

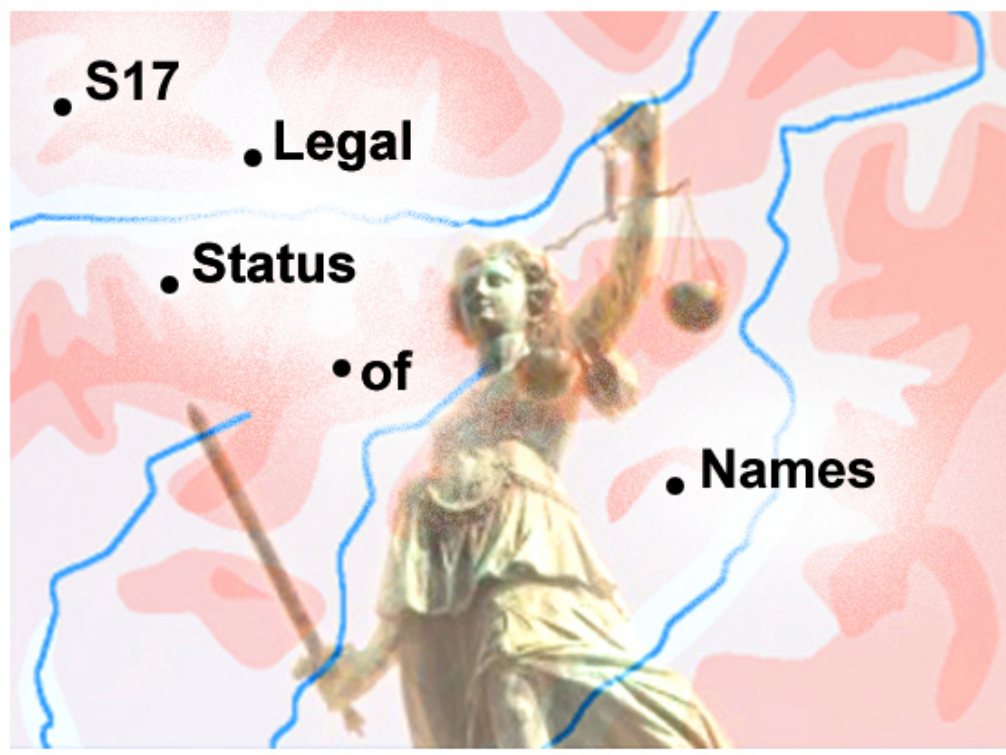
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This chapter is mainly based on the paper "Script Transformation Systems" by Peeter Päll , in the proceedings of the Training Course on Toponymy 2002 (Mitteilungen des Bundesamtes für Kartographie und Geodäsie nr 28, Frankfurt 2003. See also the "[documents](#)" section.

The module contains the following chapters:

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When reading through the following pages, you will come across some unusual terms. These terms are hyperlinked to the UNGEGN [Glossary of Terminology](#) (pdf). Behind each term a number (#) is given that corresponds to the numbering applied in this glossary, e.g. [toponymy](#) (#344).

For exercises and documents (and literature) on this topic see respectively the "[Exercises](#)" and/or the "[Documents](#)" section of this module.

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INTRODUCTION

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Standardization of geographical names is the process of choosing preferred name versions and linking them to specific geographical features. Full stability of the standardized names is only achieved when the names are granted official status. By this act geographical names would be protected by law and cannot be changed or tampered with anymore.

According to the Glossary of Toponymic Terminology an **official name** (#223) is a "toponym sanctioned by a legally constituted (e.g. national) names authority and applied within its jurisdiction".

In this definition one should note that a **names authority** (#232) is needed to approve official geographical names, and also that these names are applied within a certain jurisdiction. This would mean that only those names can be given official status that are under the sovereignty of the authority in question. A national names authority cannot assign and approve official names of places beyond the national sovereignty, although it can recommend on how to use these (foreign) names within its jurisdiction.

In reality, however, a national names authority sometimes just might not exist, or otherwise, even if it does, it could be difficult to determine what the official name of any given place is.



