

## Place Branding in Finland: A Discourse Analysis of Municipal Slogans

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**Abstract** The purpose of this multidisciplinary study is to investigate how municipalities position themselves in their slogans as unique places among competitors, namely other municipalities in their region or country. Empirically, discourse analysis was used to investigate the semantic features of municipal slogans in the context of place branding in Finland. The major findings demonstrate similarity in commonness rather than uniqueness: the slogans resembled each other thematically and did not distinctively differentiate places from one another. Academic research on slogans and their relation to linguistics and place branding is scarce. This study aims to narrow this gap. Nevertheless, further research is needed on slogans from different countries and languages. The study recommends that place managers should invest time and thought in the creation of slogans based on the factual attributes and values of the place as well as its strategies.

**Keywords:** Slogans, Municipalities, Place branding, Semantics, Discourse analysis

### 1. Introduction

The slogan of a municipality is a promise about what it is and what it offers to stakeholders (Kivistö, 2013). Kivistö notes if the truth is something else, the slogan will not work.

Focusing on municipality slogans, in this article, we highlight the importance of marketing and branding activities in supporting the vitality and development of an individual place. The competition for residents, taxpayers, companies, and tourists increasingly demands the most effective marketing possible. Previous studies (Fleury-Bahi et al., 2008; Hernández et al., 2007; Zenker et al., 2013, 2014, 2017) have shown that a positive evaluation of a municipality leads to higher levels of satisfaction, identification, attachment, and intention to stay. However, from the branding perspective, places are very complex entities, largely due to their number of stakeholders, the number of organizations and committees steering the place brand, their conflicting interests and controversy on who leads the branding process, and the number of diverse target groups.

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Each place has a given name and location as well as its own history, heritage, and infrastructure; the unique attributes of the place can be compressed into a slogan. Place branding is more complex than mere promotional elements, however, and although slogans obviously do not constitute the brand (Govers, 2013; Zenker, 2021), they play an important role in differentiating and creating awareness of a place. In fact, they are often the most visible and memorable of a municipality's branding elements (Govers, 2013; Hildreth, 2013; Kohli et al., 2013; Medway & Warnaby, 2014; Wilson, 2020; Zenker, 2021). Slogans crystallize the municipality's idea verbally, which makes their linguistic form interesting and worth examination. Thus far, studies combining linguistics with place branding and investigating municipality slogans are practically non-existent.

At the same time, slogans have been widely examined in the context of tourism (e.g., Lee et al., 2006; Pike, 2004; Richardson & Cohen, 1993). It is reported in these previous studies that tourism slogans could help in developing a destination brand (e.g., Galí et al., 2017), enhance the destination's image (Kohli et al., 2013), and differentiate it from other destinations (Pike, 2004). In our study, we broaden the scope and investigate the varying language and targets of slogans and how they are linked to municipalities' USPs and strategies. According to Huadhom and Trakulkasemsuk (2017), most studies of destination slogans overlook the persuasive power of language. Effective language use is strongly based on meanings or semantics; hence, it is important to scrutinize municipality slogans more closely from the semantic perspective.

The purpose of this multidisciplinary study, therefore, is to investigate how municipalities position themselves in their slogans as unique places among their competitors, namely other municipalities in their region or country, in this case Finland. In addressing this question, we used linguistic discourse analysis as a method. Discourse analysis focuses on language in its context, and discourses are conventional ways of using language that influence and are influenced by our patterns of thinking (Johnstone, 2018). Here, we implement the discourse analysis by screening the lexical items, that is, the words of the slogans and their meanings, and grouping them into thematic categories. After that, we investigate the complete slogans theme by theme, examining the syntagmatic collocations of words. By studying the discourse of slogans in branding municipalities, we aim to answer the following research questions (RQs):

1. What kind of meanings do the lexical items, i.e., the words comprising the slogans, represent?
2. According to the lexical analysis, in what thematic categories could the slogans be classified?
3. How do the discursive features of the slogans position the municipalities in relation to other municipalities?
4. By what means are the slogans potentially linked to the municipalities' strategies?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Slogans in Place Branding**

Linguistically, a slogan is an established, concise clause, noun phrase, or other type of syntactic structure exploited repeatedly in promotional discourses. The term slogan has been assigned various interchangeable labels in the marketing literature: tagline (e.g., Beverland, 2021; Tuten & Solomon, 2018), brand mantra (Keller, 2015), and brand motto (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). A concept that closely relates to slogan and has become a theory in its own right is unique selling proposition (USP), a term developed by Rosser Reeves in 1961. In essence, a USP communicates what is unique about the place and what sets it apart from its competitors (Henthorne et al., 2016), namely its positioning strategy. This strategic core competence is then realized in a slogan. By definition, a slogan is a condensed version of a brand's USP (Keller, 2008). In the case of municipalities, it is a concrete linguistic expression used to position a municipality and to differentiate it from others.

