

INTERCULTURAL INFLUENCES IN CONTEMPORARY ESTONIAN SETTLEMENT NAMES

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Abstract: This paper examines contemporary Estonian settlement names that appear in the Estonian linguistic landscape and have resulted from foreign language contact. Toponyms that users now sense to be Estonian in origin are sometimes derived from a foreign linguistic form. The research material was supplied by the database of the etymological dictionary of Estonian place names. The aim was to subdivide the types of loan names by exploring Estonian place names that originate from German, Russian or Swedish, and to determine the way in which they have been converted into Estonian. The database was studied and place names that had intercultural influences were selected; the place names were analysed diachronically and two major types of loan names were identified: adaptations and translations. Compared to translated loan names, adaptations were much more common, but its subtypes (partial adaptations and epexegetic adaptations) were rarer.

Keywords: toponyms, etymology, loan names, adapted place names, translated place names.

Introduction

Place names are a very important part of our ancient linguistic legacy as they reflect our cultural history. At the time place names are generated, there is always something specific about the culture they are born into, and toponyms are like reflections of that specificity (Pitkänen 2007: 11). Estonian place names often reflect past contacts with colonisers that ruled here from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. It is important to point out that the first written recordings of Estonian nomenclature also date back to the beginning of that period – the beginning of the thirteenth century.

This paper examines Estonian contemporary settlement names that occur in the linguistic landscape and originate from foreign languages. The focus was on languages that have influenced Estonian the most: German, Russian and Swedish, while languages that have not had as much influence were left aside. The aims of the research were (1) to observe how the names that today often seem to be of Estonian origin have actually resulted from some kind of language contact; (2) to subdivide loan name types by exploring which Estonian place names originated from German, Russian or

Swedish; and (3) to determine the way in which these names have been converted to the Estonian language.

The research material was taken from the database of the etymological dictionary of Estonian place names (EKNR). This dictionary is currently being compiled by the Institute of the Estonian Language and the Võro Institute. The corpus can be found in the electronic dictionary system EELex. The database contains synchronic data – place names that presently exist in the Estonian linguistic landscape as well as in communication (official place names), or only in communication (unofficial, but also widely used and known place names). The names were analysed using the diachronic method. To subdivide the types of loan names, it was necessary to understand the true etymology of every single toponym. In using the diachronic method, etymologising is extremely important because it is the only way to find out the actual starting point and the naming motivation for the toponyms. When etymology is absent, explanations for the meaning of names are very likely to be folk etymologies, which have little to do with historical reality and give no information about the strategies once used to create the names (Burenhult and Levinson 2008: 145).

Language contacts (brief overview of the colonisers)

In the thirteenth century, the territory of present-day Estonia was conquered by crusaders and went under German and Dutch rule. Estonia became closely bound to German culture – German was the language of the local elite, both in the countryside and in the cities, and a number of cities belonged to the Hanseatic League. Consequently, the main official language was German (up to the sixteenth century it was Low German, and later High German). A large Estonian-Swedish settlement appeared during the Middle Ages; it was the largest in the fifteenth century and extended the most on the western and north-western islands and on the coast of Estonia (Juhkam 1992: 394–395). By the seventeenth century, the whole territory of present-day Estonia was under Swedish rule, and from the eighteenth to early twentieth century it belonged to the Russian empire. Local power was still in the hands of the Baltic German elite and ties were maintained until the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1918 the Republic of Estonia was established, in the 1940s Soviet and German occupations took place, and from 1944 to 1991 Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union.

It is clear that there have been enough close contacts with other cultures and languages for some influences to exist. Foreign languages that have influenced Estonian general vocabulary have also influenced the genesis and interpretation of place names. Sometimes foreign influence is easily recognisable, but sometimes a borrowed toponym can appear to be a common Estonian name that is now perceived to be of Estonian origin, and the fact that the name is derived from a foreign linguistic form is no longer shown or known.