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1. DIFFERENT NOTIONS OF "OFFICIALITY"

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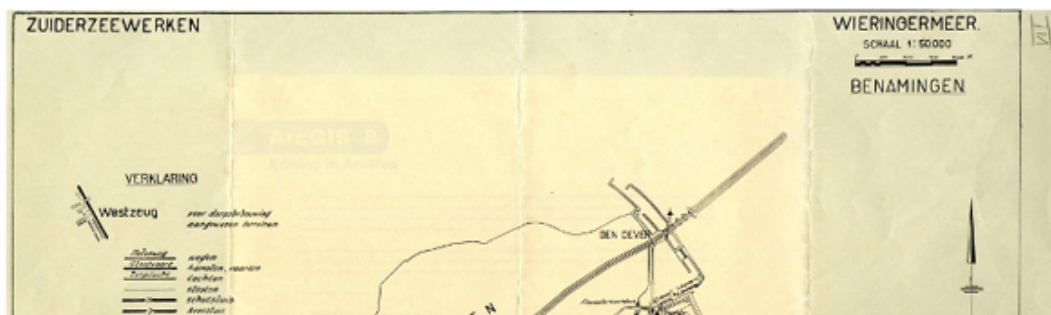
There is no uniformity in defining what would constitute an official name. Names might be given the official status by:

- a special name decision, or naming act, issued by an authorized agency;
- another legal act that would, *inter alia*, approve an official name to the place in question;
- mentioning the name(s) in official acts and documents;
- being published in official maps;
- being written on road signs, public signboards, etc.;
- the established usage.

Obviously, these methods are not all equally clear and efficient. For example, names mentioned in official acts might too often be contradictory and varying in their spelling. Road signs seem to be universally the least trustworthy sources for any names, including official ones. The "established usage" is also vague as there should be an authority to define what is meant by that. Even name decisions might be contradictory if it is not clear who exactly is authorized to name a certain feature as, for example, different agencies might name the same feature differently.

Basic questions that should be answered, though, in each case, are:

- Who has the naming power?
- How is the official status granted to names?


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2. NAMING COMPETENCE - EXAMPLES



In the **United States** the Board on Geographic Names (BGN), established in 1890, is responsible by law for all geographical names except those applying to offices or establishments of Federal agencies. Practically, however, the Board decides primarily on the names of natural features of the land, unincorporated localities, and populated places in the United States, its territories and outlying areas. The primary reference for official geographical names is the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS): all names included in GNIS, have equal official status. Names can be used on Federal maps, charts and other publications only if they are included in GNIS, otherwise they would have to be submitted to the BGN for approval. As exception, names established by Act of Congress or Executive order are official by law and do not need the approval of the BGN. (Orth & Payne 1997: 5-6, 10.)

In **Canada** the power to approve geographical names is the responsibility of provinces and territories; the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) has mainly a coordinative role. Principles and procedures adopted in Canada state, however, that the names of municipalities, territorial divisions, reserves, parks and other legal entities as created by, or resulting from, legislation by the appropriate government shall be accepted and thus would not fall in the scope of consideration of the regional names authorities. Names for facilities established by postal authorities, railway companies and major public utilities are accepted, if they are in keeping with the other principles. (CPCGN 1990.)

In **Israel** the Government Names Commission was set up in 1951 by a decree. The Commission is the sole authority on geographical names in Israel and in order to acquire legally-binding official status the names must be ratified by the Commission. The names are granted official status after publication of the Commission's records. An appeal against name decisions can only be made before a Court of Law but this has happened only three times during the existence of the Government Names Commission. (Kadmon, 2000: 213-216.)

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Names of administrative units are approved in most cases by the central government or parliament; only rarely may the representatives of the units themselves decide upon its names. Fairly common seems to be also the practice of allowing local municipalities to approve names to features within their area, such as streets, parks, municipal buildings and sites.

But there is still a vast number of features that appear on maps with names for which there are no universal rules regarding who is entitled to approve them officially. These include: populated places, natural features (lakes, rivers, mountains, capes, islands, etc.), artificial features (roads, bridges, junctions, buildings, railway station, etc.) and the like.

Several ways of approving of names:

1. The most efficient way of dealing with geographical names and granting them full official status is to set up a **geographical names authority** with decision-making power.