Municipalities are very complex entities in terms of branding, largely due to the number of stakeholders (Cassinger & Eksell, 2017; Roper & Davies, 2007), the number of organizations and committees steering the place brand (e.g., Hakala et al., 2020), and the number of diverse target groups. Municipal authorities tend to believe that the place brand is controllable; hence, they try to avoid the inevitable complexity and to accommodate the diverse interests of the multiple stakeholders within the same theme

– which also tends to resemble other municipalities' themes (Zenker, 2021). However, if a slogan is too general, it fails to establish a touchpoint in anybody's memory: "When you speak to everyone, you speak to no one".

USP and slogans as concepts have been featured in the literature on tourism since Richardson and Cohen (1993) operationalized and tested the former in their seminal comparative study of marketing campaigns promoting tourism in US states. According to Richardson and Cohen, a good slogan in a tourism context should pithily and honestly express the USP. They identified four criteria on which they based their analysis: first, good promotion and branding rely on one focused proposition that easily sticks in mind; second, if more propositions are needed, they must be thematically coherent; third, the proposition must be persuasive in the sense that it informs the audience of genuine benefits; and fourth, the array of benefits must be unique. The empirical data in Richardson and Cohen's (1993) study consisted of 46 US state slogans, which were taxonomized into seven groups. This taxonomy is also interesting as a starting point for the investigation of municipality slogans. However, the framework cannot be exploited as such in our material for three reasons: first, the analyzed slogans are directed only at tourists; second, US states as research subjects are very different from Finnish municipalities; third, the different levels of the taxonomy remain somewhat obscure linguistically, starting from the interpretation of the unique selling proposition. A proposition in linguistics is the content of an assertion and is not bound up with the form of the clause (e.g., imperative) (see Brown & Miller, 2013).

According to Richardson and Cohen's (1993) research findings, most US state slogans either make no meaningful claim or make a claim that could equally well be made by other states. The authors suggest that this problem stems from the geographical heterogeneity of the states and the political heterogeneity of the geographical regions. Lee et al. (2006) report similar results: almost all 50 states emphasized nature and culture/heritage on their official tourism websites, and many of the official websites did not maximize their usefulness as marketing tools due to the lack of proper positioning and poor communication strategies.

## 2.2. Slogans as Texts Making Meanings

In our study, we approach language as both a cognitive and a social phenomenon, and therefore, we chose discourse analysis as our tool. Discourse analysis is based on a model of language in its social context developed in the field of systemic functional linguistics, SFL (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Martin & Rose, 2004), as well as on the cognitive linguistic understanding of context and meaning. The basic principle in cognitive linguistics is that language should be investigated in interrelation with other cognitive abilities and socio-physical experiences (Evans, 2012). Language and discourse are about making choices from meaning potential in a certain socio-physical context (Held, 2018).

According to SFL, all meaningful manifestations of language (such as municipality slogans) are texts. In other words, language is a resource for making meaning, and the text reflects the process of making meaning in different contexts. Semantics, comprising the meaning system, are realized by means of lexicogrammar or a grammatical structure and lexical items. The meaning system is shared – in other words, meanings are construed in collaboration. There are three general functions (metafunctions) of language in social contexts: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction is about language constructing experience: one can investigate how texts represent the world. The interpersonal metafunction is about language-constructing relationships, such as by assigning speech roles or interacting with others. The textual metafunction organizes discourse as text with a contextualized and shared meaning (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, 2014).

Our focus in this study is on the ideational metafunction of municipality slogans, in other words, the kind of world the slogans represent. As a part of promotional discourse, municipal slogans, on the one hand, are shaped by the promotional context, and on the other hand, they shape our perception of the municipalities and their marketing. We aim to explore the lexicogrammar of slogans, which means that we are interested in the vocabulary of the data: the names of entities (common and proper nouns), the names of processes (verbs of action, events, reactions, experiences), and the names of evaluative and emotive qualities (adjectives) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

As texts, slogans are short, consisting of only one full clause or even just a nominal phrase or other fragment. In discourse analysis, it is necessary to consider not only the lexical choices but also the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations of the chosen words. Paradigmatically, words are associated with other words that are semantically linked to them, such as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and hypernyms. Syntagmatically, words tend to collate with certain other words (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). All these lexical and grammatical choices highlight certain viewpoints – and possibly hide others. Thus, the meaning of a slogan is determined not only by the contents of the individual elements in it but also by the relations between them (see Hakala, 2006).

