

The Onomastic Landscape of Copenhagen – Meaning Formation, Rewriting History and Onomastic Scale Reduction

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Abstract

This article provides an insight into urban toponyms in Copenhagen from a stylistic-rhetorical discourse analysis perspective. The findings originate from empirical collected names, which are further examined in my coming PhD thesis. I investigate all urban toponyms across onomastic categories within three study areas. The study areas are defined by rather different linguistic and rhetorical paradigms and consequently I am investigating each area from a slightly different theoretical and analytic approach.

The City Centre study area is defined by many commercial names. Often the meanings of commercial names are complex because multimodal meaning construction strategies have been applied to the names. The multimodal meaning construction strategy delays the shift from appellative to proper name.

In *the development area (Carlsberg City District)* I investigate the motives behind naming comparing the official chosen names to the actual in-use but unofficial names in the district.

The residential area (Nørrebro) is, in my opinion, defined by different kinds of ‘places’. In the following I present my own term *onomastic scale reduction* as a tool for the naming authorities in Copenhagen to construct a sense of *place* in a vast and otherwise linguistically disorganized city.

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Introduction

The connection between language and the physical world is not a simple one. Name givers may name the landscape using tropes and figurative language and sometimes folk etymologies are tied to the places too. These are ways in which to add more meaning to the real world than if you name the world in a literal manner.

Tangling with people’s perception of reality as a rhetorical strategy becomes even more obvious when we look at the toponyms in big cities from a synchronic viewpoint. Street names, names of squares and shops have often been invented by official naming authorities or the shop keepers themselves. Often these name givers have an economic interest. Thus it becomes important to the name givers to both invent names that people can relate to in a positive manner and to create names people will remember.

This article investigates three different rhetorical strategies used for naming in Copenhagen. I aim to show how these rhetorical strategies have an impact on proper names and how we perceive them. By applying multimodal meaning construction strategies many commercial names point back at their appellative origin and the shift from appellative to proper name gets delayed. This rhetorical strategy aims at keeping the name as open to interpretations, associations and connotations as possible.

When developing a district the naming authorities can choose other names than the ones already in use at the site. By fitting the chosen official names into an overall branding strategy, the language users' perception of reality can be tampered with.

I also present my very own term *onomastic scale reduction* as a tool for the naming authorities in Copenhagen to construct the notion of *place* in a vast and otherwise linguistically disorganized city simply by tangling with urban toponyms in a rhetorical manner.

Material, Method and Premise

Copenhagen is the capital city of Denmark. Approximately 22% of the Danish population live in the Region of Copenhagen today, in round figures 1.2 million people.

During the industrialization in the 18th century large numbers of people moved to Copenhagen and the city expanded rapidly. This called for a great deal of city planning, and new streets and squares needed names too. Thus, the City of Copenhagen formed an official naming authority, now called The Copenhagen Naming Board. The board consists of five politicians appointed internally among their fellow party members, all for election every four years. The Copenhagen Naming Board suggests names for all new streets and squares being developed in Copenhagen and the board members are otherwise involved in The Technical and Environmental Administration at City Hall.

My data consists of all the urban toponyms from within the three study areas. I have collected the visual place names by physical field trips, but I have also excerpted from maps and other written sources.

I deal with street names, names of squares, churches and houses, names of institutions and commercial names, albeit mainly official names. I have, however, collected unofficial names in the study area defined as 'development area', because I am investigating how many unofficial names are now made official.

Each of the study areas is a quarter of a square kilometre and has been carefully chosen from a selection of similar possible study areas. I have conducted pilot projects previous to my actual decisions to make sure the chosen study areas would contain a sufficient amount of toponyms of linguistic and figurative variation.

Because I am interested in linguistic variation and figurative language, I wanted my study areas to be in different parts of the city in order to get as many different types of urban toponyms as possible. I wanted some of the oldest names in Copenhagen, and therefore I chose to study an area in the City Centre. But I also wanted some of the youngest names in Copenhagen, which led me to pick a study area in a development area. My third and final study area is in a district that classifies as 'residential area', but the space is characterised by a number of features distinctive to the study area district. It is impossible to avoid area-specific characteristics in the study areas, because every district has its own distinctive features (Stensgaard 2002).