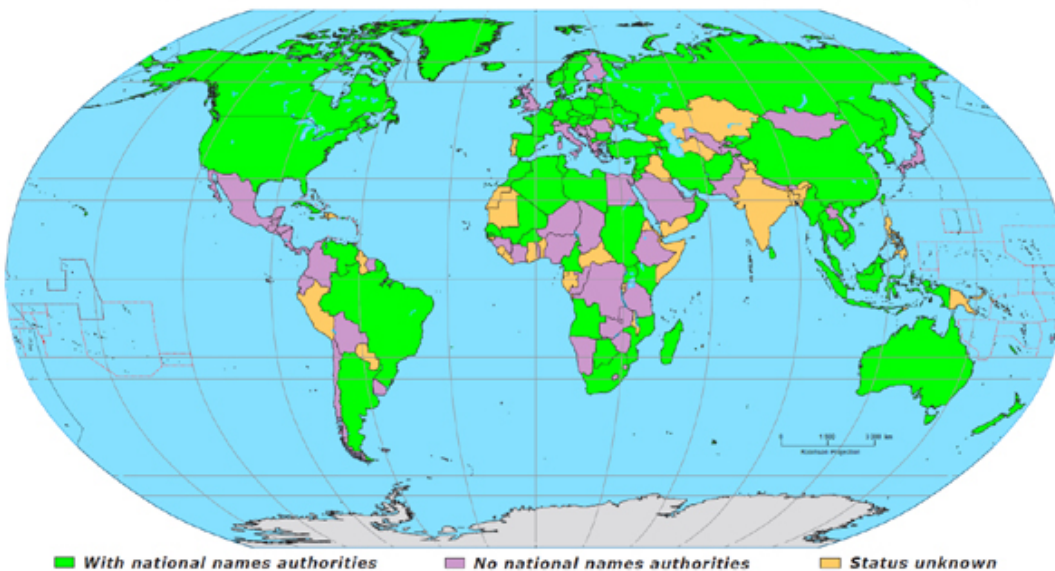
For examples click here 

2. The examples mentioned in the previous bullet illustrate cases where names authorities have full responsibility over geographical names, as mandated by legal acts. It seems, however, that a more common option in many countries is to have an **advisory names authority**.

The process of granting names an official status might work well also with this arrangement, provided that the decision makers would listen to the advise given.

3. In quite many countries the **national mapping authorities** themselves are considered as names authorities and, consequently, names published in official maps are regarded as official.
4. The least advantageous situation is the situation in countries where there are **no national or regional names authorities**. Name decisions in these countries might depend on arbitrary motivations by individual officials or politicians.

Geographical Names Authorities (May 2011)



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The procedures of giving names the official status also deserve attention, as the practice here may vary quite significantly.

What is in a name decision?

Naming is a process of assigning names as verbal expressions to certain geographical features. Consequently, a name decision must:

- contain the geographical name to be applied,
- identify the feature that the name will be assigned to, and its extent

The name must be spelled out in full (in capitals and lower case letters), including generic terms if they are used, in order to avoid ambiguities.

How the named features will be identified in a name decision, depends on needs and possibilities. It is fairly typical to indicate the administrative affiliation of any features (which provinces or other administrative units the features belong to) and/or give coordinates. Sometimes maps or simple plans are attached to name decisions.

If these two criteria are met, we can speak of an unambiguous name decision. In practice, however, we see too often official decisions with long lists of names that have practically no reference to the features that they are applied to. It must be assumed that the named features are identified in sources outside the scope of the name decision. But this makes the task of using official names quite complicated.

A name decision is not just about giving names. Basically a decision can:

- give an official name to a feature previously unnamed or not having an official name,
- change the existing official name (renaming),
- delete the existing official name.

The last option may become necessary if the named feature has ceased to exist.

Other types of legal acts whereby official names are established usually deal with the features to be named from another point of view. For example, an act establishing a national park would also give the park an official name. There are many borderline cases, though, in dealing with such official sources: names are obviously often not the focus of such listings and their spelling might be casual.



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4. LEGISLATION ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES



Norway is probably the first country to have adopted a Place Names Act. This was passed by the Norwegian Parliament in 1990, the Act came into force in July 1991. The main provisions are:

- the public body which uses a place name should authorize the spelling, after having consulted all parties concerned,
- place names which have been determined by law should be used by other public bodies,
- the written form should be based on the traditional, local pronunciation, while at the same time keeping to current spelling rules.

According to the Act positions for two place name consultants and one secretary were created for each of the four university regions in the country, in addition to consultants and secretaries for Saami and Kven (Finnish) place names in Norway. The advisory service is financed by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. All names recognized under the Act must be reported to a central computerized register administered by the Norwegian Mapping Authority. An appeal body was set up to deal with complaints about the standardized forms of place names. (Toponymic guidelines for Norway, 2000; Helleland, 1992.) - see: [UNGEKN Working Group on Toponymic Guidelines](#).

