

The Great Onomastic Divide in Norway: The Standardizing Problem of Settlement (Farm) Names after 400 Years of Danish Influence¹

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Abstract

In Norway the spelling of place names, in particular the names of farms and smallholdings, has been disputed since the second half of the 19th century. There are two reasons for this, one being the strong influence by Danish on the written language after 400 years of Danish rule, and the other one being the idea that the ownership of a farm implies the ownership of the name of the farm or the smallholding. In 1990 an act on the spelling of place names was passed to safeguard the place names as a part of the cultural heritage. The farm owners, however, should be heard before the spelling is decided (by the Mapping Authority). Numerous farm owners have protested against the spelling regulations and in 2009 a small group of MPs forwarded a proposal to give the owners of smallholdings the right to decide on the spelling of the name of their smallholdings, whereas the name of the main farm will keep its standardized spelling. The Parliament voted, rather surprisingly, in favour of the proposal. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs has been charged with formulating an amendment according to the wishes of the politicians. The bill is in process, and if such an amendment to the law will be adopted, the onomastic divide in Norway will be legally mandated.

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Introduction

Let me start by posing an intricate question: who owns names? I do not think that people in general pay much attention to such a question in everyday life. Some may say that, as names are parts of the language, they are owned by everybody and should be considered as being in shared ownership. Of course, people are concerned with their own names and like to see them written and used correctly. Most people would probably say that ‘this is my name’, for instance *Tom*, and correspondingly ‘that is your name’, for instance *Ann*, perhaps meaning that a name is a personal thing attached to one’s identity. In fact it is, but that does not mean that Tom owns the name ‘Tom’ or Ann owns the name ‘Ann’. They are sharing those names with thousands of other individuals. Some people bear unique names bestowed on them by their parents, while some have invented their own unique names, and in such cases the name bearers may, to some extent, claim the ownership of their names. When it comes to company names and brand names, the owners will certainly claim that such names are privately owned

¹ My thanks go to Guy Puzey for proofreading the language in the paper.

in the sense that no one else can use them for other purposes than those they were made for. Such names are also normally protected by law. I shall return to this category in connection with the claimed ownership of farm names.

In my view there is a common understanding that personal names (first names / surnames) – as opposed to place names – are taken on an individual basis, and that the person carrying the name, and those who gave the name, have a kind of ownership of the name, at least of its spelling. Names of things belonging to the private sphere, like boats, rooms, cabins etc., may also be considered private property. When place names are used in a private context they are often used with varying spellings, and it is by no means forbidden to do so. However, in this paper I will argue that place names belong to the whole society and that they should be standardized in accordance with officially adopted regulations. These names are linguistic terms handed down from generation to generation mostly without identified name givers. Consequently, they should be regarded as common cultural property. This is also in line with United Nations resolutions (UNGEEN 1897-1926). In many cases, however, individuals like to see their own private spellings of place names on maps and road signs instead of the official spellings, and bitter conflicts sometimes emerge from such disagreements. This applies, not least, to Norway.

Legal Requirements for Giving and Using Names

Names have a formal aspect at the state level as authoritative means of identifying individual people, ships etc., and they also have a communicative function among people. As part of a language, names are shared by a linguistic society, which may be small or large. Most personal names are borrowed from a personal name stock and, as mentioned above, these are normally shared by a certain number of people. Many countries have issued laws concerning personal names. The recent Norwegian personal names law (Lovdata 2001) is quite liberal in the sense that it allows almost any name to be taken as a first name or surname. A first name should, however, have the character of a first name, and it should distinguish between males and females. Furthermore, it should not be derogatory.