Developments in place names

When a place name is created, it gets a phonetic shape that at the time is relevant to the language, describing its referent in some way and having some kind of meaning. In time, place names may drastically change. There have been some changes in this respect that do not occur with general vocabulary but are characteristic of place names. It is common for

old toponyms to go through some specific developments such as the following (Pall 1977; Laansalu 2012):

- (1) **Irregular shortenings.** A strong irregular shortening (much more frequent than in the case of general vocabulary) is specific to old place names. The shortening is more likely to appear in secondary place names, because the proper name is no longer related to a certain common noun (e.g. farm name *Harjuva* < *Harjuoja*, the Estonian word *oja* means ‘creek’).
- (2) **Group transitions.** This is a phenomenon occurring in place names when parts of names that display a similar phonetic shape can be substituted for each other during variation (e.g. farm names *Allikmäe* ~ *Allikmaa*, *Kirjassilla* ~ *Kirjasselja*).
- (3) **Folk etymology**¹. This happens due to the language user’s linguistic perception. The first aspect that brings about folk etymology is often the fact that the common nouns that form a place name have disappeared from the general language. Folk etymology is, in a way, a reinterpretation of a place name, making it fit the language user’s linguistic norm – the phonetic shape of the toponym is slightly changed, so the meaning will become more understandable (e.g. the village name *Pühalepa* < *püha* ‘sacred’ or *põhi* ‘bottom, floor’ + the dialectism *lõpp*: gen. (genitive) *lõpe* ‘bay’, which has transformed into *lepp*: gen. *lepa* ‘alder’).
- (4) **Adaptations.** This is a similar mechanism to folk etymology. Place names of strange foreign origin are usually adapted to the phonetic structure of the language just as borrowed appellatives are (e.g. village name *Lasputre* < German estate name *Flaschenfutter*).

Types of loan names

Loan names emerge in a language only if there is contact between two languages and also the need to refer to places. When a place name or place name element is borrowed from one language to incorporate into another, it becomes a part of the onomasticon of the target language (Gammeltoft 2007: 481). Names can be borrowed quite easily (in a direction from the source language to the target language). It is possible to say that in the case of names, loans are more common than in general vocabulary. In a language contact situation, the name as a certain sign is easier to pass on than other lexical items. The name stays as an identifier regardless of whether or not the user knows the meaning of the elements of the name. It is insignificant whether the name is transparent or opaque (Ainiala et al. 2012: 31). In other words, for a name to function, it is not essential for the name user to know the origin of the name – it could even be absolutely senseless.

There are two major types of loan names (Ainiala et al. 2012: 95–97; Harvalik 2009: 477; Pitkänen 2007: 13):

¹ Estonian researcher Marja Kallasmaa believes (1998: 229) that in Estonian farm names, for instance, folk etymology has played a much bigger part than assumed. That is because folk etymological changes are often very hard to identify – when a name is reinterpreted by folk etymology, it acts in a new way, namely as the word or word combination of which it now consists. Only when early recordings exist can folk etymology be identified.

- (1) **Adapted names** – the name is adapted to the phonological structure of the target language. This means, that the phonetic shape of a name is the foundation of the new name. Phonetic adaptations can be complete, epexegetic, or partial.
- (2) **Translated names** – the name is translated from one language into another. This indicates that the meaning of a name is the foundation of the new name; phonetic structures of the name forms in the source and target languages are not bound.

Complete adaptations

Complete adaptations are the most common subtype of loan names. For adaptations to occur, there has to be some kind of foreign linguistic influence. For linguistic influences to take place, close contacts between two cultures are required. Whether an extraordinary name becomes adapted or not probably depends on the level of difficulty in translating it (e.g. place names that derive from foreign surnames would be difficult or even impossible to translate), although many adapted place names or parts of them could have originally been translatable (Pitkänen 2007: 14).

Old loan names can be so extensively adapted that contemporary name users may readily consider their nomenclature as having Estonian origins, especially if they find some phonetically similar appellatives to associate with the name. It is also possible that an old name that has lost its lexical meaning and naming motivations over time is no longer recognisable, as it has become opaque and seemingly just an arbitrary word (Radding and Western 2010: 396). Although it is absolutely possible for a name to function without having any meaning, it is part of human nature to try to explain the surrounding world and find meanings for everything, opaque place names included. That is probably why folk etymology occurs with so many adapted place names.

