish *stad* ‘city’. Still today, Helsinki slang is

reported to sound “strange” to the ears of people from rural Finland (e.g., Paunonen 2006; Mielikäinen and Palander 2014), but this is not a new phenomenon, as will be shown in Section 3.4. A similar attitude can still be seen in the internet discussions of today and this ideology repeats itself in our experimental study at the Science Centre, where several generations of Finns from different regions participated (Vaattovaara 2013a; Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015).

We assume it as no coincidence that there is in Finland quite a unique and long practice of logopedic training for people with “/s/ defects”, as mentioned earlier. The speech defect is typically diagnosed on the basis of a pronunciation of /s/ that is deemed to be too fronted or lisp-like. According to Aittokallio (2002) there is not a complete agreement among the speech therapists on what kind of /s/ articulations should be cured.

It is currently under investigation (Halonen et al. in prep.) when exactly the tradition of speech therapy started in Finland, but there is already evidence of the /s/ norm being taught at schools since at least the 1930s. In his guidebook *Good and Bad Finnish (Hyvää ja huonoa suomea)* published in 1931, E.A. Saarimaa lists deviations from good Finnish, and among the features mentioned are the fronted, “sharp /s/”. This type of pronunciation is judged as “artificial and prissy” (Saarimaa 1931: 5). This book, interestingly, uses the exact same words as Setälä according to the Minutes of the Finnish Literature Society back in 1885 (cited above). In many guidebooks to follow, similar judgments are made concerning /s/. Since these books were used widely in schools, they were obviously influential in spreading the knowledge of /s/ norms throughout the Finnish community.

It is impossible to say exactly to what extent these early roots play a role in the present-day perceptual landscape through cultural transmission. However, it can be stated without any hesitation that the perhaps more global influences promoting socially meaningful potentials of /s/ today have certainly hit fertile ground in Finnish society. We will come back to this process of indexicalization later on.

3.2 From the 1950s until present: Popular culture impact on /s/ perceptions

Over the course of the twentieth century, the discourse of /s/ shifted from actresses to another embodiment of stardom – popular singers. This trajectory dates from the 1950s, from the early years of popular music and especially from female pop stars, called *schlager* singers (based on the German term for the hit

songs of the time). The shift to pop singers thus continued the associations of otherness and femininity as well as discourses of Swedishness.

In the 1950s and 1960s, these aspects were embodied in the iconic popular artist Laila Kinnunen, who had lived the first 10 years of her life (1939–1949) as a war refugee in Sweden. Kinnunen was among the first Finnish popular culture personae, and certainly one of the most famous and admired ones. She had her breakthrough in 1957 with a Finnish version of the originally Italian song *Lazzarella*. The Finnish version features the song title *Lazzarella* repeated in the refrain, which meant that Kinnunen’s /s/, and more generally sibilant, pronunciation was repeatedly accessible on radio and television. Her image as a remarkable singer in the minds of the Finns included her “Swedish” /s/ pronunciation.

Kinnunen’s /s/ seems to have caught on very quickly as a basic feature of a successful *schlager* star. Evidence of this is presented by a famous singer of the next generation, Virve Rosti, who implies that the fronted /s/ had become a part of the whole style, a pop-star resource that could be adopted and stylized by others (cf. Rampton 1995; Coupland 2007). In 2008, after a long career as a *schlager* star, Rosti revealed in a radio interview of the national broadcasting channel (Yle Radio 1) that Laila Kinnunen and Marion Rung used to be her idols and also the models for her /s/ pronunciation.⁴ Rosti explained in the radio program that she felt that the fronted pronunciation of /s/ – which she refers to as “an intentional s-defect” – was an index of a credible and professional female *schlager* star singer at the time. Marion Rung, to whom Rosti refers, is another *schlager* star with a multicultural and multilingual background. Rung also spoke Swedish as her first language. Hardly coincidentally, her pronunciation of /s/ was fronted. As evident by Rosti’s statement, the Swedish backgrounds of these popular culture personae must have indirectly affected both the /s/ perceptions as well as the linguistic otherness of the star category of the time.

