

# Background information on the standardisation of geographical names in Finland

## 1. Linguistic background of toponyms in Finland

Finland is a multilingual country. According to the constitution, Finnish and Swedish are, on an equal basis, Finland's official state languages. According to the Saami Language Act, three indigenous Saami languages – Inari Saami, North Saami, and Skolt Saami – have an official status as minority languages in the four northernmost municipalities of Finland.

The language areas are overlapping, and a specific geographic feature may have several parallel names in different languages. In bilingual Finnish–Swedish and Swedish–Finnish areas, a feature typically has two names, and in Lapland's Finnish–Saami language areas, a feature may have up to five well-established names.

## 2. Names authorities and legislation

### 2.1 Current place names legislation

Several different agencies in Finland are responsible for planning and dealing with geographical names. The legislation on decisions for geographical names is scattered about in different acts. Inherited place names, such as the names of natural features, are not mentioned in the law at all. In Finland there is no one national authority responsible for geographical names or any specific law that would determine who has the power to decide on different place names and their spelling, who registers the approved names and what place names the authorities should use.

### 2.2 Institute for the Languages of Finland

The Institute for the Languages of Finland is an institute of expertise under the auspices of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. It is the leading language-planning authority, steering and developing the Finnish and Finland Swedish standard languages. Its activities are laid down by the Act on the Institute for the Languages of Finland 1403/2011.

According to the Act, the Institute is devoted to language planning and guidance of Finnish and Swedish. It acts as an authoritative and coordinating organ in matters relating to the standardisation of place names by providing guidance for administrative bodies and by checking geographical names in the Geographic Names Register of the National Land Survey. The recommendations provided by the Institute are based on linguistics, cultural history, local tradition, and the practical demands of everyday life.

## 2.3 National Land Survey of Finland

The National Land Survey of Finland operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and has the responsibility, by law, to take care of national mapping activities and the maintenance of the national topographic data system, support and coordinate the development of the national spatial data infrastructure and to release, publish and share map data and other data in its field of activity.

As a part of the national topographic data system, the National Land Survey maintains a normative Geographic Names Register, the toponyms in which are systematically checked by the experts in the Institute for the Languages of Finland (Finnish and Swedish names) and the University of Oulu (Saami names).

## 2.4 Official place names

The statutory obligation to ask for a statement from the Institute for the Languages of Finland covers only the municipal names in two circumstances: according to the law (Local Government Act 410/2015), it is the municipal council's task to decide which name the municipality is given. In municipal mergers each municipal council involved in the merger must approve the new name of the merging municipalities (Act on Local Authority Boundaries 2009/1698). If 1) a municipality intends to change its name or 2) merging municipalities intend to choose a name which is none of the existing names of the merging municipalities, the council(s) will have to ask the Institute for the Languages of Finland to issue a statement on the new proposed name.

The power of decision on names of other administrative units belongs to various administrative bodies. Names in town and city plans (names of districts, streets, squares, parks, etc.) are confirmed by the Ministry of the Environment but the actual naming is under the responsibility of local authorities. The National Land Survey of Finland has the final decision on the names of farms and estates given originally by their owners.

Central and regional organisations have the right to decide on names relating to their sphere of activities. Thus, for example, the Posti Group Ltd. (the post company) decides on the names of post office districts and the Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency decides on the names of railway stations and names on road signs.

## 2.5 Initiatives on place names legislation

In 1957, the Finnish Parliament expressed a wish that in decisions concerning place names, officials should consult experts in onomastics. The wish has been followed by administrative orders by ministries and central boards but because it has no legal force, it has not been very effective.

In 1996, the then Research Institute for the Languages of Finland, and again in 2011 the Institute for the Languages of Finland together with the National Land Survey of Finland proposed to their respective Ministries (Ministry of Education and Culture, and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) that legislation should be enacted to clarify the usage and registration of traditional place names and the

planning of new official names. Since then, enacting a legislation has been promoted as a part of Action Plan for Clear Administrative Language in 2014 and in conjunction with the drafting of the Government Report on the application of language legislation in 2017. More information on the initiatives is available in the [Report of Finland](#) at the 10<sup>th</sup> UNCSGN and in [WP 27/7](#) of the 28th UNGEGN Session.

### 3. Field collection of place names

The work of the Institute for Languages of Finland is based on onomastic field research conducted since the beginning of the 20th century. Place names have been collected by interviewing local inhabitants in the entire country. The systematic collection of the Swedish-language names has been completed. The collection work done in the Finnish areas in the past few years has been mostly renewed collection. As a result of this research, about 2.7 million annotated place name entries based on field collection and 625,000 name cards collected from old documents have been entered in the Institute's Names Archive.

The digitalisation of the Names Archive began in 2014. More information on the digital archive is available under the title *Toponymic datasets and services*.

### 4. Office treatment of names

The Institute for the Languages of Finland is responsible for the office treatment of Finnish names (the Language Planning Department), as well as that of Swedish names (the Swedish Department). The person responsible for office treatment of Swedish names at the Institute participates regularly in the meetings of the Geographical Names Network in Sweden. The Giellagas Institute at the University of Oulu takes care of Saami names.

