

MONA FORSSKÅHL

## **Helsinki slang around 1900: a new slang variety is born**

*Cet article se propose de décrire les circonstances de la formation de l'argot finno-suédois de Helsinki vers le début du vingtième siècle et de l'examiner à travers les champs sémantiques qu'on peut identifier dans le vocabulaire argotique de l'époque. Les contacts linguistiques entre la bourgeoisie de langue suédoise et la classe ouvrière bilingue, parlant suédois et finnois, ont été d'une importance majeure du point de vue de la création de ce nouvel argot dans les faubourgs d'un Helsinki en plein essor.*

At the beginning of the twentieth century Finland was part of Russia. It had been so for almost a hundred years since 1809, when it was taken over from Sweden after a war between Sweden and Russia. During the first decades of Russian influence the Swedish culture and administration in Finland had continued as before, but towards the end of the century Russian influence became stronger. Demands were made for Russian to become the official administrative and military language. The Russian military presence in the country increased and stricter rules for public life were issued. An official censure on all public and private texts, together with tougher methods by the Cossacks and the police in the country, made the Russians very unpopular in the eyes of the local inhabitants.

At the same time there was another major debate going on in the country, in a way connected to the wish of getting rid of Russian influence. This debate did not concern all of the population, just the educated, usually academic and urban circles. The debate was about the status of Swedish and Finnish as national languages of Finland, and even though many of the people involved had Swedish as their mother tongue some were in favour of the idea of “one nation – one language”, namely Finnish. Many of these Swedish speaking Finns thus decided to officially change their mother tongue to Finnish, even though they did not speak nor understand it properly. The other party in the debate

consisted of those Swedish speakers who wanted to keep Swedish as (one of) the national language(s) of Finland and promote Swedish as the carrier of cultural and educational life and as the administrative language throughout the nation. The two standpoints were also seen in relation to the Russian presence and both sides argued that their point of view would lead to stronger means of opposition against Russian influence. Both sides agreed on one goal: to turn Finland into a more or less free nation without any interference from Russian interests (WARIS 1973, pp. 98, 101–105).

At the same time, in the countryside and among working class people there was no debate going on between the different language communities. What language one spoke or understood was of small or no consequence. First of all, most of the countryside was either Finnish or Swedish, and where both languages were present this was seen mostly as an everyday and practical problem. Secondly, in the towns, which at that time were only beginning to grow, the uneducated groups, the working class, usually lived closely together regardless of what language groups they belonged to and marriages between Swedish speakers and Finnish speakers were quite common. This was also the language situation in Helsinki where early Helsinki suburban slang was born (PAUNONEN 2000, p. 15).

Helsinki in the beginning of this period was a small town of 43,000 inhabitants. It had had a majority (23,000) of Swedish speaking inhabitants. They inhabited the centre of the town and were mostly families with long urban traditions in Finland. 15,000 had Finnish as their mother tongue whereas 4,000 spoke Russian. There was also an influential group of German speaking bourgeois families living in Helsinki, with close contacts with the Swedish speaking bourgeois population (NORDISK FAMILJEBOK 1894, Helsingfors).

However, both the social situation and the language situation were starting to change rapidly as the population grew due to the industrialization and the growing logistical systems it required. More and more Finnish speaking persons moved into the town, so that already around 1910 the two major language groups in the town were equal in numbers, amounting to a total of 94,000 inhabitants. But the new inhabitants were not only Finnish speakers. The new population consisted of both Finnish and Swedish speaking people moving in from different rural areas around Helsinki, and Russian speaking people,

coming from different parts of Russia. The Russians followed the army or came as seamen or traders (NORDISK FAMILJEBOK 1894, Helsingfors).

The new inhabitants were mostly working class people with little or no education. They settled around the former centre of the town which was situated on the eastern banks of a peninsula. The new inhabitants thus found their new homes in the western and south-western parts of the same peninsula, on an island east of the old centre, and also in different directions to the north. Figure 1 shows a map of Helsinki around 1910.<sup>1</sup> The area where many of the buildings are marked black is the old centre, around that, to the west and to the north, we can see the new parts where the new and growing working class settled. The old centre also grew to some extent and the new bourgeois parts of the town can be found directly south of the old centre. The island just east of the peninsula is called *Skatudden* Island where seamen of different origins settled and where they traded more or less legal goods. Illegal pubs, brothels and smugglers' nests kept many townspeople away from the place until the end of the 1910s when the small buildings and huts were torn down and the island got a whole new infrastructure.

