

Municipality Names in Consolidations: What Happens to Place Branding?

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Abstract

A place name is not only a valuable carrier of individual and social identity but also historical ties. Place branding includes many aspects, but a name is always the core of a brand. What happens if the name changes due to a municipality consolidation?

In the ongoing reform of the Finnish municipality structure, the number of municipalities will decrease markedly. The nomenclature will be revolutionised while most municipal names will be withdrawn, and just one name will be selected as a joint name. Moreover, new names have been invented. Therefore, the image of the new city may become fragmented and the place-of-origin image might be lost. The municipal office-holders in marketing will face unexpected problems in branding, if they have not taken identity and image questions related to names into account.

In our paper, we will contemplate the impact of municipality name change on place branding from the viewpoint of socio-onomastics and place branding research. We will reflect our theoretical views on our data that consists of responses to a survey conducted among residents in the region of Southwest Finland. According to the survey, names do represent collective memory and place identity and carry a significant heritage value among the residents.

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Introduction

A name is a crucial component of any brand. Without a name, a brand does not have an identity. Prosperous place identity is the foundation for a successful place brand. According to many scholars, a name entails a story about the place's history, values and culture. A place name carries the heritage of the place in the minds of residents; it triggers their collective memories and makes them feel belongingness to a group living in the same place. (See e.g. Basso 1996, Helleland 2009, Kostanski 2011, Mueller and Schade 2012). But what happens if the place name changes? How do residents respond to the change? Is the place name as important to the residents as it is claimed to be?

This study contemplates the impact of municipality name change on place branding. The role of local people is crucial for the evaluation of place brands as well as an important asset in the branding itself (Braun *et al.* 2013). This is why we are interested in the people's genuine attitudes towards municipality names and their changes. We will discuss the role and importance the name has to residents in a situation where a municipality name changes due to administrative procedure. In order to gather empirical evidence, we conducted a large survey among residents of the region of Southwest Finland in spring 2013.

Geographically, the area has the longest history of structured municipality administration in Finland. Compared to the other parts of the country, numerous small municipalities and a dense population have been typical. This results from the history and the strong role of the established Church. Close, compact and socially coherent parishes created the foundation for the later development of municipalities (Laamanen 2007). In 2014, there were 28 municipalities in the region, ten of them with fewer than 4,000 inhabitants. In terms of population, they range in size from Kustavi with 900 residents to Turku with 182,000 residents.

In the ongoing reform of the Finnish municipality structure, the number of Finnish municipalities will decrease markedly. There has already been a significant drop, from 431 in 2006 to 230 in 2013. In some estimates, the final number of municipalities will be under 100 in 2017. This would mean extensive consolidation in the Southwest region as well. From the beginning of 2015, 27 municipalities in the region will remain, and according to the reports focusing on this issue, the aim is to have five municipalities in 2017.

The reform is also revolutionising the nomenclature in that most municipal names will disappear, and just one of the names will be selected as a mutual name (Paikkala 2012). This was the case, for instance, in the town of Salo, with which nine other municipalities merged in 2009. Nine municipal names faced a demotion to an area name, and only *Salo* preserved its position as the municipal name. Moreover, new names have been and will be invented: when the island municipalities of Parainen, Nauvo, Korppoo, Houtskari and Iniö merged in 2009, the new municipality got a completely new name, *Länsi-Turunmaa* ('west Turku land'). However, this new name was not generally accepted, and in 2012, the municipality was renamed *Parainen*. Quite seldom, old municipal names are combined to form a blended name: there is a town in Central Finland known as *Mänttä-Vilppula*, which got its name after the consolidation of two municipalities, Mänttä and Vilppula, in 2009.

Names and Brands – Some Theoretical Viewpoints

The linguistic character of proper names, from the cognitive or functional linguistic viewpoint, fits perfectly with the goals of marketing and branding. Cognitive linguistics underlines that the primary purpose of language is to produce meanings. As proper names are signs of language, they also produce meanings. However, there is a significant difference between *having* a meaning and *producing* and *constructing* meanings. Appellatives, such as *city*, have a meaning that links similar entities and categorises them. Proper names, such as *Glasgow*, do not have such a meaning. Nevertheless, proper names pick up and individualise entities, in other words, they are meaningful parts of texts when expressing that certain beings or things are worth identifying and individualising. Proper names are on the highest schematic level in the hierarchy of nouns, and there is always a reason why a language speaker chooses a name instead of some appellative. In other words, a proper name has functions – textual, interpersonal and ideational – just like any other linguistic expression (Sjöblom 2006, Ainiola *et al.* 2012; on cognitive linguistics e.g. Croft and Cruse 2004, Langacker 2008, see also Halliday 1985).

