



# Roads to regimentation: Place, authenticity and the metapragmatics of naming



David Karlander

Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Stockholm University, Frescativägen 10 C, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Social agents often stake claims to the naming operations that are embedded in official discourse. The present article explores the metapragmatics of such investments. Drawing on post-Austinian theories of naming (Kripke, Harris, Bourdieu, Silverstein), the article analyses the contentious process of naming roads in a rural community in Sweden. In this process, one major stake was the entextualisation of names in Övdalsk, a locally used form of Scandinavian. Focusing on an extended exchange over spatial and linguistic authenticity, the article elucidates several ways in which the semiotics of place are bound up with a range of symbolic struggles and antagonisms. More generally, the article argues that such focus is necessary for grasping the semiotisation of space and spatialisation of semiosis.

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## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to envisage language and place as entirely independent entities. Even if purposely teased apart, the one indexically invokes the other. Some forms of language may persist as 'lovingly invested emblems' of places and their place-like qualities (Silverstein, 2014a: 179). Others might assert someone's control of a place (e.g. Basso, 1996; Rose-Redwood, 2008) or strive to challenge such spatialised forms of symbolic domination (e.g. Urla, 1995; Doherty, 2007). Importantly, enregistered or subjectively felt qualities of places can be animated by any such instances of semiosis. Names, and place names in particular, are potential indexes of investments in and attachments to places (e.g. Tuan, 1991; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Yet, names, just as places, are by no means pre-given. Both are produced as people engage with the spatial, material and symbolic resources they have at their disposal. Taken together, such engagements constitute a good point of departure for prying into the semiotic production of place and the place of names therein.

The intrinsic unity of place names, naming practices and ideologies of place and language is the main concern of this article. It takes its aim at the manifold exchanges that precede acts of naming, as well as at the symbolic and material manifestations and entailments that follow upon them, and at the articulations that at some point reflect on any aspect of such relationships. As critics have observed (Kripke, 1980; Agha, 2007: 65–68; Harris, 2009; Pablé, 2009, 2010; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010), it is not uncommon to separate these facets of the social existence of names from each other, analytically privileging only one of them. Building on this critique, the present study seeks to understand spatialised language as a mutable semiotic relation established between relevant metapragmatic acts, signs, places and common-sense beliefs about their interrelatedness (Hanks, 2005: 191; cf. Silverstein, 2014a). This outlook remains sceptical about the extent to which the semiology of names is grounded in a decontextualised sign–referent relation. Instead, it entertains the assumption that the

E-mail address: [david.karlander@biling.su.se](mailto:david.karlander@biling.su.se).

semiotic efficacy of names is fundamentally contingent upon the social conditions in which names are employed (Bourdieu, 1991: 107). Names, recalling Bakhtin (1981a), gain social relevance precisely as dynamic meshworks of a wide variety of voices, signs, exchanges and lingering discourses (cf. Kripke, 1980; Agha, 2007: 65–68; Harris, 2009; Pablé, 2009: 153, 2010; Silverstein, 2009: 281–288), all sifted through privileged modes of regimentation, censorship and sanctioning (cf. Bourdieu, 1991: 107–116; Rose-Redwood, 2008; Silverstein, 2009; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010).

Through this lens, the article examines the metapragmatics of names and naming. The analytical concern lies first and foremost with the social production and circulation of road names that unfolded between 2001 and 2010 in Älvdalen, a vast but sparsely populated municipality in northwestern central Sweden. The municipal authorities, who anticipated changes in national address register regulations, initiated a process of naming approximately 300 local roads that previously lacked officially sanctioned names. As part of this ensuing metapragmatic regimentation, all residents of the municipality were offered the opportunity to submit name suggestions to the authorities. This essentially metapragmatic framing did not only encourage residents to conceive possible names, but also afforded them to comment extensively on the selection and implementation of the names. Contingently, the road naming process turned out to be a lengthy affair. An extensive and sometimes heated debate dogged the project, especially in relation to the naming of roads in the southernmost part of the municipality. The crux of the argument pertained to language. It hinged on and engendered several related questions of authenticity, all intertwined in the overarching interrogative of what the roads should be called. What were, so to speak, their *proper* names? Who could legitimately decide on such matters? And, significantly, would Övdalsk<sup>1</sup> – a local form of Scandinavian used by some inhabitants of Älvdalen – be included among the road names?