Here are some examples of complete adaptations of Estonian settlement names:

- (1) **Aaspere** (village) < from the German surname *Hastfer*. Folk etymology has shaped the name to *Aaspere* – Estonian *aas* ‘meadow’ and *pere* ‘household, family’.
- (2) **Elbiku** (village) < from the Swedish words *äle* ‘alder forest’ and *bäck* ‘creek’, which was locally pronounced as [bikk].
- (3) **Heimtali** (village) < from the German estate name *Heimthal* ‘home valley’.
- (4) **Horoski** (village) < from the Russian word *xopouku* ‘the good ones’.
- (5) **Juhkentali** (city district) < from the German name of a summer estate, *Jauchenthal* (meaning ‘valley that belongs to Jauch’), which got the name after its landlord, the book salesman and city bookmaker Lorenz Jauch.
- (6) **Kaarepere** (village) < from the German surname *Scharenberg*. Folk etymology has modified the name – Estonian *kaar*: gen. *kaare* ‘curve, arch’, and *pere* ‘household, family’. In Low German, words beginning with *sch-* were pronounced *sk-*, and the words borrowed from Low German that began with *sch-* were changed in Estonian to start with *k-* (for instance *Schule* > Estonian *kool* ‘school’). One of the main reasons was that it was not common for Estonian dialects to have more than one consonant at the beginning of a word.
- (7) **Liismiti** (village) < from the German cognomen *Kleinschmidt* ‘little smith; smith, who makes little things’.

- (8) **Lindi** (village) < from the German surname *Linten*. Folk etymology might have also played a role – Estonian *lint*: gen. *lindi* ‘ribbon’.
- (9) **Paldiski** (town) < from the Russian port name *Балтийский порт* (renamed that way in 1762).
- (10) **Praakli** (village) < from the German surname *Brakel*.
- (11) **Pilkuse** (village) < from the German surname *Billingshusen*.
- (12) **Puski** (village) < from the Swedish word *busk* ‘bush’.
- (13) **Päri** (village) < from the German surname *Bergen*.
- (14) **Reina** (village) < from the German surname *Treyden*.
- (15) **Rumpo** (village) < from the Swedish word *rumpa*, meaning (inter alia) ‘animal tail’ and figuratively ‘a narrow strip of land’, as the cape or headland where the village is situated is long and narrow.
- (16) **Taali** (village) < from the German surname *Stahl*.
- (17) **Triigi** (village) < from the German surname *Stryk*.
- (18) **Truuta** (village) < from the German female first name *Gertrude*.
- (19) **Valtu** (village) < from the German estate name *Waldau*, given by the owner in 1816 under the influence of the German naming fashion (*Wald* ‘forest’ + *Au* that usually marked spaces near water).
- (20) **Vetepere** (village) < from the German surname *Wedtberg*. In this case, folk etymology has also played a role – Estonian *vesi*: pl. gen. *vete* ‘water’ and *pere* ‘household, family’.

Epexegetic adaptations

The advantage of adapted loans is that the forms used in both languages are phonetically close and thus easily recognised as the names of the same place. The disadvantage is, however, that they often do not contain enough essential information to reveal the type of place. Sometimes this leads to adding a new, epexegetic generic term to the adapted loan name. (Pitkänen 2007: 14–15) Thus, epexegesis is a phenomenon whereby name structure is changed by adding an appellative as a secondary generic term to specify the name type. In the case of Estonian settlement names, epexegesis is evident only in certain contexts because they are usually elliptical. A generic term is added only when it is necessary to specify the name type. For example:

- (1) **Einbi küla** (village) < from the Swedish word *en*, pronounced locally as [ein ~ ain], meaning ‘juniper’, + generic term *by* ‘village’. The Estonian word *küla* also means ‘village’.
- (2) **Niibi küla** (village) < from the Swedish words *ny* ‘new’ + *by* ‘village’. The Estonian word *küla* was added, which also means ‘village’.