The paradigmatic links and the syntagmatic collocations help to uncover wider themes that conjoin slogans and thus enable researchers to create models that are comparable to the groups taxonomized by Richardson and Cohen (1993). For example, Finnish words such as *luonto* ‘nature’, *metsä* ‘forest’, *meri* ‘sea’, and *joki* ‘river’ in the slogans are paradigmatically linked, the word for nature being the hypernym and the other words its hyponyms. A very common syntagmatic collocation is the adjective *pieni* ‘small’, defining the word *kaupunki* ‘town’. The entire information structure of the slogan is important: what is the point of departure of the message – in other words, which word is chosen to be the theme, and what does it say about the theme? This message structure is expressed by word order in a complete clause, the theme being the first word, but because many slogans are defective clauses, this might not hold true in every case (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Materials

We focus on the slogans of municipalities in Finland. Finland is a country in Northern Europe with a population of 5.5 million. In 2020, it comprised 310 municipalities, of which 107 defined themselves as urban communities and 203 were rural districts. The smallest one, Sottunga in the Åland Islands, had only around 90 inhabitants, and the biggest, the capital city of Helsinki, had around 654,000 inhabitants. In the Finnish context, municipalities with over 100,000 inhabitants may be called cities, and smaller municipalities are towns or rural communes (Official Statistics Finland, 2022).

Finland is officially a bilingual country. The two main official languages are Finnish and Swedish, Swedish being the main language of 5.2 percent of the population. Sixteen municipalities situated in the Åland Islands are monolingually Swedish. Thirty-three municipalities are bilingually Finnish and Swedish, of which 15 have a Swedish-speaking, and 18 have a Finnish-speaking majority. In addition, in official connections, the Sámi language has a special status alongside Finnish in four municipalities in North Finland (Kuntaliitto, 2021a, 2021b; Official Statistics Finland, 2022).

Our research data comprises all current municipal slogans in Finland. In collecting our data, we found out that as many as 267 (86%) of all Finnish municipalities have one or more slogans. The total number of slogans in the data was 603, with many municipalities having more than one. There are two main reasons for a municipality to have several slogans. First, many municipalities had separate translated versions in two or more languages. Of the 267 municipalities, 83 had slogans in different languages: 66 had versions in two languages, 14 in three languages, and three of them had four different language versions. Swedish was quite commonly used in the slogans, but many municipalities also had English versions. The second reason for having several slogans related to the different contexts and the different stakeholders. For instance, the small municipality of Asikkala has two slogans, one for tourists (“The gate to Lake Päijänne”) and one for inhabitants, highlighting the various opportunities related to sports and exercising (“Finland’s most mobile municipality”).

#### 3.2. Procedure

We used two separate methods in collecting the data. First, we conducted a survey (October 2020) among municipal authorities. Questionnaires in both Finnish and Swedish were emailed to all municipalities in Finland, and we received replies from 82 of them (response rate 28%). The survey covered questions about current and previous slogans, the motives behind them, how they linked to the municipality’s strategies, and their usage in the municipality. Second, we gathered information on the missing 227 municipalities from their websites. All municipalities in Finland have their own websites, and all the

websites include information about current and potential slogans; thus, it was relatively easy to access the data. Self-evidently, the data from the 82 municipalities collected via our survey is much broader and more extensive than the website data and includes relevant background information about the slogans.

The linguistic discourse analysis (for answering RQs 1 and 2) was conducted in three steps. Step 1 comprised a lexical analysis, which involved screening the vocabulary in the slogans. We looked at nouns (naming), adjectives (qualities), and verbs (processes), listing them in their basic forms, and then we counted the frequency of the different lexemes in all the slogans. In Step 2, we carried out a semantic analysis of the lexical items to find out how they represented the world (ideational metafunction in SFL, see above). We also took note of possible polysemy. For example, the Finnish word *kasvaa* ‘grow, develop, increase’ can be used with reference to nature or people (to grow from seed, to grow to manhood) or in the economic sense (sales have increased, the village developed into a town, expanding industries). Step 3 involved grouping the slogans into eight thematic categories by investigating the paradigmatic links between the lexical items (e.g., words referring to nature) and their syntagmatic collocations (e.g., which qualities appear with the word for ‘life’). By following these three steps, we were able to assess how the slogans were discursively positioned in relation to others (RQ 3). In addressing the fourth research question (RQ 4), we compared the findings from the linguistic analysis to the municipalities’ strategies.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. A Lexical Analysis of the Slogans

Our first study question was, “What kind of meanings do the lexical items represent?”. Given the focal position of verbs, nouns, and adjectives in the meaning of a text, we first picked and grouped these words in the slogans and counted the frequency of each one in the data. We included not only Finnish vocabulary but also English and Swedish words because these languages are quite widely used in Finnish slogans. We listed inflected words in their basic form and dialectal words in their standard form. We also listed the degrees of comparison as separate adjectives because we believe that there are specific differences in meaning between the positive, the comparative, and the superlative, especially in marketing discourse. Table 1 lists the English equivalents of the most common words chosen in the Finnish slogans.

