

Minority Language Place-Names: A Practice-Oriented Study of the Establishment of the South Sami *Kraapohke* in Swedish Lapland

LARS-ERIK EDLUND 

Scandinavian Languages, Department of Language Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

Implementation of the Swedish minority policy has resulted in the national minority languages having been visualized. But what minority language place-names should be put on road signs together with the Swedish names? This article is focused on the establishment of the Sami toponym for Dorotea in southern Swedish Lapland. The question is, which of the following Sami names should be adopted as the official name: *Birjevahne* (< Sw. *Bergvattnet*), *Döörte* (< Sw. *Dorotea*), or the original South Sami *Kraapohke*. This practice-oriented study illustrates the problems involved in finding out how Sami names are used in living language. Such problems generally arise when place-names are handed down by small language communities. The establishment of the Sami name *Kraapohke* illustrates the complicated questions that arise when working with minority language place-names and the identity processes associated with such names.

KEYWORDS Toponyms, place-names, minority languages, linguistic landscapes, road signs, Sweden, Västerbotten County, Sami languages, South Sami, revitalization.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the complicated issues that arise when working with official minority language place-names. This is achieved through a case study of the process of determining an official South Sami name for the municipality of Dorotea in the southern part of the province of Lapland in northern Sweden, where three alternative Sami forms of the name have been discussed, namely *Birjevahne*, *Döörte*, and *Kraapohke*.

A close study of this name process highlights the important function of place-names in “identity strengthening” for the local Sami population. Furthermore, the study illustrates how orally inherited Sami names are given official status in this decision-making process. The role of place-names in language and in the cultural revitalization process is also exemplified. We are, after all, dealing with the fully justified desire of minority groups to make their language visible, for example by manifesting their place-names in the linguistic landscape.

Linguistic conditions in the area

In the southern part of Swedish Lapland there has been an older Sami place-name stratum, which has been heavily influenced by Swedish-speaking and, in the west, also by Norwegian-speaking settlers. There are several examples of reshaping of Sami place-names among the official place-names of the area (Edlund et al. 2016; Holm 1980, 44–52).

Some of the place-names in the area bear witness to encounters between the Sami and the Scandinavians as early as prehistoric times (see Dahlstedt 1965, 1967), which may possibly be traced back to Old Norse or even older stages of the Nordic languages. It is natural that different groups of people with different languages meet in Lapland for trade and other activities of a mutual nature, and the presence of a multilingual competence can also be counted on here. Multilingualism is far more common among the world’s linguistic societies than monolingualism, and such multilingual competence obviously existed also in this area (e.g. Bergman and Edlund 2016.).

Among the Sami themselves, quite a few of the historically inherited Sami names have lived on; these are not, however, always well documented on official maps or in the folklore chronicles. In their communication with the authorities, the Sami have for a long time used the Swedish place-names, even in cases where older Sami place-names for the same locations existed, as it was easier to use a common naming practice in those contexts. As a result, the Swedish names have been documented in these contexts, but not the Sami ones. This source situation can be troublesome when an older Sami name is to be established as the official name.

In the past decade, as a result of the Swedish minority legislation (see below), interest in Sami names has increased in the Sami linguistic environments, together with a general interest in strengthening the threatened Sami languages. Increasing demands are placed on authorities responsible for road signage to manifest Sami place-names in the linguistic landscape. In the process of giving old Sami place-names official status, the Sami names handed down orally are very important.¹

This study is practice-oriented and describes the complicated decision-making process that, based on Swedish legislation and practices, precedes a decision to adopt an official minority language place-name form.² This article is concluded with some general reflections on related issues. First, a presentation is provided of the official process required before a place-name can be posted on a road sign.

Swedish legislation and practice regarding minority language place-names

In December 1999, Sweden acceded to the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, whereby the Sami, Tornedalers, Swedish Finns,

Jews, and Romani people were recognized as national minorities and their respective languages were given the status of minority languages. Being an indigenous people, the Sami were considered to have a special position. In 2009, the protection of the national minorities in Sweden became even stronger when a minority policy strategy was adopted, which included the creation of an expanded administrative area for the Finnish and Sami languages, and a clear ambition was expressed to encourage the municipalities concerned to join the minority language administrative area. The language and cultural revitalization efforts would also be strengthened.

