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Language and Space in Northern Spaces

Editorial

The call sent out for this issue of *Journal of Northern Studies* asked for contributions on “Language and Place in Northern Spaces,” a theme that invites interpretation.¹ What is a “northern space” to begin with? And how is language and place connected? As the contributions were sent in and the issue gradually took shape, possible answers to these questions were formulated.

Although a “northern space” is a mental construct whose only necessary characteristic is that of being located north of a given vantage point, there also exists a sort of “canonised” north, i.e. geographical areas and societies “furthest to the north.” It is this latter type of northern spaces that became the main focus of this thematic issue: Sami contexts in Sápmi in northern Scandinavia and Inuit contexts in Greenland, Canada and northern Alaska.

The juxtaposition of language and place also requires an explanation, since there are many kinds of such connections, illustrated by research on, for example, linguistic landscapes, dialectology and sociolinguistics. In place-name studies, however, there are indisputable and strong connections between language and place. Place-names not only identify places and make it possible to describe and talk about the places they denote, they *are* place, they create place. “Naming,” as the geog-

rapher Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, “is power—the creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things” (Tuan 1991: 688). This function of names, that they can “render the invisible visible,” is especially important in connection with minority place-names.

Minority place-names today tell a story about the sociolinguistic context, but also about *who* lives in an area, regardless of the language they speak. This is an important function in post-colonial contexts, as centuries of suppression of indigenous languages have led to massive language loss and even to language death. A place-name also provides historical connections to the place in question, which is important as colonialism have severed indigenous peoples’ connection to places in many contexts. It is partly by telling these stories about the past and present that a minority place-name has the power to strengthen languages, cultures and identity. Therefore, official usage of minority place-names is important when trying to revitalise minority language and culture. Although it is naïve to think that a place-name may lead to a significant increase in indigenous language use, as a symbol it supports other processes and clearly shows that society supports the revitalising efforts.

The contribution in this issue by Taarna Valtonen, based on her dissertation (2014), analyses place-name loaning processes in two Sami communities, the South Sami Ruvhten sįjte (= Tännäs sameby [‘Tännäs Sami village’]), Härjedalen, Sweden, and the Inari Sami communities Čovčjävri (= Syysjärvi) and Kosseennâm (= Paksumaa), Aanaar (= Inari), Finland. The processes are studied within the cultural contexts of the two Sami communities, and interesting differences between them are observed. A kind of protectionist, purist strategy towards outsiders could be observed in Ruvhten sįjte—a phenomenon observed within the entire South Sami area, according to the author, but also earlier observed—while in the Čovčjävri–Kosseennâm context the processes aim “to share the cultural-linguistic code with the majority.” The reasons why the processes in the two communities differ so much are discussed by the author.

Nellejet Zorgdrager takes a historical approach and illuminates the role of place-names in two yoik texts, the so-called winter song and summer song, which were published by Johannes Schefferus in his book *Lapponia* in 1673. Zorgdrager maps out the translation history of the place-names in these yoiks throughout time and how the description of the landscape changes in the different versions. It is illustrated, for instance, that when translators returned to the Sami source texts in the twentieth century, the original landscape gradually emerged again. These observations are important.

Julien Pongérard, in his article, focusses on the name the Inuit have

given their own land, *nuna*. The indigenous definition of *nuna* is described as follows in the Inuktitut dictionary:

Nuna. Does not move. For a long time, it has been the inhabited land and the place where humans and animals grow and also where they die. Nuna has plants, food, people in great numbers and variety; it is full of [different] language groups.

This term is widespread in all Inuit dialects and also included in the Inuit regionyms. Interesting observations are made in the analysis, where the term *nuna* is placed at the center of identity politics, “making *nuna* a key component of the imagination of these northern communities,” as stated at the end of the article.

Guy Bordin, finally, studies a specific type of place-names in Nunavut and Nunavik in the Canadian Eastern Arctic, viz. names related to “other-than-animal non-human beings.” Approximately 50 such names are described, many of which are related to the category of *tuurngait*, a generic term for all shaman helping spirits. These “spiritual” place-names often have similar, negative connotations; the places named are described as being, for example, spooky, frightening or places of bad spirits. Bordin’s mapping of this specific type of toponyms illuminates the coexistence of the usual space, *tumitaqaqtug*, where humans and animals are, and *tumitaittuq*, a space where all non-human beings live. The place-name world conjured up by Bordin is fascinating.

The contributions in this thematic issue illuminates the importance of place-name research. Place-names are part of our intangible cultural heritage, they reveal historical connections between people and place and they are also essential to ongoing creation and understanding of place.

NOTE

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REFERENCE

- Tuan, Y.-F. (1991). “Language and the making of place. A narrative-descriptive approach,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 8:14, pp. 684–696.