The longer the history behind a name, the more meaningful it is as a part of language. Some current meanings arise from the individual emotions and experiences of each language user, but some meanings belong to collective memory and common folklore and, as such, are transferred to the future generations (Helleland 2009, Kostanski 2011). Branding can make good use of the linguistic nature of names. A brand has to identify and individualise a corporation or a product. It has to have the ability to entail several cognitive and emotional meanings that can shape people's images about the referent. An established, unique name with a long enough history is at the core of a brand and asserts the existence and individuality of the brand to consumers (Hakala *et al.* 2015: 264-265).

What happens if the brand name changes? It is an interesting question regarding the importance of the name to the brand. Strangely enough, marketing research has not paid very much attention to names even though the brand name has been generally considered to be central to consumer brand equity. To fill this gap, Round and Roper (2012) have studied the functions of names by focusing on name changes of established global consumer brands. They found qualitative evidence from semi-structured consumer interviews that the name element performs various rational as well as relationship, habitual and symbolic functions. For instance, name change diminished the consumers' relationship to the newly named brand of which all other elements (e.g. package and colours) remained the same.¹ All and all, they claim that name change causes discomfort and distress among consumers. Despite corporate promotion, individual consumers have their personal associations of the brand name and they determine the equity of that name.

One important concept regarding brands and names of brands is *heritage*. This can be defined as a representation of the past and production and reproduction of meanings of the past. It includes almost all intergenerational exchange between societies as well as individuals, but it should not be confused with the concept of history. Rather, it is the timeless value of the past justifying our contemporary ideas of the future. It is created and transferred by means of language as well as via our socio-cultural practices and tangible products. Heritage is one of the attributes that play a significant role in distinguishing places, and it also takes part in building the identities of the communities within them (Graham *et al.* 2000, Balmer *et al.* 2006). Heritage has recently become one of the future priorities in branding research (Keller and Lehman 2006).

Heritage should be acknowledged as an important factor in toponomastics as well. Place names, identity and heritage are closely connected to each other.² Helleland (2009: 503) sees names as 'historical oral or written text of the landscape and the people in it'. According to him, people born in a specific area or who live there for most of their lives may have particularly strong feelings about the historic ties of the place names, which also produce the feeling of social belonging in the area. Kostanski (2011) even claims that the residents' connections with a place's history and the community are stronger with regard to names rather than to the places themselves.

So-called critical toponomastics (see Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009) emphasises the key role of naming in the formation of identities. Traditional place names transmit the

¹ One informant's opinion on *Opal Fruits* that was changed to *Starburst* was: '–even though I know that it's the same sweet inside it's lost that history behind it, so it's almost like a new sweet–' (Round and Roper 2012).

² About conceptualization of place heritage see Hakala *et al.* (2015: 266).

significance of the place to new generations of local people. However, naming is connected to power: authorities may claim the right to name places, and thus, they can make certain places exist as ‘real’ places. They also can ignore traditional names, people’s place identities and the heritage carried by these traditional names. This is what is happening in the merging process of municipalities. In many cases, authorities just remove the old municipal names from signposts and maps without any discussion with the residents or taking their feelings into consideration.

Findings of the Survey: Residents’ Attitudes towards Names

In order to find out if a place name is as important to people as it is always claimed to be, we acquired empirical evidence on residents’ attitudes by the use of a survey. The questionnaire was given to 5,020 randomly selected residents of all 28 municipalities in the region of Southwest Finland. The percentage response rate was 27.5, and the final sample thus contained 1,380 responses. The data was weighted for the purpose of sample adjustment, and statistically analysed. The questionnaire comprised 52 questions and statements in total, but for the purpose of this paper we only analysed the following nine statements:

1. The name of my place of domicile is important to me.
2. The coat of arms of my place of domicile is important to me.
3. The history of my place of domicile is important to me.
4. A municipality’s name change is primarily a question regarding people’s emotions.
5. Changing the name of my place of domicile makes or would make me feel angry.
6. The name of a newly merged municipality is a secondary issue.
7. If my place of domicile were to undergo a name change, I would lose part of my identity.
8. If my place of domicile were to undergo a name change, I would no longer really know where I come from.
9. My city or town has lost or would lose its appeal because of a municipality name change.

A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure the level of agreement (completely disagree [1] to completely agree [5]) of the statements. A zero [0] was used for ‘I can’t say’.

First of all, both symbols of the municipalities – the name and the coat of arms (statements 1 and 2) – were valued high among the residents as well as the history of their place of domicile (statement 3). However, the coat of arms was clearly not as important as the name and the history of the place: the mean value of all responses for the importance of the name was very high, 4.16, whereas the importance of the coat of arms was given a mean value of 3.53 (see Table 1).