The perceptual connection between fronted /s/ and stardom has circulated already for decades, and it has been identified and re-circulated by logopedic professionals. For example Ollaranta (1968: 62) in his guidebook *This is how we learn to behave and talk properly - Exercises for schools and clubs* states that the fronted /s/ pronunciation is particularly characteristic of *schlager* stars. To illustrate this, the author tells an anecdote about a male student he had been treating for his too fronted pronunciations of /s/ for some time, and progress had been made. After the winter holiday break, the student returned to speech therapy for a checkup, and the author remarked that the student’s /s/ had

4 *Miten minusta tuli minä* [How I became me]. Interview of Virve Rosti 2008. Yle Radio 1. <http://www.yle.fi/elavaarkisto/?s=s&g=5&ag=115&t=778&a=6939>

become even more fronted than before. The explanation given by the student was watching Eurovision song contest tryouts all during the holiday. (Ollaranta 1968: 62.) We take it as no coincidence that a year before the publication of the book, in 1967, both the aforementioned Kinnunen and Rung participated in the Eurovision song contest tryouts, and both with two songs. A significant illustrator of the indexicalization process is that in the later, present day discourse, “Helsinki s” is often also described as “gay /s/”, and this is part of the same indexical field (cf. Eckert 2008; see Section 3.3.) With Ollaranta’s anecdote, we have the first known manifestation of what would become a common trope: the association of the fronted /s/ variant with both a *schlager* type diva, as well as the the urban gay and queer stereotype, which in Ollaranta’s story is indicated with the reference to the Eurovision Song Contest – which is known to be popular among gay and queer populations (See, e.g., Tuhkanen 2007.) This trajectory of stardom and “deviant Swedish s” continues also in contemporary male gay *schlager* star Jari Sillanpää (from 1990s on), who also has his roots in Sweden. Embodied in his persona, we can see the expansion of the index “prissy” and “overdone” femininity into certain male gay styles.

Simultaneously with Jari Sillanpää, the iconic image for the 1990s and early 2000s “Helsinki s” was a girl music duo called Nylon Beat, featuring two young women from Eastern Helsinki. At this point, the /s/ pronunciation was no longer about Swedish influence, but a “Helsinki influence” originating from the Eastern suburbs. In various media discourses, the girls’ general articulation was perceived as extremely nasal, and their pronunciation of /s/ as “sharp” and “hissing”, thus, fronted. The girls’ origin in Eastern Helsinki was significant in considering them as being part of the “speech chain” (Agha 2003) of the indexicalization process of “Helsinki s”. Generally, Eastern Helsinki has acquired much of the associations that was general in the turn of the century. “Bad” suburbs have displaced the images concerning Helsinki as a whole, at least in the local imaginations. In light of socio-economics, the suburbs of Eastern Helsinki are more working class and multicultural than most other areas in Helsinki, although not even near the extent of any other European capital and metropolitan suburbs. (See Kurttila and Tani 1993; Tikkanen and Selander 2013.) In the images of people living outside of the area, it has however gained a bad reputation without any single factual reason – it has been in a sense “othered” in the Foucaultian (1986: 24) sense.

The rise of the popular Nylon Beat duo also dates from the years of the great depression in Finland in the 1990s. At the time there was much media discussion about the perceived changing behavior of girls and girl cultures. In these discourses, the girls were accused on the one hand of becoming man-like – for example, drinking publicly – but on the other, for being ultra feminine in vanity

and superficiality when it came to physical appearance. The *Pissis* girl category also carries the ancient bad woman reputation and the belief of the girls being sexually promiscuous (cf. Aapola et al. 2004). On television in 1994, in the very popular Mirja Pyykkö talk show, these new type of girl problems (in the Helsinki suburbs) were introduced to a general television audience. Simultaneously, a new concept, similarly mythical to “Helsinki s” was created: the social category of the *Pissis* girl. (For more about the group and various semiotic features associated to it, see Halonen 2015; Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015.) In media discourses, the Nylon Beat artists were categorized as *Pissis* girls, based not only on their physical appearance but also their speech style. At this point, the notion of overdone or unrefined femininity generally associated with diva-like singer stars was extended to encompass social attributes associated with certain urban place(s), social class and style. (See Halonen and Leppänen 2016.)

3.3 From the 1990s: Recycling of the concept and “new others”

By the 2000s both folk dialectology studies carried out in Finland, as well as our more recent perceptual studies based on reaction tests, have indicated how “Helsinki s” has established the status of a mythical folk concept. This is evidenced most clearly in our studies addressing Helsinki, in the post-structuralist vein, as an imagined place (Massey 2005; Johnstone in press).

