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National standardization: Office treatment of names

“Good place-name practice” in the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act: Evaluations 2006 and 2011

Submitted by Sweden**

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**TENTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
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GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES**

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**“Good place-name practice” in the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act: Evaluations
2006 and 2011**

Submitted by Staffan Nyström, Sweden

Summary

Since July 2000 there is a paragraph on “good place-name practice” included in the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act. In an attempt to implement the paragraph two booklets were produced and distributed to all the municipalities in Sweden in 2001. This paper presents the paragraph in full and comments on two evaluations made to examine the possible effects of it. In 2006 – a first evaluation tried to find out how the paragraph and the two booklets had been received so far. A questionnaire was distributed to the 290 municipalities in Sweden and the results from this inquiry were presented in a printed report. In 2011 – another five years after the introduction of the place-name paragraph – a second and almost identical questionnaire was distributed to the municipalities in Sweden. The evaluations show that the paragraph on good place-name practice is gradually getting known, accepted and understood in the parts of society that handles most of the local place-name affairs in Sweden today. The awareness has increased when it comes to considering names as part of the cultural heritage as well as when dealing with their linguistic form and spelling. Constantly remaining, though, are the strong demands from the municipalities for more support, more training, available experts to call, more fora for discussion and more digitally accessible websites, databases etc. The paper also presents an ongoing process aiming to include Meänkieli in the Act. Meänkieli is an officially recognized minority language in Sweden with the same legal status as Sami and Finnish. The Swedish Government – as part of a political strategy to strengthen the minorities in Sweden – considers this a useful way to enhance the awareness and protection of minority language place-names.

Background

Since July 2000 there is a paragraph (§ 4) on “good place-name practice” included in chapter 1 of the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act [Sw. Lag (1988:950) om kulturminnen m.m., ändrad 2000:65, in short “Kulturminneslagen”]. In the Act emphasis is placed on linguistic correctness but even stronger on the importance of preserving place-names as a part of the nation’s cultural heritage. In an attempt to explain and implement the new place-name paragraph, the National Heritage Board of Sweden produced a small booklet in Swedish called “Ortnamnen och kulturminneslagen. Om tolkning och tillämpning av begreppet god ortnamnsed” (Nyström 2001) [“Place-names and the Heritage

Conservation Act. The interpretation and application of good place-name practice”].¹ It was distributed in printed form and free of charge to all municipalities and regional authorities in Sweden. It is also available on the Internet. Furthermore, in another booklet titled “God ortnamnsed. Ortnamnsrådets handledning i namnvård” (2001) [“Good place-name practice: a guide to name standardization”], the Place-Name Advisory Board of Sweden published and distributed an extensive comment on the new paragraph. The paragraph reads as follows:²

Good place-name practice

In State and local government operations good place-name practice shall be observed. This means that

- place-names established by long usage shall not be changed without good cause,
- place-names shall be spelled in accordance with generally accepted rules for linguistic correctness, unless spelling forms established by long usage otherwise require,
- the impact on names established by long usage shall be taken into account when forming new place-names, and
- Swedish, Sami and Finnish names shall, as far as possible, be used in parallel on maps and also for signs and other marking in multilingual areas.

Names that have been approved for public map production shall also be used in their approved form in other contexts.

The 2006 evaluation

The place-name paragraph (§ 4) in the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act – prescribes that in State and local government operations, good place-name practice shall be observed. As shown above, “good place-name practice” is specified in four rather short and compact clauses – no more.

Six years after the place-name paragraph took effect – in 2006 – a first attempt was made by the National Heritage Board to evaluate how the paragraph and the two booklets had been received so far by the 290 municipalities in Sweden. The Board distributed a questionnaire to all of them and the results from this inquiry were presented and commented on in a printed report (Karlsson & Nyström 2006). The title in English should be “Good place-name practice in the municipalities. An inquiry concerning local place-name activities as regards the place-name paragraph in the Heritage Conservation Act”.

A little less than half of the municipalities responded to this inquiry. Smaller municipalities (less than 50 000 inhabitants) were less inclined to answer than those with a larger population. Municipalities in the rural and sparsely populated areas of Sweden, far away from the major cities, were also less inclined to answer than those close to for instance Stockholm or Göteborg.

“Are you familiar with the section in the law dealing with place-names?” “Are you familiar with the two booklets on this subject?” “Are you using them often?” “Has the new legal amendment had any effect on the working procedures, the organization, the attitudes, etc. in your municipality when it

¹ An English version of the full text (Nyström 2007) was presented at the 9th UNCSGN (E/CONF.98/58Add.1).

² There is no official English translation of the paragraph. At least three versions have been used and this is one of them.

comes to place-names?” “Is the Act complicated, hard or easy to apply in your daily work?” “What kind of help, information or education would you like to have from the national place-name experts?” These questions indicate in a more available way what we asked for in the questionnaire, but not in these exact words, of course. As expected, most municipalities were aware of the existence of the paragraph, and many were also familiar with the two booklets that had been produced in order to elaborate the short formulations in the Act. But somewhat fewer of them actually used the booklets in their work even though they did have daily access to them. As mentioned above, only one of the booklets is on the Internet, not the other, and there was a strong wish that both should be available that way.

