

# The Changes in Place Names on the Northern Coast of Estonia

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## Abstract

This paper is focused on how and to what extent the rural place names on one peninsula – the Vergi Peninsula on the northern coast of Estonia – have changed between the 20th century and the present day. Although the place names have been preserved and lost equally (41%), differences occur in the types of names. If settlement and nature names (especially the names of waters) have survived very well, then practically no names related to cultivation have survived. The reason is the changes that have occurred in lifestyles. The need for agriculture has disappeared and the names related to domiciles and relaxing by the seaside have survived.

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## Introduction

The object of paper is the toponymy of the Vergi Peninsula in the Haljala rural municipality on the northern coast of Estonia. More precisely, the article focuses on the socio-onomastic aspect of changes in place names. The socio-onomastic approach takes the social and situational field where the names are used into consideration and studies name use and variations (Ainiala *et al.* 2012: 56). The need for place names depends on people's need to communicate and to differentiate places from each other. Only those names with references that are still important to people remain in use; when a place is destroyed or differentiating it is no longer important, the name disappears.

My study provides a survey of how place names have survived and disappeared, mostly during the last 50 years, in one coastal rural area. Work on the changes in place names can only be conducted if collections of place names from various time periods exist. The historical material from the 20th century comes from the collection of place names in the Institute of the Estonian Language and I collected the current material myself in the course of fieldwork.

## Characterisation of the Place

The Vergi Peninsula is on the coast of Northern Estonia and is located about 90 km from Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. The coastline is quite subdivided, and there are many shallows; the beaches are mostly rocky and the land is flat. The settlement is concentrated on the coast, where small coastal villages with farms are situated in close proximity. The interior of the peninsula is covered by forests and there is little arable land. The size of this area is about 20 km<sup>2</sup>.

The settlement has been permanent, with the villages mentioned for the first time starting in the late 14th century to the early 16th century (cf. Tarvel 1983: 73-77). Historically, the activities in the area have included fishing, seafaring, boatbuilding, and

maritime trade, which ceased with the Soviet occupation after World War II. The coast, as the western border of the Soviet Union, became a closed border zone, where movement was restricted and the beaches were patrolled by border guards. The local residents were prohibited from owning boats, freely going to sea or catching fish. One needed a permit to go out to sea and this was monitored by a guard in the harbour. Today, the peninsula is more of a summer resort area, where the permanent residents are mostly older people and the population is dramatically increased by seasonal holidaymakers. If in 1959 the official statistics show that 324 people lived in these seven coastal villages, then by 2014, the number of registered residents had been halved to 162 (Katus *et al.* 1996; Vihula Rural Municipality website). The stability of the permanent residents was affected by deportations to Siberia and escapes to the West, as well as by the general urbanisation and the gradual marginalisation of the rural areas. However, uninterrupted name usage is a very important precondition for the preservation of place names.

## Material

Places are named so that they can be identified and distinguished from other places (Ainiala 2010: 297). Only those places are named that need to be differentiated, and only the names with enduring references and a continued need for differentiation by the residents survive. The material includes all types of the place names in the Vergi Peninsulas' villages, i.e. the names of the dwellings, cultivated areas (fields, meadows, pastures), artefacts and natural features (water and terrain features).

In the area under examination, there are a total of 548 named objects from four different time periods, which, in turn, have 346 parallel names. A total of 910 names have been recorded on the Vergi Peninsula. The 20th-century material comes from the collection of the Institute of the Estonian Language. The material from the 1930s is limited and comprises mostly farm names, and the collection is laconic (121 names). The material from 1967 is very thorough (463 names), but few names of artefacts have been recorded. The collections from 1985 and 1994 (446 names) were compiled by the same collector and are characterised by a large percentage of parallel farm names and the lack of agricultural names. I collected the current material (427 names) myself in the course of fieldwork, while also checking whether the informants knew about any earlier material. The current collection is most comparable to the 1967 collection, where the percentage of settlement names and nature names is equally high. A comparison of the quantitative percentage of the toponymy collected in 1967 and 2013 indicates that agricultural names were more significant in 1967. This is connected to the lifestyles at the time, when animals were kept. There are more artefact names now, which probably results from the differences in the reasons for collecting. All the collections have more names of nature features than agricultural features, which is both naturally and culturally characteristic of this area.

The following chart provides a survey of which features on the Vergi Peninsula have been named during various time periods. It includes all the names in the various collections, also the features that have been destroyed or the names fallen out of use, although they are still remembered.

