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🔗 <https://doi.org/10.4467/K7501.45/22.23.18077>

The Next Stop Is... – Naming of Bus Stops in Two Nordic Capital Regions

Abstract

This paper discusses the names of bus stops in two Nordic capital regions: Helsinki, Finland and Stockholm, Sweden. These names can be defined as official, urban toponyms, and the naming is also characterised by the reuse of existing nomenclature whereby the names gain a secondary referent as a label for a bus stop. The choice of names is analysed from a sample of bus stops from the two regions. Street names are the most used source for names of bus stops. Other sources include names of train and metro stations, names of areas, other official urban nomenclature (e.g., names of squares, parks), and names of various potential destinations and urban landmarks. As the names themselves cannot reveal information about the actual use and perception of the names, the paper also outlines potential research questions for further socio-onomastic approaches.

Keywords

urban names, bus stops, naming, official names, relocation of names

1. Introduction

In the cityscape one can find several different types of proper names that have been less discussed within onomastics but are widely used in different contexts of everyday city life. One such category are names used within public transportation networks, more specifically the names of bus stops. These names are the focus of this paper. The names of bus stops are used by both the transport authorities themselves and by passengers navigating the city and have become increasingly important with digital journey planners and other such services. The names of bus stops are also intertwined with other urban nomenclature. Thus, the naming of bus stops can tell us something about how the city is perceived.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the names of bus stops as a specific type of urban naming. The discussion will be based on examples from two Nordic capital regions, Helsinki, Finland and Stockholm, Sweden. A simple analysis of the names is used to answer the research question: how are bus stops named in an urban environment? Furthermore, the present case study can be seen as groundwork for further, more socio-onomastic studies on these names. As the names themselves cannot give insight into, among other, how the names are actually used or what effect they have on perceptions of the urban landscapes, the closing sections of the paper will outline possible inquiries on such perspectives.

In the following section, general characteristics of the names of bus stops will be discussed to define their place within the urban nomenclature. Some connections to previous onomastic studies are also highlighted. Then I follow up with a short presentation of the setting of and materials for the present case study, before discussing the results of the analysis and raising questions for further socio-onomastic research to the names of bus stops, and other less discussed urban naming.

2. Background: Names of bus stops

Trying to define the category of “names of bus stops” is in itself an interesting topic for onomastic discussion. A simple answer might be that these names are official urban toponyms. There is no doubt that they are toponyms, as they denote specific places (i.e. the locations of the bus stops). But unlike other “less discussed” urban toponyms, such as names of footpaths or parks (cf. Nyström, 2016) that complete the official system of street names, the names of bus stops form another layer of urban nomenclature. The other two words from the simple definition, official and urban, still need to be looked at more closely.

The names in focus for this paper are the official names for bus stops, managed by the local transport authorities. Thus, they represent a form of official, planned names (Ainiala et al., 2012, p. 99). There exist of course other ways of referring to bus stops. One possibility is to use names of other known landmarks to indicate the location of the stop, another to use unofficial names, such as slang variants of the official names or completely separate, privately created nicknames (cf. Ainiala et al., 2012, pp. 105–109). Such alternative names can be more widespread or only used by a small group of people – or used ad hoc in a specific communicative situation. To consider the use of unofficial names a more socio-onomastic perspective would be needed. Therefore, they are left outside of the analysis presented here.

Whether or not the names of bus stops should be considered urban names depends on the very definition of an “urban name” that is used, that is, whether we consider mainly the location (urban or rural) or other characteristics of the names (cf. Akselberg, 2013, pp. 65–66). More of these names can be found in urban environments, as there are more bus lines and thus bus stops in need of names there, but there are of course bus stops with names even in more rural areas. However, the naming process that is in focus for this paper is more complex in urban areas with multiple names (most of them to be considered urban names, e.g. street names and names of buildings) to draw from when describing a specific location. I will highlight some differences between names of bus stops in urban and more rural areas in connection to the results below. At least (the majority of) the names of bus stops discussed in this paper should thus be considered urban names. It is also important to note, that the

more societal questions related to these names are more prevalent in urban environments, as will be discussed in the closing section of the paper.

The names of bus stops are a large group of names, as there are a lot of bus stops in a larger urban area, such as those exemplified here. However, these names are not as visible nor as widely known as other names of the public transport network, like names of metro and train stations. As described by Lehtonen et al. (2016), the names of metro stations are a result of a more complex planning process. The stations are also more of places with their own identities, compared to bus stops that might only consist of an inconspicuous sign somewhere along a street. Therefore, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that there is hardly any previous research into the names of bus stops.

