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National and international standardization of geographical names: Names collection, office treatment, national authorities, features beyond a single sovereignty and international cooperation

Project on the national standardization of geographical names in Norway

Submitted by Norway**

Summary:

Since September 2016, research on the standardization of geographical names has been conducted in the context of a doctoral project funded by the Research Council of Norway through its public sector doctoral scheme. The working title of the thesis is “Politicizing toponymic standardization: towards a new theoretical approach to the scalar politics in the standardization of geographical names”. The project, which is expected to be finalized by 2021 or 2022, is being undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the Norwegian University of Life Science.

As the State’s consultative body on language issues, the Language Council has been assigned by the Ministry of Culture to follow up on the official language policy. In Norway, the national standardization of geographical names is an integrated part of language policy and is even regulated by law. The overall purpose of the Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990 is to safeguard toponyms as part of the nation’s cultural heritage. The Act aims to balance dialectal diversity, official spelling norms, etymology, traditional spellings, local usage, local preferences and market forces. However, the various principles of standardization are often non-congruent, leading to disagreements, public debate and frequent revisions of the Act. Meanwhile, the expertise needed to work in the onomastic field and to implement the Act is rapidly decreasing.

Framing a policy issue along geographical, jurisdictional, temporal or linguistic lines influences governing ability, inclusion/exclusion, interests, power and the responsibilities of actors. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs is currently in the process of democratizing toponymic standardization policy within the concept of municipal self-government, suggesting that geographical names should be standardized according to local spoken and written usage and local preferences. However, the local use of names frequently

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conflicts with linguistic recommendations, which indicates that there is no undisputed truth on how the problem of toponymic policy can be solved.

Through a qualitative case study of the Act and its history, the doctoral research project explores how policy actors manoeuvre along geographical, jurisdictional, temporal or linguistic lines in order to legitimize one standard over another (and, consequently, to implicate one mode of regulation at the expense of others). The empirical data in the research project consist of policy texts, supplemented with semi-structured interviews with central policy actors and participant observation from policy work. The analytic tool used to analyse the data is a post-structural policy analysis drawing on concepts such as power, knowledge, discourse, genealogy and governmentality. The overall purpose of the project is for all parties to gain a better understanding of the discursive struggles and political rationalities associated with toponymic standardization in Norway so that the Language Council can be better equipped to address future policymaking in that area.

Introduction

Since September 2016, research on the standardization of geographical names has been conducted in the context of a doctoral project funded by the Research Council of Norway through its public sector doctoral scheme. This research project is owned by the Language Council of Norway and is conducted by one of its employees. The working title of the thesis is “Politicizing toponymic standardization: Towards a new theoretical approach to the scalar politics in the standardization of geographical names”. The project, which is expected to be finalized by 2021 or 2022, is undertaken in cooperation with the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the Norwegian University of Life Science.

This project is driven by the desire to understand the underlying power struggles tied up in policies promoting the standardization of geographical names in the Norwegian context. It is a story uncovering how toponymic standardization in Norway is based on particular views on geographical names as cultural heritage and how these particular views are produced, reproduced, contested and resisted.

Research problem

As the State’s consultative body on language issues, the Language Council has been assigned by the Ministry of Culture to follow up the official language policy. In Norway, the national standardization of geographical names is an integrated part of language policy and is even regulated by law. The overall purpose of the Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990 is to safeguard toponyms as part of the nation’s cultural heritage. The Act aims to balance dialectal diversity, official spelling norms, etymology, traditional spellings, local usage, local preferences and market forces. However, the various principles of standardization are often non-congruent, leading to disagreements, public debate and frequent revisions of the Act. Meanwhile, the expertise needed to work in the onomastic field and to implement the Act is rapidly decreasing.