**Table 1**

*The English Equivalents of the Most Common Word Choices in Finnish Slogans: Words are Paradigmatic Choices, and Word Classes are Syntagmatic Choices.*

Paradigmatic Slogan Elements	Syntagmatic Slogan Elements			
	Nouns (n = 399)	Adjectives (n = 204)	Verbs (n = 84)	Other (n = 181)
Life (30)	Good (24)	To be (23)	All (13)	
Municipality (23)	Small (16)	To live (12)	Together (11)	
Nature (20)	Best/Better (16)	To make (10)	We (10)	
City (17)	Bold (12)	To reside (9)	In the middle (8)	
Finland (12)	New (11)		Near (8)	
Future (12)				
Heart (10)				

The slogans included 399 different nouns (excluding municipality names). The most frequent of them were *elämä* ‘life’ (in 30 slogans), *kunta* ‘municipality’ (in 23 slogans), *luonto* ‘nature’ (in 20 slogans), and *kaupunki* ‘city/town’ (in 17 slogans). Other frequent nouns were *Suomi* ‘Finland’ (12), *tulevaisuus* ‘future’ (12), *sydän* ‘heart’ (10), and *koti* ‘home’ (9). The slogans name both concrete entities such as city, dweller, Baltic Sea, and forest, and abstract entities such as paradise, courage, and miracle. Certain cases are ideational metaphors: some derive from processes (e.g., growth, development), and others from qualities (e.g., happiness, vitality) (Martin & Rose, 2004).

The data contained 204 different adjectives, the most frequent of which was *hyvä* ‘good’ (in 24 slogans). The adjectives *pieni* ‘small’, *paras* ‘best’, *rohkea* ‘bold’, and *uusi* ‘new’ appeared in more than 10 slogans. Overall, the diversity of adjectives was clearly wider than that of nouns: of all occurrences, 60

percent were different adjectives, compared to 56 percent of all occurrences of nouns. Verbs were the least varied: of the 84 occurrences, only 46 percent were different verbs. The most frequent one was olla ‘to be’, which occurred in 23 slogans, followed by elää ‘to live’ (12), tehdä ‘to make’ (10), asua ‘to reside’ (9), and kasvaa ‘to grow’ (6 slogans).

In addition to the above, the slogans included adverbs, pronouns, and some numbers. The most frequent of these words were kaikki ‘all’ (in 13 slogans), yhdessä ‘together’ (11), me ‘we’ (10), keskellä ‘in the middle’ (8), and lähellä ‘near’ (8).

In a nutshell, on the ideational level, the Finnish municipalities represented in the slogans are small towns in the middle of the country; they are places in which everything is near and where people live their everyday lives surrounded by nature. They are good, even the best, places in which to live and to ensure future growth.

#### 4.2. Thematic Categories

To find broader thematic categories and to address the second research question, namely “According to the lexical analysis, in what thematic categories could the slogans be classified?”, we took a closer look into the meanings of the words and the paradigmatic relations of the vocabulary. In addition, we examined the discursive meanings of the words by taking into account their syntagmatic and grammatical relations as well as the context of place branding.

We distinguished eight thematic categories (Table 2) into which the slogans could be divided. Although these categories overlap to some extent, we portray them here as separate groups. Moreover, a single slogan usually belongs to various categories. Below, we discuss the eight categories and give illustrative examples of the slogans. The original slogans, in Finnish, Swedish, or English, are marked with italics; when translated into English by the authors, they are marked with single quotes.

**Table 2**  
*The Slogans Divided into Thematic Categories*

Theme	Paradigmatically related words and other features	Examples
1) living, everyday life	<i>elää</i> ‘to live’, <i>arki</i> ‘everyday life’, <i>toimiva</i> ‘well-functioning’, <i>turvallinen</i> ‘secure’	<i>Easy and effortless everyday life</i> [Kemi]
2) closeness, localness	dialectal words; local sayings; municipality's characteristics; intimacy; <i>kotoisa</i> ‘cozy’, <i>lähellä</i> ‘close, near’	<i>Right here</i> [Hämeenlinna] ‘Pori gets under your skin’ ‘Borderless’ [Tornio, located on the border of Sweden]
3) social community, home, family	<i>kotikaupunki</i> ‘hometown’, <i>perhe</i> ‘family’, <i>yhdessä</i> ‘together’	<i>Family-friendly city</i> [Lapua] ‘Our Mynämäki’
4) location, place	place names; compass point; <i>meri</i> ‘sea’, <i>joki</i> ‘river’, <i>saaristo</i> ‘archipelago’, <i>keskellä</i> ‘in the middle of’, <i>sydämessä</i> ‘in the heart of’	<i>Gate to Päijänne</i> [lake Päijänne; Asikkala] ‘Discover Kokemäki - its river and folk’
5) size	<i>pieni</i> ‘small’, <i>suuri</i> ‘big’, <i>kaupunki</i> ‘city, town’, <i>maaseutu</i> ‘countryside’	<i>Small City, Big Life</i> [Heinola] ‘Room for everyone’ [Kauhava] ‘Finland’s best little town’ [Loviisa]
6) vitality, growth, business	<i>mahdollisuudet</i> ‘opportunities’, <i>tulevaisuus</i> ‘future’, <i>elinvoimainen</i> ‘vibrant / dynamic’, <i>yrittää</i> ‘to set up a business’, <i>kasvu</i> ‘growth’	<i>Strong and brave</i> [Harjavalta] ‘Place for good growth’ [Murame] ‘Key to success’ [Siuntio]