My study aims to show ways in which two different slang varieties were connected to their social and physical surroundings during this period. The material used for the study consist of informal school magazines, texts from student organizations, song books, stories about and from local neighbourhoods, lists of words written down by persons living in different parts of the town at that time, interviews made by sociologists and linguists and finally theatrical texts, mostly comedies about local phenomena. The slang words collected amounts to a total of about 2,000 different elements. All the words used for this study are found in at least two different sources. I have left out quite a few words which were not verified by the different sources as commonly known or at least known by more than one person, the writer of the text.

The centre of the town was thus populated mainly by wealthy families, university staff and students, other well educated persons like school teachers, priests and artists and people of high military or administrative rank. Some of

---

<sup>1</sup> The official name at that time was the Swedish form: *Helsingfors*.

Figure 1. Map of Helsinki at the beginning of the 1900s  
(Source: NORDISK FAMILJEBOK 19)

MONA FORSSKÅHL: Helsinki slang around 1900

---



these also had their own service staff living nearby or in the same household. The social and cultural life in the town centre was dominated by Swedish and German, although growing Russian influence over the administration of the town and the whole country naturally had an impact.

The students and schoolchildren in the inner parts of the town seem to have had a common slang vocabulary (and slang grammar), in part dating back at least to the days when the first university in Finland was established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most of these slang words originate in Swedish, but there is also a considerable amount of German words, while some come from French and Latin.

Semantically the slang of the old town centre draws a surprisingly clear picture of students' and school children's every day life. It can roughly be divided in four different parts: firstly verbs and substantives related to phenomena in restricted physical surroundings, mostly closed spaces and inner yards, secondly verbs and substantives describing outdoor phenomena. Besides these groups directly connected to a specific physical surrounding there are two groups of slang words used in various contexts and surroundings. The first of these consists of – mostly evaluating – adjectives or adjective-like words, and the second of words, names or nicknames for persons, places and groups of people. This four-part division is a result of various longitudinal analyses (NYHOLM et al. 1989; PAUNONEN 2000; FORSSKÅHL 2005) which show that the physical context in which the words have been used in different periods has had an impact on the further spreading of the words in the town and on how new influences have been adopted by the slang variety in the different parts of the town. In this study I will concentrate on the two groups of words related to specific indoor and outdoor surroundings.

While the outdoor world was to some extent common to everybody in town, the surroundings around and happenings inside buildings or closed yards were shared only by those having access to enclosed space. In my opinion two facts follow from this: Those who do not share this environment have less or no need to talk about the phenomena connected with it, at least not in the same terms as those living in it, and thus do not have any need for slang in this area. Those who do not share the environment do not come into contact with the slang words as they are typically used: only in and about this environment.

The slang words from enclosed space in Helsinki around 1900 are consequently used in Swedish and with Swedish morphology. Some of the words, however, come from German and Latin. The words from German are related to school and student habits, to drinking alcohol and to social habits. The words from Latin are also related to drinking alcohol, but aside from that, to higher and basic education.

Examples of words from German are: *fux* ‘first years student’, *nachspiel*, *nahare* ‘cocktail, pre-party’, *bira* ‘beer’, *bierkneip* ‘pub’, *blama* ‘make a mistake’, *sjava* ‘carry, take, walk’, *vippa* ‘lend, borrow’. Words from Latin are: *spiri* ‘spirit, alcohol’, *krabbis*, *krapula* ‘hangover’, *rudis* ‘rudimentary, stupid’, *arra*, *bibba* ‘names of subjects in school: arithmetic, biblical history’, *fides* ‘teacher’s pet’.