The claim that the “Helsinki s” is a sociocultural construction rather than a linguistic fact is substantiated by the results of our experimental studies in the late 2000s, carried out among Finns from different regions and age groups, and later among 12-year-old Helsinki school children (Vaattovaara 2013a; Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015). In our first study, visitors to the Science Centre Heureka, located in the capital region next to city of Helsinki (in the nearby city of Vantaa), were asked to comment on sentence-long speech samples they heard through headphones. The samples were 5–8 second extracts of media talk, sociolinguistic interviews, or from recorded ethnographic data. After each sample, listeners were asked to respond to the question “where can you hear talk like this, or who speaks this way?” The sample set was designed to elicit free talk concerning eight different linguistic variables so that /s/ pronunciation was only one of the features examined. Out of the 12 samples played, only one was designed for and expected to elicit talk about /s/ pronunciation. That particular sample (played as number 9) included several occurrences of fronted variants of /s/ produced by a young female voice. The sample was successful in the sense that it did elicit direct or indirect comments about social

connotations of /s/ from approximately one third of the 45 listeners, who represented different age groups and regional backgrounds. These reactions also indicated that “Helsinki s” is a self-evident concept that needs no explaining, like (example analyzed in detail in Vaattovaara 2013a):

No tosson selvä toi stadilainen ässä. et voi kuvitella että se on suhteellisen NUORI henkilö ja tosiaan niinkun, Helsingistä tais sitten (.) muualta pääkaupunkiseudulta.

Translation: ‘Well there is a clear case of the Stadi s. so we might imagine she is a relatively YOUNG person and really kinda from Helsinki or then (.) from somewhere else in the capital region.’ (Vaattovaara 2013a)

What is of special interest and importance for our discussion here is that out of the 12 sample recordings, six altogether elicited metalinguistic discussion about /s/, even though only sample number 9 contained fronted variants. The study suggested that the listeners were attuned to hearing socially relevant /s/ even when there is no acoustically or even auditive fronted variant of /s/ available in the material. It was concluded that if the speaker is regarded as being from Helsinki on the basis of some other linguistic features (including open diphthongs, low back vowels and “nasal” articulation), any type of /s/ may be designated as “Helsinki s”. Additionally, three of the voices perceived as containing Helsinki /s/ were male voices. In the evaluations, the male speakers were typically perceived and described as homosexual. Comments were often this explicit, but some were more implicational; for example, through designating the male speakers in stereotypical positions such as hair stylists or interior designers.

The otherness displayed by the Swedish language influence associated with “Helsinki s” in the very beginning of the discourses can be linked to the more recent index of homosexuality. In Finland, gayness has been, and still often is, associated both with Sweden as a state and thus Swedish citizens, but also with the Swedish speaking minority in Finland (see Juvonen 2002). Especially when speaking Finnish, pronouncing /s/ in a “Swedish way”, that is, clearly sharper and more fronted compared to the typical range of Finnish /s/ pronunciation (Leinonen 2004: 52; Kuronen 2014), seems to be associated with gayness. This perception resonates also with Levon’s (2007) results of perceptions of sibilants as indexes of sexuality and/or gender. The associations and connotations have arisen partly from the relatively liberal Swedish legislation concerning sexual minorities in Sweden. However, the main trigger for the association seems to arise as a result of the history of Finnish popular music in which the Swedish speaking minority and prominent gay artists play a major role. Even though that seems to be quite a leap, it is not a long one in the sense that all the relevant

groups we have been able to identify are stigmatized others. In addition to the connotations with Swedish and gayness, Helsinki itself has likewise gained a status as a typical metropolitan center attractive for homosexuals, described in terms of “gay index” by Florida (2005: 55, 59, 174–175). It is thus anticipated that if there is a pronunciation perceived as “gay”, it would most probably also be perceived as originating from Helsinki.