As a result, my study areas are very different from each other, which is why I am conducting stylistic-rhetorical discourse analysis in a slightly different manner in each area. Nonetheless, I share a premise of the toponyms as mainly textual figures and the overall

stylistic-rhetorical analysis. But respecting the unique and distinctive features defining each area, I simply needed a slightly different approach for analysis in each study area.

I mainly investigate urban toponyms from written sources (maps, signs and official documents). Therefore I regard the urban names I deal with to be small pieces of texts, which is why I apply an analysis that originates from literary theory to the etymological interpretations too. As a result my analysis' has two end results: the etymological interpret and a characteristic of the rhetorical-stylistic nature of the name.

In my opinion this approach becomes even more fruitful when the urban names are to be understood figuratively. Literary theory has dealt with the variety of different understandings of tropes for a decade, and I am now applying some of these theories to my material. As I see it 'a metaphor' is more than just 'a metaphor' because the nature of what constitutes 'a metaphor' varies depending on viewpoint. In this sense it gets limiting to define 'a metaphor' in as narrow terms as e.g. 'a metaphor = the cognitive metaphor', because one could easily exclude viewpoints that might be more adequate in given circumstances.

Copenhagen City Centre – The Problem of Meaning Formation

Like the majority of capital city centres in the world, the Copenhagen City Centre has a rather big shopping area for pedestrians, and therefore the study area contains a vast number of commercial names. Many of these names are visible on signs at street level. Apart from the proper names the linguistic landscape also contains appellatives, logos and texts, and sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between the linguistic and grammatical categories.

This is hardly a problem for the potential customers. As long as 'some kind of text' is communicating what the shops are selling, the customers are able to choose to either go inside or past the door. The communication is doing what it is supposed to do: it communicates. Yet, I could not stop to wonder: how much of the context do we need to take into consideration in order to understand a commercial proper name? And how do we distinguish the proper name from appellative, logo and linguistic landscape?

Take the name *Paradis (Paradise)*. The last two letters (-is) are written in a different colour and these particular two letters spell the Danish word for 'ice cream'. Furthermore -is is written in blue letters, and the colour blue often symbolises something cold. Not surprisingly the shop sells ice cream. If I had only written down the name, and not taken the visuals (the colours) into consideration, I would have missed this piece of information.



Fig. 1. The shop *Paradis* ('Paradise') sells *is* ('ice cream')

Of course there is more to the name than the colourful visualisation of the fact that the shop sells ice cream. The name itself meaning ‘paradise’ gives all potential costumers associations with ‘something divine’. Adding this association to the word ‘ice cream’ we expect a divine, tasteful quality ice cream. Additionally, the first five letters ‘parad’ are pronounced just like the Danish word *parat*, ‘ready’, and this association too blends in with the association of the divine. The ice cream not only tastes heavenly, you can get it right away.

The name *Paradis* is very different to the text: *Gormsgade 23 Købmand*.



Fig. 2. Gormsgade 23 Købmand (Gorm’s Street 23 Grocer)

‘Gormsgade 23’ is the actual address of the shop. *Købmand* means ‘grocer’ and is nothing more than an appellative. From a name research perspective *Gormsgade 23 Købmand* is hardly even a proper name. Yet it communicates exactly the information potential customers are interested in knowing, namely that this particular place is a grocery shop. And I do believe that the prevailing majority of people would consider *Gormsgade 23 Købmand* to be a proper commercial name, because (1) it communicates and (2) the text is placed above the entrance door, where shop names are usually located.

Though the name does not resemble a classic proper (commercial) name, there is a powerful discourse in play for where the physical visualization of commercial names are usually found in the cityscape. The strong discourse compensates for the fact that *Gormsgade 23 Købmand* (*Gorm’s Street 23 Grocer*) from a grammatical point of view is an address and an appellative – not a proper name.

The point I am trying to make is not whether *Gormsgade 23 Købmand* is in fact a proper name or not, but to point out the variety of commercial names in the cityscape. Some of the names resemble appellatives and others communicate a lot of meaning using multiple communication strategies, which relate to the proper name but are not *in* form of a proper name itself.

