Vibeke Dalberg

NAME AND PLACE

Ten essays on the dynamics of place-names

The psychology of place-name changes[*]

A large number of the place-names that we use without hesitation every day appear quite unintelligible on second thoughts, at least compared with other words in the modern language. This does not, however, mean that they are any the less Danish in origin than other words in our language.

One reason why we cannot identify place-names with familiar words is the fact that many names are of great age and over the years, phonological changes have altered their form to such an extent that we do not recognise the words from which they were formed. This may be true even if the words actually exist in the modern language. Who could possibly recognise 'Odins vi', 'ånæs' and 'hejrehals'[1] in the place-names *Vojens*, *Ans* and *Hejls*, for instance? In addition to phonological changes, a number of words have been lost in the course of time. The vocabulary is constantly changing, as some words disappear and others are added. Consequently, place-names may become opaque to modern speakers because the words from which the names were once formed are no longer part of our vocabulary. For instance, we are not familiar with a word *nibe* meaning 'a protruding hill', but this word was current when the place-name *Nibe* was coined. In the same way, the words **ī* 'yew tree' and *kost* meaning 'coppice' have been lost, but the words were still current at the time when a thicket of yews was given the name *Ikast*.

In a large number of place-names we recognise familiar words, e.g. *præst* 'vicar' and *ø* 'island' in *Præstø*, *havn* 'harbour' in *København* and *skov* 'forest' in *Nakskov*. However, we often notice that the meaning that can be read out of the name is not very appropriate for the locality in question. For instance, *Præstø* is a town rather than an island, and the clergy are no more prominent here

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[1] The Danish etymologies mean 'Odin's sanctuary', 'river headland' and 'heron's neck' respectively.

than in other towns. Normally, we do not even consider the meaning of names, i.e. whether the elements of the name can be associated with familiar words. Neither do we ponder as to whether the characteristics deduced from the names are actually consistent with the locations. There is no need to reflect on these matters, for place-names generally function perfectly well even if we do not understand them, or if their semantics make no sense. After all, the primary function of a place-name is not to describe a locality to which it refers. Rather, its linguistic function is solely to single out a certain locality, i.e. to function as a recognised and stable appellation for a specific locality.

We may still reckon that the linguistic unit that gained the status and function of a place-name bore a meaning related to the place it denotes at one point in its development, namely the moment the name was formed. Identifying the meaning of the names at the moment they were coined has been the main task of traditional onomastics. Knowledge about linguistic changes from pre-historic times until today often enables us to reconstruct the form and meaning of the name at the time of formation. In the first place, this is a prerequisite for clarifying fundamental onomastic issues, namely the principles at play when place-names are formed. In addition, the etymological analysis, as the process is called, is a base that enables us to use place-names as a source for cultural history. The words contained in place-names often refer to phenomena in the society in which they were coined, e.g. pre-Christian religion, old administrative units, communications and settlement, agriculture etc. Thus, place-names may be an important source of information in such matters.

In recent decades, onomastic research has turned to other aspects than etymology. To some extent, this is a result of current trends in modern linguistics, focusing on language as a means of communication. In addition, an extension of the field has emerged internally, as onomasts have addressed new questions. For instance, studies with a more theoretical focus have attempted to define and delimit proper nouns, including place-names, as opposed to other words in the language. These have pointed at the lack of meaning as a distinctive characteristic of place-names. Moreover, it has become

relevant to discuss the function of proper names in the usage, in communication.

Above, it has been suggested that it is irrelevant for speakers whether they are able to associate a meaning with place-names and what kind of meaning they are able to deduce. Though this is true for the vast majority of place-names, the claim is somewhat simplistic. There are a number of place-name changes that can only be explained if we take into account an intentional contribution on the part of the speakers. These seem to prove that the semantic content speakers associate with a name is not always subordinate.

