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Exonyms from a Norwegian point of view: a historical outlook

When comparing foreign geographical names in the three Scandinavian countries, one will notice that they are not always written in the same way. This is perhaps not surprising, but when taking into account that Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian are closely related languages one should expect that the same spellings of foreign names were used in all the three countries. That the *Marshall islands* is written respectively *Marshalløerne* (Da), *Marshallöerna* (Se) and *Marshalløyene/-øyane* (No) is natural, as translation of topographic appellatives is a world wide practice, and also in compliance with the UN resolutions. But why is *Florence* spelled *Firenze* in Norwegian and *Florens* in Danish and Swedish, and why is *Venice* written *Venezia* in Norwegian and *Venedig* in Danish and Swedish? The Swedes also use *Rom*, *Turin*, *Neapel*, *Prag* whereas the Norwegians use *Roma*, *Torino*, *Napoli*, *Praha*. In an article on endonyms and exonyms in Finland, Sirkka Paikkala (2007) gives a thorough survey of the Finnish practice, but touches also upon the use of foreign geographical names Swedish.

Obviously the Norwegian practice at this point is more in accordance with the UN recommendations on exonyms than in the two neighbouring countries. However, at an earlier stage *Florens* as well as *Venedig* were used in Norway, too. In order to understand the Norwegian position it is necessary to go a little back in history. As you may know Norway was in a union with Denmark for almost 400 years, from 1450 until 1814. Already in the 16th century Danish was established as administrative language in Norway and was hence used in writing in the Norwegian society until the latter part of the 19th century, i.e. after the dissolution of the Danish-Norwegian union in 1814. As a part of the treaty after the Napoleonic wars, Norway entered into a union with Sweden in 1814, but still Danish remained as the country's language in writing; Swedish was used only to a limited extent. When the Swedish-Norwegian union was dissolved in 1905 and Norway

finally regained its full independence, the linguistic situation was about to change. How can this be explained?

The answer lies partly in the 18th century. Throughout the centuries of Danish linguistic predominance the Norwegians continued to use Norwegian dialects orally, and as the streams of national consciousness swept over Europe in the 19th century the Norwegians became more aware of their own language and its ties with Old Norse. The genius and autodidact *Ivar Aasen* set out to collect information on the Norwegian dialects in the 1830ies, and around 1850 he published a dictionary and a grammar presenting a new language as synthesis of the Norwegian dialects. This new language, or rather a resurrection of the Old Norwegian was called *Landsmål*, and from 1929 *Nynorsk*. At the same time the Danish-Norwegian language underwent changes that brought it closer to the pronunciation of the upper class Norwegians in the towns, especially in Oslo. This Danish-Norwegian language was called *Riksmål*, from 1929 *Bokmål*. *Nynorsk* gained terrain until the 1940ies and was used mostly in the countryside, whereas *Bokmål* was dominating in the towns. After 1950 *Nynorsk* gradually lost terrain in written contexts, but is still used by 10-15 per cent of the population, mostly in Western Norway.

During the union with Denmark Norwegian place-names were written in various ways, very often with distorted spellings which did not reflect the pronunciation. The process of standardizing Norwegian place-names started already in the 1830ies and the work continued throughout the century. In 1912 it was decided that the spelling should be based upon the local spoken form and at the same time comply with *Nynorsk* as far as possible. Around 1920 a great many of the names of administrative entities were changed according to the same principles. There were two persons who exercised a major influence on this process, namely *Marius Hægstad* and *Hjalmar Falk*, both professors of Scandinavian languages. These two were also asked to formulate principles for a revised spelling of foreign geographical names. Until then Norway had mostly followed the Danish spelling.

Now the path was cleaned so to speak for a “new deal”: The reduction of exonyms in Norway. As this process took place several decades before the United Nations started drafting resolutions on the reduction of exonyms it may be of interest to have a closer look at the principles which were set up.

In the introduction of the first Norwegian published list of foreign geographical names (1922) Hægstad and Falk state (my translation):

“As to the spelling of geographical names in Norway it is well known that the Danish spelling was used until the 19th century, and that the Norwegians’ taste of orthography was directed from Copenhagen. Our own place-names were written in a way that suited the Danish system, so *Akershus* became *Aggershus*, *Larvik* became *Laurvig*, *Selbu* became *Sælboe* etc. Geographical names outside Denmark and Norway were written according to the German way of spelling. The result of this practice was that a great many foreign names in German spelling were imported to Norway via Denmark, not only names of German speaking countries, areas and towns, but names from all of the world, for instance many names on *-ien*, like *Asien*, *Armenien*, *Italien*, *Australien* and town names like *Neapel*, *Vendig*, *Florents* (German *Florenz*). In some cases the names were altered, for instance *Normandie* became *Normandiet* (with definite article *-et* in Danish/Norwegian).”