I do however think the multiple meaning construction strategy is a very deliberate communication strategy from the name givers’ perspective, and something name researchers should take into consideration when interpreting commercial names. In this respect commercial names are very different from place names and other toponyms. Since the vast

majority of commercial names live a life as written forms on signs and texts above the shops' entrance doors, they are able to communicate via text as medium. Therefore the commercial names have the ability to communicate a number of simultaneous multiple meanings, in a way that often makes the names complex and impossible to define as carriers of merely one specific 'proper' meaning.

Carlsberg – How to Rewrite History

Carlsberg Byen (Carlsberg City District) is a development area. But the name *Carlsberg* is also the product name of the renowned Danish beer that had been brewed at this particular site from 1847. In late 2008 the beer production moved outside Copenhagen and the Carlsberg brewery sold off 75% of the 600,000 m² industrial area to four other shareholders. Now the shareholders have to agree on the future of the site, although they do not necessarily share the same visions.

Over the next 10-15 years the industrial area will be developed into a new district containing private residences, retail, business premises, a new station, streets and squares. Some of the old industrial buildings are listed heritage buildings so the new district will be a mix of old and new.

Strategies of around-the-clock urban living play an important role in the Carlsberg City District development strategy. This means the site is far from desolate, even under construction. The Carlsberg brewery still has administrative offices at the site and private traders and institutions have rented spaces for their trades in the buildings formerly used for beer production. In this sense the area is diverse and contains a lot of urban names differing in time and type.

In the 1970s-80s up to 7,000 people worked at the brewery. Some of these people are still working for Carlsberg at the site and they carry knowledge of the in-use unofficial names tied to the site, some of which may well date back to 1847.

On the 1st of August 2014 twelve squares and streets in the new *Carlsberg City District* were named. The vast majority of the streets and squares do not yet exist. The city planners want to brand 'the Carlsberg story' and preserve the area's history, so they prefer street names that relate to the Carlsberg brewery activity. Spokesmen from the Carlsberg brewery agree to this branding strategy.

When the names got published several Danish newspapers wrote about the twelve names emphasizing them as *historic*. This is obviously a qualified truth since the official names were just published (1st of August 2014) and became known to the actual name users. Furthermore many of the names do not even have a denotata yet, so the names are rarely used. The historic origin of the chosen names becomes even more questionable when comparing them to the place name recordings I conducted among the Carlsberg employees that have worked at the site the longest. Thus, the historic reputation of the twelve chosen names is part of a clever branding strategy. Let us take a look at the misunderstanding.

When looking at the official documents explaining the background and motives behind the twelve chosen names, it becomes clear that the name givers have worked on the basis of themes. The twelve names fall into five different categories of name motive, defined

by the name givers themselves. The chosen themes are: beer production, the area's history, people related to Carlsberg and artists. The latter name motive does not relate to 'the Carlsberg story', but is a result of The Copenhagen Naming Board's private interest in naming streets after famous Danish artists (in this specific case the painters Franciska Clausen and Christen Købke), which has been a popular name motive for many years.

Two streets are named after people related to Carlsberg one way or the other. *Johanne Møllers Passage (Johanne Møller's Alley)* is named after the woman, who worked at Carlsberg the longest (65 years) and *Bohrs Gade (Bohr's Street)* is named after the physicist Niels Bohr, who lived at the Carlsberg honorary residence 1931-1962. Originally the honorary residence was the home of Carlsberg's founder, but it functioned as honorary residence for scientists or artists from 1914-1995.

The two street names are not historic in the sense of being old and original, neither are Niels Bohr and Johanne Møller a random choice of people after whom to name the streets. Yet one should bear in mind that these people are carefully singled out from other options. In the function of street names Niels Bohr and Johanne Møller put Carlsberg in a certain light connecting Carlsberg to (1) the world famous Niels Bohr and thus an interest in science (2) an employed *woman*, which brand Carlsberg as an enterprise with a seemingly long interest in women's equal rights.

