Opportunity or Threat?
The Role of Minority Toponyms in the Linguistic Landscape[1]

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Abstract

This paper will consider how the choice to include minority place-names on signs can constitute an act of renaming in itself. A relationship will also be shown between toponymy and studies of the *linguistic landscape* – the ensemble of languages present in textual form in public spaces – suggesting great potential for future investigations.

   Cases from across Europe will be examined to illustrate why, and by whom, minority place-names on signs have been seen as an opportunity or as a threat. For instance, the use of Sámi place-names in Norway is seen by some as essential for the promotion of minority rights, but others have interpreted bilingual signs as a provocation. In northern Italy, the separatist Northern League has controversially campaigned for signs to include dialect place-names. In the Italophone Swiss canton Ticino, some streets have monolingual dialect names, but that this is not seen to threaten national integrity means this has not generated the same controversies seen in northern Italy. In Caithness, Scotland, resistance against the use of Gaelic on signs seems to be due to popular ideas about local history. Meanwhile, in Ireland, the delegitimation of some established English place-names led to concerns for the impact on tourism.

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1. Linguistic landscapes

The promotion of bi- or multi-lingual signs is a popular scheme in efforts to revitalise or legitimise indigenous, regional and minority languages. Although the worth of minority place-names is recognised in, for example, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and indeed in much national legislation too, the official use of minority toponyms can be controversial. Here, an examination of cases from a variety of European contexts will attempt to determine why some see putting minority place-names on signs as an opportunity, while others see this as a threat.

   Road signs are a point of reference for travellers: the sign, as a material object fixed in place, is where the place-name itself meets the landscape. Road signs instruct and inform, and they are therefore symbols of authority; of the dictates of authority and of the terms of reference that authority employs. By extension, the place-names used on road signs can have a prescriptiveness of their own. As the place-names on signs appear in the actual context of the places that are named, they are afforded even greater importance. Therefore, when an official administrative body decides to use bilingual signage, this can be seen as official recognition of a multilingual, and hence multicultural, place-name heritage. The recognition and, generally speaking, the acceptance of official signs have meant that the choice to include minority place-names on signs can constitute an act of renaming in itself.

   The past decade has seen the publication of a number of studies into the linguistic landscape. The term *linguistic landscape* has often previously been used to describe the general linguistic

situation of a place, but this more specific application refers to written language found in public spaces:

> The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 25)

The first function of the linguistic landscape, as defined by Landry and Bourhis, is its informational function. The use of a particular language on public signs could inform the public's expectations regarding broader official use of that language, for example it might suggest the right or the opportunity to use that language in communications with public institutions, although this will not always be the case. The linguistic landscape can also contribute to indicating the boundaries of a linguistic region (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 25–26).

The second function of the linguistic landscape is that of symbolism. If a certain language is to be found in extensive use in the linguistic landscape, this can symbolise that language's "subjective ethnolinguistic vitality" (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 27). Furthermore, while the linguistic landscape can be a reflection of the sociolinguistic situation, it could also manipulate an individual's judgment of the status of languages, either intentionally or unintentionally. This could then potentially alter that individual's linguistic behaviour. The relationship between linguistic landscape and sociolinguistic context is therefore "bidirectional" (Cenoz and Gorter 2006: 67).

Linguistic landscape studies constitute a growing field in sociolinguistics, and linking linguistic landscapes and toponomastics could prove to be a productive line of research. Observation of the linguistic landscape can reveal the most contentious place-name debates, and the public discourse about these issues will often shed light on societal attitudes towards place-names. The incorporation of theories and findings from place-name research could also be of great benefit to linguistic landscape studies, providing an alternative focus and further expanding the field.

In the present paper, several instances of the application of minority toponyms to the linguistic landscape will be considered, ranging from Norway in the north to Switzerland and Italy in the south, with Scotland and Ireland to the west. These are mostly focused on the linguistic landscape of the public sphere, or on "top-down" items (Ben-Rafael and others 2006). Further studies looking specifically at names in the linguistic landscape could also consider "bottom-up" signs, those "issued by individual social actors – shop owners and companies – like names of shops, signs on businesses and personal announcements" (Ben-Rafael and others 2006: 14).

2. Northern Norway: Respecting a minority or impinging on personal identity?

In some municipalities of northern Norway, road signs have been installed featuring Sámi place-names, and in a very few cases also place-names in the Finnish dialect Kven. Here, the case of the signs in Sámi will be studied.

From the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century, the Norwegian state took a stance towards the Sámi that was based on a *fornorskningspolitikk*, that is to say a policy designed to lead to the integration of the Sámi people into Norwegian society. This included the Norwegianization of Sámi place-names, as has been described by Kaisa Rautio Helander (1994; 2004). Official attitudes have now been moving away from this policy for some time, but the road sign debate has shown that discriminating attitudes endure in some sections of the public. The Sámi Act of 1987 was expanded in 1990 to cover official use of Sámi languages, but the majority of the new provisions only concern the small number of municipalities that make up the Sámi Language Administrative Area.