The German and Latin slang words do not generally spread outside enclosed space at all, neither around 1900 nor later. Most of them disappear before the 1930s. Many of the words related to drinking and alcohol are exceptions to this tendency. They tend to spread to all groups within the town and later on, in the 1950s, also to other towns in Finland. This means that some Latin and German words, like *krapula* and *bira*, are today still part of a commonly known and used Swedish and Finnish slang vocabulary. Funnily enough the Latin word *krapula* is perceived both in Finland and in Sweden as an originally Finnish slang word.

The numerous Swedish slang words related to enclosed space are more or less slangy (NYHOLM 1989, p. 13). Some of them could be defined more as informal every day words while others are obviously considered slang and not suitable for situations where teachers or elders are present. A pupil in one of the inner city schools writes in a school magazine in 1912 that if we disregard the “ugly Finnish words” known and used by some pupils, there is a great cultural treasure in the Finland Swedish slang yet to be discovered.

The Swedish words connected to enclosed space do not form a very clearly defined semantic group. They consist of words for institutions: *kondis* ‘bakery, café’, *stuidun* ‘students exam, at the end of the gymnasium’, *gästis* ‘restaurant and hotel’, *gåsis* ‘school caretaker’; words for things student and pupils do in school: *lunta* ‘crib, fiddle’, *funtja* ‘think, ponder’, *skåta* ‘hit on somebody’, *pruja* ‘copy’; words related to school and student parties: *maskis* ‘masquerade’,

*krosja* ‘neck tie’, *svirra* ‘to party’. Many of these slang words were obviously imported from Sweden, from school and students’ slang in Uppsala and Stockholm (Kotsinas 1996) as a result of close contacts between groups. However, today they are less known in Sweden (von BONSDORFF 1997) than they are among Swedish speaking youth in Helsinki. Some of the words have lived on and are still known as “old time Helsinki slang”, some have become part of every day Finland Swedish.

While the words related to the closed inner city rooms were not, to any greater extent, adopted into Finnish slang, the words related to the outdoor world spread rapidly to new young generations from both language groups in Helsinki. In some instances it can even be impossible to tell in which language group a slang word is created or introduced first, since there might be both Finnish and Swedish sources for a slang word and they might be from exactly the same time. It is only the morphological form of the word that differs: Swedish forms such as *frido* ‘girl’ and *konde* ‘boy’ are for instance found in the Finnish form *friidu* and *kundi* from exactly the same period, before 1910. This phenomenon, that slang words move back and forth between the two languages, is typical of Helsinki slang since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (SOLSTRAND 1980, p. 314; NYHOLM 1989, p. 12). It has been called *ping-pong-loaning* and concerns primarily the slang words related to outdoor, open space phenomena.

Slang in the open space in the inner parts of the town consists mostly of words in Swedish, but also of some Russian words. As for words originating etymologically in Finnish, there seem to be none. However, many of these Swedish slang words start to appear in Finnish slang at the very same time, and it seems that their adoption by Finnish slang influenced the phonological form of the Swedish slang as well. There are for instance changes first observable around 1910 in syllable lengths (*stylä* – *styyla* ‘to date’), changes in vowel quality (*sumpla* – *sumpli* ‘exchange, organize’, where the first form is a Swedish infinitive form and the second a Finnish infinitive) and new hypercorrect prefixes and suffixes added to words previously used without them (*tåg* – *ståge* ‘train’, where a definite form suffix *-e* is added to a constructed form with an extra *s*-, believed by Finnish speakers to be correct Swedish).

The Russian words in this group have to do with law and order and with commerce. These semantic fields can be seen partly in relation to the fact that

the Russian administration and military had an increasing impact on happenings in the streets and in the mind of persons moving about town. But there were, as mentioned above, also ordinary Russian tradesmen and seamen trading goods in the town centre. These are probably the original source of words such as *snaja* ‘understand’, *lafka* ‘more or less legal small shop’ and *haroshi maroshi* ‘ice cream, ice cream seller’ (there where Russian ice cream sellers shouting this phrase while walking about town selling ice cream). In the illegal end of the commerce there are slang words like *blaja* and *kurva* ‘girl with bad reputation’ and *stärä masj* ‘old criminal’ dating back to old St. Petersburg underworld slang (PAUNONEN 2000, p. 31). Nouns like *butka* ‘prison cell’, *nagajka* ‘first whip, later any threat and to threaten’ come from Russian law enforcement. The word *prenika*, also introduced around these years, is a pejorative noun for medal or prize given by the Russians (after the 1920s, by any institution).