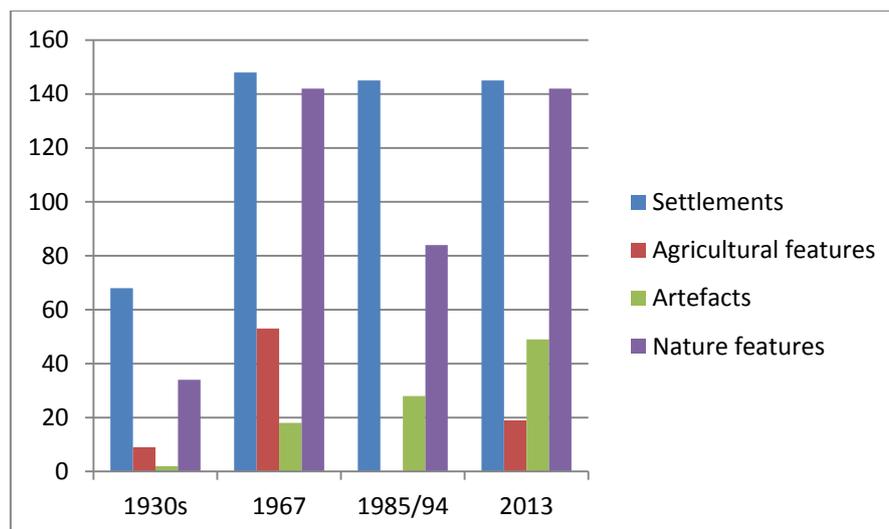


Fig. 1. The relative importance of the given objects during different time periods

The collection of place names in the Institute of the Estonian Language includes an overview of the place names that were used by the older generation in everyday situations and also the names that were only in user's memories. Unfortunately, the knowledge of names by the various generations and people living different lifestyles is not reflected in the collections. No collection of place names can be a uniform whole that includes a collection of all the names in use in a specific area. A role is also played by the collector's focus, what he/she considers to be important to record and what he/she even considers to be a name. For example, artefacts are represented very unevenly in the various collections. Often artefacts are designated by terminological names – *Kivisild* ('Stone Bridge'), *Muul* ('Jetty'), *Pritsukuur* ('Firefighting equipment shed') – which, it may seem, do not need to be recorded because of their transparent meanings. Toponymy, like other language, changes in time and the need to speak of places does not remain unchanged from decade to decade (Ainiola 2010: 297). For instance, this is demonstrated by the disappearance of agricultural features, and the fact that, in reality, the recorded names of these places exist only in people's memory, and are not used everyday, because these places no longer exist. Collections of names reflect which places have been important enough for people to name, not what places actually exist in the landscape. For example, more farm names could be included in the contemporary material since many dwellings and summer houses have been built, however, names that are generally used and known have not become attached to them.

### The Preservation, Disappearance and Emergence of Place Names

Place names have been primarily divided into two main groups: culture names and nature names. Culture names refer to settlements, agricultural features and artefacts – names that refer to cultural places that entirely or partly result from man's work or activities. Nature names refer to natural features – places that are associated with bodies of water and the landscape (see also Ainiola 2002: 181, Kallasmaa 2005: 136, Alas 2009: 78-79).

### Settlement Names (Oikonyms)

The settlement names (names of the villages, part of villages and farms) constitute the most significant part of the material. The village names have remained the same since the settlements developed, although the names of the *Jorika* and *Neebuka* villages, which lost their status as villages in 1940, are currently still used to designate parts of villages, but the knowledge of these names is declining. The names of homes and places that are important to people are comparatively enduring, and 72% of the main farm names have survived in various collections until the present day. The importance of the farms is also demonstrated by the fact that a large number of disappeared farms' names can be found in all the collections of place names, which the people still remember and wish to hand down. For example, *Paadi*, the name of a large farm appears in all the collections although the farm was abandoned after World War II and divided in four. Other names of destroyed farms are recorded in secondary names – the seaside is called *Nuudialune* ('Below Nuudi') after the destroyed Nuudi farm. The military campus built instead of the Koltsi farm is called the *Koltsi raketibaas* ('Koltsi Missile Base') and the hill that is located on the road that replaced the Kase farm is called *Kasemägi* ('Kase Hill').

The farm names are characterised by a large number of parallel names; and many names of owners are used in addition to the official names. This was also acknowledged by the informants themselves who said that currently more owners' names were being used than farm names. For instance, if previously a farm was given the official name of *Kuusiku*, now it was called *Palmari* after the owner's family name. In the 1967 materials, owners' family names dominated as parallel names; however in 2013, first names also occur in addition to family names. For example, the farm's official name *Koitmetsa* exists in both the 1967 and 2013 materials; in 1967 the owner's family name *Kauküla* was also used; however in 2013, the first name was used, i.e. *Krista maja* ('Krista's house'). The parallel names of the farms are less permanent and are affected by changes of ownership.

Quite a large number of small new dwellings have been built in the area, which are given names in the official register. However, these official names are not generally known and other unofficial names that are known to everyone also do not develop. The main reason is the limited dealings that the residents have with each other and, with this lack of communication, all the (seasonal) households do not need names that most of the villagers would know.