The results from our research at the Heureka Science Centre motivated us to test the samples among young teenagers in Helsinki (reported in Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015). A similar perceptual pattern was also found in four elementary schools in Helsinki. One aim of the study was to investigate whether the urban Helsinki teenagers would identify themselves as users of fronted /s/ variants. The test was inspired by Johnstone and Kiesling’s (2008) finding that many of the listeners in their study who heard monophthongal /aw/ as an index of localness in Pittsburgh do not have this feature in their own speech, while many of those who do in fact monophthongize /aw/ did not commit to expressing a local Pittsburgh identity with this feature. The schools were located in the suburbs of greater Helsinki, mostly in the Eastern areas, where an earlier study (Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006) had indicated that the socially stigmatized /s/ is stereotypically linked to. Data collection involved 132 6th grade respondents (approximately 12 years old) who were asked to place five of the Heureka Science Centre samples on a local metro and train traffic map.⁵

Interestingly, the students never placed the speech sample with the fronted variants at their own school area, but tended to place the sample further to the east of their own suburb. This tendency was surprisingly regular throughout the data, suggesting that the majority of informants from Helsinki schools seemed to perceive the sample in a relatively similar way. According to the data, they tend to “push” the sample with fronted /s/ variants away from their own area but still place it in Helsinki. The students also had an opportunity to write open comments about the samples, but none of them made any overt comments or claims on fronted or any other non-standard /s/ pronunciation. From these data, we cautiously concluded (Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015) that while the Helsinki youngsters view the fronted /s/ as something “normal”, this generation regards the fronted /s/ at the same time as a particular index of Eastern suburb speakers - not a feature of their own, but not necessarily anything worth commenting on. This pattern can be interpreted in the light of Irvine’s and Gal’s (2000) theory on ideological process of fractal recursivity. Everywhere in Finland the fronted /s/

⁵ We owe this idea to Bijvoet and Fraurud (2010), who used similar method of locating the samples along the metro stations to study teenagers’ perceptions on various “Swedishes” in Stockholm metropolitan area.

(or any socially relevant /s/) is regarded as a Southern feature. In Southern Finland it is further perceived as a feature of Helsinki speech, and in the Helsinki context as a feature of Eastern Helsinki suburb speech (Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006). This way the spatial scale of the “Helsinki s” perception varies from one place to another but has its heart in the urban Helsinki area.

To a certain extent, the students did comment on the samples. When they did, the trigger was very similar to the adults in Heureka: the sample speaker was labelled as *Pissis* girl (see Section 3.2 above) when the speaker in the sample was female, or homosexual if the voice in the sample was a male voice. In this respect, the 12-year-olds Helsinki youngsters share similar perceptions of /s/ variation with Finns in general. Overall, this study (Vaattovaara 2013a) concluded that the perceptual associations between a distinctive (nonstandard) /s/ and spatial categorizations (Helsinki) arise both from participants’ subjective life-worlds and individual experiences, but also from the shared sociocultural knowledge that bridges people’s imaginations. One such important cultural dimension among Finns seems to be the opposition between the urban south and the rural north.

The various social meanings of /s/ among Finnish adults includes a range of concepts all associated directly or indirectly with urban culture (e.g., *young*, *Pissis* style described in the introduction, *feminine*, *non-academic*, *airhead*, *queeny gay men*, *cosmopolitan*), and particularly with Helsinki, the Finnish urban center. These associations have been promoted by media characters in such reality TV-shows as *Inno*, an interior decoration reality program that began in 2000, and in which the decorator was openly gay and had fronted /s/ pronunciation. This small detail has gained strength from the history we have introduced so far and also likely from the global spread of reality TV, for example *Queer Eye*, which appeared on Finnish TV in the year 2003, and from Jari Sillanpää and his Swedish /s/ pronunciation. The same applies to the social category of *Pissis* girls, a widely-known concept which has been used in national media and which has recently gained even more leverage through the importation of British reality-TV-shows with various extra-feminine figures, often of low class and/or ethnic origins, who share the same perceived features with *Pissis* girls. (See, e.g., Halonen 2015; Halonen and Leppänen 2016.)

3.4 The role of the media in circulating “Helsinki s”

As already indicated, the findings of media discourse as early as the late twentieth century have helped us to gain insights in the historical roots of

“Helsinki s”. Helsinki has been a focus of interest to the Finnish media even before World War I. The newspaper *Savo-Karjala* refers to the “strangeness” of Helsinki as a linguistic environment in 1888:

Suomen kansan lapsi tuntee itsensä melkein joka paikassa Helsingissä muukalaiseksi. ‘Vieras kieli’ siellä korvaan kajahtaa, puhuuko hän itse sitten vierasta kieltä, vai helsinkiläisten, Suomen pääkaupungin asukkaiden kielikö se on vierasta?