An exception to this territorial limitation should be found in the use of Sámi place-names on signs, as the Place-Name Act 1990 stipulates that Sámi place-names in use by the local people should be used on road signs together with their Norwegian equivalents, when these exist, irrespective of whether the place-name is located in the Sámi area or not. If properly applied, this would perhaps have led to Sámi place-names appearing on signs across Norway, but only a very few municipalities have actually installed signs featuring Sámi.

One municipality where Sámi-Norwegian road signs have been erected is Gáivuotna-Kåfjord in Troms county.[2] There has been some hostility towards the application of the Sámi Act in Gáivuotna-Kåfjord, and the attacks on the bilingual boundary sign have become the strongest symbol of this. The Sámi panel on this sign has been repeatedly obliterated. Sometimes it has been shot at, while other times it has been painted over or removed completely. This matter received considerable press attention, with the Norwegian state broadcaster even producing a half-hour documentary on the issue (NRK 2001). One of the vandalised signs can now be seen in Tromsø University Museum.

The fact that the focus of the attacks was the boundary sign specifically, and not one of the two bilingual tunnel-name signs that can also be found in Gáivuotna-Kåfjord, may provide some of the explanation for the sign raids:

> People's family histories and personal histories, their narratives, are woven together with the collective history in countless ways. Therefore, when the [Sámi] activists write the collective history of [Gáivuotna-]Kåfjord anew, they also go after every single Kåfjording's personal understanding of themselves. (Hovland 1999: 154, my translation)

If local identity in Gáivuotna-Kåfjord is contested, then this struggle could hardly be played out on a more symbolic arena than the sign that marks the municipal boundary, welcoming visitors and effectively proclaiming the name of the place in two languages. The northern Norwegian newspaper *Nordlys* interviewed an unidentified "sign crusher" ("*skiltknuser*"), who claimed the problem would not have been as great if other adjoining areas also put up Sámi signs, so that Gáivuotna-Kåfjord would not appear individually labelled in this way (Enoksen 2001).

The apparent intention behind putting Sámi on signs is to see a new acceptance of indigenous toponyms that were previously denied official status, and to contribute to improved recognition of the Sámi by Norwegian officialdom. The causes of the dispute that followed in the linguistic landscape may be rooted in discriminatory attitudes, but it also exposes aversion, among some, to seeing their home portrayed as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic place. The specific object of disagreement, however, is a place-name. The function of place-names as markers of identity is a clear indication of the role of place-names in many linguistic landscapes, and not least in those that are contested.

3. Northern Italy: Supporting dialects or endorsing racist secessionism?

For the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), a party that advocates greater autonomy for northern Italy, language has frequently appeared as a cornerstone of its identity. In addition to the party's discourse being characterised by a populist, and occasionally boorish, style of language, the movement has attempted to use regional dialects to promote its idea of the Republic of Padania, the party's own "nation" that it declared independent in 1996. This re-imagining of the north as a cohesive whole required the creation of symbolic boundaries, to be defined by "criteria of purity" (Tambini 2001: 18–19). As part of this, regional dialects were at first used as symbols of what the League saw as wide-ranging differences between northern and southern Italy. This was not without its contradictions, as the many dialects of northern Italy are considerably diverse and, furthermore, they are now regularly spoken only by a minority of the population.

Since the genesis of the League movement in the 1980s, its activists have been carrying out a graffiti campaign to dialectize the Italian place-names on road signs, particularly in the areas

where the League has found most support, such as in the Lombard provinces of Varese and Bergamo. In many cases, this dialectization amounts to deleting the final vowels of place-names, often with paint in the League's symbolic green, or to covering these letters with League stickers. Such actions continue to the present day.

Since the late 1990s, some League-administered municipalities have erected official boundary signs in local dialect. As the Italian Road Traffic Act, the *Codice della Strada* (literally "Highway Code"), did not authorise signs in languages other than Italian outside officially recognised bilingual areas such as Südtirol or Valle d'Aosta, this occasionally led to legal proceedings. The new *Codice della Strada*, introduced in 2003, includes an amendment put forward by the Northern League, which permits road managing authorities to use, in addition to Italian, regional languages or local dialects.

There have also been backlash graffiti actions against official dialect signs, either to delete place-names in dialect or to Italianize them. This reaction may be due in large part to what the League represents more broadly, in particular with regard to its extreme anti-immigration policies.

4. Ticino: Multilingualism breeds multilectal acceptance

Just over the border from Lombardy, in the Italophone Swiss canton Ticino, a relatively large number of streets have been given monolingual dialect names, but this has not been as polemical as the recent use of dialect place-names in Italy has been.