### Agricultural Names (Agronyms)

Agriculture has always been a marginal activity on the Vergi Peninsula. There is little arable land and livelihoods have basically been connected to the sea. Since the fields and meadows were usually named after the farms they belonged to, there are very few agricultural names in the archives. They are totally lacking in the 1985/1994 collection. The meadows were often wooded meadows, which are now overgrown. Every farm tilled its fields and meadows itself and a general place name, or one that pertained to more people was not necessary. The meadows were also located away from the villages, and are outside the current movement trajectories.

In the name collections there are a total of 68 agricultural names, of which 16 are still remembered today, but can be considered lost, because the objects no longer exist as such in the landscape. Although people can still recall the destroyed places, the names are no longer used actively, since the places themselves no longer exist and in daily communication, one can not talk about these places (Ainiala 2000: 365).

The names of two meadows have changed and the type of one place has also changed. The meadow that belonged to the Oja farm has become a forest, which is named after the large boulder located there: *Oja heinamaa* ('Oja meadow') > *Ojakivi mets* ('Oja rock forest'). The former *Kappala heinamaa* ('Kappala meadow') > *Kotka lagendik* ('Eagle clearing'), since an eagle nesting area is located there and activities are restricted.

### Artefact Names

The category artefact or artificial object names is a group comprising culture names not connected to dwellings or agriculture. Artefacts are not a homogeneous group and their names have been recorded very unevenly, depending on the collector. A total of 64 artefacts have been named; in the 1967 collection only 16 names and in the 1985/1994 collection 27 names. Today, there are 50 artefact names, of which 27 only occur in this latest collection, although there is only one new object – the *Vergi maja* guesthouse was built in 2012.

Of the artefact names, the largest groups comprise of the names of the division lines in the forests and the roads. Of the 11 division lines, almost all have survived until the present day, because the division lines in the forest are important as objects and permanent in nature. Of the 11 road names, only six exist in earlier materials, of which one has not survived until the present because the road was destroyed. The name of one road has changed from *Leedepera tee* ('Leedepera Road') in the 1930s to *Sadamatee* ('Harbour Road'). Although the road also led to the harbour at that time, the road was named after the Leedepera Bay, on the edge of which the road was located. The disappearance of the Leedepera Road is probably caused by the fact that the *Leedepera laht* ('Leedepera Bay') is now usually called the *Vergi laht* ('Vergi Bay') after the village of Vergi. The Leedepera Bay name is known less and less and therefore the secondary road name – Leedepera Road – has also disappeared.

The northern coast is characterised by the so-called 'military pollution', which was left behind by the Soviet military, and life in the border zone is reflected in names like *Raketibaas* ('Missile Base'), *Prožektoriplats* ('Searchlight Grounds') and *Prožektorialus* ('Searchlight Base'). These names occur for the first time in the 2013 collection, but one can assume that they were already in use before.

It is difficult to generalise about the artefacts, because the group is so diverse. Basing on the available material, it turns out that relatively few of these names have disappeared. Of the 16 artefact names in the 1967 collection, five have now disappeared; of the 27 names in the 1985/1994 materials, six names have now disappeared. The reason is that the objects have been destroyed. In summary, one can say that 22% of the artefact names have now disappeared.

## Nature Names

On the Vergi Peninsula, the other most significant object type under examination, along with settlement names, is the category of nature names. Nature names can be divided into names of waters and terrain names.

### *Hydronyms*

Due to both natural conditions and historical lifestyles determined thereby, the names of waters predominate in nature names. Of the 280 nature names in the materials, 208 are hydronyms. These names include ones that define the objects connected with water (bays, rivers, lakes, seas, underwater reefs, shallows, depths, fishing spots, etc.) and those located on the boundary between the water and the land (islets, peninsulas, seacoasts, beaches, etc.).

Although with the arrival of the Soviet era, access to the sea was prohibited in most places, and today there is a considerable problem with the shore becoming overgrown with bulrushes, almost all the bay names have survived. The bays are visible from land, and can be used as landmarks even when access to the sea is restricted. The survival of the seaside names and names of the capes depends more on human activity. From 1967 to 2013, 57% of the names defining the border between the water and the land survived. The survival of the seaside and cape names is more dependent on human activity. Of the names of objects designating the boundary between the water and the land, 57% of the names recorded in 1967 still existed in 2013. An impact was made by the restrictions on the use of the seaside resulting from the border zone, the abandonment of the use of the shoreline as pastures, as well as the growth of bulrushes that have resulted from the latter. People do not need to use the seaside the way they did before and therefore, it is the names of the public beaches and larger capes that are generally known (e.g. the *Neeme lõugas* ‘Cape Backwater’ and *Lobi neem* ‘Lobi Cape’ which are used for swimming).