Some of the intentional name changes seem to be due to mainly *external changes*. If the characteristics of a locality change to such an extent that there is an obvious discrepancy between the apparent signification of the name and its actual location, the name may be changed completely. Alternatively, the element that stands out as manifestly inappropriate may be replaced by another that seems more adequate. For reasons not yet identified, such changes are rare for names of towns and cities. I have already mentioned town names formed from words that denote other localities than habitations. Other examples include e.g. Hol*bæk* 'brook', Ros*kilde* 'spring' Nek*sø* 'lake'. There are some examples of name changes, however, e.g. *Sakstorp* changed to *Sakskøbing* when the village changed into a market town. For non-habitation names there seems to be less tolerance towards the lack of correspondence between the names, in particular the generic, and the actual locations.

Some name changes have *practical* reasons. It causes confusion for speakers if two localities within a limited area have identical names or names that are easily confused. In the case of identical habitation names, the problem is normally solved by adding an element to one or more of the names, e.g. *Lille* Næstved : Næstved, Brøndby*vester* : Brøndby*øster*, *Kirke*-Søby : *Sø*-Søby etc.[2] In recent times, it has been necessary to change street names that are identical or similar enough to cause postal confusion. Thus, *Enighedsvej* and *Randersvej* in Frederiksberg have been changed to *Edisonsvej* and

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[2] *Lille* 'little'; *vester* 'western'; *øster* 'eastern', *kirke* 'church'; *sø* 'lake, sea'.

Priorvej to avoid confusion with *Enighedsvej* and *Randersgade* in other parts of Greater Copenhagen.

In the majority of cases, however, the motive for place-name change should be sought in the mind of the speakers. Psychological factors may have been at play even in the examples given above, but in many cases the reasons for changes seem to be purely psychological.

Name taboo is related to superstitions in former times. It was imagined that evil powers could be warded off if one avoided mentioning the names of the localities to which they were connected. In many cases, this resulted in new, inoffensive names, so-called 'noa-names'. It may be difficult to prove that such name changes have taken place, since it is rare for us to know the original name that was lost owing to the taboo. Some scholars have suggested that names containing the element *hellig* 'holy' may be such taboo names, e.g. *Helgenæs* and *Hellesø*. The latter may have replaced a tabooed lake-name *Sevel*, a name preserved as the name of a village and parish in Jutland.

Aesthetic and *ethic* standards change over the years. Quite a number of names have been changed on the grounds that speakers have considered them to be aesthetically or ethically offensive, either because of the words they have appeared to contain or because events associated with the location caused unpleasant associations. To remedy the matter, the whole name could be changed, or at least the offensive parts of it. The name or element chosen as a replacement was either more positive from an aesthetic or ethical point of view, or possibly neutral. Thus, the inhabitants of the Silkeborg suburb *Aldershvile* 'Rest for the Aged' chose this name in 1873 as a replacement for the former name *Pjaltenborg* 'Ragged castle', which went back to the time when this was a poor quarter. And even though they contain respectable personal names, the former even a saint's name, the Sjælland village names *Ludserød*, *Gumperup* and *Rumperup* were changed in the 1920s on the initiative of the inhabitants. Their first elements were associated with *lus* 'lice' and *gump*, *rumpe* 'behind, bum' respectively.[3] The streets *Sct. Peders-*

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[3] Their new names are *Høvelte*, *Klinteby* and *Højsted*.

stræde 'St. Peter's Street' in Svendborg and *Krystalgade* 'Crystal Road' in Copenhagen acquired their present names in the mid 18th century. Until then, they were called *Røven* 'The Arse' and *Skiden-stræde* 'Dirty Street'. The street *Bremerholm* in Copenhagen has had it name changed twice by request, in 1823 from *Ulkegade* to *Hol-mensgade*, and then in 1932 to its present name. Both times the argument was that prostitution in the street had given the street name a negative ring.[4] A number of similar examples could be mentioned. However, it may be difficult to bring about a name shift, i.e. make people use a new name. This was obviously the case for the village name *Tyvkær* 'Thieves' Marsh' in Jutland. It retains its name[5] in spite of a royal decree from 1580 stating that its name should be "Fridtzkier" ('Peace Marsh'), even though the fine for using the old name counter to the King's orders was "a good, ready ox".

