

Toponyms and language history – some methodological challenges

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Abstract

The topic of this paper is toponyms as sources of information about language history, mainly based on examples from south-western Norway. The names provide information about the phonological and morphological development of a dialect and language. Many toponyms contain ‘frozen’ grammatical forms representing earlier stages of a dialect. In some cases earlier dialect boundaries appear from a corpus of names. Toponyms offer interesting information about linguistic heritage and represent a treasure trove of words and semantics, especially topographical appellatives. Certain methodological challenges must be taken into consideration when using place-names as sources. In some cases it is difficult to decide, due to lacking knowledge of the vocabulary in earlier stages of a language, whether an ancient toponym is an example of so-called primary naming, i.e. formed with a suffix, or result of secondary naming, i.e. coined from an existing (sometimes reconstructed) word.

Introduction

Names and the use of names form part of the language history. Ancient place-names and personal names provide information about the phonological and morphological development of a dialect and language, as well as the history and cultural history of a region and nation. Old Scandinavian settlement names are important sources about the settlement history and pre-Christian cult in the northern part of Europe, and anthroponyms used in Scandinavia likewise give information about the cultural history, including the Christian influence in medieval times and the Anglo-American influence in the twentieth century (Stemshaug 2008: 155 p.).

The topic of this paper is toponyms as sources of information about language history, mainly based on examples from south-western Norway, however, some parallels from other parts of Norway and other European countries will also be mentioned. The paper discusses certain methodological challenges which must be taken into consideration when using place-names as sources.

‘Frozen’ grammatical forms

Toponyms form part of the language and the language structure. Inherited local place-names have been passed on in a local dialect and have followed the development of that dialect. Some toponyms contain older ‘frozen’ forms and represent in that sense an older stage of a dialect. Examples are Norwegian settlement names reflecting an old case form of a noun in an area where the case system is no longer used, e.g. *Sunde*, *Nese*, *Lunde*, *Åse*, *Sande*, *Steine* and *Hauge*, developed from dative singular, ON *Sundi* (ON *sund* neut. ‘sound, strait’), *Nesi* (*nes* neut. ‘headland’), *Lundi* (*lundr* masc. ‘grove’), *Ási* (*áss* masc. ‘hill, ridge’), *Sandi* (*sandr* masc. ‘sand’), *Steini* (*steinn* masc. ‘stone, rock’) and *Haugi* (*haugr* masc. ‘mound, hill’).

Settlement names such as *Haga*, *Bakka*, *Brekke* and *Tunge* from south-western Norway (also found other places in Scandinavia) represent casus obliquus of a weak declined noun, in nominative ON **Hagi* (oblique form **Haga*; ON *hagi* masc. ‘enclosure, pasture’), *Bakki* (**Bakka*; *bakki* masc. ‘hillside’), **Brekka* (**Brekku*; *brekka* fem. ‘steep hillside’) and *Tunga* (**Tungu*; *tunga* fem. ‘tongue’).

Some topographical names have as well developed from casus obliquus in ON, e.g., *Kråge* (rock in the sea), *Oksa* (rock in the sea) and *Mula* (headland), representing ON **Kráku* (nominative **Kráka* fem., ‘crow’), **Oxa* (**Oxi* masc., ‘bull, ox’) and **Múla* (**Múli* masc., ‘muzzle’).

A corpus of topographical names coined from oral sources in south-western Norway the last 20–30 years, contain interesting information about the development of the dialects in this area. Some names preserve an older – no longer used – pronunciation of certain words. Along the coast of Jæren (Mid-Rogaland) one finds the name *Sødel* /'sø:d,l/ (Årsland and Kvasheim/Kvalbein), denoting rocks with a special shape (like a saddle), formed by the sea. The name contains the noun *sâl* m. '(horse)saddle', which today is pronounced /'sa:d,l/ or /sa:l/ (by younger people) in the dialect. The two names represent an older pronunciation of this word, developed from ON *sðull* masc., i.e. with /ø/ from ON *o* (*o*-caudata), such as in Icelandic and Faroese. A similar toponym *Söðull* is found in Iceland, denoting a “depression” in a rim of mountains and a “shelf” on a cliff, resembling a saddle (Sigmundsson 2004: 315), and this word is also found in Icelandic compound names such as *Söðulfell*, *Söðulhólar* and *Söðulsholt* (op.cit.).