For the Sami, this decision meant that Sami language centers would be established and that Sametinget (the Sami Parliament) would be given a clearer role for the establishment of goals for Sami language work and responsibility for leading these efforts.

To make minority language place-names visible, Trafikverket (the Swedish Transport Administration) was tasked with increasing its efforts to put up road signs with minority language place-names. In addition, all authorities involved were instructed to safeguard minority language place-names and make them visible on signs and other markings.³

Several official actors are involved in the work with minority language place-names in Sweden. Lantmäteriet (the National Land Survey) decides on place-names in cases where no other agency has expressly been given this authority. Institutet för språk och folkminnen (ISOF; The Institute for Language and Folklore) is responsible for the review of place-names prior to Lantmäteriet's decisions. Sametinget is also involved through its language consultants – in the following, we shall meet a South Sami language consultant – and in addition, opinions are gathered from Sámi giellalávdegoddi (the Sami Language Board), which is made up of representatives from Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Trafikverket is ultimately responsible for the physical placement of the road signs. Several of these stakeholders are represented in Ortnamnsrådet (the Place-Name Advisory Board), which often addresses Sami name issues.

To illustrate how the decision-making process works and what kind of arguments may be presented in the preparatory work preceding name decisions, I am here presenting a discussion conducted between 2008 and 2016 concerning the South Sami name for Dorotea. In June 2016, the discussion was concluded and a final decision made by the Swedish government.

South Sami *Birjevahne*, *Döörte*, or *Kraapohke* for Dorotea – which one should be adopted as the official name?

The area that comprises Dorotea “kapellag” (later Dorotea Parish) was originally part of Åsele Parish, which constituted a significant part of southern Lapland. The “kapellag” was called *Bergvattnet* from 1795, but as early as 1799 the name was changed to *Dorotea* after the then Queen of Sweden, Fredrika Dorotea Vilhelmina (1797–1809). As the area has a long Sami history, there have of course always been Sami place names in the area. Many of them have disappeared, but quite a few have lived on and have been used in our time, sometimes partially translated and with reinterpreted name components (see above).

As for the parishes, later the municipalities, in the area, it is unclear which Sami names were actually used as there are few chronicles. In the authorities' work to determine the settlement's official South Sami name, the empirical foundation appeared gradually, as we

shall see partly thanks to strong involvement among the local population. Newspapers and broadcast media also diligently reported on the discussions evoked by the various decisions involving the name issue. In this article, these texts and the decision documentation form the basis for the discussion (see Sources in the List of sources and references.)

The South Sami name *Birjevahne*, which was chronicled in 1935 by the well-known Uppsala Fenno-Ugrist Björn Collinder (ISOF), was based on the aforementioned Swedish name *Bergvattnet*. On the Ordnance Survey Map (2004), the names *Dorotea/Birjevahne* are consequently given next to each other, with the official Swedish name first, followed by the Sami name. When the names on this section of the map were to be revised (Text 1), ISOF announced that the Institute and the Sami Parliament's South Sami language consultant had come to the conclusion that *Birjevahne* was outdated and recommended that "Dorotea's Sami name should be *Döörte*" (Text 2), a name based on the Swedish name *Dorotea* (Text 3). On the basis of ISOF's recommendation, Lantmäteriet decided in 2008 to use the Sami name *Döörte* in the Ordnance Survey Map (2008; Text 4) and this decision concluded the first phase of the discussion.

Lantmäteriet's decision was appealed against, first by three private individuals (2009; Text 5) and later by Dorotea Municipality (2013, 2014; see Texts 8, 10) in favor of the name *Kraapohke*. In the appeals, it was noted that this older Sami form of the name was found as "Kraponjaure – NotaBene Bergvattnet" in a chronicle from 1818–1820 by a Lappmark vicar by the name of J. A. Nensén (UUB, R 649 p. 10). A closely related name, *Graponjavrie*, is also found in a later note, made by the Lappmark researcher O. P. Pettersson (ISOF).

