

Standardization of Swedish Place-Names Yesterday and Today

Leif Nilsson
Sweden

Abstract

Since 2000, the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act (Swedish Kulturminneslagen) has included a section on 'good place-name practice', with an emphasis on the importance of preserving place-names as part of the nation's cultural heritage. This marked the culmination of a trend that had been in progress for more than three decades. Around 1970 an animated debate on place-names began as a reaction to a parliamentary resolution to reorganize the Swedish real estate register, whereby a large number of Swedish village and farm names were in danger of disappearing from the register and the corresponding maps. Thanks to this debate, the decision was revised and the threat was averted. As a result, the scope of standardization of Swedish place-names was broadened from being an entirely linguistic task performed by place-name scholars to a question also of preserving and protecting place-names, and archaeologists and cultural historians became involved in the standardization process. My paper is a short summary of the early years and an account of the steps taken towards this new approach to standardization in Sweden, together with comments on the current legislation.

Background

Since the year 2000, the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act (Sw. *Lag (1988:950) om kulturminnen m.m.*, 'Kulturminneslagen' for short) has included a section on 'good place-name practice', with an emphasis on the importance of preserving place-names as part of the nation's cultural heritage. This marked the culmination of a trend that had been in progress for more than three decades. As the result of an animated debate around 1970, the scope of standardization of Swedish place-names was broadened from being an entirely linguistic task performed by place-name scholars to a question also of preserving and protecting place-names, and archaeologists and cultural historians became involved in the standardization process.

As for the purely linguistic side of the subject, we can go back to the year 1906, when the Swedish spelling reform laid down a number of new principles, including the abolition of what was termed 'old spelling'. These and other changes were to be made in place-names, as well.

At the time, there were enormous discrepancies in various official registers as regards the writing of place-names, both *between* and *within* the documents concerned. There was hesitation not only among geographers, census takers, etc., but also among the public. A certain name could have one local spelling, another on a map and a third in the real estate register, and there could even be two completely different names for the same place. The first topographical map with total coverage of Sweden was the Ordnance Survey map (Sw. *Generalstabskartan*), which started out as a military map and became public in 1857. From 1904 the Swedish Place-Names Committee (PNC) was involved in checking the names on the map sheets before they were published by the Geographical Survey Office (Sw. *Rikets allmänna kartverk*). On the first sheets that were studied, some 50 per cent of the names were estimated to be incorrect in some way!

One reason for the inconsistencies in the registers was that the scribes who had recorded the names down the centuries were largely unfamiliar with them and their local usage. When they

rewrote them, mistakes were often made, causing much confusion. Owing to these shortcomings, there are numerous examples of quite appalling changes.

The name check carried out by the PNC had the twin purpose of getting the names linguistically correct and reflecting locally established forms and, as a result, settling on one official spelling for each name. It was also a democratic process, in that landowners were consulted.

When a royal ordinance on the spelling of place-names in official documents came into force in 1927, this work was facilitated. The ordinance stated that the place-names concerned should be spelt according to the principles of the Swedish Academy Wordlist. Several principles could be deduced from it, but the three basic aspects to be considered were: etymology, pronunciation and tradition. Up to 1970 it was chiefly the concern of the Swedish Place-Names Committee/Commission to provide this interpretation and to formulate the guidelines for Swedish standardization.

In the 1930s it was decided that a new type of economic map (land use map) should be published, in most parts of the country on a scale of 1:10,000. For the first time it was now possible to give an overall and up-to-date cadastral picture of all property boundaries. Production began in 1935, and the name-check procedure soon became organized in a way that was to last up to the final map sheets in 1978 (Nilsson 2002).

The real estate register

An important group of Swedish place-names is found in the real estate register, where all real properties are registered, and these names have been treated in a special and more 'official' way. Every property has its own unique designation, normally consisting of a village name and a number. Approximately 120,000 place-names are included in this register and on the economic map, representing the vast majority of the settlement names of Sweden. In 1936 the National Land Survey Board (Sw. *Lantmäteristyrelsen*) became the authority in charge of the register, thereby also having the final say as regards the spelling of the names.