	<i>vahva</i> ‘strong’	
7) nature	<i>luonto</i> ‘nature’, <i>luonnollisesti</i> ‘naturally’, <i>ekologinen</i> ‘ecological’, <i>aurinkoinen</i> ‘sunny’	<i>Mighty by nature</i> [Inari]
8) uniqueness, positivity, dreams	<i>ihme</i> ‘wonder’, <i>unelma</i> ‘dream’, <i>kiehtova</i> ‘charming’, <i>onnellinen</i> ‘happy’, <i>paratiisi</i> ‘paradise’, <i>taika</i> ‘magic’	<i>Five-star living</i> [Kalajoki] <i>Growing wonders</i> [Ylivieska]

The first category covers the theme of living and everyday life, with semantic features such as ‘life’, ‘living’, ‘everyday’, and ‘security’. As a concrete example, Kemi’s slogan, Easy and effortless everyday life, includes both ‘everyday’ and ‘life’.

The key theme of the second category is closeness and localness. This is evident in slogans containing words for ‘near’, ‘close’, and ‘here’, as well as words that mean the people or qualities of a certain municipality or province (e.g., *simolainen* ‘person from Simo’). Semantic features expressing nearness, or a kind of intimacy, are also typical in this theme: *Kaustinen on sinun* ‘Kaustinen is yours’ and *Human-centered municipality* (Lapinjärvi), for example.

The third thematic category, the social community, contains semantic features such as ‘community’, ‘together’, ‘home’, ‘family’, and ‘connect’. Many slogans representing this theme imply that the municipality’s character is family-friendly. Examples include *Lapsiperheiden paratiisi* ‘Paradise for young families’ (Keuruu) and *Family-friendly City* (Lapua). Other examples of slogans expressing the value of people and the social community include *Kohtaamisten kaupunki* ‘Town of encounters’ (Hamina), and *Ystävyys meitä yhdistää* ‘Friendship connects us’ (Nakkila).

The theme of the fourth category is location, and a substantial group of slogans contains local place names, often with the names of seas, lakes, and even rivers, such as *Gateway to Päijänne* (Asikkala, including the name Lake Päijänne). Sometimes compass points or other locating expressions are used, such as *Ilomantsi idässä* ‘Ilomantsi in the East’ and *City by the Sea* (Kotka). Other kinds of semantic features in this category include those emphasizing that the municipality is ‘in the middle of’ or ‘at the heart of’ something, as in *Mahtava kunta keskellä kaikkea* ‘A magnificent municipality in the middle of everything’ (Koski Tl.), and *Lapin sydämessä* ‘At the heart of Lapland’ (Pelkosenniemi). The latter example also includes the place name of the province; thus, two semantic features express locality.

The fifth theme focuses on the size of the municipality and includes semantic features such as ‘small’, ‘large’, ‘city’, ‘parish’, and ‘town’. Noticeably, the slogans highlight the small size of the municipality or city much more often than its large size: for example, *Small City, Big Life* (Heinola), *Småstad som bäst* ‘A small city at its best’ (Uusikaarlepyy), *KOOLLA on väliä* ‘SIZE matters’ (Kauhajoki), *Bigger than its size, true to its reputation* (Karstula). The word KOOLLA has two meanings: it is the adessive case of both the Finnish word for ‘size’ and the letter k, which is pronounced [ko:] in Finnish. The municipality name begins with k. This theme is very common in Finnish slogans, probably because Finnish municipalities, in general, are very or quite small: they tend to highlight their small size and underline either the positive qualities of smallness or the “bigness” of the municipality in some other respect. There are between 4,000 and 18,000 residents in the above-mentioned municipalities.

The sixth thematic category, namely vitality, focuses on business and growth, and the semantic features include ‘strong’, ‘impressive’, ‘future’, and even superlatives. Herein, the entrepreneurial character of the municipality may be explicitly interpreted, as in the slogans *Kasvua ja asennetta* ‘Growth and attitude’ (Kontiolahti) and *Yrittämisen virtaa* ‘Flowing business activities’ (Leppävirta).

The seventh category, covering the theme of nature, emphasizes the closeness of the municipality to nature, using semantic features such as ‘sea’, ‘forest’, ‘lake’, ‘nature’, ‘natural’, ‘countryside’, and

‘green’. Examples of such slogans are *Mighty by Nature* (Inari), *Green Lahti*, and *Start your day on a forest path* (Sipoo). It is worth noting that the features of the fourth category, especially those that included a local place name, were closely connected to this one.

