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# 'Slowing down' in small and medium-sized towns: Cittaslow in Germany and Italy from a social innovation perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

Smaller towns in rural regions are important anchors for regional development, but they are not usually considered particularly innovative and open to new ideas. This paper asks how the network of small and medium-sized towns, Cittaslow, could establish slowing down as something new in local development. Against the theoretical background of sociological innovation research, an analytical framework of social innovation is elaborated to analyse Cittaslow using four case studies: two German and two Italian towns. Based on fieldwork in the four towns, this paper shows that discourse and communication on slowing down, local projects labelled as slow and new cooperation structures go hand in hand. This leads to the conclusion that new ways of local development need a communicative umbrella under which projects and stakeholders come together. The paper furthermore demonstrates that the analytical framework, with its triad of semantics, pragmatics and grammar, is extremely helpful for analysing spatial development and has the potential to be adapted as a tool for policy strategies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social innovations can be understood as new ways to achieve goals modifying the direction of social change (Zapf, 1989). According to sociologists, we currently live in a high-speed society characterized by acceleration across various sectors of life (Rosa, 2013; Rosa & Scheuerman, 2008). Thus, one direction of current social change is the tendency towards higher acceleration of life. The international network Cittaslow proposes approaches to reverse the trend of acceleration by establishing *slowing down* as a development strategy in small and medium-sized towns to improve quality of life. Therefore, it can be analysed as social innovation.

Smaller towns are often anchors in rural areas. As economic, social and cultural centres, their attractiveness is a prerequisite for strengthening the entire region, so 'small towns around the world contribute to sustainable development at the regional, national, and international level'

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(Senetra & Szarek-Iwaniuk, 2020, n.p.). In 1999, Cittaslow was founded by four Italian mayors, and today it has more than 260 member towns in 30 countries worldwide (Cittaslow, 2020). The basic idea was to transfer the philosophy of Slow Food to daily life, administration and development in towns with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. Such towns can apply for membership of the network respecting 72 criteria, the so-called 'requirements for excellence' (Cittaslow, 2017, p. 25). The criteria are grouped into seven macro-areas ranging from energy and environmental policies, quality-of-urban-life policies, policies for hospitality, awareness and training, and social cohesion. While some of the criteria are very general, such as public housing or planning for urban resilience, others are very specific, such as a reduction in public light pollution or a service desk for sustainable architecture (Cittaslow, 2017).

Existing research on Cittaslow mainly focuses on specific examples and/or resilience issues, and has shown that small towns and their surrounding areas can benefit from joining international networks (Senetra & Szarek-Iwaniuk, 2020). How was it possible to establish such a new idea for local development? By understanding Cittaslow as a social innovation and analysing cases from Germany and Italy, this paper shows that an interaction of discourse, projects and new cooperation structures has been necessary to establish slowing down as local development strategy.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Following Ogburn's (1964) and Zapf's (1989) social innovation concepts, sociologists started to widen perspectives from technical and economic innovation to social innovation in terms of both empirical research and theory-building (e.g., Gillwald, 2000; Howaldt & Jacobsen, 2010; Schwarz & Howaldt, 2010; Rammert et al., 2018). Meanwhile in local development and urban studies, a debate on social innovation started (e.g., Christmann et al., 2020; MacCallum et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2013). Although this research landscape was described for a long time as consisting of two streams, essential commonalities have now been established (Christmann, 2020). Following Mumford, social innovation in this paper is understood as 'the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organize interpersonal activities, or societal interactions, to meet one or more common goals' (Mumford, 2002, p. 253).

To analyse Cittaslow as social innovation in spatial development, this paper uses a framework that has been developed in sociological innovation research and is based on three observation perspectives: *semantics*, *pragmatics* and *grammar* (Hutter et al., 2011; Rammert et al., 2018). According to spatial innovation research 'it is a *conditio sine qua non* of any innovation that a novel idea was put into practice and became institutionalized' (Christmann et al., 2020, p. 499). Such new practices, creative activities and innovative actions are conceptualized as *pragmatics*. The perspective of *grammar* deals with arrangements, regimes and rule systems that make innovation possible, such as cooperation structures, and can 'thus acknowledge the aspect of proactive agency without neglecting the relevance of structures' (p. 499). Complemented by the conceptual idea of social innovations as social constructions, *semantics* refers to 'meaning, knowledge, and discourse' (Hutter et al., 2018, p. 20). Accordingly, an innovation as such must also be marked linguistically and rooted in public discourse.

