

Place Names as Identity Markers

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Abstract

Place-names are first and foremost labels attached to one's surroundings, as useful today as in prehistoric times. Since place-names have been coined as descriptions of the features in question, or of circumstances that influenced the naming process, they are vital for the knowledge of our past. They also make out a part of one's identity both as linguistic expressions and as identifiers of the landscape. As such they convey particular values to those who are familiar with the names. The multiple quality of place-names also strengthens their role as part of the intangible cultural heritage. After having dealt with some aspects relating to terminology, function and meaning of names, especially place-names, the author discusses the role of place-names as identity markers both from an individual and social point of view. By means of some named landscape features from his childhood he argues that the names trigger the mental relationship between the name users and the named places. One main challenge will be to collect reliable data which may be done by use of questionnaires and sound recordings. Also systematic literature studies will no doubt contribute to a better understanding of the role of names as identity markers.

1. Introduction

It is often argued that names, especially place-names, are not only a source of linguistic knowledge, but also of geographical, historical, anthropological, ethnographic, social, psychological, or other knowledge and may be of interest to the respective sciences. In their turn name scholars may take advantage of data from a large range of sciences when dealing with names. There are numerous examples demonstrating the value of such interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., Gelling 1990, Helleland 1998), although the methodological challenges are not always satisfactorily discussed. Still I find it conspicuous that so few geographers, anthropologists, or other social scientists are taking place-names into consideration when studying cultural landscapes and human activities (see Jordan in press for a fruitful example).

One reason for the flagrant absence of onomastic approaches in most landscape studies is no doubt due to the fundamentally different levels on which 'landscape', or more precisely 'place', and 'place-name' occurs. The former may be examined and described as measurable physical entities, whereas the latter consists of a linguistic expression and as such is an abstraction of the named entity. Nevertheless there is an intimate relationship between place and place-name, and below I will discuss how place-names may reflect, or arouse, feelings of individual and collective identity attached to the places in question.

2. Space, place, and identity

The term *identity* is used in various contexts with various meanings, also when it is related to names. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED V: 19) defines *identity* as 1) "The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness;" 2) "The sameness of a

person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.”

When talking about place-names and identities it is also necessary to define ‘place’ in relation to ‘space’. The two terms should be used separately as is common for instance in geography and anthropology. The first one may be defined as “[a] particular part of space, of defined or undefined extent, but of definite situation”; “[t]he portion of space actually occupied by a person or thing; the position of a body in space, or with reference to other bodies; locality, situation” (OED VII:926), whereas the latter may be defined as “[s]uperficial extent or area; also, extent in three dimensions”; “extent or area sufficient for some purpose; room” (OED X:496). The anthropologist Christopher Tilley suggests the following distinction between place and space:

Personal and cultural identity is bound up with place; a topo-analysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place. Geographical experience begins in places, reaches out to others through spaces, and creates landscapes or regions for human existence (Tilley 1994:15).

Landscape identity may thus (in my context) be defined as “oneness between self and landscape as experienced by human beings in given circumstances”. Sometimes the term *mental landscape* is used to describe different kinds of feelings which a landscape evokes in a person. It is hardly controversial to maintain that a person’s mental strings to a landscape are stronger when it is a question of a familiar landscape than when it is a question of a less familiar or unknown landscape. I will also argue that a person’s landscape identity (or place identity) is strengthened if he or she knows the place-names of the area.

Place-names are an important part of one’s language and one’s personal vocabulary, and as such also of oneself. Place-names contribute to the feeling of belonging to a social group in a particular area. Changing a traditional name or even changing, removing or adding a letter of a traditional name creates a feeling of displeasure. Also on a regional and national level place-names play an important part. As Arseny Saparov (2003:179) puts it: “Place-names are some of the most durable of national symbols ... [They] are important features of national and territorial identity”. It is a general view that place-names are of national and ethnic importance and name changes may create strong feelings among large groups of people. When the former name of the Norwegian capital *Kristiania* in 1924 was changed back to its medieval name *Oslo*, there was a real battle (Wetås 2000). Today the name is generally accepted and functions as an icon of the capital.