At the beginning of the name discussion in 2009, the starting point was the following: a Sami name established in older source texts appears to exist for the lake of Bergvattnet, which name was also given to the parish and subsequently to the municipality and the municipality's main population center. At this stage, it was not clear whether the name form lived on at all in spoken language. It was on this that ISOF had to express an opinion.

ISOF stated (Text 6) with regard to the name noted by Nensén that it had never been on Lantmäteriet's maps and that it was not the accepted South Sami name of the municipality. The Institute had already, as we saw earlier, together with the Sami Parliament's South Sami language consultant suggested that the South Sami name should be *Döörte*. For this reason, ISOF stated that:

According to current principles of map presentation, *names that have fallen out of use cannot be entered on maps*. Names on the official maps should reflect current naming practice. *New maps should not be historical maps*. However, older names that are already used on maps may be presented on new maps. (My italics)

Since private individuals cannot appeal decisions in matters of this kind, the first appeal was denied. However, Dorotea Municipality took up the issue and appealed the decision to the government, recommending the name *Kraapohke* in view of "the desire and sentiments of the local population to use and make visible the traditional, time-honored name *Kraapohke*." The municipality also stated in the appeal that "it is the Sami people living in the geographic area who possess the traditional knowledge" and that the Sami population in the municipality "feels unfamiliar, uncomfortable and dissatisfied with

the name *Döörte*. This will influence and disrupt ongoing Sami identity-strengthening efforts.” The building of identity is obviously an important aspect for the municipality.

Two reindeer-herding communities (so called *samebyar*) in the area now expressed their support for the name *Kraapohke*. On the basis of this, the South Sami section of the Language Board decided on 18 November 2010 to recommend that the official Sami name of Dorotea should be *Kraapohke* (Text 7). It can be assumed that its support for *Kraapohke* was based on the fact that the name *was used* in both these Sami communities and that it was also otherwise confirmed in the area. This was probably so obvious to the representatives of the Sami communities that they felt there was no need to formulate this explicitly.

The documents on the matter indicate that the occurrence of the name in J. A. Nensén’s nineteenth-century chronicles was assigned special significance. A member of the Sami Parliament’s Cultural Committee emphasized in correspondence with the Sami Parliament (Text 9) that “the source value of the name form *Kraapohke* is strong, considering the records Pastor Nensén gathered [- - -] during the nineteenth century on, among other things, Sami circumstances in Dorotea in old times.”

As already mentioned, there had thus far been some uncertainty as to whether the South Sami name *Kraapohke* for Dorotea actually existed in the current spoken language. This circumstance clearly impeded the assessment of the name’s status and thus also the issue of whether the name could be included in Lantmäteriet’s geographical database, which in turn would enable Trafikverket to post the name on road signs.

In connection with the government’s decision on this name issue, ISOF conducted an ambitious investigation (Text 11) that absolutely crucially supplemented the empirical basis and resolved all remaining questions. This investigation was based on interviews with 21 South Sami informants from Sami communities within a wide area around Dorotea. The investigation yielded some unambiguous results.

First, it was established that most of the informants were not at all familiar with *Birjevahne* and that no one wanted it to “be the official South Sami place-name”; in itself, this is uncontroversial since *Birjevahne* had already been dismissed as an adequate South Sami name for Dorotea.

Second, it was stated in the investigation report that the use of the name form *Döörte* had spread to a certain extent since its inclusion in Israelsson’s and Nejne’s dictionary (2008, 262), where it is given as one of the Sami names for Dorotea. It has been claimed (personal communication) that the name *Döörte* was actually coined during the work on the dictionary, but this is uncertain; the name may after all have been used by one or more of the informants, been noted by the authors and then incorporated into the dictionary. For its part, the investigation noted spoken forms such as *Doerte*, *Doarte*, *Duerte*, and *Dörte*, but these forms did not appear to be in common usage by informants in Dorotea’s immediate proximity.

Third, the investigation established that *Kraapohke* had been used since the 1950s onwards by four informants who were in their 80s. This confirms the name form’s age and fixed establishment in Dorotea long before this name discussion started.