I quote further (my translation):

“In this way Norway got numerous spellings of geographical names that complied neither with the correct spelling in the country in question nor with a ‘natural nationalization’ of the names according to the analogies of Norwegian. On the contrary, it was question of a German adaptation, or a Danish nationalization of the German spellings. Foreign countries with which Norway gets in contact with may get a strange impression of the Norwegian culture and the sovereignty of the country as it is not in the position of rendering foreign geographical names in their original form or adapting them according to Norway’s own linguistic structure. This practice also leads to problems for instance in the schools as the pupils have to learn names that are not in accordance with the Norwegian tongue.”

No doubt the two scholars Falk and Torp partly argued on a non-scholarly basis as their program had the intention of getting rid of the German-Danish spellings of geographical names and replace them by spellings which were more likely to conform to Norwegian. However, they also argued that by introducing endonyms the receivers came closer to the donors.

In the preface of the first comprehensive Norwegian list on foreign geographical names (published 1922) the editor, Aksel Arstal stated some guiding principles for the rendering of the names by considering:

- a) traditional Norwegian spelling
- b) spelling in the country/language concerned
- c) spelling used in the widest used languages and possible changes in those languages
- d) expected development in the use of foreign names

In order to secure the quality of the list the editor consulted numerous experts and organizations dealing with the same problem, for instance the United States Geographic Board which in its Fourth Report (p. 17) states that “It is unquestionably desirable and proper that the home names should be the ones universally used. .. It is a reform to which we may look forward and work toward and which may be attended in the future.”

The editor also referred to the British Committee on Geographical names (quote): The spelling of every place-name in an independent country or self-governing dominion using the Latin alphabet shall be that adopted by the country or dominion, except ...”. Finally the French *Atlas Universel de Géographie* was cited: « A tout nom imposé avant la dernière guerre par une domination étrangère, nous avons toujours substitué la forme originelle et nationale. »

The main principle stated in the list looks very much like the one adopted by the UN:

“A foreign geographical name – especially the names of towns and administrative areas – should as a general rule, be spelt as it is written by the linguistic society to which the name belongs. If there is an official spelling it should be used. Official spellings are those which are used by the Post- and Telegraph and by national mapping authorities.”

Thereafter seven exceptions were mentioned:

- 1) The principle applies to languages with the Latin alphabet,
- 2) Uncertainty of which spelling has official status in the country concerned

- 3) A geographical name belongs to more than one country or linguistic group, or the area is not selfgoverning,
- 4) The local name may misguide the pronunciation (*Lisboa, Magalhães*)
- 5) Practice in the neighbouring countries and great linguistic societies (English, French, German),
- 6) Taking traditional long term practice into consideration (not question of altering the names of states, except the above mentioned changes like *Italien > Italia*),
- 7) When a name, completely or partly, is translated, the translated form should follow Norwegian orthographic rules, for instance *De forente stater/Sambandstatane U.S.A.* (now *USA*). The question of translating transparent names like '*Store saltsjø*' *Great Salt Lake* was discussed, but this one and names like *Montenegro* and *Sierra Nevada* were kept in the endonymic form.

As to the use of the definite article the editor recommended that the article should be left out and the main word (name) written according to official form in the country concerned. The German name *der Rhein* with the definite article 'der' should be written *Rhinen*, where *-en* is the definite article in Norwegian. *La Seine > Seinen*. But in *La Rochelle* and *Algeciras* the article is understood as a part of the name by Norwegians.

In order to ease the pronunciation a simplified phonetic script was added in sharp brackets to most of the names. The editor underlines that the list was set up as a proposal, and he is fully aware of its weaknesses. He was also prepared to receive criticism by saying:

Touching upon traditions and customs is a very delicate matter. Changes of this kind [geographical names] should be carried through step by step, and the soundest way is that they are realized on a deliberate basis and by showing that they are useful and well argued for.

Those set up the principles, and the editor in particular, were in my opinion pioneers as they could foresee the benefit of using endonyms, as well as many problems attached to the use of them.

In 1932 a governmental list of names of states and important land areas was published. In the preface the committee which prepared the list stated that "in Norwegian one should as far as possible use the "home" form of foreign geographical names". Names originating from

languages with non-Roman alphabets should be written as close to the home form as possible in Norwegian, or according to established international use. Still many traditional exonyms were retained.

If we move to our days, how is the situation in Norway? As I have indicated Norway started its march on the endonymic path around 1920, and has continued in this direction. Most changes from the 1922 list are in favour of the endonymic principle. In 1991 the Norwegian language council published *Geografilista* containing about 5000 foreign geographical names. This list has been updated and is now accessible on the Internet. Also this list stresses the endonymic principle: "For names in countries that use the Latin alphabet the main rule should be to respect the national spellings". According to the preface the list should be of special interest to publishing & printing houses, journalists, proof readers, schools and universities, tv and radio, and to the public in general.