3. Function and meaning of place-names

Names are indispensable parts of our language. We use names when we refer to individual objects, like people, animals, buildings, organisations, artefacts, and places. One of the great issues as to the definition of a name is whether it has a ‘meaning’ or ‘sense’. It is not my intention here to retrace the extensive discussion of this subject (for a recent survey see Van Langendonck 2007). I will confine myself to making a few comments pertaining to the two main approaches to the question:

- a name has reference, but is empty of meaning
- a name is “brimful” of (connotative) meaning

It is well known that philosophers like John Stuart Mill (1884) and Bertrand Russell (1940), and in more recent times, Sir Alan Gardiner (1954) maintained that names have reference, but are empty of meaning. The last one’s often quoted sentence “the purest of proper names are wholly arbitrary and totally without significance” (Gardiner 1954:19) has been contended by many other scholars, for instance Gottlob Frege who claims that there is much more to the meaning of a name than simply the object to which it refers. John R. Searle, who does not agree with Frege on all theoretical aspects, comments upon the role of proper names in the following way:

But the uniqueness and immense pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lies precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to an agreement as to which descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object. They function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions (Searle 1969:172).

James E. Weiner (1991:45) emphasizes that place-names act “as mnemonics for the historical actions of humans that make places singular and significant”. I think it is easy to agree to this view – without the place-names it would indeed be more difficult to retain what happened at Verdun or Beaver Creek or any other named place. Here I would like to refer to Keith H. Basso, who in his remarkable book *Western Apache Language and Culture* highlights the qualities of place-names in the following way:

Because of their inseparable connection to specific localities, placenames may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations – associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one’s life (Basso 1990:144).

Basso underlines the capacity and compact power of place-names to evoke personal and cultural experiences. In his view, place-names acquire a functional value “that easily matches their utility as instruments of reference” (ibid.). The Finnish name scholar and poet Lars Huldén puts it this way (my translation):

The [place-]name is a key to memories and experiences. To be familiar with the same name is to know a little about each other. The names are social signals of solidarity (Huldén 1994: 33).

Certainly one of the qualities of place names lies in their ability to create a feeling of belonging to a certain community and feeling at home. Besides, the wide range of qualities inherent in place-names makes them valuable not only as bearers of individual and social identity, but also as historical ties.

4. Place-name ties to the past

The primary role of place names is the reference (or label) function, including the connotations that the name users may associate with the names, but the names also have a historical content which may tell us something about the qualities and circumstances of the named entity at the moment when the name was assigned. The names also convey information on the relationship between the name-giver and the named object. Place names are parts of the history of a given area and – if they are correctly interpreted – reveal details of the name-givers’ understanding of the named place at the time when the name was coined. Thus names may be viewed as a historical oral or written text of the landscape and the people in it. This may be demonstrated in the following way:

