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Flexibility in the linguistic landscape during the pandemic: tourism services in Helsinki

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Аннотация

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism linguistic landscape in Helsinki has changed. Travel restrictions and safety measures have reduced the number of tourists visiting the city, and as a result, there were fewer multilingual signs and advertisements. Additionally, businesses catering to tourists, such as hotels and restaurants, have closed or reduced their operations. The present research is a combination of tourism and linguistic landscape studies, as well as of investigations into the consequences of the pandemic. The goal is to research how the tourism-oriented companies have adjusted their activities to the new situation linguistically and what their motivation has been, with a focus on the most salient languages in tourism scene of Helsinki. It also investigates what constitutes good language use strategy when a major proportion of foreign clients disappears. The international language English was used more than the other foreign languages but still less than before, and Finnish and Swedish, the two national languages of Finland, took partly its place. The study showed that companies have started to direct their marketing towards domestic travellers. The use of Finnish has increased more than Swedish, whereas the use of foreign languages has decreased.

Ключевые слова: linguistic landscape, tourism, Helsinki, pandemic, COVID-19, border crossings, number of bednights

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¹ **Introduction.** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emergence of new linguistic expressions and terms, as well as the popularization of existing ones. Some examples include: “social distancing” and “physical distancing” which refer to the practice of keeping a safe distance from others to prevent the spread of the virus; “flattening the curve” which refers to slowing the rate of infection to prevent hospitals from becoming overwhelmed; “zoom fatigue” which refers to feeling tired from excessive use of video conferencing platforms; “quarantine” and “self-isolation” which refer to the practice of staying at home and avoiding contact with others to prevent the spread of the virus; “pandemic speak” which refers to the new jargon and technical terms used to describe the virus and its effects; “new normal” which is used to describe the changes and adaptations made to daily life as a result of the pandemic. These terms are used globally and have become part of the common language in the context of pandemic. Additionally, there is a great need of translation and interpreting services as many languages are spoken in different countries, while countries are cooperating to fight the pandemics.

² When Finland closed its national borders on 19 March in 2020, there was no travel for leisure purposes across its borders till 15 June. Then, restrictions were lifted for the summer peak season, and later, the borders were opened only for some countries in Europe with few cases of coronavirus. From 20 August (the end of the usual high season) on, the change in border-crossings happened gradually. As autumn progressed, borders were closed with more and more countries. Restrictions were implemented on domestic as well as international travel. Finland’s restaurants remained closed from 24 March until 31 May, although the options of home delivery or take-away were still available.

³ **Hypothesis.** Multilingual tourism services refer to travel and hospitality services that are able to accommodate guests who speak different languages. This may include providing translated materials, having staff who speak multiple languages, or offering language classes or translation services to guests. The goal is to ensure that guests are able to communicate effectively and feel welcomed and comfortable during their stay.

⁴ Changing market orientation towards domestic clients would likely result in an increased focus on serving customers who speak the national language(s). This could include offering information, customer service, and other interactions in the local language, hiring staff who are fluent in the language, and providing language support for non-native speakers. The shift in focus to domestic clients may also result in the promotion of local culture, traditions, and attractions, further enhancing the overall experience for domestic travellers. My hypothesis was that businesses would adjust their market orientation, making more use of the two state languages, Finnish and Swedish.

which would lead to an increase in the use of the national languages, the use of Finnish increasing more than Swedish, whereas the most significant changes would be seen in social media, since this is the most flexible media form, and the lockdown has alternated the manners in which we are using it [23; 25]. I assumed that, owing to the decrease in the number of foreign tourists, a shift in market orientation towards domestic clients and an increased emphasis on using the national languages can lead to a decrease in revenue for companies. This reduction in revenue may require companies to lay off some of their staff, including those who do not speak the local languages. However, it is important to note that laying off staff members can have negative impacts on both the employees and the company, such as lower morale and decreased productivity. Companies may consider alternative cost-cutting measures, such as reducing hours or salaries, before resorting to layoffs. Moreover, if summer help is hired, it is likely that there will be a greater stress on the standard of Finnish language skills. This may involve stricter hiring criteria or language proficiency tests or providing language training for new hires. The goal would be to ensure that the summer staff are able to effectively communicate with customers who speak the local languages, thereby providing better customer service and improving the overall customer experience as in previous years. This may also help to promote the use of the national language and support local culture and traditions.