The administrator at ISOF emphasized in the investigation report that the fact that the older informants used “*Kraapohke* in the 1950s suffices as an argument for considering *Kraapohke* a living place-name and it should therefore be the official South Sami name

of Dorotea.” Moreover, it was noted that seven informants had begun using *Kraapohke* in recent years, which meant that they had “revitalized its usage and as most of them are middle-aged or younger, this is a good indication that the name *Kraapohke* will be carried on to younger generations.” This, too, was an aspect that spoke in favor of *Kraapohke*.

This investigation provided a solid basis for the final decision, and ISOF summarized the results in its report to the government (Text 12; 25 February 2016) in the following way:

The Institute for Language and Folklore recommends that the South Sami name for Dorotea should be *Kraapohke*. Our earlier assessment was made in consultation with the Sami Parliament on the basis of what was then known about the usage of the name. The Institute has therefore changed its position following an investigation.

The investigation report was submitted to the Swedish Government, and a decision was soon forthcoming. The Government decided on 16 June 2016 that Dorotea’s official South name should be *Kraapohke* (Text 13). However, even before this decision was made, *Kraapohke* had been used in official documents in the municipality. For example, as early as 2014 the municipality presented a “Minority Action Plan Kraapohken Tjälte. Dorotea Municipality 2014–2016,” and had also for quite some time used the name *Kraapohke* locally. But now *Kraapohke* was the official name.

Some concluding reflections

The concrete name issue presented here provides a good deal of food for reflection. The name’s identity bearing and “identity strengthening” function for the local Sami population is clear. It is also obvious that the historic dimension was important when individuals and the municipality pleaded for this Sami name to be given official status. As we have seen, an older record that supports *Kraapohke* was referred to early on in the process of reclaiming the original South Sami name instead of the South Sami names based on Swedish names, *Birjevahne* and *Döörte*.

When studying the decision-making process, it is also interesting to note how Lantmäteriet – to be fair, *entirely* in accordance with its instructions – makes its assessments as to whether or not a Sami name should be incorporated into its geographical database. The skepticism that existed regarding *Kraapohke* was due to uncertainty as to whether this name had been used at all in modern times. While ISOF had said in an early statement that “new maps should not be historical maps” (see Text 6), it subsequently found strong support for *Kraapohke* having been used in the local Sami spoken language in modern times, and that it continued to be so (see Text 11).

This example shows the importance of ascertaining a name’s usage in living language. In turn, this places considerable demands on the authorities responsible for preparing name cases. It is only exceptionally that thorough investigations such as the one described above are encountered, but this example emphasizes that they are definitely needed. Earlier records may indeed exist in fortunate cases, but very often they are missing. Investigations of this kind require access to informants who can provide

information concerning a name's usage one or more generations back. Problems may also arise in this respect, since we are dealing with small language communities that hand the place-names down orally.

In many places, the use of minority language place-names evokes strong feelings and reactions. Sometimes Sami road signs are subject to vandalism or torn down (e.g. Andersson 2016, 145, 2017, *passim*; Helander 2015, 121, 125; Puzey 2007 *passim*). In my study, I have found that such negative reactions are also expressed in newspaper website comment fields and in the web postings of the regional Sami TV program *Ođđasat*, where discussions regarding Sami names are often related and where headlines such as “Sami road signs destroyed” and “Sami place-names covered over” appear at times.⁴ Some of these reader and viewer comments seem to express the view that the Sami and Sami culture are subordinate to the Swedish and their culture. As Brit Mæhlum (2012, 249) concludes after discussing the situation in Tromsø, we are dealing with:

... prototypical mechanisms in a post-colonial reality. History is second nature; we are all to varying degrees prisoners of the past. Historic categorizations and past cultural interpretation schemes continue to be applicable, even if political decisions and ideological changes would entail something else.