Framing a policy issue along certain scales (e.g. geographical, linguistic and administrative scales) makes a difference in terms of governing ability, inclusion and exclusion, interests, power and the responsibilities of actors (Van Lieshout et al 2017). The Norwegian Ministry of Culture has recently proposed several amendments in the Norwegian Place Name Act that aim to give the municipalities more

power over and influence on the standardization of geographical names.¹ The backdrop for this policy proposal is an ongoing local government reform where the idea is to transfer more power and responsibility to the municipalities as they evolve into larger units. The dilemma, however, is that the local opinion on how to standardize geographical names frequently conflicts with linguistic recommendations. This indicates that there is no undisputed “truth” on how the “problem” of toponymic policy can be solved.

Main research question

As further described below, an anticipated outcome of this project is to lay the groundwork for theoretical development within this policy field. What kind of theoretical knowledge the research would contribute to, however, was not clear from the beginning of the research process. Following an inductive approach to explanation and theory development, the research questions have been open and are still developing. In the current stage of the research, the tentative (and broad) main research question is:

How, why, when and to what effect do policy actors construct and constrain scalar frames in order to solve the “problem” of toponymic standardization in Norway?

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The first step in this project is to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework that can help explore how the nature of toponymic standardization is currently being problematized in the Norwegian context. The aim is to introduce a framework for the analysis of problem representations that deals not only with how policy issues are problematized by various policy actors, but also with a focus on the “politics of scale” in the making of toponymic policy. In the following sections, the main concepts in this framework will be introduced.

Critical toponymy

A critical turn in the study of place names over the last decades has led to a growing amount of literature emphasizing the cultural politics of naming instead of focusing solely on the name itself. *Critical toponymy* has become a label for research that explores the power relations inherent in naming places, thus challenging a narrower linguistic approach:

Given that naming a place is always a socially embedded act, one that involves power relations, the “pure” linguistic standpoint remains inadequate for the critical study of toponymy. Accordingly, whilst we agree with the need to be specific about what type of “naming” we are talking, we advocate an understanding of place names as “social facts” embedded in intricate cultural interrelations and tension-filled conceptions of space. As such, the practices of place naming are also caught up, in any given society, in the power and possibilities of “making places”.

(Vuolteenaho and Berg 2009, p. 9)

So far, much of the studies in critical toponymy have focused on questions of nationalism, (post)colonialism, identity politics, and the spatialization of collective memory (Rose-Redwood and Alderman 2011b). In terms of standardization and modernization of geographical names, Vuolteenaho

¹ For further information on the proposed amendments to the Norwegian Place Name Act, see the individual country report submitted by Norway.

and Berg (2009) have pointed out the negative effects of standardization projects, the erasure of multilingual place names and the “toponymic silencing” of indigenous cultures (p. 4). In a Norwegian context for instance, Kaisa Rautio Helander describes the ignoring of the oral traditions of Sámi names during the growth of the Norwegian national state (Helander 2009).

Rose-Redwood et al (2010) suggest that a possible theoretical approach in further research in critical toponymy is offered in the literature on governmentality studies, which very few place name scholars have engaged with so far (p. 9). Governmentality studies are utilized to theorize the making of regimes of spatial inscription as an integral strategy in the production of “governable” spaces. Governmentality is a concept derived from the French thinker Michel Foucault’s work and provides a framework or perspective that allows certain kinds of questions to be asked about how particular aspects of taken-for-granted social relations came to be as they are (Huxley 2008, p. 1636). According to Mitchell Dean (2010), an analytics of government “is a type of study concerned with an analysis of the specific conditions under which particular entities emerge, exist and change” (2010, p. 30).

Politics of scale

Human geographer Joshua Hagen (2011) argues that place name research has been slow to engage to broader developments in geographical and social theory, for instance the idea of scale: “When place-name scholars discuss scale, it is generally conceived as a simple container or hierarchical level enclosing the place-naming process” (p. 25). Consequently, the conceptualizations of scale usually are limited to the size of the place being named and the corresponding level of government. The need for political toponymy to engage critically with scale and scalar politics is followed up by Rose-Redwood and Alderman (2011b), claiming that “place naming is a symbolic conduit through which various scales of political identity are constructed and legitimized” (p. 4).

