

1. MEANING SOUND AND LOOKS - A) MEANING: THE SEMANTIC ASPECT



Semantically, names carry a meaning at the time they are coined. Because of its meaning as 'ford on the Roman road', there could, at least to local people, be no misunderstanding about the location of the settlement named Stratford. The meaning may be lost in the course of time, either because the language the name springs from is no longer current, or because the name itself degenerates to such an extent that its meaning can no longer be recognized. More often, the original meaning ceases to be appropriate. The Greek settlement named Neapolis or 'New Town' by its founders, to set it apart from the 'old town' they had fled (neighbouring Kymai, that had been established six or seven generations earlier by colonists from the Ionian city state of Chalcis), retained its Greek name as it was incorporated in the Roman republic in the 4th century BC. As long as Greek remained the (local) official language in Roman Neapolis, which it did for about seven more centuries until the reign of Constantine the Great, the name of the city, its meaning still being understood, was fairly safe. After that, the state language Latin, in a regional variety spoken for long by the majority of the commoners in the city, replaced Greek as the language of administration. To the speakers of the regional variety of Latin, that consequently developed into the Romance Napolitan language (or dialect), the meaning of Neapolis was lost; to its citizens, the city actually appeared ancient instead of new. Kymai had completely been overshadowed even before the Romans came; what remained of it was, ironically, destroyed by the Napolitans in the early 13th century. The name Neapolis ultimately degenerated into Napoli in the Napolitan and Italian languages that succeeded Latin as the language of administration (the latter actually as late as the 19th century).

Unlike the Latin-speaking heirs of Napoli, new foreign-language users of existing names are occasionally known to make efforts to retain the meaning of a name after its language has been discarded. Translation of names was never a Roman policy - another famous 'New Town', the Phoenician colony of Qart Hadash, was also incorporated into the empire under its own native name, be it in this case latinized into 'Carthago' - but was very popular during the manifold changes of sovereignty between the new national states of 19th and 20th century Eastern and South-Eastern Europe: examples are Austrian Karlsbad changing into Czech Karlovy Vary, Hungarian Újvidék becoming Croat Novi Sad. An example outside Europe, but equally associated with the emergence of national sentiments, is the translation of Spanish Casablanca (itself a translation of Portuguese Casa Branca - the Portuguese founded the place in 1515) into Arabic ad-Dar al-Bayda'. In other cases, name changes following transfer of ownership explicitly reflect a change in the meaning the object has to the new owner compared to the one attached to it by his predecessor. The seaport city of Reval was just a 'little sand bank' to its Danish founders in 1219. Although it successively passed into Teutonic (1346), Swedish (1561), and Russian hands (1710), it was allowed to retain its name; but upon the emergence of the independent Estonian nation-state in 1917, the town now chosen to be the nation's capital reverted to a co-existing Estonian appellation reflecting what it had from the beginning on meant to the Estonians: the 'Danish fortress' (Tan-linn, through the centuries contracted to Tallinn).