

Countries without a geographical names bureau: the Netherlands

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The Netherlands: 1815-2011

For the first national mapping series 1:115.000 the topographical bureau wanted to have correctly spelled place names and therefore in 1815 sent out questionnaires to all municipalities asking how the municipality names were written.

Generally, the municipalities fancied medieval or 16th century spellings, unlike current pronunciation. Those were frequently at odds with the official 'Siegenbeek' spelling rules that were adopted in 1804.

The result was that names were often unpredictably and arbitrarily spelled.

About 1870 a law was passed that called for implementation of new spelling rules ('De Vries & te Winkel' spelling). The Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences tried to achieve uniformity and consistency in place names spelling by adhering to these new rules. It appointed a commission to decide on the place names spellings and produced a gazetteer (3000 names).

Their decisions reflected a trend of simplifying place name spellings and adjusting spelling to current pronunciation, achieving consistency and uniformity. But these gazetteers were not officially supported by government.

1880-1930 Royal Netherlands Geographical Society Gazetteers: 30 000 names

As more place names were needed by ministries, the Royal Netherlands Geographical Society set up a commission that produced a number of gazetteers based on the new spelling rules, the last of these (1937) contained over 30 000 names.

One month after this final exhaustive list was published, the official spelling rules were changed again: in 1937 new spelling rules (Marchant Act) were adopted by Parliament.

Despite the fact that from 1870 onwards these gazetteers existed, the spelling customs amongst the different ministries further diverged, as an increasing number of geographical names figured in government publications. These ministries were:

Ministry of Defense – topographical , -hydrographic survey

Ministry of Education – Academy of Science

Ministry of Finance – Cadastral maps

Ministry of Transportation – polder maps, river -, roads maps

Ministry of the Interior – statistical maps

The name sets in use by the various ministries reflected the different degrees of adhering to the orthographic rules for different name categories⁵

To end this situation, from 1950-1970 the topographical, hydrographical and water management mapping organizations decided to standardise the names by themselves, by looking for official sources for the name spellings, like acts, and use the spellings found there. Of course it had never been the purpose of parliamentary acts to define toponym spellings, but in this way the mapping organisations at least could refer to official sources for the spellings used.

The result was that name spellings were thus standardised, even if these standardised versions lacked consistency (similar word(part)s were spelled differently because they were derived from acts in which they were spelled differently).

The Hydrographic survey took care of all names of objects in the sea and estuaries, the Water management board looked after all polder names and inland water names. The Topographical survey standardised all other names: farm names, building names, settlement names, relief names and areal names.

In 2004 the topographical survey became part of the national cadastral agency. Since 1970 it has sustained and updated the de facto standardised name corpus and produced gazetteers.

But: in 2000 a new municipality act was voted by Parliament and according to this act, all municipalities can decide on the spelling of their place names, without any expertise in cartography, linguistics or onomastics.

Some municipalities are now changing names, and thus the existence of a standardised name set is threatened.

We are in danger of reverting to the situation as of 1815: non-systematical, non-predictable and non-standardised toponyms!