Partial adaptations

Partial adaptations are also an infrequent type of adapted loans. Partially adapted names have an adapted first element and a translated final element (Pitkänen 2007: 15). Some examples are as follows:

- (1) **Lüütsepa** (village) < from Low German *lütt* + *schmidt* (which is probably the same as German *Kleinschmidt*), where *lütt* was adapted as *lüüt*- and *schmidt* was translated into Estonian > *sepp*.
- (2) **Maarjamäe** (city district) < from the German castle name *Marienberga*, named after a count's wife's or daughter's first name. *Marien*- was adapted as *Maarja*- and the generic *Berg* 'hill' was translated into Estonian as *mägi*: gen. *mäe*.
- (3) **Kadriorg** (city district) < from the German castle name *Katharinenthal*. The castle was named after Peter the Great's wife Catherine (Katarina) – the name has been adapted to Estonian as *Kadri*. The German noun *Thal* 'valley' was translated into the Estonian correspondent *org*.
- (4) **Tõnismäe** (city district) < from the German hill name *Antonisberg* (there had already been a cemetery named after Antonius on the hill in the fourteenth century). The name *Antonius* has been adapted to Estonian as *Tõnis*. The German word *Berg* 'hill' was translated into Estonian as *mägi*: gen. *mäe*.

Translated loans

Compared to adapted loan names, translated loan names are much rarer. Any name can be borrowed as a phonetic adaptation, but translating a name is not that easy. The translation is required to consist of words that make sense and involve people who know both languages. (Pitkänen 2007: 15–16)

The language of origin of the translated loan names can be detected only when the initial name (from the source language) is also known (Päll 1999: 340). Thus, some of the translated loans are very difficult or even impossible to trace to the source language, contrary to adapted loans, which are easily traceable to the source language (Pitkänen 2007: 16).

Here are two examples of translated settlement names:

- (1) **Merimetsa** (city district) < from the German estate name *Seewald*, which consists of the German words *See* 'sea' and *Wald* 'forest'. The name was translated into Estonian as: *meri* 'sea' + *metsa*: gen. *metsa* 'forest'.
- (2) **Valgevälja** (village) < from the German estate name *Weißefeld*, which consists of the German words *Weiß* 'white' and *Feld* 'field'. The name was translated into Estonian as: *valge* 'white' + *väli*: gen. *välja* 'field'.

Discussion and conclusion

As presumed, there were many adapted loan names and just a few translated loans among contemporary Estonian place names. The reason for this, as previously stated, can be easily explained – while any name can be borrowed as a phonetic adaptation, translations are limited by several factors.

Place name adaptation often fails to follow any certain rules – it develops differently for each name. But it is still possible to make some generalisations and draw some conclusions. For instance, it can be presumed that, in completely adapted names, there can be some group transitions, for example *berg* > *-pere* (*Kaarepere*, *Vetepere*).

Danish researcher Vibeke Dalberg has mentioned (2008: 81–83, 90) that names affected by folk etymology are quite often compound names. She proposed that this leads to another latent cause of changes, namely that language users assume that compound names are formed from existing words and often interpret the name according to their own linguistic norms and the vocabulary they are familiar to. Thus, folk etymologically-derived name shapes often have compound stems. At first glance, it seems possible to draw the same parallels in the case of Estonian loan toponyms as well (e.g. *Aaspere*, *Kaarepere*, *Vetepere*), but this would certainly need more investigation before any more conclusions can be justifiably drawn.

A large quantity of adapted loan names is derived from the landlord's name of former estates. The main reason for this phenomenon was probably the tradition to name domiciles after their owners, by using a surname, cognomen, or family name.

Therefore, among the settlement names that appear in the present Estonian linguistic landscape, there are many names that have been influenced by some kind of language contact. There are many adaptations, for the most part originating from former landlords' German surnames, but also from other foreign words. Epexegetic and partial adaptations, as well as translated names, are less frequent. Some of the names have forms that seem natural and inherent to the Estonian language. Exploring the history (i.e. etymology) of these kinds of names would allow us to understand whether they were totally or partially foreign in origin. Name users have over time (probably while not even knowing it) made them seem to be local in origin, using the tools of adaptation and folk etymology, and sometimes translation.

The examination of synchronic data with diachronic methods helps language users decipher the surrounding world. It can highlight the true meaning of place names and prevent users from falling into the traps of false etymologies that often seem transparent and inherent in names.

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