Another public area where many Russians were involved is public and private transportation. Cabs in the inner city were often driven by Russian cabdrivers. Young Swedish speakers living in the inner parts of town called these Russian cabs *isvog* or *isvostjik*, which is quite close to the original form, and when the cabs became motorized they were called *birs* or *birsbil* ‘birs car’. In the bilingual (or even tri-lingual) outskirts of the town where the cab drivers lived, the phonological and morphological forms were altered, but I will come back to this later on.

Many of the Swedish slang words of the open space concern happenings and activities which young people were involved in or used to watch. There are many words related to sports and games, such as *fotis* ‘soccer’, *fippa*, *flinta* ‘throw’, *barbi* ‘a children’s jumping game played with a stone thrown on a drawn pattern of squares’, *stibu*, *bulika* ‘the stone used in the *barbi* game’. Other happenings and other phenomena important (and probably usual) enough to have an impact on the slang vocabulary were *eldis* ‘fire’, which makes the *brankis* ‘firemen’ come, *båtskin*, *skipare* and *skiglare* ‘boats, skippers and sailing boats’, *flaidas* ‘to fight’, *krita* (from *kredit*) ‘credit’, *blaffa* ‘to smoke’, *loda*, *luffa*, *tjuppa* ‘to run’, *schaber*, *klöver*, *flis*, *fyrkar* ‘money’.

During this period there was a new and increasingly strong trend to imitate, import and adopt Swedish inner city slang words into the slang of the new growing suburbs. But not all inner city slang words spread, just the ones used in

and related to the open and more and more common space. The two groups of slang words mentioned above: nouns and proper names for persons and places on the one hand, and evaluative slang adjectives on the other, were also to some extent used all over town, but not very systematically and their spreading was not so fast. At the end of the 1910s when almost all the open space words had become common knowledge to all young persons living in Helsinki, there were still very different uses of words from the name and adjective groups. Many of the open space words were changed into forms more suited to the Finnish morphological and phonological system and then incorporated into Finnish slang. Some of them kept their original Swedish phonological form but got different suffixes in Swedish and in Finnish, the Swedish infinitive forms *flaidas* and *blaffa* for instance became *flaidea*, *blaaffaa* in Finnish and the noun *fyrkar* (countable, plural form) became *fyrkaa* (mass, partitive). Later on, after 1920, the borrowing direction changed and Swedish speakers started to import words from Finnish and Finnish slang (PAUNONEN 2000, pp. 30–31; TASKINEN 1986, p. 49). But let me now turn to the situation outside the town centre.

The working class neighbourhoods closest to the inner bourgeois town were inhabited by families and persons less wealthy than the inner city people but with urban roots and traditions in the town. In these families it was common for the children to start working early in life and therefore never or seldom attend school. There were free school classes for all children in the town, but there was no obligation to attend them. Those children who went to school did at first go to mixed schools where there were both Finnish speaking children and Swedish speaking children. These schools were usually close to home. But after the first two or three classes, in order to separate Swedish schools for boys and girls, children had to attend schools inside or near the town centre.

These school arrangements provided a link between the centre and the surrounding parts of the town, which can be observed through the slang vocabulary they shared and which seems to have spread out in circles to the new suburbs. We find many of the same slang words for games and sports both in the inner city and in the nearer suburbs, the same words for happenings and phenomena in the centre of the town. Of course, they had fires in the suburbs as well and they went down to the harbours to look at boats, they fought amongst

themselves and also fought gangs from other suburbs and thus came into contact with the slang of these suburbs as well (PAUNONEN 2000, p. 15). But they also created themselves new slang words for these phenomena, and they had slang words in Finnish.