The three observation perspectives of semantics, grammar and pragmatics offer the potential to examine local development in a differentiated way and consequently to recognize and describe social innovations in local development. However, as shown in Figure 1, it is necessary to fill all three perspectives theoretically with areas of spatial development. When dealing with questions of local development in small and medium-sized towns, the classical approach is to look at those elements that could be understood as grammar, such as actors, laws, plans or other sets of rules, and pragmatics, such as projects, events or urban design (e.g., Kunzmann, 2010; Servillo et al., 2017). Increasingly, however, social science spatial research is also paying attention to issues that can be subsumed under semantics, such as image, mission statements or symbols.

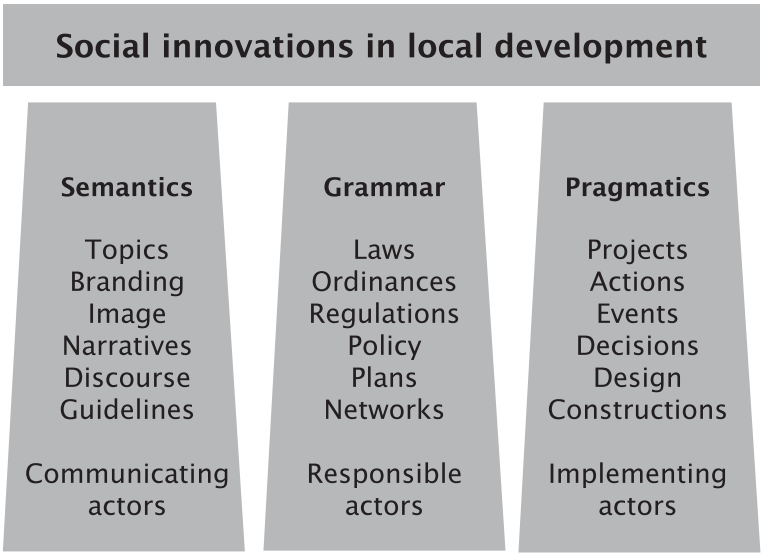



**Figure 1.** Social innovation observation perspectives applied to local development. Source: Author's own elaboration.

## METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

Methodologically drawing upon the ideas of focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005) this paper is based on several short-term field visits, data intensity and time intensity, combining different qualitative instruments for data collection. To study the local establishment of Cittaslow four member towns were selected, two in Germany and two in Italy. Italy was chosen because it is the founding country of the network; Germany because it is the longest established regional network outside Italy. Cases were selected in summer 2015 out of all Cittaslow member towns in the two countries, which at the time included 12 towns in Germany and 79 in Italy (Figure 2). In each country one of the two towns has been a long-standing member (Francavilla al Mare since 2002 and Überlingen since 2004) and the other a recent member (Tolfa and Berching since 2013). Other factors considered included having a similar number of inhabitants in each of the two pairs and a predominantly rural location for all selected towns. This four-field study, with a combination of most similar and most dissimilar cases, should take similarities and differences into account between early and later acceding towns and between the two countries.

In 2016 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local actors in the four towns. These interviews were complemented with ethnographic interviews and field notes from daily life in these towns and during the network's meetings between 2015 and 2017, and interviews held in 2012 in all German member towns. Furthermore around 200 documents, including local newspapers and network documents, were collected. The data were analysed by means of qualitative content analysis according to Gläser and Laudel (2010) using the software Atlas.ti. The core of this process is the extraction of the required information from the text using a search grid based on preliminary conceptual considerations. The search grid was initially divided into the three main categories: semantics, grammar and pragmatics. For each of the three main categories several dimensions were defined according to the conceptual preliminary considerations and previous knowledge. Most of these dimensions turned out to be helpful, some were dropped because they did not play a role in the empirical material, and some new ones were added. After




**Figure 2.** Cittaslow member towns in Europe in 2015 with an emphasis on the four case studies. Source: Author's own elaboration.

the coding process these dimensions were underpinned by conceptual terms. With the help of these categories and their dimensions, it was possible to condense the information and answer the research questions. In addition, a fourth category was created to systematically collect general information on the Cittaslow network as well as on the four towns' development and projects.