Surnames are normally transferred to children from the family to which they belong. If a person at a later stage wishes to change his or her surname, he or she is relatively free to do so. An existing surname may be assumed by anyone if it is borne by more than 200 individuals. The law also accepts that any place name may be taken as a surname, as long as it is not protected in the capacity of a surname. So instead of the common surname *Hansen*, a person may choose the name of a well-known topographic feature as a surname, such as *Jotunheimen*, the name of Norway's highest mountain area. It would, however, not be very well received if a person were to assume the name of such an iconic place for personal naming purposes. As soon as somebody assumes a unique surname, including any 'vacant' place name, then that name is, so to speak, taken and protected. A great number of place names used as farm names are already taken as surnames, as there is a long tradition in Norway of using farm names as surnames – a point to which I will return shortly.

Coining New Place Names

Before discussing the question of the ownership and spelling of farm names and the names of parts of farms (smallholdings²), I will briefly comment on the naming of unnamed topographical features. This question may sound redundant, but it is not. The large majority of place names have been handed down from generation to generation without any indication of who coined them. Most place names have come into use ‘by themselves’ through a gradual process, with exceptions such as the planned naming of streets or similar spaces by local and governmental authorities.

In fact, there are countless spaces large and small that are not named. As a result, the name consultancies and the Mapping Authority sometimes receive enquiries from people or groups who wish to name topographic features in their local areas. The answer is that there is no law that forbids such an action, and in private contexts people may give names as they wish. The Norwegian Mapping Authority’s attitude is that a place name, even if it is a result of a private initiative, may be accepted for mapping if it becomes known among a larger group of users. It should then also be confirmed by the municipal authorities. Recreational organizations have on several occasions taken the initiative to coin new names for parts of the Norwegian mountains. Now the ‘touristic’ names *Breheimen* ‘the home of glaciers’, *Reinheimen* ‘the home of reindeer’, and *Trollheimen* ‘the home of trolls’ are all well established. *Jotunheimen* ‘the home of giants’ received its name already in the 19th century at the very beginning of mountain tourism.

Recently, a discussion has been going on in Scandinavia about giving a new name to the long mountain range running from the south to the north of Norway and through part of Sweden. An existing name *Kjølen* is traditionally used for the border area between the two countries, but this name does not quite fit the mountain range in question. The Geological Society of Norway announced a name competition a year ago and, after a committee had evaluated the proposals, the winner was announced as *Nordryggen* ‘The Northern Ridge’. However, both Norwegian and Swedish geological experts protested and claimed that *Skandane* / *Skanderna* had a long tradition as the name of the common mountain range and is accepted by the two countries as well as by Finland. Time will tell if the new name comes into use (Jenstad *et al.* 2013, Nystuen 2014).

Standardization of Place Names in a Historical Perspective

One question is who owns place names; another question, more relevant in practice, is who has authority over their spellings. If there is an ‘owner’ of a name, it could be assumed that the owner decides. The question regarding the spelling of place names (or geographical names) becomes pertinent, for instance, when the mapping authorities publish maps, or national statistics agencies construct national names registers, or the public roads

² There are about 50-60,000 farms in Norway which were established in the Middle Ages or earlier. During the following centuries, most of these farms, if not all, were divided into parts (in Norwegian (*gardsbruk*)); sometimes into two parts, but mostly into several parts. The individual farm parts might continue to bear the same name as the original farm, or they might get a different name. In this paper, I will use the term *smallholding* although it does not quite comply with the corresponding Norwegian term *bruk*.

administration put up names on road signs. Most countries have regulations on how to spell place names. Theoretically, any spelling of a name could function if the society in question agrees upon it. Normally it is agreed that the same spelling rules used in the language in general should be used for place names, although not without exceptions, as many traditional names are used in old and very often distorted spellings. In many cases, however, more than one spelling of a place name is used, especially in Norway.