The larger number of slang words in the suburbs can be seen in relation to the fact that children and young persons outside the town centre lived most of their every day life outdoors, out of reach of grown-ups and linguistic models and control. The bourgeois children and youth on the other hand lived under more supervision from grown-ups and in socially more controlled surroundings. Even when they became students they were integrated into already formed traditions for drinking, singing, dancing and conversing.

There were not many Finnish slang words used in the suburbs of Helsinki at this time. Finnish slang researchers (see PAUNONEN 2000, pp. 28–30) have agreed that about three quarters of the words used as slang by Finnish speakers of this time were of Swedish origin. Words with Finnish origin amounted to only 20% of the slang vocabulary. However, the numbers are complicated by the fact that it seems Finnish speakers just took any Swedish words they knew and adopted them to Finnish morphology and phonology (PAUNONEN & SORSAKIVI 1988, p. 15). One could perhaps insist on the necessity of some sort of an establishing procedure before a word is to be counted as a slang word. But a major point remains. The tendency in these times was that Swedish words got some sort of a slang status when imported into Finnish and this status was then recycled back into Swedish so that they were seen as Swedish slang as well.

In order for the above mentioned *slangification* to take place, there had to be bilingual contexts. More than half of the new inhabitants moving into town for work, spoke only Finnish. At the same time there were also new inhabitants who spoke only various Swedish dialects. In the case of many marriages the wife and the husband could not understand each other at all (WARIS 1973). The children then became bilingual, but not with standard Finnish and standard Swedish but with two dialects. And these dialect speaking children were the ones creating and developing the new suburban slang variety. This means that all new Swedish slang words from these neighbourhoods had their origin in dialects. For instance, instead of Swedish standard words like *dricka* ‘drink’,

*flaska* ‘bottle’ and *huset* ‘the house, an outdoor toilet’ slang words were taken from dialects: *doka*, *flinda* and *höse*. In the same manner Finnish standard words like *tulipalo* ‘fire’, *naama* and *sisko* were not used, instead slang words like *tulppari*, *pärstää* and *sysika* were created from dialect words.

As for the semantical fields covered by the new Helsinki slang, the street slang, the new suburban slang words were closely related to the local living conditions. Usually people in these outer parts of town lived very close together and it was not unusual for a family with seven children living in one room of about 21 m<sup>2</sup> to have other persons living with them and help pay the rent. It is not surprising then that children lived their lives mostly outdoors, together with other children and youth. As some children were bilingual while others spoke only Swedish or Finnish, the slang created in these local gangs became a sort of a lingua franca covering all necessary semantic fields children and youth had a need for.

In contrast with inner city slang, and aside from the words imported from that variety, there are many words for food, drink, health and clothes. These are typically Swedish in origin but have changed into forms usable in both languages. In standard Swedish, for instance, there are words like *sjuk* and *klen* for ‘ill, weak’. They are pronounced with long rounded vowels in the middle, which are hard both for Finnish and Russian speakers to pronounce. The slang forms *klesa*, *flesa* pronounced with a short vowel are easily fitted into Finnish grammar and phonology. Other slang words related to health like *flatare* ‘louse’ and *rännis* ‘diarrhoea’ are also of Swedish dialectal origin.

Words for food and clothes are also mostly of Swedish origin, but there are some words from Russian in this area as well, for example *safka* ‘food’ and *tjujska* ‘a special kind of cap’. Swedish words *stribare* from *strömming* ‘herring’, *fisu* from *fisk* ‘fish’ and *pottare* from *potatis* ‘potatoe’ give a picture of a quite monotonous menu.

Then, like probably everywhere where slang is used, there are a vast amount of words for drinking, becoming drunk, and things to drink and to drink from. In this area there are words from all three languages and their dialects. Words from Finnish are *kalja* ‘beer’, *huikcaa* ‘sip, take a sip’ and probably *flisu* ‘bottle’ even though it may be connected to the Swedish word *flaska* as well. The Swedish words in this semantic area amount to around a hundred, some of

which, for example the dialect word *doka* ‘drink’, are widely known and used all around Finland today, while others like *i flänän*, *i stakan* ‘drunk’ are no longer widely known.