In a short article, Suviranta (2015) has commented on the naming of bus stops from the perspective of name planning. There is also a student paper (Koistinen, 2005) discussing names of bus stops in a part of Espoo, Finland. Koistinen (2005) also includes unofficial names and further socio-onomastic perspectives (are the names known and used) in her case study. What both of these descriptions highlight is the fact that bus stops are named in a context where other (urban) names already exist that can be used to identify different locations (cf. Suviranta, 2015). The names of bus stops are therefore hardly ever unique or “new”. Instead, existing names for the (nearby) locations are given an additional function as the name of a bus stop. Thus, bus stops can be named after streets, districts, buildings, etc. – based on location or potential destinations of travellers.

Akselberg (2017) describes how old toponyms are given new functions as names for railway stations on the Bergen line in Norway (p. 9). Through referential and geographic relocation of the names (Akselberg, 2017, pp. 16–17) we get a double or parallel name use, where the names have two different referents. These primary and secondary referents can be almost, but not quite topographically identical (Akselberg, 2017, p. 9), as is the case with the names of bus stops. What Akselberg (2017) describes as revitalization of toponyms, might in the case of bus stops better be described as “re-use” of names. As most of the names used as names of bus stops in this manner are well documented (e.g., street names, cf. Helsingin kaupungin nimistötoimikunta, 1999; Stahre, 2005; Ainiala et al., 2012, pp. 100–105), the process of naming and resulting name use are often more interesting than a description of the names themselves.

Another aspect of the names of bus stops already alluded to is their highly functional and informational nature. As Suviranta (2015) points out: the names

of bus stops (and stations) create together with other place names a larger namespace, where the different parts support each other allowing us to navigate in the city. The names are thus first and foremost meant to describe the location of the bus stop – and to help tell them apart. As such, they are useful for both travellers and the public transport authorities themselves. They also demonstrate the power of proper names for effective communication, compared to numerical codes, for example (something the bus stops studied here have also been assigned). The informational value has gained even more relevance in the digitalised era (cf. Koistinen, 2005).

Where can the names of bus stops be seen then? The names can be found in different parts of the linguistic landscapes (cf. Puzey, 2016) of the public transport network: on the stop sign and on bus shelters, on displays (and in recorded announcements) on board buses, as well as in different kinds of informational materials, such as timetables. The names have a prominent role in the virtual linguistic landscapes, for example in the travel information given by digital route planners. Names of bus stops are also used in notices on service disruptions available online, in mobile apps, etc. In such notices the names are almost always preceded by a specifying label (“stop X”) – thus highlighting the fact that the reference to the bus stop is only secondary for these names, as noted above.

Lastly, the names of bus stops can also carry additional symbolic value. For example, the use of bilingual names for bus stops in the Helsinki region contributes to the visible bilingualism (i.e. visibility of the second official language, Swedish), as discussed more in-depth in Syrjälä (2021). The choice of specific existing names as names for bus stops can in itself say something about how different names and places in the city are viewed, in turn potentially influencing our knowledge of the namespace. As the names and naming of bus stops can have both informative and symbolic functions, in the local and regional context, this would make them an interesting starting point for further socio-onomastic studies.

To summarise, several aspects must be considered when describing the names of the bus stops that are in focus for this paper. These official names are functional, urban toponyms, repurposing existing nomenclature as described above. I will now turn to the specific case study to exemplify how the choice of names for bus stops can look.

3. Material and method

To get an up-to-date understanding of what kinds of names are used for bus stops, and thus a potential basis for further socio-onomastic studies, I have analysed the choices of names of bus stops in the public transportation systems of two Nordic capital regions: Helsinki, Finland and Stockholm, Sweden. In both regions the naming of bus stops is under the responsibility of the local transport authority, that is, Helsinki Regional Transport (HSL) and Stockholm Public Transport (SL) respectively. These authorities also cooperate with the local municipalities that handle other official urban nomenclature, such as street names.

As there are several thousand bus stops – and thus names – in both regions, a sample of names was chosen to facilitate a more detailed analytic discussion on the names in this paper. Thus, the qualitative analysis presented shortly is based on the names of stops on some of the most important bus lines in each city, the so-called trunk lines. The material from Helsinki includes a sample of 233 names of bus stops along the 9 trunk lines in the region.¹⁵ Almost all of these stops have both a Finnish and a Swedish version, as is the case with other official nomenclature in the bilingual municipalities of the Helsinki Region. Similarly, the material from Stockholm includes a sample of 226 names of bus stops along 12 of the region's trunk lines.¹⁶ The names were collected in late August 2021 from timetables and maps available on the transport authorities' websites for the autumn timetable period.