In particular, concerns with the inclusion of Övdalsk road names were voiced throughout the nearly decade-long metapragmatic exchange between local residents and Älvdalen's municipal authorities. Initially, the road naming was geared towards implementing names in standard Swedish, but a number of residents perceived this move to be an exclusion of Övdalsk. They protested and the road naming, indicatively, evolved into a serious matter, over which residents repeatedly challenged the municipal authorities. In the ensuing exchange, toponymic authenticity, indexically embodied in and licensed by Övdalsk road names, served as a central stake. As the authorities deliberated and made decisions on names and naming, some local residents sought to influence or overturn these decisions. From this exchange percolated a mass of written comments, queries and decisions forming a temporally extended and socially distributed chain of entextualisation (see Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Hanks, 1995; Silverstein and Urban, 1996). From this textual connectivity, which assembled various articulations of authenticity, a set of sanctioned road names eventually precipitated.

The textual traces of this metapragmatic exchange serve as the empirical basis for the arguments that are presented here. Examining these entextualisations, the article investigates the ways in which the naming of roads in Älvdalen fed on and into various articulations of authenticity, which, in turn, addressed several pertinent indexical relationships between place and language. By attending to the discursive justifications, explanations and incentives at play in the naming of roads (cf. Gal, 2013: 45), as well as to enunciations of approval and invalidation directed at such moves, the analysis seeks to produce a more nuanced understanding of the production of names, and of the logics of inclusion and exclusion implemented in naming. Just as in any process of valorisation, the metapragmatic labour surrounding Övdalsk names constituted a critical link between the real-time existence of indexical order and the permanence, *mutatis mutandi*, of the social order in which names became contained (Silverstein, 2003a: 204). This pervasive exchange operated as an impress on reflexively conjured linguistic forms and meanings (Silverstein, 1979, 1985, 2003a, 2014b; Agha, 2007). By analysing this exchange, the article attempts to provide 'a better picture of what is actually going on' when people engage in the micropolitics of naming (Kripke, 1980: 96).

## 2. Background and scope

Similar to many other relative peripheries of Europe, Älvdalen is often taken to be mutually indexical with a localised way of speaking (cf. Jaffe, 2007; Cavanaugh, 2009; Urla, 2012). Accounts of the place readily invoke accounts of Övdalsk, a form of Scandinavian used by some of its inhabitants. Övdalsk, although used elsewhere (see Karlander, 2015), is conversely addressed as a distinctively localisable object, endemic to the Älvdalen parish in the southernmost part of the much larger Älvdalen municipality. This rationalisation of localness is not unwarranted. The villages of the parish are the most likely places to hear spoken Övdalsk and to see Övdalsk systematically displayed as public writing. Most instances of the latter type of semiosis are road names. They appear in print on some 200 street signs, installed in roughly 20 Älvdalen villages. One such artefact is pictured in Fig. 1. From top to bottom, it reads *Skatholsvägen|Stjieruolsween* (i.e. *Magpie Hill Road*). A black line separates the two words, with the top one, produced in plain font, being twice as large as its italicised counterpart at the bottom.

The coupled words stem from an extensive process of metapragmatic differentiation, bent at addressing, interpreting and entextualising first-order linguistic differences (cf. Irvine and Gal, 2000; Gal, 2013). Partially discernible in the word *Stjieruolsween* (in Fig. 1), this differentiation of Övdalsk is, here, reiterated in the textual renditions of non-Swedish features, such as diphthongs (entextualised as *ie* and *uo*), a *w* (intended to encode a [w]), and overlong syllables, as represented in *sween* (which approximates [we:n:] or [wē:n:]). Like any metapragmatic discourse of difference, the differentiated orthography indexes the apartness of Övdalsk by means of formal semiotic types. As such, it links with other shibboleths of Övdalsk

<sup>1</sup> Also: *övdalsk* (in Övdalsk), *Elfdalian* and *Övdalian* (English), *älvdalska* and *älvdalsmål* (Swedish).

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