Many Carlsberg employees did in fact prefer the latter street named after *the person*, who had worked the longest at Carlsberg. But since that person turned out to be a man the naming authorities decided to name the street after *the woman*, who had worked the longest at the brewery, despite the fact that she had had colleagues with longer seniority. Although this final decision might be controversial, The Copenhagen Naming Board has made the decision to name more streets and squares after women since a survey in 2008 concluded that a lot more streets are named after men than women in Copenhagen.

The name motives 'beer production' and 'the area's history' also have the potential to be 'historically misleading' depending on how you define 'historic' in this onomastic framework. Eight names are categorized as belonging to these categories, but in reality they mainly resemble a *modern day conception* of what 'beer production' and 'the area's history' looked like in the late 1800s and through the 1900s.

The street names *Lagergade (Warehouse Street)*, *Flaskegade (Bottle Street)*, *Flaskehalsen (The Bottleneck)* and *Kuskenes Gade (Drayman Street)* are all made up names and part of 'the area's history'. However, it would be fruitful to ask in what sense the names relate to the area's history?

When comparing the above-mentioned names to the names I collected by name recordings the chosen names are very different from the actual in-use urban place names. According to my place names recordings only a few streets have names at the Carlsberg site, as opposed to a vast number of buildings and squares. Yet, the square names are generally much more specific than the appellative 'bottle' or 'warehouse'. In reality there were many warehouses spread all over the site, not to mention the numbers of bottles going in and out the site on a daily basis. Names like the above-mentioned ones would simply be too unspecific.

If you wanted to mention a warehouse, you would rather say *DC'eren*, a derivative, definite form and acronym of the appellative *distributionscenter* 'distribution center'. Being

the ‘distribution center’ would be the most distinctive usage of the building and an information you would need to specify in order to distinguish that particular warehouse from *Rød Lagerbygning (Red Warehouse)*, *Halmlageret (The Straw Storage)*, *Lagerkælder 3A* and *Lagerkælder 3B (Storage Cellar 3A and Storage Cellar 3B)*. A name like *Warehouse Street* simply would not act as the motivation in the time span it takes for a word to become a proper name. *Warehouse Street* designates too many potential road sections and you would have to present an additional piece of information every time you were to use the name. Consequently the proper name would get fixed in the form including the additional piece of information, for instance as *Straw Storage Street*.

On the other hand, several warehouses could in theory have been gathered at the same stretch of road, making the name a lot more plausible. But in reality the warehouses were spread over the 600,000 m² site, the *Straw Storage* was near the stables and pen and not next to the *DC’eren*, for example, ultimately making the name of *Warehouse Street* unlikely as a naturally composed street name.

The naming authorities themselves say that *Warehouse Street* and *Bottle Street* will be established close to a former warehouse containing bottles. In this sense the names *do* relate to the former buildings and activities at the specific place, but the names are hardly what one would find at an old brewery site.

Four squares are named according to a ‘beer production’ theme: *Gærtorvet (The Yeast Square)*, *Kildepladsen (The Spring Square)*, *Humletorvet (The Hop Square)* and *Tapperitorvet (The Bottling Square)*. All of these names are created on a highly associative basis naming the main ingredients for beer making (yeast, water and hops) and a working method specific to beer production (bottling). Furthermore *Yeast Square* is actually the renamed turning square. The Carlsberg employees have called it *Køretorvet (The Turning Square)* for over 40 years due to the drivers who would turn their cars at this specific square in order to either drive further into the industrial site or to leave the area to go into the city.

Though *The Turning Square* may very well have been in use among the Carlsberg employees for a long time, the name does not correspond with the modern day conception of beer production in 1847-2008 that a non-specialist would have. The name simply does not leave the ‘outsider’ with ‘the right’ piece of information, if any at all. The fact is that many people drive around in varied means of transport every day, thus potentially leaving a name user not familiar with beer brewing at the actual Carlsberg site with all sorts of images or ideas of the name’s meaning in the mind. And these images are likely to either be too comprehensive or simply the *wrong* picture according to the branded ‘story of Carlsberg’.