In the mid-1960s steps were taken towards a reorganization of real estate registration. The Swedish Real Estate Register Committee made it clear in its 1966 report (SOU 1966:63) that the deficiencies of the Swedish system were so pronounced as to necessitate a reform. To a great extent these deficiencies were due to the existence of two different systems, one for towns and another for the countryside. The committee proposed that a new real estate register be built up on a uniform basis for the whole of Sweden, including a uniform notation system and using computer technology. Computerizing the records also made it possible to link several systems and to integrate information that had traditionally been managed in separate registers.

Initially, all this was looked upon as a technical and administrative reform, but very soon fears were expressed that many traditional and well-known place-names would disappear if the project was realized in its original form.

Sharp criticism in this respect was delivered by representatives of archaeology and cultural history, who pointed out that the cultural landscape is the result of a historical/functional process, characterized by man's adaptation to the natural environment and his social behaviour, and that place-name preservation is necessary to maintain a good, hierarchical, functional name structure and to explain the cultural process in the landscape, with special regard to the question of continuity (Nilsson 2005a).

The protests were heeded, and in 1974 a reform was passed which meant that all names of farms and groups of farms were to be retained. Between 1975 and 1995, when the 'real property designation reform' was implemented, all property names were examined once again, this time also from a cultural-historical point of view, before they were entered in the new real estate register (Sw. *fastighetsregister*). Following the debate caused by the original reform plans, a new

aspect of place-name standardization was introduced. Before the 1960s, standardization had been almost exclusively a question of the correct spelling – and had been described as ‘name regulation’. Now this was broadened to include an ingredient of ‘preservation’, shifting the focus to the importance of place-names as a part of the cultural landscape and to preventing the eradication of those names, as well as to activities now perhaps more correctly rendered as ‘promoting proper use of our place-name heritage’.

Thus, from the 1970s onwards the cultural-historical aspect has been an important part of place-name standardization in Sweden. One obvious sign of the times was that within less than twenty years, six symposia were held to discuss the care and preservation of place-names. These meetings were attended by both name scholars and representatives of cultural history in general. Indeed, it is symptomatic that the theme of one of the symposia was ‘The Culture of Place-Names’ and that it was arranged by the National Heritage Board.

Government inquiries

During this period *two* government committees dealt with the question of a place-name law, intended to include linguistic and preservation aspects. The *first* inquiry report was published in 1982 (SOU 1982:45). A number of measures to improve place-name preservation were proposed, including an act on the place-naming activities of local, regional and central authorities. Such an act, however, was not considered necessary by the Government. Instead it was suggested that the same goals should be achieved by other means. One result was the creation of the Place-Name Advisory Board (Sw. *Ortnamnsrådet*), another that the place-names on official maps were to be regarded as normative (Nilsson 2005b).

For several years, however, the question of place-names legislation was raised in Parliament again, and in 1993 Parliament suggested that the Government should consider whether a law on place-names was necessary. As a result a *second* government inquiry was carried out. The Cultural Heritage Inquiry presented its report in 1996 (SOU 1996:128), stating that place-names should be preserved and not allowed to fall out of general use unnecessarily.

The deliberations of the inquiry led to the conclusion that official place-name activities should be carried out in a spirit of respect for the cultural value of place-names, i.e., in accordance with good practice. However, instead of special rules to regulate the different types of activities, it was suggested that it ought to be sufficient to include a special consideration provision – a new section – in the Heritage Conservation Act, also covering the treatment of names in the minority languages Saami and Finnish in Sweden (Nilsson 2000).

