Merging the urban and the religious: constructing a sociolinguistic style in a Christian youth TV show

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This paper discusses a sociolinguistic style in a Christian TV show called Katupaimen (‘Street shepherd’) on a Christian TV channel. The host of the show is a youth pastor in a Pentecostal-like charismatic church in Northern Finland. Originally he is from Helsinki. In his show he preaches and talks about living as a Christian. Some episodes are meant more for non-Christian youngsters and other episodes more for Christians.

I will explore the ways the host constructs a style of an urban, cool, hip-hop-like Christian in his show. Drawing on conversation analysis and recent research on stance and style in sociolinguistics, I will look at the linguistic resources of the stylistic practice, and the ways the style emerges in his language use. I define style as a clustering of linguistic resources that is not a static variety of speech but social practice in which speakers create social meanings (Auer 2007, Eckert 2012).

I will particularly focus on how the use of Helsinki slang is employed in the stylistic practice. I will show that words typical for street language are used for constructing religious meanings and spiritual perspectives. Before turning into Christianity the host belonged to the drug user circles in Helsinki suburbs for which Helsinki slang is an essential brand. I will argue that the language use of this subculture can be viewed as one resource for his style.

The host also uses slang side by side with traditional religious language in his speech. Helsinki slang and Finnish religious language are often considered as contradictory: Helsinki slang is a modern, rapidly renewing variety whereas religious language is considered old-fashioned by outsiders and also by Christians themselves. However, I will show that in the host’s speech these varieties are not used contradictorily but are both an essential resource for the stylistic practice.

Keywords: style, stance.