Surnames in the Melting Pot: Presentation of a Project on Surnames and Immigration

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Abstract

This article presents a new three-year research project on surnames and immigration in present-day Sweden. Chosen surnames from some of Sweden's most important immigrant languages will be examined through interviews with name bearers. The interviews will focus on changes in pronunciation and spelling, parallel use of name form in different stages of adaptation, the officially registered name form (where not all special characters can be properly registered) and the relation between name and identity in a migration context.

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This article presents a new research project on surnames and immigration in present-day Sweden. After World War II, the number of immigrants has increased and at present, almost every fifth Swedish citizen is either born abroad or born in Sweden, but with both parents born abroad. Of course, this has had great influence on the Swedish surname stock, as many immigrants bring surnames which have not been in use in Sweden before. And when those surnames from foreign countries and languages become used in Swedish society, it also has an influence on the forms of the names. Swedes in general do not know much about Hungarian, Turkish or Arabic pronunciation, so when names from, for example, those languages are used in a Swedish context, the names are almost always bound to get a more or less different pronunciation. This is, of course, a natural process – but also a process of great onomastic interest. Many of these surnames will be handed over to new generations, and therefore be a part of the Swedish name stock in the future as well. Which name forms will be in use in the future, are results of the adaptation process going on today.

My research project is called *Surnames in the Melting Pot. How Immigrant Surnames are Integrated into the Present Day Swedish Surname Stock*. It is financed by Riksbankens jubileumsfond, the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences, and will last for three years, with one researcher. The aim of the study is to investigate how immigrant surnames are adopted to a new country, in my case Sweden. The reason for choosing surnames is of course that they are hereditary, and are therefore likely to be part of the name stock in the future as well. A researcher on Swedish immigrants in America has claimed that, of the whole Swedish language that was once in use there, it is the surnames that have remained the longest (Hedblom 1984: 87-88). That can possibly be the case with the immigrant languages and surnames in future Sweden, too.

This study concentrates on what I call *immigrant names* – which partly, but not completely, overlap with *immigrants' names*, in the sense 'names borne by immigrants'. In

my investigation, it does not matter if the name bearers are born abroad, if they are immigrants of the so-called second or third generations or if they bear the name as a married name. Of course, all these different conditions will influence the name bearer's relation to the name in different ways, but in this project, I am interested in all these aspects. My approach is the name itself. It is, so to speak, the name that is the immigrant.

Immigrant surnames have been defined as surnames that:

1. Had no bearers in Sweden by 1 Jan 1920, and
2. Are borne by at least 100 bearers registered as residing in present-day Sweden.

The date 1 Jan 1920 is chosen for purely technical reasons: a stock was taken of all the family names registered as being in use in Sweden that specific date. This resulted in the name list *Sverges familjenamn 1920* ('The family names of Sweden 1920'), which can be used to check which names were in use in the country, by at least one person, at that time. The reason for the limit of 100 bearers is to avoid most of the newly created surnames, which are quite common in Sweden as a group, but where the individual name in most cases has fewer than 100 bearers.

If you count the surnames that meet these two criteria, you will find that they are about 1,500. But how to handle them? As a start, I wished to group them by their language of origin. That is, however, no easy task. The first problem is that I do not know all the languages of the world. As a remedy for that, I have formed a reference group of people with knowledge in some of the major immigrant languages in Sweden, e.g. Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Polish, Turkish, Albanian, etc. The members of the reference group are mainly native speakers working as university teachers and researchers, and thus highly qualified for the task. But this does not help me in my second problem, namely the general difficulties of name classification. In many cases, personal names are hard to classify, since they are borrowed and transferred between languages and often get new, more or less, adopted forms. Therefore, no definite classification can be expected. But at this stage, a preliminary classification is nevertheless better than none at all. The plain and unpleasant truth is that when you try to get a grasp of a huge material, you cannot have the ambition of being as exact and particular as when dealing with only a few objects. Sometimes it is worth more to get an overall picture than to get exact information on just a small part.

Each member of the reference group was given a list of the 1,500 selected surnames in alphabetic order, but with no other marks or comments. I asked them to mark all the names they considered belonging to their own language, not necessarily in the etymological sense, but also names from other languages which have an adopted form in the actual language. Needless to say, such languages labels are apt to be very rough, since it is not always easy to determine to which of two related languages a certain name belongs. But even if it is not possible to distinguish if a certain name has a Spanish or Portuguese form, it can still be possible to determine that the name is not e.g. Estonian or Chinese – and in a first mapping of names that might be of almost any origin, that information is actually useful. My previous work (presented in Fründén 2013) has given an overall picture of the most important donor languages when it comes to immigrant surnames. With both the number of immigrant names and the frequency of specific names taken into consideration, the most important languages

seem to be Arabic, Finnish, Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian, Turkish, Spanish, Chinese, Persian, Albanian, Vietnamese, Hungarian, and Polish.