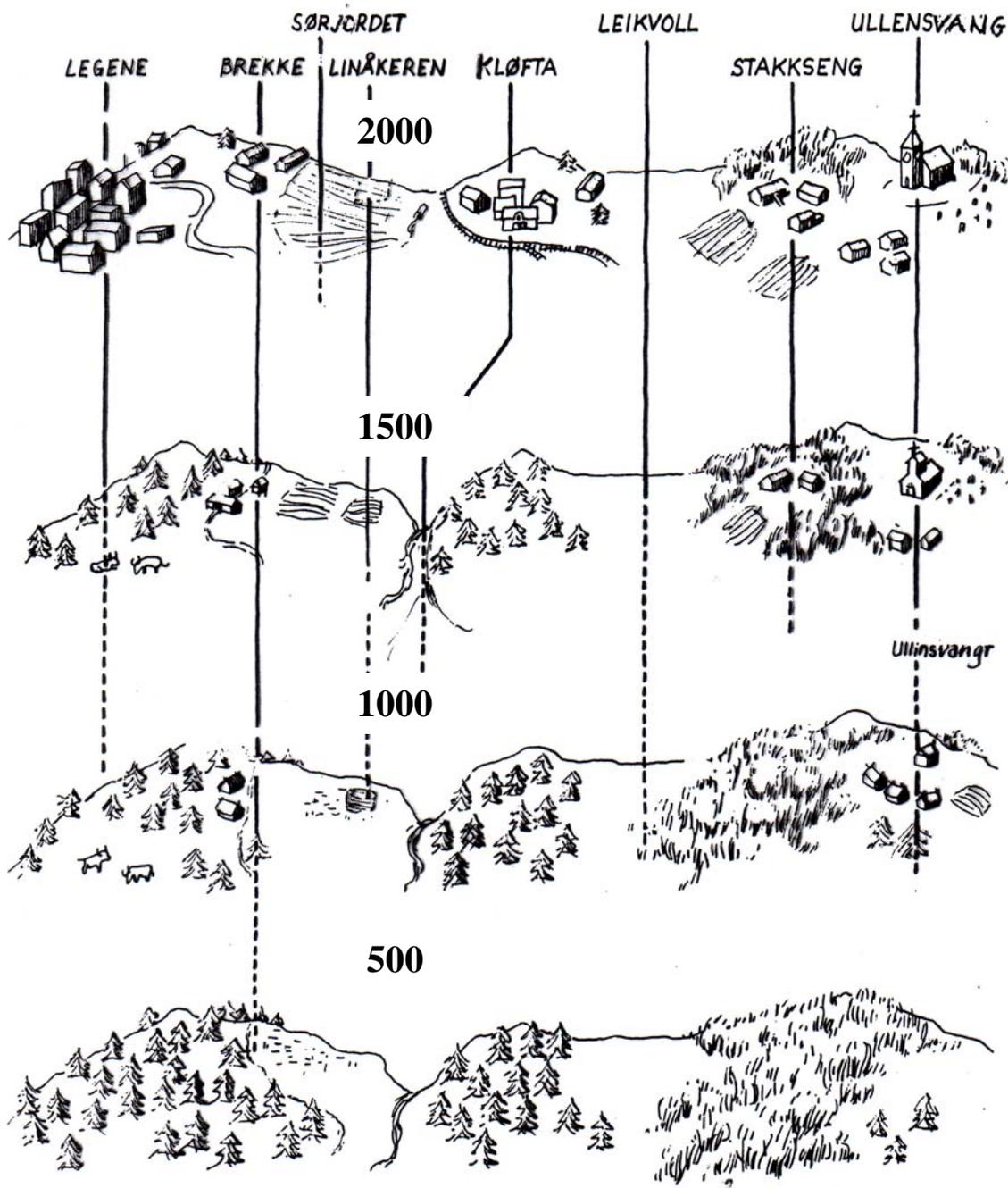


Figure 1. Place-names as seen from a synchronic and diachronic point of view.

In Figure 1, the horizontal row of names at the top of the figure represents the synchronic or reference function of place-names whereas the vertical lines represent the diachronic dimension, let's say over 2000 years. At the bottom of the vertical lines we are back to the time of the coining of the names. The dotted parts of the lines suggest possible periods of the name giving. The lines move constantly upwards as time passes. New names may be coined at any time, as old

names sometimes fall out of use and become obsolete. And over time the places to which the names refer may change.

If we look at the names mentioned on Figure 1, for instance *Legene* on the left is today used of a settlement. The etymological meaning of this name is ‘place where the cattle rests’, and that is what the name referred to earlier. The name is testified in writing only some hundred years back in time, but it is no doubt much older. *Brekke*, reflecting Old Norse *brekka* f. ‘slope, steep road’ is now used of a farm. It is recorded in the 14th century, but the importance of the name and its onomastic typology indicates that it could be several hundred years older. The last example I will mention is *Ullensvang* on the far right of the drawing, the name of a parish and the farm on which the parish church has been built (see also picture and map below). It is recorded many times in the 13th and 14th centuries. As the name apparently is composed of the pagan god’s name *Ullin* and *vang* ‘meadow where people assemble’, there is reason to believe that it has been coined in the centuries before the introduction of Christianity in Norway around the year 1000. Today – as probably more than a millennium ago—people use the name without thinking of its heathen background.