The municipality of Monte Carasso, for example, has entirely monolingual dialect street-names, which are shown on the street signs. The setting aside of 50,000 Swiss francs in 1994 to put up these signs was agreed to unanimously by municipal councillors (Vassere 2005: 134). Such a comprehensive move would be almost unthinkable over the border in Lombardy, where only the Northern League would be likely to fully support it.

There are other reasons, however, why the official use of dialects is not as controversial in Italian-speaking Switzerland. Switzerland has four official languages, so there is not the same link between linguistic loyalty and national loyalty as there is in Italy, or indeed as there is in Switzerland's other large neighbouring countries France and Germany. Furthermore, dialects of all four national languages in Switzerland remain in extensive use.

5. Caithness: "No Gaelic please, we're Norse"

In Scotland, there has recently been an increase in the use of bilingual Gaelic-English road signs on trunk roads, which are roads controlled by the Scottish Government, and also on local council-run roads in the mainland Highlands. The main aim is to contribute to Gaelic language revitalisation, but some also hope that this will contribute to the generation of a "Gaelic Face" for tourism in the Highlands (Pedersen 1995: 293). These signs have, however, caused some debate, not least in Caithness.

Caithness is a former county in the far north of Scotland, and is now part of the Highland Council administrative area. In March 2008, with the Highland Council proposing to extend its bilingual signage policy to cover all of the roads under its management, Caithness councillors staged a revolt. Their motion – to allow Caithness to continue the opt-out it has exercised on this policy since it was first introduced in the 1990s – was voted against (BBC News 2008). The whole affair had serious consequences for one Scottish National Party councillor who, in voting not to introduce bilingual signs to Caithness, went against the party whip, and was eventually ejected from the party (Calder 2008).

Although there has been opposition to bilingual signs in many parts of Scotland, the strong feelings seen in Caithness are connected to the area's linguistic heritage, which many feel is more Norse than Gaelic. In fact, the area has historically been a meeting place for different cultures.

There is even possible evidence in the area's place-names of a certain degree of contact between Norse settlers and a Gaelic-speaking population. The Norse generic *setr*/*sætr* 'shieling' is not as common in Caithness as in some other areas of Norse settlement. Instead there are frequent occurrences of *ærgi*, a borrowing from the Gaelic element *airigh*, 'shieling' (Waugh 1993: 123).

6. Ireland: Dingle™

In 2005, legal force and effect was removed from all English place-names in the Gaeltacht, the Irish language regions of the Republic of Ireland. Elsewhere in the country, Irish and English names have equal legal force and effect. The majority of English place-names in Ireland are, however, anglicised forms of Irish names.

Nevertheless, the changes that this brought about on road signs caused some unrest. The town of *Dingle* became *An Daingean*, and locals were displeased as they claimed that tourists came from all over the world to visit Dingle, and that the town's English name was a marketable brand. One individual interviewed even claimed that the name's brand recognition was "like Coca-Cola" (quoted in Sharrock 2006). When signs were replaced, spray painters repainted the English name next to the now monolingual Irish name. A plebiscite was held about the name in October 2006, resulting in a 91.8% vote for the bilingual name *Dingle Daingean Uí Chúis* (Lucey 2006). Many prefer the Irish name *Daingean Uí Chúis* to *An Daingean* to avoid confusion with the town of the same name in County Offaly (Sharrock 2006).

The Government did not initially act on the vote, but the Environment Minister announced in April 2008 that he proposes changes to legislation to allow places like Dingle to adopt official English and Irish names if the local authority so wishes. Even if the name *Dingle* does return to official use, the one instance in which it would not be used would be on road signs in the Gaeltacht, as traffic regulations allow only Irish place-names on signs there (De Bréadún and Lucey 2008). It remains to be seen what those who voted in the plebiscite will think, as it certainly seemed to be the road signs that attracted the most attention.

7. Linguistic landscapes and toponomastics: Further opportunities

From the examples discussed in this paper, it is clear that the linguistic landscape plays an important role in the promotion of minority or indigenous languages, and especially with regard to toponyms belonging to these languages. The linguistic landscape, as the locus within which place-names can be displayed for all to see, can provide ample demonstrations of attitudes towards almost any modern toponymic naming process. The inter-connections between the linguistic landscape and place-names, between place-names and places themselves, and between place and identity would suggest that it could be possible to incorporate within the symbolic function of the linguistic landscape a function of place identity and attachment. Kostanski and Clark (2006) discuss the similarities and differences between "toponymic attachment" and place attachment. To examine the relationship between attachment to toponyms, to places, and to languages in a multilingual context, the linguistic landscape can be used as an effective tool. Furthermore, it can suggest the implications of naming decisions for individual and group identity.

Notes

1. This paper draws partly on research conducted for an MSc dissertation (Puzey 2007).

2. Gáivuotna is the name of this municipality in Northern Sámi and Kåfjord is the Norwegian name. As neither could be considered established usage in English, I will use a bilingual name here.

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