‘A descendant of the Finnish folk has the feeling of a stranger in almost every place in Helsinki. There “a strange language” teases one’s ear, is it that one’s own language is strange or is it that the language of the Finnish capital’s citizens’ is strange?’ (*Savo-Karjala* 13 November 1888)

Basically a similar tension is still present, more than a hundred years later, in the discourses concerning the capital region’s speech style(s). Perhaps needless to say, the forums available for circulation have only expanded. Finnish media as well as social media have participated in circulating and (re)formulating the symbolic landscape of socially meaningful /s/ variation, and there are no signs of this phenomenon fading. On the contrary, the interest seems to have grown alongside the growth of social media. Elsewhere (Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015), we have documented letters to the editor from the 1990s which present concerns about fronted /s/ pronunciation. The range of concerns on the /s/ in the more traditional media falls between the worry of proper pronunciation and the observations of /s/ deviations as a characteristic of Helsinki speech. The main argument or a question in the letters to the Editor have been whether this “foreign style” would or could be accepted as a norm in spoken Finnish. The style has been problematized, for example, as possibly originating from teenagers having returned from foreign exchange years in American high schools. One writer hints at it being copied from a gay (male) teacher of French at a particular Helsinki school.

A couple of decades later, in 2013, a popular scientific article (Vaattovaara 2013b) on the “Helsinki s” based on our recent studies triggered several responses from the media, including the national radio news, the main daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, the tabloid papers *Ilta-lehti* and *Iltasanomat*, as well as several women’s magazines. Journalists were enthusiastic about the claim that no such thing as the Helsinki /s/ really exists as a linguistic fact but rather that it is *the idea of Helsinki /s/* that connects to our ideas about what it is like to be in Helsinki or from Helsinki. Around the same time, the popular TV show *Have I Got News for You* (*Uutisvuoto*) selected our /s/ study as the trigger for a discussion of “what Helsinki-ness is about”. This type of media interest indicates that topics concerning /s/ pronunciation in Finland have wide public appeal, which has been present from the late nineteenth century on, as

we have presented above. The present-day discussion of /s/ in the media is often followed by internet discussions, which offer particularly valuable research material, as the data is natural and non-elicited. Due to the volume of comments, we do not deal with this natural data here, but it is certain that such comments confirm the salience of /s/ in Finnish society.

“Helsinki s” or “Stadi s” is also referred to in columns written by well-known journalists, which connect the feature to various contexts. For example, Saska Saarikoski, a journalist who was nominated as Journalist of the Year in 2014, reflected on his own use of “Stadi s” as a teenage boy working for a travel agency. He reported having been instructed to give up the irritating “Helsinki s” (Saska Saarikoski in *Helsingin Sanomat* 28.2.2013). In the same newspaper, Laura Kytölä discussed “Stadi s” earlier as a characteristic of a certain type of radio journalist (*Helsingin Sanomat* 28.6.2012). These are just a few examples to show how the media has played and is playing an active role in circulating, re-negotiating and strengthening the discourse and label of “Helsinki s” in Finnish society (see also Vaattovaara and Poutiainen in press for an investigated case).

3.5 The overall development path of “Helsinki s”

In the light of the gathered data, there seems to have been one consistent feature in the process of the indexicalization process of the notion the “Helsinki s” across time. This is the othering of groups of exceptionally visible women in society. As argued above, the perception of overdone, unsophisticated or unre-fined femininity can be seen as forming the core of the indexicalization path in the construction of the concept (see Figure 1). This kind of femininity has been associated with different kinds of others: (i) from Swedish speaking actresses at the turn of the twentieth century to (ii) Swedish speaking or Swedish “influenced” *schlager* singers in the 1950s and (iii) pop stars in general, especially from the beginning of the 1990s, and finally, (iv) to young Eastern Helsinki suburban girls, and now to (v) urban male homosexuals (queenly gay style). What is common to all these social groups, categories and personae is some kind of a stigma in society. Figure 1 presents some of the major historical bodies (Scollon and Scollon 2004; cf. Halonen et al. 2015) or personae involved in the process in relation to the chronology of general, socioculturally relevant historical periods and significant events.