Statement	Mean	N	Standard deviation
1. The name of my domicile is important to me.	4.16	1345	1.105
2. The coat of arms of my domicile is important to me.	3.53	1313	1.302
3. The history of my domicile is important to me.	4.09	1333	1.089

Table 1. The mean values for statements 1 to 3

People were quite unanimous about the importance of the name and the history. However, the respondents were slightly more divided when asked about the coat of arms (Table 2).

	The name of my place of domicile is important to me.		The coat of arms of my place of domicile is important to me.		The history of my place of domicile is important to me.	
	Unweighted count	Weighted %	Unweighted count	Weighted %	Unweighted count	Weighted %
Completely disagree	60	4.4%	136	10.2%	45	3.7%
Partly disagree	75	5.3%	128	10.2%	69	5.9%
I don't agree or disagree	131	10.3%	302	22.5%	192	14.3%
Partly agree	346	27.3%	321	24.4%	398	28.1%
Completely agree	733	50.2%	426	28.2%	629	45.7%
I can't say	35	2.5%	67	4.5%	47	2.3%
Total	1,380	100.0%	1,380	100.0%	1,380	100.0%

Table 2. The importance of the name, the coat of arms and the history of the place of domicile

We asked the respondents about the feelings that a name change would evoke or had evoked in the case of a municipality consolidation. All in all, people take to municipality name changes quite emotionally; the residents gave statement 4 'A municipality's name change is primarily a question regarding people's emotions' a high rating (mean value 3.92). Middle-aged (age group 40 to 59) and elderly (age group 60 to 79) respondents especially felt strong negative emotions towards a name change (statement 5). However, over 21 per cent of the middle-aged respondents would not describe their emotion with the word *anger* (see Table 3).

		Changing the name of my place of domicile makes / would make me feel angry.					Total
		Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree	
Age group	18-39	8.3%	10.1%	13.3%	28.8%	39.5%	100.0%
	40-59	10.2%	11.0%	15.0%	20.3%	43.4%	100.0%
	60-79	7.8%	6.4%	13.8%	17.2%	54.7%	100.0%
Total		8.9%	9.4%	14.0%	22.5%	45.1%	100.0%

Table 3. The feeling of anger towards name change among different age groups

The attitudes towards a name change were tested with opposite statements as well. The responses to these statements attested to the assumption that name change has a strong effect on people's emotions and it is important how names will be used in municipality mergers. For instance, the majority of respondents disagree (mean rate of 2.82 on the Likert scale 1 to 5) on statement 6 'The name of a newly merged municipality is a secondary issue'.

Regarding the concept of identity, it is interesting that the place's identity and image are thought to suffer more than the residents' personal identity in a name change: 48.8% of all respondents agreed (values 4 and 5) on statement 9 'My city or town has lost or would lose its appeal because of a municipality name change', the mean value being 3.29. Conversely, almost half of the respondents (48.9%) disagreed (values 1 and 2) with statement 7 'If my place of domicile were to undergo a name change I would lose part of my identity', the mean value being 2.64. However, the name seems to be more important to the identity of farmers compared to other occupational groups: 47.6% of farmers agreed (value 4 and 5) with statement 7, whereas 49.4% of the respondents of other occupations disagreed. The responses to statement 8 'If my place of domicile were to undergo a name change, I no longer really know where I come from' gave parallel results. Clearly over a half, 56.6%, of those who had other occupations than agricultural entrepreneurship disagreed with the statement, whereas only 33.3% of the farmers disagreed and as many as 49.2% agreed with it.

Discussion

Our survey confirms that residents place high value on the history of their place of domicile as well as its symbols – especially the name. A place name to a certain degree goes hand in hand with place identification, even though most residents do not consider the name of their place of domicile as a crucial part of their own identity. However, municipal name change has strong emotional consequences on residents, and a constant name is considered important regarding the identity and image of the municipality.

People's place identification gets established in the question 'Where are you from?'. We also asked this question in the survey, and almost all respondents gave a place name – or several names – as an answer. Therefore, we can make a conclusion that one essential

linguistic meaning of a place name is to carry one's place identification. But in carrying many cognitive associations and memories of the place's past as well, names represent the collective memory and identity of the place itself. In other words, place names have a significant heritage value.

A place's identity and heritage are crucial to place branding, and place brands are driven by the identities of the residents. Names are crucial elements in branding, and a name change affects branding efforts. It is important that authorities responsible for making decisions also understand the role of names in place branding. As far as we know, this has not been properly taken into account in the consolidations thus far.

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