Überlingen in Baden-Württemberg (about 22,500 inhabitants), located on Lake Constance, became the third town in Germany to join the network in 2004 (Südkurier, 2005). Although the region is relatively dense, it is predominantly rural, characterized by villages and small towns (Schirmer Architekten und Stadtplaner, 2015). With approximately 25,000 inhabitants Francavilla al Mare, is similar in size and is also located in a rather densely populated region. It was part of the second group of towns to join Cittaslow in 2001 (Gherardi, 2001). Überlingen and Francavilla al Mare have established themselves as tourist destinations since the 19th century, but are still also agricultural and do not rely exclusively on tourism. The two towns are similar in settlement structure due to their location on Lake Constance and the Adriatic Sea, respectively. In Berching, a town of 8530 inhabitants, the population has grown relatively steadily over the last years with a slight downward trend. About 60 km from Nuremberg, Berching is a rural small town with a historical core and 45 villages within the municipality (Schober Architekten, 2012). Agriculture and brewing are traditional activities that have been recently rediscovered. Tourism is playing an increasingly greater role, particularly for cycling, walking or family holidays, as opposed to any form of mass tourism. The small town of Tolfa with

over 5000 inhabitants has been growing slowly but relatively steadily since 1970. Due to the geographical conditions, the area around Tolfa, although only about 70 km from Rome, is one of the most remote in the Lazio region. It is mainly agricultural (cereal, fruit and vegetable and wine-growing, horse and cattle-breeding), a small amount of day tourism has developed in recent years.

In Berching and Tolfa, the Cittaslow focus is on strengthening the old towns' qualities (Comune di Tolfa, 2020; Stadt Berching, 2020), with Tolfa focusing on culture and events, while in Berching the emphasis is on renovation measures and the enhancement of public spaces. In Überlingen Cittaslow was for a long time considered above all as an award and brand, which in the meantime could not be used effectively for tourism marketing. Only recently have new considerations and ideas been put forward to actively shape membership in the network (Wagner, 2019). In Francavilla al Mare, the membership in Cittaslow was a way of creating a new quality of tourism (Gherardi, 2001) working against the partly negative image which had developed during the 1990s due to high soil sealing and building density, mass tourism, and outdated hotel structures (Associazione Culturale Buendìa, 2006). However, after several years of particularly strong commitment to the network, the idea of Cittaslow became almost meaningless after the election of a new mayor. What all four cities have in common is that they see it as their active task to use Cittaslow as a means for promoting local products and manufacturers.

## RESULTS

In all the four towns the beginning of Cittaslow activities occurred at a time when local development was realigned to foster the towns as anchors within the surrounding regions. In Überlingen and Berching accession to Cittaslow was part of a new integrated development concept. In Francavilla a *Piano Regolatore* (land-use plan) had just been approved, within which the continuing sealing of the urban area should be contained and new design concepts tried out. In Tolfa a new mayor has gathered a young team around him, which with much commitment was engaged to promote the culture of the city. In all cases Cittaslow has been an additional engine to elaborate and strengthen the new way, although each of the four towns set a different focus on Cittaslow.

Under the lens of semantics, Cittaslow establishes slowing down via local adaptations of the always identical texts of the network, playing with rhetorical opposites. One of the network's main slogans is 'slow for better life' with the explanation that 'living slow means being slowly hasty' (Cittaslow, 2020). The basic messages are adapted to the local contexts and embedded in current debates. Linguistically explicit, *slowing down* is claimed as *better*, *special* and *different*; a Cittaslow – according to the message – is a better, sustainable and decelerated town. Semantically, Cittaslow everywhere is regarded as a distinction and testifies to the fact that a step has been taken into a new and better direction. For Francavilla al Mare this was especially true between 2002 and 2008. In these years, the local newspaper mentioned Cittaslow in 57 articles, always related to improving the town's quality of life. New bike lanes, the replanting of an old tomato variety and a solar-powered communication island were all presented under the semantic umbrella of Cittaslow.

In Tolfa, on the other hand, Cittaslow membership directly led to smaller measures such as Cittaslow evenings in local restaurants where slowing down has been discussed while eating local food. As a representative explained, 'We have organized thematic dinners in restaurants and pubs together with local residents and have tried to spread this message from below.' Überlingen tried to use the label as a brand in tourism marketing. Berching and Tolfa actively drew attention to slowing down in public spaces with posters and signs using the Cittaslow logo (an

orange snail). Semantic leanings towards the better known Slow Food ensured that food, local products and nutrition were discursively anchored in local development in all four towns.