It is interesting to note that Jacob Rasch in his collection of words from Jæren from approx. 1698 has included a similar form of this word, i.e. *tresøddel*, translated “clitellæ, tresadel”, i.e. ‘wooden saddle’ (Rasch 1957: 18). As a matter of fact Rasch grew up on the farm Kvalbein (southern Jæren), where he lived till he was 13 years old (1669–1682).

In some old compound place-names the first element represents an old form of a settlement name which is no longer productive in forming compound names in the dialect. Names such as *Seleåna* (*å* fem. ‘river’), *Revesanden* (*sand* masc. ‘sand’) and *Hodnemarkene* (*mark* fem. ‘fields, land’) include the present form of the settlement names *Sele* (ON *Sil* n.), *Reve* (ON *Rif* n.) and *Hodne* (ON *Horn*), all of them from Klepp (Jæren). However, some old compound names, e.g., *Silsflu* (*flu* fem. ‘fishing ground’), *Rifstø* (*stø* fem. ‘boat landing’), *Honnsstø* and *Honnsviga* (*vik* fem. ‘bay’), contain older forms of these settlement names, reflecting genitive singular in ON: *Sils-*, *Rifs-* and **Horns-*.

Many toponyms contain words not found in written documents nor represented in dictionaries; these words must therefore be reconstructed. This especially applies to the oldest names, due to the fact that our knowledge of the vocabulary in the pre-Norse period is restricted because of the lack of sources. One well-known example from Scandinavia is ON **vin* fem. ‘meadow, pasture’, found in approx. 1000 old settlement names in Norway. This word is represented in the present city name *Bergen*, ON *Bergvin* and *Bjørgvin* (‘the meadow at the foot of the mountain’). Another well-known example from prehistoric times is ON **angr* masc., included in more than 70 names of fjords and bays in Norway. This word is also found in the present city name *Stavanger*, ON *Stafangr* (probably ‘the bay by the straight headland’). In Jæren this word is also represented in the name *Breiangen*, denoting river-windings in three rivers: Figgjo(åna), Hååna and Brattlendsåna.

Reconstructing words from place names is also relevant for a modern language period. When coining place-names (micro-toponyms) from oral sources one comes along words which are not registered in dictionaries. Examples are the words **brase* and **brasse*, appearing in coastal names from Northwest-Rogaland, e.g. *Brasen*, *Brasane*, *Sørøybrasen* and *Brassen*, all of them denoting rocks in the sea in areas with rough sea (Uppstad 1993: 41, Særheim 2007: 36). These words are probably related to the verb *brasa* ‘fry’, referring to locations with rough sea and threatening waves.

Place-names also provide valuable information about the geographic distribution as well as the semantic content of certain words, especially topographical appellatives, e.g., the word *ford* masc., appearing in names like *Foren*, *Forane*, *Forosen* and *Tråneforen*, all of them from southern Rogaland. This word is related to English *ford* (e.g. *Oxford*, *Stratford*), German *furt* (*Frankfurt*, *Ochsenfurt*) and Dutch *voort* (*Voort*, *Voortje*, *Vorden*, *Voorthuizen*). In toponyms from Jæren this word denotes wetland with a stream, often with a path crossing the water (Særheim 2007: 67).