The final thematic category, namely uniqueness, positivity, and dreams, incorporates features such as ‘paradise’, ‘happy’, ‘happiness’, ‘magic’, ‘experience’, and ‘joy of life’: examples include *Five-star living* (Kalajoki), *Lapin taikamaa ‘The magic world of Lapland’* (Posio) and *Lapsiperheiden paratiisi ‘Paradise for young families’* (Keuruu). The last-mentioned slogan also belongs to the social-community thematic category, presenting a special group of people (families with children) as the municipality's target group.

### 4.3. Discursive Positioning of the Municipality Slogans

Here, we will consider the differences and find an answer to the third research question: “How do the discursive features of the slogans position the municipalities in relation to other municipalities?” In this endeavor, we will find sample slogans for each theme and take a closer discursive look at them. In other words, we will investigate the syntagmatic choices, paying attention to features such as word order, collocations, and semantic associations.

The clauses – or as is the norm in the case of slogans, phrases, or fragments – consist primarily of words for processes (happening, doing, sensing, saying, being, having) and the participants involved. Participants may be qualified with an adjective, the meaning of which typically depends on the co-occurring noun. The text may also contain words for circumstances, such as time, space, cause, and manner (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The vast majority of slogans lack a finite verb, but the underlying process can be inferred from the ideational metaphors in which the processes are construed as if they were entities (e.g., growth instead of grow), for instance, or by complementing the fragment with a probable verb, such as is in the slogan *Oulu – The Light of the North*. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the main processes involved are material, mental, and relational. Material processes construe a change in the flow of events through some input of energy. The source of the energy is usually construed as a participant, called an Actor. The verbs mean ‘doing’ or ‘happening’. Mental processes are about experiences and the senses. The verbs are emotive or cognitive, and the participant in a mental process, the *Senser*, is human or human-like. Relational processes identify and characterize and are usually realized by the verbs *be* or *have*. There are two natural participants in a relational process, namely *be*-ers, and between them is a relation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In the case of municipality slogans, one of the two participants is the municipality itself, whether mentioned or not.

Typical words in the first theme include (every day) ‘life’ and ‘living’. Life is the other participant in the relational process and can be ‘genuine’, ‘full’, or ‘good’ (e.g., *Tilaa hyvälle elämälle [There is] ‘Space for a good life’ in the municipality*: there may be ‘more’ life, and ‘happy’ or ‘five-star’ living. The municipality can be ‘For life’ or ‘Bigger than life’: it may be *The Story of Your Life!* and it could provide ‘Roots for your life’. Some slogans within this theme include a material process, as in *Live like Mikkeli*, ‘Create your story in Naantali’, and ‘A place where you can live, as well’.

Closeness and localness are realized as a theme not only by the words ‘near’, ‘here’, and ‘close’ but also by indexical features such as dialectism or references to a local saying. The slogans relate the municipality to the spatial sphere of the receiver, which could usually be interpreted as a resident of the municipality (e.g., ‘Genuinely close’, ‘In Joutsa everything you value is near’). ‘Kaustinen is yours’ addresses the message directly to the receiver, as well as *Tuu jo kotia ‘Please come home’*, which includes a material process and is in dialect; as such, it highlights the local features of the municipality. There is also a material process inherent in the slogan *Pori pääsee ihon alle ‘Pori gets under (your) skin’*. It is a more innovative version of this theme: it includes an idiom, which in Finnish, unlike in English, means that something has not only a negative but also a positive and strong impact on one’s emotions. The town of Pori is known for certain tensions between the town and its dwellers, and some outsiders have negative stereotypical perceptions. The town artfully uses the strained meaning of the idiom in its slogan.

The third thematic category, namely social community, is quite common in Finnish municipality slogans. It is often accompanied by a material (‘Succeeding and reviving together’, ‘In Loimaa we grow



together – grow with us’, ‘Let’s build the future together’) or relational (‘Lifelong partner Joutsa’, ‘The community of people’) process. It may also be expressed with reference to ‘home’ or ‘family’, e.g., Family-friendly city, ‘Cozy hometown Kemi’. The possessive element in the slogan of a small municipality in Central Finland identifies the resident as the sender of the message: ‘The municipality is my home’. Many of these slogans include the first-person plural pronoun we, indicating community spirit (‘We don’t wait for miracles. We make them’).

Inherent in most slogans that express locality is a relational process that positions the municipality as part of something (Pearl of Bothnian Bay, ‘The heart of Ostrobothnia’, ‘The star municipality of Lapland’), or locates it somewhere (‘A small town by the sea’, ‘Home in the lap of lake Saimaa’, ‘With joy from the East’). Finland is a geographically big area with a population of under six million people. Some municipalities exploit their remote location in ironic slogans such as In the middle of nowhere and ‘A little better periphery’.

