On the emergence of a folk linguistic fact – The historical roots of ’Helsinki s’

Johanna Vaattovaara¹, Samu Nyström¹, Mia Halonen²

¹University of Helsinki, Finland
²University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Finnish folk dialectological studies indicate that a notion of ’Helsinki s’ has become ’a folk linguistic fact’ (e.g. Preston 2002), i.e. Finns regard /s/ pronunciation in Helsinki as somehow different from ’a normal s’. While the only sibilant of Finnish is officially a voiceless medioalveolar ,’Helsinki s’ is discussed as ’hissing’, ’sharp’ or ’fronted’. Our recent perception studies show that this variant is often associated to urban ’Pissis-girls’ (cf., e.g. ’Valley girls’ or ’Fresas’; Eckert 2008; Mendoza-Denton 2008) and gay men (e.g. Levon 2007).

However, our studies (based on listening tasks among both adults and teenagers) indicate that a variety of /s/ variants may have similar indexical values if a speaker is associated to Helsinki in some other semiotic terms. In the frame of late-modern understanding of language (as primarily a semiotic system, e.g. Silverstein 2003, Agha 2007) and of spatiality (spaces become places through discourses, e.g. Johnstone 2004, 2010; Cresswell 2004) we can understand why ’a folk linguistic fact’ needs not even have a specific acoustic correlate in order to be real for people and contribute to the cultural value system. Evidently, the myth of ’Helsinki s’ has started to nourish itself (cf. Barthes 1957).

Our earlier study suggests that the sharp fronted variant of /s/ is the origin of the ’Helsinki s myth’. Old films, literature, mass media, internet etc. offer material for us to construct a hypothetical path into the mythical ’Helsinki s’ notion. But where are the origins of the myth in terms of its roots, historical situation and context? In our presentation, we will examine this in cross-disciplinary framework by exploring the historical context of early 1900’s where the first documented judgments on /s/ pronunciation can be found.

Keywords: ideology, social meaning, enregisterment.