

**Twenty-sixth session
Vienna, 2-6 May 2011**

Item 20 of the Provisional Agenda

Other toponymic issues

**COMMERCIAL AND PRIVATE INFLUENCE ON THE
STANDARDIZATION AND USER OF PLACE-NAMES**

Summary

Place-names (geographical names) are not only vital for identifying places, but also for promoting knowledge about public and private properties, buildings, businesses, products, etc. When a name with a particular spelling has obtained certain repute, it is normal that those involved in a business want to continue using the name, also within state and municipal areas. However, when a spelling is not in accordance with the place-name law and its regulations, it should not be applied in official public contexts. Nevertheless, several instances show that the political mainstream seems to be more generous than before in accepting business-based arguments and usage of place-names. Also, when it comes to the naming of for examples arenas for popular venues there seems to be more goodwill for “selling” a name than before, even if such bargains may lead to impairment of traditional names. In several cases big companies have funded football stadiums and arenas in return for the privilege of naming them, for instance *Aker Stadium* (2006), earlier *Molde Stadium*. Probably there will be more such cases as there is increasing interest for private sponsors of sport and cultural activities. The other side of the picture is that traditional place-names lose ground.

1. The Norwegian place-name law

Standardization of place-names started in Norway in 1879. That year the Mapping Authority introduced a public place-name service by charging the name scholar Oluf Rygh the task of giving advice on the correct spelling of place-names on official maps. Starting in 1917 the spelling rules were decided by government regulations.

In 1990 the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) passed an act on the standardization of place-names (geographical names) in official use. Only the representatives of the right wing party, Framstegspartiet (the Progress Party), voted against the act. In 2005 amendments to the act were passed, and this time the vote was unanimous. The amended act took effect on August 1, 2006.
(<http://www.lovddata.no/all/hl-19900518-011.html>)

The law states that place-names should be standardized according to the official form of Norwegian (Bokmål or Nynorsk) which corresponds best with the local inherited pronunciation. However, some dialectal traits as well as widely used old spellings may be retained. More detailed spelling rules are specified in the regulations of the law. Sámi and Kven (a Baltic-Finnish language spoken in northern Norway) place-names should be standardized according to the spelling rules of those languages. During the standardization process there is a hearing so local parties can present their views before a spelling is determined. When the name of a farm or a part of a farm is in question, the owner’s view should be respected as long as it does not go against the main spelling regulations. The Mapping Authority is responsible for standardizing most place-names on the government level, whereas the municipality is in charge of standardizing street names and names of other municipal locations.

The purpose of the Act is to safeguard place-names as cultural monuments, to determine a practical and useable spelling based upon the inherited local pronunciation, and to promote knowledge and active use of the standardized names. The Act shall protect the consideration of Sámi and Kven place-names in accordance with national law and international treaties and conventions. The Act applies where any state, county or municipal body shall determine place-names or the spelling thereof, or use them in the performance of its duties. The Act also applies to the use of place-names in companies in public ownership and in textbooks that are to be used in the schools. This Act does not apply to Svalbard, Jan Mayen and the Norwegian dependent territories, the Norwegian Continental Shelf and Norway’s Economic Zone. Positions have been created for two place-name consultants and one secretary for each of the four university regions in the country, in addition to consultants and secretaries for Sámi and Kven place-names in Norway. There is an appeals body to deal with complaints about the standardized forms of place-names. Different spellings of a name may be in official use at the same time, and the goal of establishing a single standardized form for each name is

still a long way off. All names recognized under the Law must be reported to a central digital register administrated by the Norwegian Mapping Authority.

Decisions on spelling are made by the state or municipal body that is responsible for the name-bearer in question, after having received the place-name consultants' advice. The Mapping Authority is responsible for standardizing most of the names, including major and minor names which appear on maps, signs, etc. However, on official road signs incorrect spellings are often found. The roads authorities are responsible for this, because they tend to look to the local usage, and this is not always in accordance with the standardization rules.

2. An unexpected decision on January 13, 2009

There are numerous cases where farmers and property owners have protested against the Mapping Authority's spelling decisions. During the first decade of the third millennium a group of farmers in the district of Toten north of Oslo was lobbying to change names like *Kvem* and *Hol* to *Hveem* and *Hoel*, the last ones being the spelling of the place-names used as surnames. In Norway the majority of surnames are derived from farm names, but they are very often written in a divergent or "corrupt" way, due to an elderly, often inconsistent, Danish spelling practice. Thus place-names like *Dal*, *Li*, *Vik*, *Voll* are often written *Dahl*, *Lie*, *Wiig*, *Wold* as surnames, and in many cases those who bear these names wish to have the names of their farms written in the same way as their surnames. Two representatives from the conservative party Høgre promised to follow up the suit of the Toten farmers and forwarded a private proposal to Stortinget with the aim of supporting the owners' right to determine the spelling of the name of their properties. In December, 2008, the Committee of Cultural Affairs organized hearings where five different linguistic/cultural groups, including the Mapping Authority, argued against the proposal. Only one group was in favor of it, namely the farmers in Toten, representing "The Movement for Protecting Names in Norway". During the hearings it was stressed by the Mapping Authority that if the proposal passed,

- existing spellings in official use might have to be changed according to a landowner's view
- different parts of a farm might get various spellings of the same name, e.g. *Voll*, *Vold*, *Wold*

The Committee members, with representatives from all the major parties, seemingly disregarded the arguments against the proposal and some weeks later, on January 13, 2009, Stortinget adopted it unanimously.