In Denmark, place-name changes due to the dominance of certain *political* ideologies or *religious* fractions at different times are rare. Politically motivated name shifts are frequent in Eastern Europe, however. For instance, the town called *Tsaritzin* in the Tsar period was renamed *Stalingrad* after the Russian revolution and *Volgograd* after Stalinism had been abolished. Danish examples are mainly to be found in South Jutland, which was under German rule 1864–1920. When the area was reunited with Denmark, a number of street-names in Sønderborg were changed, for instance, *Kaiser Wilhelm-Allee* was replaced by *Kongevejen* 'King's Road'. *Adelbart Strasse* – named after a German admiral – was changed to *Helgo-landsgade*,[6] and *Baudessin Strasse* was renamed *du Plats Gade*. The former name commemorates a German admiral, the latter a promi-nent Danish major-general.

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[4] *Ulk* denotes 'the short-spined sea scorpion' and other fish of the Cottus family. It is also an old slang word for a seaman. *Holmen* 'the islet', is a place-name.

[5] However, in order to conceal the negative connotations of the name, its local as well as authorised Danish spelling is now *Tiufkær*, reflecting an older writ-ten form of the name.

[6] Helgoland or Heligoland in the North Sea was under Danish rule 1714–1814, after a successful Danish conquest.

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Though the conversion to Christianity must have meant a total upheaval, it did not really leave an imprint in the form of place-name shifts with religious motivation. The new faith only appears indirectly to give rise to occasional name shifts. Since it is known that most churches were built in existing villages of a certain size, we may assume that some of the villages called *Kirkeby* and *Kirk-erup* (Dan *kirke* 'church') etc. have previously borne other names. We know little or nothing about these original names, but there is no reason to assume that they were particularly "heathen". This can be deduced from the fact that other church villages have retained their names in spite of their reference to the old religion, e.g. *Nærå*, *Tise* and *Thorsø*, containing the names of the gods *Njord*, *Tyr* and *Thor*. The reformation appears to have had a somewhat stronger influence on the stock of place-names. For instance, the names of monasteries were occasionally changed after the royal takeover, e.g. *Sct. Hans Kloster* in Odense to *Odensegård*.

An early instance of place-name shift caused by an owner shift is attested in Sorø Abbey's register of donations from about 1440, in the words "Gökstorp qvod nunc Knutstorp dicitur", meaning "Gökstorp which is now called Knutstorp". It can be deduced that at some point in the Middle Ages, the masculine name *Knut* replaced another masculine name *Gøk* as a specific in the village name which is now called *Knudstrup* (near Sorø). It is probably safe to assume that the personal names refer to owners or tenants. We do not know to what extent personal names in place-names were replaced in medieval times, as old sources rarely make reference to such changes. In most cases, only one form of the name is recorded, which is identical with the form that has survived until the present day. However, this can also be construed as showing that the custom of indicating the names of changing owners or tenants had stopped by the time our oldest sources were written, possibly because there was no longer a chieftain in the village.

We know, however, from later periods and other localities that changing ownership may result in changing names. In the late 16th century, it became fashionable in the Danish royal family and the aristocracy to give their manors and castles etc names indicating ownership. This tradition, influenced by foreign patterns, continues

