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# Lexical relations in dialects and place names: Landscape terms

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## Abstract

The occurrence of landscape terms in Estonian dialects and place names is compared. Material from cognate languages is also used. Analysing the areal distribution and function of appellative nouns in dialects vs. place names, their lexical differences and semantic relations are discussed. The terms *nurm*, *põld* and *väli* occur throughout the Estonian area and in several cognate languages. In North Estonian dialects and Northern Finnic languages *nurm* means 'grassland, meadow', while in South Estonian dialects and the Livonian and Votic languages it stands for 'field'. An analogous semantic boundary runs through toponyms. In the Islands and Western dialects the common generic term in field names is *põld*, while *väli* is used in the North Estonian dialect east of the area. The meanings differ across dialects. Transferred names and recent farm names taken from standard Estonian stand out from the local dialectal background. Sometimes, homonymy may cause semantic confusion.

## 1. Introduction

The paper discusses a project aimed at bringing together the areal and diachronic views of Estonian lexis.<sup>1</sup> For that purpose the two main historical language resources, dialects and place names, are treated in parallel. The source material comes from the Estonian dialect archives, which contains over 5.5 million slips quoting dialect words or place names, the corpora of Estonian dialects, dictionaries and linguistic atlases, and onomastic studies.

Traditionally the Estonian language area is divided into three main dialects: North Estonian, South Estonian and Coastal dialects, covering eight smaller dialect areas, which, in total, comprise 115 parish patois. The areal boundaries of linguistic phenomena have repeatedly been subject to changes. Place names are a valuable source of information on ethnogeny as well as on settlement and language history. If a word currently known all over Estonia functions as a place name component in a limited geographic area, there is reason to believe that this is the very area where the word was earlier used in this concrete appellative meaning. The other way round, if a current place name component is known in a wider area than the corresponding modern noun, the geographic area where the word was used as appellative noun must have contracted after the place names were established.

### 1.1. *Structure of Estonian place names*

Estonian place names typically consist of an attributive component followed by a generic term. As settlement names are used elliptically they usually drop the generic term. The attributive component may contain more than one word stem, while the normal number is one or two. In a general case the first component of a multi-component place name is the oldest, while the second is the next oldest etc., and the generic term is a word of the local dialect. Most of the names consist of two stems, the first of which functions as attribute and the second is a generic term, but there are also a considerable number of place names with a two-stem attributive part. Hypothetically, in such names the second stem is an earlier generic term, which now is used in the

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genitive form, e.g. the village name *Saadjärve* < *Saadjärve küla* ‘*Saadjärve* village’ originates in the name of Lake *Saadjärv*.

## 2. Place names and local dialects

Comparison of the areal distribution of a word with its occurrence in place names is often suggestive of the earlier use of the word. Our approach to place names is based on linguistically processed name resources analysed by the diachronic method. Estonian place names have been treated in several major regional studies (e.g. Ariste 1938, Kallasmaa 1996, 2000 and 2010, Kettunen 1955, Pall 1969 and 1977). However, as these are far from covering the whole language area the present project includes the synchronic approach and studies based thereon (Kallasmaa 2003, Saar 2008, Wieselgren 1951 and 1962). The problem is that such a synchronic typology (demonstrating, for example, the areal distribution of a name component) needs neither to differentiate between all possible layers of the name development nor to specify clearly the original area where the name component was used.

For example, in the 1920s–1930s the newly settled farms in Võrumaa (South-Eastern Estonia) used to be given North Estonian names such as, e.g. *Pärna* (< *pärn* ‘lime’, Võru dial. *lõhmuss* or *pähn*), *Männiku* (< *männik* ‘pine grove’, Võru dial. *pedästik*), *Nõmme* (< *nõmm* ‘heath’, Võru dial. *palo*), *Kase* (< *kask* ‘birch’, Võru dial. *kõiv*). This was due to the higher prestige of standard Estonian, which is based on the North Estonian dialect. As a result, the more recent farm names originating in standard Estonian are much more widespread in Võrumaa than the field names containing the same words in the attributive function, moreover, some of such farm names do not occur among the local traditional name material at all, not even as a name component (Saar 2008: 173).

Transferred names (names brought along by settlers from their previous place of residence) are evidence of resettlement. This complicates the correlating of the areas of occurrence of appellatives and toponyms as the emergence and spread of place names is closely connected with the emergence and spread of settlement, which may easily transfer names and even name types to places where these have no appellative counterparts and, thus, no prerequisites for natural emergence (Kiviniemi 1971: 58–130, Pall 1977: 190). The areal distribution of dialect features in place names enables researchers to ascertain the travelling routes and spread of cultural flows and, to a certain extent, of ethnic groups.

