

Conference of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, “The use of languages by local and regional authorities” – Balvanyos, Covasna County, Romania, 31 May 2018

Presentation by Kaisa-Rautio HELANDER, Associate Professor of Sámi and Finnish languages at Sámi allaskuvla | Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Guovdageaidnu

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Session 3 “The role of minority toponyms in the linguistic landscape”

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The Sámi languages are indigenous languages in the Nordic countries, as well as in the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Today, I shall limit the discussion to the recognition of Sámi place names in linguistic landscapes in Norway, and I'll pay a special attention to road signs in Sámi areas.

Norway is the only one of the Nordic countries with a Place Name Act which came into force in 1991, with amendments in 2006 (Lov 1990). The use of bi- or even multi-lingual place names is regulated in section 9 of the Place Name Act:

‘Sámi and Kven place names that are used by people who permanently live in, or have an occupational attachment to the place, shall be the names normally used by official authorities, e.g. on maps, signs, in registers, together with a possible Norwegian name.’

Hence, Norwegian place names still have the same right to be in official use as they have always had. Regardless of this, the use of Sámi names is perceived as a threat and as a stronger right than that which Norwegian people already have.

Even if the legal basis for official use of Sámi names is ensured by the Place Name Act, problems of official recognition may still arise in Norway. Opposition to the recognition of Sámi place names most often culminates in discussion of the use of Sámi names on signage. Signs showing place names are a central part of the linguistic landscape, visible to local communities in their daily life in a very different way from, for example, the use of maps.

As Spolsky (2004,1) notes, “public signs are outward evidence of language policy”. Silencing Sámi place names in public spaces is a part of power structures used to continue to maintain the status quo when it comes to the ownership of history and identity. – I use the term *silence* of such place names which are in oral use but are not accepted in official use e.g. on maps, signs and landproperty registers. – In Norway, adding Sámi names to signs reveals the ethnic complexity of local societies. Before the Place Name Act came into force, this complexity has been hidden by using place names only in Norwegian and hence creating a misleading representation of a homogenous, monolingual society.

The three categories of place name policy

I have termed the components of place name policy by adapting the term use in language policy, and hence divide name policy to *name practices*, *name ideologies* and *name management*.

I'll discuss shortly some examples of these components:

Name practices comprise e.g. oral and written use of the Sámi-language and Sámi place names as well as personal names, both within the language-community but also, in addition, in all the various different official contexts.

Attitudes and views regarding the value and use of the Sámi language and Sámi place names form part of name ideologies. Earlier assimilation policy of Sámi place names is a typical example of name ideologies still strongly affecting official use and acceptance of Sámi toponymy.

There has, of late, been much discussion in the Sámi areas of Norway, both in the mainstream media and more recently also on social media, about the use of Sámi place names, and against their official use. Something that is apparent in this discussion, particularly in the arguments against official use, is the local majority language speakers name ideology, at the core of which is an exclusive acceptance of only majority language place names in official use, thus maintaining a monolingual onomastic landscape that has been built up over generations. The following example of the debate of accepting parallel Sámi place names on the road signs describes this issue: "Have the Sámi people not learnt to read Norwegian, and are they not Norwegian citizens? – In Norway, it is the Norwegian language that must be spoken and written. What languages a person might know, has nothing to do with the matter. Every country has its own language. Everything else is ridiculous." (Nelly Balteskard, HT)

This is an example how majority language people's name practices are intertwined with name ideologies supported by name management. The opposition to public use of Sámi village names in Norway, often shows that bilingual signage is perceived as a threat, which would change the whole of the 20th century's consciously constructed, monolingual, monocultural settlement representation, where only the language of the nation state has rights.

Name ideologies are found on all levels of society, and they clearly influence, through top-down mechanisms, even the name practices of individual persons. This, in turn, in local level name ideological contexts, has a clear bearing on the name-ideology of the local authorities, particularly with respect to name management. We also have examples where local authorities are mixing their private name ideological opinions with their role as public bodies.

In the Norwegian context, the role of administration and local discussions, especially bottom-up resistance affecting local authorities—are often closely connected. In the Norwegian model, the well-meant decentralization of the decision-making process to the municipal level with regard to implementation of the Place Name Act has given rise to a paradox of local democracy, since the majority are able to suppress the minority by putting pressure on local authorities and politicians.

The third component of the place name policy, name management comprises, as an example, the Place Name Act. Name management is though, not just about whether laws get passed or not. The central question with regard to name management is, how name-related matters as a whole are decided and how those decisions are implemented and respected, particularly at regional and local level.

The Place Name Act has been in force for almost 30 years, yet public bodies at both local and regional level still seem to lack sound routines for following up and supporting legislation through practical toponymic management. Hence, changing monolingual linguistic landscape to bilingual is still progressing extremely slowly.

Municipalities and the Public Roads Administration as place name managers

Many municipalities ignore the Sámi names for villages and do not approve standardized spellings for the corresponding Sámi language village names. In addition, the municipalities in the Sámi areas do not actively follow up bilingual signage but let the previous monolingual signage continue.

The county offices of the Public Roads Administration have not either fulfilled their official function as name manager, but recognition of Sámi place names on road signs is still very unsystematic. There are also notable differences between the sign categories themselves which is also a part of the unsystematic acceptance of parallel Sámi names in linguistic landscapes.

Local authorities can even draw out the process of recognition of village or town names in Sámi over an unacceptably long period of time, often extending over many years or even decades.

During the period of the harsh assimilation policy from the mid-nineteenth century, Norwegian central authorities established an official language and place name policy with the aim of suppressing Sámi languages and place names. In the contemporary setting, this suppression has moved from the central level of administration to the local, even to the extent of disregarding the law.

In Norway, Sámi settlement names are clearly regarded as symbols of Sámi rights, so resistance to the official use of Sámi place names shows not merely opposition to Sámi place names or Sámi languages, but also opposition to Sámi rights in general, i.e. linguistic rights, land rights and rights to cultural livelihoods, such as nomadic reindeer herding. Place names visualized on signs are thus the visible symbols that represent these rights. (Helander 2013a)

Silencing Sámi place names in public spaces is a part of the power structures employed to maintain the status quo with respect to ownership of history, identity and language.