⁵ **Theoretical background.** The scope of Linguistic Landscape (LL) refers to the study of language as it appears in various texts and signs in both public and private spaces. This includes outdoor public spaces, such as streets and parks, as well as indoor public spaces, such as shops and public transportation, company staff rooms with their utensils, and the virtual world of websites and social media. LL also covers private spaces, such as homes, schools, and businesses. The focus of LL is on how languages are used and displayed in these spaces, including the type of texts and signs, the languages used, and their relative frequency and dominance. By examining the language use in these spaces, LL provides insight into the multilingual and multicultural aspects of society, including internal communication among the staff members. In emulation of *cityscape* [8] and *schoolscape* [3], I could use the term of *linguistic business-scape*, to highlight the focus on public information signs that are not normally studied in conventional LL research instead of LL that I refer to throughout the paper.

⁶ The classification of information signs [29], and the theoretical distinction between public and private signs [14] reflect the policies and values of the different societal layers. But the authorships and other authenticity matters should not be oversimplified, as they exhibit power relations [28]. Language hierarchy in the tourism scene indicates the order of language usage, and reflects the impact and number of situations where they appear [24; 31]. LL always has a dynamic nature [5, pp. 351–353] and is customer-oriented [28].



Fig. 1. Signs in the Helsinki Tourist Information. INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE. 1. Put your hands under the dosing tap. 2. Dose sanitiser by pressing the foot pump with your foot)

8 In LL studies, the typical method of classifying signs combines with the practice of asking clients about their emotions in view of those signs where special attention is paid to English [4]. The LL may be influenced by immigrants or administrations [2; 9; 17]. This was the case in the history of Helsinki [18], where street signs were often the subject of analysis. Swedish is often diminished in relation to Finnish [30]. The linguistic landscape may be (in)accessible for people with a foreign background [11].

9 The implications of COVID-19 on language concern, e.g., information about the current tendencies in medicine, wearing masks, learning and teaching, and communication [7; 16; 19]. People speak about it and use humour, which helps them to overcome negative feelings [21]. Marshall [15] followed the concepts of visual ethnography in the parks and paths that remained open for socially distanced exercise, and saw a rapid rise in the quantity of top-down and bottom-up signs in social spaces. Canada has two official languages, but English started to dominate in providing information about the pandemic [6]. The pandemic has affected linguistic diversity, and the communication of the crisis could be supported [20].

10 The tourism and leisure industry has been affected the worst [1]. There is still hope for recovery because tourism is important for economic growth [26]. The German LL during the pandemic involves creative word formation, unique word play, special forms of politeness, and the innovative communication of values [13]. Building interest in and eliciting good feelings about tourism is critical for destination recovery in a post-COVID scenario, while the use of immersive technology for tourism marketing has increased in popularity [32].

11 **Tourism in Helsinki.** In the summer months, Helsinki welcomes most of its visitors, peaking in July. Most data have been taken from the Visitory website (visitory.io/en/Helsinki), and Helsinki Marketing Oy provided the statistical databases. For example, in 2019 the number of foreign visitors in Helsinki varied between 160,000 in March and 383,000 in July. Many tourist services (tiny souvenir shops, hop-on-hop-off buses, ferry excursions) exist only in the summer season. In January 2020, there is a

growth of 6.8 %, giving hopes of a good year for tourism. In April-June, the numbers dropped significantly, by 90 % for the whole year.

¹² Before the pandemic, the average stay in Helsinki during the summer months was 1.9–2.1 nights, and there was a slight growth. In 2020, foreigners were spending on average 2.1–4.3 nights in Helsinki. I can only speculate that the likely reason for this is quarantining and the risks of travelling just for the sake of a one-night stay. The international cruise ships have an enormous impact on the tourism scene in Helsinki, e. g., in August 2019, the city received 121,000 day-trip visitors and 143,000 big cruise ship arrivals. In 2020, all of them were cancelled.

¹³ It is true that there is no official statistics on tourists' linguistic abilities, including their native and second language (L2) skills. This information is often not collected as part of standard tourism data and can be difficult to accurately determine. Factors such as self-reported language proficiency, language context and situational fluency, and changing language skills can also make it challenging to accurately assess tourists' language abilities and preferences. Despite this lack of data, it is clear that language can play a significant role in tourists' travel experiences, and companies in the travel and hospitality industries are often mindful of the importance of multilingualism in serving their clients. The best statistics we have relate to the languages used by visitors to the Helsinki Marketing Website, and their nationalities, ranked according to the number of bed-nights. Furthermore, the level of correlation between visits to the website and visits to the city is low.