Older dialect boundaries (isoglosses)

Due to the fact that some place-names preserve older pronunciations and declensions of words, it is sometimes indicated in the local pronunciation of names that dialect boundaries (isoglosses) have changed over time. The rounding of /a/ in front of /ŋ/ (*ng*), e.g., in words like *lang* adj. ‘long’ and *mange* adv. ‘many’, at present represents a difference between the dialects of northern Rogaland, where /ɔŋ/-pronunciation is common, /'lɔŋe/, /'mɔŋe/, and southern Rogaland, with /aŋ/-pronunciation: /'laŋe/, /'maŋe/. However, microtoponyms like *Langåger* /'lɔŋɔ:ger/ (‘the long field’), *Longevoll* /'lɔŋevɔd,l/ (‘the long meadow’) and *Langhodl* /'lɔŋho:d,l/ (‘the long mound’), found several places in Jæren (southern Rogaland), prove that the rounding of /a/ in front of /ŋ/ earlier was common further south than today. This isogloss has moved northwards.

Another isogloss which is relevant in this context, deals with the voicing of /p, t, k/ to /b, d, g/ following a long and longed vowel, e.g., in words like *pipe* fem. ‘pipe’, *båt* masc. ‘boat’ and *tak* neutr. ‘roof’, pronounced /'pi:ba/, /bɔ:d/ and /ta:g/. According to Haslum (2004), the corpus of microtoponyms collected by school children in the 1930ies clearly indicates that this development earlier had a wider distribution in the southern part of Norway (parts of Agder). This coincides with the findings of Hannaas (1911: IV), who has studied a collection of words from this part of Norway (from Råbygjelag) from the first half of the 17th century.

Microtoponyms collected from oral sources in Northwest-Rogaland since the 1980ies indicate that the use of different endings in strong and weak declined feminines has had a wider distribution in this area than stated in linguistic publications and maps of dialect boundaries (Christiansen 1969). Strong declension with *e*-ending and weak declension with *ɔ*-ending is found in toponyms as far south as Sandve in south-western Karmøy, e.g., *Kvidemyra* /'kvi:demy:re/, *Fjellsnova* /'fjelsnɔ:ve/ and *Ura* /'u:re/ with /e/, but *Hella* /'hedlɔ/, *Hola* /'hɔ:lɔ/ and *Klypa* /'kly:pɔ/ with /ɔ/. These endings are used in the parishes of Åkra and Ferkingstad (between Veavågen and Sandve). Further north (in Torvastad, Utsira, Røvær and parts of Skåre, i.e. Hagland, Førland and Vikse) /e/ is used in strong declined feminines and /u/ in the weak ones. Still other endings are used in parts of Skåre, with /ɔ/ in strong declension and /u/ in weak declension. Avaldsnes and the city of Haugesund has /ɔ/-ending in both types (strong and weak declined feminines), e.g., /'my:ɔ/ and /'hedlɔ/, a system which nowadays is spreading to neighbouring areas which traditionally has had different endings in the two types of feminines.

The oldest toponyms

Native words and names represent the oldest sources of our language. The oldest place-names in Scandinavia have been passed on in oral tradition as part of the language and oral culture for more than 1000 years before they were written down, often in medieval times. They provide information about vocabulary, word- and name-forming, phonological, morphological and semantic development, as well as linguistic relationship.

Many old, uncompounded and unique names of islands and fjords are found along the Norwegian coast, e.g., ON *Bókn* fem. (at present *Bokn*), *Umbar* plur. (*Ombo*) and *Síri* masc. (*Sira*), all of them denoting islands, and *Jalsi* masc. (*Jelsa*) and *Fístr* masc. (*Fister*), both denoting fjords. The etymology of quite a few of these names is uncertain. In most parts of Norway one also finds ancient names of rivers and lakes, e.g., river names such as ON *Penx* fem. (*Tengs*), *Íms* fem. (*Ims*) and **Figg* fem. (*Figgjo*), and lake names like *Lími* masc. (*Lima*). The examples mentioned are from Rogaland.

In the farming district of Jæren, where there has been continuous farming and farming settlement since the Bronze Age, there is a concentration of old and unique settlement names,

associated with the largest and most central farms, e.g. ON *Sóli* masc. (*Sola*), *Sómi* masc. (*Soma*), *Þjórar* masc. plur. (*Tjora*) and *Alra* fem. (*Orre*). The names mentioned do not contain words that are known in the Scandinavian or Germanic languages, and the etymology of most of them is uncertain. They are probably originally denoting topographical features, e.g., rivers, lakes, hills, seashores etc.