The work on place names concentrates on:

- (1) **Checking and correcting names in the Geographic Names Register maintained and maps published by the National Land Survey of Finland.** The Institute for the Languages of Finland has been checking the names in national topographic maps covering the entire country since 1976.
- (2) **Statements and recommendations** on various names, such as the names of municipalities and administrative areas, villages, public buildings and enterprises, as well as municipal road and street names.
- (3) **Organising onomastic training** for cartographers, municipal name planners, students and teachers. The teaching on onomastics at the university level has been carried out by docents and a university lector. The Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies of the University of Helsinki has held one (half-) semester-long course in onomastics every year in Finnish, besides which there have been a couple of other courses at other universities. The students of Finnish, Swedish and Saami (in the University of Oulu) can opt for onomastics as the field they want to specialise in.

- (4) **Acquiring and providing information** on the planning of domestic names and spelling, pronunciation, and inflection of domestic and foreign names in Finland. The Institute maintains a toll-free telephone line to answer name-related questions. Guidance is also given free of charge via e-mail. The experts of the Institute write articles in institute's webpage and give interviews on place names in newspapers, magazines, and radio programs.

## 5. Toponymic datasets and services

### The Geographic Names Register

The Geographic Names Register (GNR) of the National Land Survey of Finland (NLS) is the authoritative repository of standardised geographic names in Finland and one of the elements included in the national and international spatial data infrastructure.

The GNR comprises the primary Place Name Register (PNR), containing information on over 800,000 named places and their standardised names, and the Map Name Register (MNR), an operational dataset holding the cartographic attributes (placement, typography) for the PNR names selected to be presented in the NLS cartographic products. The spelling of names and location of named places have been checked and approved by the Finnish, Swedish and Saami experts of the Institute for the Languages of Finland and the University of Oulu. More detailed information on the Geographic Names Register can be found in working paper [WP 27/9](#) presented at the 29<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGEN in 2016.

The GNR data is disseminated, e.g., through standard web services (OGC API – Features) and GML data files. The National Land Survey has opened its topographic and names datasets to the public and to companies to be used free of charge. Thus, the NLS implements the objectives set by the Finnish Government for making public datasets available to all interested parties.

### The Digital Names Archive

The digital Names Archive of the Institute for the Languages of Finland was opened in December 2017. It is available free of charge at <https://nimiarkisto.fi>.

The Names Archive includes over 2.7 million place names which are originally written down on place name cards and organised by parish. All Finnish, Swedish and Saami place name cards and maps showing the location of named places have been scanned into pictures, and the main collections of Finnish and Swedish place names are converted into database format. Each name entry in the digital archive includes the spelling of the place name, the year of collection, the name of the collector, the type of place and an identifying Q-code. Most of the place names have a location reference given as point coordinates.

The user interface of the digital archive is a Wiki-based website where users can either search for a certain place name or browse a map in which the named places are shown. A possibility to register to the service will be available in the future. Registered users will be able to see the scanned place name cards and will have a possibility to comment on the names. The place name cards may contain

additional information on pronunciation or etymology or other background information that is not included in the database.

More information on the digitalisation process is available in working paper [WP 28/16](#) of the 29th UNGEGN Session.

## 6. Publications and websites

### 6.1 List of publications on standardised place names

#### (1) *A gazetteer and an online service on Finnish Exonyms*

In March 2013, the Institute for the Languages of Finland published a book setting out exonyms used in Finnish. More information in working paper [WP 26/14](#) of the 28th UNGEGN Session.

In September 2018, the Institute published an online service on Finnish Exonyms, which is an updated version of the book published in 2013. The service is available at <http://kaino.kotus.fi/eksonyymit/>. More information in working paper [GEGN.2/2019/54/CRP.54](#) of the UNGEGN Session in 2019.

In November 2020, the online service on Finnish Exonyms was supplemented by over 900 Finnish composite exonyms in which only the generic term has been translated (e.g. *Chapalajärvi* ← *lago de Chapala*).

#### (2) *An online service for settlement names in Finland*

*Asutusnimihakemisto* [An index for settlement names] is available free of charge at <http://kaino.kotus.fi/asutusnimihakemisto/>. It contains over 20,000 Finnish names of towns, villages and other inhabited places. The database gives guidelines on the correct spelling and inflection of the names of inhabited places. More information in [Conference Paper 105/77](#) of the 11<sup>th</sup> UNCSGN.

#### (3) *An online service on the correct use of proper names*

*Kielitoimiston ohjepankki* [A guidelines bank of the Finnish Language Office] is an online service covering Finnish orthography and grammar, as well as the correct use of proper names (including endonyms and exonyms) in the Finnish language. The service is available free of charge at <http://www.kielitoimistonohjepankki.fi/>. More information in working paper [WP 26/18](#) of the 29<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN Session.

(4) The Institute for the Languages of Finland publishes electronic bulletins in Finnish (*Kielikello*) and in Swedish (*Språkbruk*). These publications also discuss name planning and give recommendations.

(5) The Institute's website includes advice and material on name planning for the general public ([https://www.kotus.fi/ohjeet/nimistonsuunnittelun\\_ohjeita](https://www.kotus.fi/ohjeet/nimistonsuunnittelun_ohjeita)).