into modern times. It causes a large number of name-shifts, partly because old names had to give way to new names of this kind, and partly because names of the new kind replaced each other concurrently with changes of owners. There are numerous examples, and only a random sample is presented here. In most cases, the family name is included in the new name. Examples of such changes are *Holmekloster* to *Rantzausholm*, *Iversnæs* to *Wedellsborg*, *Sandagergård* to *Brinkenslyst*, *Kærup* to *Gabelseje*, *Finstrup* to *Holstenshus* and *Løvenskjolds Palæ* to *Schacks Palæ*.[7] In some cases, an abbreviated form of the family name is included, e.g. Rosenkrantz in *Roseneje*, formerly *Qvitzowsholm*, or an extended form, such as Holck in *Holckenhavn* (replacing *Nygård*). *Brahetrolleborg*, formerly *Rantzausholm*, includes both family names (Brahe and Trolle). In some cases, a family name can be used as a place-name without an added generic, e.g. *Hardenberg* and *Brockdorff*, which replace *Krenkerup* and *Grønlund*. The owner may also use his first name to signal his claims to an estate. For instance, former *Hillerødsholm* was renamed *Frederiksborg* after King Frederik II. *Skovkloster* acquired its new name *Herlufsholm* after its owner Herluf Trolle and the manor *Ulfeldsholm* was renamed *Ellensborg* when it was taken over by the renowned Ellen Marsvin. As we have already seen, names indicating ownership often replace one another. The above-mentioned *Roseneje*, renamed from *Qvitzowsholm*, later had its name changed to *Bøttigersholm* and finally *Hofmannsgave*. Similarly, *Ulfeldsholm*, *Ellensborg* and *Holckenhavn* all refer to the same manor in Fyn. A name indicating ownership of no current interest was sometimes replaced by a name with no connection to the new owner. In the case of manors, it was rather common to adopt a former, abandoned name. Thus, *Brinkenslyst*, *Gabelseje* and *Hardenberg* eventually got back their original names *Sandagergård*, *Kærup* and *Krenkerup*.

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[7] In the latter, the family name *Schack* replaces another family name *Løvenskjold*. The generic means 'palace'. The other original names are typical habitation names, apart from *Holmekloster*, which means 'islet monastery'. The specifics of all the new names are Danish and Schleswig-Holstein aristocratic family names: *Rantzau*, *Wedell*, *Brink*, *Gabel*, *Holsten* and *Schack*.

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The wish to signal ownership through a name is not limited to the upper classes, but we know more about its manifestation in naming tradition among the nobility. Even if farms and houses belonging to common people have borne names indicating who their owners were, we rarely know the circumstances around their formation or which names they may have replaced. This naming practice is still alive, for instance when summer cottages are named.

The so-called *memorial names* are another group of names associated with a certain prestige. Their purpose is to honour a person or an event by referring semantically to that person or event. This sometimes means that established names are abolished. For instance, the owner of *Vedtofte* renamed his manor *Brahesholm* in honour of his aunt Christence Brahe. *Hagenskov* acquired its new name *Frederiksgave* 'Frederik's gift' as an expression of gratitude towards the donator, King Frederik II, and *Østrup Slot* was renamed *Fredensborg* (Dan *fred* 'peace') to commemorate the peace treaty after the Great Nordic War. Above all, memorial names abound in street names coined from the 19th century onwards. A couple of Copenhagen street names demonstrate that these, too, have occasionally replaced existing names: *H. C. Andersens Boulevard* replaced *Vester Boulevard* in 1955, and *Dag Hammarskjölds Allé* formed a part of Østerbrogade until 1961. The latter change also appears to be politically motivated. As for such shifts, as well as for other types of psychologically motivated name shifts discussed above, there may be underlying complex motives.

Above, we have seen that the introduction of new naming practices has led to the replacement of names. For there are *fashions* within name formation, too, and the desire for a more up-to-date name may be one reason for name change. The changes from *Nydamshuse* and *Lundehuse* to *Skovly* and *Lundely* reflect a 19th-century trend in naming patterns, when *ly* 'shelter' became a popular generic. The changes from *Abrahamstrup*, *Ibstrup* and *Tubberup* to

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Jægerspris, *Jægersborg* and *Hjortespring*[8] are heavily influenced by foreign (German) patterns.