Out of these languages, I will pick specific names to investigate. In the choice of which names to investigate, I will combine various aspects. In principle, on the one hand, highly frequent names, and on the other, names that in some way differ from the normal structure of Swedish names. Highly frequent names can be e.g. *Ali* (borne by 9,829 persons in Sweden) and *Ahmed* (borne by 7,445). One can always argue that the most common names are of great importance, simply since they are most likely to remain. Names that differ from Swedish language or name structure are on the other hand the ones more likely to undergo a change of pronunciation. Such names are e.g. *Khosravi*, *Nousiainen*, and *Kovács*.

When it comes to written forms, there are a lot of names with special characters or diacritics which are not in use in Swedish, e.g. *Ćosić*, *Yılmaz*, *Şahin*, and *Pawłowski*. Apart for the problem that these characters are not very well known to Swedes in general, there are also limitations to which letters can be handled by the Swedish population registration system. What you can register is the ordinary Swedish alphabet (a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z å ä ö) alongside with some special characters, namely à á â ã è é ê ë ì í î ï ò ó ô õ ù ú û ü ý æ ø ç ñ and ÿ. Thus, many vowels can be registered, but only two consonants apart from those of the Swedish alphabet. This means that for example the letters ć č š ž ğ ı ş ł ś and ź, which are all in use in some of the major immigrant languages in Sweden, cannot be registered. These conditions will be highly relevant to my investigations.

Names originally written in other alphabets or writing systems form a special category. Their transcription forms normally do not include problematic characters – but there might be quite a few possible transcription forms for the same name. For example, the forms *Sharif*, *Shareef*, *Sharef*, and *Charif* all represent the same Arabic name, but are transcribed according to different systems. Names with various transcription forms are also an interesting object for this study.

My main research question is how the immigrant names are Swedified. But how can I find that out? My idea is that the best information about the different name forms in use is to be found with the name bearers. Therefore, I am going to interview people who bear those names that I have selected. To find informants, I am planning to use university student databases. This does not, however, mean that I am only going to interview university students. The databases contain information on everyone who has attended or even only applied for some kind of university course, long education programs as well as freestanding part time courses, since the computer based registration of applicants started some decades ago. This means that persons found in the database can be of all ages and professions, present-day students, teachers, civil servants, engineers, nurses, unemployed artists, etc. What they do have in common is interface with Swedish society and, not of least importance for me, up-to-date contact information. Thus, those databases are an easy way to access information: I can search the database for a certain name, and immediately get a list of name bearers and how to get in touch with them.

My main interview themes are planned to be four: spelling and pronunciation; parallel name forms; officially registered name form, and name and identity.

The first theme, spelling and pronunciation, concentrates on the linguistic changes of the names. Which sounds or sound combinations actually cause problems? Are there

similarities or dissimilarities compared to loan words, which also undergo a process of phonetic adaptation? Are names treated in the same way, or differently? In this adaptation process of names, there might also be differences between languages. In general, one can presume that names from languages which are well-known and high status are pronounced closer to its original form. So, English, German or French names in Sweden are probably pronounced in a more English, German or French way, while names from low-prestige languages might be more likely to undergo change. I will not investigate any English or German names this time, but maybe there can still be differences between the languages of my investigations.

Parallel name forms means two different forms of the same name, being in use by the same person in different contexts. This is often one name form close to the original name (in the sense of a normal pronunciation in the homeland) and one more Swedified form. If parallel name forms are in use – and I think they often are – it is interesting to find out in which contexts the informants use the Swedified form, and in which contexts the form closer to the original name. On this point, I hope the informants will be able to report not only which forms they use themselves, but also which forms their family members use in different contexts. I have an idea that there might be differences in the same family, so that the younger ones use the Swedified form more often. In that case, based on this information, can you get an idea if the use of parallel forms will be maintained, or if only the Swedified form is likely to remain?

The restrictions on special characters in the official Swedish registers mentioned earlier form the background of my third interview theme. Quite a few special characters or diacritics are left out or replaced with characters that are graphically similar. But will the name bearers continue using these diacritics when writing their names, or will they start leaving them out after some time? Diacritics bear information on the pronunciation of its letter. If a diacritic is left out, will that gradually cause a change of the pronunciation, so that it is adjusted to the new spelling? Or will the spoken form remain unchanged, regardless of the loss of the diacritic?

Finally, it is of course of great interest to find out more about the relation between name and identity in this specific context. Can one identify with a 'misspelled' and 'mispronunced' name? How long does it take to accept the new Swedified name form as your own name – if you ever accept it at all? The questions of name and identity are important to everyone, but maybe they can be of even greater importance for those who have, for some reason or other, separated from a former homeland, or else are part of a linguistic or ethnic minority group.

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