Fernando de Noronha Brazilian island in the Atlantic

(**Fernando Póo**) see *Bioko*.

Ferrara town in Italy

Fichtelgebirge mountain in Germany

Fife county in Scotland

Fiji state in the Pacific; *fijian* el. *fijianar/fijianer*, *fijiansk*

Filippinane/Filippinene group of islands and state in the Pacific;
filippinar/filippiner, *filippinsk*

Filippingropa/Filippinergropa

Bokmål also **-gropen** ocean deep east of the Philippines

Filipstad town in Sweden

Finistère province in France

Finland state in Europe; *finlendar/finlender* el. *finlending*
el. *finne*, *finlandsk* el. *finsk*

Finskebukta, Bokmål also **-bukten** branch of the East Sea

Finspång town in Sweden

Finsteraarhorn mountain in Switzerland

(**Firat**) see *Eufkrat*.

Firenze town in Italy; *florentinar/florentiner*, *florentinsk*

Firth of Clyde or **Clydefjorden** fjord in Scotland

Firth of Forth or **Forthfjorden** fjord in Scotland

Fiskenæsset or **Qeqertarsuaatsiaat** place on the west coast of Greenland

Fjerritslev town in Denmark

Fjugesta municipality in Sweden

Fladengrunn fishing ground in the North Sea

Flandern landscape divided among the Netherlands, Belgium, and France

flamlendar/flamlender

If you search *Sprakradet*, you may open the list *Geografiske namn*

(http://www.sprakrad.no/Ordboeker/Geografiske_namn/).

In addition to the list of names the book gives information on spelling and pronunciation of names in various languages.

In 1995 the government published a list of names of states, based on a list issued by United Nations. The other Nordic countries published similar lists. Since the 1950ies there had been a close cooperation among the Nordic countries in order to agree upon the same spelling as far as possible, for instance *Skagerrak* for earlier Norwegian *Skagerak*. In 1959 Norway changed the spelling of *Finnland* to *Finland* in accordance with the Swedish-Finnish spelling.

If we compare the systematic changes from 1932 until to-day we may reckon with five main types:

1) Changes because of political events and decisions:

Dahomey > Benin, Danzig > Gdańsk (Gdansk)

2) New spellings as a result of orthographic changes in Norwegian:

Marshalløene > Marshalløyene

3) Norwegian changes in transcription practices:

Kasan > Kazan

(In 1970 a Norwegian printing house published a booklet on the spelling of Russian names.)

4) Norwegianizing:

Cambodia > Kambodsja, Tchad > Tsjad

5) De-Norwegianizing:

Fidsji > Fiji, *Butan* > *Buthan*

In 1997 a symposium on foreign names in Norden was organized in Oslo, and the question of exonyms and endonyms was dealt with from different points of view. One of the speakers, *Jan Brodal*, gave a talk entitled *Exonymy or endonymy – some fundamental considerations*. Mr. Brodal expressed his doubt about the UN resolutions recommending the reduction of exonyms. Most of the participants did not agree with his rather extreme view, but it is worth while dwelling with some of his arguments because they are shared by many people. He pointed to the existence of consistent exonymic systems of rendering foreign geographical names like the Icelandic one, as well as the a large number of exonyms in several European languages. Even if both endonyms and exonyms occur in a mixed system, he considered exonyms to be more frequently employed than the endonymic parts of the system, a fact that in his view made it difficult to replace them with the corresponding endonyms. The speaker mentioned some cases like *Rumania* and *Sri Lanka* where the implementation tend to have a politically discriminating effect in relation to a regional majority of different ethnicity.

At the same symposium *Vigleik Leira* presented the present policy of the Norwegian Language Council regarding exonyms/endonyms. He pointed at some fundamental criteria of standardizing names and language in general, like

- 1) Language is an important mean of communication
- 2) Standardizing the spelling must promote communication
- 3) Internal communication must have priority
- 4) Norwegian should not be standardized according to the need of foreign tourists in Norway, or to the need of Norwegian tourists abroad
- 5) Norwegian authorities must decide the spelling of a foreign name used in a Norwegian context (like other words such as *spaghetti* > *spagetti*)

However, Mr. Leira also stressed that when such considerations had been taken, one should keep to the endonymy principle, and he demonstrated that over the last 30 years this principle had gained more and more support, both in the major dictionaries and in the above mentioned list from the Norwegian Language Council.

Still there are many problems to be dealt with in Norwegian as far as exonyms are concerned. Names that have not figured in Norwegian contexts are of course easier to adapt to an endonymic practice than already existing and well known names. Names of states like *Irland* will hardly be replaced by the endonym *Ireland* over night, although it should not be a big challenge. Nor is it expected that the exonym *Irskesjøen* will be replaced by the endonym *The Irish Sea*.

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