To answer the research question on how the bus stops are named, this corpus of 459 names will first be categorised according to the source of the names, as discussed in more detail in the following section. As such, the approach resembles the study of Akselberg (2017, pp. 14–16) on names of train stations, as the focus is not on a description of the names but on the choice of names. Examples of names from different categories, as well as some challenges of such categorisation, will then be commented on in a further qualitative discussion before drawing some general conclusions on the naming of bus stops in the two regions.

¹⁵ HSL bus lines 20, 30, 40, 200, 500, 510, 550, 560, and 570.

¹⁶ SL bus lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 172, 173, 175, 176, 177, 178, and 179.

4. Results

In this section, I will discuss the results of my analysis of the aforementioned sample of names of bus stops from Helsinki and Stockholm. The focus will be on the naming motifs, that is, the source of the names used for bus stops. As mentioned, existing names of different types from the urban environment are reused as names for bus stops to indicate their location in the city. Broadly speaking, four different types of names are used, namely other names of the public transport network (i.e. names of metro and train stations), names of districts and other areas, official urban nomenclature such as street names or names of squares and parks, as well as names of buildings and institutions. A small number of other names can be found as well, for example, historical names and nature names, as will be discussed shortly.

It is to be noted, however, that some names are open to different interpretations regarding this categorisation. For example, bus stops by metro stations might share their name not only with the station, but also with, for example, the district the station was named after. Thus, a sort of a chain of referential transfer of certain names is taking place – even when not considering the original etymology of the name, as a district might have been named using a historical settlement name etc. Therefore, a single name of a bus stop might have several other referents at once, making the categorisation of such names inherently subjective. How these names are interpreted by travellers (i.e. which referent they are most closely associated with) cannot be answered only by looking at the names themselves, something I will return to in the final section of this paper. My own analytic solution is also discussed below.

A rough categorisation of the 459 names of bus stops from the two regions is first presented in Table 1. I will then discuss the characteristics of the names in different categories more in detail through some qualitative examples.

Table 1. The names of bus stops categorised by their source

	Helsinki	Stockholm	Notes
Station names	21	34	
Area names	24	24	
Street names	129	84	
Other official urban names	28	29	Incl. names of squares, parks, bridges etc.
Destinations/landmarks	23	32	Incl. names of buildings and official institutions; commercial names
Other	8	23	Incl. nature names, historical names, various rural toponyms
Total	233	226	

Source: own work.

Station names are a natural source for names of bus stops, considering their role as part of the integrated transport network. This category includes names of both metro stations and train stations, as well as that of a bus terminal in both regions. With approximately half of these names the reference to a station is unambiguous, as the name includes the word “station”: for example, *Pitäjänmäen asema – Sockenbacka station* (Helsinki), or *Huddinge station* (Stockholm). With a couple of names another such specifying word is used: *Tikkurilan matkakeskus – Dickursby resecentrum* (‘travel centre’, Helsinki) and *Cityterminalen* (‘terminal’, Stockholm).

As already touched upon, the other half of bus stops named after stations is more complicated to categorise, as they are identical not only with the name of a station, but with another name as well. Such station names can be derived from the name of a district (*Aviapolis, Kontula (M) – Gårdsbacka (M)*, Helsinki; *Högdalen*, Stockholm), but also from names of other localities and landmarks, such as squares (in Stockholm: *Brommaplan, Fridhemsplan*) and a university (in Helsinki: *Aalto-yliopisto (M) – Aalto-universitetet (M)*). As seen in the examples, a suffix (“(M)”) is in some contexts added to the names of metro stations in Helsinki to signal the metro connection – but that is not always present with the names (and no such marking is used in Stockholm). I have still decided to place all these names in the category of station names, as the connection with a station is a natural motive behind the naming: in most cases another name might be more suitable if there was no station with this name (as there might be several stops within the same district, for example).

Whether or not all the names are interpreted the same way by travellers is of course something I cannot say.