¹⁴ The following method was proposed to measure the importance ranking of the languages used in the Helsinki tourism industry. The languages are given points on the basis of their place on both top-10 lists. The 1st gets 10 points, 2nd — 9, 3rd — 8, etc. The points are added together to give an importance ranking. The most important languages, besides Finnish and English, are German, Russian and Swedish. Chinese has suffered the greatest loss. German remains one of the most important languages. Japanese and Russian have fallen a couple of ranks. The biggest rise has been with Estonian, whereas Swedish has also improved its ranking (table 1).

¹⁵ *Table 1* Average importance rankings of languages during summer seasons

	Ranking in the top-10 list		
language	2018	2019	2020
German	1.0	1.1	1.2
Russian	2.8	2.5	4.9
Japanese	3.0	3.0	5.9
Swedish	3.3	3.4	2.1
Spanish	6.3	6.1	7.7
Chinese	6.4	6.2	10.0
French	6.1	6.7	6.2
Norwegian	7.2	9.5	5.3
Italian	8.0	7.9	7.3
Dutch	9.2	8.2	7.0

Danish	9.5	--	9.0
Estonian	--	--	3.8
Latvian	--	--	7.5

¹⁶ **Data and methods.** The data collection involved the following steps: (1) Creating a list of potential companies (those displayed in Helsinki tourist maps, plus experience providers, shops, museums, bars, restaurants and other attractions mentioned in *Helsinki Marketing*, *Helsinki This Week*, *TripAdvisor*) to participate in the research. (2) Designing a questionnaire to gather information from the companies. (3) Contacting the companies and inviting them to participate in the study by completing the questionnaire. (4) Following up with those who were willing to answer additional questions in a semi-structured interview. This methodology combines both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview) methods to gather data, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied. By collecting data from both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, the research can gain insight into the attitudes and practices of the companies, as well as a more in-depth understanding of their experiences and perspectives.

¹⁷ From 500 companies contacted, 51 filled in the questionnaire, and 8 gave an interview. Four groups were formed: 11 shops, stores, souvenir shops, etc.; 15 eateries; 11 hotels; and 14 companies others, such as transportation services, sports, saunas, etc.

¹⁸ A sociolinguistic questionnaire [27] starts with background information on the companies. Respondents were then invited to evaluate the languages they employ (Finnish, Swedish, English, other). The core interest was in the changes that occurred in each context, including the employees' linguistic skills. Finally, respondents were expected to assess their satisfaction with their language planning, and to assess the effects of the questionnaire. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted while the participants had the questions fresh in their mind, in Finnish, and recorded with permission. The importance of determining which languages were used in the absence of a previous model highlights the significance of language in the decision-making process of companies. The question about how and by whom the linguistic decisions were made in the company is also critical in understanding the role of language in the operations and strategy of the business. This information can provide insight into the policies and procedures surrounding language use, as well as the individuals or groups responsible for making decisions about language. This can be useful in identifying any potential barriers or challenges to the effective use of language, as well as opportunities for improvement and growth. For example, texts relating to the pandemic (hand hygiene, distancing) appeared only recently. No actual names of the people and companies participating have been published.

¹⁹ **Results.**

²⁰ *Table 2* Languages before COVID-19 (proportion of those who answered the question)

	Finnish	Swedish	English	Other
Social media	48/51	4/51	34/51	3/51
Website	48/49	16/49	40/49	10/49

External texts	47/47	11/47	37/47	5/47
Internal texts	50/49	19/49	43/49	10/49
Staff space	49/48 ¹³	1/48	10/48	1/48
Internal communication	50/50	3/50	11/50	2/50

²¹ The respondents differed greatly in deciding where to put English. 24 companies (47 %) displayed Swedish inscriptions, and 19 companies (37 %) used other languages. Websites and internal texts featured Swedish to quite a large extent, and were multilingual, whereas in-door spaces were the least multilingual being predominantly in Finnish. The most popular choice of foreign language was Russian, which was used by 12 companies, followed by Japanese (5 cases), Chinese, German, Spanish (each used by 4), Estonian (3) and French (3). Unique cases were Arabic, Danish, Italian, Korean, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, and Romani, as well as domestic Finnish and Swedish braille writing and Northern Sami. Only one company had texts in more than 10 languages.

²² Most companies made few changes in their LL, yet 75 % of the firms have made some changes. Two restaurants made the most of changes in the LL (table 3).

²³ *Table 3* Tendencies for the direction of change for different languages

Language	Increased a lot	Increased somewhat	Decreased somewhat	Decreased a lot
Finnish	28	28	0	0
Swedish	0	8	4	2
English	3	8	31	17
Other	1	3	3	11

²⁴ Finnish was used more in 19 % of companies, and English was used less in 16 %. Swedish increased and decreased in almost equal extents, with only a marginal increase in its use. No company reduced the use of Finnish. In 11 cases, English increased compared to the pre-pandemic time.