From a pragmatics perspective, Cittaslow is established by a translation of the ideas and concepts of slowing down into projects and actions of local development. These are farmers' markets, kitchen gardens, active support and promotion of local products, small festivals of local culture, and walking buses. Common or concerted events and promotions of the network, such as the Cittaslow Prize, play a further role in the practical establishment of the idea. It seems to be a merit of the Cittaslow approach to anchor the issue of local food and local products as a factor in local development. One interviewee from Überlingen stated, for example, 'Well, that is also a matter of nutrition, Cittaslow. And we are already very good at that. So, when it comes to markets and farmers' own products.' Thus, the Cittaslow towns can be regarded as pioneers in this area because, overall, the interest in nutritional issues in local development only slowly increased after the turn of the millennium.

However, it remains unclear for many projects and measures whether they are directly related to Cittaslow and are carried out in this way because there is a 'Cittaslow awareness' or if they are only marked as 'slow projects' afterwards. Only a few local developments are directly connected to Cittaslow membership. One example is the so-called *Slow Spots* in Berching. Slow Spots are quiet places in and around the town but away from the busy paths, established and marked in 2017 by the local development association. According to one of the activists 'this would not happen, in my opinion, if we were not constantly reminded of this Cittaslow.' This suggests that social innovations in local development require at least the interplay of semantics and pragmatics, because a project or action sometimes only becomes a 'slow action' when it is discursively or visibly marked as such.

Moreover, slowing down often refers to those projects that are deliberately not implemented. In doing so, a certain development is anticipated in the context of general observations or experiences that local actors want to prevent in order to preserve local peculiarities. This can be the non-privatization of public land (Überlingen), the active halt in growth of a street art festival (Tolfa), the non-designation of building land (Berching) or the prevention of large-scale retail (Francavilla).

Under the lens of grammar, Cittaslow is primarily established as part of a larger slow movement that is spread over different social fields and thus reinforcing new actor constellations. At the same time, it is the existing grammar of the countries in the form of regulations and laws, especially on time policy and economic policy, which supports dissemination. Cittaslow can be read as an instrument of Italy's communal time policy (Mareggi, 2002) and, on the other hand, can be understood as a driver of a hitherto hardly institutionalized time policy at the communal level in Germany. Some of the network's criteria directly push the introduction of local time policies, such as time-based currencies or free cycling projects (Cittaslow, 2017). In the four observed towns those measures were discussed but have not yet been introduced.

As a transnational network, Cittaslow has developed its own structures with regular international and national meetings enabling towns to act in accordance with the idea of slowing down. A representative from Berching underlines the importance of this exchange: 'I think the spring and autumn conferences are good […] I think it's important. […] That you stimulate each other, that you learn from each other.' The organization thereby reinforces new actor relationships and new cooperation between towns of similar dimensions in geographical distance leads to the exchange of ideas and experiences without competitive thinking. Out of the networking activities new local projects also develop, as an example from Tolfa shows; 'Thanks to Cittaslow, we joined a very nice project for children, which is dedicated to sustainable mobility for children, namely Piedibus,' said a member of the administration.

Although the admission criteria have been particularly adapted to the needs of Italian towns, they are used as development guidelines also by the other towns offering the opportunity to

adapt themselves. Familiar issues, such as plans for resilience, alternative mobility, valorization of local products and techniques, or prohibiting genetic modification in agriculture, are linked under the keyword *slow* and become quality standards in their own right. So, this grammar in the form of criteria and cooperation can serve as a basis and inspiration for pragmatics.

## DISCUSSION

With the help of Cittaslow, slowing down is transformed from an individual topic to a spatial one and related to local development, at least in Cittaslow member towns that are in predominantly rural areas. Although many of the measures can also be applied by towns and other spatial entities that are not network members it is the semantic embedding and the grammatical Cittaslow structures that connect them to slowing down. In other words, in the analysed towns new local development projects are labelled and discussed as 'slow', explained or justified with the Cittaslow membership.