A number of bus stops in both regions are named after the area they serve. This category includes both official names of districts (*Maunula – Mån-sas*, *Ruskeauo – Brunakärr*, Helsinki; *Lilla Essingen*, *Nockeby*, Stockholm), and names of smaller, not always officially defined, areas (*Fallpakka – Fallbacka*, Helsinki; *Eriksdal*, Stockholm). Sometimes the stop is the only one located in the specific areas, in other cases the most central. This is also the explanation as to why more stops are not named after areas, as most districts of the cities are served by several bus stops. A special subcategory are names that are supplemented with the word “centre” to denote a more specific location within the area (*Karakallion keskus – Karabacka centrum*, Helsinki; *Rinkeby centrum*, *Segeltorps centrum*, Stockholm) – regardless of there actually existing, for example, a mall with such designation (in which case the name could also be placed in the category of destinations and landmarks).

The most numerous sources for names of bus stops are street names of different kinds. There are, on the one hand, stops that get their name from a crossing street, and on the other hand stops named after the street they are located on. Although these are evidently functioning (neutral and more or less precise) strategies for naming bus stops, some interesting points on both these subcategories can be discussed.

By far the most common way of naming bus stops in both regions is after nearby crossing streets: with 109 such names in the sample from Helsinki and 74 from Stockholm. Exactly which street names are chosen as names for bus stops is an interesting question. However, to objectively determine how significant, well-known, etc., specific streets are is difficult and would at least require further socio-onomastic and ethnographic work. Thus, suffice to say that various kinds of street names can be found among the names of bus stops. In my material examples from (well known) main streets (*Bulevardi – Bulevarden*, *Sturenkatu – Sturegatan*, Helsinki; *Fleminggatan*, *Roslagsgatan*, Stockholm) to small alleys and quiet, suburban sideroads (*Kaarenmäenkuja – Kårbackagränden*, *Seivästie – Hoppstavsvägen*, *Talontie – Hemmansvägen*, Helsinki; *Drevergatan*, *Flottbrovägen*, *Kästadalsvägen* Stockholm) can be found. In some cases, stops are even named after crossing footpaths (*Poutahaukanpolku – Stenfalksstigen*, Helsinki; *Grönlandsgången*, Stockholm). An interesting question for further research would be if some of these names are more well known as names of the bus stops and to what degree they are actually

associated with the streets or footpaths. A couple of stops are even named after crossing motorways (where interchange to other bus lines is possible), such as *Tuusulanväylä – Tusbyleden* (Helsinki).

A further 14 stops in Helsinki and 10 stops in Stockholm are named after the street where the stop itself is located (at least in one direction). These names can be somewhat curious cases: there might be further stops along the same street, and even though many of these streets might be well known, they are also often quite long streets. Therefore, the name does not give that precise information about where the stop is actually situated. This is not only limited to the stops named after the street they are located, as there is also an example in the material from Stockholm, where two different stops towards each end of a long crossing street on different bus lines are both named *S:t Eriksgatan*.

Furthermore, there are among the names from Helsinki six examples of bus stops named after the exact street address. In these cases, there are no other viable alternatives such as crossing streets or landmarks (as they are located in residential areas) that could describe their location, and there might be several stops on the same street. In fact, four of these names of bus stops can be found along the same street: *Ulvilantie 11 – Ulfsbyvägen 11, Ulvilantie 17 – Ulfsbyvägen 17* etc.

Besides street names, other official urban nomenclature also functions as a source for names of several bus stops. These names denote a more specific, in many cases well known, location within the city. Names of squares are used for 13 stops in Helsinki (*Kuninkaantammenaukio – Kungseksplatsen, Haagan tori – Haga torg*) and 20 stops in Stockholm (*Karl XII:s torg, Stureplan*). Parks and other green areas give names to 13 stops in Helsinki (*Asentajanpuisto – Montörsparken, Sysiniitty – Träkolsängen*) and seven stops in Stockholm (*Humlegården, Mandelparken*). Further individual sources for names of bus stops include bridges: *Otaniemensilta – Otnäsbron*, Helsinki; *Bergshamra bro*, Stockholm.

Another major source for names of bus stops are different potential destinations for travellers or otherwise known landmarks. Names of both buildings and official institutions of different kinds are used in this way. Common examples include hospitals (*Meilahden sairaala – Mejlans sjukhus, Naistenklinikka – Kvinnokliniken* in Helsinki; *Danderyds sjukhus, Södersjukhuset* in Stockholm), schools (*Haagan ammattikoulu – Haga yrkesskola, Hanken*, Helsinki; *Kämpetorpsskolan, Musikhögskolan*, Stockholm) and sporting venues (*Töölön kisahalli – Töölö sporthall*, Helsinki; *Spånga idrottsplats, Stadion*, Stockholm).