The following discussion addresses three terms denoting a field, grassland or meadow throughout the Estonian language area (see also Saareste 1924: 142–144). The focus lies on the areal distribution of the word and its meanings as well as on its semantic relations in Estonian dialects and place names, compared with the situation in cognate languages.

### 2.1. *nurm*

*nurm* (genitive *nurme*) is one of the words whose use differs in common vs. proper names. As a place name component *nurm* occurs all over Estonia, but there is a clear difference between North and South Estonia. In North Estonian field names the word is rarely met, only as a component of secondary compound names. Neither does it function in the North Estonian area as a generic term in the nominative case, i.e. *nurm*

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is not the determinative here. In South Estonian place names, however, *nurm* is quite a normal generic term (see Pall 1977: 202–203). The difference results from dialectal background. In South Estonian dialects the word is actively used in the sense of ‘field’, whereas in North Estonian dialects it mainly means ‘meadow, grassland’ and is not frequently used. The general occurrence of the word in place names and dialect usage suggests that in the past it was probably known as an appellative noun throughout the whole language area. As the North Estonian appellative noun *nurm* gradually receded from use it also lost its function as a generic term in the local place names and became a final component of secondary names.

*nurm* is an old Finno-Ugric word known not only in the Finnic area but also in more distantly related languages and, as a Finnic loanword, in some Russian dialects (Kalima 1919: 173, SKES 403–404, UEW: 328, Vasmer 1986 3: 90). Semantically the word divides the Finnic area in two parts: in Finnish, Karelian, Vepsian and Ingrian it refers to a natural grassland, meadow or just an open field, like in North Estonian dialects, whereas in Votic and Livonian it mainly means ‘field’, like in South Estonian dialects (SSA 2: 242–243). In Karelian, Vepsian and a few East Finnish dialects *nurmi* is a straightforward term for hayfield or meadow (see Kettunen 1940, map 170, Oja 2004). In Finland names of the lakes *Nurmijärvi* and *Nurmesjärvi* and the river *Nurmijoki*, which derive from the word *nurmi* ‘grassland’, have been pointed out as sources for Finnish settlement names (Paikkala 2007: 295–296).

## 2.2. *põld*

In standard Estonian and many North Estonian dialects arable land is called *põld* (genitive *põllu*). The same word is used (in South Estonian dialects mainly) for crop, harvest, and in some places, for a plot of land. The occurrence of the word in Estonian place names seems, at first sight, slightly surprising: In Northern Tartumaa there are only three names with *põld* as generic term, whereas in the field names of Saaremaa and the Western dialect area its generic function is absolutely common, the word running second among the most frequent generic terms used in the field names of Saaremaa (Kallasmaa 2000: 117). As the first component in place names the word *põld* is also widespread mainly in the western Estonian islands and the northern coast, where the soil is poor in humus and thus not too fertile. The reason may be that the poor and scarce arable land characteristic of the area served more attention than the better fields elsewhere.

The Germanic loanword *pelto*, *põld* etc. is used in most of the Finnic languages in the meaning of ‘field, open ground’ (< Gmc. *\*felþo* ‘field’). It has been believed that Proto-Finnic could originally borrow the word in the meaning of ‘open land, grassland etc.’ (SKES 516, SSA 2: 334). In some Finnish areas *pelto* also refers to a part of a field or a confined area. Karelian dialects use the word for arable fields or meadows, but also, similarly to the South Estonian dialects, for field crop (KKS 4: 198). Finnish place names in general have *pelto* as a common and the most frequent second component. Most of the occurrences concern farm names, but about two-fifths of the total number of such place names refer to fields or meadows (Paikkala 2007: 325).

### 2.3. *väli*

The noun *väli* (genitive *välja*, *vällä*) is also used all over Estonia. In the Eastern dialect area it means ‘(arable) field’, while in western Estonia it mostly refers to ‘grassland’, in coastal areas also ‘open sea’ (cf. the compound words *välimeri*, *väljasmeri*, *väljameri*). As a first component of place names the occurrence of *väli* is more frequent in the north-western part of Estonian mainland and in the western islands and less frequent in the western and southern parts of the mainland. Towards the west (the North-Estonian Central dialect and the Western dialect) this generic term means ‘grassland’, whereas towards the east, beginning from the easternmost parishes of the Western dialect area it occurs as a generic term in field names (Kallasmaa 2003: 71). There are, however, a few reports of the word having earlier been used for arable fields in western Estonia as well.