The fact that there seems to be a somewhat parallel social indexical field involved in other contemporary language societies (see other articles in this volume) raises questions as well as further research interests about the

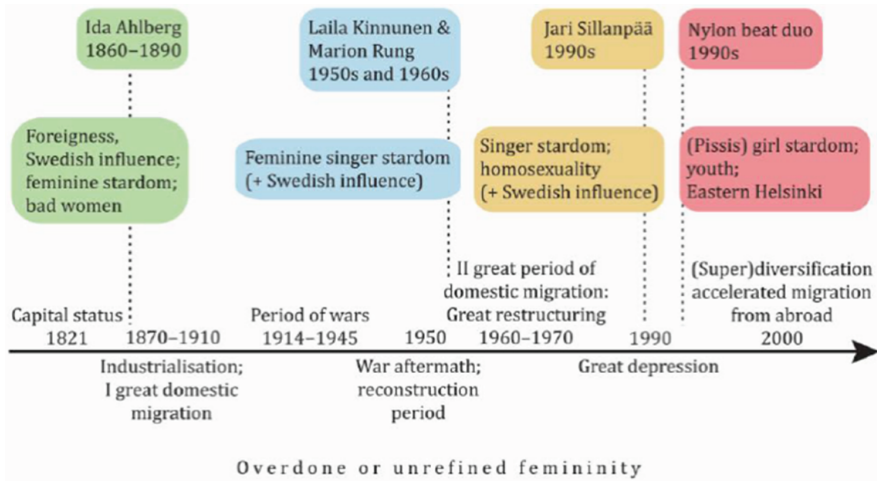


Figure 1: The development path of the ideological construction of “Helsinki s”.

connections to more globally emerging social motivations. After all, the “Helsinki” in the concept of “Helsinki s” refers rather to a social category – Helsinki as an imagined place – rather than a geographic location. To trace the history behind this spatial association, we have presented various empirical data that can be seen as participating in the indexicalization process of the construction of this sound symbolism. The link to Helsinki, a place, is often thin, but the link is there through the ways Helsinki is imagined as a place (Vaattovaara 2013a).

The history of Helsinki is, among many other things, also a history of deprecation, contrasting the “bad”, modern, liberal, socialist, restless and revolutionary city to the dominant conservative peasant culture at the dawn of the twentieth century (cf. Nyström 2013; see also Pulma 2009). A very important aspect in the indexicalization process was domestic migration to Helsinki, which is also currently taking place. Because of the vast domestic migration to Helsinki and its status as, by far, the biggest city in Finland, every Finn has a relationship with Helsinki. Therefore, Helsinki and the local speech are collectively imagined, with also the help of TV dramas and reality shows often positioned in the scenes of Helsinki.

When we look at the indexicalization path so far, from the late nineteenth century till today, we can detect a change toward new kinds of female others in the form of *Pissis* girls – originally Eastern Helsinki subculture and discursively constructed social group – and male homosexuals, an extremely heterogeneous

group. These groups however, have already enlarged the associative possibilities from females into and from Swedish towards new, other and foreign. A new other can be based on socio-economic status or place of living, like the *Pissis* girls of the Helsinki eastern suburbs. Presumably because of this, Eastern Helsinki is also generally perceived as more urban than many other areas, as it easily compares to other big cities in Europe. In this sense, Eastern Helsinki seems to have also become somewhat exoticized, perhaps similarly to “Easts” in general (Said 2003 [1978]; Ainala and Halonen 2017). /s/ appears to play an ideological part in this process. Our school data suggested (Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015) that this “Easternization” also recurs inside of the Eastern Helsinki area, with school children “pushing” the pejoratively perceived fronted /s/ to East of themselves, to the neighbor suburb, away from their own area and thus away from their own speech. This resembles the reverse process of adolescents appropriating likable speakers and features to their in-group, as studied by Williams et al. (1999).

4 Discussion

In this article, we have explored the social semiotics of /s/ variation in Finnish by identifying how and why /s/ variation has initially become a target of metalinguistic commentary in the first place. Moreover, we have presented evidence on how the history of Helsinki, the history of Finnish language norms and the history of several popular culture phenomena have triggered or enabled the circulation of discourse on “Helsinki s” to gain power. Through analyzing various types of documents, such as newspapers, minutes of meetings, published historical studies, central literature and relevant historical milestones in Finnish (popular) culture, we have been able to account for approximately 150 years of the evolution of the concept of “Helsinki s”. The picture of “Helsinki s” label is fragmented but relatively coherent.