Thus, the twelve historic names for the *Carlsberg City District* are not historic in the sense ‘old’. They are historic in the sense of pointing out pieces of the modern day non-specialist conception of beer brewing. In this sense the urban names are rewriting (or rebranding) history. But at the same time the naming authorities are in fact turning the perception of reality upside-down. They could have chosen the names already in use at the site, designating reality as it was and partly still is. By doing so they could teach the non-specialists the (historic) everyday life at Carlsberg. But rather they chose names so unspecific they fit into any non-specialist’s knowledge of beer brewing leaving the non-specialist with nothing but his or hers (idealized) ideas intact, which may not correspond

with reality. The name fits the lowest common denominator, albeit ensuring that the non-specialist is left with a *sense* of brewery activities.

Nørrebro – Onomastic Scale Reduction as a Tool to Construct a Sense of Place

The district of Nørrebro was mainly built in the late 1800s and it quickly became a slum and working class area. Over the past 30 years it has, however, been significantly renovated, and now it holds a diverse group of residents from working class people to students, artists and families with small children. But the district of Nørrebro still has a rough reputation and it is also the part of Copenhagen with the highest amount of immigrants compared to any other part of the city.

I originally thought my main investigation in this study area would be commercial names and language encounter studies, because of the high amount of, in particular, Arabic commercial names. But as I collected the urban names I noticed some of the toponyms were used to create a notion of a ‘city within the city’ from an onomastic point of view..

The Copenhagen districts are not perceived only as different places with individual distinctive features. Sometimes a group of street names stands out as a unit different from the rest of the city. Sometimes we even name the units: *Pisserenden (The Urinal)*, *Kødbyen (The Meatpacking District)*, *Det Mytologiske Kvarter (The Mythological Area)*. The areas become self-sufficient and sometimes they direct themselves inward toward their own centre. They become cities within the city.

I am not the first one to have made this observation. Both architects and phenomenologists have dealt with similar notions. In the following analysis I am aiming at an interdisciplinary application of existing theories of how ‘place’ and ‘cities in the city’ are created in (big) cities and why. I do this to reach a greater understanding of semantically related street names and to show that naming is also a rhetorical tool. I call this: *onomastic scale reduction*.

Det Mytologiske Kvarter (The Mythological Area)

In this particular study area there is an area of streets with semantically related names named after characters of the Norse mythology. The oldest street name related to this theme is *Thorsgade (Thor’s Street)* named so in 1863 after the thunder god Thor. Over the following years more streets were built and named according to the mythology theme.

With a theoretical background in the book *La pensée sauvage* (1962) by anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Danish professor Martin Zerlang introduced the concept of scale reduction in the urban context as an attempt to make the city’s tremendous development feasible (Zerlang 2002: 16). Zerlang claims that when the European cities expanded in the late 1800s, it happened at such a pace and to such an extent that they became too vast for the city dwellers to comprehend. Zerlang claims that when people get confronted with an overwhelming mass of some sort, they have an urge to spontaneously simplify it by reducing the mass into smaller entities, because only then you are able to

comprehend what you are dealing with (ibid.). To Zerlang this way of *reducing in scale* becomes a tool to create entities within a larger whole that enables people to comprehend the urban dimension once again. In order to grasp the city, the city dweller needs smaller entities that Zerlang calls *cities in the city*.

In this way cities in the city are a consequence of the modern disintegration of the city (Zerlang 2002: 19) and scale reduction is a tool to deal with the problem. Consequently one might say that cities in the city become modernity's attempt to re-establish 'place' in the distorted city.

Zerlang describes cities in the city as architectural phenomena and he lists a number of characteristics defining them. In the present context not all of the characteristics are equally important, but he accentuates that the cities in the city appear as *self-sufficient entities* and that they create an *otherness* to the surrounding cityscape. As prototypical cities in the city he mentions the zoo and amusement parks.

Based on these assumptions I claim that semantically related names in defined areas, potentially have the same dynamics – only it is linguistic. Often semantically related street names create a linguistic otherness when compared to the surrounding onomastic cityscape. In my opinion the consistent linguistic entity of a group named area often creates the *illusion* that the streets belong together and must be perceived as an entity.