(6) The MapSite is a popular map and place name service provided by the National Land Survey. Launched in 1996, it was the first national online map service in Europe. The service was renewed in 2016 and is available in English at <https://asiointi.maanmittauslaitos.fi/karttapaikka/?lang=en>.

## 6.2 Other gazetteers and publications related to geographical names

*Kielitoimiston sanakirja* [the Dictionary of Contemporary Finnish] [Electronic database] (2020) / Eds: Tarja Heinonen (editor-in-chief) & al.; Institute for the Languages of Finland and Kielikone Oy. Publications by the Institute for the Languages of Finland, <https://www.kielitoimistonsanakirja.fi/> URN:NBN:fi:kotus-201433

*Kreikan paikannimet* [Greek geographical names] 2011. Eds. Kimmo Granqvist and Sirkka Paikkala. (2019– Ulla Onkamo). The material is to be continuously updated. Copyright © Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus [Research Institute for the Languages of Finland]: Helsinki. <http://kaino.kotus.fi/kreikanpaikannimet/> URN:NBN:fi:kotus-20118; ISSN 1796-041X.

*Maat, pääkaupungit ja kansalaisuudet* [Countries, capital cities, nationalities] (2000). Eds. Sirkka Paikkala & Saara Welin (2019– Ulla Onkamo). The material is to be continuously updated. Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus [Research Institute for the Languages of Finland]. [https://www.kotus.fi/julkaisut/nimijulkaisut/maat\\_paakaupungit\\_ja\\_kansalaisuudet](https://www.kotus.fi/julkaisut/nimijulkaisut/maat_paakaupungit_ja_kansalaisuudet)

*Names of countries in seven languages* (Finnish, Swedish, Saami, English, French, German, Russian; 2009). Editor-in-chief: Sirkka Paikkala (2019– Ulla Onkamo), ed. Minna Salonen. The material is to be continuously updated. Copyright © Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus (Research Institute for the Languages of Finland). URN:NBN:fi:kotus-20117, ISSN 1796-041X. <http://kaino.kotus.fi/maidennimet/index.php?h=en>

*Suomalainen paikannimikirja* [Place Names Lexicon of Finland] (2007). Chief editor: Sirkka Paikkala; sub-editor: Eeva-Liisa Stenhammar; other editors: Pirjo Mikkonen, Ritva Liisa Pitkänen, Peter Slotte. Helsinki, Karttakeskus: Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus [Research Institute for the Languages of Finland], 2007. 592 pp. ISSN 0355-5437, ISBN 978-951-593-976-0. [https://kaino.kotus.fi/www/verkkojulkaisut/julk63/SuomalainenPaikannimikirja\\_e-kirja\\_kuvallinen.pdf](https://kaino.kotus.fi/www/verkkojulkaisut/julk63/SuomalainenPaikannimikirja_e-kirja_kuvallinen.pdf) The publication was presented working paper [WP 28](#) of the 25<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN session.

*Toponymic Guidelines for Map Editors and Other Editors, Finland*. Prepared by Sirkka Paikkala in collaboration with Teemu Leskinen and Kerkko Hakulinen. 4th, revised edition (version 4.12., April 2023, prepared by Ulla Onkamo and Teemu Leskinen). Available at <https://www.kotus.fi/toponymicguidelines>.

*Venäjän federaation paikannimiä, oikeinkirjoitus- ja painotusopas* [Place names in the Russian Federation. Handbook of spelling and stress] (2010). Facsimile of a 2006 publication edited by Martti Kahla, Pirjo Mikkonen, Ida Kempinen & Anna Charnaya. Helsinki, Research Institute for the Languages of Finland. ISBN: 952-5446-18-2. 361 pp. <http://scripta.kotus.fi/www/verkkojulkaisut/julk11/> (pdf) URN:ISBN 978-952-5446-47-0; ISSN 1796-041X

Mattfolk, Leila & Vidberg Maria (eds), *Svenska ortnamn i Finland*. Institutet för de inhemska språkens webbpublikationer 32. - An inventory of the most important Swedish place names in Finland; about 4,250 entries. URN:NBN:fi:kotus-201221, ISSN 2323-3370. <http://kaino.kotus.fi/svenskaortnamn/>. The publication was presented in conference paper [CRP 101/79](#) of the 10<sup>th</sup> UNCSGN in 2012. The material is to be continuously updated.

Information on the names of municipalities and areas of regional divisions based on municipalities is available from the Statistics Finland, <https://www.stat.fi/en/luokitukset/>.

### Atlases

*GT tiekartasto Suomi – Finland = GT-väгатlas = GT Road Atlas = GT-Strassenatlas* 1:250 000 / 1:200 000 / 1:100 000 / 1:40 000 (2022). Index of names. Karttakeskus. ISBN: 978-952-266-725-0. 352 pp.

*Suomalainen maailmankartasto* [Comprehensive Atlas, Atlas in Finnish] (2021). Index of names. Karttakeskus. ISBN: 978-952-266-649-9. 240 pp.

## 7. Contact details

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