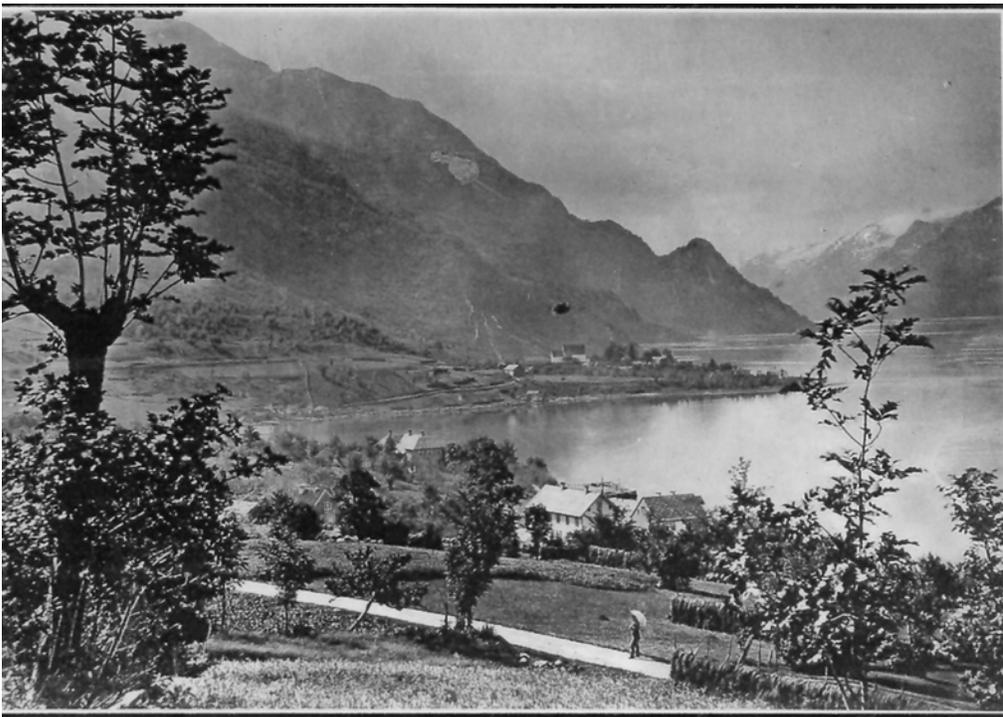


Figure. 2. Ullensvang, Western Norway around 1880.

The Ullensvang church may be seen on the promontory in the middle of the picture. In the background the characteristic peak of Börvehovden.



Figure. 3. Map of Southern Norway. The parish of Ullensvang is marked by an arrow.

As already mentioned most place-names are coined as descriptions of various entities at the time when they were given, thus telling about the place and the human relations to the place at that stage. Even if people generally don't reflect very much on the historical meaning of the place-names it is my view that the names' links to the past enhance their qualities as identity markers. The name users may have a certain feeling of the historical content of the place-names; at least they are felt as something which belongs to the place and "always was there". My experience is that people who are born in a particular area and have lived there for most of their lives feel stronger about the historic ties of the place-names than those who stay there for a shorter time. Thus place-names may contribute to the feeling of belonging to a social group in a particular area.

5. Sharing of place-names

Every speaker or group of speakers has at his or her disposal a certain number of place-names (onomasticon) which constitute a referential system for the speaker(s) in question. Some names are known only by a small group of persons, for instance those living in a single settlement, others are known by people in a town or a district, and again others are known by people in a greater society. Already the Norwegian name scholar Magnus Olsen (1939:9 ff.) pointed to the stratification of place-names based on user groups. He suggested three levels: the names used within a single farm, the names used within a parish, and the names used by those who travel long distances. The range of the place-name competence of various name users may be illustrated by the following model (Helleland 2006:124):

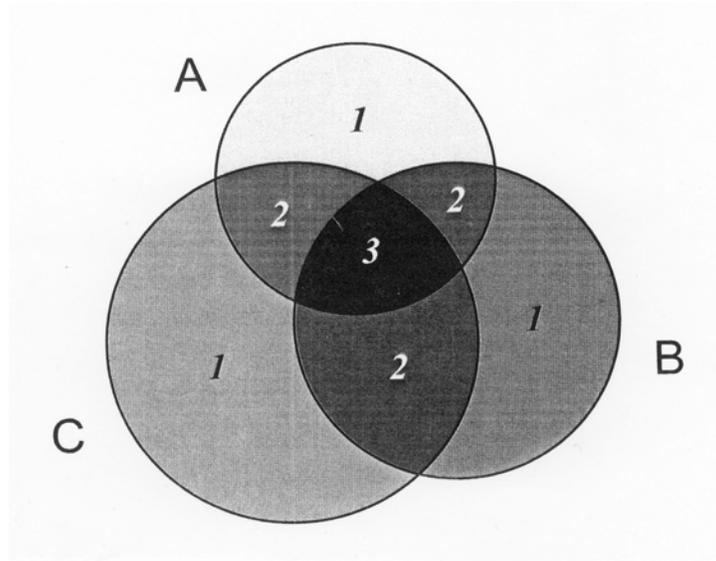


Figure 4. Sharing of place-names.