The written sources from 1863 do not say anything about the motivation for the name *Thorsgade* (*Thor's Street*). But in 1892, when *Heimdalsgade* (*Heimdal's Street*) gets its name, the minutes state the name motivation as a direct consequence of the prevailing Norse mythological theme present in existing street names in that particular area. This makes us capable of deducting that the conception of the semantically related names as a *self-sufficient entity* and an *otherness* compared to the surrounding cityscape was present at this time in history.

In 2007 the City of Copenhagen decided to put up signs explaining the myths about the characters after whom the streets within the mythological theme were named. On *Baldersgade* (*Balder's Street*), for instance, one can read the myth of Balder (if one reads Danish) and the myth-telling signs are on every street corner of *Baldersgade* telling the same story. On *Nannasgade* (*Nanna's Street*) one can read the myth of Nanna, on *Mimersgade* (*Mimer's Street*) one can read the myth of Mimer and so on.



Fig. 3. Street sign and myth on Baldersgade (Balder's Street)

In doing so The City of Copenhagen re-brands the streets with the mythological theme as an entity. It is the only place in Copenhagen where you have actual myths as a deliberate context to street names, so it is a rather distinct linguistic strategy to create otherness. As they put up the signs, they even named the area *The Mythological Area* (*Det Mytologiske Kvarter*) and by doing so the linguistic creation of a city in a city was indeed complete.

There are two onomastic layers playing an active role in the case of *The Mythological Area*. The first onomastic layer is the one presenting the bird's eye view that is easily observed when you look at maps. From this perspective it is easy to see the semantically related street name areas as entities spread over the city, creating a notion of structure and organization.

But when walking around at street level the city might not look as organized and structured, because you are constantly confronted with different kinds of texts both street names, commercial names, appellatives, ads and logos that all together constitute a complex linguistic landscape. Often you might not be aware that you are in the middle of an area of semantically related street names. The City of Copenhagen tries to go from the bird's eye view to street level, to create the same sense of order and structure that can be observed on a city map. And they try to create order and a sense of 'place' by putting up the myth-telling signs.

In doing so they are also trying to tangle with the process of when the proper names become so grammatical that the semantics and the original meaning of the name steps into the background, as was the case to a much greater extent before the City of Copenhagen put up the signs adding a context to the proper names in *The Mythological Area*. It is a deliberate rhetorical strategy to pour meaning and associations into proper names. But it is also a constant battle between grammar and semantics.

Conclusion

I have found discourses in the urban toponyms of Copenhagen that in different ways are trying to influence our conception of the connection between language and reality.

The commercial names form a complex problem of understanding meaning and grammar itself. Applying multimodal meaning construction strategies to commercial names shows how they become more than proper names in a narrow grammatical sense, because we also need to take e.g. visuals into consideration as either the part of a name or at least as an important part of the commercial names' context. But it forms a paradox too, for what happens when the proper name becomes the proper name and the classifying and semantic meaning is suspended? Do the multimodal meaning constructing strategies in the written form of *Paradis* constantly remind us of the names' semantics, because the shop sign communicates the proper name (grammar), the connotations and what the name is denoting all at once? Is it possible to manipulate grammar using multimodal strategies to construct meaning? The positioning discourse for proper nouns in the city scape plays an important role for the language users and city dwellers to understand and distinguish grammatical categories from each other.

In the development area the Copenhagen Naming Board's and Carlsberg city planners' branding strategy on one site and the unofficial in-use names at the other site forms a potential discourse collision. Furthermore, the onomastic 'reality' that the city planners and the Copenhagen Naming Board are constructing will surely crack if you start comparing the chosen official names to the actual in-use unofficial names.

Finally, there is the question of who is controlling the onomastic cityscape at bird's eye view and at street level. How do you control and maintain the onomastic cities in the city by onomastic scale reduction as a rhetorical-stylistic strategy to create place in a vast and otherwise linguistically disorganized city?

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In addition various lists, official documents, reports and recommendations from The Copenhagen Naming Board (Vejnavnenævnet) and documents from the archives at the Copenhagen City Hall:

- Borgerrepræsentationens Forhandlinger (1855-1997)
- Minutes from Copenhagen Naming Board with recommendations and The Environment and Technology Committee's decisions (1997-2014)