3. How could this happen?

This decision displayed a political will to promote the individual feelings of property owners over knowledge-based recommendations from official institutions, as well as disregard for the principles set down in the present law. It was an unusual decision. The strangest thing about it was that no one from the political parties that had voted in favor of the present law a few years ago was against the proposal. There were intense deliberations among various political groups, but apparently no one dared to vote *no*, although the present law was amended unanimously four years earlier. One representative mentioned that the existing act allowed the property owners to influence the spelling of the name in question, but his intervention was disregarded.

How could such a thing happen? It is not easy to answer the question. One reason may be that the initiative was taken at a time with increasing goodwill for private commercial activity. Another reason may be that the representatives were not aware of the wide-reaching effects of the decision. (It should be noted that only a few members of Parliament were present when the proposal was debated.) Another reason for the outcome may have been the fact that general elections were to be held later that year (2009), and as there was probably a general feeling that voting against the proposal would be unpopular, no party would run the risk of losing votes by rejecting it. New hearings are planned, and hopefully a number of representatives will look differently at the issue. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs is now in the process of preparing an amendment to the law, based on the parliamentary decision.

4. The political climate

A main argument for passing a law on the spelling of place-names in 1990 was that place-names are part of the intangible cultural heritage of the nation. The first paragraph of the act says that “the intention of this act is to preserve place-names as cultural inheritance”. However, in practice its effect is limited.

There are two aspects of the law which apply to place-name preservation. The first is that a place-name must be used according to its local tradition and use. For instance, a place-name should not be moved to a place where it does not belong originally. Sometimes this rule is broken by housing companies because a particular name may “sell” better than the inherited name. The municipal authorities are encouraged to prevent such breaches. The second aspect in the law which relates to the protection of place-names is the rule that place-names should be standardized on the basis of the inherited local pronunciation. The reason is that the inherited local pronunciation is looked upon as the primary one as it is handed down from generation to generation. Theoretically politicians agree upon this view. However, in some cases locals have reacted against officially standardized names. This applies particularly to families that have an alternative form of the name in question as a surname, for instance the above-mentioned *Wiig* for the standardized form *Vik*.

Often the use of place-names is disputed. For instance, in many districts in Northern Norway where Sámi and Kven names are used alongside Norwegian names, the majority population, i.e. the Norwegians, are often discontent with the names in the minority languages and tend to leave them out on road signs. The use of the Sámi name *Romssa* alongside the Norwegian name *Tromsø* has aroused a lot of protests by the Norwegian speaking population.

5. Influence of private enterprises and companies

Another disputed area is the naming of new buildings or leisure grounds. Real estate agents sometimes exchange traditional place-names with “snob value” names to get better prices. One well-known example is *Portør brygge* which was used for a vacation village several kilometers from the original harbor of Portør. In this case the real estate agents changed the name back to a local name following local protests.

Another example is a proposal to change the river name *Akerselva* in Oslo to *Frysja*. *Frysja* is an obsolete name of the present *Akerselva*, but has been widely used by private businesses. A group of business planners has written a letter to the Mapping Authority claiming that the old name should be retained because this would trigger local business. But there is little reason to believe that the Mapping Authority will comply with the claim.

6. Sports arenas

«Forget about rooted, Norwegian place-names of football stadiums in future. Color Line Stadium in Ålesund is on a highroad to success for company and sponsor names» (Heading in the Norwegian Newspaper “Adressa” 22.04.2005, <http://fotball.adressa.no/eliteserien/article6187.ece>)

In several cases big companies have funded football stadiums and arenas in return for the privilege of naming them. For example, some years ago a new football stadium was built in Ålesund. The Norwegian cruise ferry company Color Line paid for it on condition that it was named *Color Line Stadium*. Another example is *Aker Stadium* which in 2006 replaced the earlier name *Molde Stadium* (after the town in which it is situated). *Aker* is the name of one of the biggest Norwegian engineering and construction companies, which in its turn has borrowed the name of the parish of Aker in Oslo. Several other football clubs are considering similar initiatives. Further European examples are *Reebok Stadion* (Arsenal, Great Britain), *Emirates Stadium* (Bolton, Great Britain), *SAS Arena* (Midtjylland, Denmark), *Volkswagen Arena* (Wolfsburg, Germany). The name of the earlier *Neckar Stadium* (Germany) has now been replaced by *Mercedes-Benz Arena*. Probably we will see more such cases as there is increasing support for private sponsoring of sport and cultural activities. Although the selling of names is disputed, at least in Norway, it is easy to understand the reasons for it: money is needed

for renewal and modernization and one way to get it is to enter into an agreement with companies or organizations which are willing to act as sponsors.