Other slang words created on the outskirts of the town are those connected with work and working conditions. The inhabitants in the suburbs worked in factories, in public transportation, for the town administration or the military. Military personnel and cab drivers living in the suburbs were uneducated Russians. Their impact on the local slang can be seen through words like *vossika* and *issikka* ‘cab’,<sup>2</sup> *graitta* ‘accordion’ and *sjiva* ‘hurry’. Typical factory words were *don*, *donare* ‘work, worker’, *liksa* ‘pay cheque’. As for public transportation, nearly all of the people working as tram drivers, ticket officers and service staff happened to come from a specific group of people moving in from one rural area just east of Helsinki. The consequence of this is that many of the slang words – which in fact remain largely unchanged to this day – connected to transportation originate in the “Sibbo-dialect” and show traces of it in their phonology. The phonology of this dialect generally also fits very well the Finnish system and this is probably one reason why many of the words have remained in use ever since.

To conclude: while the inner city slang shows a clear division between “indoor words” and “outdoor words”, there are almost no typical indoor words related to enclosed space created in the new and growing suburbs during the studied period. The reason is that the inhabitants of the suburbs hardly lived indoors at all, neither as children nor as adults. They worked indoors, but probably had very little time to talk informally and with peers during working hours. One could say that outdoor words make up the meeting point between inner city slang and suburban slang. And thus outdoors words function as a bridge between the two different social classes. At first some parts of the inner city slang vocabulary had directly moved over to the suburbs, but later on this same bridge seemed to be activated when other, Finnish, parts were imported back into Swedish inner city slang.

Towards the end of the described period, around the year 1915, something radical happens to Helsinki slang. The Russians start to draw back their massive

---

<sup>2</sup> The working class version of the more Swedish sounding *isvog* mentioned above.

military and administrative presence from the town. The small local gangs merge into bigger suburban gangs and their language starts to settle and become established varieties of slang – every gang must have its own specific vocabulary. Slowly the tide also starts to turn and Swedish, neither its standard form nor its dialects, no longer provides the main source for new slang words. In the long run Finnish takes over the tough status suitable for the creation of new slang.

---

MONA FORSSKÅHL

University of Helsinki  
E-mail: mona.forsskahl@helsinki.fi

### **References**

- BONSDORFF (von) Maria, 1997, *Att styyla eller att deitta. En inblick i ungdomsslangen i Helsingfors och Stockholm*, Helsinki University, unpublished M.A. thesis.
- FORSSKÅHL Mona, 2005, *Mitt emellan eller strax utanför. Språkkontakt i finlandssvensk slang*, Nordica Helsingiensia nr 2, Helsinki, Helsinki university press.
- NORDISK FAMILJEBOK 1894, part 18, Stockholm.
- NYHOLM Leif, 1989, Helsingfors: Slang och forskning, in Nyholm et al. (ed.): *Helsingforssläng nu, en skolenkät 1988*. Meddelanden från institutionen för nordiska språk och nordisk litteratur vid Helsingfors universitet B:12, Helsinki, Yliopistopaino.
- PAUNONEN Heikki, SORSAKIVI Merja, 1988, *Äänikuvia Helsingistä*, Helsingin koululaitos, Helsinki.
- PAUNONEN Heikki, 2000, *Tsennaaks stadii, bonjaaks slangii*, Helsinki, WSOY.
- SOLSTRAND Per Henrik, 1980, Suffixet -are i finländskt slangspråk, in SAARI Mirja, SOLSTRAND Helena (utg.), *Xenia Thorsiana. En vänskrift tillägnad Carl-Eric Thors på hans 60-årsdag den 8 juni 1980*. Meddelanden

från institutionen för nordiska språk och nordisk litteratur vid Helsingfors universitet B:5, Helsinki, Yliopistopaino.

TASKINEN Riitta, 1986, *Positiivisia ja negatiivisia ominaisuuksia kuvailevat ilmaukset Helsingin slangissa*, Tampere University, unpublished masters thesis.

WARIS Heikki, 1973, *Työläisyhteiskunnan syntyminen Helsingin Pitkänsillan pohjoispuolelle* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Helsinki, Weilin & Göös.