In this context it is relevant to take a look at some theories about a possible pre-Indo-European substrate in the oldest toponyms in this part of Europe. Theo Vennemann has presented a theory where he suggests a so-called Vasconic substrate (related to Basque) and a younger Atlantic (Semitidic) substrate in old European toponyms. People who spoke an Indo-European language supposedly took over toponyms from people who earlier lived in this area and spoke another language, and adjusted the names to their own Indo-European language. Following this theory, some names in Scandinavia have been explained by Vennemann as being of non-Indo-European origin, e.g., the island name ON *Sólund* (at present *Solund*) in Sogn (western Norway), where he has suggested a Semitic word for ‘mountain’ (Vennemann 1999b: 38 ff.). A more likely explanation is mentioned in the Norwegian place-name dictionary (Sandnes & Stemshaug 1997: 416 p.), i.e. derivation with *und*-suffix to ON **sól-* with the semantics ‘incision, furrow’, which fits well with the topography.

Vennemann compares the town name *Arendal* (southern Norway) with other so-called *Ar(e)n*-names in Europe, e.g., *Arundel* in West-Sussex (England) and *Val d’Aran* in the Pyrenees. In the last mentioned a Basque word for ‘valley’, *aran*, has been suggested, combined with the French *le val* ‘the valley’. Vennemann suggests a Vasconic word for ‘valley’ also in *Ar(e)n*-names in northern Europe (Vennemann 1999a: 309 p., 2000: 18 p.). More likely the first element in *Arendal*, ON **Arnardalr*, is an old river name (in genitive), either reflecting ON **orn* fem. ‘eagle’, i.e. ‘the eagle’s river’, or – maybe more likely – related to river names with the element *Arn-* further south in Europe, e.g. the Danish *Arn* and the Italian *Arno* (Toscana), referring to water that flows rapidly (Krahe 1964: 46, Sørensen 1968: 81 p., 84, Jørgensen 1994: 25). A possible Norwegian parallel is the fjord name ON **Arni* masc. (now *Arna*) in Bergen (Sandnes & Stemshaug 1997: 75). Coates (2009: 232) has rejected Vennemann’s interpretation of the English *Arundal*.

Another theory concerning old toponyms in Northwest-Europe has been presented by Hans Kuhn, who also suggests that some names were taken over by the Indo-Europeans when they came to this area. Among his examples (Kuhn 1971: 58 pp.) is the element **Urk-* in ON *Orkdalr* (*Orkdalen*, a valley and municipality in Trøndelag) and ON **Yrkir* (*Yrkjesfjorden*, a fjord in Rogaland), as well as **Sir-* in ON *Sira* and *Síri* (a river in Vest-Agder and an island in Rogaland). Other examples from Norway are *Urter*, *Ørteren*, *Fura*, *Fora* and *Fonn*. However, also these names can be explained based on Nordic, Germanic or Indo-European language, e.g., the river name ON *Ork-* and fjord name **Yrkir* as related to the verb *yrkja* ‘work’, referring to currents in the water and rough sea (Sandnes & Stemshaug 1997: 154 p., 161, 346 p., 393, 503, 505). Kousgård Sørensen (1996: 452 p.) has rejected practically all the 24 Danish examples where Kuhn has suggested a pre-Indo-European origin.

Neither Kuhn’s nor Vennemann’s interpretations have been regarded as convincing by Scandinavian onomasticians, since it seems possible to explain most of the names they discuss on a Scandinavian, Germanic or Indo-European base. It has been emphasized that one should always try to interpret ancient place-names on the basis of linguistic material that one knows – or there is good reason to believe – has been used in the area (Sørensen 1996: 446 p.). There might well be a pre-Indo-European substrate in ancient toponyms in southern Norway and Scandinavia, i.e. names taken over and adjusted by people who spoke an Indo-European language when they came to this area. But so far, no convincing theories or examples have been presented which explain this in a satisfactory way.

