

Vibeke Dalberg

NAME AND PLACE

**Ten essays on the dynamics
of place-names**

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Vibeke Dalberg's 70th birthday, August 22nd 2008*

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Denotation shift and shift in denotatum*

In South-West Jutland there is a bog called *Skærbæk* (< Dan *bæk* ‘brook’, cf. DSÅ VI: 192). Originally, *Skærbæk* was the name of a brook which ran through the bog. Later it was transferred as the name of the bog itself. In Western Sjælland, we find a bog called *Ellesø* (< Dan *sø* ‘lake’) DSÅ II: 39). The locality acquired its name in its earlier condition as a lake and retains it even after having become a bog.

The above examples represent the two types which are called “utbyten” (replacements) and “förskjutningar” (displacements) by Kurt Zilliacus (1988: 9–10) – see also *Ortnamn och samhälle* 1976: 222–23). With regard to terminology it should be noted that the Danish equivalents *denotationsskifte* (denotation shifts), *udskiftninger* (replacements), *forskydninger* (displacements) have hitherto not been used in Danish place-name research. With names of the *Skærbæk*-type, where the name of a brook is transferred to the adjacent bog, the terms metonymic transference (Weise & Kousgård Sørensen 1964: 4) or semantically secondary names (Dalberg 1985: 67) are occasionally used. For the *Ellesø*-type, where a lake develops into a bog but retains its name unchanged, there are no specific terms in Danish, although the phenomenon is naturally well-known.

In the following, I wish to discuss some differences between the two types. However, before proceeding to do this, I aim to illustrate the two types with additional examples.

The *Skærbæk*-type – the semantically secondary names – occurs primarily in the countless instances where settlements have acquired their name from the natural or cultural feature close to which the settlement evolved. Below, I shall primarily concentrate on natural features which have semantically secondary names – i.e. like the bog *Skærbæk* – as it appears that this type of names may

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occasionally be difficult to distinguish from names of the *Ellesø*-type. In the example *Skærbæk*, a semantically primary brook-name has become a semantically secondary bog-name. Watercourses may themselves also carry semantically secondary names. An example is the West Jutlandic stream *Falen* (< Jutish *fal* ‘ford’), whose name was transferred from the ford crossing the watercourse. *Smækken* (< Dan *smække* ‘drawbridge’) is a North Jutlandic brook whose name was originally that of a bridge and *Egesti* (< Dan *sti* ‘path’) a brook in West Sjælland, takes its name from its fish weir (DSÅ II: 68–69, DSÅ IV: 233, DSÅ II: 17). In a number of instances, names of watercourses have themselves become the semantically secondary names of other types of localities, including numerous settlements. In the village of Dragør, the name of a hydronymic feature has been transferred to a street, namely *Badstuevælen* (< Dan *væl* ‘watercourse, watering-place’), which was originally the name of a pond (DSÅ I: 105). In the city of Århus, there is an example of a street name, *Immervad* (< Dan *vad* ‘ford’), which has been transferred from the name of a ford (DSÅ III: 236). In these instances, a place-name has acquired a new place-name function. It has become the name of a new and different locality from the one which first bore it and for which it was originally created. The etymological content of the name is thus concerned with the original bearer of the name and it must be seen as being an uncompounded name in a name-semantic analysis, regardless of whether or not it was compounded. *Skærbæk* was at the outset a compounded name, consisting of the specific *skær* adj. ‘pure, clean’ and the generic *bæk* n. ‘brook’. The bog-name *Skærbæk*, on the other hand, cannot be split up into separate elements. Naming has taken place as a metonymic name transfer based on association by adjacency, presupposing topographical contact between the locality from which the name was transferred and the one onto which it is transferred. With regard to the original carrier of the name, it is fully possible for it to retain its name. This is, for example, the case with *Nivå* (< Dan *å* ‘stream’) in North Sjælland, which is still the name of both the watercourse as well as the settlement *Nivå*. Another possibility is that the original name bearer is given a new name, such as in the case of the lake of *Glumsø* (< Dan *sø* ‘lake’) in South-Western Sjælland which ended

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up by being called *Glumsø Sø*. In this case we even have the original lake name *Glumsø* in its later function as a settlement name as the specific in the new lake name. Finally, it is also possible that the original name bearer may be left unnamed. This seems to have been the case with the little pond east of the farm *Kantedam* (< Dan byname *Kantor* and *dam* ‘pond’) on Bornholm. The pond, whose original name must have been *Kantedam*, apparently no longer has a name of its own (DSÅ IV: 35).