The names of rocks are included with the names of waters, since of the 51 rock names only 9 designate rocks that are not in or by the sea. Although this rock-rich coastal area would provide enormous opportunities for naming, only the rocks that are somehow useful to people have been named. For example the *Piprakott* (‘Pepper Bag’), *Äia kivi* and *Ämma kivi* (‘Father-in-Law Rock’ and ‘Mother-in-Law Rock’) have been important when sailing in shallow waters. Rocks are by nature very permanent and wholly 75% of the rock names have survived. Much of the location-related folklore is also connected to rocks, which helps the names to survive. New names for seaside rocks have also developed due to the increased importance of the vacation area, e.g. *Diivan* (‘Sofa’), *Vahvlikivi* (‘Wafer Rock’) or *Kurruline kivi* (‘Pleated Rock’). Today most of the rock names with references that are now inaccessible due to the growth of seaside bulrushes have disappeared or are being forgotten, as are the ones that are further from the shore and have lost their importance due to the disappearance of fishing.

Hydronyms are very enduring, because the named objects in nature are permanent and less dependent on humans. In this area, 72% of the names in various collections have survived to the present day; there are few new names and these designate objects related to swimming areas.

### Terrain Names

Of the 72 terrain names on the Vergi Peninsula, the majority comprised forest and hill names. Most of the peninsula is covered by forests and a total of 36 forest names exist in the name collections. Of these, 18 have survived. Half the forest names have disappeared, and all the secondary names have survived (e.g. *Pedassaare mets* ('Pedassaare forest') in the village of Pedassaare and *Neeme mets* ('Cape forest') on the Natturi neem ('Natturi cape')). The names of the smaller sections of forest and those located far from the villages have disappeared. The reason is the change in lifestyle, because most people no longer do their own logging and the utilisation of wooded meadows has also totally disappeared. Additionally, the majority of the forests growing on the peninsula are maintained by the state.

Although the ground is flat on the Vergi Peninsula, a total of 22 hill names exist. Of these, 14 hill names have survived to the present day; half of them designate small rises on roads and are used by many people and therefore more likely to survive. Like the forest names, many of the hill names are based on the names of larger objects, for example, the *Pihlaspea mägi* ('Pihlaspea hill') in the village of Pihlaspea, and the *Süsinõmme mägi* ('Süsinõmme hill') in the Süsinõmme forest. In total, 53% of the terrain names have survived. Of the nature names generally, 67% have survived.

### Summary

Figure 2 provides a survey of the types of analysed names, a comparison of the data from 1967 and 2013, since these two collections are most comparable and the time gap between them is the greatest. Those names that are still remembered but no longer used have been left out, since the references have been destroyed or fallen into disuse. As we can see from the chart, the greatest number of names designates people's dwellings or is related to bodies of water and these two groups of names have survived the best. Conversely, the agriculture names on the Vergi Peninsula are the least stable and we can say that all the names have disappeared. Relatively few new names have been added, a total of 8%. Although many new dwellings have been built, the need for new names has not developed.

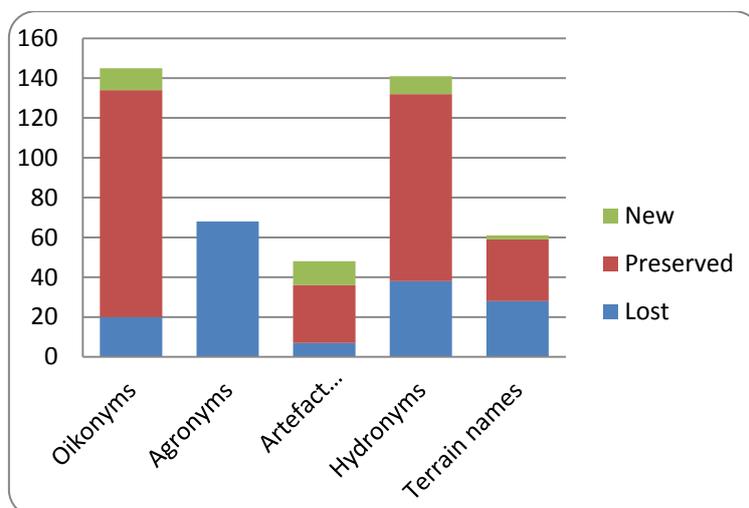


Fig. 2. The disappearance, survival and emergence of new names between 1967 and 2013

Place names have disappeared and survived equally – 41%. The difference is in the types of names. Based on the character of the places, agriculture names are much more likely to disappear than the names of nature objects. Only 30% of culture names and artefact names have survived and 59% of nature names. Of the names of natural features, terrain names have disappeared more frequently than hydronyms – of the latter only 27% have disappeared, while 46% of terrain names have been lost. Generally, culture names have disappeared because the objects have been destroyed. However, natural features are less dependent on human activity and these names disappear when the need to identify them decreases.

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