In Figure 4, each of the three circles **A**, **B**, and **C** represents a name user or a name user's onomasticon. The sections marked **1** in each circle covers names which are known only by each single name user in question. The sections marked **2** cover names that one name user shares with another name user, for instance **A** with **B** or **B** with **C**. The section marked **3** covers names which are known and used by all three name users. On the basis of this simplified model it is possible to imagine innumerable circles/sections to define the degree of shared place-name competence of various social, geographical, linguistic, or other groups.

6. A cluster of qualities and meanings

Place-names are not only addresses in the landscape, they are something much more: they are "pegs" (cf. above) that carry the experiences of each single individual in relation to the place which bears the name in question. Of course, an unnamed place or a place of which the name is unknown by a person may mediate feelings, etc, but a place-name represents a more accurate perception and identifies the place in question to the name user(s).

A place-name not only points out a place, it also mediates a cluster of qualities and meanings, partly valid for a single individual, partly shared by a given social group. If a person has positive experiences from a place, then he or she tends to have positive feelings of the place and its name, and reverse negative feelings tend to emerge if he or she has negative experiences from a place. I agree with Christopher Tilley when he maintains that "place names are of such vital significance because they act so as to transform the sheer physical and geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced (Tilley 1994:18). And he continues:

In a fundamental way names create landscapes. An unnamed place on a map is quite literally a blank space. Names may create places of human import; but they do so in relation to the raw material at hand (loc. cit.).

Place-names also function as a social consensus or a sort of an agreement reached over many generations. This property, I think, is another contribution to the wellbeing and ease of people who are familiar with the area and its names, although the name users may not be very conscious of it. Mostly the place-names of an area are used orally and in a dialectal form, which also reflects a social consensus. When local people see place-names written on road signs and on maps they

often react negatively because they feel that the standardized written forms of the names break with their idea of the correct name. This conflict, which sometimes makes the standardization of place-names problematic, is an issue which needs to be discussed in relation to the preservation of place-names as part of the intangible cultural heritage. It lies, however, outside the scope of this paper.

7. A personal experience

I would like to follow up the discussions of place-names and identities by presenting and commenting upon a couple of pictures from the landscape where I grew up, Ullensvang in Hardanger, Western Norway. I was met with this panorama every day during my childhood and youth – of course the scenery changed according to weather conditions and season of the year, but the place-names were given and used for all seasons, and they became early a part of my vocabulary and my awareness of details in the landscape.