Scale and heritage

In Norway, the standardization of geographical names is framed mainly as cultural policy and politics, and the Norwegian Place Name Act legitimizes standardization as a governmental tool for safeguarding geographical names as cultural heritage.

David Harvey (2015) points out that the concept of heritage in recent years has been expanded, and this expansion can be seen on two fronts (p. 577). He describes the first front as the increased importance of heritage in relation to governmental and economic concerns at different scales. The second front is according to Harvey the expansion of heritage as an ontological category (e.g. the formal recognition of *intangible* heritage). Harvey argues that the ubiquity of heritage on the global scale seems to combine “by the trend towards recognizing the power and meaning of heritage within the spheres of the local and even the personal”. He claims that there is a need to build theory as to how heritage interrelates with new concepts of scale: “[I]f we are to understand how heritage works, we must examine what scale does, and how heritage and scale interact”² (p. 579). According to Harvey, few reflect on what scale does apart from categorization. Meanwhile, “[d]evolution pressures from below, together with continental, multinational and global practices and politics from above, compete for attention within new systems of governmentality” (p. 585).

Problem representations

As a tool for questioning how governing takes place, Carol Bacchi has developed an approach to policy analysis called “What’s the problem represented to be” (the WPR approach) (Bacchi 2016; Bacchi and

² Italics in original.

Goodwin 2016). According to Bacchi herself, this approach offers a particular way of thinking rather than a simple “method” of analyzing policy. This approach to a large extent builds on Michel Foucault’s work, where for instance his concept of governmentality, as described earlier in this paper, plays a crucial role.

Bacchi (2016: 1) underlines that “problems” do not sit outside policy processes waiting to be solved. However, every policy proposal contains within it an implicit representation of what the problem is represented to be. Consequently, a policy that promotes the standardization of geographical names as a mean to achieve something (e.g. more effective communication and navigation or for the safeguarding of toponyms as cultural heritage) represents the problem to be *non-standardized* toponyms. Hence, to study this policy program there is a need to investigate critically how *non-standardized* toponyms are problematized, the premises this representation of the “problem” rests upon and its effects (Bacchi 2016: 1).

Methodology

Through a qualitative case study of the Norwegian Place Name Act focusing on the most recent policy proposal, the doctoral research project explores how policy actors maneuver along geographical, jurisdictional, temporal or linguistic lines in order to legitimize one standard over another (and, consequently, to implicate one mode of regulation at the expense of others). The empirical data in the research project consist of policy texts, supplemented with semi-structured interviews with central policy actors and participant observation from policy work where representatives from the Language Council have been present. The analytic tool applied to analyze the data is inspired by the WPR approach developed by Carol Bacchi. This approach draws on Foucauldian concepts such as power, knowledge, discourse, genealogy and governmentality.

Philosophical worldview

Broadly, this study falls into the social constructivist worldview where subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. Consequently, this research project is influenced by the researcher’s personal, cultural and professional background as an employee in the Language Council and as an expert on the (national) standardization of geographical names. The starting point for this research is that both standards and scales are socially constructed, and that policy work is political work, and not a question of just deploying scientific methods in the service of solving policy issues (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, p. 9). Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges that the knowledge produced in this study is socially constructed (Farthing 2016, p. 19).

Outcome

One of the main goals of a public sector PhD is to generate new knowledge in areas relevant to the public sector, where the need for knowledge and innovation is substantial. The overall purpose of the project is for all parties to gain a better understanding of the discursive struggles and political rationalities associated with toponymic standardization in Norway so that the Language Council can be better equipped to address future policymaking in that area.

According to the regulations for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) at the Norwegian University of Life Science, a PhD thesis must contribute to the development of new scientific knowledge and must be of sufficiently high academic quality to merit publication as part of the scientific literature in the field. Through a critical approach to the standardization of geographical names, this project aims to lay the

groundwork for theoretical development in this policy field, and to bring new aspects into the growing field of critical and political place name studies.

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