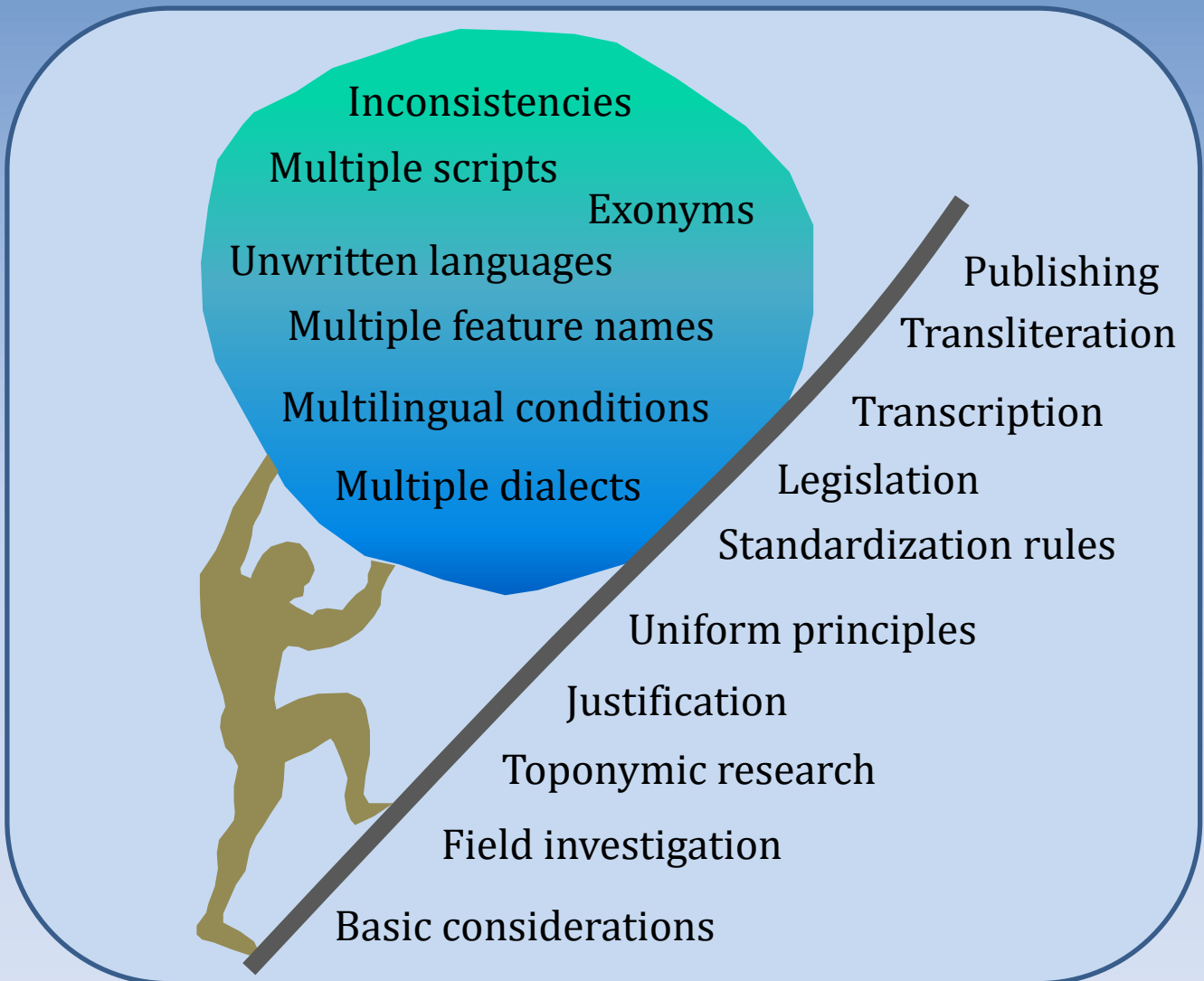




Issues and experiences in the standardization of geographical names





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The referendum of Hov vs. Hou, Danish Place Name Orthography on the Ballot

When people in the village community of Hov in Jutland, Denmark, like all other Danes were called to cast their votes for the European Parliament on 26 May 2019, they were given an additional issue to decide upon: *Should the spelling form of the village name continue to be **Hov** or should it be changed to **Hou**?*