From this and other similar cases involving place-names, it is apparent that *Lantmäteriet* does not take into account in its decision-making process whether the municipality is located in the Sami administration area, or whether the Sami language in question is subject to revitalization ambitions. Landry and Bourhis (1997) emphasize that the linguistic landscape – where not least place-names on road signs are visible elements – helps maintain and protect a group's language and identity (also Puzey 2007). This symbolic function, together with the linguistic landscape's information function, i.e. the function that clarifies what languages there are in an area and their relationship to one another, influences the language users' valuation and use of their language. The role of place-names in a revitalization process is obvious, and should reasonably not be ignored in decision-making processes involving minority language place-names. We are after all dealing with the fully justified desire of minority groups to make their language visible and to manifest their place-names in the linguistic landscape – and a language can hardly be more visible than on a road sign.

Notes

¹. With regard to Sami names on maps and in signs, see Helander (2015) for comparisons between various parts of the Sami area, Sápmi. For circumstances in Norwegian areas see Helander (1994, 2004, 2009, 2015), Aslaksen (2009), and Puzey (2007 ch. 3; 2009). For Swedish Sápmi, see Mattisson (1993) and Swedell (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), for Finland Vuolab-Lohi (2009) and Russia Zamyatin (2014).

². The study is included in the project “Naming and Narrating Places: Empowering Sami Traditions and

Identities through Popular Place-Making Processes,” financed by the Swedish Research Council Formas (254-2132-186).

³. A generally important starting point for the place-name preservation efforts is the Heritage Conservation Act (1988, 950), the name of which was changed to Cultural Heritage Act (1988, 950) on 1 January 2014.

⁴ See Samiska vägskyltar förstörda (2009), and Samiska ortsnamn överklistrade (2011).

List of sources and references

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UUB = Uppsala University Library

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Text 1: Correspondence from the Institute of Language and Folklore to the Sami Parliament’s South Sami Language Consultant regarding Dorotea’s Sami name, 10 November 2008

Text 2: Correspondence from the Institute of Language and Folklore to Lantmäteriet regarding Dorotea’s Sami name, 17 November 2008

Text 3: Correspondence from the Institute of Language and Folklore to Lantmäteriet regarding Dorotea’s Sami name, 17 November 2008

Text 4: Correspondence from Lantmäteriet to Jenny Swennevall regarding Dorotea’s Sami name, 20 May 2009

Text 5: Appeal by Jan-Olov Ellebrink et al. regarding the decision to use the South Sami name *Dööorte* for Dorotea, 13 May 2009

Text 6: Statement from the Institute of Language and Folklore to Lantmäteriet regarding a requested change of Dorotea’s Sami name *Dööorte*, 20 January 2010

Text 7: Decision by the Sami Language Board to the Sami Parliament regarding the “official Sami name for Dorotea,” registered at the Sami Parliament 14 December 2010

Text 8: Appeal from Dorotea Municipality to the Swedish Government regarding the Sami name of Dorotea, 20 September 2013

Text 9: Correspondence from Erik-Oscar Oscarsson, member of the Sami Parliament cultural committee, to the Sami Parliament regarding the Sami name of Dorotea, 24 June 2014

Text 10: “Supplemental statement” from Dorotea Municipality to the Swedish Government regarding the name of Dorotea, 20 August 2014

Text 11: Basis for statement from ISOF to the Swedish Government in conjunction with the Sami name of Dorotea, 24 February 2016

Text 12: Statement from ISOF to the Swedish Government in conjunction with the Sami name of Dorotea, 25 February 2016

Text 13: Decision from the Swedish Government in conjunction with the appeal of Lantmäteriet’s decision on the Sami name of Dorotea, Dorotea Municipality, 16 June 2016

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Notes on contributor

Lars-Erik Edlund is a professor of Scandinavian languages at Umeå University. He specializes in Scandinavian dialectology and onomastics. Edlund has been research leader for several projects, e.g. “Cultural Boundaries in Northern Scandinavia: Temporal and Spatial Processes” and “Naming and Narrating Places: Empowering Sami Traditions and Identities through Popular Place-Making Processes.”

Correspondence: Lars-Erik Edlund, Professor, Department of Language Studies, Umeå university, SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden. Email: lars-erik.edlund@umu.se.  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8748-9934>.