Is the name formed with a suffix or coined from an existing word?

The unique un-compounded names of islands, fjords, rivers, lakes and ancient settlements mentioned in this paper contain suffixes that were productive in the pre-Nordic period; this might give indications about the age of the names. Examples are:

- t: ON *Kǫrmt* (*Karmøy*)
- s: ON *Jalsi* (*Jelsa*); **Þenx* (*Tengs*)
- n: ON *Bókn* (*Bokn*); *Sókn* (*Sokna*)
- m: ON *Aumar* (denoting *Kvitsøy*); **Lími* (*Lima*)
- r: ON *Síri* (*Sira*); **Alra/ǫlru* (*Orre*)
- (s)tr: ON *Fistr* (*Fister*)
- ð: ON **Hengð* (*Heng*)
- und: ON **Jǫsund* (*Jøsen*)

The semantic content of some island and fjord names seems to refer to strong currents in the sea, to rough sea, strong winds and difficult sailing conditions, e.g., ON **Jǫsund* (the island *Jøsen* and the fjord *Jøsenfjorden*), probably related to the verb *esa* ‘swell, rise’. Other names describe the shape, e.g., ON *Kǫrmt* (the island *Karmøy*), related to *karm* masc. ‘sides, frame’, or the soil, e.g., ON *Hrótt* (the island *Rott*), related to ON *hraun* neutr. ‘rock, stone’.

The semantics of several river names refer to water that flows rapidly, e.g., ON *Íms* (*Ims*; ON *ím* neutr. ‘damp (from water)’). Other hydronyms refer to the colour of the water in the landscape, e.g., the lake name ON *Blikri* (*Blikra*), related to *blik* neut. and *bleik* adj. ‘pale’.

Most of the unique settlement names from Jæren describe, as mentioned, topographical features, e.g., ON *Hinni* (*Hinna*) masc., belonging to an Old-Germ. root **hīs-* ‘cut, split’, describing land that is almost cut off by two fjords. Another example is *Mallar* plur. (*Madla*), related to ON *mǫl* fem. ‘gravel, pebble’.

It is sometimes difficult to decide whether a toponym is coined from an existing word, i.e. a word which was used at the time when the name was made, and hence a case of secondary naming, or if it is formed with a suffix within the period when that suffix was productive, and thus an instance of primary naming. Most of the un-compounded names of islands, fjords, rivers, lakes and ancient settlements have been regarded as instances of primary naming. They are unique and contain suffixes and other linguistic elements indicating that they are very old. Due to our limited knowledge of the vocabulary in pre-Nordic times it is difficult, however, to decide if a name is formed from an existing word.

The settlement name ON *Þjórar* plur. (*Tjora*) is probably related to Old English *þēor* ‘abscess, inflammation’, belonging to a root with the meaning ‘swell’, denoting various hills and rocks on the farm (e.g., *Vardåsen* or *Kongshaug*). Similar names are found other places in Norway, such as *Tjore* in *Aust-Agder* and *Tjora* in *Hordaland*. Several toponyms in Sweden are probably related, like the medieval *Thiurbo hundare* (*Över-* and *Yttertjurbo*, *Västmanland*), *Tjur* (*Västmanland*) and *Tjurkö* (*Blekinge*), interpreted as formed from OSw **thiur*, denoting ‘mountain, rocks’ (Wahlberg 2003: 319, 376). From a formal and semantic point of view, the three Norwegian settlement names are clearly related to the Swedish names and the reconstructed word, and to the mentioned Old English appellative, and there is an obvious topographical similarity between the locations. The Norwegian names probably contain a similar appellative that existed in an older stage of the language, describing the topography.

Final remarks

The aim of this paper has been to show that toponyms are important sources about language history. They give interesting information about earlier stages and developments of a dialect and language. In some cases earlier isoglosses appear from a corpus of names. Toponyms

offer information about linguistic heritage and relationship and represent a treasure trove of words and semantics, especially of topographical appellatives.

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