In the Swedish language survey of the Finnish terminology overview of 1974 (*Terminologin inom namnforskningen* 1974: 72), denotation is defined as ‘syftning’ (reference), which ties in with the definition I should like to use, namely that denotation is ‘a linguistic symbol for an extra-linguistic phenomenon, a denotatum’ cf. also *Stednavneforskning* 1 1972: 227.

It may be justified to claim that there have been changes in denotation in the above-mentioned names, in so far that they have become linguistic symbols for completely different kinds of denotata from what they had originally referred to. I do, however, doubt whether it is fitting to call this *replacement* of denotation, as is done by Zilliacus (1988: 9–10). To me, replacement means that *x* is substituted for *y* but others may have diverging interpretations of the meaning of the word. The change in denotation I have tried to describe does not necessarily consist in the former denotation disappearing and giving way to a new one – i.e. what I understand by the word replacement. In its new function as a linguistic symbol for a new denotatum, the name has a different denotation from what it had in its earlier function but the original function may still be fulfilled at the same time. Or to express it more directly: They are two different denotata – name bearers – and two different but homonymic names.

In the case of the *Ellesø*-type, on the other hand, we are dealing with one name and one name bearer only. The latter has clearly undergone a change, to which I shall return after I have illustrated the type with additional examples. On a map from 1806, a lake is marked west of Kalundborg in Western Sjælland as *Munkesø*. On later maps from 1897 and 1944 the lake is no longer visible. *Munkesø* is now the name of the meadow land which was earlier a lake

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(DSÅ V: 95). Two plots of land in South Western Jutland are named *Bredkær* and *Smalkær* on a map from 1943. The word *kær* is used of swampy areas, and the names had been formed prior to the drainage of the area. In the middle of the 19th century, the island *Holmsland* (< Dan *holm* ‘islet’ + *land* ‘land’) on the west coast of Jutland was connected with the mainland (Trap⁵ IX, 1: 483) but the locality is still called *Holmsland*. Somewhat later in the same century, a similar occurrence took place on the north coast of Fyn, where the island *Langø* (< Dan *ø* ‘island’) was connected to Fyn (Trap⁵ V,1: 371). However, the name of the area is retained as *Langø*.

In the above-mentioned examples, the name bearer has been transferred from one category of locality to another: from a lake to a bog, from a swamp to cultivated fields, etc. No new naming has taken place. *Ellesø* as the name of a bog cannot, for example, be analysed as an uncompounded name, that is, as a name with a structure different from the etymologically compounded lake name *Ellesø*. If my definition of denotation above (‘a linguistic symbol for an extra-linguistic phenomenon, a denotatum’) is applied to this phenomenon, it is very difficult to see that the name as a linguistic symbol has undergone any kind of change. It is the extra-linguistic phenomenon, the denotatum of the name, which has changed. In the above-mentioned cases, one may claim that it is the character of the locality which has changed. If we remain within Zilliacus’ terminological universe (Zilliacus 1988: 9–10), then we may call this change a shift in denotatum. I shall return to the question as to whether such a shift in denotatum is an onomastically relevant phenomenon or not.

Even if I find the terms less than satisfactory in a number of instances, I shall refer to denotation shift in connection with the semantically secondary bog-name *Skærbæk* and shift in denotatum in connection with the name of the bog *Ellesø*, which was formerly a lake.

I can only agree with Zilliacus (1988: 9–10) that it is important to distinguish between two such differing phenomena. Normally, this is not that difficult either. The names of neighbouring localities can often guide us with regard to a denotation shift, and extra-onomastic information about topographical changes in the

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locality may reveal the shift in denotatum. It may, however, be difficult to make such a distinction in cases where we may establish that the present character of the locality does not correspond to the one which, according to the etymology of the name, was referred to at the time of naming. To return to my type-examples: It is fully plausible – and well-proved – that a lake may develop into a bog (*Ellesø*), whereas it is more difficult to imagine a development in which a brook has become a bog (*Skærbæk*).