In Norway, the standardization of place names started in the middle of the 19th century. When the Danish-Norwegian Union was dissolved in 1814, Danish was totally dominant as a written language, whereas the various dialects spoken in the country had developed more or less directly from the Old Norwegian spoken language. This resulted in a great difference between the written and spoken forms of place names. In 1836, the authorities decided to establish a new land register in which farm names would be modernized and written more in line with the Norwegian spoken forms. The new register was an important step forward, but many mistakes remained. Another great undertaking was launched in 1886, when a completely new cadastre was issued. Now most of the names had been given a standardized spelling based on their local pronunciation and their etymology. Oluf Rygh, who had been the chairman of the committee working on the revision, continued to study farm names, and from 1897 onwards his material was published and explained in an 18-volume series entitled *Norske Gaardnavne* ('Norwegian farm names') (Rygh 1897-1926).

The Mapping Authority issued its first rules on the spelling of place names on maps in 1912-1913. Here, the main principle was that the spelling should be based on the inherited local pronunciation and at the same time follow the spelling rules of the newly established Norwegian language, Nynorsk. In the following decades, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs issued updated versions of the regulations, following the same principles. However, there were numerous protests against many official spellings, and in around 1960, several cases were brought to court. It was ruled that the Ministry had no legal authority to decide on the spelling of names of smallholdings. In fact, this verdict was one of the reasons for beginning the process of creating a new law.

The Place Name Act

Another 30 years came to pass until the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) adopted a law on the standardization of place names in 1990. The law maintained the principle of standardizing place names on the basis of inherited local pronunciation, including old names of farms and smallholdings. To some extent, the views of the owner should be taken into consideration, but only new names were completely left to the owner's decision. The law stated that geographical names should be standardized according to one of the two official forms of Norwegian (Bokmål or Nynorsk), and then on the basis of the traditional local pronunciation. However, some dialectal traits, as well as widely used traditional spellings, may be retained. More detailed spelling rules were issued in the regulations pertaining to the law. Sámi and Kven (Finnish) geographical names should be standardized according to the spelling rules of those languages. During the standardization process, local views must be heard and taken into consideration before the determination of a spelling. The Mapping Authority is responsible

for standardizing most names on governmental level. The purpose of the Act is to safeguard the cultural heritage vested in geographical names, to determine a spelling that is both practical and useable, and to promote knowledge and active use of names. The Act applies where any state, county or municipal body needs to determine geographical names or the spelling thereof, or use them in the performance of its duties (Lovdata 1990).

Local Protests

In many cases, however, locals have reacted against the official standardization of names. To understand this, one should bear in mind that a large number of Norwegians have a surname derived from a farm name. Until the 1800s, farm names functioned as addresses for the inhabitants of a farm, and when a person moved from one location to another, their ‘surname’ was changed in order to correspond to the new residence. As time went on, mostly in the second half of the 20th century, farm names were adopted as permanent surnames. When such names were entered in church records, an Old Danish-like spelling was normally used. The orthography of the farm name and surname was frequently inconsistent and could be confusing with regard to etymology and local pronunciation. When the orthography of farm names was standardized during the 19th and 20th centuries, the same names used as surnames were preserved in the old orthography with any distorted spellings or ‘mistakes’.

Another historical factor is that most old farms have been divided up over the last few centuries, but the various smallholdings parcelled off have mostly retained the same name as the original main farm. As the same name is used for both the original farm and the subsidiary farmsteads or smallholdings, it has been customary to standardize both names according to the same rules, but individual families often have their own way of spelling their surnames. For example, a family with the surname *Wiig* might live on a farmstead named *Vik* that was originally a part of a main farm named *Vik*. The owners of one of the smallholdings within the major farm *Vik* may prefer to spell their surname *Wiig*, while their neighbours might insist on other spellings like *Wik*, *Wiik*, *Wig*, *Wiig*, *Wich*, or in many cases also the standardized form *Vik*. The same applies, for instance, to *Krogvold*, a Danish-inspired form of the standardized form *Kråkvål*. *Krogvold* looks like a compound of Danish *krog* ‘hook’ and *vold* ‘meadow’, whereas the compound *Kråkvål* consists of *kråke* ‘crow’ and *vål* ‘burnt clearing’.