Click [here](#) for the Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990

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There are legal acts that are concerned with at least partly standardization and official approval of geographical names in many countries. These mostly identify the competence of various agencies in dealing with names. But in a few of the countries geographical names have merited also special legislation. We used examples Estonia and Norway.

The Place Names Act of **Estonia** was adopted in 1996. This legal act determines both the competence of various agencies in establishing place names and requirements for place names in order to be approved officially. The main requirements include:

- The language of place names (as a rule, these are in Estonian but minority names are also legal).
- The spelling of place names (this must comply with the rules of orthography but may reflect the local sound structure).
- Having only one name per (one) feature but allowing two official names in order to preserve minority language place names.
- Harmonization of the spellings of names.
- Publicity of naming procedures.
- Choice of new official place names (locally most widely recognized and widespread, also most significant in terms of history and cultural history shall be preferred).
- Allowing for change of geographical names only under exceptional circumstances.
- Avoidance of duplicate names in certain contexts.

Toponymic guidelines for Estonia, 1998, see: [UNEGN Working Group on Toponymic Guidelines](#)

For more information on the Norwegian example click here , and click [here](#) (or download [pdf](#)) for the Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990.



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5. CAN OFFICIAL NAMES BE WRONG?

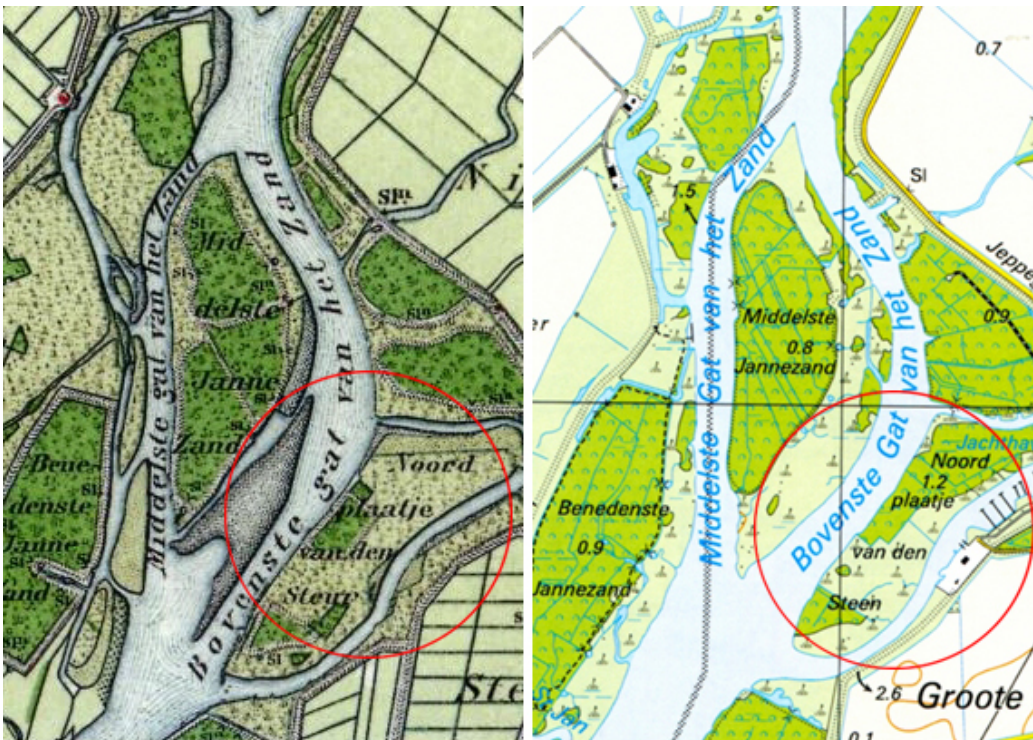
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Yes, if we consider geographical names from a point of view of linguistics, name planning or geography (location). The name might be orthographically incorrect, it might not correspond to the name actually used by the local population or an otherwise correct name might be applied to a wrong feature.

It must be emphasized that an official status of a name would not automatically guarantee correctness of the name and it cannot replace standardization in the true sense. Official names must be standardized according to the accepted set of rules prior to their approval. Quite a lot of efforts have been made in many countries to correct official names that are not linguistically or otherwise suitable.

Sometimes, when names are copied from a superseded edition of a map to a new one, mistakes are made. In that case, although still official, the new name version is no longer valid!