²⁵ Two firms had no website, four firms had no texts outside, and two firms had no public indoor facilities. Three firms lack staff rooms, and one reported to have no internal communication. Most changes occurred on social media (30 %), which may reach more customers. Since no actual posters need to be ordered, changing the language on a website is very simple. Websites underwent 16 % of all alternations. By contrast, the text in staff space experienced only 3.4 % of all the modifications. Texts outside and inside the public spaces scored 21 % and 25 % of all the novelties.

²⁶ Languages are interrelated and influence each other in a shared context; when one language experience changes, the other changes as well. The concept of language contact and linguistic interference may be relevant in understanding this phenomenon. For example, when the use of Finnish rises, the use of English goes down (40 such cases were collected, of which 26 were proportionate).

²⁷ No official regulations stipulated which languages ought to be used in pandemic-related texts. Still, some firms received the sign texts from a higher authority, such as The Finnish Hospitality Association (mara.fi). The Finnish Institute for Health

and Welfare (thl.fi) made available some printable signs with hygiene recommendations in Finnish, Swedish and English. It is very expensive to translate texts into some languages, especially non-European. Many new signs included information on wearing masks, social distancing, hand hygiene, and other safety measures. The goal of these signs was to slow the spread of COVID-19 by promoting healthy behaviour in public spaces. Some companies relied on pictograms ignoring written texts used in a normal situation, which shifted their original power relation. In ten cases, the inside posters were more detailed than external posters. The overall change in the indoor rooms open for the public use took the second place in statistics (table 4).

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Table 4 Power shifts in languages due to COVID-19-related texts

	Increased due to the signs	Decreased due to the signs
Finnish	4	0
Swedish	1	1
English	2	3
Other	2	4

29

Some firms mentioned always encountering customers who do not speak Finnish, although they travel for work, or are foreigners or exchange students who live here without having acquired the language. Thus, the pandemic situation did not require any changes, or the companies could outsource their marketing in other languages, or they already ordered paper flyers in several languages before the lockdown having general tourism growth in mind. In what concerns websites, some updated them in different languages at once or left their websites unchanged waiting for the future developments. Other firms prefer not to use abundant texts at all because they impair readability.

30

Since there were no tourists from abroad, the marketing would be directed towards local clients. The marketing of the seasonal items in particular was directed to them. Only essential info was renewed in English or remained unchanged. In one case, all information besides in Finnish and English was taken down. It is noteworthy that the removed signs were not destroyed but kept for the possible future occasions. Some paper brochures were stored for a while to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Many experience providers chose to increase the use of English and the other languages on social media, in order to reach those clients who were unable to attend in person. On several occasions the spectrum of languages on display varied according to their availability with the staff.

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Most of the companies argued that both domestic languages were a must, while foreign languages were considered an extra bonus. By contrast, some companies valued linguistic diversity and were open to hiring individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds as long as they meet the language requirements for their business operations. One firm wanted to employ a German-speaking person who could serve the customers in their mother tongue.

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This also shows the importance of English and other languages in the global business landscape. Nevertheless, only four firms looked at the employees' linguistic abilities. There were two firms who started to appreciate other languages and one firm

who regarded Finnish as fewer significant than in previous years, although their priorities lay not in linguistic abilities but elsewhere. For example, status within the company or the need/desire to get a new job were more crucial factors for this decision-making.

³³ In the summer of 2020, nobody could predict what happens next, as countries caught the spreading virus arbitrarily. This caused uncertainty around the possible language choice in the LL. For instance, Estonian was never in the top 10 summer languages, and now, it took 2nd–4th ranks. The use of Danish, Dutch and Norwegian increased. The respondents claimed that local customers started to vary in their background, so, all linguistic skills, irrespective of any ongoing pandemic, were more important than earlier.

³⁴ The results in what concerns satisfaction with LL were fairly encouraging showing 88 % of positive answers, and only 12 % were not satisfied. The measure of dissatisfaction is not broken down into degrees (“somewhat”, “very”, etc.). However, representatives of the companies’ stated, especially in the interviews, that they hoped for improvement. So, they could be quicker and more flexible, display additional languages, improve the use of Swedish and English. One business disagreed with this way of thinking, in that they omitted all the other languages on their website and retained Finnish and English.

³⁵ Two companies, however, state explicitly that they encountered technical difficulties: to make a multilingual website, they needed to solve their problems. Sometimes a multilingual post quickly becomes too complicated to attract customers. Blogs and newsletters look more friendly.