If a topographical development cannot be rendered probable, it is impossible to reckon with a shift of denotatum. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that a denotatum shift has occurred even when it may in fact be probable. A denotation shift remains a theoretical possibility. A bog which carries an original lake-name may also have acquired its name by means of a metonymic name transfer from an adjacent lake. Is it, for instance, possible to establish whether the North Jutlandic brook *Starsig* (< Dan *sig* ‘waterlogged hollow’) has undergone a shift in denotatum or one in denotation? The brook runs through a large swampy meadow, and it must be this, now nameless, meadow, which originally bore the name *Starsig* (DSÅ VI: 314). Is the situation to be judged in such a way that a watercourse developed at the bottom of the swampy meadow or has a watercourse running along the bottom of the meadow assumed its name? *Bellerup* is the name of a hill in central Jutland, originally borne by the village situated here (DS IX: 217). Is the hill to be seen as the last remainder of the village – i.e. a denotatum shift – or has the hill had its name transferred from the now lost village? I wonder whether it is best not to attempt a definite answer in these cases?

One circumstance of an entirely different character may in some cases render it uncertain whether a name belongs to this discussion or not. It is relatively common for the names to occur in the records both with and without an element which states the character of the locality. Such names are only relevant to this discussion if name forms with characterising elements can be considered to be epexegetic. The previously mentioned example of the name of a watercourse transferred from a ford, *Falen*, is also known as *Falenå*. However, the *-å* is best interpreted as an epexegetic addition, a sec-

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ondary name element, intended to state the character of the locality at a certain point in time. The reason is partly that *-å* forms are few in number and partly that they are primarily found on maps, where epexegetic elements are common. If there are no arguments for considering the name forms with character-stating generics as being epexegetic, then they must be considered to be semantically primary compounds, and the forms without such elements must be elliptic formations. *Falenå* should in this case be interpreted as ‘the brook by the ford *Falen*’ and the name form *Falen* for the brook as an elliptic instance of *Falenå*. Such names are of no interest to this discussion. Unfortunately, we often lack the means to ascertain positively with which type of name formation we are dealing. The following situation in which both interpretation possibilities are present is not that uncommon. In the 1682 cadastre a fenced meadow in southern Fyn is characterised as “En Enghaffue som kaldis Brunemose” (“A fenced meadow called Brunemose [*< Da. brun* ‘brown’ and *mose* ‘bog’]”). Elsewhere in the same source the locality is called “Brunemose Enghave” but it is otherwise not known from other sources. If *Brunemose Enghave* is to be considered as being epexegetic with *Brunemose* as a semantically secondary transfer from a bog to a fenced meadow, then we are dealing with a shift in denotation. If *Brunemose Enghave* was coined as the name of the meadow with the name of the adjoining bog as specific, we do not need to consider either it or *Brunemose* in this discussion. This problem is, however, present in numerous farm names both with or without the element *-gård* ‘farm’.

Finally, I wish to return to the question of shift in denotatum, i.e. the type illustrated with the example *Ellesø*, the name of a bog which had formerly been a lake. All localities change character over time and the transition between the type-categories is often relative. What basis do we have for deciding if a locality has entered into a new category – e.g. changed from a lake to a bog? We have our language and the structuring of our surrounding world which it reflects. However, such a change of concept is not very exact and is additionally also influenced by the individual language user’s command – or lack of command – of the topographical word stock. A descriptive model borrowed from e.g. geology or topography does not

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appear to be suitable either. In my opinion, such methodological deficiencies are irrelevant. In which respects is a shift in denotatum an onomastically relevant problem? It has already been underlined that it is important to be able to distinguish between a denotation shift and a shift in denotatum. To ascertain that a denotatum shift has taken place is also relevant from an etymological point of view, as it is important to know the character of the locality which was the object of naming when interpreting a name. However, the point here is how to reconstruct the character of the locality at the time of naming, not to classify the locality's characteristics at a later stage. It is very difficult to see how a description of a shift in denotation can in itself be of onomastic relevance. The fact that the name may survive at the same time as a denotation shift takes place shows that we are dealing with a proper noun, as a proper noun does not have the description of its denotatum as its mission. Naturally, it is an onomastically relevant aspect but it does not belong in a discussion of denotation shift.

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