It is not common practice in Denmark to add local issues to the ballot at national elections and referendums, but it does occasionally occur. And in this case, the local referendum in Hov was received with significant interest from the Danish media – both before and after the voting. Danish place-name orthography is usually not decided by public voting, and neither was it this time, as the authorisation of geographical names on settlements of this type (“major place-names”) has been a matter for the Danish Place-Name Committee (*Stednavneudvalget*) since its formation in 1910. The inspiration to put the question of *Hov* vs. *Hou* on the ballot may, however, have come from a former chairman of the committee, Peder Gammeltoft, in

connection to another, somewhat similar case. When the Place-Name Committee in May 2017 decided to reject a petition from people in Kramnitse on Lolland for an orthographic change to *Kramnitze*, it also gained enough public attention to become an issue for the national media. Dr. Gammeltoft was therefore interviewed by Danish television, where he explained that for such a request to be granted by the committee, it either has to be solidly founded on historical evidence in its support OR it has to be proven that there is a profound public opinion in favour of the change. “This could be done with a signature petition, or perhaps even better with a local referendum.” (Interview with TV2 Øst, 8 May 2017). In Kramnitse, the local community decided to make a signature petition, which evidenced an overwhelming majority for the form *Kramnitze*, after which the

community (through the local municipality) asked the committee for a change once again – and this time the committee complied with the wish, partly due to its now proven public support (Olesen & Jakobsen 2019).

The town council of Odder Municipality – where the village of Hov is situated – in 2019 decided to take the public inquiry a step further than what had been done in Kramnitse/Kramnitze, by following Dr. Gammeltoft’s recommendation for the even better solution: a public referendum. The incentive to go that extra mile may to some extent have derived from the fact that some

form of a special public referendum had, in fact, already been tried in Hov on the same issue back in 1974. In spite of a clear vote in favour of *Hou* already then, the Place-Name Committee, who in those days were less inclined to follow public requests, rejected the petition on the grounds that only the form *Hov* was in line with Danish orthography, and that a change furthermore would be too expensive (e.g. for new road signs) and risked causing confusions with other existing localities by the name *Hou*. For the internal committee



When the citizens of the Danish village Hov were called to cast their vote for the European Parliament on 26 May 2019, they were also asked to vote on the future name of the village. Photo: Reuters Scanpix.

records, one unnamed professor confidently stated that “the aversion to the spelling with v will wear off in the course of time”. This prediction proved wrong. The Municipality of Odder formally complained about the decision in 1976, but was rejected once again by the committee. The committee this time added that the municipality had not objected to the standardized form in a hearing before an official county list of geographical names that was authorised in 1958. Thus, the municipality council in Odder, as well as the local community in Hov, knew that they had to present the strongest possible case in order to turn the Place-Name Committee.



The people of Hov are by no way alone in their preference for the letter *-u-* in their village name instead of *-v-*. One of the most continuous public objections to the place-name orthography implemented by the Danish Place-Name Committee since 1922 regards the norm of preferring *-av-* and *-ov-* to *-au-* and *-ou-*. The letter combinations represent the exact same pronunciation [aw] and [åw] respectively, and their usages have differed randomly in Danish historical orthography – both for place-

The original etymology of the name Hov is unclear, and the word in present Danish only means 'hoof' (foot of a horse), which apparently holds but little appeal as a name element for the modern-day inhabitants of the village. As it was to be expected, the outcome of the referendum in Hov was a significant majority in favour of a change to Hou; 844 voted for a change, 49 against.

names and in general. The decision by the Place-Name Committee around 1920 to standardize all existing forms of vowels followed by *-u-*, *-v-* or *-w-* with *-v-* only henceforth happened in accordance with a contemporary and similar standardization for Danish orthography in general, beginning with the first Danish dictionary of spelling from 1872 and the first legislation on the matter from 1889. While this particular issue has hardly ever caused any grievance for the Danish language in general, it immediately launched a stream of objections and public disobediences in regard to place-names. The public feeling seems to be that forms with *-au-* and *-ou-* are more original and true, whereas *-av-* and *-ov-* are artificial forms enforced by the bureaucrats in Copenhagen. Apparently, the same feeling does not comply to names with *-ev-*, *-iv-* or *-øv-*, and only rarely to names with *-av-* or *-ov-*, where the included name element is a word easily recognised from present Danish vocabulary (such as *Havnsø*, from *havn* 'port, harbour' and *sø* 'sea, lake').

The original etymology of the name *Hov* is unclear, and the word in present Danish only means 'hoof' (foot of a horse), which apparently holds but little appeal as a name element for the modern-day inhabitants of the village. As it was to be expected, the outcome of the referendum in Hov was a significant majority in favour of a change to *Hou*; 844 voted for a change, 49 against. The advisory referendum was acknowledged by the municipality, who sent a new petition to the Place-Name Committee, and on the committee meeting of 18 September 2019 it was decided to finally comply with the request. *Hov* has now officially become *Hou*. Time will show if the success of this electoral means will lead to more Danish place-name referendums in the future.

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