In many cases, names of smallholdings are used for businesses, often also in a distorted spelling. Gradually, as a ‘private’ spelling takes over, even among local people, there are renewed requests for this spelling to be accepted as official. As a result, economic interests may pave the way for a spelling which is not in conformity with the standardization principles.

A Proposed Amendment of the Norwegian Place Name Act

A basic question is whether the ownership of a private property with an inherited name also includes the right to determine the name’s spelling or even to change the name. This is a widespread view. It is understandable that people object to having to use a spelling of a name that they are not accustomed to using. This means weighing up considerations of individual or family identity against orthographic consistency to serve the common good. The current trend, however, in politics as well as public opinion, seems to be that jurisdiction over the name of property should be on an equal footing with the right to choose one’s own surname.

The law had not solved the discrepancy between authoritative spellings of farm names and spellings used in private contexts. A group of farmers contacted two MPs from the conservative political party Høgre, who took the matter forward through the political process. In 2009, the Parliament voted unanimously, rather surprisingly, in favour of an amendment aiming to give owners the right to decide on how to spell the names of their smallholdings. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs then prepared an amendment which was sent out for consultation among relevant administrative bodies and organizations. An extract from the justification states as follows (translated from Norwegian by the author):

In the opinion of the Ministry, it will prove expedient to establish different rules in connection with the orthography of names of smallholdings than those used for farm names.³ The Ministry believes this solution will pave the way for creating a good balance between the right of owners to influence the orthography of the name of their property and considerations involved with preserving cultural heritage. (Kulturdepartementet 2007-2008)

Counterarguments

The Mapping Authority, as well as the Language Council of Norway and name scholars, have argued against the proposal as it will allow for various spellings of the same name to exist, depending on the owner’s view. Seen in the light of the drive to preserve intangible cultural heritage, this initiative is regarded by name scholars as a step backwards, although most Norwegian place names will be safeguarded in compliance with the existing paragraphs of the regulations. According to the Mapping Authority, this line of reasoning will make it difficult to distinguish between the name of a smallholding, where the owner has the right to determine the spelling, and a farm name, which is standardized according to orthographic rules; as mentioned above the name of the smallholding may be derived from the farm name.

³ A farm name is in this context the name that the original farm had in the Middle Ages, before it was divided.

This may, in turn, lead to a situation in which the spelling of a smallholding name also takes over the function of a farm name. If the proposed amendment is carried out, Norway will see the establishment of a double onomastic system, or a divided system, in which most of the place names will be consistent with the spelling rules, but where many names of smallholdings (parts of farms) will be written in an inconsistent and casual way.

Place names are an important part of cultural heritage locally and nationally, as well as for the international community. Most names have appeared, so to speak, by themselves, at various times in the area's history, and they are a reflection of man's activity in the area over the ages. They show how name givers have described nature and various stages of settlement. In many countries place names are traces of earlier language communities. And they represent a broad spectrum of historical linguistic forms. Therefore, the precious value of place names should be managed like other types of national heritage. This implies that place names should be standardized according to national standards and used consistently on all public levels.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs has, in this proposal to amend the Place Name Act, accepted the onomastic divide in Norwegian nomenclature. Or, more explicitly, it has accepted the premise that one category of place names, specifically those of smallholdings, should be left to owners to determine, whereas other names principally belonging to the same onomastic category, i.e. farm names, should be determined according to a set of regulations. In its proposal, the Ministry itself stresses the importance of place names as valuable constituents of the intangible cultural heritage, giving good arguments for their preservation. But, as the names of smallholdings have become politicized, the Ministry has been charged with formulating an amendment according to the wishes of the politicians. Before too long, the onomastic divide in Norway will probably be legally mandated.⁴

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⁴ The proposed amendment of the Place Name Act which has been discussed in this paper was passed by the Parliament on 15 June 2015. However, a considerable minority consisting mainly of the Norwegian Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Christian Democrats voted against the amendment.

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