The fifth theme, the size of the municipality, is usually expressed within the small-big dichotomy. As mentioned above, most Finnish municipalities are small; thus, the slogans either turn smallness into a strength (‘Parainen – a real small town’, Small, cheerful, and so much more!) or refer to its size in other contexts (A little town with a BIG HEART, ‘Small municipality, many heroes’, ‘Bigger than its size’). An interesting detail in these Finnish slogans is the use of the word capital, irrespective of the size of the municipality, and they typically also have an English version: e.g., Oulu – Capital of Northern Scandinavia, Rovaniemi – the capital of Lapland, Finland’s climate capital, Finland’s Capital of Sustainable Development. The town of Seinäjoki, for instance, with 65,000 inhabitants, has the slogan The capital of space. The cleverness lies in the double meaning of space: Seinäjoki is an expanding municipality located in the center of Ostrobothnia, which is a province known for its plain terrain and open, spacious landscape. Stereotypical Ostrobothnians boast and flex their muscles and, therefore, might talk big about ruling the universe.

Slogans that focus on vitality typically include the word for ‘growth’, such that the material process of growing is construed as an entity. As mentioned above, it is an ideational metaphor, a feature of which is that the participant roles are made obscure. For instance, the slogan Hyvän kasvun paikka ‘A place for good growth’ could be interpreted (in Finnish) to mean either that the municipality is “a place where it is good for children to grow up” or “a place which allows businesses to grow”. There is another example of an ideational metaphor in the slogan Bold reformer (“the municipality boldly reforms things”). Such metaphors are typical in scientific, legal, and administrative discourses in which the participant roles are intentionally obscured (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). A few of these slogans are indeed mentioned in municipalities’ strategies, and they are probably targeted most strongly at businesses and administrative collaborators. However, the slogans in this thematic category are varied. Including material processes, they refer to ‘growing’ or ‘building’ success, they ‘establish’ new, ‘give birth’ to future, and so on. Some of the few slogans with a mental (incl. verbal) process are also included in this group (e.g., A Smart City Makes More Sense, ‘A strawberry town known for its bold development’, ‘A municipality that says, Yes!’).

The thematic category of nature includes slogans indicating material, mental, and relational processes. Many of them utilize the polysemic word luonto ‘nature’ and its derivatives, such as ‘natural’ and ‘naturally’: ‘Nature starts from the door’, The natural choice, Mighty by nature. Elements of nature, especially water and forest, usually feature in the slogans. ‘Start your day on the forest path’, for example, implies the material process of starting, in which the receiver, which is addressed in the imperative, participates: the location is the forest path. Simple slogans such as ‘Lakeside town’ or City by the sea characterize the municipality by its waterside location. However, there is a lot of variety, starting with the metaphoric use of plant components (‘Sow your seeds in Siikalatva’, ‘Strong roots in a river valley’) to all kinds of animals (Arctic bird bay, ‘The free ones swim upstream’, ‘Granitoid parish of Baltic herrings’, Be like the Panda) and other natural phenomena (‘A municipality with eight seasons’).

Finally, many of the slogans based on uniqueness, positivity, and dreams describe the municipality as ‘the best’: ‘Finland’s best little town’, ‘Simply the best Kangasala’, Tampere – the best for you). Even though the superlative form places the municipality in a unique position relative to others, these slogans do not differentiate because the evaluation is not based on any real comparison. The same applies to

slogans including positive words such as ‘happiness’ and ‘joy’. Those that point out a unique feature that is reality-based are much more effective. For instance, ‘The Moomins live here, too’ is one of the slogans of the town of Naantali, which is the location of Moominworld, a family park based on the well-known children’s books of Finnish author Tove Jansson.

All in all, the syntagmatic collocations and the syntactic structure reveal specific types of slogans that are connected to certain contexts and functions. A typical slogan of a Finnish municipality evokes the image of good, safe everyday life in a small community surrounded by nature and located near water. Slogans such as these seem to be directed principally toward current and potential dwellers. Another typical image is that of a dynamic, strong, growing place in a central location offering entrepreneurial opportunities, the spirit of teamwork, and a good future. These slogans are aimed at attracting new businesses to the municipality. The third type includes slogans that are mainly directed at tourists: they depict an inviting, authentic, and cozy place with friendly people, a good feel, and a paradise-like environment. Accordingly, most Finnish municipalities seem to rely on points of parity in their slogans rather than on points of difference. They could thus apply to any other place (e.g., highlighting pure nature, happy living, and a central location).

#### 4.4. How are the Slogans Linked to the Municipalities’ Strategies?

According to their responses in our survey, most of the municipalities (63/82) based their slogan on their USP and their strategy. However, only a few of these described how they did it. Table 3 gives some of the most typical answers.