Take for example the name Noordplaatje van den Steur, the name for an inlet in a tidal area in the Netherlands. When it was copied in the 1960's to a new map edition, it was changed by mistake into: Noordplaatje van de Steen, although on commercial map products the original name was maintained. Still, the new, faulty name found its way into the Gazetteer of the Netherlands.



left: 1930 edition topographic map / right: 2000 edition topographic map 1:25,000





From a commercial map of the same area, 1960

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Based on the situation in the Netherlands.

- Place names in cadastral plans have no legally binding aspect. It is coordinates and numbers that have priority.
- Place names were exempted from the 1947 spelling law in the Netherlands: the spelling of geographical names was to be decided later on, not by law but by decree.

Topics of discussion

1. Street names were not considered as geographical names, and were to be spelt according to the 1947 Spelling Law.
 - During the last 10 years municipalities in our Frisian minority area where Frisian names used to be translated into Dutch by the topographic survey found the use of municipal acts to define the spelling of all toponyms within their area in Frisian.
 - Names of new municipalities (because of mergers) are decided upon by the Ministry of the Interior, experts from the Academy of Sciences contribute in an advisory capacity.
2. Municipalities have all authority regarding their areas. They can determine land use, have cultural autonomy, and may thus decide on spelling of names of geographical objects in their areas (but unfortunately, they frequently favour foreign or mediaeval spelling!).
 - The policy of the Topographic Survey is to write geographical names in accordance with their spelling in legal acts (election laws, provincial laws, municipal laws, drainage board authority ordinances). This is a misuse of those laws, that never were intended to standardize the name spelling, but were passed for other purposes. But as there is no national names bureau in the Netherlands, the Topographic Survey (part of the Dutch Cadastre) has no alternative sources.

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AVAILABLE EXERCISES

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Exercise 1: Devise a way to distinguish non-official names on a map

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EXERCISE 1: DEVISE A WAY TO DISTINGUISH NON-OFFICIAL NAMES

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a) Indicate a way in which the non-standardised character of place names can be indicated on the map.

b) Why is the restoration of indigenous place names often linked to legal aspects? See also in the literature the paper by Wonders.

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EXERCISE 1: DEVISE A WAY TO DISTINGUISH NON-OFFICIAL NAMES - ANSWERS

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- a) to underline / apply different font / differentiate through colour.
- b) it can cause conflicting land claims.

DOCUMENTS AND LITERATURE



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Available documents:

- [D17-01](#): Päll, P. (2002). *Legal status of names*. Training Course on Toponymy. Enschede, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin. 11 August - 6 September 2002. Compiled and edited by Ferjan Ormeling, K. Hans Stabe and Jörn Sievers Mitteilungen des Bundesamtes für Kartographie und Geodäsie. Band 28. Verlag des Bundesamtes für Kartographie und Geodäsie, Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp 91-94.

Literature:

- Norwegian Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors, for International Use, submitted at the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in New York 21-30 August 2007 as document E/CONF.98/124/Add.1
- Toponymic Guidelines for Map Editors and Other Editors, For International Use - Finland, submitted to the 22nd Session of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in New York 20-29 April 2004 as Working Paper No. 49
- Naftali Kadmon (2000) Toponymy, the lore laws and language of geographical names. This contains a part on: toponyms in a Court of Law; The legal status of geographical names, and on: The legal-administrative status of toponyms.
- Ludger Müller-Wille (2004) "Toponymies of lesser-used languages in the North: Issues of socio-linguistic conditions among Inuit and Sámi" *Études/Inuit/Studies*, vol. 28, n° 2, 2004, p. 73-88 ([URL](#)).
- Oskari Rovamo - MONOPOLISING NAMES? The Protection of Geographical Indications in the European Community. Helsinki University, 2006 ([URL](#)).
- William C. Wonders (1987) Native claims and place names in Canada's western Arctic. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* VII, 1 (1987):111-120 ([URL](#)).

Online resources:

- [Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990](#) ([pdf](#))

The United Nations sell the following publications which also can be downloaded from the [UNGEGN](#) website:

- [Glossary](#) of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names (New York 2002) / [pdf](#)
- [Manual](#) for the national standardization of geographical names (UN - Ecosoc, New York, 2006 ST/ESA/STAT/SERM/88 Sales No. E.06.XVII.7 ISBN 92-1-161490-2, available in the 6 UN languages) / [pdf](#)
- [Technical reference manual](#) for the standardization of geographical names (New York, 2007) / [pdf](#)
- [Resolutions](#) adopted at the nine UN Conferences on the standardization of geographical names ([English](#) ([pdf](#)) / [French](#) ([pdf](#)))