Individual stops are also named after churches (*Kungsholms kyrka*, Stockholm), libraries (*Töölön kirjasto – Tölö bibliotek*, Helsinki), the airport (*Lentoesema – Flygplatsen*, Helsinki) or other landmark buildings (*Radiohuset, Stadshuset*, Stockholm).

Commercial names appear only rarely as sources for the names of bus stops – this is as one might expect since they are not recommended to be used in official nomenclature (in Finland or Sweden). The only 3 purely commercial examples in my material are *Ikea Espoo – Ikea Esbo* (Helsinki), *IKEA* (Stockholm), and *Jumbo* (a shopping centre in Helsinki). However, the line between commercial names and urban landmarks is not clear-cut. *Munkkivuoren ostoskeskus – Munkshöjdens köpcentrum* (‘Munkkivuori shopping centre’) and *Eiran sairaala – Eira sjukhus* (‘Eira hospital’) in Helsinki are both examples that are both neutral, established descriptions of these buildings while at the same time private businesses. In any case, from the perspective of a traveller on public transport these names still just identify the location of the bus stop in question (and not, for example, a company).

As noted, a small number of names of bus stops do not fit into the categories presented above. These are therefore included in Table 1 under the label “other”. Like the names already discussed, however, these names are also repurposed from existing nomenclature. Some such additional sources for the names of bus stops include nature names (e.g., a bay: *Kipparlahti – Skepparviken*, Helsinki) and other (historical) place names (*Köyhämäki – Fattigbacka, Rajamänty – Råtallen*, Helsinki; *Järva krog*, Stockholm). Even if the source of some names is not transparent for the urban dwellers today, these names can preserve historical nomenclature, thus in a way resembling the revitalised, transferred names discussed by Akselberg (2017). Furthermore, there are several various rural toponyms included among the names from Stockholm (stops on lines running into the municipality of Ekerö) – both traditional settlement names and names of natural features (e.g., *Fårhagen, Malmviken, Tillflykten, Västeräng*). This is also an example of how the names of bus stops in urban and rural areas differ from one another, while still reflecting the surrounding name landscape.

To conclude, this simple analysis of the names of bus stops has shown some interesting similarities between the two regions. The most common source when naming bus stops in both regions is street names, and even other types of names – those of stations, areas or various urban landmarks – are used in similar fashion. The subtle differences can be largely explained by

the differences on areas that the bus lines in the present samples happen to serve (e.g., a higher number of stops in the city centre and in a rural municipality yield more stops named after squares and using various rural toponyms in the material from Stockholm). As such, although the results presented here should not be generalised, I would still argue that they are quite indicative of the naming practices for bus stops in these two regions at large.

5. Closing remarks and proposals for further research

While giving insight into practices surrounding a less discussed part of urban nomenclature, an analysis of the sources of names of bus stops like the one presented above can only tell us so much about how such names are used and perceived. Thus, understanding these names would warrant a more socio-onomastic approach to include the perspectives of actual name users (cf. Ainiala & Östman, 2017), that is, the travellers encountering the names of bus stops while utilising public transport. As already demonstrated by Koistinen (2005), such methodology can offer insights into both unofficial names and the public's use and knowledge of the official names. Therefore, I will use this closing section of the paper to outline some questions and possible approaches to further research into the names of bus stops – and other such urban names.

Interesting questions can be raised from two perspectives. Firstly, about the use of names: if, and if so how, are the official names of bus stops used? How well are they known by the general public? Do people have unofficial names for bus stops, or do they use other alternative descriptions when discussing the locations of stops and travelling through the city? Secondly, about the effect these names have on the knowledge of the namescape, and by extension on the views on the city itself. Are the names used for bus stops better known than other surrounding names of the same type? How are the names and locations perceived? What kind of names are deemed functional, and what locations deemed important to be included in the nomenclature? As names of bus stops are a part of the larger context of urban naming, these perspectives on names and naming can be used to discuss how urban places are used and perceived. Thus, this type of further research would not only

be of interest to onomasticians, but to other urban scholars, and those planning the names, as well.

To approach these perspectives in a socio-onomastic study several methods should be included. It is possible to inquire directly about informants' use of (official and unofficial) names of bus stops, or test their knowledge of specific names, by way of interviews or questionnaires. Still, more revealing could be to observe if and how the names are used when informants are tasked to discuss their everyday journeys through the city. Such approaches could furthermore be complemented by more detailed analysis of (the names in) the linguistic landscapes, virtual and physical, or further ethnographic observations. Overall, even the most everyday, functional names should not be overlooked when aiming to discuss urban landscapes.

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