The answers and comments from the municipalities also showed that the addition of the place-name paragraph had not resulted in any significant changes in the way the work is organized when handling place-name affairs. But many of them emphasized that – and this is an important result – due to the Act there is an obvious increase of interest, of awareness and of consideration, especially concerning the preservation and management of place-names as parts of the intangible cultural heritage, but also concerning place-names as necessary linguistic expressions for daily use (including their morphology and spelling). People handling place-name affairs in the municipalities actually felt a bit more appreciated and respected after the introduction of the name paragraph.

The paragraph on good place-name practice was considered clear and easy to apply by some municipalities, while others claimed it is much too vague and too difficult to interpret and use on a daily basis. It was also regarded as “toothless” as there is no penalty possible at all, no sanctions in cases of infringement. So following the growing awareness and interest, the need for further guidance and help from the national experts was often pointed out by the local officials; more practical training, more onomastic education and more cooperation on a regional basis were on the list of desiderata.

The 2011 evaluation

In December 2011 – another five years after the introduction of the place-name paragraph – a second questionnaire was distributed to all the 290 municipalities in Sweden, this time from Uppsala University, which is my scholarly place of abode since 2008. In 2006 I was employed by the National Heritage Board in Stockholm. Just like in 2006 a little less than half of the municipalities responded to this inquiry (138 compared to 136 in 2006). Of course it is to be regretted that not every single municipality does as we wish but that is a fact we just have to accept.

A minor difference between the evaluations 2006 and 2011 must be mentioned here. In 2006 the basic term “place-name” was not explained and did cause some misunderstanding. Therefore, in the covering letter in December 2011 I made it very clear that place-names do include names of streets, squares, parks and other urban objects just as well as names of farms, villages, towns and natural objects like rivers, lakes, valleys, forests, etc.

The questions in the new questionnaire were, apart from one single added question, exactly the same as in 2006. Questions 1–11 were to be answered by choosing any of the alternative numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5, with 1 meaning “do not agree at all; this is not the case at all” and 5 meaning “do totally agree; this is exactly the case”. Questions 12–14 were more open questions to which anyone involved had the opportunity to answer or make a comment in his or her own words. Question number 15 was the new one compared to 2006 and had to do with Meänkieli, a variant of Finnish and one of the officially recognized minority languages in Sweden, spoken in parts of the north (see below).

Based on the chosen alternative 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 in the questionnaire and the number of municipalities answering the particular question I calculated an average result for each of the questions 1–11. I also compared the results from the inquiry 2006 with the ones from 2011. The results from 2011 follow closely the ones in the earlier inquiry. This is obvious. But a positive observation – and a promising trend – is that none of the questions has resulted in a lower average number in 2011 than in 2006, instead the number is either exactly the same or, as in most cases, somewhat higher. See fig. 1.

Question number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Average 2006	3,9	3,5	3,5	3,6	3,7	2,1	1,3	2,6	2,7	3,6	1,9
Average 2011	4,0	3,6	3,5	4,0	3,9	2,5	1,8	3,0	2,9	3,8	2,0

Fig. 1. A comparison between the questionnaires from 2006 and 2011. The numbers show the average results based on answers given to questions 1–11.

This development can hardly be interpreted in any other way than the following. The consideration provision on good place-name practice (i.e. the place-name paragraph) is gradually getting more and more known, accepted and understood in the parts of society that handles most of the local place-name affairs in Sweden today. The awareness has increased when it comes to considering names as part of the cultural heritage as well as when dealing with their linguistic form and spelling. Constantly remaining, though, are the strong demands and wishes from the municipalities for more support, more training, more lectures, available experts to call, more fora for discussion and more digitally accessible websites, databases etc.

Names in Meänkieli – an amendment

Quite soon after the inclusion of the place-name paragraph in the Heritage Conservation Act the question arose as to why Meänkieli is not mentioned in the text. Since 2000 Meänkieli is an officially recognized minority language in Sweden, today spoken by somewhat 75 000 people (www.sprakradet.se/meankieli). It has the same legal status as Sami and Finnish, both of which are explicitly named in the last of the four “explaining” clauses in the paragraph.

- Swedish, Sami and Finnish names shall, as far as possible, be used in parallel on maps and also for signs and other marking in multilingual areas.

One explanation of the lack of Meänkieli in the Act is that earlier many people, also the Government, regarded Meänkieli as just a variant of Finnish and consequently to be covered by the phrase “Sami and Finnish names”. But this attitude towards Meänkieli was and is not satisfying to everyone, complaints were still heard and continuous proposals were presented. In February 2011 the Institute for Language and Folklore (i.e. the major Swedish language agency) was commissioned to find a way to include Meänkieli names in the existing place-name paragraph. The Government – as part of a political strategy to strengthen the minorities in Sweden – considers this a useful way to enhance the awareness and protection of minority language place-names.

The work should be carried out in close cooperation with a selected group of other agencies and organizations making sure that any proposal from the Institute were firmly supported. The amendment that was finally suggested is short and self-explanatory. In English it reads (in bold letters) as follows:

- Swedish, Sami and Finnish names **and names in Meänkieli** shall, as far as possible, be used in parallel on maps and also for signs and other marking in multilingual areas.

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