**Table 3**

*Examples of Municipalities Claiming their Slogan(s) are Linked to their Strategy: The English Slogans are Marked with Quotation Marks; The Finnish Ones have been Translated into English, as Have the Extracts from the Municipalities’ Responses.*

Municipality	Slogan	Link to USP and strategy
Helsinki	“One HEL of an impact.”	Yes, brand and strategy are part of the same entity. The strategy is strongly worded: "Helsinki is the world's most functional city". The brand, in turn, is communicated through words, images, and actions.
Iisalmi	We don't expect miracles. We make them.	Iisalmi has the ambitious goal of being Finland's most attractive regional town by 2030.
Kangasniemi	This is the place.	The slogan emphasizes the importance of the municipality to all its residents.
Laitila	Even more marvelous [mainiimpi] Laitila.	The slogan itself is short and contains the name of the city. The word "mainiimpi" [more marvelous] encapsulates a great deal. It is based on a positive mentality and a forward-looking attitude.
Asikkala	a) The most active town in Finland. b) Asikkala - gateway to Päijänne [waterway].	The aim of the municipal strategy is to be Finland's most active municipality (a), i.e., highlighting the various possibilities of sports and exercising. Tourism is another strong strategic point (b).
Inari	“Inari – mighty by nature.”	The slogan reflects the area's clean, unique environment.
Somero	Here we can.	The values expressed in the strategy are openness, a community spirit and looking forward.
Rautavaara	Powered by nature.	Nature and the opportunities it offers is our key strength and is recognized in the municipal strategy.

Even though the slogans are supposedly based on the municipalities' strategies, we found in our linguistic analysis that the themes were very similar, as were the slogans. Thus, they did not distinctively position and differentiate the places from others, nor did they make them recognizable. This may have been due to the similarity and commonality of the strategies. According to Henthorne et al. (2016), it is difficult to find 'uniqueness in the commonness'. Most municipalities seem to employ similar, generic wording in their slogans instead of capturing their core competencies and features. One way of positioning and putting a municipality on the map is to refer to another place or region close by, other than the municipality itself. The slogan could also gain linking value by referring to similar entrepreneurship in the area.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how municipalities position themselves as unique places among their competitors, namely other municipalities in their region or country. We investigated the lingual aspects of slogans and sought to answer four research questions concerning 1) the kind of vocabulary the slogans apply, 2) the thematic categories the words and their meanings represent, 3) how the thematic categories position the municipalities in relation to other municipalities, and 4) how the slogans link to the municipalities' USPs and strategies.

We concluded from our thorough linguistic discourse analysis (see, e.g., Johnstone, 2018) that the vocabulary was quite rich but that the semantic features of the words constituted a narrow range of thematic categories, which made the wider picture rather nondescript and fuzzy (see Johnstone, 2018). In slogans, Finnish municipalities use similar themes that do not differentiate and position them in relation to other municipalities: such themes as good life, nature, smallness, and community spirit can be connected to almost any municipality in Finland. A comparison of the municipalities' strategies revealed that the problem was not the lack of a link to the strategy; it was the strategy itself.

As mentioned, slogans draw quite a homogenized picture of Finnish municipalities: in general, they do not differentiate the municipalities from each other, and they do not clearly communicate their USP. However, concluding from our results, municipalities seem to have three different types of slogans: 1) those that are made to appeal to receivers who value a safe and effortless life, small communities, and nature; 2) those that are made to appeal to receivers who value a dynamic environment with growth potential; and 3) those that are made to appeal to receivers who seek genuine and fascinating new experiences. How much these different target groups are actually thought about in the process of inventing municipal slogans remains unclear.

Even though slogans have been criticized for their role in downplaying place branding, they are still widely used, as Wilson (2020) recently claimed and as we demonstrated in our study: 86 percent of all 310 Finnish municipalities had one slogan or more at the time of the data collection. Slogans tend to be the most visible form of a place's brand, and a great deal of emphasis and finance is allocated to their development (Govers, 2013; Wilson, 2020, 2021; Wilson, 2020). Yet, as the results of our study show, they do not accurately differentiate or position the municipalities in relation to each other. Municipalities seem to have failed to find their USP (competitive advantage) in their strategy work, which they could crystallize in their slogan. One denominator of the similitude can be that the name, location, history, culture, and surroundings of a place have been given, and in essence, municipalities are the same: they serve the same mission and aim at attracting the same stakeholders. Our recommendation to place managers is to invest time and thought into finding the factual attributes of the place and developing a long-term strategy on which the slogans can be based. This could improve credibility and professionalism and ease the work of those responsible for branding the place.

This study investigated slogans in one country, and most of them were in Finnish. Further research is needed, and one possible avenue would be to conduct a similar study in other countries with other languages to find out whether they use similar themes in their slogans. Another interesting approach

would be to study municipality slogans targeted at various groups and their acceptance of them. Future studies should also take residents' views into account more. From the linguistic perspective, it would also be fruitful to delve deeper into the syntagmatic relations of the slogans. Finally, as the use of artificial intelligence is becoming more widespread, future research could investigate how slogans created by AI are likely to differ from man-made slogans.

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