In all Finnic languages *väli*, *väljä*, *välla* and other words with the same stem denote concepts associated with openness, open spaces, unreserved state etc. Like in Estonian names we find *väljä* meaning ‘open space, open country, field, grassland, arable field, open sea’ in some Southwest Finnish place names, but this is believed to be evidence of Estonian influence. Although the appellative noun *väljä* is also used in Ingrian and in the Karelian Isthmus, above all in the islands of the Gulf of Finland and the coastal zone, there is no trace of them in the local place names (Nissilä 1967: 292–293).

### 3. Change of words and names

Due to the conservative nature of place names they may have preserved affixes and other morphological elements that are vanishing from the common language or dialects, as well as words currently used in a quite different meaning. In Estonian place names, for example, the final component *pere* (currently meaning ‘family’) occurs in the area north of the imaginary Pärnu–Narva line, where one of the earlier meanings of the noun *pere* was ‘farm’ (Pall 1977: 219). Also, place names may preserve traces of words that have vanished from Estonian, but survive in cognate languages. For example the Estonian village name *Malda* has no perfect match among Estonian nouns, the closest being Est. *mald* : *mallu*, *malla* ‘patient, mild, steady’. In Finnish, however, we find the words *malto*, meaning inter alia ‘place with still waters’ and *maltovesi* ‘still place without flow’, cf. Olonec Karelian *maldo* ‘still place in a river’. Derivatives from *malto* can be found in Finnish place names, mostly in the water names of the historical Häme and Karelian areas, but also of Western Finnish dialects. The Estonian village of *Malda* is located in the place where the stream of *Malda* flows into the Audru River. Although *Malda* may originally also have been the name of the brook, there is no proof of it (Kallasmaa 2011: 35).

Landscape terms occurring in place names often challenge us with homonymy. For example the Estonian noun *allikas* : *allika* ‘spring, source’, which earlier used to be *h*-initial, tends to get mixed up with the borrowed personal name *Hallik*, *Hallick*, thus in older place names it is impossible to ascertain which of the two is the right source. A further complication is added by earlier word boundaries. For example the word *laan/laas* : *laane* is used in the meanings ‘great dense (coniferous) forest’, ‘field, (open) land’, ‘low (woody) land’, ‘low watery land; puddle’, ‘forest meadow’ in Estonian dialects (EMS IV (19): 768–769). Place names are usually explained on the basis of local semantics, but most of their first components have hidden their original

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semantic nuances by nowadays. We can only state that names beginning with *Laane* are more frequent in the eastern half of Estonia. The possible meanings of the word, however, differ quite radically ('dense forest' vs. 'open land'). If the age of the names is unknown, we have to be satisfied with a more general, dialectological explanation. What we know by now is that 70–80 years ago *Laane* was a fashionable name indeed. As a result, many old names that were phonetically close to *Laane* became subject to folk etymologization and were recorded in documents as *Laane*-initial. This way the village of *Lannametsa* was officially renamed as *Laanemetsa*, even though *laas/laan* has a quite different stem than *land* : *lannu* 'puddle; (overgrown) lake; low watery ground' (EMS IV (20): 902).

#### 4. Conclusion

A comparison of the areal distributions of a word and its meanings in Estonian dialects and place names reveals partly coincidence with intriguing differences. In some Estonian dialects the words *nurm*, *põld* and *väli* denote arable land or field, while in some others they refer to a meadow, grassland etc. Dialectal semantic differences usually survive in the local place names. The meanings of *nurm*, for example, differentiate between the North Estonian and South Estonian dialects, while the South Estonian use of the word resembles that of Livonian and Votic, and the North Estonian use tends to that of Northern Finnic languages. Also, a semantic boundary is revealed in place names: In southern Estonia *nurm* occurs as the generic term in many field names, in northern Estonia, however, it mainly occurs in farm and village names (earlier probably also in meadow names). In the Western and Island dialects area it is common that the generic term in field names is *põld*, while its eastern counterpart in the North Estonian dialect area is *väli*. The use of the word *väli* in Estonian dialects and cognate languages suggests that earlier it could also be used in the field names of western Estonia.

A comparison of the material with that of cognate languages has helped to further specify the areal distribution and meanings of dialect words (e.g. *nurm*, *põld*, *väli*) and of the place names containing those words, as well as to pinpoint some historical changes (e.g. *pere*, *Malda*). Names standing out from the local dialectal background may either be transferred names eloquent of resettlement, or recent farm names taken from standard language as the more prestigious variant. Sometimes meanings may get mixed due to homonymy.

#### Note

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