Government bill and parliamentary approval

The findings of the inquiry resulted in a government bill, stressing the importance of place-names as part of the nation’s cultural heritage and stating the vital importance of preserving long-used place-names. The Government proposed that a new section on place-names be included in the Heritage Conservation Act. With regard to the postal address system in rural areas, the Government made it clear that the system must be designed so as to preserve the traditional settlement names used by the local population. The bill was passed in Parliament, and in the year 2000 a section (Section 4) on place-name standardization was finally added to Chapter 1 of the Heritage Conservation Act.¹

There is thus a clear tendency in Swedish place-name standardization. The aspect of preservation is one that is accentuated, which is a healthy sign, but the strong emphasis on ‘established’ names in the law may also cause problems. Which aspect should take precedence, local or national usage, and when should a linguistically incorrect name be regarded as ‘sufficiently established’ to be approved? I have seen a number of place-names in municipal contexts that would never be approved under regular name review procedures. When such place-

names are published on municipal and hence public maps, those maps do not represent good place-name practice. It is stated in the Government's commentary, though, that the provision implies that accepted rules of linguistic correctness are to be followed. It is not the intention to 'support archaic spellings in general' (Bill 1998/99:114, p. 73). The normative function of the place-names register at the National Land Survey is also a guarantee against incorrect spellings.

Evaluation

Six years after the place-names section took effect – in 2006 – an attempt was made by the National Heritage Board to analyse how it had been received so far by Sweden's municipalities. The Board distributed a questionnaire to all of them (Karlsson & Nyström 2006).

The answers and comments from local authorities show that the addition of the place-names section has not resulted in any significant changes in the way their work is organized when it comes to the handling of place-names. But many of them emphasize that, owing to the Act, there has been a clear increase in awareness, especially concerning the preservation and management of place-names as parts of the intangible cultural heritage, but also concerning place-names as necessary linguistic expressions for daily use.

The section on good place-name practice is considered by some municipalities to be clear and easy to apply, while others claim it is much too vague and too difficult to interpret and use on a daily basis. But with growing awareness and interest, the need for further guidance and help from national experts is often highlighted by local officials.

Addresses and good place-name practice

Local authorities currently have a particularly essential part to play, since today's most important place-name project in the country is the reorganization of the addressing system in rural areas, a major task for the 290 municipalities.

This is being done for the purposes of Sweden's population and housing censuses (Sw. *Folk- och bostadsräkningen, FoB*). Future censuses are planned to be based entirely on information from registers and various other administrative sources. To achieve this goal, a register of housing units is needed. A new law to establish a dwellings register (Sw. *lägenhetsregister*) came into force in 2006. A precondition for such a register is that each Swedish municipality establishes location addresses (Sw. *belägenhetsadresser*) to the required extent.

A major aspect of this process involves substituting the old letter-box addresses with addresses based on settlement names or road names. This will make it easier for rescue services, taxis and others to find dwellings quickly. Another benefit is that this is a way of promoting the use of place-names, given the great importance and impact of postal addresses. But the size and significance of the address project now under way is considerable, and it includes a large number of names that have never before been checked with regard to their linguistic correctness.

Apart from the linguistic aspects of place-names, there are also fears that a number of old names will be abolished in this process. According to the *Swedish Local Heritage Federation* many new addresses are in conflict with the code of good place-name practice.

In a report to the Parliamentary Committee on Cultural Affairs, the Federation pointed out that local usage of names must be taken into consideration to a much greater extent than is presently the case. The new location addresses are sometimes constructions that are not accepted either by the households concerned or by the local population. As a result there may be two competing addresses, causing confusion for visitors and transport services, particularly where no guidance is offered by maps or road signs (Nilsson 2008).

According to the law, 'established names shall not be changed without strong reasons'. The Federation questions whether the benefits for the household and population census are sufficient to justify an address reform that threatens the existence of many old settlement names.

The Swedish Standards Institute produced the national standard for 'location addresses' in 1998, but no name expertise was involved. The standard has now been revised, and this time the Place-Name Advisory Board was represented in the working group dealing with name issues. The provisions on good place-name practice have been taken into consideration in the new standard that came into force in 2007 (SS 63 70 03).

Concluding remarks

During the last four decades, then, it has become more apparent that place-names are a valuable part of the intangible cultural heritage of Sweden. Certainly they render communication between people more effective, but they also add a further dimension to the landscape and help us understand its social and historical content. The new consideration provision in the Heritage Conservation Act is an important tool for the standardization of place-names in Sweden.