Influence from *existing place-names* is important in another kind of place-name change as well. Place-names are sometimes reshaped so that they appear to have the same generic as a large group of other place-names, although they were originally compounded with completely different words. It is not, however, every frequent type of place-name that can attract any place-name whatsoever. A certain phonetic similarity between the attracted form and the attracting one is required. Thus, such changes differ from the free substitution of place-name elements observed in the examples above. On the other hand, these substitutions have no reference to actual circumstances relating to the locality. Their main function is to give these names a more familiar form, i.e. make them resemble other well-known place-names. For instance, there was once a village name *Græsholte* in Sjælland. This developed a form *Græste*, which was reinterpreted as *Græsted* under the influence of other names in *-sted*, which is still the name of the village. The names *Strellev*, *Vedersø* and *Grenå* in Jutland are all original compounds with the generic *høj* 'mound'. In the first, *høj* developed into *-øw*, and as the specific ends in *-l*, it was interpreted as the familiar ending *-lev*,[9] and was spelt accordingly. The two latter names also developed dialectal forms with an *ø*-sound and an *o*-sound respectively. Under the influence of other village names ending in *-sø* and *-å*, they were reinterpreted as containing these words. This kind of reshaping has sometimes been called "folk etymology". The term is somewhat unfortunate, partly because these forms rarely emerge as popular pronunciation forms, but much more often as scribal forms in official documents. Moreover, such changes are not necessarily due to attempts to etymologise names or to restore older, more original forms. The first element or specific is subject to

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[8] The original names are typical Danish settlement names with the generic *torp* 'dependent settlement'. The new names mean 'Hunter's Praise', 'Hunter's Castle' and 'Deer Leap', cf. German *Hirschsprung*.

[9] *-lev* is an Iron-Age name element denoting 'inheritance, what is left for somebody'.

reshaping, too. *Jordløse* and *Kildebrønde* do not originally refer to *jord* 'soil, earth' or *kilde* 'well'. Instead, they contain the old words **iūr* 'wild boar' and **gældi*, probably denoting 'a stretch of infertile land'. When the words went out of use, they were replaced by two familiar words that were phonetically close. Reshaping based on the phonetic form may be combined with other motives, e.g. avoiding a name that does not appear sufficiently aesthetic. The changes from *Svineborg* to *Svendborg* and from *Fulebæk* to *Fuglebæk*[10] can probably be seen in this light. Occasionally, place-name reshaping can be ascribed to learned persons who wish to restore the original etymology of a name. A well-known Danish example is *Hertadalen* near Roskilde. The form is due to the antiquarian interest of medical practitioner Ole Worm, who wanted to see the heathen goddess *Herta* in the rather mundane place-name *Ærtedalen* 'pea valley'.

The examples quoted above combine to prove that name shifts cannot always be ascribed to phonetic development over the years. In some cases, psychological factors lie behind such changes, and these may overrule organic developments. However, we should bear in mind that most place-names develop independently of conscious external chance. Moreover, changes that do not depend on language-internal development are always irregular. Under what seem to be identical circumstances, some names remain untouched, whereas others are replaced or reshaped in some of the ways discussed above.

It has been maintained that conscious name changes prove that the linguistic information a name appears to convey is relevant to the speaker after all. From this point of view, I shall look at one final group of extralinguistic name changes, the so-called elliptical names. In such names, the information appears to be reduced, since one element of the name is omitted. This is the case with village names *Fuglebjerg* and *Borre*, which are recorded as *Withfuglæbyerg* and *Østerburgh* in the Middle Ages, *Blegdammen* for *Blegdamshos-pitalet*, *Bakken* instead of *Dyrehavsbakken* and *Sundet* for *Øre-*

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[10] *Svin* 'pig, swine' is replaced by a masculine name *Svend*, and *ful* adj. 'foul' by *fugl* 'bird'.

sund.[11] In the initiated circle where such ellipses arise, the elliptic form is no less informative than the original form, however. After all, the functional impact of a name is determined by the persons who use them at different times.

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[11] *Withfuglæbyerg* may either have meant 'hill with woodland birds' or 'at the hill with the birds'. *Østerburgh* meant 'the eastern stronghold', *Blegdamshospitalet* 'the hospital at the bleaching ground', *Dyrehavsbakken* 'the hillslope at the deer park' and *Øresund* 'the sound at the gravelly sandbank'.