Our recent work (Vaattovaara 2013a; Vaattovaara and Halonen 2015) has indicated that there is no single one acoustic sound that would correlate with the concept “Helsinki s”, but a wide variety of acoustic realizations can be associated to this place. However, the very origin of the “Helsinki s” discourse concerns the fronted /s/ variant. The symbolic relationship between “Helsinki” and the fronted variant of /s/ seems to be particularly strong. This is supported by the imitation task data included in the Heureka Science Centre data set (Vaattovaara 2013a). At the end of each interview, all of the respondents were asked to imitate “typical Helsinki talk”. Almost without exception, participants refused to do this task, but the five individuals who did volunteer an imitation

all included stylized, produced fronted variants of /s/ in their performance. We take this as an evidence of enregisterment (e.g., Silverstein 2003; Agha 2007; Johnstone et al. 2006; Johnstone in press) of “Helsinki s”.

The peculiarity of “Helsinki s” is, however, that basically any non-standard /s/ is easily ideologically linked to Helsinki speech style. What is being enregistered, then, is not only the sign (fronted /s/) but the idea, the folk label “Helsinki s”, covering a range of socially recognized /s/ pronunciations. Under certain contextual and social circumstances the ideological link between Helsinki and /s/ pronunciation is evoked. This is explained by the fact that the label “Helsinki s” itself has gained a strong status in Finnish society. It can be regarded as a socially constructed modern “myth”, in Barthes’ (2009 [1957]) terms; that is, a dominant ideological concept in contemporary Finnish society. The discourses we have presented here have encoded the central ideological issues concerning the community of Helsinki, whether imagined in Anderson’s (1982) terms, or “real” for the citizens (cf. Nyström 2013: 34–35).

The symbolic relationship between /s/ and Helsinki fits within a late-modern understanding of places as constructed through discourse (e.g., Massey 2005; Johnstone et al. 2006; Johnstone 2011). Ultimately, “Helsinki s” underpins a set of social styles and practices that are themselves ideologically linked to Helsinki. What is at issue is that the existence of a discourse of “Helsinki s” has less to do with the actual pronunciation of /s/ in the Helsinki region than with the ways in which Helsinki itself is imagined as a place. Therefore, although acoustically questionable as a linguistic fact, “Helsinki s” is strong as a folk linguistic fact because of the long-term discourse(s) linking non-standard pronunciation of /s/ and Helsinki as a place. What exactly is linked there varies from individual to individual and from context to another.

It is presumed that the ideological links between /s/ pronunciation and Helsinki are constantly expanding and undergoing change, but as we have indicated, some ideological elements can be relatively stable. The core of “Helsinki s” has always been otherness, or foreign. A new “foreign” might also start to gain new referents though the flows of immigrants that the Finnish society is currently experiencing. In Copenhagen for example, fronted /s/ is sometimes connected with immigrant speech (Pharao et al. 2014). Considering the development path so far, a similar association pattern is perhaps likely in Finnish context as the (modest) number of immigrants is to increase. A migrant speaking Finnish as a second language could predictably be a possible next “other in (super)diverse late modernity (Vertovec 2007; Blommaert and Rampton 2011). This would be following the path of the previous and present different others, that is (bad) women, adolescent girls and male homosexuals. Currently, the main perceptual connection is one of lack of

refinement or overdone femininity, which has held steady while the associated social group has changed from Swedish-speaking theatre actresses, to 1950s *schlager* stars, to 1990s pop stars, to 2010s urban teenage *Pissis* girls and openly gay styles. What comes next remains to be seen.

5 Conclusions

The status of the Finnish phoneme /s/ being the only Finnish sibilant makes the pronunciation of it relatively free, which again enables /s/ variants to gain social meaning. The ideological link between socially meaningful /s/ pronunciation and Helsinki can be traced back to the early industrialization and urbanization era and (media) discourses of Helsinki in the late nineteenth century. The perceptions were initiated through Finnish nationalists and language policy makers wishing to separate themselves and the Finnish language symbolically from the Swedish language as the relevant foreign “other”, as part of the general process of autonomy and gaining independence. The mechanism which today connects the folk notion of “Helsinki s” with the place called Helsinki is a complex one, and in many ways imagined. Moreover, despite the saliency and also the factual basis of fronted /s/ variant connected with this place, the linguistic correlate is often vague or can be of various kinds. But in light of the late-modern understanding of language as primarily a semiotic system and of spaces becoming places through discourse, “Helsinki s” types of folk linguistic facts need not even have acoustic correlates in order to be real for people. These mythical folk ideas do still reflect, and contribute to, a broader system of cultural values.

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