Note

1. It is entitled 'Good place-name practice' (Sw. 'God ortnamnsed') and reads as follows:

Central and local government authorities shall follow a code of good practice when handling place-name questions. This means that

- established names shall not be changed without strong reasons for doing so,
- the spelling of place-names shall normally follow accepted linguistic rules unless there are other, well-established spellings,
- the effect on established names shall be considered when new names are created, and
- Swedish, Saami and Finnish names shall, as far as possible, be used together on maps, signposts and other signs in multilingual areas.

Names that have been approved for use on public maps shall be used in their approved form in other contexts as well.

References

- Bill 1998/99:114 = *Regeringens proposition 1998/99:114. Kulturarv – kulturmiljöer och kulturföremål*. 1999. Stockholm.
- God ortnamnsed. Ortnamnsrådets handledning i namnvård* [Good place-name practice. The Place-Name Advisory Board's guidelines on the preservation of names] (Ortnamn och namnvård 6.). 2001. Gävle: Lantmäteriet.
- Karlsson, Jan, and Staffan Nyström. 2006. *God ortnamnsed i kommunerna* [Good place-name practice in the municipalities]. En enkätundersökning kring den kommunala ortnamnsverksamheten i förhållande till paragrafen om ortnamn i kulturminneslagen. (Rapport från Riksantikvarieämbetet 2006:5). Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet.
- Kulturminneslagen*. [The Heritage Conservation Act.] Lag (1988: 950) om kulturminnen m.m., ändrad 2000: 265.
- Nilsson, Leif. 2000. Current trends in Swedish place-name standardization. *Onoma* 35, 279–287.

- Nilsson, Leif. 2002. Standardization of Swedish place-names in the 20th century. In: *Proceedings of the XXth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences 20–25 September 1999, Santiago de Compostela*. 521–526 (Biblioteca Filológica Galega). A Coruña: Instituto da lingua Galega.
- Nilsson, Leif. 2005a. Svensk ortnamnsvård före och efter beteckningsreformen [Standardization of Swedish place-names before and after the designation reform]. In: Staffan Nyström (ed.), *Namnens dynamik. Utvecklingstendenser och drivkrafter inom nordiskt namnskick. Handlingar från den trettonde nordiska namnforskarkongressen i Tällberg 15–18 augusti 2003*. 245–254. (NORNA-rapporter 80) Uppsala: NORNA-förlaget.
- Nilsson, Leif. 2005b. The Place-Name Advisory Board of Sweden. *Namn och bygd* 93, 105–108.
- Nilsson, Leif. 2008. Addresses, place-names and legislation in Sweden. In: *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Onomastic Sciences. Pisa, 28.8–4.9.2005*. Pisa: Edizione ETS (in print).
- Nyström, Staffan. 2001. *Ortnamnen och kulturminneslagen. Om tolkning och tillämpning av begreppet god ortnamssed* [Place-names and the Heritage Conservation Act. On the interpretation and adaptation of the term good place-name practice]. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet.
- SOU 1966:63 = *Fastighetsregistrering* [Real Estate Registration]. Betänkande av fastighetsregisterutredningen angående principiellt system, fastighetsbeteckningar, koordinatregistrering. (Statens offentliga utredningar 1966: 63). Stockholm: Justitiedepartementet.
- SOU 1982:45 = *Ortnamns värde och vård* [The value and preservation of place-names]. Betänkande av särskild utredare. (Statens offentliga utredningar 1982:45). Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.
- SOU 1996:128 = *Skyddet av kulturmiljön* [The protection of the cultural environment]. En översyn av kulturminneslagens bestämmelser om byggnader och kulturmiljöer, prästgårdar, kyrkstäder och ortnamn. Slutbetänkande av Kulturarvsutredningen. (Statens offentliga utredningar 1996: 128). Stockholm: Kulturdepartementet.
- SS 63 70 03 = *Svensk standard SS 63 70 03:2007. Geografisk information – Belägenhetsadresser – Applikationsschema*. 2007. [Swedish standard. Geographic information – Location Addresses – Application Schema. Stockholm: SIS.

Leif Nilsson
The Institute for Language and Folklore
Box 135
751 04 Uppsala
SWEDEN
leif.nilsson@sofi.se