³⁶ The question arises whether the rise in the Swedish language usage is a satisfying factor. Opinions were divided 50–50 between increasing Swedish in the future and remaining without Swedish underlining that it should be used for inter-company interactions, with partners or higher authorities, as well as for historical reasons. However, not all Swedish-speaking Finns use Finnish [10, p. 57–89]. Depending on the linguistic abilities of the staff, Swedish was available in the LL as well. The company added Swedish to its LL after receiving feedback about the lack of Swedish.

³⁷ Participants confirmed that after they filled in the questionnaire, they became more aware of the LL in their companies. 52 % said that they will pay more attention to it in the future. Yet, some respondents were sceptical towards the long texts in multiple languages. The LL can be influenced by various factors including politics, economic conditions, migration patterns, technological advancements, and global events such as pandemics. The demand for certain languages can change as the world situation evolves, affecting the LL in different regions.

³⁸ There was no correlation between company size and the flexibility in their LL. The different-sized companies show the even figures. Rather, the companies’ behaviour appears to vary according to their type. Stores made the fewest changes. According to the daily number of new cases of coronavirus infection, the instruction changed, what altered the external texts more than social media for shops and restaurants. There is in fact a remarkable discrepancy between websites and internal texts of hotels and hostels due to their strategy of impressively attracting clients online, which is the complete

reverse of the methods of eateries and department stores. Experience providers fluctuate in their ways of targeting their clients preferring to change websites rather than external texts. Most of events should be booked in advance. This task is usually carried out online on the company's website.

39 **Discussion and conclusion.** During the pandemic time, the LL of the Finland's capital was not so big. The state languages Finnish and Swedish obviously superseded the foreign languages, and both increased in the LL. Foreign languages lost ground, English suffered less than the others, while Finnish gained most. Thus, the initial hypothesis was confirmed. If Swedish continues to increase in the future, this might change the situation [30]. Respondents were divided in their opinion on the displaying of Swedish. Sometimes the owners refused to use Swedish on signs which was often the result of their unwillingness (due to the poor linguistic skills in respective language) to serve clients in this language and hence make them presuppose that this is an option.

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Fig. 2. Signs in a Helsinki underground passage to a shopping centre forum: Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian, Japanese, Chinese (February 2022).



Fig.2 Entrance to the Newspaper Museum: Finnish, Swedish, English, French, German, Estonian, Russian (June 2022)

⁴² Most variations in language use occurred on the companies' internet blogs and social accounts. The second largest number of modifications happened in texts within the companies' public spaces. The texts traditionally viewed as the LL, external texts, had the third highest number of alternations, followed by the company websites. Internal texts did not change at all. So, the company's public image is constructed mostly on the internet, and it depends largely on the staff's foreign language skills, where additional expense on translation services is not needed. This fact changes the goal and methods of the LL studies. Employees may keep the LL unchanged, or they can update all of their languages equally, which increases multilingualism in a company's LL. The company types influence the linguistic reaction to the new situation.

⁴³ The participants could share their worries and ideas of improvement with the interviewer. It might be that the research made them feel heard and cared for. Considering the study [12], the tourism professionals deserve psychological support during those difficult times of pandemic. Quality comments on the study and its goals was given by 5 companies who mostly appreciated its interesting results and could use them for their work. One sceptical reaction mentioned that the questionnaire is not

tailored for a small company. The predominantly optimistic remarks demonstrate that this investigation was needed, in both the linguistic world and the tourism industry.

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Flexibility in the linguistic landscape during the pandemic: tourism services in Helsinki

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism linguistic landscape in Helsinki has changed. Travel restrictions and safety measures have reduced the number of tourists visiting the city, and as a result, there were fewer multilingual signs and advertisements. Additionally, businesses catering to tourists, such as hotels and restaurants, have closed or reduced their operations. The present research is a combination of tourism and linguistic landscape studies, as well as of investigations into the consequences of the pandemic. The goal is to research how the tourism-oriented companies have adjusted their activities to the new situation linguistically and what their motivation has been, with a focus on the most salient languages in tourism scene of Helsinki. It also investigates what constitutes good language use strategy when a major proportion of foreign clients disappears. The international language English was used more than the other foreign languages but still less than before, and Finnish and Swedish, the two national languages of Finland, took partly its place. The study showed that companies have started to direct their marketing towards domestic travellers. The use of Finnish has increased more than Swedish, whereas the use of foreign languages has decreased.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, tourism, Helsinki, pandemic, COVID-19, border crossings, number of bednights

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