The idea that innovations in the field of sustainability-oriented policy and planning are established primarily through discourse (Hutter et al., 2011, p. 13) and rich narratives (Healey, 2012, p. 9) – in other words through semantics – can be confirmed in principle. The example of Cittaslow shows that this works in an international context primarily when the international semantics are embedded in local discourses and encounter an appropriate grammar in the form of structural framework conditions, which in turn are translated into projects. The

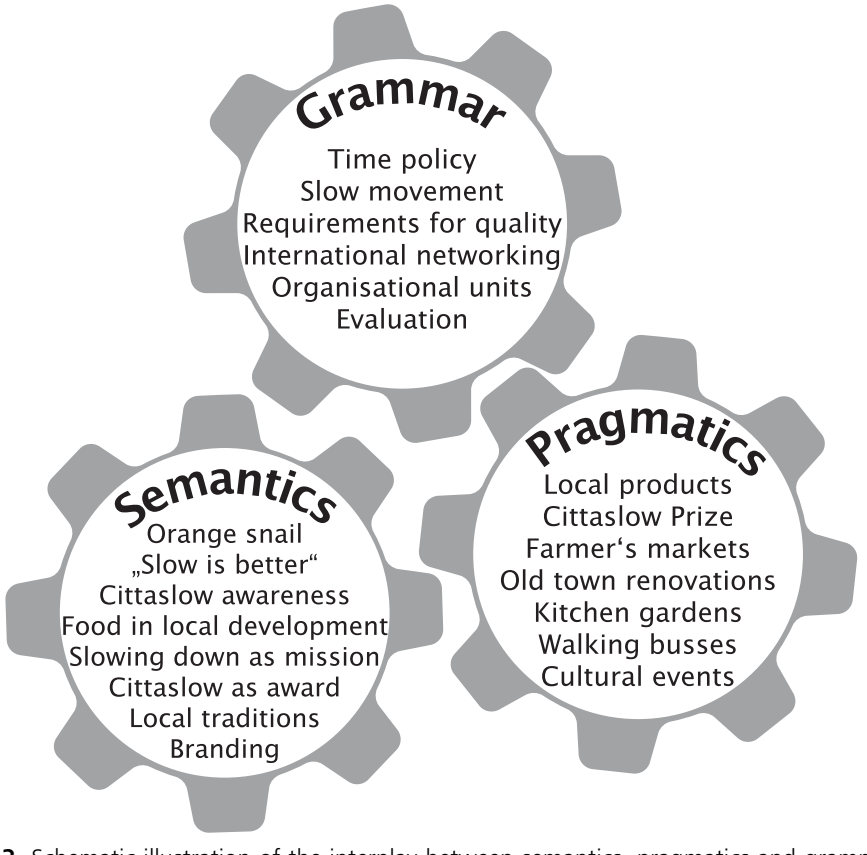



**Figure 3.** Schematic illustration of the interplay between semantics, pragmatics and grammar for slowing down.Source: Author's own elaboration.

practical implementation is often limited to small projects and actions of local development. These could sometimes take place without Cittaslow, but with their embedding in the slow discourse and the connection with international network structures they are a step towards slowing down. The cooperative but informal network, which is at the same time institutionalized as association with self-constituting criteria and regular meetings, bridges the gap between small scale local development projects and international debates on deceleration. Thus, it is the special interplay of semantics, pragmatics, and grammar (Figure 3) that makes Cittaslow a social innovation.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper asked how Cittaslow could establish slowing down as something new in the development of small and medium-sized towns. It has been shown that this was achieved through a combination of discourse (semantics), its translation into projects (pragmatics) and new cooperation structures (grammar). Furthermore, this paper demonstrates that the analytical framework of social innovation with its triad of semantics, pragmatics and grammar is extremely helpful for analysing local development. The three observation perspectives offer the potential to be used as heuristics also for other urban and regional development issues. With regard to the establishment of slowing down it has been shown that in the four towns the principles and mechanisms are very similar, but the specific slowing down topics and projects were adapted to local or national needs, debates, and structures. Accordingly, the underlying ideas, as well as some specific measures, can also be applied to spatial entities which are not members of Cittaslow.

For local development policy in rural regions this means that new development approaches should be carefully established with the help of clear communication. Public debates and communications need to logically connect projects and measures as well as stakeholder structures and development strategies under a common umbrella, such as slowing down. Against the background of the current challenges for small and medium-sized towns in terms of resilient and sustainable development, the slow perspective offers a range of options towards quality of life in all fields of relevance. The valorization and emphasis on local and regional assets within an innovative and cooperative, albeit informal, structure like Cittaslow prove adaptable to different local and regional constellations as well as policies for co-creation and co-production. The proposed framework with its triad of semantics, pragmatics, and grammar can also serve as a policy tool to elaborate and check new local development strategies.

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