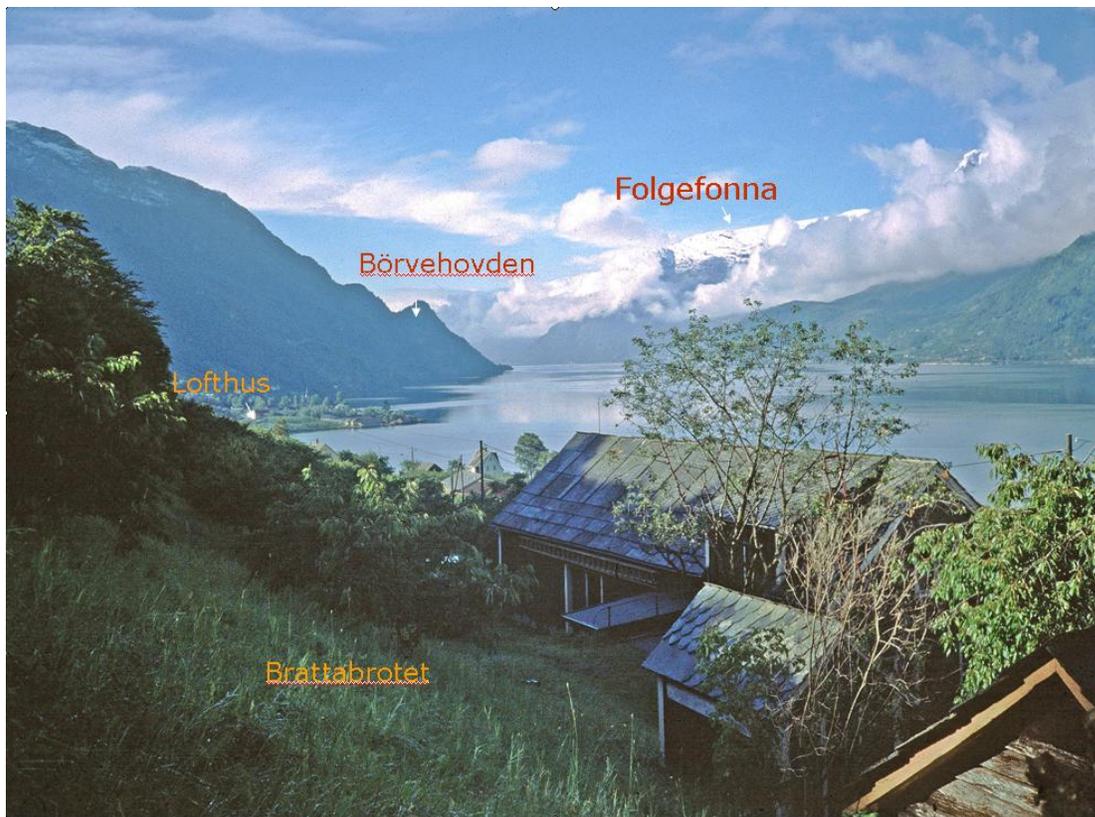


Figure. 5.

This picture (Figure 5) shows the fjord of Sörfjorden as it looks today, to the right we see the Folgefonna glacier and to the left in the background the characteristic hill Börvehovden. In the foreground some of the houses of the farm Helleland, the name of which also is my family name in the spelling of *Helleland*. On the photo I have marked the names of *Folgefonna*, composed by *folge* f. ‘snow layer’ and *fonn* f. ‘glacier’; *Börvehovden*, composed by the farm name *Börve* ‘meadow at a hill’ and *hovde* m. ‘rounded hill’, and the field name *Brattabrotet*, composed by *bratt* adj. ‘steep’ and *brot* n. ‘slope’. In Brattabrotet I used to sledge when I was a boy. This was and is one of *my* places; cf. Thomas F. King (2003:3): “Each of us has places like The Hill and like Your Place, whatever and wherever it is or was”.

There are of course many more features in these surroundings that have a name, but these are often the first ones that I am met with, or which come to my mind. I have asked myself if I can view this landscape without at the same time thinking of some of the names. The answer is no, to me the main features of the landscape are immediately attended with the names. So the name *Börvehovden* reflects the hill, as the hill evokes the name *Börvehovden* in my mind. When I asked some other people living at the farm or nearby how they felt about those names they expressed more or less the same view (see Helleland 1992); they could not look at for instance the hill *Börvehovden* without associating the feature with its name. And reverse, if I mentioned the name *Börvehovden*, the respondents immediately referred to this particular feature. Those who are not familiar with this landscape will of course experience it differently. Visitors may observe the same scenery; the glacier, the hill, the settlement, as the locals and they may learn and use the names. But the names do not evoke the same connotations in a visitor's mind as in a local's mind. Nor does a local place-name evoke the same feelings in every local; it is always a question of gradation. Still it is reasonable to conclude that the place-names of a local area, for instance Ullensvang, add to the people's wellbeing – they are keys to memories and experiences and social signals of solidarity (cf. Huldén above).

8. Concluding words

The intention of this paper was to discuss and demonstrate some aspects of place-names as identity markers. However, the topic needs further research. It requires continued theoretical and methodological studies and continued cooperation with scholars of philosophy, psychology, and others. One main challenge will be to collect reliable data, and the most efficient way will probably be to interview individuals by use of a questionnaire and sound recordings of natural speech situations. Also systematic literature studies will no doubt contribute to a better understanding of the role of names as identity markers.

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